

"Voegelin as Philosopher: Achievement and Loose Ends"

Response by

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"Understanding in Quest of Faith': The Central Problem in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy"

Stefan Rossbach

"Faith Seeking Understanding? A Response to Stefan Rossbach"

Fred Lawrence

No commentary during this panel can do justice to the erudition, complexity, and seriousness both of Stefan Rossbach's paper and of Fred Lawrence's response. This discussion is in the unique position of responding to the original paper and responding to the response. The hermeneutics is complicated by the fact that Rossbach would have us look at Voegelin's "failure" rather than his achievement, or, more properly, look at his "loose ends"--indexes of his path of inquiry. This approach, understood in this way, could indeed be a fruitful one. Still, the "loose ends" become intelligible only in light of the achievement, but Rossbach gives no indication of Voegelin's achievement. Thus we must first explore what, in fact, is Voegelin's achievement. The crux of the issue is that Voegelin is a philosopher of history, historian of symbols, philosopher of consciousness, and philosopher of revolution.

1. Voegelin's Achievement

Voegelin has identified the constituent factors of historical existence as the divine movement and the human countermovement within an orientation of "participatory consciousness" emergent in historical process and heading beyond it. There are leaps in being, or differentiations of consciousness, within the process, but they do not abolish the process, for there are lines of meaning that are not temporal. History is indeed at the intersection of time and the timeless. Voegelin as a philosopher of history can discern the differentiations of consciousness because they have emerged in historical process. They are, accordingly, expressed in historical materials (what Voegelin calls "symbols"), and Voegelin as historian of symbols can recover them.

But how can Voegelin correctly identify the meaning of the symbols? Voegelin can recover the engendering experiences because he is also a philosopher of consciousness (a technical term to reach precision in *Anamnesis*). His philosophy of consciousness explicates the cognitive, moral, and spiritual normative orientation of consciousness that is the source of order, both personally and socially, and, simultaneously, a source of unrest. Without the philosophy of

history, the philosophy of consciousness would have to start from an historical blank slate (equivalent to the Stones Ages, even for a thinker of rank). Without the philosophy of consciousness, the philosophy of history would be merely speculative, lacking critical control and concrete reference.

2. Voegelin's Challenge

The complex interplay among the philosophy of history, history of symbols, and philosophy of consciousness is matched, and caused, by the complexity of the subject matter of Voegelin's inquiry, where there are a series of tensions. Thus Voegelin cannot adopt a purely transcendent view and look at the process as whole from the outside (as might a Cartesian, Marxist, or perhaps Hegelian). Similarly, he cannot adopt a stopgap procedure and freeze the process and the symbols as rigid "dogmas." Nor can he adopt a purely immanent standpoint and ignore the experiences of the giftedness of existence and of human inquiry as a response to a drawing. Voegelin, then, makes a decisive break with modern and post-modern secularism, which would either eliminate the mystery, as in crude forms of reductionism, scientism, and materialism, or control the mystery through multicultural, relativist projects of purely human constructions of the unknown, including religious doctrines.

According to Voegelin, the philosopher has the imperative of taking religious experience, i.e., divine presence, seriously, beyond any narrow concept of the faculty of reason. Why? In the first place, the evidence of the historical texts points that way. The philosophy of history must appropriate the materials emergent in the actual process, particularly the materials of maximum achievement. In the second place, an adequate philosophy of consciousness avoids the "intentionalist fallacy" of a subject confronting an object and identifies consciousness as participatory (human-divine) consciousness. The philosopher in taking the religious material seriously nonetheless speaks, as a philosopher, to universal humanity about the universal structure of the Metaxy (the in-between of historical existence). The philosopher is not a theologian representing a particular religious perspective. (The philosopher may be a "theologian" in the sense of Plato, who coined the term, but not in the sense widely employed since the advent of Christianity.)

