

Some Principles of Voegelinian Hermeneutics – Eric Voegelin's Reading of Jean Bodin

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(PROVISIONAL VERSION)

How did Eric Voegelin read texts? In which way and to what extent did his reading of other authors influence his own thinking? Or to put it in a more analytical question: Is it possible to identify certain hermeneutical principles of what could be called Eric Voegelin's philosophical art of understanding? These questions periodically reappear in discussions on Eric Voegelin. That it seems to be particularly difficult to answer them may be partly due to Voegelin's work itself. For while other hermeneutical philosophers (and I think Voegelin can be rightfully labeled this way) explicitly and more or less elaborately addressed these questions, Voegelin himself seems to remain rather silent in this respect. It seems as if in order to identify such general principles of Voegelin's hermeneutics they have to be hermeneutically extracted from his numerous material studies. In the following very tentative reflections I want to suggest a few aspects that may be worth considering regarding such possible principles of "Voegelinian hermeneutics".¹ I want to consider some early texts in which Voegelin at least incidentally reflects on "methodical" questions, and I want to primarily focus on Voegelin's reading of Jean Bodin. For Voegelin's interpretation of this thinker in my opinion is particularly instructive in this respect.

¹ I thus pick up a question that in a similar way was treated (yet in a much broader perspective than intended here), for instance, already by Thomas Hollweck in his 1981 article on the method of Voegelin's scholarly work (Thomas Hollweck, Gedanken zur Arbeitsmethode Eric Voegelins, in: Philosophisches Jahrbuch, Vol. 88 (1981), p. 136-152), by Jürgen Gebhardt (see, for instance, Gebhardt's article Eric Voegelin und die neuere Entwicklung der Geisteswissenschaften, in Zeitschrift für Politik, 36 (1989), p. 251-263) and Barry Cooper (see his chapter on „Method: Voegelin, Strauss, and Arendt in: Barry Cooper, Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science, Columbia and London (Univ. of Missouri Press) 1999, p. 120 ff.). I owe these texts various hints and informations.

The argument of my paper can be summarized as follows: The first answer I want to suggest to the question of how Eric Voegelin read texts is that he read them in two substantially different ways. There are two different, yet dialectically related variants of his hermeneutical method of interpretation discernable in his material studies which I want to call his “open” and his “closed” method of interpretation, respectively. These two variants reflect – on the “methodical” level – fundamental principles of Voegelin’s general theoretical perspective. Secondly I want to argue that particularly his “open” method of interpretation, of which his reading of Jean Bodin is a particularly distinct example, in turn has important general theoretical implications. It seems to constitute a genuine form of Voegelinian philosophical hermeneutics in which author and interpreter – the work to be interpreted and Voegelin’s genuine interpretation of it – are intimately related in an intricate reciprocal or “dialogical” complex of meaning. These peculiarities of Voegelin’s way of reading texts appear to emphasize the importance of the “hermeneutical” traits within his philosophical questioning and his conception of political science in general.

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There are several reasons why it appears to be plausible to pick Voegelin’s reading of Jean Bodin for an inquiry as intended here. Voegelin himself, first of all, explicitly states the importance of his studies on Bodin for his own intellectual development.² That Bodin in fact is somehow an important author for Voegelin, secondly, can be demonstrated by a collection of the references to Bodin in Voegelin’s writings.³ Such references appear for the first time in the 1930s, in contexts particularly important for Voegelin’s intellectual development at that

² Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz, Baton Rouge and London (Louisiana State Univ. Press) 1996, p. 113 f.: “My careful study of the work of Bodin in the early thirties gave me my first full understanding of the function of mysticism in a time of social disorder. I still remember Bodin’s *Lettre à Jan Baturu* as one of the most important documents to affect my own thought.” See also Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution. A Biographical Introduction*, New Brunswick/London (Transaction Publishers) 2000, p. 42.

³ See for such a collection Peter J. Opitz, *Nachwort*, in: Eric Voegelin, Jean Bodin, hrsg. von Peter J. Opitz, Munich (Fink) 2003, p. 115 ff.

time.⁴ Then, in the *History of Political Ideas*, which occupied Voegelin throughout the 1940s, the long study on Jean Bodin plays an eminently important role.⁵ Finally, in Voegelin's main works from the 1950s and later, Bodin usually appears in one line with thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine or Thomas Aquinas, and as an example of a thinker who in his work expanded political science "to its full grandeur as the science of human existence in society and history, as well as of the principles of order in general".⁶ Yet, on the other hand, the references to Bodin in these later writings are not too numerous, and they are rather short and incidental. So, if Bodin in fact has to be considered an important author for Voegelin, he appears to be (at least for the later Voegelin) rather a silent companion of his thinking than an explicit source of inspiration.

But, leaving this question unanswered for the moment, there is another reason why it seems to be particularly rewarding to look at Voegelin's study on Bodin with regard to the questions I want to raise. In this text we find a passage where Voegelin himself does at least in passing and briefly address questions regarding his own hermeneutical method, the question of how he in general thinks a hermeneutical study of philosophical texts should be pursued. And, although rather short, I think Voegelin's remark to be found here is very instructive, and it implicitly formulates one of the crucial questions of the Bodin chapter in general. Defending Bodin's thinking against the attempts in the scholarly literature on his work to reduce it to a certain "doctrine" (like his concept of sovereignty) and against the "clichéd dichotomies" (particularly the dichotomy "modern" versus "medieval") that for Voegelin unrightfully dominate the modern perspective on Bodin's work, Voegelin makes a general methodical remark in which he outlines some "principles of critical historiography" which in his opinion have to be followed in an interpretation of a philosopher's work:

⁴ See Hans-Jörg Sigwart, *Das Politische und die Wissenschaft. Intellektuell-biographische Studien zum Frühwerk Eric Voegelins*, Würzburg (Königshausen & Neumann) 2005, p. 228 ff.

⁵ Eric Voegelin, Bodin, in: CW 23, p. 180-251. See also James L. Wiser's characterization of Voegelin's „particularly sympathetic“ reading of Bodin (James L. Wiser, Editor's Introduction, in: Ibid., p. 1-9; here: p. 8.

⁶ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, Chicago and London (Univ. of Chicago Press) 1987, p. 2. See also the similar earlier formulation in Voegelin, CW 23, p. 68, where Voegelin characterizes the aim of a "philosophy of history" as the attempt to find "a meaningful order in the variety of existence."

