

The Concept of the Person in Eric Voegelin's Early Philosophy (1922-1934)

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The examination of Eric Voegelin's early writings with the intention of shedding light on his understanding of the concept of the person does not always lead us to texts in which the concept of the person is an explicit topic. For example, the theme of Voegelin's dissertation, "Interaction and Spiritual Community" (1922)¹, is the science of sociology. Here the role of the person is present but the concept is not discussed. In Voegelin's writings on Staatslehre the person becomes thematic. However, in the *Theory of Governance* (1931/34)² and in the two books on race (1933)³, although a central theme, it is but one topic among others. Thus this paper does not make the claim that, in examining Voegelin's concept of the person in these texts, it has been able to do justice to the full intention of the texts. The more modest claim I wish to make is that by consulting these texts we can get an idea of Voegelin's understanding of the concept of the person in the period between 1922 and 1934.

I refer to this period as Voegelin's "Early philosophy" because it marks the beginning of his thought and reveals its development to the point where the lineaments of the concept of the person that we find in his mature philosophy are clearly present.

The study is divided into the following sections:

I. Sociology

¹ Eric Voegelin, "Wechselwirkung und Gezweiung," in Voegelin Papers, box 51, folder 5, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, Calif. Translated as "Interaction and Spiritual Community" in Eric Voegelin, *The Collected Works of Erich Voegelin*, vol. 32, edited by William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 2003, 19-140. Subsequent references to Eric Voegelin's *Collected Works* will appear abbreviated as CW.

² Eric Voegelin, "Herrschaftslehre," in Voegelin Papers, box 53, folder 5, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford Calif. Translated as "The Theory of Governance" in CW, 32: 224-372.

³ Erich Voegelin, *Rasse und Staat*, Tuebingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Siebeck), 1933. Translated as *Race and State* in CW 2, edited with an Introduction by Klaus Vondung, 1999. Ibid., *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus*, Berlin, Junker und Duennhaupt, 1933. Translated as *The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus*, edited with an Introduction by Klaus Vondung, in CW 3, 1999.

II. Staatslehre

- a. *The Theory of Governance* I. (1931)
- b. *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Idea* (1933)
- c. *The Theory of Governance* II. (1934)

III. Conclusion

I. Sociology

In "Interaction and Spiritual Community" (1922) Voegelin observes that a number of research directions into social phenomena that use the term "sociology" fail to qualify as a science because they fail to establish a unified object. The sociology of Herbert Spencer, for example, begins with the notion of a physical law of development but soon applies this law to objects in the regional ontology of social action, which is by no means one of physical objects. A number of other sociological approaches commit similar errors. After these clarifications, the specific theories of sociology that Voegelin examines in the theoretical part of his dissertation are Georg Simmel's sociology of "interaction" and Othmar Spann's sociology of the "spiritual community":

"Due to the inclusion of psychological elements the theory of interaction in its current form cannot be called a science [...]. However, with a more thorough analysis of its problems, which is the task of this study, it is possible to bring out the elements of truth present in the theory. They prove to be identical with those contained in the social theory of Othmar Spann, specifically to the theoretical complex of spiritual community (Gezweiung)".⁴

The task of sociology is to grasp the social nature of the phenomena it studies. For example, it must be able to tell us why a particular painting is a Dutch painting, or a particular philosophical system a French one. The sociological method provides us with the means of

⁴ "Interaction", *CW*, 32: 22. The page numbers of subsequent references to this work will appear in the main body of the text between parentheses.

undertaking such an investigation. Voegelin introduces the term “creative spirit” (schaffender Geist) to designate the producer of such phenomena as the state, works of art, etc. We approach phenomena as social phenomena when we investigate the creative spirit that produces them. We speak of the creative spirit to designate the agent that “in the process of cognition, creates a phenomenon that corresponds” to an essence (or “nature”) such as art, science, government, etc. The investigation into the social element involved in the phenomena brought forth by the creative spirit deals with already known essences. (For example, the study of German sculpture assumes the reality of the essence “sculpture” (28).)

The sociologist arrives at the creative spirit by first suspending the sphere of essences. He then tries to determine the instance or agency that lends the phenomena (that embodies the universal essence) its social character. When a phenomenon is identified as having the quality that we call “social character”, it becomes a “social phenomenon” and the object of sociology. Voegelin’s next step is to discuss the concept of the “social relationship” in which “social phenomena” appear as the correlates of social acts: “the relationship [of phenomena] to the creative spirit means the relationship to the sociated spirit” (29). It is here, where the relationship between human beings in society comes into focus that the problem of the person slowly emerges. For, there are obviously many aspects of the human being, physical, psychological, intellectual-spiritual. When we say that the creative spirits are related to one another, to what extent are we focusing on a particular aspect of the human being?

