

◆Gnosis◆ in Eric Voegelin◆s philosophy

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DRAFT -- Work in progress

◆The book certainly has an odd reception. Setting aside a few positivists, everybody seems to consider it very important, though nobody knows exactly why. Anyway, from my correspondence I see that it is read widely; and apparently it does not sell badly.◆

Eric Voegelin on The New Science of Politics, 11 November 1953

The present paper re-examines the role that terms such ◆gnostic◆, ◆gnosis◆ and ◆Gnosticism◆ played in Eric Voegelin◆s thought and its development. Such a re-examination seems appropriate for a number of reasons. First, as Murray Jardine observed, Eric Voegelin is still ◆probably best known to the current generation of American political theorists from his unrelenting critique of modernity in The New Science of Politics [◆]◆. Voegelin◆s ◆unrelenting critique◆ in what is, arguably, his most ◆successful◆ book was based on a twofold argument. He claimed (1) that ◆the growth of Gnosticism◆ was ◆the essence of modernity◆ and (2) that there was a historical continuity from ancient Gnosis to its modern variants. For the proper evaluation of Voegelin◆s work it appears essential, therefore, to locate the insights from the New Science (NSP) within the context of the overall development of Voegelin◆s thought. Furthermore, and second, there is the question of the empirical validity of Voegelin◆s analysis of the relationship between ◆Gnosticism◆ and modernity as presented in NSP. The two problems ◆ the place of NSP within Voegelin◆s life-work and the empirical validity of the book◆s contents ◆ are analytically distinct. The analysis of ◆Gnosticism◆ might have been an important milestone in his work even if it was factually incorrect. The value of the work does not exclusively depend on its empirical correctness. Indeed, before we can draw any conclusions regarding the relationship between the two problems we will first need to establish in what ways, if at all, Voegelin uses ◆Gnosticism◆ as an ◆empirical concept◆.

The paper is divided into four parts. In the first part we will trace the evolution of Voegelin◆s treatment of ◆Gnosticism◆ from NSP to In Search of Order. Part 2 reconstructs Voegelin◆s self-understanding from his presentation of the ◆meditative quest for truth◆ as we find it in Anamnesis and the later works. This reconstruction should then allow us to locate the work on ◆gnosis◆ within his self-understanding. The question of the empirical validity of Voegelin◆s analysis of ◆Gnosticism◆ is briefly taken up in Part 3. In the concluding section we will explore the implications of our analysis for our understanding of Voegelin◆s quest as a whole.

1. Eric Voegelin on ◆Gnosticism◆

Many authors tend to highlight the fact that Eric Voegelin, after years of reflection, came to reconsider his views on the corrosion of Western civilization through Gnosticism. Indeed, as we shall see below, Voegelin admitted that NSP had overemphasized the Gnostic contribution to the shaping of modernity. Other factors, such as the miscarriage of Neo-Platonism during the Renaissance, were of equal importance. Commentators have also drawn attention to NSP's aggressive style, a style that appears very remote from the meditative essays of his later work. Accordingly, it has been suggested that NSP is little more than an example of Cold War rhetorics. On both accounts those that emphasize flaws in its contents as well as those that emphasize flaws in its style -- NSP turns out to be an exception or aberration in Voegelin's enterprise and is thus representative only for a fairly short episode in Voegelin's life and work.

These assessments, however, are problematic because they conflict with Voegelin's understanding of this particular episode. More than twenty years after the event, he still considered the work he did on the Walgreen Lectures a breakthrough. Arguably, it was this vision, the sudden recognition of a structural equivalence between ancient gnosis and modern ideologies, that launched Voegelin's later work. If NSP was to be dismissed as an episode or aberration, the status of the late work might be called into question as well. It seems important, therefore, to look back at what Voegelin himself had to say on this matter and at how his views evolved in the aftermath of NSP.

1.1. Continuity

In the book proposal for NSP, at that time still entitled Beyond Modernity, Voegelin explained that the second part of the proposed work was to be devoted to modern society and the type of Gnostic truth which it represents. Emphasizing the book's originality, he added that the idea that modern politics is essentially a Gnostic movement is quite new. It is probably not known to anybody except one or two specialists like Hans Urs von Balthasar. It is intriguing to find in these lines a genuine sense of discovery. While he was preparing the volume, Voegelin must have felt that he was the first to unearth an important truth concerning both the history and essence of modernity. This sense of discovery was later qualified as he became aware that through the argument he was making he continued a tradition of scholarship that included, in addition to von Balthasar, Ferdinand Christian Baur, Hans Jonas and Henri de Lubac. While this insight might have relativized his own contribution, it also allowed him to draw on an established body of scholarship in defense of his own enterprise. As late as 1959, eight years after lecturing on modernity and Gnosticism in Chicago, Voegelin wrote in a letter to Carl J. Friedrich:

Then there is the question of Gnosis. You attribute to me the "readiness" to identify all sorts of ideas as Gnostic as if that were my oddity. Well, if you attribute to me, as is frequently done, the great discovery of the problem of modern Gnosis and its continuity with antiquity, I must decline the honor and humbly disavow that stroke of genius. I ran across the problem for the first time in Balthasar's Prometheus of 1937. Then I ascertained that he was right, through the study of Jonas's Gnosis of 1934, and through the reading of mountains of materials on medieval

sectarianism. For the modern application, I found this view confirmed through the works of Lubac. And then I took the precaution of discussing the question in detail with Puech, Quispel, and Bultmann, that is, with the foremost living authorities on Gnosis and Christianity. They all agreed that this was indeed the issue. To sum up: everybody who is somebody in questions of this kind shares the opinion. Of course, you are quite right when you state that this comes as a surprise to the "profession". But you know as well as I do, that the "profession" consists to a notable percentage of academic racketeers who cash professors' salaries without the minimum effort of even reading the books written by other people. And when you speak of the "startling consequences" with regard to the bracketing of contemporary figures, I can only assure you that they are not startling at all, but common-place, to the scholars who know their business. Again, I am flabbergasted that you of all people should take the side of the racketeers against the scholars and what scholars look again at the names given above.

Against mounting criticism, Voegelin continued to pursue the research program unfolding from NSP's diagnosis of modernity throughout the 1960s. In 1959, the problem of Gnosticism was to become the central focus of the final volume of the Order and History series. The first part of the volume was to be entitled The Gnosis of Western society from Charlemagne to the outburst of the Reformation, while the second part had the provisional title The Gnostic transformation of Western society. And although the emphasis on Gnosis has somewhat faded, a revised outline of the final volume of the series from 1963 still concludes with a section on The continuity of the Gnostic movement from antiquity to the present. In 1961, as he was looking for external funding for his new institute for political science in Munich, Voegelin applied to the Fritz-Thyssen-Stiftung with a proposal that included as one of its important projects research on the entire complex of Gnosis, ancient and modern as well as on the system as the typically Gnostic form of thinking. When it turned out that the Thyssen foundation would not fund entire institutions but only research projects, it was suggested that Voegelin should concentrate on the project on Gnosticism. With a reformulated project on modern political mass movements and their spiritual motivation through variants of gnosis Voegelin's application was eventually successful. The project was funded over three years between 1962 and 1965. And in the preface written for the 1968 American edition of Science, Politics, and Gnosticism, Voegelin still asserts with confidence that the more we come to know about the Gnosis of antiquity, the more it becomes certain that modern movements of thought, such as progressivism, positivism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, are variants of Gnosticism.