The interpretation of a thinker ... must not attach itself to particular doctrines (for instance, the theory of sovereignty) but penetrate to the motivating center of his thought that endows the particular doctrines with their meaning; and it must place thinker and work in their civilizational environment.⁷

The remark is commonly known, and for readers of the *History of Political Ideas* it is obvious that this short methodical sketch indeed mirrors the basic principles of Voegelin's political and historical science in general which, instead of dealing with a history of abstract theoretical and political dogmas in their chronological order of appearance, rather focuses on the underlying articulations of personal experiences and on their constitutive historical significance, without (regarding the latter) adhering to dogmatic periodisations and historic clichés. But are there further theoretical or methodical implications of this succinct statement? Obviously, there is a tension between the two outlined requirements a hermeneutical interpretation has to meet. On the one hand the interpretation has to try to penetrate to the most personal, most original motivation, the individual "Why", the "What for", so to speak, that lies at the core of a philosophical work. On the other hand, it has to try to unravel the various "objective" influences that modeled the specific form of articulation at hand, it has to focus on the fact that any thinker is determined by the dominant ideas, problems, and questions of his time, of his society and its political culture and of the intellectual traditions in which he stands. Every author is, in short, always embedded in and determined by his "civilizational environment". Thus, Voegelin's hermeneutical formula seems to confront the idea of individual *experience* as the original intellectual motivation of philosophizing (and, one could say: the resulting methodical guideline to understand the author as he understood himself) on the one hand with the assumption (some would say: the "historicist" assumption⁸) of the external, historical determination and contextuality of any human "experiences", articulations, expressions, and (philosophical) reflections.

⁷ Voegelin, Bodin, p. 182.

⁸ On Voegelin's interesting debate with Leo Strauss on this methodical question see Cooper, Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science, p. 121 ff.

To separate these two aspects of the problem too harshly would, of course, mean to misinterpret Voegelin, for it is the insoluble tension between the two – in Voegelin’s own words: “the very historicity of human existence, that is, the unfolding of the typical in meaningful concreteness”⁹ – which is the very basis of Voegelin’s philosophizing in general. Nonetheless, their clear separation for the moment can be of heuristic help since it more clearly brings out the methodical implications of the problem. In fact, in my opinion this dialectical tension between the two patterns of interpretation intimated in the Bodin chapter – “motivating center” and “civilizational environment” – actually not only reflects the two principal “poles” of Voegelin’s own tensional theoretical orientation, they at the same time constitute the two axes, to change metaphors, of his hermeneutical coordinate system. And these axes, I want to furthermore argue in the following, indicate two fundamentally distinct and dialectically related variants of his hermeneutical method – *of his way of reading texts* – that directly correspond to the two “poles” of this tension. I think that by looking at Voegelin’s various material studies from this angle, one can distinguish two implicit ideal-typical methodical variants of Voegelin’s hermeneutics. I want to call them Voegelin’s “open” and his “closed” method of interpretation, respectively.

If we look a bit closer at the way in which Voegelin concretely carries out his intimated “principles of critical historiography” in his interpretation of “the solitary, peerless Bodin”,¹⁰ there are three peculiarities of the study that attract attention. The first is the clear emphasis Voegelin here puts on one side of the hermeneutical tension between personal motivating center and civilizational environment. Voegelin’s interpretation of Bodin starts with reflections on the “civilizational environment” of the work at hand. Yet, this civilizational environment in the case of Bodin is, although instructive regarding his specific perspective,¹¹ still of secondary importance. And this is apparently due to the peculiar nature of Bodin’s work itself, or, one could say, his peculiar style of thinking. Bodin’s work is that of a

⁹ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Voegelin, *CW* 23, p. 18.

¹¹ In order to characterize this very particular environment of Bodin’s thinking Voegelin coins the interesting term of „mediterranean modernity“. See Voegelin, *Bodin*, p. 181 ff.

“contemplative realist”,¹² as Voegelin puts it here with a term that for Voegelin at the time in general denotes the authoritative style of substantial philosophizing on political reality that also characterizes his own conception of a philosophical political science.¹³ The object of Voegelin’s interpretation in the case at hand is in its intellectual characteristics, so to speak, close to the interpreter’s own perspective. The second peculiarity I want to point at is the fact that the hermeneutical principles intimated by Voegelin’s remark quoted above themselves constitute one of the main subjects of the interpretation of Bodin. They are not only the basis of Voegelin’s “open” interpretation of Bodin, they at the same time are also the results of the interpretation. And, finally, the third peculiarity of the text seems to me to be a further methodical consequence of the first two: The intimate constellation between author and interpreter and the focus on the author’s motivating center results in a very particular reciprocal or “dialogical” form Voegelin’s reading of Bodin assumes. And this reciprocal or dialogical form of interpretation – I want to call it the form of “open” interpretation – in my opinion is one of the two genuine methodical forms in which Voegelin in general pursues his hermeneutical science of politics.

Before I will try to clarify some further implications of Voegelin’s reading of Bodin as a particularly instructive example of his “open” form of reading, I first want to distinguish this “open” form in a brief sketch from what I see as Voegelin’s second, clearly distinct, yet at the same time dialectically related form, his “closed” method of interpretation. To this end I want to turn to Voegelin’s interpretation of John R. Commons and George Santayana in *On the Form of the American Mind*. Gregor Sebba, in his “Prelude and Variations on the Theme of Eric Voegelin” refers to this text and characterizes the significance of these two authors for Voegelin as follows:

¹² Voegelin, Bodin, p.240 ff. and 250 f.; see also Voegelin, CW 25, p. 59 ff. and Voegelin’s characterization of „Spiritual Realism“ in his chapter on Dante in Voegelin, CW 21, p. 70 ff.

¹³ On the concept of „contemplative“ or „spiritual realism“ in Voegelin see Jürgen Gebhardt, *Erfahrung und Wirklichkeit – Anmerkungen zur Politischen Wissenschaft des spirituellen Realismus*, in P.J. Opitz/G. Sebba (Eds.), *The Philosophy of Order*, Stuttgart (Klett-Cotta) 1981, p. 332-344.

The figure of Santayana is, in Jungian terms, Voegelin's 'shadow', the kind of sterile thinker he might have become. Commons, 'whose greatness one must love to defend oneself against its superiority', is by contrast what Voegelin could never be: the nonreflexive man who, in all simplicity and modesty, has experienced life so fully that 'almost not knowing what he is doing, he merely has to say what he sees to give highest philosophical expression to the meaning of the society in and for which he lives.'"¹⁴

Sebba's equivocal comment about the personal significance of these two figures for Voegelin in my opinion points toward the distinction of the two methodical variants I intimated. A closer look at the respective chapters in *On the Form of the American Mind* reveals that Commons and Santayana obviously not only represent two fundamentally different personal ideal-types, if you will, but also two corresponding *styles of thinking* that appear to be as well rather important and of ambivalent significance for Voegelin personally. Although Voegelin's respective reading of the two is equally rather affirmative, and although it is John R. Commons who *as a person* finds the utmost admiration of the young Voegelin, it is clearly Santayana, not Commons, who represents the *style of thinking* which is also Voegelin's own. The Commons- and Santayana-chapters furthermore indicate some significant characteristics of these styles of thinking, and they indicate that these two different styles for Voegelin obviously have important "methodical" implications. In the respective chapters Voegelin follows, as he points out in his introduction to the book, two substantially different methods of interpretation.¹⁵ Voegelin's interpretation of Santayana, after having "eliminate(d) from the philosopher's formations anything that is not of a personal nature", evolves an "analysis of an intellectual career in which all events appear to have been formed by their relation to the life of one person."¹⁶ Clearly, the "motivational center" of Santayana's original philosophical questioning is the main object of Voegelin's analysis, and his interpretation therefore assumes the form of an *intellectual biography* that curiously considers

¹⁴ Gregor Sebba, Prelude and Variations on the Theme of Eric Voegelin, in: Ellis Sandoz (Ed.), *Eric Voegelin's Thought. A Critical Appraisal*, Durham 1982, p. 3-65; here: p. 10.