In a series of steps Voegelin shows that the physical relationship between human beings and the interactive relationship of psychic functions do not fulfill the criteria needed to establish the nature of the social relationship. As far as the physical relationship is concerned: whereas a tree once removed from a forest is no longer a part of the forest, it is not true that a person physically removed from a society loses his social identity. Nor can the psychic interaction of individuals account for the social relationship. Interaction is a measure of quantity, but the social relationship expresses a quality (e.g. what is “Dutch” about a painting). Nevertheless it is clear that interaction provides a foundation upon which the spiritual relationship (geistige Beziehung) called “social relationship” can take place.

Voegelin therefore suggests the hypothesis: “Interaction provides the means of communicating, or conveying a substance, and it is this substance that constitutes the society-building element”(36). By the term “substance” Voegelin does not intend anything more than

a marker that serves to identify the problem under consideration: there is no attempt at this point to ascribe a specific content to this substance. Voegelin next attempts to isolate the nature of this “substance” by focusing more clearly on the nature of social relationships.

Society is a whole, and the individual human being is a whole. How does the individual become a “part” of society? Voegelin identifies two different spheres of the human being. There is the psycho-physical sphere which remains a “whole” and cannot be a part of anything else, and there is the sphere of the “social ego”, the locus of the “substance” of social relationships. Society is a whole composed of social egos as its parts (44). Sociology can only advance to clear analysis where these two aspects of the human being – the ego of the psycho-physical individual who is an inviolable whole and the social ego (and its sub-regions) which is a part of society— are not confounded.

All the forms to which the regions of the social ego correspond are a priori forms (art, religion etc.). The types of social ego (i.e. its sub-regions) designate the possible syntheses that correspond to the forms. In other words: laws can be made to govern human conduct, the world can be shaped artistically, etc. But however we approach the world via a priori forms, the locus of all these syntheses remains the one social ego to which the various regions belong. “They are encompassed by this ego and are mere sections, spheres, or regions of it, all equally legitimized by membership in this one social ego. *For its part, the social ego is also a synthetic principle; it unites the above-mentioned types of ego*”(45).

The essences—art, religion etc.— are found universally. But the concrete realization of the essences is colored by the particular social substance of the society in which they are realized. The social substance through and in which the spiritual essences are given to the members of a particular society is a “value” which is to be realized by the members of that society, indeed it is an “imperative” to realize these essences in acts of spiritual (geistige) commerce (56f.).

Let us look at the process of realizing value in a little more detail. Spiritual-intellectual communication takes place in the form of “spiritual awakening” (“geistige Anregung”). Individual A speaks to individual B. The process includes three parts: A’s words, the meaning he attaches to them, and the meaning B attaches to them. The “meaning” of A’s words, i.e. the way the speaker and his auditor understand them, cannot be established without reference to the “entire life experiences” (Erlebnis-Totalität) of the individuals A and B. For the specific meaning that is attributed to a discourse is dependent on the context of

meaning (Sinnzusammenhang) of the person making the attribution. If the attributions of the two speakers differ too widely one would have to speak of a continuous and consistent misunderstanding between them. But, ruling out this extreme case, what takes place in communication – the process of spiritual awakening – is the deepening of the “value” that is being realized in this social act:

“[T]he intensification and deepening of meaning is acknowledged as a value. The task of maximizing the meaning of our experiences presents itself to us as a postulate or an imperative to be fulfilled through continuous effort. Ultimately this effort is the reason why acts of sociation take place .”

The consequence of the fact that sociology does not deal with the ego of the sensually perceived psycho-physical individual, but with the social ego as the bearer of meaning is that “sociology recognizes only meanings, imperatives, and processes in which postulates are realized”(64). And, as we have read, it is the task of the social partners to maximize the meaning of their experiences.

After Voegelin’s sketch of the essence and meaning of the social relationship, in which, as we have seen, the “entire life experiences” of the individual are involved, it becomes clear that in the last instance when we speak of “understanding” or “communication” we are speaking of such questions as those generally termed “metaphysical”. For that reason Voegelin turns here to Henri Bergson’s remarks on the nature of metaphysical knowledge and its communication.

The subjects of last questions involve those in which the foundation of the “entire life experiences” (Erlebnis-Totalität) are explored in the interest of optimally developing the meaning of those experiences. Metaphysical insight is gained in an act of intuition. Once gained it must be expressed in a mode suitable to familiar patterns of thought and known concepts. “By its very nature meaning transcends conceptual formulation” and we should therefore not forget “the mere relative validity and symbolic nature of logical formulation”(65). Bergson compares the act of intuition in which the “absolute” is attained to the plumbing of the ocean floor: “the more alive the reality that is touched, the deeper the sounding” (65f.).

“All intuitions penetrate to the same ground and bring the same thing to the light of day, but in various degrees of intensity (66)”. The act of intuition “meditatively penetrates to the meaning of the world itself” (67). Therefore, the individual who wishes to understand the philosopher must also penetrate to the same depths, perhaps pursuing an already marked path, but it is not enough that he merely receive information “about” the ground. What is the meditation?