These ideas remained a constant in Voegelin's work also throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The Eclipse of Reality compares Schiller's interpretation of Genesis to the ancient Gnostic inversion of the Fall of man as a Promethean revolt against God, and speaks of the Gnostic endowment of the homunculus, of the imaginary man who, after embracing the Gnostic spirit as well as doxic reason eclipses both faith and philosophy. The analysis of Gnosticism continues in The Ecumenic Age, where we encounter the Gnostic thinkers, both ancient and modern, as the great psychologists of alienation, carriers of the Promethean revolt. In fact, Voegelin links the emergence of Gnosticism directly to the substance of The Ecumenic Age: [] the Gnostic deformation of consciousness must be put into the pragmatic and spiritual context of the Ecumenic Age which is the subject-matter of the

present volume. And again we are reminded of the parallels between the ancient and modern variants of the Gnostic distortion of reality: In the prototypical case of modern Gnosticism, in Hegel's system, the essential core is the same as in the Valentinian speculations []. We learn that once Gnosticism, the dead end, had entered the universal field of history, it was there to last: Since Gnosticism surrounds the libido dominandi in man with a halo of spiritualism or idealism, and can always nourish its righteousness by pointing to the evil in the world, no historical end to the attraction is predictable once magic pneumatism has entered history as a mode of existence. The theme returns also in *Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation*, where Voegelin explains that the Gnostic-satanic movements with their revolt against reality had become a force in world history.

Finally, both Volume 4 and 5 of *Order and History* feature the familiar distinction between ancient and modern gnosis. Volume 4 asserts that while the early [Gnostic] movements attempt to escape from the metaxy by splitting its poles into the hypostases of this world and the Beyond, the modern apocalyptic-Gnostic movements attempt to abolish the metaxy by transforming the Beyond into this world. The formula is used also in Volume 5, where both ancient and modern gnosis amount to a revolt in consciousness:

At the extreme of the revolt in consciousness, "reality" and the "beyond" become two separate entities, two "things", to be magically manipulated by suffering man for the purpose of either abolishing "reality" altogether and escaping into the "beyond", or of forcing the order of the "beyond" into "reality". The first of the magic alternatives is preferred by the Gnostics of antiquity, the second one by the modern Gnostic thinkers.

Voegelin also does not in any way revoke the diagnosis of contemporary Western society which was first put forward in NSP. *In Search of Order* presents the deformation of consciousness and the confusion of language as syndromes of a disorder that has grown to the proportion of an established, in the sense of publicly accepted, state of unconsciousness.

It is thus fair to say that Voegelin never departed fundamentally from the NSP vision of a structural equivalence between ancient and modern Gnosis. Even if we admit that Gnosticism did not again feature as prominently as it did in NSP, the evidence still suggests that this was not because Voegelin abandoned the arguments from NSP but because he took them for granted and left the details to the specialists and to his students.

1.2. Adjustments

Although, as we saw, Voegelin never abandoned his ideas on Gnosticism entirely, he had many reasons for becoming more cautious in presenting them in his later work. After all, even the authorities mentioned in his letter to Friedrich had openly expressed their disagreement. Bultmann, for example, finds Voegelin's characterization of Gnosis inappropriate. He speaks of a secularization of the term and wonders whether this gesture is admissible. And

again, commenting on Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis, he disapproves of Voegelin's use of the label "gnosis" and "gnostic". Voegelin's friend Alfred Schütz, too, expressed reservations. As always, however, the criticism that carried most weight and, therefore, was most painful to endure was the criticism that came from experts like Bultmann. In a letter to Gerhart Niemeyer, Voegelin complained that

"[w]henver you suggest a general causal connection between an institutional state of order or disorder and a spiritual experience and its symbolization, you run into the snag that a connoisseur of history can give you an *instantia contraria* which invalidates the general relation which you have assumed on the basis of your limited materials."

Voegelin responded to the criticisms not by giving up his claims regarding the contemporary relevance of Gnosticism but by refining them. In a lecture given at the Eric Voegelin-Symposium at the University of Notre Dame during Spring 1971, held in honor of "20 years of The New Science of Politics", he noted that "there is nothing about The New Science of Politics, as I wrote it twenty years ago, that has to be retracted. It fits, on the whole, still, but a lot has to be added." On this occasion, he laments the "dogmatization, which sets in whenever a book is published". In case of NSP, this dogmatization was

"[] perhaps more dangerous than in the other situations, because immediately the problem of gnosis as characteristics of modern political ideas especially in the great speculative systems of Fichte, Hegel, of Marx and Comte, et al. attracted attention and was absolutized. And every day I get questions of the kind: "Is the Russian government a Gnostic government? Of course, things are not that simple."

The situation was "not that simple", he explained, because Gnosis turned out to be but one element in the "modern compound". There were other elements, including apocalyptic and neo-platonic symbolisms. He concludes "Gnosis is not the panacea and the recipe for dealing with modernity. There are other problems besides Gnosis in modern political science".

This broadening of the original vision is also discussed in the Autobiographical Reflections, dictated in 1973:

"Since my first applications of Gnosticism to modern phenomena in The New Science of Politics and in 1959 in my study on Science, Politics, and Gnosticism, I have had to revise my position. The application of the category of Gnosticism to modern ideology, of course, stands. In a more complete analysis, however, there are other factors to be considered in addition. One of these factors is the metastatic apocalypse deriving directly from the Israelite prophets, via Paul, and forming a permanent strand in Christian sectarian movements right up to the Renaissance. [] I found, furthermore, that neither the apocalyptic nor the Gnostic strand completely accounts for the process of immanentization. This factor has independent origins in the revival of neo-Platonism in Florence in the late fifteenth century."

As always when he felt it necessary to revise his "position", Voegelin explained the revision as an adjustment that had become inevitable with the availability of new empirical material:

over the years what I had seen in the 1940s and 1950s as a problem had also been seen by others, and the historical exploration of such problems as Gnosticism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi finds, the prehistory of Pseudo-Dionysius, the revival of neo-Platonism in the Renaissance and its developments up to Hegel, had made enormous progress, so that now I could refer to the studies of the sources conducted by a great number of scholars sources that had not been accessible to the public in the 1940s and 1950s.

Thus, in 1973 Voegelin had plans to develop a philosophy of history that would include the new picture of prehistory that is emerging following the revision of the C-14 dates after 1966, as well as *the entirely new picture of origins of modernity* in the Renaissance with special emphasis on hermetism, neo-Platonism, magic, apocalypse, and Gnosticism as compound strands in the structure of the modern West. The extent to which Voegelin's horizon had broadened since the 1950s is nicely illustrated in a list of twelve languages of order [Sprachen der Ordnung] to be found in a file Notes and research material on Philosophy of History in the Hoover Archives. The twelve languages of order are:

Myth, ancient-oriental [alt-orientalisch]

Myth, hellenic

Revelation

Philosophy

Metaphysics

Theology

Apocalyptic

Gnosis

Neo-Platonic systems

Mysticism

Ideology

Philosophy of consciousness

The list indicates how, for Voegelin, the problem of Gnosis had become just one item in a cluster of fundamental problems related to the experience and expression of order. Indeed, the problem that was at the centre of the second part of NSP, the characterization of modernity, seems to have largely disappeared from the range of problems that Voegelin was exploring in his work. The problem faded into background as it became clear that the periodization of history into epochs or eras such as modernity resulted from the application of apocalyptic symbols to immanent

history. In the address given at Notre Dame in 1971, Voegelin noted that the problem of historical epochs, the paroxysm of successive avantgardes, was one of the problems he had neglected in NSP. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that later in his life he devoted more time to the paleolithicum he travelled to France, Ireland, Iran and Hawaii in order to see pre-historical cave paintings and monuments -- than to modernity.

Accordingly, when invited by Richard Bishirjian in 1976 to contribute to a book on Gnosticism and Modernity, Voegelin declined, referring to all [his] other work that he was burdened with. But he offered important advice:

One comment I should make right now. Obviously the title "Gnosticism and Modernity" is, at least partly, inspired by my own work in the field. But when I hit on this problem, that was 25 years ago. In the meantime, science in this matter has advanced. And today I would have to say that Gnosticism is one component in the historical structure of modernity but no more than one. Of equal importance, it has turned out, are apocalyptic, neo-Platonism, hermeticism, alchemy, and magic. Your projected volume would have to take account of this newer development in the historical sciences or there will be critics who will blame it for inadequacy.