¹⁵ Voegelin distinguishes in the same text a third methodical variant (which will not be further considered here): the interpretation of „the anonymous history of an idea“. (Eric Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, CW 1, p. 15.)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the different stages of Santayana's lifelong philosophical endeavor that in a way remains substantially alien, foreign and even "solipsistic" against its "civilizational environment" of the "American Mind".

The chapter on Commons, on the other hand, follows a remarkably different method of interpretation, and this is due to its fundamentally different object:

Another form is used in the chapter on John R. Commons. What is at issue is not the signature the life stages imprint on the intellectual expressions. Rather, in a neutral area of experience there arises the description of a diversity of events, coming from the most varied directions and converging in one center of meaning. (...) (A)ll ... events appear one after another in Commons' life and coalesce [zusammenwachsen] into a meaningful whole that finally finds the words to speak about itself. The individual life becomes the collector and the expression of the history of a nation and of its meaning.¹⁷

On the one hand we have the almost "solipsistic" reflections of the philosopher Santayana who to a great extent remains a foreigner in his social and historical environment. On the other hand we have John R. Commons, whose intellect is so deeply embedded in his environment, that he only has to say what he sees in order to almost unconsciously express the fundamental historical and social principles of his time and his society.¹⁸ Commons, the "nonreflective man" seems to paradigmatically represent (and Voegelin seems to admire at him) a very particular style of thinking, maybe even more: a particular form of existence that appears to be the antipode of the authoritative philosophical scholar as "contemplative realist": the form of existence of the political intellectual,¹⁹ if you will, or simply: of the

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁸ Commons' perspective is, as Voegelin points out, "so astute that, almost without being aware of what he was doing, he needed only to say what he saw in order to give the highest philosophical expression to the significance of the society in which and for which he lived." (Ibid., p. 281.)

¹⁹ As the paradigmatic example of Commons shows, the term as it is meant here does not necessarily have the negative and pejorative implications it has in Voegelin's later writings. For Voegelin's later very critical, partly polemic use of the term see, for instance, his paper „Political Science and the Intellectuals“, presented at the APSA annual conference in 1952, in: Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution, box 64.13: „The political science that was created by Plato and Aristotle, was established in opposition to the opinions held by the intellectuals of their time, by the sophists. And the conflict with the intellectuals, the revolt against the intellectuals, from which emerged our science, is monumentally commemorated to this day in the political dialogues of Plato's early and middle years. From its origins the science of politics is a militant enterprise, a defense of truth both theoretical and practical. It is a defense of true knowledge about human existence in society against the untrue opinions dispensed by intellectuals;“

citizen, the active member of the democratic American republic, whose intellectual perspective is deeply rooted within the ideas, beliefs and traditions of his political community.

The two different styles of thinking represented by Commons and Santayana for Voegelin are of a substantially different nature: they represent the “transcendent”, the philosophical or scholarly style on the one hand and the “immanent”, the political style, if you will, on the other. And they are substantially different because they are located at fundamentally different points within the dialectical tension between “person” and “civilizational environment”. While Santayana’s work for Voegelin is clearly “personal” in nature, Commons’ writings are rather “environmental”:

The person of Santayana ... was historically neutral; such contemporary history as of necessity entered his work is meaningful only to the extent that it formed his personality. Commons the individual fades completely away; his life and work is only one event among many, marked by the fact that unrelated and silent matters found unity and a voice in him.²⁰

Apparently for Voegelin a literary work can be understood in two substantially different ways: either as a “personal” (an “original”) analysis and articulation of fundamental existential and philosophical questions that in their significance “transcend” their specific historical and socio-political context. Or it can be understood primarily as an articulation of this very context itself, and as an articulation *from within* this context, as a more or less “nonreflective” “expression to the significance of the society” in which the thinker lives. Such a work is not so much “personal” as rather a *symptom* of “objective”, “super-personal meaningful structures” (as Voegelin frequently puts it in his early writings²¹), such as historical traditions, political communities, or, most important for Voegelin’s later writings: social and historical pneumopathologies and patterns of crisis etc.²² A work, as Voegelin

²⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

²¹ On Voegelin’s use of this formulation see the texts published in vol. 32 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, particularly *The Theory of Governance* (ibid., p. 224 ff.).

²² See as an early and particularly explicit example in this respect Voegelin’s interpretation of Thomas More as „the first tangible symptom of the great spiritual disease that was to grip Western civilization in the following centuries.“ (Voegelin, CW 22, p. 129.)

(probably implicitly referring to Bergson's *Deux Sources*²³) puts it in the first volume of the *History*, is either the medium of "primary creative intelligence", or it is the medium of "secondary common intelligence".²⁴ And as much as these styles of thinking are fundamentally different, also Voegelin's respective method of reading and interpreting them - is fundamentally different. Voegelin's object in the chapter on Commons is not so much the person of the thinker, but rather the historical and social "intellectual formation" of which Commons' work is a perfect articulation. "Commons the individual" gives expression to the meaningful social and intellectual structure which Voegelin calls the "form of the American mind", and while doing this, Commons the individual almost "fades away", he merges with the "super-personal structure" he gives expression to. Commons' style of thinking is rooted in the meaningful patterns of the *cosmion* surrounding him to an extent that his individual intellectual *motivation* and the meaningful preconditions of his *civilizational environment* are nearly identical. The "person" almost intellectually disappears, and with the person also seems to disappear the dialectical tension (the tension between *person/motivational center/science* on the one hand and *community/historical context/civilizational environment/political ideas* on the other.)

Thus, to conclude, the exemplary cases of Santayana and Commons indicate two different variants of Voegelin's hermeneutical method, depending on the dominant style of thinking in the object of his analysis.²⁵ Depending on the dominant style of thinking of an author, his work for Voegelin has to be interpreted in a way that leans toward the respective "pole" of the hermeneutical tension. Voegelin orients his interpretation either primarily towards the "motivating center" of the thinker, or he primarily treats him in terms of a hermeneutical case study of a specific "civilizational environment". This is meant to be a heuristic or an ideal-typical distinction, since Voegelin's concrete studies of thinkers always simultaneously reflect

²³ See Bergson's distinction of „static“ and „dynamic religion“ in Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, Notre Dame (Univ. of Notre Dame Press) 1986, particularly p. 209 ff.

²⁴ Voegelin, CW 19, p. 128 f.

