

ERIC VOEGELIN ON RACE THEORIES: A Critique on the “Superstition” of Science

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THE “SUPERSTITION” OF SCIENCE AND THE UNITY OF THE PARTS

In 1933 Eric Voegelin published his first book on race, *Race and State*¹. Published in Tübingen, *Race and State*, was, at the end of the same year, followed by a second, *The History of the Race Idea*². It goes without saying that the results of his studies were not compatible with the ideology of National Socialism: *The History of the Race Idea* was withdrawn from circulation by the publisher and the remainder of the edition destroyed³. In the two books on race (followed by a series of articles, the most of them aimed to

¹ E. Voegelin, *Race and State*, ed. by K. Vondung, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge-London 1997. Original edition: *Rasse und Staat*, J. C. B. Mohr, Tübingen 1933. This volume is the number 2 of the Collected Works of Eric Voegelin (since now onwards, CW).

² E. Voegelin, *The History of the Race Idea. From Ray to Carus*, ed. by K. Vondung, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 1998, CW 3. The book was originally published in 1933 with the title of *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus*, Junker und Dünnhaupt, Berlin.

³ See E. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. by E. Sandoz, University of Missouri Press, Columbia-London 2006, pp. 52-53, CW 34. Since the publisher of *Race and State* had rejected the part dedicated to the history of the race idea, the latter was published under the title of *The History of the Race Idea* at the end of the same year. See the letter to E. Baumgarten, dated April 1, 1933, in E. Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*, ed. by J. Gebhardt, University of Missouri Press, Columbia-London 2009, p. 109, CW 29.

further clarify their contents) the author – at that time still lecturer in political science and sociology at the University of Vienna – not only faced some of the most challenging issues of the day but offered an articulate reflection concerning the relationship between science and anthropology, the corporeal-psychic nature of man and political ideas.

In order to clarify the terms of the debate Voegelin underlines the importance of drawing a demarcation line between the concepts of race theory and that of race idea⁴: whereas the first claims to be a science, the latter belongs to politics, «[...] it is used by modern creeds, of the type of National Socialism, in order to integrate a community spiritually and politically»⁵. The first part of *Race and State* is dedicated to the analysis of theories, whereas the second is dedicated to race ideas. In this perspective we want to focus especially on the first topic, that of race theories, giving nevertheless – in the last part of this contribution – few hints concerning race ideas, in order to contextualize Voegelin's analysis.

In order to analyse the race problem Voegelin brings it back to the body-soul problem, thus inaugurating a field of investigation much deeper than the narrow one typical of contemporary race theories, which were self-satisfied to work mostly with «[...] a system of dogmas that, as we can see, is neither transcendently shaken by philosophical anthropology nor deeply affected inherently by the course of biology and scientific anthropology»⁶. The perspective adopted by Voegelin, by contrast, made his reflection valid not only in the specific field of race, as it involves also a wider discussion on science, philosophical anthropology, society and politics. Voegelin's position against contemporary race theories (from the second half of the nineteenth century) is that they consist in a system based on superstition, and in particular on two dogmas: the first consists in believing that the only scientific method to be valid is the one provided by natural sciences; the second, that «science progresses steadily; the researcher is sufficiently equipped for his work if he is aware of the

⁴ See Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 13.

⁵ E. Voegelin, *The Growth of the Race Idea*, in Id., *Published Essays, 1940-1952*, ed. by E. Sandoz, University of Missouri Press, Columbia-London 2000, pp. 27-61 (the quotation is from page 27), CW 10. This essay was originally published in «Review of Politics» 2 (1940). See also T. W. Heilke, *Voegelin on the Idea of Race. An Analysis of Modern European Racism*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge-London 1990, p. 63.

⁶ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 9.

problems currently facing his discipline, and he must proceed from this point on»⁷. What emerges from this context is a “superstition of science”, «the peculiar nature of the problems presented by social symbols, mainly theological and metaphysical, was disregarded» – Voegelin says – as it can be noticed also by the fact that «[...] the creators of the new symbols of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries insist most fervently that what they produce is not a new social symbol, expressive of religious experiences at all, but science. [...]. The modern political race theorists insist that their judgments are scientific, even when they deviate quite obviously from the narrow path of science and indulge lustily in the invention of symbols and dogmas»⁸.