In his reply Bishirjian wondered whether these various movements [could] be considered species of the genus Gnosticism. But Voegelin disagreed:

The literature on magic, neo-Platonism, apocalyptic, Kabbalah, hermeticism, and alchemy is growing prodigiously and can be read by anybody who cares to read it. All of these factors are components in the present intellectual disorder, just as is Gnosticism. I would be cautious about using Gnosticism as a genus, comprehending the other movements.

There almost developed an aversion on Voegelin's part against attempts at making him the representative of a position in the debate on modernity. He did not hide his impatience when he felt that the insights of NSP were dogmatized beyond the empirical analysis from which, he claimed, they were derived. For example, in a letter to Dante Germino he writes:

Since you include some remarks on what I have said now almost twenty years ago about the problem of modernity, I should perhaps express a little sorrow that you tend to dogmatize a result of empirical analysis. During the last twenty years, the study of Gnosticism and its modern variants has advanced very much. Hence, what apparently you consider a "position" in the matter, has undergone considerable changes, which, in their turn, are not a "position" but an expression of the present state of science in this matter. In the meanwhile, we have learned about the connections between gnosis on the one side and sorcery and alchemy on the other side through Festugiere. It now looks as if the sorcery which emerges from Enlightenment rationalism were a sequel to medieval alchemy.

2. Gnosticism as a type-concept

The previous discussion does not allow us to draw easy conclusions. As much as the question of modernity and epochs faded into the background of Voegelin's work, Gnosticism gained in importance as a perennial problem, as a temptation that was a constant force in the millennial process of the quest for truth. With the focus on modernity gone, the analysis could move to the more general problem of the experiences that result in immanentist constructions.

Gnosticism, as a theme, runs through Eric Voegelin's work from NSP to In Search of Order. To be sure, there were qualifications, revisions, and adjustments as indicated in the previous section. But Voegelin never surrendered his belief that behind the notion of gnosis or Gnosticism there was a very serious, perennial, spiritual problem that somehow, in the modern era, had risen to the level of social and political mass phenomena. The image that emerges from the quotations provided in the first part of this paper is the image of a thinker who wrestles with the discovery of a problem and who struggles with its articulation. Voegelin is not struggling with solutions; his problem is the articulation of the problem. It is thus not surprising that Voegelin returned to the problem again and again, wrestling with its meaning and its implications. His letters reveal that there were the occasional moments when he felt that he was finally able to fully articulate the problem. In retrospective, a brief hint found in a 1962 letter appears almost comical:

The last week was somewhat hectic, as I finally had to solve the problem of gnosis.

As late as 1977, as we noted above, Voegelin was still working on the relationship between the various historical manifestations of Gnosticism. He announced that work on Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme had finally allowed him to render more precise the distinction between ancient and modern gnosis. The fact that Voegelin was never able to put the problem suggests that its full articulation was never accomplished.

The criticism that his use of words such as gnostic and gnosis provoked, of course, left its mark. At various times Voegelin considered giving up the label Gnosticism but he remained loyal to the problem. For example, in 1956 he wrote in a letter:

And I have solved at last the great methodological and terminological problem for classifying ideas which operate with a change in the nature of the world. Their origin lies with the Prophets; and the term found is metastasis. *That ought to make everybody happy who balked at gnosis.* That is now a great relief, because I have the conceptual instruments to handle such phenomena as gnosis and Marcionism, and especially the modern ideas.

The quotation is revealing. Voegelin could not ignore the expert criticism, the balking, and yet he was unwilling to surrender the problem as meaningless. It was now under the label of metastasis that ancient gnosis and especially the modern ideas were subsumed. The solution was stable, however, only for a short time as he was unable to avoid the notion of Gnosticism altogether. Voegelin continued to look for alternative labels for the Gnostic spiritual problem or aspects thereof. Among the other labels that he proposed in this context are: egophany, egophanic revolt, pneumopathology, doxic reason, resistance to

reality, deformation of existence, refusal to apperceive, schizophrenia. At some point Voegelin was looking for similarities between clinical schizophrenia and the split consciousness of the creators of systems. There is also the notion of second realities, which caught his attention while he was reading Musil and Doderer in 1956/7.

Only if we appreciate how Voegelin's language expanded in this way will it become possible for us to comprehend the meaning and the direction of the development of his work. For the terms listed above occur together, in various permutations and combinations, emphasizing various aspects of the one cluster of spiritual problems that was once subsumed in a more compact concept under the label Gnosticism. As we noted above, the process whereby these terms are introduced never came to an end; neither did the terms introduced later replace the earlier ones. None of the terms, taken on its own, seemed to capture the problems in its entirety. The terms work together, as in a cluster, so that Voegelin's language in which he explores the problem is enriched and thereby refined. An important implication of this observation is that Voegelin's use of the label Gnosticism cannot be fully comprehended and evaluated in terms of its empirical validity. In the context of Voegelin's development, Gnosticism is a concept that corresponds to a particular phase in a meditative process. This process was probably initiated with the work on NSP and continued after its publication; indeed, the process becomes thematic in Anamnesis. We must not forget that the quest that Voegelin explores in Anamnesis and his post-NSP works is also a self-exegesis, the exegesis of a quest that Voegelin himself was pursuing. And it might be instructive, therefore, to follow his lead in our interpretation of his endeavour.

Beginning with Anamnesis, Voegelin's work becomes increasingly self-referential. A questioning movement is examined and, thereby, exemplified. In its course, various names are given to the movement. It finds its historical antecedent in the classical noesis of Plato and Aristotle; it takes place in the divine-human in-between, in the metaxy, and is variously characterized as the quest for the ground, noetic exegesis, participation, cognitive reflection, meditation, meditative process, reflective distance. In the following we will highlight those features of Voegelin's cognitive reflection that are of interest to us in the context of the present paper.

(i) The various names that the meditative process assigns to itself are not concepts or definitions referring to objects. This observation is so important to Voegelin that he repeats it again and again. It is analysed at some length, for example, in What is Political Reality?, where he introduces the notion of language indices of the meditative movement. Cognitive reflection, he explains on another occasion, does not arise from the observation of an external object but within the process from acts of reflection that relate present insights to earlier ones. Thus, reflection is not an external act of cognition directed towards the process as its object, but part of a process that internally has cognitive structure. Within the meditative process, there is no such thing as a pre-existent language that can be applied to the movement of appeal-response; there is only the language that arises from the metaxy of the process in its course. The language symbols that emerge from the process do not denote objects or their properties but are language indices arising from the metaxy in the event of its becoming luminous for itself and for the comprehensive reality. Indeed, the symbols of noesis are linguistic indices of a movement

of participation. Their primary function is to illuminate this movement itself, but they cannot illuminate it without simultaneously expressing insights into the participating realities. In other words, the symbols are exegetic, not descriptive. They are not to be understood as a truth to be possessed as informative doctrine. The truth of the symbols is not informative; it is evocative. The symbols do not refer to structures in the external world but to the existential movement in the metaxy from which they mysteriously emerge as the exegesis of the movement in intelligibly expressive language. The reflective distance is the distance between the philosopher's existence as an event of participatory consciousness, and the exegesis of the event through the symbols he developed in his work. In the ending of Bodin's Colloquium Heptaplomeres, Voegelin finds reflected the insight that symbolism is nothing more than the last word of each historical religion; the reality of faith through *conversio* lies beyond the symbols. Accordingly, the symbols have to be understood as an index of the meditative movement because they lose their meaning if taken out of the context of the movement that engendered them. If they are separated from the engendering experience, the result will be a hardening of the symbols into hypostases or doctrines. These doctrines, as they enter history, then have an impact of their own as they provoke alternative doctrines which are not motivated by noetic experience. Voegelin has dealt extensively with the resulting confusion under titles such as literalism, literalization, doctrinization. In a letter to F.A. Wilhelmsen, focusing more specifically on metaphysical symbols, Voegelin explained:

[] metaphysical symbols [] only make sense as the terminal points of the existential movement of participation in the divine. It appears to me that, in this manner, one can more convincingly explain what is meant by doctrinization, i.e. by the separation of the terminal symbols from the movement that has engendered them.