²⁵ The respective method of Voegelin's interpretation thus is a reflection of the dominant style of thinking of the author at hand. The method of interpretation is, to put it in Voegelin's own terms, a reflection of the "lines of meaning" that run through "the material itself." See Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, p. 3 ff.

on both questions.²⁶ Yet, most of his studies clearly emphasize one of the poles, and I think there is a substantial reason for this. For the respective styles of thinking themselves tend to drift apart, so to speak. To be deeply rooted in and intellectually grounded on the meaningful patterns of a concrete cosmion within history requires a certain “nonreflective” ingredient in ones intellectual perspective. Philosophy or science, as Voegelin understands it, on the other hand, requires a certain degree of “alienation” (as Santayana’s), or better: an intellectual emancipation from ones own civilizational environment. This environment, the specific “Zeitgeist” remains present in the philosopher’s work, yet it turns from an unconscious determinant of thinking into one of the explicit objects of the scholarly reflection. A “transcendent” perspective in this sense is only gradually attainable. Nonetheless, it is the constant intellectual attempt to attain such a transcendent perspective that for Voegelin constitutes the particular position of scholarship.

The theoretical and methodical consequences of this distinction between open and closed interpretation are particularly discernable in Voegelin’s *History of Political Ideas*.²⁷ Actually, seen from this angle, Voegelin’s *History* appears to evolve a grant typology of styles of political thinking, or better: it appears to be a grant case study on the problem of the political thinker in which Voegelin locates the different thinkers at hand – depending on their dominant style of thinking – on peculiar positions within the continuum between the two ideal-types of the immanent political intellectual on the one side and the philosopher or scholar as “contemplative realist” on the other.²⁸ And depending on their specific position within this continuum Voegelin’s interpretation leans towards one of his two fundamental

²⁶ And, again, the relation between the two poles itself for Voegelin seems to be eventually more intricate and reciprocal than the distinction introduced here intimates at first sight. See, for instance, the following interesting remark of Voegelin in his *History*-chapter on Joachim of Fiore where he speaks of the „peculiar dialectical relation of the idea with the historical place of the thinker (that the historical position enables him to think the idea, and the idea defines his historical position).“ (Voegelin, CW 20, p. 131.)

²⁷ Voegelin not only frequently addresses this crucial question of the peculiar position of a thinker towards his socio-political environment, he also develops several concepts particularly to denote the „immanent“ nature of certain styles of thinking and ideas. See, for instance, the type of the „intellectual in power politics“ (CW 21, p. 46 ff. and 66. f.), the concepts of „epigonism“ (Voegelin, CW 22, p. 93 f.) and „polite philosophy“ (ibid., p. 114 f.) and the further examples in the following footnotes.

²⁸ See, for instance, Voegelin’s interesting characterization of the personality and intellectual style of Francisco de Vitoria as „a model case of intermediate existence between contemplation and action.“ (Voegelin, CW 23, p. 128 ff.)

methodical variants and towards the respective pole within the hermeneutical tension. His interpretation either constitutes an intimate “dialogical” interrelation between author and interpreter. Or it rather “objectives” the work at hand and treats it as an immanent, substantially political expression of a specific historical and socio-political situation. His interpretation of Cicero and his “hieroglyphic” style of thinking,²⁹ for instance, is an example of such a “closed” interpretation, as well as the chapter on John Locke’s theories as “ancillary evocations”.³⁰ Actually, the “closed” variant of Voegelin’s hermeneutical method has far reaching implications. I think one could demonstrate that Voegelin’s later critiques of the modern ideologies and pneumopathologies in terms of method could be at least partly described as a derivative of his “closed hermeneutics”.³¹ Yet, I will leave aside in the following the peculiarities of this methodical variant and rather concentrate on Voegelin’s “open” interpretations. It is here where we may find answers on how his reading of other authors actually influenced his own way of philosophizing.

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I return to the chapter on Bodin which is a particularly instructive example for an “open” interpretation. Voegelin’s focus here clearly lies on the motivating or “animating center” of Bodin’s thinking.³² Similarly to his reading of Santayana Voegelin’s analysis of Bodin focuses on his personal intellectual biography and on the physiognomy of his work as a

²⁹ Voegelin, CW 19, p. 131 ff. on Cicero and 128 ff on the „hieroglyphic“ style of thinking in general.

³⁰ Voegelin, CW 25, p. 137 ff.: „The time when Locke was considered by historians a great political philosopher seems to be passing. His thought is recognized today as the expression of the social and constitutional settlement of the Restoration and the Glorious Revolution His theory of consent and o property belong among the most successful ancillary evocations.“

³¹ The constellation, however, becomes more intricate than it is sketched here in Voegelin’s treatment of the problem of modernity. It would need further analysis, for instance, whether Voegelin’s critical ideal-types of “antispiritual spiritualism” (Voegelin, CW 22, p. 189) and of the „activist mystic“ (ibid., 173 ff.) as another typically modern antipode of the „spiritual realist“ can still be characterized in terms of the „immanent” style of thinking in the sense outlined here. On the problem of „spiritual disorder“ in Voegelin’s later writings in general see Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt. The Roots of Modern Ideology*, Baton Rouge and London (Louisiana State Univ. Press) 1992.

³² Voegelin, Bodin, p. 186 ff.. See in this context also the interesting methodical remarks in Voegelin’s chapter on Jesus in Voegelin, CW 19, p. 153.

whole.³³ It is primarily the original intellectual personality of Bodin (and only secondarily the symptomatic traits his time and society imprinted on his work) Voegelin is interested in. The specific problems and constellations of the 16th century are addressed in Bodin's work, but they are critically reflected, as Voegelin points out, by a thinker who in substantial aspects is not really part of his society and of the main currents of his time. Voegelin repeatedly stresses Bodin's intellectual "solitude" and his intellectual independence from his time, and he emphasizes the systematic and conceptual contributions of Bodin to the fundamental questions of a philosophical science of politics in general.

There are several obvious parallels between these contributions and some major concerns of Voegelin's own political science, as for instance regarding the question of a philosophy of history and a theory of consciousness,³⁴ but also with regard to Bodin's peculiar perspective on the question of the nature of „the Political“,³⁵ and between Bodin's theory of climate and politics and Voegelin's theory of national types of mind.³⁶ Even more clearly than in these parallels the reciprocal or "dialogical" relation between the author and his interpreter is discernable in Voegelin's reflections on the "motivating center" of Bodin's work. Particularly in these passages the interpretation of Bodin and Voegelin's own original reflections on the pivotal questions of his political theory overlap each other and almost merge into one intricate pattern of reciprocal interrelations.³⁷ The main points of Voegelin's interpretation of Bodin in fact seem to mirror the major concerns of his own political theory in the 1930s and 1940s. And they mirror and further explicate the implications of Voegelin's method of interpretation,

³³ Voegelin, Bodin, p. 184 ff.

³⁴ See Cooper, Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science, p. 226 ff. (see Voegelin, Bodin, p. 247) (See Voegelin, CW 32, p. 430 ff.)

³⁵ See Voegelin, Bodin, p. 247.

³⁶ See Voegelin, CW 32, p. 430 ff.