“Formally this meditation [Sinnversenkung] is a submerging of the self into the essence of things where it becomes one [Einswerden] with them by means of continuous contemplation. Intuition itself is not a cognitive act, but a condition of becoming one with nature, which can later be reported on (67)”.

Voegelin presents Bergson’s views on metaphysical knowledge and its communication in order to present his own basic position concerning the nature of the social relationship whose ultimate context is the realm and the foundation of the individual’s “entire life experiences”.

What we find in Voegelin’s dissertation for our question concerning the concept of the person comes indirectly into view. Each society realizes basic spiritual forms. Substantial communication leads beyond the inner-worldly realm, and as Voegelin’s reference to Bergson shows, ultimately to the “ground of things”. Voegelin refers to the communication that deepens the meaning of our entire life experiences as a “postulate or [...] imperative to be fulfilled through continuous effort” (640). Thus there is a moral responsibility to participate in the realization of value and the deepening of meaning. Where there is a moral responsibility there is also a freedom to participate or not. For those who have most comprehensively penetrated to the ground, there is the further obligation to help others find their way (the return to the cave of Plato’s parable). Strictly speaking this is an act of charity toward one’s fellow human beings (a theme that Voegelin will develop in his *Theory of Governance*. See below.). Thus the social relationship takes place in the exercise of the intellectual and moral virtues. Voegelin does not mention them by name but they are implicitly present in his description of the nature and intention of the social act.

Although Voegelin’s dissertation only touches upon the theme of the person indirectly, the lineaments of his concept of the person are clear. It is that of the Greek-Christian teachings on the nature of human thought and action which includes the role of the world-transcending spiritual (intellectual) experience in which the human being attains his or her full nature.

We turn now to Voegelin's writings on Staatslehre where the concept of the person comes into direct focus.

II Staatslehre

a. The *Theory of Governance* I. (1931)

Voegelin's work in law and Staatslehre (political science) begins with essays in the 1920s⁵ and culminates in a Staatslehre of his own which he worked on between 1929 and 1933 but which remained unfinished.⁶ One sub-section of this work appeared in his two books on race in 1933: *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus*. Other parts remained manuscript fragments. Most of these are quite small⁷. However a discussion of two of the central ideas treated in Voegelin's project: 1) the question of rule and obedience that is rooted in the existential structure (Daseinsstructure) of the human being, discussed in the one larger section of the unfinished work, *The Theory of Governance*⁸, and 2) the question of the spiritual nature of community with its origin in religious experience, discussed in his books on race, shed light on the development of Voegelin's concept of the person in the years between 1930 and 1934.

⁵ The most comprehensive studies of Voegelin's background in legal studies and work on a Staatslehre have been written by Michael Henkel. See *ibid.*, "Herrschaft – Erlebnis – Erfahrung: Warum scheiterte Voegelins Projekt einer geisteswissenschaftlichen Staatslehre?" in Peter J. Opitz (ed.) *Erich Voegelins Herrschaftslehre: Annaeherungen an einen schwirigen Text, Occasional Papers*, LVII, Munich: Eric-Voegelin-Archiv, August 2007, 41-73. Henkel traces Voegelin's work on a Staatslehre back to the 1924 essay "Reine Rechtslehre und Staatslehre" *Zeitschrift fuer Oeffentliches Recht* IV (1924), 80-131. Henkel sees Voegelin's project of a Staatslehre come to an end sometime after 1933 and before 1936 when Voegelin published *Der Autoritaere Staat* (CW, 4). This latter work, as Henkel points out, while dealing with subjects that thematically belong to Staatslehre, can no longer be considered a part of Voegelin's Staatslehre since it does not deal with the theoretical problem of the state's existence. Its purpose is rather to provide an equivalent for the Austrian Staendestaat to Carl Schmitt's *Verfassungslehre* (1928). See "Herrschaft-Erlebnis-Erfahrung", 42.

⁶ Voegelin discusses the various sections that his Staatslehre would have included in the opening pages of *Rasse und Staat*, 1ff. CW, 2:1ff.

⁷ See for example, Erich Voegelin, "Staatslehre als Geisteswissenschaft", Voegelin Papers, Box 53, Folder 7. It has been printed as an appendix to Erich Voegelin, *Herrschaftslehre (Occasional Paper LVI)*, 59-73. An English translation appeared in CW, 32: 414-429.

⁸ Eric Voegelin, "Herrschaftslehre," in Voegelin Papers, box 53, folder 5, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford Calif. Translated as "The Theory of Governance" in CW, 32: 224-372.

The Theory of Governance is divided into three chapters. Chapter one is entitled “To Determine the Concept of the Person”, chapter two examines the “Powerful and the Powerless Person”. The third chapter treats the theme of “Basic Types of Theories of Governance”. A comparison of Voegelin’s table of contents with the surviving manuscript reveals that the concluding sections of chapters one and two are missing. The complete chapter three is by far the largest. In the published English translation of the manuscript it comprises 104 pages. Together the first and second chapters have only 40 pages. (Nor, judging by the size of the existing sections, would these two chapters have been significantly larger had the last section of each survived.)