Voegelin later added this phenomenon of doctrinization to the list of factors which he considered components in the present intellectual disorder next to Gnosticism, magic, Neo-Platonism, apocalypticism, hermeticism etc.

(ii) The various symbols that emerge from the meditative process may occur together, as in a group or cluster. They may form what Voegelin calls a complex or meditative complex. A complex is a symbolic framework, a unity, in which the symbols relate to and mutually illuminate each other. The two perhaps most important examples of such complexes are developed in In Search of Order: consciousness reality language and intentionality luminosity reflective distance. The Ecumenic Age mentions the complex experience question answer, which only when taken as a whole can be considered a constant of consciousness. A complex is usually the most appropriate form of symbolization for the experience of a tension; the complex holds the various poles of the tension together as parts of the one reality that becomes cognitively luminous in the experience, thereby preventing them from being misconstrued as separate entities. Thus, by calling these configurations complexes, Voegelin implies that their components are not to be separated; a complex is not meant to be cut up into pieces or fragmented. For example, the tension towards the ground can evoke a complex of three symbols: a divine reality that inspires the soul's movement, a concrete human soul that quests, and the in-between of the metaxy. To say that this complex must not be fragmented means that the study of the divine side (theology), or of the

human side (anthropology), or the study of the in-between process (psychology) should not stand separately. ❖ The meditative investigation must not be deformed into these three forms ❖ because ❖ the in-between is not a question of psychology, theology or anthropology; it is always a matter of the response, of the movements and countermovements ❖. The fragmentation of a complex is a derailment closely related to the phenomena of deformation and ❖ doctrinization ❖.

A meditative complex emerges and unfolds as the result of a process of differentiation. As the meditative process continues, an integral set of new symbols (or old symbols with new meaning) replaces, or is added to, the symbols already in use. The new symbols manifest a refinement of the original insight into the experience that engendered the earlier symbols. An enrichment of language may reflect a refinement of ❖ vision ❖ and a differentiation of the consciousness undergoing the meditative process. In the course of this differentiation, the singularity of one ❖ compact ❖ symbol is replaced with the complexity of a meditative complex. The complex itself thereby becomes an index of the meditative process. Through these complexes of symbols and their differentiation the process becomes luminous for itself.

(iii) Voegelin emphasizes that noesis ❖ does not arise independently of the conception of order of the surrounding society but in a critical argument with the latter. Wherever noesis appears, it stands in a relation of tension to society's self-interpretation ❖. ❖ The movement towards truth always resists an untruth. ❖

(iv) As they try to protect the noetic center of the metaxy against the ❖ deformative forces prevalent at the time ❖, the meditations obtain a ❖ historical dimension ❖. As noesis enters history, and consciousness gains insights into its structure, all non-noetic experiences and symbols are revealed as ❖ attempts to gain true insights into the existential tension towards the ground ❖. Noesis establishes a basic equivalence with other types of symbolisms and thereby evokes the ❖ universal field of history ❖ with itself as the standard of ❖ rationality ❖. In other words, noesis ❖ indexes history as a field of rational structure ❖ by identifying the degree of rationality of other truths in relation to itself. A ranking or ❖ positioning ❖ takes place, which is expressed in ❖ type-concepts ❖. As examples of ❖ modern type-concepts ❖, Voegelin lists ❖ compact and differentiated experiences ❖, the ❖ primary cosmic experience ❖, the ❖ noetic and revelatory experiences of transcendence ❖, the ❖ derailment into dogmatism ❖, the ❖ metastatic, apocalyptic, and Gnostic experiences ❖, ❖ revolutionary experiences ❖, ❖ and so on ❖. The formation of type-concepts reflects that noesis forces all other interpretations of order into the role of ❖ objects ❖:

❖ In this oppositional relation lies the starting point for a process of differentiation, in which the noetic interpretation can become a "science" relating to political reality as its "object". This oppositional relation is, furthermore, reciprocal in that the protagonists of a given non-noetic interpretation are not helpless when their noetic critics attempt to objectify them. They do not let themselves be pushed into the role of an ❖ object of investigation ❖ without resistance. Instead, they will in turn objectify their noetic opponents from the viewpoint of their own knowledge of order. ❖

It is here, thus, where Voegelin helps us explain his use of the term "Gnosticism". The term is a "type-concept"; and it refers to its denotation as an "object". These type-concepts, he elaborates further, are to be distinguished from the indices of the exegesis, in which the noetic movement of participation becomes linguistically transparent to itself and thereby communicable. Even though type-concepts can be developed only in consequence of this exegesis, they do not interpret the noetic experience itself but refer to phenomena beyond its scope.

(v) Voegelin is right in distinguishing the "type-concepts" from the indices of the meditative movement. The concepts are not interpretations of the noetic experience; moreover, they entail an objectification while, as noted above, the symbols and complexes do not refer to "objects" at all. Indeed, Voegelin's late work defines the distinction between symbols and concepts in terms of the distinction between luminosity and intentionality. While this definition emphasizes the fundamental difference between symbols and concepts, it also makes us realize their equivalence. Both luminosity and intentionality are "structural meanings" of consciousness, and they both are part of the complex "luminosity" "intentionality" "reflective distance", and they are, therefore, in a sense complementary. In particular, the concepts too are indices of the meditative movement that engendered them through objectification. For the meditative process begins in existential unrest caused by the surrounding disorder; every movement towards truth always resists an untruth. In this sense, the movement towards truth is "indexed" by the untruth it resists. The type-concepts make this resistance communicable.

(vi) We can push this analysis further by arguing that type-concepts, too, can form a "complex". Just as the meditative process leads to a refinement of meditative symbols and complexes, the type-concepts, too, can be elaborated by adding more concepts which, in their relationship to the concepts already in use, lead to a refinement of "vision". In "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme", Voegelin speaks of two correlative complexes, the meditative complex of "(divine) appeal" "(human) response" "metaxy" and a "deformation complex", to be derived from the former through fragmentation. Furthermore, there is the possibility of "deformation complexes" undergoing "differentiating advances" in parallel with the meditative complex. This possibility is acknowledged in In Search of Order:

"If, however, one does not stop thinking, the recall [of various cases of "disturbances of existential consciousness"] will read as a "story" of deformative symbols [sic] engendered parallel with the formative differentiation of the Beyond in the Near Eastern ethnic cultures of the cosmological empires and the Chosen People. The recall, far from being a plain account of indifferently equal cases coming under a general head, tells a story of increasingly conscious resistance to beginnings that come to an end without reaching the End, culminating in the phantasy of a beginning that will make an end of the Beginning. In the context of the story, therefore, the cases partake of the diversification that characterizes the quest for truth. Parallel with the diversified history of truth and of attunement to its order, and closely related to its substance, there appears to run a diversified history of untruth and disorder."

(vii) The notions of "parallelism", "opposition" or "correlation", however, do not adequately capture the complicated, multi-layered relationship between the two

stories/complexes. The two stories are intertwined; there is a sense, in fact, in which they mutually constitute each other. The forces of imagination that bring forth luminous symbols are the very same forces that bring forth objectifying concepts. The history of the quest for truth is involved in the history of the resistance to truth, the history of untruth, and vice versa. History turns out to be a process not only of truth becoming luminous, but also of truth becoming deformed and lost by the very forces of imagination and language which let the truth break forth into image and word. Even more, the differentiating advances of truth can become the source of new types of untruth, when visions are misused to obscure areas of reality outside their more immediate field, or when visionary symbols are subjected to the deformative processes of doctrinization and literalization. But the meditative quest is not passively objected to deformation; it actively contributes to the deformative process by objectifying its competitors. Through language symbols the process becomes luminous for itself and the participating realities; through type-concepts the process structures the universal field of history in which it finds itself. Its competitors in the struggle for truth are objectified and ranked according to their degree of rationality. The situation of the struggle induces a "language of the struggle", [] burdening the formulation with the double meaning of truth and opposition to untruth; and through the oppositional component of meaning something of the untruth opposed creeps into the symbolization of truth. At the same time, the meditative process finds itself objectified by its competitors in the struggle for truth. Historically, therefore, the struggle is bound to adopt the form of verbal mimesis.