Concerning the specific contents of *Race and State* Voegelin's intention was to avoid both the dangers of, on the one hand, advancing the pretention of an ability to explain adequately an object of experience through abstract reasoning and, on the other hand, to leave the multiplicity unexplained and confused, using the same method to investigate objects characterized by a different nature⁹. Observing some fundamental human experiences, such as death, sleep, dream, fear, illness, skill, the purposeful control of actions, depersonalizing Dionysian ecstasy, mystical submersion in God, the spiritual self-involvement of meditation etc., Voegelin considers some of the most relevant theories concerning man's nature as a composite of matter and substances as soul, mind, intellect¹⁰: these theories are called “construction type” theories; according to them the unity of being results from the multiplicity of its elements. Voegelin's interest in construction types is due in particular to the exceptional case «[...] in which the principles are applied to the composition of a unified whole out of a part

⁷ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 9.

⁸ Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 56.

⁹ See Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 10. In 1934 Voegelin published an article entitled *Rassenidee und Wissenschaft: Ein Beitrag zur Klärung*, «Kölnische Zeitung», Sonntagblatt, January 21, 1934, now translated as *The Race Idea and Science: a Clarification*, in Id., *Published Essays, 1934-1939*, ed. by T. W. Heilke, University of Missouri Press, Columbia-London 2001, pp. 13-16, CW 9. In that article Voegelin underlines the fact that «[...] prominent investigators of the race question fail to *adequately differentiate* [...] between propositions of a scientific nature capable of withstanding scientific testing on the one hand and, on the other hand, propositions that we must deem to be an immediate expression of experience per se that cannot be scientifically either proved or disproved» (Voegelin, *The Race Idea and Science*, p. 13).

¹⁰ See Voegelin, *Race and State*, pp. 19-20.

considered specifically human and others considered subhuman»¹¹. Examples of construction types are (1) the human being imagined as a form not already human in itself which becomes human through the addition of an essential element (isolation of one part); (2) the problems raised by this model lead to the construction principle of an intermediate link between parts considered heterogeneous (Descartes' pituitary gland, Scheler's volitive acts, Aristotle's passive reason and Kant's arbitrariness); (3) the "super-power" construction, which is intended to create «[...] a causal relationship between the parts of the whole human being. The phenomena of the essentially human sphere of the mind and those of the sub-human sphere are acknowledged in their reality, but the manifestations of the one realm are considered dependent variables of those of the other realm. The knowledge of one is the key to knowing the other, and ontically one is determined by the other»¹². This construction is called "super-power" construction precisely because «[...] the autonomy of the classes of being» is replaced by «the heteronomy of one realm of being»¹³. The overarching unity of the two realms is the non-datum: the "objective and methodological unity" is then lost because «the problem of unity cannot be solved by positing the *pars* for the *totum*»¹⁴. Taking the distance from the "super-power" construction Voegelin maintains that «the unity of the parts therefore exists, and they can enter into a close connection, which presupposes that in their substance they are not totally alien to each other but can easily flow into each other and be amalgamated»¹⁵: such a connection – however – is not a subject that science can study because it does not pertain to the field of reality that can be measured through scientific instruments. The fourth case is the construction of the intellectual unity, to which I. H. Von Fichte come closest as he proposed a «[...] space- and duration-establishing soul [that] corporalizes itself and becomes perceptible to the senses through the organization of inorganic matter into its body»¹⁶ [the latter being intended as soul-body]). Even failing to give a rational

¹¹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 23.

¹² Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 28.

¹³ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 29.

¹⁴ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 30.

¹⁵ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 32.

systematisation of the fundamental experiences, his perspective is superior to the other construction types as it starts from an experience of unity and not from one of autonomy of the parts¹⁷. As Voegelin underlines, moreover, 'the mind is not simply a characteristic added to the animal form, giving man superiority over the animal, but it is a substance that is just as originally active as the animal soul: as the animal body is the complete expression of the soul proper to the species of the animal in question, so man's physical and psychological functions are the complete expression of the active mind'¹⁸. The speculation starting from the experience of unity draws a more favourable path for the purposes of a race theory of man: this perspective – Voegelin maintains – '[...] does not "solve" the body-soul problem but leaves untouched the experiences of the isolated existence of the parts of human totality and the possibility of experiencing each of these parts in itself with the means adequate to it'¹⁹. Starting from these premises Voegelin does not intend to deny the validity of physical anthropology as natural science (which aim consists in classifying man '[...] into racial types according to groups of traits» and to study «the transmission of physical traits and predispositions through heredity'²⁰) precisely because animal nature is part of the total human existence and thus can be considered separately, at the same time – however – the result of physical anthropology cannot claim the right to be scientifically relevant for the mind. This perspective is considerably significant for Voegelin's thought as the Author himself underlines in the *Introduction to Race and State*, where he maintains that human race theory is affected by difficulties which come from the fact that «[...] the methods proper to one of the realms of being and applicable to a part of man are to be applied unjustifiably and impossibly to other partial spheres», so, if is it possible for physical anthropology to study man as animal, at the same time «it is impossible to make meaningful statements about the mental sphere on that basis»²¹.