³⁷ This peculiar „dialogical“ form is, at least in a similar way, also intimated in Thomas Hollweck's reflections on Voegelin's method of reading and thinking. Hollweck characterizes it as a peculiar dialectic between philosophy and „science“ (Wissenschaft) within Voegelin's work: „Die Denkmethode Voegelins lässt sich ... im Bild der dialektischen Spannung fassen, die darin besteht, dass der Denker einerseits analytisch differenzierend die konkret erscheinenden Denkformen zu begreifen sucht, andererseits aber dann im eigenen Denken die Bestätigung dafür sucht, dass das so Begriffene anschaulich ist. Anschaulichkeit steht dabei für Erfahrbarkeit, und erst hierin liegt etwas wie das Versprechen, dass es sich bei dem Geistigen um etwas Wirkliches handelt. Das Versprechen wohlgeordnet, nicht die Garantie. Das Philosophische im Denken Voegelins ist also der Anker zur Wirklichkeit, wodurch die Analyse des Materials überhaupt nur ihren Sinn erhält.“ (Hollweck, Zur Arbeitsmethode Eric Voegelins, p. 145. See also the further reflections on the same question on the following pages, *ibid.* P. 146 f.)

of his “principles of critical historiography”. These three main themes, interwoven into each other, indeed appear to constitute the structure of the text on Bodin: the interpretation of Bodin, the reflection on the general principles of hermeneutical interpretation, and the philosophical reflection on the interpreter’s own self-understanding as a political thinker.

I want to give a few particularly perspicuous examples which may help to clarify this peculiar structure of the text: In his attempt to penetrate to the motivating center of Bodin’s thinking, Voegelin elaborates and brings out the two crucial means by which the core characteristic of the scholarly perspective in general, viz. the “transcendent” position as a gradual emancipation from one’s own “civilizational environment”, is achieved. It is achieved, first of all, as Voegelin demonstrates by unfolding the theoretical implications of the motivating center of Bodin’s work, by a *comparative perspective*. The respective passages in the Bodin chapter can be considered as a *locus classicus* where Voegelin elaborately unfolds the theoretical implications of his principle that any scholarly perspective has to be founded on broad comparative empirical knowledge. The comparative perspective is a necessary prerequisite of the transcendent position, as he demonstrates in his interpretation of Bodin’s *Heptaplomeres*. Voegelin interprets the peculiar constellation of Bodin’s dialogue as paradigmatically representing the ideal dialogical setting of an open conversation among “scholars and philosophers”. Due to their broad comparative knowledge, the tone of the conversation is characterized by a tolerant, anti-fanatical and anti-provincial intellectual atmosphere. All of the speakers “move in a universe of discourse that presupposes an encyclopedic knowledge of religious literature. And all of them quote everything”.³⁸ This description does not merely promote a certain classicist intellectual elitism. Voegelin does not indulge in any academic or “bildungsbürgerlichen” idiosyncrasies, but he treats, while interpreting Bodin, the problem of contextuality and historicity as a fundamental “methodical” problem. Broad comparative knowledge is not a mere end in itself, it is a necessary prerequisite of the scholarly perspective because comparative knowledge, the

³⁸ Voegelin, Bodin, p. 210.

awareness of the multitude, complexity and variety of historical phenomena breaks the naïve belief in dogmas, it “profoundly shakes” any provincial or parochial personal conviction. The comparative perspective breaks, if you will, the “relativ natürliche Weltanschauung” founded on the meaningful patterns of the concrete cosmion in which the thinker “through biographical circumstance” is intellectually rooted.³⁹

The scholarly emancipation is achieved, secondly, by a *particular intellectual motivation*, and it is Voegelin’s second hermeneutical principle, his personalistic principle, that reappears here as a concrete result of his interpretation of Bodin. Bodin’s personal intellectual motivation, so Voegelin, focuses on a problem which appears to be a reflection of the above outlined tension between “person” and “history” itself and which in Bodin assumes the form of the dialectical, tensional question of “religion”: “The animating center of Bodin’s thought lies in his religiousness”, states Voegelin, and it is a religiousness which in its core is concerned with a problem that resembles the major questions underlying Voegelin’s own philosophical and hermeneutical perspective. Bodin’s religiousness “is a personal religiousness; and it cannot be characterized in terms of adherence to one or the other of the religious movements of the sixteenth century.” Voegelin’s interpretation brings out the ambiguous implications of Bodin’s “religiousness” that merges Christian with pre-Christian as well as post-Christian elements into one conglomerate that is almost too equivocal to characterize it at all in concrete terms. Bodin’s particular “religiousness” apparently has to be characterized as being of a somewhat transhistorical nature. On the other hand – and, as Voegelin argues: contradictorily at first sight – the concrete forms of “historical religions”

³⁹ Voegelin, Bodin: p. 210: „They all have broken the limits of their dogma; in none of them is living seriously the exclusiveness of his faith; they all have a wide comparative knowledge of religions; and all of them are aware of historical conditions of the variety of religions and are willing to discuss them under this aspect. They are not irreconcilables; they are rather in the position of Bodin himself: of being in their faith through biographical circumstance, but profoundly shaken by their comparative knowledge of the historical religious manifold.“ On the crucial significance of a broad comparative perspective for Voegelin personally see, for instance, Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 14 f. and the following remark from a letter from 1970: „What today is deplorably lacking in the understanding of current events is comparative knowledge Only if the phenomena of our society are compared with those of earlier societies can we hope to arrive at an understanding of what really is going on today.“ (Voegelin to Gerald F. Else, November 25, 1970, in: Hoover Institution Archive, Box 9.12.)

obviously play a prominent role in Bodin's studies.⁴⁰ "In face of this situation two questions must be raised. We must ask, in the first place, whether the faith of Bodin was engaged seriously anywhere at all. And if there was a point of serious engagement ..., we must ask, second, why did Bodin bother about historical religions?"

Again, the fundamental tension between person (and individual „experience“) and history (and civilizational environment) reappears here, and it reappears as a crucial „line of meaning“ within the object of the interpretation itself. The “obviously complex” “religious attitude” of Bodin seems to reflect the dialectical tension between the core significance of personal experience as the animating center of any original intellectual endeavor on the one hand and the necessarily historical, parochial means of its articulation and symbolization on the other. Thus, the fundamental problem of the tension between motivating center and historical context is not only present as the crucial analytical question of the interpreter, it at the same time is the central question of Bodin himself. Voegelin continues:

The two questions are intimately connected. The problem posed by their interrelation is present in the literary work of Bodin from the earliest to the latest. And it is not only the constant problem in Bodin's thought; it is also its central problem. From this center go forth the rays of meaning that hold the system together. We may say that an understanding of Bodin's ideas is impossible without clearness on this point.⁴¹

In his further interpretation that deals with the “various components” of “this complex problem” Voegelin identifies as its pivotal core Bodin's idea of “true religion” rooted in “contemplation”.⁴² Voegelin characterizes these terms as particularly equivocal in Bodin's work. He stresses the Christian themes by which Bodin describes his personal religious experience, and he brings out Bodin's mystical, exclusive and prophetic self-understanding.

⁴⁰ Voegelin, Bodin, p. 188: „On the one hand, the historical religions are important enough for Bodin to occupy him seriously, so important that he is even willing to run bodily risks for them; on the other hand, none of them engages his faith seriously.“

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 188 ff.