(viii) Voegelin analyses the dynamics of the verbal mimesis in his discussion of the role of the fool in Anselm of Canterbury's exchange with Gaunilo, following the Proslogion. In the context of Anselm's text, Gaunilo acts the role of the fool, of the *insipiens*, who says "There is no God" and assumes that the explorer of faith [Anselm] is engaged in a "proof" for the assertion that God exists. As we noted above, it is the encounter with untruth, with the fool, that provokes the noetic response. The noetic response, of course, is not a proof in the sense of a logical demonstration, but only in the sense of an *epideixis*, of a pointing to an area of reality that the constructor of the negative propositions has chosen to overlook, or to ignore, or refuses to perceive. One cannot prove reality by a syllogism; one can only point to it and invite the doubter to look.

This pointing to reality may lead noesis to counter the fool's negative propositions with positive propositions of its own. Reality then becomes a this or that rather than a mystery in the process of revelation. The encounter with the fool, thus, affects the noetic reflection in that the latter, confronting the negative assertion that God does not exist, acquires the character of an affirmative position. Hence, the symbolism of the noetic quest threatens to derail into a quarrel about proof and non-proof of a proposition when the fool enters the discussion. This quarrel between the positive and negative response to the divine appeal is an example of verbal mimesis:

As a consequence, the two types of theology together represent the verbal mimesis of the human tension between the potentialities of response or non-response to divine presence in personal, social, and historical existence.

(ix) Thus, truth and untruth, meditation and deformation, meditative complex and deformation complex are not simply opposed to each other. Voegelin, as we saw, acknowledged that something of the untruth opposed creeps into the symbolization of truth; and at least indirectly he also acknowledged the reverse effect, that something of the truth denied and resisted creeps into the symbolization of untruth. We also noted that the meditative process is a real player in the mimetic game of objectification; it entails the seed, we may say, for its own deformation. But there is also a sense in which, vice versa, the process of deformation can contribute to the formative quest:

[] a movement of resistance [against truth], if it achieves clarity about its experiential motivations and elaborates the story of its deformative quest, can contribute substantially to the understanding of the paradox in the formative structure it resists, while the defenders of the truth may fall into the various traps prepared by their own self-assertive resistance and thus contribute substantially to an understanding of the forces of deformation.

Therefore, Voegelin concluded, in the depth of the quest, formative truth and deformative untruth are more closely related than the language of "truth" and "resistance" would suggest.

(x) The spectacular drama of the struggle for truth in history should not overshadow the fact that the struggle is fought also within the consciousness engaged in the meditative quest. The fool cannot be dismissed lightly, Voegelin explains, because the folly of responding to the divine appeal by denial or evasion is just as much a human possibility as the positive response. As a potentiality it is present in every man, including the believer; and in certain historical situations its actualisation can become a massive social force. Therefore, the thinker engaged in the formative quest is a human being plagued by the forces of self-assertive resistance in his soul just as much as his counterpart, the resister to the paradoxical structure of consciousness-reality, is plagued by the truth of reality. For it is from within the quest that both luminous symbols and objectifying type-concepts unfold. At any cross-section of history, therefore, it is only its reflective distance that distinguishes the formative quest from the other players in the mimetic game of objectification. By reflectively distancing itself from the symbols and concepts currently in use, the meditative process reminds itself that both symbols and concepts are *indices* of its differentiating advance; they never fully exhaust the process itself. Referring specifically to Plato's example, Voegelin observes that

Plato's positive "type of theology" derived its validity from the defense of truth against the negative type of the Sophists, *but the truth defended was not to be found in the propositional "type" itself*; even the positive type would have been empty without its background in the truth of experience.

(xi) The insight into the truth which is beyond the symbols used in its defense explains Voegelin's interest in mysticism. According to *What is political reality?*, classical noesis and mysticism are the two pre-dogmatic realities of knowledge in which the logos of consciousness was optimally differentiated. In modern times, Voegelin explains, mysticism has twice become the source of attempts to find the way back from dogmatism to the rationality of

thought: once by Bodin in the 16th century, in the situation of theological dogmatomachy; the second time by Bergson in the 20th century, in the situation of ideological dogmatomachy. The mysticism of Bodin avoids the derailment into literalist dogma by maintaining the balance between the knowledge of symbols and the knowledge of what lies beyond them. This balance between the realms of silence and of expression characterizes the nature of tolerance.

This interest in mysticism pre-dates NSP. In a letter to Friedrich von Engel-Janosi Voegelin noted in 1943 that the philosophical process begins, not with the categories of being, but with the rationalization of the encounter with the divine [Rationalisierung des Gotteserlebnisses] through the mysticism of the *via negativa*. At the end of 1944 Voegelin explained that he had interpreted Nietzsche, for the study on Nietzsche and Pascal, from the perspective of the *theologia negativa*, and this for the following reason:

What collapses is a historical stage of concretisation and the corresponding institutions; for the individual today, as much as for the individual in the 5th and 15th century, there remains the *socially indestructible* position of the *theologia negativa*; for the individual undergoes a crisis only if he insists on finding his absolute coordinates in his nation, as a Marxist, as a Liberal etc.

It is interesting to note in this context that Voegelin on at least two occasions remarked that his interest in problems of religious understanding was first provoked by Paul Deussen's lectures on the Upanishads in Vienna in 1918/19. Deussen, a friend of Nietzsche's, was the translator of the Upanishads and a foremost expert on Indian philosophy. Voegelin's favorite text among the Upanishads was the Brihadaranyaka because it was a beautiful example of the *via negativa* of intellectual mysticism. It is intriguing to think that Voegelin's preoccupation with transcendence might have originated from a search for a socially indestructible position.

We are now in a position to characterize Voegelin's use of Gnosticism as a concept. As we saw, Voegelin's noetic quest arises in the form of a resistance against the surrounding disorder; the quest for truth always resists an untruth. In Voegelin's case, this untruth was at some point subsumed under the label Gnosticism, a type-concept derived from the noetic indexation of history. In order to appreciate the significance of the label for Voegelin's analysis, we need to remind ourselves again that both the meditative symbols as well as the objectifying type-concepts are achievements of the consciousness engaged in the meditative quest. The indexation of history is at the same time a self-indexation of the meditation; it is indexed by the untruth that it resists. Accordingly, Voegelin's work is indexed by its meditative symbols as much as by its type-concepts. However, in the course of the meditative process, both the meditative symbols and the type-concepts undergo a differentiating advance whereby the more compact language symbols and concepts are replaced or qualified by newer, more refined symbols and concepts. According to the self-understanding of Voegelin's quest, this process is to be expected; it signifies a refinement of, rather than a departure from, earlier assumptions.

The close relationship in Voegelin's analysis between symbols and concepts, between the meditative complex and the deformation complex, will allow us, in the concluding section of this paper, to characterize the philosophical type that Voegelin's philosophy represents. Before we can turn to the conclusion, however, we need to briefly examine the question of the empirical validity of Voegelin's analysis of Gnosticism.