Recent scholarship has shown that what Voegelin’s manuscript designates as chapter three was originally the entire manuscript.⁹ It was completed in 1931. Chapters one and two were written at the end of 1933 or during 1934. This means that, if we are to follow the development of Voegelin’s concept of the person, we must begin with the current chapter three of the *Theory of Governance*, then discuss the two books on race—which were finished in 1932 and published in 1933— and then return to the first two chapters of the *Theory of Governance*. (As far as our theme is concerned it is the first two chapters of the *Theory of Governance* that provide the *Staatslehre*’s “last word” on the theme of the person. Here we can confine ourselves to a discussion of the principle points made in chapter one.)

The theme of the *Theory of Governance* is the relationship of the ruler to the ruled. In the original text (now chapter three) Voegelin begins by criticizing Max Weber’s notion of governance because Weber restricts himself to a discussion of how the relationship between the rulers and the ruled function in an already existing political community. However this approach is a “specifically legal way of looking” at the relationship: An action is not attributed to the person who performs it, but is referred back to another person. Only in legal discourse does one find the “phenomenon of the extinguishing of a person’s moral center through a chain of responsibility going back from the action of the person performing it to a center transcending that person”(276):

⁹ See Peter J. Opitz, *Eric Voegelins Herrschaftslehre: Annaeherung an einen schwierigen Text (Occasional Papers LVII)*, 5-17, esp. 12ff.

“But in the sphere where human beings really exist, there is no ‘extinguishing’ of the moral person. Each human being exists in all the modes of that being, including moral being, even if he is in a relationship of command and obedience.”(276).

After criticizing Weber for focusing on matters that are “external” to the nature of the relationship, Voegelin turns his attention to theories that focus on the internal factors of command and obedience. In following commands the human being acts as “a moral being” in accordance with an imperative that he finds in himself. Both the person issuing the order and the person carrying it out are motivated by “an insight into the value-whole (Wertganze), the realization of which” is experienced by both persons as “a moral obligation” (277).

The depth of the moral relationship that is involved in ruling and being ruled points to the need to consider the human being in the full range and depth of his nature:

“In the field of sociology it is Othmar Spann who has considered the constitution of human existence [Daseinsverfassung des Menschen] with the utmost clarity and rigor. In principle the human being is not a closed being who confronts the world in such a manner that, in the last instance, all spiritual phenomena can be traced back to the constitution of objects in consciousness, to the mode of the appearance of an object for a subject, even if it be a transcendently purified one, free of all material and empirical-psychological misinterpretation. Rather the human being is a spiritual being [Geistwesen] open to a super-personal spiritual reality [Ueberpersonales geistig Reales]...”(279f.).

Spann refers to this super-personal spiritual realm as “the world of ideas. Through inspiration the ideas enter into the individual spirit: A “higher spiritual order shines through such inspiration. From the standpoint of the individual we could say: Through such opening gates we penetrate into the realm of ideas, the realm, which by our nature is our very own”¹⁰(280). Voegelin illustrates Spann’s use of the term “intuition” with reference to Descartes’ *Meditations*. In his third meditation Descartes contrasts the experience of the finiteness of existence with the concept of a substance that is infinite. The human substance is open to a divine substance and the human being understands that his finite substance is enclosed in an infinite one. “From this paradigmatic case of intuition the concept of the openness of human

¹⁰ Voegelin is quoting: Othmar Spann, *Gesellschaftsphilosophie* (Munich: Oldenburg, 1928), 61.

substance is extended to the notion of the substance being continuously created by God”(284).

The meditation thus establishes the center of the human being in the world-transcending realm in which the human being, to the extent possible to a finite being, participates in the divine’s continuous creation. Only in the concrete experience of the ground is the human being given to himself directly. When the mode of being, that “is” the meditation, has been brought to a close “the direct contact with the infinite is interrupted” (285). Thus, according to Voegelin, a theory of human existence [Daseinslehre] must take the fundamental fact into account that only in the meditation is true knowledge possible. It is merely an extrapolation and rationalization to posit this experienced structure of existence for the entire course of life. For the extension of the insights gained in the experience of the meditation into the world’s space-time continuum necessarily force the poles of the meditation – the self that is originarily given in the experience and the super-personal spiritual reality in which the human’s finite being rests -- into the abstractions of “subject” and “object”. But this dichotomy belies the experience of participation. For “in reality human existence cannot be grasped in an objectifying mode of thought, but only in the existential movement of thought in which it becomes present to itself”(287).