¹⁷ See Voegelin, *Race and State*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁸ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 32.

¹⁹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 34.

²⁰ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 34.

²¹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 10

As it emerges from these considerations, Voegelin's reflection on the topic of race is supported by a philosophical anthropology²² mainly deriving from Max Scheler's thought, which Voegelin analyses, while taking a critical distance from the latter where he seems to advance inadequate solutions concerning the problem body-soul-mind²³. Another author that plays an important role in shaping Voegelin's anthropological perspective at the time of *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Ideas* was Helmuth Plessner, professor of philosophy at the University of Cologne, who eventually migrated to the Netherlands in 1933. Plessner's philosophy was praised explicitly by Voegelin: according to Plessner (as the latter said in a very positive review of *Race and State*²⁴) philosophical anthropology has to develop a concept of the human being able to consider the different levels by which the human being is constituted «[...] without making one of these layers the measure and explanatory basis for the others»²⁵.

THE DARWINIST ROOTS OF RACE AS BIOLOGICAL UNIT

In this context Voegelin's specific interest consists in clarifying «[...] the relationship of political race theory [...] to the scientific and biological theory of race and species in the narrower sense of the term»²⁶. In order to reach this goal Voegelin outlines the two main perspectives from which race, in contemporary age, is usually considered, that is either as biological or anthropological unit

²² See *Editor's Introduction* to Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. XIV.

²³ See Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, pp. 66-67. Such an influence can be traced back to Max Scheler's book *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, as Voegelin himself underlines in his *Autobiographical Reflections*: «I adopted at the time the philosophical anthropology of Max Scheler, as expressed in his recent publication *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*» (*Ibidem*). When Voegelin was working on classical philosophy he became more conscious of the limits permeating Scheler's philosophy that – however – early in the '30s was able to provide him with the necessary philosophical instruments to found an adequate anthropology.

²⁴ See «*Zeitschrift für öffentliches Recht*», 14 (1934), pp. 407-414.

²⁵ See *Editor's Introduction* to Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. XIX. For other reviews of the book see Eric Voegelin Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, box 54.

²⁶ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 37.

(intended as physical anthropology)²⁷. For pointing out the problematic aspect of the first concept (that of biological unit), Voegelin goes back to Darwin's theory of the origin of the species. His purpose is to familiarize with the debate on race and species, because – according to his view – Darwin's concept of individual and species is presumed by contemporary race theories. According to the author, «the attempt to classify humanity according to physical traits is reasonable because there are constants [...] that follow Mendelian laws of heredity in their combination and separation when individuals of different types interbreed»²⁸. According to Voegelin, Darwin's theory (whose success, in his opinion, is due to the fact that «Darwin depicts the organic world according to the model of the harmony of liberal society which constantly reproduces and maintains itself by eliminating what is unfit and retaining what is fit and useful»²⁹) is characterized by an irremediable fallacy. The three thesis formulated by Darwin (variation, the struggle for existence, hereditability) – Voegelin says – are nowadays questionable. First of all, «the differences between living beings that are merely due to the individuation of a type (fluctuating variations) are irrelevant to the species problem»³⁰. Secondly, the premise of the theory of selection is that organisms are completely adapted to their environment, but this is not true. Even if organisms are sufficiently adapted to survive and reproduce in their environment, «[...] there is a gaping chasm between this minimum of adaptation and the empirically found species, and it is so wide that the major part of all traits and particularly those relevant for speciation find room in it»³¹. This is so true that moreover also supposedly harmful traits can become essential elements for surviving. Finally, heredity promises much more that it can maintain, «[...] since precisely traits acquired by individuals and perhaps due to adaptation are not transmitted to the offspring. As best we can determine today, all that can be inherited are certain variations, the so-called mutations that are

²⁷ In a letter to E. Baumgarten dated September 6, 1932 Voegelin, referring to the chapter on species in his book on race, says that «it is a risky business because I have to describe a number of biological problems for which I do not have even the knowledge of a dilettante», in Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924-1949*, p. 95.

²⁸ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 37.

²⁹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 39.

³⁰ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 39.