This raises the specific "problem" of Christianity, a problem that only arises from within the philosophy of history, as Voegelin conceives of it, with both its subject matter and its audience of universal humanity. The philosopher certainly cannot ignore the claims of Christianity, including the claims of the uniqueness of the incarnation of the Logos, for the claims are emergent in the historical process, having entered the process as constitutive events (the "maximum of differentiation"). The philosopher, however, cannot operate as simply an expositor of Christian dogma and assail the spiritual legitimacy of other religions and philosophy *tout court*, since this would be to engage the material on the level of the battle of the dogmas. Nor can the philosopher in a more tolerating mood "Christianize" all other religions and philosophy (witness Gadamer's concern that Voegelin has read too much of Christianity into Greek philosophy), which would be to do violence to the texts themselves. If the philosopher in these cases would be, so to speak, operating underneath Christianity, the philosopher, on the

other hand, cannot operate above Christianity either and seek to grasp its "rational truth," as did the *Aufklärung* thinkers, starting with Lessing and perhaps culminating in Hegel's system. Schelling seems much more cautious in his approach to Christianity than was Hegel. This is important because Voegelin at one time (*History of Political Ideas*, vol. 7) spoke of a "Schelling Renaissance" and changed his whole project from the history of ideas to the history of symbols under Schelling's influence. In one sense, Voegelin's *Order and History* could be interpreted as an attempt to update the project of Schelling, as found in his *Philosophy of Mythology and Revelation*, with contemporary sources (this is the conclusion of Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence*). Still, Voegelin criticized "gnostic tendencies" in Schelling (deriving in large part from Hans Urs von Balthazar's critique of the early, but not later, Schelling). Voegelin seems more cautious than Schelling.

Simultaneously to affirm something like the epiphany of Christ and to speak of universal humanity--this is truly a balancing act. If Voegelin exhibits caution, reformulation, probing, even silence, this is surely part of the balancing act. Voegelin is an exploratory thinker, not a system builder. Insofar as his exploring is part of this balancing act, it is more at the core of his *achievement* than in the "loose ends." In the twentieth century, what philosopher of history has taken the problem of religious materials and Christianity so seriously? What thinker has made the balancing act so thematic?

3. Loose Ends: Stefan Rossbach's Critique

Stefan Rossbach raises the quite legitimate question of why Voegelin gives short shrift to primary sources in two key areas, Gnosticism and Christianity. Voegelin hardly mentions the original Gnostic texts at all and gives meager treatment to Christianity, particularly to the Gospel texts. On the latter point, the discussion above about the balancing act may shed some light. Rossbach himself has perhaps some loose ends, since he focuses much more on Voegelin's analysis of Paul than on Voegelin's "Gospel and Culture," and he ignores Voegelin's extensive treatment of Christianity in the *History of Political Ideas*. In volume one of the *History of Political Ideas* Voegelin, interestingly enough, argues that an ordinary historical analysis of the Gospels will not reveal the *mania*, or *dynamis*, of Jesus. To consider this claim would have raised important hermeneutical issues concerning historical method and the roles of explanation, evaluation, and intellectual, moral, and religious conversion.

Rossbach makes a bold and serious charge against Voegelin about the role of Gnosticism. According to Rossbach's interpretation, Voegelin employs "gnosticism" as a grand-scale ideal-type of the counter position to the symbol of the Metaxy. Behind this is Voegelin's failure to have proper Christian humility, for Voegelin erects the term Metaxy into a system (there is deliberate irony here since Voegelin excoriates systems and doctrines). He then by a process of transference with "gnosticism" (the classical scapegoat) seeks a safe haven--free from concern with sin and the need for *metanoia*--in the "system" of the Metaxy. From that safe haven he can apply the system *a priori* and deductively to explain the essence of Christianity.

Fred Lawrence has, I think, correctly raised qualifications to Rossbach's thesis. He pointed that there are many texts supporting Voegelin's keen awareness of the precariousness of the life of faith (which reasonably suggests the author speaks first-hand). Perhaps one of the most vivid descriptions of the life of faith in philosophical literature is that of Voegelin in the *New Science of Politics*, which Lawrence quotes in full. Lawrence does agree that Voegelin uses the term "gnosticism" primarily to refer to a structure or tendency. Whether or not this is the most appropriate historical use of the term, the tendency does exist.