3. Voegelin's errors

The previous observations are not meant to be apologetic; we are not attempting to rescue Voegelin's work on Gnosticism from attacks by zealous critics. On the contrary, if gnosis and gnosticism in Voegelin are understood as empirical concepts then we must agree with the critics that his work is full of problems. Two observations deserve to be highlighted in this context. First, his use of Gnosticism violated the most elementary methodological principles that he had defined for himself long before and, in fact, in (!) NSP. Let us briefly review these principles. In On the Form of the American Mind, Voegelin had explained that his analysis was not meant to impose an interpretation from the outside onto the material; instead it represented an attempt at extracting the instruments of interpretation as well as the meaning from the material itself. In NSP Voegelin was able to articulate his methodological principles with greater clarity by distinguishing between the language symbols that are produced as an integral part of the social cosmion in the process of its self-illumination and the language of symbols in political science. The relationship between the two sets of symbols is such that the latter should always derive from the former:

Both are related with each other in so far as the second set is developed out of the first one through the process that provisionally was called critical clarification. In the course of this process some of the symbols that occur in reality will be dropped because they cannot be put to any use in the economy of science, while new symbols will be developed in theory for the critically adequate description of symbols that are part of reality.

In NSP, the symbols of political science are referred to as concepts. Voegelin thereby introduced for the first time a distinction between symbols and concepts long before the two terms became attached to the distinction between luminosity and intentionality. At the time of NSP the meaning of the two terms is fairly straightforward. Symbols emerge from the self-interpretation of the social cosmion, while theoretical concepts are the result of the critical clarification of the symbols. Political science begins with the symbols, with the self-interpretation of the cosmion, and advances towards concepts. Voegelin noted that there were many symbols that could not be clarified to the point that they were of use in science:

More than once in a discussion of a political topic it has happened that a student and for that matter not always a student would ask me how I defined fascism, or socialism, or some other ism of that order. And more than once I had to surprise the questioner who apparently as

part of a college education had picked up the idea that science was a warehouse of dictionary definitions by my assurance that I did not feel obliged to indulge in such definitions, because movements of the suggested type, together with their symbolisms, were part of reality, that only concepts could be defined but not reality, and that it was highly doubtful whether the language symbols in question could be critically clarified to such a point that they were of any cognitive use in science.

If Voegelin had applied these principles which he finds in Aristotle to the analysis of Gnosticism, he could not have written The New Science of Politics. The term Gnosticism did not arise from the self-interpretation of a social cosmion, nor can it be considered the result of a process of critical clarification on the part of political scientists. In fact, the term Gnosticism emerged in 18th century France; applying it to religious movements in late antiquity is an anachronism. While Greek words like *Christianos*, *Christianikos*, *Christianismos* began to appear in ancient texts a few generations after Jesus, no such words existed for Gnosticism or a Gnostic religion. Some Christian heresiologists reported that the members of at least some groups which later came to be called Gnostic referred to themselves as *gnostikos*. As the heresiologists then began to compile catalogues of heresies, the temptation was to generalize such sporadic self-designations into one single category. There are instances in Irenaeus, for example, in which the term Gnostics is used as a generalising label for all heretics. In fact, for a long time the main sources available on Gnostic sects and movements were the treatises of Christian heresiologists writing explicitly against the heretics. When the Gnosticism was created in the 18th century, the term Gnosticism still had a pejorative connotation. Thus, Gnosticism is not a symbol as understood in NSP; the large majority of groups designated as Gnostic did not interpret themselves in these terms. But, in Voegelin's usage of the term, Gnosticism is not a concept either because he does not provide a critical clarification of (i) the self-understanding of religious movements of late antiquity, or of (ii) the heresiologists who categorized them or of (iii) the French thinkers who introduced the Gnosticism in the 18th century. On the contrary, NSP contributed to the inflationary use of the term which makes today's students of early Christianity and religions of the Greco-Roman world wonder how they could have learned from very authoritative interpreters of Gnosis that science is Gnostic and superstition is Gnostic; power, counter-power, and lack of power are Gnostic; left is Gnostic and right is Gnostic; Hegel is Gnostic and Marx is Gnostic; Freud is Gnostic and Jung is Gnostic; all things and their opposites are equally Gnostic. The confusion is largely due to the fact that Gnosticism cannot be defined as a category that exists outside history. Attempts to delineate its margins through lists of characteristic features and symbols such as the six defining features listed in Voegelin's Ersatz Religion: The Gnostic Mass Movements of our Time against which concrete historical manifestations are checked have been shown to encompass either too much or too little.

Moreover, the historical continuity that was meant to link ancient and modern manifestations of Gnosticism is deeply problematic. In Chapter 54 of his The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Edward Gibbon had already established a direct line of continuity beginning with the Paulicians in seventh century Syria and Armenia, to their resettlement in the Balkans, their ramification into the Bogomils, the migration of both Bogomils and Paulicians

into Northern Italy, and the emergence of the Cathars in Southern France in the eleventh century. From the Cathars Gibbon saw links to the Waldenses and Spiritual Franciscans and the later sectarian movements, which spread all over Europe with climaxes in the Lollard movement in England and the Hussite movement in Bohemia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By the time of the Reformation, these protest movements had grown into mass movements with manifestations in the Peasant Wars in Germany and the Anabaptist movement, which continued to diffuse into the Netherlands and Moravia. Gibbon considered the Paulicians as **non-Manichaeic Gnostics**. For him, as for many Protestant writers, the Paulicians were the ancestors of the Protestant churches and hence had to be absolved from **heretic** Manichaeic influences. Accordingly, Gibbon does not attempt to establish the Paulicians' roots in late Antiquity. However, many scholars assume that the Paulician heresy (in its dualist version) originated in late Antiquity with direct or indirect links to Manichaeism, Marcionism, and possibly **other Gnostic** groups, and hence make the Paulicians a crucial link in a continuity of **dualist** teaching from Antiquity to the late Middle Ages. But the evidence they refer to in defense of this continuity is partly circumstantial and partly anachronistic. There is evidence that Manichaeic groups were present in Armenia in the late sixth century, some fifty years before Armenia became the geographic centre of the Paulicians. Moreover, we have Peter of Sicily's report on the Paulicians, which he wrote from his visit to Tephrike, the capital of the by then powerful Paulician organization, in 869. After his nine-month visit, Peter characterized the Paulicians as offshoots of the Manichaeans, and all subsequent Byzantine historians and theologians considered them direct descendants of the Manichaeans; the two groups were in fact considered the same heresy. Considering the situation **Manichaeism** was often used as a generic label for all **dualist** heresies and considering the purpose of Peter's visit, his account must be treated with caution. In any case, we know of a Manichaeic presence in Armenia prior to the arrival of the Paulicians, and Peter's evidence comes from the ninth century; we do not have any contemporary corroboration of direct contacts between Manichaeans and Paulicians from the crucial sixth and seventh centuries.

Interestingly, these problems do not affect Voegelin's analysis in NSP as much as we might fear because, although it treats **Gnosticism** as an ancient religious movement that **accompanied** Christianity from its very beginnings, NSP does not talk about ancient **Gnosticism**:

The economy of this lecture does not allow a description of the gnosis of antiquity or of the history of its transmission into the Western Middle Ages; enough to say that at the time gnosis was a living religious culture on which men could fall back.

Instead Voegelin's analysis begins with the late Middle Ages:

There emerges the image of a society, identifiable and intelligible as a unit by its evolution as the representative of a historically unique type of Gnostic truth. Following the Aristotelian procedure, the analysis started from the self-interpretation of society by means of the Joachitic symbols of the twelfth century. Now that their meaning has been clarified through theoretical understanding, a date can be assigned to the beginning of this civilizational course. A suitable date for its formal beginning would be the activation of ancient Gnosticism through Scotus

Eriugena in the ninth century, because his works, as well as those of Dionysius Areopagita which he translated, were a continuous influence in the underground Gnostic sects before they came to the surface in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Why the critical clarification of Gnostic symbols should begin with Joachim is not clear. The impetus to call these phenomena Gnostic does not appear to be based on any work on primary sources that Voegelin did on his own. He was probably led to use the label by his readings of studies such as Puech's on Manichaeism and Soderberg's on the Cathars. Both talk about continuity but Soderberg's proposal of an uninterrupted chain of a tradition of Gnostic ideology is problematic for the reasons mentioned above, and Puech's argument is derived from a history of ideas that is, from exactly the literary genre that Voegelin had abandoned during the years just prior to NSP. In fact, he later presented NSP as the breakthrough after a period of indecision between 1945 and 1950 following his growing awareness of the theoretical inadequacy of [his] conventional preconceptions about a history of ideas. NSP itself expresses his criticism of the genre. We have to conclude, therefore, that the vision articulated in NSP could not have been formulated in accordance with the methodological principles on which the book claims to be based. The empirical material as it presented itself to Voegelin in the 1940s and 1950s did not warrant Voegelin's use of the term Gnosticism; thus, the vision of NSP cannot be explained exhaustively as an immediate response to, and clarification of, the empirical material.