The root of the relationship of the ruler to the ruled is found in the world-transcending ground because the openness of the spirit of both the ruler and the ruled extends into this region. And, indeed, it is here that all relationships between human beings actually take place. Therefore a theory of governance must take this world-transcending region into account. Voegelin finds only two Occidental thinkers since the 16th century who have done so. The 16th century Platonist Sir Thomas Elyot and Friedrich Wolters (1876-1930), historian and biographer of Stefan George and his Circle. The almost four hundred year period between Elyot’s *The Boke Named The Governor* (1531) and Wolters’ *Governance and Service* (1911) (*Herrschaft und Dienst*) are not treated by Voegelin. (In Voegelin’s eyes, the political “crisis” of the West—Voegelin does not use the term “crisis” in the *Theory of Governance* but the concept is present— is due to the philosophical and moral crisis that the transcendent ground of being has been neglected for these four hundred years.)

Sir Thomas Elyot takes the Platonic ruler as the “model of his investigation” (350). The social order is based on the classification of the various estates in analogy to the hierarchy of

being in the cosmos itself. (A classification of the realms of being which Voegelin finds in contemporary philosophy in Max Scheler's *Man's Place in the Cosmos* (1928) (351). The individual whose reason is most developed comes closest to God and is superiorly endowed to rule. Reason has two aspects, the metaphysical insight into "the begynnynge or originall causes of thynges", and practical reason, *prudentia*, that guides action informed by the insights of higher reason. The inequality among men based on their various endowments of reason is balanced by the equality that arises from the fact that all human beings are also made up of body and soul. Human beings are joined to God equally because a "gentiman and a carter" are made of the same clay and "libertie of wille" is as much "gyuen of god to the poore herdeman, as to the great and mighty emperour".

Why do those most endowed with reason accept the burden of public office? If they were to neglect to rule, others, less endowed, would try to govern and the inferiority of their rule would affect all. The ruler sacrifices his freedom in order to take on the burden of political office. "It is for the sake of love that rulers are willing to take governance upon themselves, to rule in the spirit of love and contribute their part to what is necessary for the realization of the community's purpose"(355). (Here in the background we find Plato's parable of the cave. The man whose reason has been developed most and who is informed by the idea of the good descends into the cave to try to help his fellow human beings. This "political friendship" is the spiritual medium that holds society together.) By voluntarily surrendering his own freedom in order to take on the burden of governance the ruler becomes an example to his subjects and serves as the norm of conduct in public affairs (356).

With the idea of the ruler as the center and norm of the lives of his subjects—which is the reason why the largest part of the *Boke named the Governour* is devoted to education—the model ruler is fashioned in accordance with the "paradigm of the Platonic state"(356).

According to Voegelin "Elyot penetrates to the core of the problem of governance, as it was not done again with equal clarity until Wolters—through Stefan George— found it again"(356). We need not go into the details of Friedrich Wolters' position here¹¹. Like Elyot Wolters begins his reflections on political order with a look at the ruler. He is the spiritually stronger person who becomes the center of a spiritual realm. The ruler, as in Elyot— (and like Bergson's philosopher in Voegelin's dissertation)— has an intuitive insight into, and

¹¹ For Voegelin's discussion of Wolters, see CW, 32:333-345.

deeper understanding of, the world-transcending spiritual essences out of which the community is born, and therefore leads others, according to their talents and ability, to gain insight into the same spiritual reality (333-340). However despite all inequality between the ruler and the ruled, like Elyot Wolters emphasizes the relative equality of the ruler and the ruled in their relationship to the spirit “in which and out of which they live”(334).

In his summary to these sections of the *Theory of Governance* Voegelin lists the essential points of Elyot’s and Wolters’ position: The rule of the good state is characterized by the pursuit of the noble life and the exercise of reason in the science of statecraft. The cardinal virtues of justice and prudence are explicitly mentioned in Voegelin’s discussion of Elyot, the virtues of fortitude and temperance are implied in his reference to the ruler taking the burden of governance upon himself , and of course justice is explicitly dealt with in the idea that the human being most endowed with reason should rule, and in the further insight that the deep identity of the ruler and ruled in their origins in the common clay that the creator has formed places limits on the ruler’s powers over his fellow human beings. At the center of the ruler’s life and actions is the virtue of love: by realizing this virtue in an exemplary way the ruler becomes the norm and model of the political order. Elyot’s and Wolters’ discussion of governance follow the symbols and self-understanding of classical philosophy and Christianity. In maintaining that Elyot and Wolters are the only theorists that have adequately dealt with the problem of governance in the last four hundred years, Voegelin also signals his acceptance of the Greek-Christian concept of the person that is at the heart of their thought.

b. *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Idea* (1933)

Voegelin’s manuscript on race, an aspect of the larger theme of “body ideas” (the best known example of the latter, the mystical body of Christ) was published in 1933 in two separate volumes, *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus*¹². “Body ideas” reveal archetypal forms (Urformen) of human nature. Body ideas, including the

¹² Erich Voegelin, *Rasse und Staat*, Tuebingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Siebeck), 1933. Translated as *Race and State* in CW 2, edited with an Introduction by Klaus Vondung, 1999. Ibid., *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus* in: CW, 3, edited with an Introduction by Klaus Vondung, 1999.