Let me elaborate on how the structure Voegelin identifies as "gnosticism" is a genuine topic in the philosophy of history. It arises precisely as a result of the differentiation of consciousness. The differentiation of the realm of transcendence heightens the tension of existence. In a fashion parallel to that of Voegelin, Bernard Lonergan comes to the same conclusion, as does Kierkegaard. For Lonergan, the dynamism behind the process of self-transcendence is the tension of limitation and transcendence. With the experience of transcendence--what Lonergan would call the supernatural--the tension becomes a tripartite tension with the explicit relation to the divine. Kierkegaard expressed this same tripartite tension in his definition of a self, where the self is a relation that relates itself to itself. The relation is that of the finite (limitation) and the infinite (transcendence), but the relation is a derived, or bestowed, one (from, and with, the divine). Voegelin makes a similar point in his differentiation of the Beginning and the Beyond. The heightened tension cries out for escape. One solution is what Voegelin calls *metastasis*, the transformation of the process by putative knowledge of transcendence. Ancient Gnosticism would indeed be such a candidate. But with its acosmic attitude it does not seem to be tied to messianism or millennialism in the ancient world. Nevertheless medieval and modern forms of the structure--perhaps more appropriately designated "neo-gnostic"--are attached to millennial and apocalyptic movements that espouse murderous ideologies of history. And there is evidence of actual influence of ancient Gnostic ideas and texts, as, for example in the case of the Bogomils and Cathars in the medieval period and the case of hermeticism in the Renaissance. Whatever the difficulties of the appellation in relation to historical texts, Voegelin's analysis of the structure and its relation to modern revolutions is stunning. This is, in fact, Voegelin's third achievement. Along with being a philosopher of history and a philosopher of consciousness, he is a philosopher of revolution. No serious study of the history of revolutions--from the Jewish messianic revolt, to the Yellow Turbans and Red Turbans and Tai Ping in China, to the medieval Ishmaelite movements, to medieval and Reformation millennialism, to the English Civil War, to the French Revolution, to the Russian Revolution, to the National Socialist Revolution, to the Third World Marxist revolutions, to the Iranian Revolution, to contemporary jihadist terrorism--can afford to ignore Voegelin's category.

But what of Voegelin's own spiritual state? Perhaps more than most philosophers, Voegelin would invite inquiry into his spiritual state because of his emphasis on the "existential virtues." But, I would maintain, such inquiry is fraught with great dangers and huge obstacles. Against Rossbach's thesis, for instance, one could interpret Voegelin's putting aside the eight volumes of the *History of Political Ideas* and putting on hold for years the last three volumes of *Order and History* as a measure of stupendous intellectual humility rather than as some kind of major spiritual failure!

Whatever Voegelin's private religious state--I suspect he is a Christian mystic of perhaps the self-designated modernist type who is also a mystic philosopher (lover of wisdom)--as a thinker with an obligation to the "public," as a philosopher of history, he is obliged to articulate the directional tendency and normative structure of consciousness in a general fashion (addressing humanity made universal by the Question) but not necessarily in an abstract fashion. His meditations are that of a philosopher. He is not a theologian. If there is a spiritual component--as there is--it is that of a spiritual quest in openness to the Divine Nous, as befitting the *special* character of philosophy as a *variety* of religious experience.

All this assumes, of course, the basic accuracy of Voegelin's explication of the Metaxy. The test is by appeal to the data of consciousness--the engendering experience. Rossbach does not really address this issue. (He doesn't really touch upon it by questioning whether the term Metaxy can be legitimately derived from the Platonic texts). But to address this issue would be to address the issue of Voegelin's achievement.

4. Loose Ends: Lawrence's Critique

Fred Lawrence also sees some loose ends in Voegelin. They tend to flow from what Lawrence regards as Kantian assumptions that Voegelin has not fully identified and criticized. Although Lawrence does not mention it, I think he is referring to a downplaying of the roles of insight and judgment in cognition. I, too, have made similar points in my published writing. I regard such an effort of explicating these elements in cognition, however, as an enrichment of Voegelin's enterprise, not as a correction of it. Lawrence focuses on dogmas and on the natural/supernatural distinction.