The second observation that we want to highlight in this context confirms this conclusion. As we noted earlier, Voegelin denied that he had advocated a position in NSP; thus, he cautioned Dante Germino, who had attributed such a position to Voegelin, that he should not dogmatize a result of empirical analysis. Voegelin did not want to be held responsible for a position which, in light of the advances made in the study of Gnosticism, obviously had to be revised. Whatever it was that he proposed in NSP, it was a mere reflection of what was then the present state of science. We have already suggested in the previous paragraph that this self-assessment is wrong. What we want to add to this in the following is the very simple observation, implicit in what was said above, that Voegelin could have known, at the time, that NSP did not reflect the present state of science. Our previous discussion drew partly on literature that was not available to Voegelin as he was working on NSP but the problems with Gnosticism were perfectly visible in the sources that Voegelin was using at the time. This was the conclusion also of Voegelin's friend, Gregor Sebba, who reviewed the literature on Gnosticism in an illuminating paper written for the Festschrift published on the occasion of Voegelin's 80th birthday. As Sebba was working on his paper, he shared his insights with Voegelin. In October 1978 he wrote to Voegelin:

[] from the sources that were available to you at the time, it follows without doubt that not a single one of the features that are thought to characterize classical gnosis fits without problems. [] Nevertheless the whole phenomenon of gnosis has a sharp profile. One motive applies throughout: the radical rejection of any immanentization of transcendence.

This is a remarkable statement, coming from a sympathetic reader whom Voegelin trusted as a reliable interpreter of his work. The statement confirms, in its first part, what we noted above,

that Gnosticism cannot be defined as a category or idea through a list of characteristics. However, if one wants to hold on to the notion and studies historically what are commonly regarded as its manifestations, the one motive that could be considered its essence is the very opposite of what Voegelin had presented as the essence of modern Gnosticism. Right at the beginning of his paper, Sebba observed:

To claim, as Voegelin does, that modern political and intellectual movements like positivism or Marxism are gnostic amounts to saying that ancient gnosticism has turned into its opposite while remaining what it is.

Sebba is sensitive to the problems in Voegelin's analysis but his account remains sympathetic. He continues:

This would be the final word on the link between modernity and gnosticism, were it not for the fact that this issue raises a far more fundamental one: that of the nature of history.

Sebba is right in concluding that the findings of NSP are not simply a result of empirical analysis as Voegelin wants to make us believe. Before one can even think of linking modernity and gnosticism in the way in which Voegelin linked these two notions one must begin with presuppositions that can in no way be extracted from the empirical material that becomes visible in light of these presuppositions. Sebba's essay does not go far enough because it still takes the notion of Gnosticism for granted as an empirical concept. Therefore he does not ask the crucial question of how this construction, this particular ism, could come to assume such an important role in Voegelin's thinking. Still, Sebba deserves credit for bringing the author of NSP, the person Eric Voegelin, back into the picture. It is truly remarkable how Voegelin throughout his life, and with much success, attempted to hide behind a smokescreen of statements in which he denies the responsibility of authorship. As late as 1983, when asked whether there was anything in Anamnesis he would deny 17 years after its publication, he replied by repeating the old formula: No. I rarely have something to deny because I always stick close to the empirical materials and do not generalize beyond them. So when I generalize, I have to generalize because of the materials. We will return to the person Eric Voegelin in our conclusions.

4. Conclusions

Voegelin considered The New Science a livre de circonstance and yet we have argued in this paper that it can be used as an index of his life work. The fact that Gnosticism, as used by Voegelin, cannot be interpreted as an empirical concept, draws our attention to Voegelin's Zutat, to the imaginative and visionary power of NSP's author. Precisely because NSP was a livre de circonstance, a book written under various pressures, Voegelin could not wait for the material to speak for itself in any case, it never does. It is in all that is not in the empirical material that we find, carefully concealed, the author's signature. For this reason, NSP is not an aberration but an index.

Our discussion in Part 2 has shown that at the heart of Voegelin's exploration of the meditative quest, of the in-between, of his interpretation of Bodin and the notion of tolerance, of his treatment of symbols and concepts, of his warnings against the dangers of doctrinization is a notion that he emphasized already in the early 1940s as the one and only position [sic] that was socially indestructible: the mysticism of the *via negativa*. The only position that is not vulnerable to social destruction is a non-position that continues to move beyond all positions. In a letter of October 1977 we find the following discussion of the tension, in Western language, between the *theologia dogmatica* and the *theologia mystica*:

The experience of divine presence, when symbolized, is burdened with the historical concreteness of the symbols. No symbolization is adequate to the ineffability of the divine Beyond. Hence, when you are a believer on the level of symbols, you become an "infidel" to the ineffable truth of divine reality; and when your faith is constituted by your relation to the ineffably divine, you become an "infidel" on the level of the symbols. Again in Western language, the problem looks to me very much like that of the *fides quaerens intellectum*, of the faith on the level of imaginative symbolism moving beyond its acceptance of the symbols, through meditative contemplation, towards the understanding of the experiences which endow the symbols with their sense.

Voegelin took pleasure from being an infidel on the level of the symbols, laughing at his readers who attempted to position him. Asked whether it was true that he referred to himself as a pre-Reformation Christian, Voegelin replied in 1977:

The "pre-Reformation Christian" is a joke. I never have written any such thing. These canards arise because I frequently have to ward off people who want to "classify" me. When somebody wants me to be a Catholic or a Protestant, I tell him that I am a "pre-Reformation Christian". If he wants to nail me down as a Thomist or Augustinian, I tell him I am a "pre-Nicene Christian". And if he wants to nail me down earlier, I tell him that even Mary the Virgin was not a member of the Catholic Church. I have quite a number of such stock answers for people who pester me after a lecture; and then they get talked around as authentic information on my "position".

These statements too are expressions of Voegelin's *via negativa*; they are reminiscent of (e.g.) Michel Foucault's declaration that he wrote in order to have no face.