sub-set of the idea of race, are mythical ideas that embody self-images of humankind. Regarding the subset of the race idea, Voegelin argues that “in our time the only major philosophical attempt to get to the heart of the race problem was undertaken by Othmar Spann”.¹³ What characterizes the idea of race is not a so-called genetic purity but a purity of style and a unity of spiritual expression (*Einheit geistigen Ausdrucks*). Style is a spiritual-intellectual concept not a biological one. The notion of the idea as the unity in the variety of members of the same race marks the point where the spirit enters (*Einbruchsstelle*) into the material world. Races are born and decay according to spiritual acts and events not according to biological laws. This statement, so Voegelin, should not be misunderstood to mean that the individual can voluntarily change his or her race. Rather it points to the social nature (*Gesellschaftlichkeit*) of the spirit (*Geist*). A society’s identity and self-understanding are formed in the deepest spiritual experiences it undergoes. The history of race is not natural history but the subject of human studies (*Geistesgeschichte*). In this connection Voegelin again turns to Othmar Spann:

“It is the great founders of religions, sages and rulers who impart to their peoples new religious life and profoundly inspiring warlike heroic spirits and who deeply stir their feelings for life. It is they who also give new impetus to racial formation, and thus succeed in changing the natural image of man (*das stammliche Artbild*). The spiritual history of archetypal humanity (*Urmenschheit*) is primarily religious history. It was Schelling who endeavored to explain race formation from this standpoint”.¹⁴

According to Schelling it is not by living together, engaging in trade, or by having a common legal order that people come together as a nation. Prior to these acts a consciousness of community must already exist. The myth itself constitutes the ground of being (*Seinsgrund*) that unites individuals into a people. Schelling sees the myth as a part of a theogonic process. Voegelin speaks of this process as “subjective” to the extent that it takes place in a consciousness and is revealed in the creation of ideas (*Vorstellungen*). However the sources (*Urspruengen*) and the “objects” of these ideas are objective because they are the forces actually at work. Voegelin concludes that Schelling’s teaching of the myth as the nations’

¹³ Ibid., 102.

¹⁴ *Race and State*, 113. The quotation from Spann: Othmar Spann, *Gesellschaftslehre*, Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 3rd ed. 1930, 359.

ground of being is the original insight into the “religious nature [...] of all community formation”, and, further that in its methodological principles Schelling’s doctrine of the formation of community in religious experience is “equally valid for the formation of community today.”¹⁵

In *The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus* Voegelin looks at some of the “primal images” of the human being. Body ideas express primal images, a spiritual way of seeing that precedes discursive reasoning. The current fashion of viewing the human being as the member of a so-called biological race is the result of the fact that the spiritual manner of seeing primal images has been lost. Having lost the ability to contemplate primal images, when the modern world considers humankind, it attempts to imitate the methods of natural science. But methods developed for the investigation of the regional ontology of the phenomena of the space-time continuum are incapable of penetrating to the region of spiritual being. As a consequence the image of man is severely distorted.

The so-called biological view of race not only ascribes true humanity to one of the “biological” races, but by viewing the human being from a primarily biological perspective distorts his full nature as a body-soul-mind (spirit) unity. The spiritual doctrine of race expounded by Othmar Spann, in the tradition of Schelling, works with the image of the entire human being. In the contemporary political field in which the body-idea of race has become an issue (Voegelin mentions Germany primarily, but also the United States), it is also the task of *The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus* to help to restore the “full image of the human being”. To do this Voegelin explores the theme of primal ideas, and the body-ideas subsumed under them, and the idea of race as a subset of body-ideas. The principle of such a primal image in which the entire human being, i.e., the unity of body, soul, and mind, comes into view is found in Plato. “Only where a spiritual norm gives order to human beings and brings them together in harmony can great history take place: for all time Plato has established the law of the reciprocal and mutually supporting claims of the noble body and the noble spirit”.¹⁶

¹⁵ Voegelin, *Race and State*, 151.

¹⁶ *History of the Race Idea*, 23.

The realization of such a spiritual norm has been attempted several times previously in German history through the founding of select circles that engaged in the task of mutual education. Voegelin mentions the attempts of Schiller and Goethe. He finds the current attempt to realize the Platonic idea of the noble body and the noble spirit in the idea of a new nobility found in the circle around Stefan George. But he laments that “George’s doctrine of the spiritual empire has not been understood”.¹⁷ George’s idea of “race” draws on various biological groups (“Staemme”) because the biological sub-structure of the human being is formed by the spirit, and not vice versa. Therefore:

“Neuen Adel den ihr suchet
Fuehrt nicht her von schild und krone!
[...]
Stammlos wachsen im gewuehle
Seltene sprossen eigenen ranges
Und ihr kennt die mitgeburten
An den augen wahrer glut.”¹⁸

We have followed some of Voegelin’s writings, published and unpublished, from 1922 to 1933 in which the development of his thought on the concept of the person has come into view. The theme was implicitly present in Voegelin’s dissertation on the method of sociology. In the *Theory of Governance* it was explicitly treated in Elyot’s and Wolters’ discussion of the relationship of the ruler to the ruled, it was again implicitly present in Spann’s and Schelling’s theme of the birth of the community in religious experience, the quintessential experience because constitutive of the human being’s self-understanding, and in George’s teachings of the spiritual empire, modeled on the Platonic ideal of the life of

¹⁷ Ibid., 24. For a fuller discussion of Voegelin’s commitment to Stefan George’s spiritual idea of race, see W. Petropulos, *Stefan George und Erich Voegelin, Occasional Papers* LI, Munich Voegelin-Archiv, December 2005, 28-36.