Lawrence, of course, recognizes dogmatism in its pejorative sense of close-minded rigidity. But he thinks that Voegelin could appreciate more the positive role that dogmas play in the actual life of a religious community as it appropriates its tradition and constitutes itself as a community. Lawrence is, to be sure, aware of the conflicts Voegelin had with the Church in the Nazi era and his understandable critical distance. He also knows that Voegelin sees philosophy as an effort of therapeutic recovery. The dogmas may have the answers, but what are the questions? Voegelin, in fact, interprets dogmas primarily as "negations of negations." They are attempts to ward off attacks on the spiritual substance of the community, and, in the extreme, attacks on the sacred and the divine by the "fools." Interpreted this way, dogmas could shed a great light on the identity-crises of religious traditions and communities. Arguably, Voegelin's notion of dogmas as negations and Lawrence's notion of dogmas as positive judgments can be viewed as more complementary than contradictory. Together they would provide historians, philosophers, and theologians with better critical tools to assess the concrete role of dogmas in the history of religious traditions.

Fred Lawrence would join Voegelin in an attack on woodenheaded ideas about the natural and supernatural that derive from conceptualist metaphysics and decadent neo-Scholasticism. He maintains, however, that Voegelin too easily identifies the natural and the supernatural, when there is a proper distinction to be held. No details are given, but I think

Lawrence would see that Aquinas, for example, held to the proper distinction in a highly nuanced philosophy that escaped the problems of conceptualist metaphysics and avoided what Voegelin labeled the "intentionalist fallacy.❖ As a Christian theologian, Aquinas was genuinely concerned, as is Lawrence, with the natural/supernatural distinction, particularly as it relates to understanding key Christian claims about the incarnation, grace, and the missions of the Son and Spirit. I think that Lawrence would agree that Aquinas's ideas were formulated in a faculty psychology linked to an antiquated view of the cosmos as a static hierarchy. The task today is to transpose the analysis into a philosophy of consciousness consonant with contemporary process metaphysics of the cosmos and with historical scholarship.

Lawrence indeed raises issues of legitimate concern to a theologian, but Voegelin is not a theologian; he is a philosopher of history. Voegelin would come under criticism here only if he would take a stand above Christianity. I find no evidence that he does so. On the other hand, the very complexity of the issue of Christianity in the philosophy of history, as I mentioned earlier, may in large part account for Voegelin's struggle with the issue as found in his letters, in the relative brevity of his treatment, and, finally, in the vagueness of his language of "spiritual presence❖ and "theophanic event.❖ I would hesitate, then, to translate his terms into strict theological counterparts. While the philosopher, too, should seek refinement of terms, what may in Voegelin's relatively "vague❖ language appear to the theologian as a deficiency may instead appear to the philosopher of history as a virtue.

For the issue is one of concrete experience. One may abstract from the process and speak of natural faculties and of a natural openness to truth and being. But in the concrete situation what is really taking place? Along with the operations of cognition and volition and along with the self-transcending orientation to transcendence there is the experience of openness as a gift--calling, healing, and sustaining. This is actually not the language of Voegelin but of Fred Lawrence's teacher, Bernard Lonergan. According to Lonergan, if we are to use the term "nature❖ not in the abstract but in the concrete, then we can apply Aristotle's' definition of "nature❖ as an "internal principle of change and rest❖ and identify such "natures❖ as questions for intelligence, questions for reflection, and questions for deliberation. But, says Lonergan, there is an internal principle of change and rest that ties together, unifies, these questions. It is a tidal wave arising from the unconscious, sweeping through those questions, only to rest beyond. That principle, that "nature,❖ is the love of God. In the concrete, though, is this still a purely world-immanent orientation? Elsewhere Lonergan notes that ordinarily--that is, in the concrete--intellectual conversion and moral conversion are conditioned by religious conversion. Lonergan does not restrict this existential condition of religious conversion to Christianity alone, and he commends Voegelin's analysis of "reason: the classic experience❖ as demonstrating the "revelatory, or at least inspirational❖ infrastructure of Greek philosophy.

As I have argued before, I see equivalences of meaning and complementarity in the works of Lonergan and Voegelin. I would agree with Fred Lawrence that there are loose ends in Voegelin's apparent retention of some Kantian assumptions. I have also argued that a fair engagement with these assumptions, far from leading to a reversal of Voegelin's position on the Metaxy and the differentiation of consciousness, would only reinforce that position--which was the fruit of a life-time's encounter with the history of symbols from the perspective of the concrete consciousness of a concrete person who took seriously science as a vocation.