Voegelin's non-position can also be characterized by relating it to the main character and title of one of his favorite novels, Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Voegelin's admiration for Musil's work is well known. He read it as a treatment of the problem of the "second reality" [] which in its variegated forms of sexual perversions, dream worlds, political ideologies, etc. superimposes itself on the "first reality" which furnishes the frame of human existence. Musil's novel studied the conflicts and catastrophies, arising from the clash between the two realities, [] in the Austrian society immediately preceding the first World War [] . Voegelin respected Musil as an incredibly careful observer of reality and as a master of the intellectual problems involved. Musil, in turn, had great respect for Voegelin's work; the two men met several times in Vienna. The main hero of the novel, Ulrich,

shares with Voegelin (and Musil) an interest in mysticism. His mystic inclinations compensate for his growing loss of confidence in language as a means for conceptualizing and communicating reality. Showing his sister his magnificent library of mystical writings, Ulrich explains:

◆Here are Christian, Judaic, Indian, and Chinese testimonies. Between some of them there lie as much as a thousand years. And yet in all of them one recognizes the same pattern of inner movement, one that diverges from the normal but which is in itself integral. Almost the only way in which they differ from each other at all is just in whatever comes from being connected with theological constructions, as it were a doctrinal edifice that supplies them with a sheltering roof overhead. What it comes to, then, is that we can assume the existence of a characteristic second, extraordinary condition, a highly important condition that man is capable of entering into and which has deeper origins than the religions.◆

Ulrich identifies here, beneath the second realities that dominate his social environment and, in fact, beneath the religious symbolisms, the truth and first reality of mysticism. Musil's novel is interspersed with more than three hundred quotations from Martin Buber's collection Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism, published in 1909. Ulrich's library derives in effect from Buber's Ecstatic Confessions. Ulrich would have little difficulties in understanding Voegelin's writings on the equivalences of experiences. Accordingly, the two also share a peculiar lack of ◆qualities◆; they are both ◆men without qualities◆, or at least they aspire to be such men for only ◆men without qualities◆ do not possess qualities that are ◆socially destructable◆. Ulrich, like Voegelin, is a ◆man without qualities◆ because, to use Voegelin's words cited above, he does not insist on ◆finding his absolute co-ordinates in his nation, as a Marxist, as a liberal etc.◆. Both do not tie their identities to what are merely the ◆last words of each historical religion◆. Both know that the ◆reality of faith◆ lies beyond the symbols. One commentator characterized Ulrich as a ◆man of faith who merely happens not to believe in anything◆, and we suggest that Voegelin's *via negativa* was driven by the same problem.

The mysticism of the ◆man of faith who merely happens not to believe in anything◆ is a mysticism that is born of skepticism. As Friedrich Nietzsche once observed, ◆when scepticism mates with longing, mysticism is born◆. And we must remember in this context Voegelin's declaration, from 1928, that reality must be approached with a ◆loving skepsis◆ [*z◆rtliche Skepsis*]. This scepticism is built into Voegelin's *via negativa* from the outset because his quest for truth, as we saw, always resists an untruth; the quest is a ◆critical◆ endeavor that proceeds primarily by leaving behind what is deemed untrue rather than by incorporating what is deemed true. But the untruth resisted is in itself a resistance to the truth of reality. Voegelin's meditative quest therefore resists the resistance to reality; it refuses the refusal to apperceive. Being a ◆resister◆ himself, he understands his opponents all too well. It is worthwhile to quote again his profound insight from In Search of Order, where he acknowledges that ◆in the depth of the quest, formative truth and deformative untruth are more closely related than the language of "truth" and "resistance" would suggest◆. And it is again in his last book that we find a reference to the troubled soul of the questioner, who, as we saw, has to produce both illuminating symbols and objectifying type-concepts:

◆The questions touch a cardinal problem inherent to the analysis of existential consciousness, the inherent temptation that is every questioner's burden, the temptation to deform the Beyond and its formative Parousia, as they are experienced and symbolized in the respective quest, by transforming the Beyond into a thing and its Parousia into the imposition of a definite form on reality. The temptation not only affects the present analysis, but is a constant force in the millennial process of the quest for truth.◆

Voegelin even notes that the ◆symbolisms engendered by disturbances of existential consciousness◆ have a ◆fascination◆ and ◆charm◆ of their own. This, by the way, is another theme that runs through Voegelin's work: the insight into the attractiveness of evil. In the Preface to the American edition of The Political Religions, Voegelin writes:

◆If my representation gives rise to the impression that it is too "objective" and "advertises" for National Socialism, then that to me seems to be a sign that my representation is good ◆ for the Luciferian aspects are not simply morally negative or atrocious, but are a force and a very attractive force at that.◆

Here is where Voegelin's ◆Gnosticism◆ finally finds its context and meaning. In NSP, ◆Gnosticism◆ assumes the role of a generic label for the untruth that Voegelin's mystic quest resists. The *via negativa* is concerned with the preservation of the openness of the whole of reality by preventing hypostatizations. It never takes the symbols and concepts that reality generates for the whole of reality; there is always something ◆beyond◆ the symbols. Accordingly, the ◆truncation of reality◆ is the counter-movement to the movement of the *via negativa*. As Gregor Sebba observed in a letter to Voegelin of 1978:

◆In the final analysis you call Gnostic everything that reflects a truncation of reality, and this goes far beyond the narrow concept of gnosis.◆

The need for ◆Gnosticism◆ does not derive from empirical analysis but from the intrinsic dynamics of Voegelin's quest, which finally found its ◆target◆ in ◆gnosis◆. The meditative quest for truth can begin because he has found the untruth that needs to be resisted. In subsequent works, Voegelin refines his understanding of both complexes, the meditative *and* the deformative complex. The harshness of at least some of the formulations in NSP are not so much due to the fact that ◆Gnosticism◆ was an existential problem for Western civilization; nor was it due to the pressures and tensions of the Cold War environment in which NSP was written. We suggest that its harshness was due, rather, to the fact that NSP entailed an element of ◆self-overcoming◆. Voegelin knew of the attractiveness and ◆proximity◆ of the ◆derailment◆ of ◆gnosis◆. The greatest threat to Voegelin's mystic quest is the temptation to find a resting place, a finality, on the level of symbols, and to take as final what is merely an ◆index◆. The ◆truncation of reality◆, Voegelin's ◆Gnosticism◆, is the one route that must be avoided on the *via negativa*. And yet, although he knew how tempting it was to take that route, it is a remarkable trait of Voegelin's personality that he insisted that the individual human being was responsible for staying on the right path. In a letter to Jakob Taubes, written in 1953, we read:

◆ The question of metaphysical blindness. You tend to see in such blindness a fate that befalls a human being. I rather tend to emphasize personal guilt. As far as my side of the dichotomy is concerned, I can only talk of a ◆ tendency◆; I have not been able to achieve much clarity in the context of this question.◆

In spite of his failure to achieve clarity, Voegelin suggests two explanations for his ◆ tendency◆. First, he feels that the representatives of ◆ metaphysical blindness◆ show in their writings that, in fact, they are not blind. They simply choose to ignore that they can see and hence are responsible for their blindness. But his second explanation is more important because he refers to ◆ personal motives◆:

◆ In every visage of a positivistic professor or liberal pastor I see the visage of the SS-murderer that he causes.◆

Against the obvious experiential background implied in this statement, Voegelin emphasizes both personal responsibility and the attractiveness of evil. The result is a tension that explains much of the intensity of his writings. If there is harshness, it is directed against others as much as against himself.

It is obvious that the experiential background that shines through in the above quote affected not only the style and tone of Voegelin's writings; it also affected his choice of his media of expression: history. Pursuing the *via negativa*, one finds God not where he is but approaches him indirectly by leaving (resisting) the places where he is not. This is the reason why it is in the medium of history (and politics) that Voegelin articulates the resisting movements of his soul ◆ an unusual choice, were it not for the background in experience. Voegelin tells us hi-stories just as Plato constructs his city as a macroanthropos in order to examine the human soul. It would be misleading, therefore, to consider him a political philosopher or political theorist. Like Plato, Voegelin is a ◆ philosopher of the soul◆. History and politics are important to Voegelin because it is there where he finds untruth that requires resistance; it is there where his ◆ moving soul◆ finds its ◆ points of departure◆.

There is no difference between a ◆ late◆, ◆ meditative◆ Voegelin and the Voegelin of NSP. The two are one and the same. His work is indexed by both the symbols and concepts that it generated. We would like to conclude, therefore, with the suggestion that his experiential background is reflected not only in particular symbols or concepts but also in the overall direction and form of his quest as a whole:

◆ The Word of truth, "the tale that saves" as told by Socrates-Plato, is not a piece of information available to everybody. The tale has to be found by the man who is suffering the death of reality and, in the cave of his death, is moved to turn around towards the divine light.◆

The death of reality leads to scepticism and longing; scepticism and longing lead to the mysticism of the *via negativa* in the hope that it might be ◆ socially indestructible◆, immune to the death of reality. But what is the price of this immunity?