But Voegelin also stresses the more philosophical and political implications of the term. Bodin's motivating question, his idea of "true religion" as contemplation can, in philosophical and political terms, also be understood as a variation, as Voegelin points out, of the "Aristotelian problem", the question of the tension between the *bios theoretikos* and the *bios politicos*, here articulated in the 16th century terms of "historical" versus "true religion". From this angle Bodin's work appears primarily as a „treatise on politics that ... attack(s) the tension between the Aristotelian *bios theoretikos* and the necessities of human existence.“⁴³ Thus, „true religion" and "contemplation", the concepts which are meant to express the animating core experience of Bodin's thinking, seem to have religious, philosophical, theoretical, and political implications at the same time. In most general terms they denote "a state of soul in solitude" as a form of contemplative practice in which the thinker to a certain degree intellectually transcends the limits and demands of his particular socio-political and historical situation. This contemplative motivation is substantially balanced by the awareness that „the existence of man nevertheless remains social“⁴⁴, the awareness that even „the spiritual life of man is essentially a life in society and history“.⁴⁵ This tension between the somewhat "purified" personal experience of "contemplation" and the necessarily parochial symbolisms of concrete societies for Bodin, so Voegelin's interpretation, forms the ordering patterns of human history:

Mankind ... is conceived [by Bodin, H.S.] as a great society in history, differentiated by civilizational periods and regions; in every one of these periods and regions is enacted the socially inevitable drama of the prophet whose true religion of the solitary soul becomes the historical religion to the solitude of the prophetic soul. Obviously this evocation is still rather sketchy; nevertheless, in substance it contains the problem that occupied Bodin throughout his life: the role that is imposed on the prophet by the historical and social nature of the life of the spirit.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ibid., p. 184.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 194.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

At the motivating center of Bodin's work Voegelin finds a historically specific reflection on the fundamental pattern of "the unfolding of the typical in meaningful concreteness" that focuses on the specific existential problem of the "contemplative thinker". Bodin's question is the problem of the general dialectical tension between the intellectual solitude of the contemplative thinker which (as his "personal way out of historical clashes"⁴⁷) gradually transcends any social and historical parochialism on the one hand, and his awareness of the fundamentally social and historical, the substantially *parochial* nature of man's existence on the other. At the core of Bodin's thinking Voegelin finds a historical variation, so it seems, of his own hermeneutical principles and of the question of the contemplative thinker's self-understanding, a question which may be seen as one of his own pivotal motivating questions as well.⁴⁸ It is not exactly the "drama of the prophet", but it is the similarly ambiguous position of the contemplative political thinker within political society that seems to occupy Voegelin throughout his work. Particularly in his writings up until the late 1940s Voegelin personally struggled with this question, and it was as important for him as it was difficult to answer. In a fragment from 1936 Voegelin characterizes (with explicit reference to Bodin) the core problem of political science as the problem of the conflict between "scholarship and politics" (*Wissenschaft und Politik*) and as the peculiar problem of the position of the contemplative thinker within society (and here the two different styles of thinking distinguished above reappear as two different forms of "human action"):

The contemplative action must by its mere existence bring the contemplative thinker [den Kontemplierenden] into conflict with his [social] surrounding which is dominated by its naïve *élan vital* and by acts of self-assertion and self-expansion. For, although regarding its ontic status it [contemplation, H.S.] is an action within a social environment, a phenomenon of human action like political action, it is regarding its existential substance a denial [Verneinung] of politics. By practicing contemplation and

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 217.

⁴⁸ On the crucial role that the question of the position and function of the political thinker in society plays in Voegelin's work see Jürgen Gebhardt, *The Vocation of the Scholar*, in: Stephen McKnight/Geoffrey L. Price (Eds.), *International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin*, Columbia and London (Univ. of Missouri Press) 1997, p. 10-34.

therewith rejecting to participate in the power struggle, the contemplating person is the personified example of another possible existence than the political. In a political community he is a disquiet, a disturbance of the peace of mind [Seelenfrieden], he diminishes the strength of political action (which usually is not paralysed by any doubt) [Er ist ... eine Minderung der vom Zweifel ungelähmten Stoßkraft des politischen Handelns]; his existence [Dasein] is an insult to all those who see in their participation in the political community the right way of living [die richtige Form ihres Lebens], because his attitude towards the world can not be grasped within the schema of loving and hating statements, but it belongs to a third type, the type of contempt. (...) A democratic, politically intensively living citizenry, like the one of a Greek polis in its flourishing or the one of the United States, can not tolerate the contemplative separation of the individual and answers it on her part with exclusion. Everything that withdraws itself from the state is against it; all thinking about the state is latent high treason; the fate of Socrates.⁴⁹

The scholarly position is ambivalent, problematic, and the contemplative style of thinking in principle conflicts with “politics”. The final question in which the speculation on “true religion” and contemplation culminates in Voegelin’s chapter on Bodin is the same question of the practical and political consequences of “the Aristotelian problem” in this sense, the question of the social and political position of contemplative political theory within society and politics. The answer here is somewhat more optimistic and more constructive. In Bodin, the “contemplative” thinker is, on the basis of theoretical arguments, retracted into society, so to speak, and assigned with a pivotal function within the meaningful parochial cosmion of the political community: Bodin’s “program”, so Voegelin, is the attempt to make “the contemplation of the thinker” and his subversive, disenchanting insights “effective as a source of order in society.” The “Aristotelian question” is answered by the attempt to reconcile *theoria* and the *polis* in the peculiar form of existence of the “contemplative realist”. Voegelin paraphrases Bodin as follows: “A polity cannot be considered truly happy unless there is room in it for contemplation; and a man cannot be considered happy unless his contemplation is that of a man in society.”⁵⁰ The position of the political thinker is founded, in the terms in

⁴⁹ [my translation]. Eric Voegelin, Fragment from 1936, in: Voegelin Papers, box 55, folder 11.

⁵⁰ Voegelin, Bodin, p. 195. See also Voegelin’s formulation in the earlier version of his Bodin chapter from 1941: „Bodin solves the (Aristotelian) problem by asserting that the contemplative life must not be an occupation for man, but that the perfect life, in order to make possible the existence of society, should be of a

which Voegelin describes his own perspective in a letter from 1939, on a practice of “contemplation that sympathetically participates in reality” [eine an der Realität teilnehmende Kontemplation].⁵¹

* * *

It is striking, in my opinion, how much in the passages considered here Voegelin’s interpretation of Bodin’s work on the one hand and the reflection on the methodical principles and basis of this interpretation, furthermore on the crucial questions of Voegelin’s own general theoretical reflections at the time and on the question of his self-understanding as a political thinker on the other hand are interrelated and almost blended, so to speak, into one interpretative-theoretical complex. I think, this closely interrelated, specifically dialogical form of his interpretation is not a merely incidental characteristic of the Bodin chapter, and it is not merely due to actual parallels between their works.⁵² It rather is the crucial characteristic of Voegelin’s reading as *open hermeneutics* in general. It substantially determines the particular structure of Voegelin’s respective material studies which, due to their peculiarly “dialogical” structure, are particularly interesting, yet at the same time may be particularly difficult to interpret. It turns out that the question of how Voegelin read texts is intimately

mixed nature, partly active, partly contemplative. Contemplation can never be more than an approximation in this life, a momentary experience from which we have to revert to the daily natural existence; pure contemplation is only for the soul that has been purged of nature, that is in death in *cospectu Dei*. Man should not [lead] the *bios theoretikos* of the Aristotelian philosopher, but in humility fulfill his duties to nature and the community that has given him birth. Contemplation is the purpose of life, of man, and of the Republic, but it has to rest firmly on the everyday household and political actions.“ Voegelin, Bodin, p. 241. For the determination of the date 1941 see Opitz, Nachwort.