¹⁸ “The new nobility you seek/ Is not found in crown or coat of arms!/ [...]Nameless, and out of the masses, grow/ Rare sons of equal rank/ And you will recognize your true brothers/ By the honest fervor in their eyes.” Stefan George, *Der Stern des Bundes*, Berlin: Bondi, 1914, 85. The “fervor” is understood as a spiritual fire, as in the line: “Aus jedes aug erriet sich hier sein grad” (“The rank of each individual is revealed in his eye (or glance, or visage)”, Ibid., 110.

virtue. In the last of Voegelin's early writings that I will examine here, the first chapter of the *Theory of Governance*, which was written in 1933/34, the idea of the person is at the center of Voegelin's study.

c. The *Theory of Governance* II. (1934)

In chapter one of the *Theory of Governance*—"To Determine the Concept of the Person"--Voegelin discusses the philosophical meditation. He examines texts by Augustine, Descartes, Husserl and Scheler. Unfortunately the manuscript is incomplete and the section on Scheler listed in the table of contents has not survived. Nevertheless, through the remaining references to Scheler in the *Theory of Governance* it is possible to identify the topics in Scheler's writings which were important to Voegelin's argument. In what follows, I will indicate some of these with references to Scheler's writings. The connection is important because Voegelin, who began his chapter on the "person" with Augustine and planned to end it with Scheler¹⁹, was certainly aware that the intention of Scheler's philosophy of religion, to recover for the modern world the experiences that have traditionally gone under the name of "natural theology", was a task that

"it can only perform once it has delivered the kernel of Augustinianism from the husk like accretions of history, and employed phenomenological philosophy to provide it with a fresh and more deeply rooted foundation. [...] Only a theology of the essential experiences of divinity can open our eyes to the lost truths of Augustine".²⁰

The chapter's first sentence reads: "The determination of what a person essentially is takes place, when the attempt is made with adequate means, in a fundamental form of philosophical thinking that, following the name given to it by Descartes, we will call *meditation*".²¹ Voegelin examines books 10 and 11 of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, and argues that the

¹⁹ I have treated Voegelin's reception of the thought of Max Scheler more comprehensively in W. P., "Max Scheler and Eric Voegelin on the Eternal in Man" in: *Max Scheler's Acting Persons*, ed. Stephen Schneck, Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2002, 111-145. My argument above draws on this article, esp. 118ff.

²⁰ Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. Bernard Noble (London: SCM Press, 1960), 13

²¹ *CW*, 32: 226. Subsequent references to this volume appear in the main text between parentheses.

forms in which the Christian's thought move, and the formulae he finds, remain to this day the classic examples for investigation into the essence of the person and time. Voegelin discerns two principle ways of exploring the essence of the person, one oriented to being, the other to becoming. Both lead the meditating person to God and therewith the knowing person (Erkennenden) to insight into the essence of the human person who is primarily "openness to a transcendent being." The human person is "a frontier between the world, with its being and becoming, and a super-world (*Ueber-Welt*) (236).²²

In our context four aspects of the meditation need to be highlighted:

1. The meditation's intention. Augustine is moved by the agitation of the heart to ask where the heart can find peace. The agitation arises from the creatureliness of the human being and gives the meditation its direction. Augustine seeks beyond creation to the creator Himself. The meditation is both a cognitive act and an experience of the entire person: Augustine seeks God, not a concept of God (227).²³
2. The *via negativa*. Step by step the meditative search passes through the physical, organic, and animal levels of being— and finding them inadequate to represent God, leaves them behind. By means of this elimination the course of the meditation advances to a "place" that is no longer a "place" in inner-worldly being (227). No science of worldly being, nor all of them together, can grant insight into the spiritual ground that transcends being, but the sciences must be mastered in order to avoid letting the meditation come to rest at a level of being that still belongs to "the world".

²² Scheler also emphasizes the importance of meditation. He writes that a prejudice exists to the effect that "no 'mystical experimental theology' could ever acquire any kind of consistent universal validity in the sphere of religious experience or for the theory of such experience". The reason for this view lies "in the lack of knowledge and appreciation of psychic techniques as a means not to ethical, practical ends but to an increase in the sphere of religious experience or for the theory of such experience." Scheler adds that his own philosophy of religion will only find its "full elaboration and verification" in a "fundamental treatment [...] of the technique appertaining to the mystical experience of divinity and the corresponding network of procedures and states of mind." Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, 30.