³¹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 39.

due to a change of genetic structure, that is, a change in the genotype structure»³². Starting from these observations – Voegelin argues – even if we accept the theory of natural selection as valid, we cannot explain why fit variations develop and which ones will come about³³. The same concept of “individual” as an indivisible entity (with an “interior” and an “exterior”) – moreover – is a speculative-dialectical construction, as in biology a “pure” individual does not exist: individuals for Voegelin can be more easily assimilated to «[...] periodic knots in the continuous string of organic substance»³⁴. The same problem arises with race and species as «the same continuously existing organic substance that carries the determinants of the individual also contains those of the varieties, races, and species»³⁵. Here the importance of Henry Bergson’s philosophy for Voegelin’s speculation is explicitly recognized by the author, in particular concerning Bergson’s view of the individual that – even in the highest forms – is not self-contained, as its boundaries are fluid «toward its ancestors and descendants»³⁶.

The mistake of identifying the “individual” drawing a demarcation line between what it is “interior” to him and “exterior” emerges also from the fact that the genotype, in order to be affected by the environment, has to be predisposed to be changed by that specific kind of environment. Thus, Voegelin

³² Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 39.

³³ See Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 40.

³⁴ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 41. The theory of heredity – Voegelin explains – «[...] locates the internal determinants of the organic forms in the germ cells. However, the germ cells, too, are not the final resting place, for they – in one of various methods of reproduction – derive from other cells in other individuals. Thus, in this quest for origins we cross the boundaries of the individual and penetrate to the parental individuals; as a result, the image of interior and exterior, which is based on the single individual taking up space, becomes meaningless» (*Ibidem*).

³⁵ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 43. See also T. Heilke, *The Philosophical Anthropology of Race: a Voegelinian Encounter*, in *Occasional Papers*, hrsg. von P. J. Opitz - D. Herz, Eric-Voegelin-Archiv Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München März 2000, pp. 34-37.

³⁶ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 42. See H. Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice*, 1907. Voegelin, after having spent two years in America through a fellowship granted by the Rockefeller Foundation, could study in Paris for one year thanks to an extension of the same fellowship. At that time he was not attracted by Bergson (even if he had already read *Matière et mémoire* and the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*). His interest in Bergson only grew with the publication of his *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* in 1932 (see Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 63).

maintains, «both the constancy of the type and its variation are functions of the structure of the organic substance in its development within an environment»³⁷. From this perspective the theory of general variation among individuals comes to be unreasonable, as individuals tend to vary only in similar and few directions. Moreover, «the great majority of these variations fluctuates [...]; they are not transmitted. Only a very few variations, occurring suddenly and unpredictably, – Voegelin underlines – the so-called mutations, represent genuine structural changes in the organic substance [...] and are preserved in further individuation»³⁸. Mutations, however, are only slightly affected by the external environment. Instead of the theory of the general variation proposed by Darwin, Voegelin supports theories of biologists who argue that «[...] it is the attribute of organic substance to mutate in a particular direction and only in that direction and that the existing species are stages in the process of mutation»³⁹. Among them Voegelin considers Carl Nägeli, G. H. Theodor Eimer, Hans Driesch and Heinz Woltereck. According to Woltereck, who elaborated the reaction-norm theory, «the species is defined as the unity of all the individuals connected by the same mode of reaction [...]. Thus, the unit in the system of biology is not the pure line [...] that is, a group of individuals distinguished from all others by a single hereditary factor – but a group of individuals that in addition to its constant constitution also exhibits a specific complex of plausible factors. These plausible factors are the changes in the constant character of the species that appear as variations in its developmental phases»⁴⁰. For Voegelin, consequently, this condition makes impossible to establish pure lineages that can function for classifying men. The outcome of these observations is that race as biologic unity is a problematic concept: the supposed “purity” – thus – «[...] remains always questionable because the purity of the hereditary factors can be assessed only by their effect on the external traits we can control. That they are actually identical in regard to all their genes cannot be proven»⁴¹. Voegelin – who, however, appreciates Darwin’s studies as a naturalist – maintains that «[...] the history of

³⁷ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 44.

³⁸ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 44.

³⁹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 51.

⁴¹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, pp. 54-55.

biological *theory* since Darwin is the history of a fiasco», not because the theory of evolution is imperfect, but because constitutively it cannot do more than describing «[...] the external circumstances under which one form changes into another; nothing can explain the fact that a substance exists that has form or is capable of changing into another – here we confront the phenomenon we must accept unexplained»⁴². For Voegelin life as a whole is, and will be always a mystery. If we pretend to «[...] reduce the phenomenon of life to the laws of nonliving nature»⁴³ we commit the mistake of trying to explain the inexplicable. As the Author underlines in the *Introduction to The History of the Race Idea*, «we must keep in mind that the laws of heredity are laws concerning the conservation of the form; the living form as such and the phenomenon of its invariance, by which the species is formed, are simply taken as givens, and research looks for the rules of hereditary succession for the form's components within the scope of these givens». As such, the laws of heredity have a scientific value not as laws of “living forms”, but only as «[...] rules of their material reconstitution in individuals of the same form»⁴⁴.