⁵¹ Voegelin to Karsten Lemche, no date, in: Institut für Geschichte – Wien (IFG), Sammlung Frauennachlässe, NL III A/3.

⁵² On these parallels, again, see Cooper, Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science, p. 226 ff. Of course, the results suggested here would have to be further tested within a broader study that would have to substantially consider Bodin’s work itself. That I cannot do this in the present paper makes the reflections presented here particularly provisional and tentative. See on this point again Hollweck, Gedanken zur Arbeitsmethode Eric Voegelins, p. 136 ff. Hollweck emphasizes the necessity of a close analysis of Voegelin’s own materials, yet at the same time he also emphasizes that the question of Voegelin’s peculiar method of treating them cannot merely by this means be clarified. There still remains the question: „Warum kommen andere, die dasselbe Material behandelt haben, so häufig nicht zu Voegelins Ergebnissen? Warum – um nur ein Beispiel zu nennen – ist erst Voegelin der Offenbarungscharakter der platonischen Spätphilosophie aufgefallen, wenn es doch genug andere gibt, die ihren Platon mindestens genauso gut kennen müssen wie Voegelin seinen.“ What is therefore necessary for Hollweck is „nicht nur der von (Voegelin) geforderte Rückgriff auf das Material, sondern vor allem ein Nachvollziehen seiner Behandlung des Materials.“ (ibid., p. 136 f.)

connected with the question of how to read Voegelin. He may have to be read with the awareness that Voegelin's Plato, for instance, is indeed in a very literal sense "Voegelin's Plato", as much as his own thinking is substantially Platonic.

Maybe this dialogical form can be understood as a direct consequence of Voegelin's methodical principle to penetrate to the motivating center of a work. And it seems that for Voegelin this "dialogical" form of reading and writing is inevitable as soon as an interpreter attempts to penetrate to the core of a philosophical text. It is inevitable because it reflects the fundamental structure of the specific *hermeneutical experience*,⁵³ if you will, of reading texts in general. In an early fragment which is to be found among Voegelin's "notes and research material on Max Weber" (in the Voegelin Archive at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University) and which was probably intended to be a "preliminary reflection" to Voegelin's first article on Max Weber from 1925,⁵⁴ he unfolds some of the epistemological and hermeneutical implications of his "motivating center"-principle. Its most important implication is that science, philosophy, knowledge in general, has in principle a "personal" form and that therefore any written text has meaning only with reference to the experiences of the concrete human consciousness from which it emanates. In this early fragment Voegelin reflects on the problem of the relationship between the reader and the author of a text and on the problem of "teaching." In fact, by raising these questions, he implicitly reflects on the possibility of the conservation and the mediation of knowledge within scholarly traditions. Voegelin distinguishes two phenomenal forms [„Erscheinungsformen“] of science, the dynamic form of its concrete becoming on the one hand and its static form of articulation in language on the other:

⁵³ This „hermeneutical“ form or mode of experience may be treated as a peculiar manifestation of what Robert McMahon analysed as Voegelin's „paradoxes of consciousness and participation“, a peculiar manifestation that brings to the fore the problem of the *plurality* of human consciousness as a fundamental structure of reality. See Robert McMahon, Eric Voegelin's Paradoxes of Consciousness and Participation, in: The Review of Politics, Vol. 61 (1999), p. 117-139.

⁵⁴ Voegelin, *On Max Weber* (1925), in: CW 7, p. 100-117. This text, by the way, is another distinct example of an open interpretation in which interpretation, methodical reflections, and reflections on the contemplative thinker's self-understanding are intimately interwoven into each other. See on this point Hans-Jörg Sigwart, Zwischen Abschluss und Neubeginn. Eric Voegelin und Max Weber, Munich (Eric Voegelin Archive) 2003, p. 17 ff.

„Science has in principle two phenomenal forms [Erscheinungsformen] – depending on the typical persons experiencing it: the scholar and the audience [Publikum]. The first form, the one of the scholar, is the wrapped up [eingewickelte], solitary form of its concrete becoming; the other (form), the one of the audience, is the unwrapped, public form, communicated in solid language. From the tension between these two fundamental phenomenal forms evolve the difficulties of teaching. For the scholar science is a psychic event that in its details can only with difficulties – and in exact terms possibly cannot at all – be described. The continuous elements of this event are: (1) a stimulus of thinking [Denkreiz], a problematic something, as the “what about” of the thinking, (2) a state of the soul that is determined by the entire life experience, on which the stimulus, the problematic something can have an effect, (3) an *agens* of vital power that carries on the psychic event. (...) The peculiarity of this event seems to exactly lie in the fact that the entirety of an unfolded system of concepts [Begriffsgebäude] that in its public form may comprise many hundred pages of a book, is given in the solitary, non-discursive thinking as the thinking premise of the moment; that this whole system in its non-discursive form of its solitary becoming reacts on the problematic something of its “what about”; that the result of this reaction may be that the system in this moment is changed to a degree that a reorganization of the system down to its most general concepts is necessary. In the form of becoming of the system, changes of the system can take place within seconds which for their explication require years, maybe even go beyond the lifetime and the power of the scholar who had the so called “Einfall” (idea). In the thus described form of becoming of science, the reality of which is not the consciously luminous [bewußtseins-helle], unfolded form of discursive thinking, but the closed up [eingeschlossene], momentary, vague [dunkle] form of the psychic event in a person, the whole of science, self-sufficient [selbstgenügsam], effecting and changing, is given.”⁵⁵

The difficulties of teaching that Voegelin points toward actually reflect the difficulties of understanding in general that evolve from any given articulation of personal experience. Being the material and the object of the scholar’s interpretation it is meaningful only because of, and therefore only if hermeneutically reconnected to, the core of the person as the source of its origin. The consequence for human science, regardless of its objective pretension, is its fundamentally “personal” form:

⁵⁵ Voegelin, *Vorüberlegung* [Preliminary reflection], in: Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution, Box 50, Folder 12: 1 f. [my translation].

