

Eric Voegelin Untimely Thoughts on the Idea Race.

Eric Voegelin published two books on race in Germany in 1933, Race and State, and The History of the Race Idea from Ray to Carus. The publications were untimely because they took place just as National Socialism came to power and the books attacked the dictatorship's idea of race. My paper does not deal with the political untimeliness of their appearance but instead focuses on the principle untimeliness of Platonism in politics.

In this summary I will touch on four points.

1. What is meant by Platonism in politics
2. The role of Stefan George in Voegelin's Platonism
3. The place of Voegelin's books on race within the context of the unfinished "Theory of the State" that Voegelin worked on between 1929-1934.
4. The role of Stefan George in Voegelin's hopes for Germany's future

First, let me briefly indicate what I mean by Platonism by recalling a few aspects of the Republic's Parable of the Cave.

The real world is a cave in which men sit chained facing a wall with their backs to the mouth of the cave. The light behind them projects shadows on the wall and these shadows are mistaken for reality. In an arduous process the philosopher ascends to the realm of day where he is at first blinded by the sun, the ultimate cause of everything and in the light of which, knowledge--including moral insight-

- first becomes possible. After growing accustomed to the light the philosopher, as an act of moral obligation, returns to the cave to try to persuade his neighbors that a political community's true interests lie in virtue. (Let this bare sketch of the Parable suffice for the moment as an illustration of "Platonism in politics".)

I come to my **second point**. The role of Stefan George in Voegelin's Platonism. Between 1910 and 1932 Stefan George's companions wrote more than 20 books on Plato. The unusual origin of these books was discussed by Kurt Hildebrandt in 1931. He pointed out that Friedrich Wolters published a small monograph on Stefan George and the life of the George-Circle in 1909, and that this book became the guide to the George-Circle's research into Plato. One might reasonably ask, is the direct way from Stefan George to Plato a real way of getting there. Some competent scholars have thought it was. In a letter to Voegelin in 1951 Leo Strauss wrote : "You are entirely right, George knew more about Plato than Wilamowitz, Jaeger, and the entire guild." I have to leave it at this one example. But in what follows Voegelin's references to George, and to the writings of members of his Circle, such as Friedrich Wolters or Friedrich Gundolf, are also references to Voegelin's understanding of Plato.

This brings me to my **third point**. The theoretical context of Voegelin's books on race is his unfinished Theory of the State, a MS he worked on between 1929 and 1934. Of this work, the books on race constitute the largest surviving fragments. They would have appeared in the work's second section that discusses "political ideas".

Political ideas are not theories but the actual ideas found in the consciousness of a group and, for that reason, play a part in the group's self-understanding. A subsection of political ideas deals with body-ideas. Examples are the idea of the

dynasty, the mystical body of Christ, and, of course, race. Thus the race idea is subsumed under political ideas. And what is principally binding for political ideas is also binding for body-ideas and race-ideas.

The section on political ideas in Voegelin's Theory of the State is preceded by the general consideration of the relationship of the ruler and the ruled. The first version of this section, the Theory of Governance, was completed in 1931. Here Voegelin argues that the relationship between the rulers and the ruled is based on the fact that the human being is open to experiences of transcendence—both ruler and ruled. Voegelin therefore rejects theories of governance like Max Weber's that do not pursue the structure of political order back to its roots in human transcendence. Instead he turns to, among others, Othmar Spann and Fyodor Dostoyevsky; and to illustrate some points concerning experiences of transcendence, to the Meditations of Descartes. But Voegelin reserves the first place in his theory to the book that marked the beginning of the Plato scholarship of the George-Circle, to Friedrich Wolters' monograph on Stefan George. Voegelin writes:

“The theory [...] developed by Wolters, based on the person of [Stefan] George [...] is the most comprehensive of those we have analyzed. It offers an inventory of the core problems that require little more than minor additions. The fundamental state of the human being from which the powers of governance emanate, is the human being's openness to divinity” (340).

The only other thought on governance that Voegelin rates as high as Stefan George's is Sir Thomas Elyot's The Boke named the Governour, published in 1531; Voegelin writes:

“The Boke named the Governour is devoted to educating the model ruler, based on the paradigm of the Platonic state [...].Elyot penetrates to the core of the problem of governance, as it was not done with equal clarity until [Friedrich] Wolters—through Stefan George—found it again (356)

The “core of the problem” is man’s openness to divinity. And the reason for the 400 year break between theories of governance that meet with Voegelin’s approval is the fact that in the intervening period the theoretical treatment of experiences of transcendence, as the heart of a theory of politics, had fallen into abeyance. The loss of the horizon of human “openness to divinity” is in Voegelin’s view the source and the substance of a crisis that has befallen the west.

In later years Voegelin spoke of the “ground of being” and used other symbols to express the nature of this lost horizon of transcendence. At the time of his books on race, he discussed this fundamental fact of political order under the general term of “religion”. In Race and State Voegelin credits Schelling with the “original insight into the religious nature of community formation”. And he adds: this insight is “equally valid for the formation of community today”. Thus the Western crisis is a religious crisis: with the loss of transcendence the full image of man has also been lost. The western nations resist the crisis somewhat better than Germany, partly because they were formed at a time when classical philosophy and Christianity still provided them with the idea of a humankind open to transcendence—the full image of man. Germany’s turbulent political history prevented national unification until the 19th century and, in the general crisis of the west, Germany fell victim to the most recent materialist onslaught on the image of man, the Social Darwinian idea of race.

This brings me to my **fourth point**, Stefan George's role in Voegelin's hope for renewal in Germany. In the Introduction to The History of the Race idea Voegelin speaks of his intention to help to restore the "full image of man". This is not just a scientific goal but also as a practical one. But this does not mean that the descent of the philosopher back into the cave is the equivalent of an attempt to compete for political power. The Platonist knows that the problems lie deeper and his intention is educational, in the sense of education that Plato illustrates in his dialogs: Not the imparting of information but the awakening of the student to his noetic, or spiritual center.

In my paper try to demonstrate that Voegelin identified his educational efforts with those of the George-Circle. To do this I compare passages from Voegelin's text with passages from Stefan George, Friedrich Wolters and Friedrich Gundolf. Here I can only offer one example of this close relationship. Voegelin says that the attempt to restore the full, spiritual, image of man will not be easy. And he adds: But he "who in matters of the spirit makes things easy for himself has no right to be heard." Decades later in Voegelin's retrospective look at the German university during the time of National Socialism¹, he again used the exact same words. But the second time, in 1965, he attributed them to Friedrich Gundolf. In 1933 Voegelin did not need to put the words in quotation marks because the small group that in particular he intended to address would recognize the author without a footnote.

To sum up:

¹ Eric Voegelin, "The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era" Intercollegiate Review—Spring/Summer 1985, 1-27. Here 23. Reprinted in CW, 12: 1-35.

1. Voegelin's books on race should be read in the broader context of his Theory of the State and in the light of Voegelin's understanding of the, now 400 year, enduring Western Crisis.
2. The nature of the crisis is the loss of the knowledge that the human being is open to divinity. The crisis can be met by regaining insight into what Schelling called "the religious nature [...] of all community formation."
3. As the Parable of the cave illustrates, the attempt to renew a society spiritually requires a person of the spirit. In the 1920's and 30's Voegelin found this person in Stefan George.
4. Finally, Platonism in politics is always untimely because spiritual renewal is a potential threat to any political order.