²³ The essence of the religious act cannot be fulfilled by any being belonging to this world: "In this sense Augustine's *dictum*, *Inquietum cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*, is a basic formula for all religious acts.", *Ibid.*, 251.

3. The *conversio*. (Plato: the *periagoge*)²⁴. In order to understand Augustine's meditation, one must perform it oneself. For the cognitive and experiential state achieved in the meditation, i.e., the finding of oneself by being found in God, is a state of being and not a piece of information. Indeed: "The meditation is the life of the person [emphasis W.P.], in which the person becomes aware of his own uniquely individual being [Eigenwesen]" (239). Discussing Descartes' Third Meditation Voegelin writes: "In the meditation I experience myself only in the moment of the concrete cogitare. Beyond this moment [...] I am only maintained by the power which created me [...]. The act of creation does not fill a moment of finite time but is the continuously working force that maintains the life of the person" (244).
4. Person and community. The community of humankind *in deo*. In the experience of the *conversio* a new method of "positive description" begins:

"in which the frontiers, or limits, of the finite person and that which lies beyond the finite person can be brought into focus. Here we find considerations of the type that we find in Scheler's discussion of the essence of Thou-evidence. The ego finds empty spaces which point to a possible fulfillment. From the nature of these empty spaces one gains a notion of the nature of the essence of the being that could fulfill them, without having concretely experienced this being. Longing, gratitude, and acts of love, point beyond the ego toward a need for fulfillment in a Thou. In experience of this type I become aware of my person as a finite person: finite in the specific sense of being both limited and open to other personal substances" (342).

Neither Voegelin nor Scheler are here referring to a "psychological need" of the human being to find a divine "Thou", but a structural aspect of the human spirit (Geist). The *cor inquietum* of Augustine is the existential experience of a concrete person which motivates the person to

²⁴ "The distinguishing characteristic of the 'Form of the Good' is that it is the transcendent source of all the reality and intelligibility of everything other than itself. Thus it is exactly what is meant in Christian philosophy by the *ens realissimum*, and is rightly regarded as distinct from and transcendent of the whole system of its effects and manifestations. And, as in the *ens realissimum* of Christian philosophers, so in the 'Form of the Good' the distinction, valid everywhere else, between *essentia* and *esse*, *So-Sein* and *Sein*, falls away. In other language, it transcends the distinction, too often treated as absolute, between value and existence. It is the supreme value and the source of all other value, and at the same time it is, though 'beyond being', the source of all existence". A. E. Taylor, Plato. *The Man and His Works*, London: Methuen, 1926, 289.

begin the meditative journey in order to discover where the heart may come to rest. This resting place, as Voegelin pointed out, is not in any “name” of God but in the concrete experience of the ground (God) itself on the part of the concrete human being engaged in the search. It is for this reason that the human being only really “is” in the *unio mystica* with the divine ground. This union takes place, not in this world, but in a “place” between the finite world and the infinity of the divine ground that Scheler called—and Voegelin after him—the In-between.²⁵ It is the finite creature’s participation in the divine ground which makes him the creature who transcends the world, or as Scheler has famously “defined” him: he is essentially (not accidentally or contingently) “the living X which seeks God”.²⁶

IV. Conclusion

The human being exists “in deo”. For this reason Voegelin’s studies on the nature of social acts emphasized participation in the ground of being (Bergson). For the same reason the *Theory of Governance* went beyond Max Weber’s legal (and “external”) way of viewing the relationship of command and obedience, to follow instead Elyot’s and Wolters’ discussions of the nature of governance: it is a spiritual relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and like every human relationship, it is rooted in the divine ground. The nature of this relationship could therefore be expressed in the Greek-Christian tradition of the intellectual, ethical and theological virtues. Because all human relations are rooted in the divine ground, in *Race and State* Voegelin took up the theme of religious experience (Spann, Schelling, George-Circle) as the experience in which community (state, nation, race etc.) is born. In *The History of the Race Idea* Voegelin turned to the theme of “primal images” and the myths that narrate such community founding experiences. Finally, in 1934, Voegelin turned to the “philosophical meditation” as the most complete experience of the primal image of the human being; most complete because first, this spiritual exercise can give an account of its path to discovery so that others, willing to take the same course, can examine its claims for themselves, and second, and more important, because “the meditation is the life of the person”.

²⁵ “The human being is a between (Zwischen), a border (Grenze) and a passage, an appearance of God in the current of life and an eternal overcoming of life itself”. Max Scheler, *Vom Umsturz der Werte*, in Scheler, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 3, ed. Maria Scheler (Bonn: Franke Verlag 1995), 186.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Voegelin's concept of the person in his early writings reflects the Greek-Christian understanding of the human being and the life of virtue. This concept remains with Voegelin the rest of his life. The particularity of Voegelin's concept lies not in making any new discoveries concerning the person but in his emphasis on the act of meditation as the cognitive and existential experience of the In-Between between life and death, finite and infinite being, in which the person truly "is".