“A scientific system of concepts cannot be more than the translation of the form of becoming of science into the form of language and of the consciously luminous intellect. With this, though, is stated that the judgments of a science are not autonomous things [für sich selbst bestehende Dinge], ultimately autonomous truths that as such could be passed on from hand to hand like pieces of a material; but they have meaning only if they are permanently reconnected [zurückbezogen] with the form of becoming of science, of which we have to understand them to be transpositions. They thus always remain rooted in the subsoil [Untergrund] of their evolving, and they share with it, in spite of their solid and clear form, the inner restlessness of the event of effect and change. Concepts and judgments are the social, communicable form of the events happening within a person, and they remain connected with this origin, in spite of their public character and their objectivity. From the common perspective science could be ideally described as the succession of layers, the highest containing the most general concepts which are differentiated in lower ones, descending to the concrete, completely defined object itself. One can keep this picture for the moment, but one always has to be aware that through all these layers permanently run the reforming, changing rays of thinking and research [umformenden Strahlen des Forschens] emerging in the center of the becoming of science, and therefore every seemingly solid form only is a momentary point of rest, a transition state of searching thinking, rendered invalid as soon as the thinking has moved on and therewith destroyed it.”⁵⁶

From this early passage that unfolds a peculiarly *hermeneutical* sort of speculation various significant parallels to Voegelin’s later work could be drawn, as, for instance, to Voegelin’s reflections on the concepts of compactness and differentiation, on experience, articulation and dogmatic deformation, all of which are crucial for his later theory of history. In this early text Voegelin comes to a conclusion that makes clear how radically his hermeneutical principle that any interpretation has to penetrate to the “motivating center” of a work actually has to be understood:

“From the fact that the world of concepts has meaning only through its origin in the personal centre of the scholar, the following for the possibility of “teaching science” has to be concluded: There are no results,

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 2 f. [my translation].

no teachable truths; we ought not see concepts and judgements and broader complexes built up of them as autonomous and true statements about clearly defined objects; but we have to trace back [zurücklösen] every concept to its (process of) becoming and try to understand the meaning it has within this process [seinen Werdens-Sinn], (that is:) the meaning it gains from its origin in a person. Only by this decline [Rückgang] which we have to carry out as persons ourselves [mit unserer eigenen Person] we penetrate into the form of becoming [Werdensform] of science, (that is:) we bring science back to its personal form, out of the general and public sphere of language, and by this we become able ourselves to work scholarly.”⁵⁷

The reading of an author in terms of Voegelin’s “open hermeneutics” actually necessarily assumes the form of a dialogue since the hermeneutical process of understanding necessarily involves the “person” of the interpreter. The interpretation not only seeks to penetrate to the core meaning of the author’s self-understanding, but it also substantially involves the self-understanding of the interpreter as well. As Voegelin puts it in *On the Form of the American Mind*, and not incidently in his description of Santayana’s mature style of thinking and reading: For the philosophical reader of philosophical texts philosophizing assumes the form of a peculiar type of hermeneutical dialogue in which author and reader, interpretation and original philosophizing mutually penetrate each other. The authors interpreted on the one hand appear as being almost merely “shadows” in the philosopher’s mind, and they only become alive by the imaginative powers of the understanding mind of the interpreting philosopher as the center of the hermeneutical dialogue. On the other hand, although being mere “shadows” in the mind of the philosophical reader, the authors and their works philosophically read still have their independent meaning that in turn determines and modulates the reader’s understanding, and they also influence the self-understanding of the interpreter.⁵⁸ Reading and understanding in terms of Voegelin’s open hermeneutics thus

⁵⁷ Voegelin, *Vorüberlegung*, p. 3f. [my translation].

⁵⁸ The passage on Santayana’s „dialogical“ form of philosophizing in Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, p. 121 f. seems rather opaque at first sight, but its meaning becomes clearer if read before the background of the above quoted fragment: „Santayana’s dialogues are not intended to instruct; their purpose is just the opposite: to demonstrate that at heart ‘teaching’ is not possible, since there is no such reality as one opinion, but that the realm of thought, in its profusion, heavy with chaos, contains many possibilities of world formation. The structure of his conversation is therefore precisely the reverse of instruction: Santayana himself, as the ‘stranger’ ... confronts the principal speakers But the dialogue is not persuasive; it merely demonstrates how far the

constitutes an intricate dialogical interrelation between author and reader in which the text as an object of interpretation, the text as a source of inspiration, and, finally, the original philosophical questioning of the interpreter intermingle.⁵⁹

* * *

Read before the background of these early reflections on the problems of teaching, reading, and understanding in general, Voegelin's chapter on Bodin may appear as a conscious realization of the hermeneutical principles just outlined. The Bodin chapter may then be read as intentionally forming and articulating one intricate hermeneutical-theoretical complex that is both at the same time: an interpretation of "a thinker of rank" and an expression of Voegelin's own reflections and speculations on the crucial methodical and theoretical questions of his philosophical political science. One may almost say: The text does not intend to merely present Voegelin's interpretation and to analyze and explain the pure and authentic position of Bodin. Nor does it express Voegelin's own position merely projected into Bodin. The text rather seeks to explicate Voegelin's hermeneutical dialogue with Bodin, and therewith formulates some sort of a third position between the two: the position, if you will, of Bodin-Voegelin.

There are other particularly "open" interpretations in this peculiar sense identifiable in Voegelin's work. His "Plato", the chapters in the *History* on Augustine and Thomas Aquinas,

speakers agree. The arguments as such do not engage one another on the basis of their rational weight alone; they are always tied to the center of the speaker's person, so that in spite of lively repartee back and forth, the persons touch each other only externally, never penetrating beneath the skin, and at the end of the dialogue they move apart again into separate loneliness. But their persons are not completely isolated from one another; the 'stranger' is not a shade and therefore does not share the trait of inflexibility in his own person: he is the only one among them whose thinking is alive and has internal tension. He, the counterpart in each of the dialogues, holds the others together: the shades are only links in the life of his thinking, and as one after the other slides back into the isolation of his mind after the conversation with him, the 'stranger' leaves behind possibilities of his own thinking – and yet he does not leave them entirely behind, since all of them interact in the cosmos of his thinking, representing the diversity of beginnings toward achieving a world order that meet inside him."

⁵⁹ It is striking – and it proofs the abiding importance of these reflections for Voegelin – that these questions, most clearly articulated in these very early texts, reappear in a very similar form (only from a different angle) in the opening passages of Vol. 5 of *Order and History*, *In Search of Order* where Voegelin meditates on the process of writing and the relation of his own text to its projected readers. See Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, Vol V: *In Search of Order*, Baton Rouge and London (Louisiana State University Press) 1987, p. 13 ff.

but also his early reading of Santayana and of Max Weber are certainly further examples. And I think these open interpretations of other thinkers are indeed key texts with regard to an interpretation of Voegelin's own thinking. In the various "third positions" of Voegelin's *open hermeneutics*, crucial methodical and theoretical aspects of his own philosophy are – not directly, but indirectly – articulated. And some of these crucial aspects of his thinking we may find articulated in Voegelin's work only in this indirect, "dialogical" form. In so far as Voegelin in certain periods of his intellectual biography in fact primarily used this form of dialogical interpretation to articulate his own philosophical thinking, he can indeed rightfully be characterized as being a hermeneutical philosopher in the literal sense of the term. The analysis of Voegelin's interpretive dialogue with Bodin, in any case, suggests that this hermeneutical trait within his peculiar style of thinking is very prominent, and it eventually may suggest among others an interesting question in this respect with which I would like to close: the question of the significance of Voegelin's reading of contemplative thinkers for his own idea of contemplation – the question, hence, of to what extent Voegelin's idea and practice of "contemplation" itself has *dialogical* and *hermeneutical* implications.

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