MAN AS ANTHROPOLOGICAL UNIT: THE “INEXTENSIVE” LAW

Concerning race as anthropological unit (where anthropology is here intended as natural science) Voegelin underlines the danger of applying basic concepts elaborated by biologists for animals and plants to human beings, because «[...] human beings are not merely beings of nature, and their physical aspect in its group formation and selection is also determined by the higher principles shaping the formation of societies and states»⁴⁵. Considering the theories of various anthropologists, only in the case of Kurt Hildebrandt we can see the question of the body as basis of community and the State avoiding to embrace a reductive perspective (as the one shaped «[...] by the misapplication

⁴² Voegelin, *The History of the Race Idea*, p. 20.

⁴³ Voegelin, *The History of the Race Idea*, p. 21. See also Heilke, *Voegelin on the Idea of Race*, pp. 67-80.

⁴⁴ Voegelin, *The History of the Race Idea*, pp. 20-21.

⁴⁵ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 62.

of scientific categories in the realm of the human spirit»), but «[...] by breeding man to a norm of the body that can absorb, preserve and keep alive the spirit of community»⁴⁶. This judgment entails a detailed examination concerning the problem of the “soul-characteristics” and their “transmission”: since the human spirit is human and not disembodied «[...] we will always have reason to state that man as a whole is involved in the process of the succession of generations and that all his traits, including spiritual ones, are related to so-called hereditary transmission»⁴⁷. However these considerations – unlike race theories contemporary to Voegelin – do not involve any fatalism: any kind of so-called “fatality”, moreover, cannot be proved through scientific arguments and «[...] a judgment claiming the dependence of the phenomenon of spirit on bodily processes would [...] be a statement about the ontology of the real that can in principle not be supported by experiences»⁴⁸. The experience of man, from an anthropological point of view – Voegelin reasserts – is to have «[...] *one* reality of being with two aspects – that of the mind and that of the body»⁴⁹. At the same time, on the other hand, every thought, every insight is «[...] paralleled by a series of physical processes»⁵⁰. Avoiding any kind of reductionism Voegelin states that «our body is not only a passive recipient of impressions from the environment but also an active center of gestures and actions [...]. Our body is open to the world not only passively, accepting intrusions, but also actively, reaching out. Conversely, the human mind is not pure activity, not only a center and source of action and power working upon the outside, [...] it is also passive, receptive. [...]. If we take as our premise this deeper insight into the essence of body and mind, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to illustrate the relationship between the two areas as two aspects of the same stream of events»⁵¹.

⁴⁶ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 63.

⁴⁷ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 65.

⁴⁸ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 65.

⁴⁹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 66.

⁵⁰ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 66.

⁵¹ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 68.

According to Voegelin what sciences can grasp about heredity are only the processes of reproduction, but not what Voegelin calls the “inextensive” law⁵², that is supposed to show the creative link between the various degrees of constancy and the genetic structure: «Empirically speaking, we see, on the one hand, the traits recurring with various degrees of constancy and, on the other hand, the mechanism of reproduction down to the genetic structure – theoretically, everything is wide open: we can just as easily believe that all the traits of an individual are completely determined as that an unknown power intervenes at each moment of conception, as that a life force whose general mode of action is predetermined newly fills a sphere of freedom in the formation of every individual, or as many other possibilities. But we must not deceive ourselves into believing that any of these assumptions has anything to do with science»⁵³. According to Voegelin, therefore, the failure of the theory of evolution lies in the fact that it was supposed to explain «[...] the origin of species out of other species»⁵⁴, but – even assuming the validity of natural selection – what the theory of evolution is able to explain is only the selection of fit variations.

Voegelin, in his discernment of Darwin’s theories, has been probably deeply influenced by the outcomes of the natural selection when the latter has been applied to the human beings, as it emerges from his consideration of Francis Galton’s work, who – according to Voegelin –, in 1869, had already elaborated a theory containing «[...] all the elements necessary for the further political development of social hygiene on a Darwinian basis»⁵⁵. However, in Voegelin’s critique we can envisage a tendency very common in contemporary pseudo-scientific theories, namely the attempt to explain the phenomenon of life through the dissection of specific aspects of it, or the tendency to explain the phenomena of soul and mind through biology, labelling such an “explanation” as a scientific proposition, whereas, in reality, it is a statement concerning ontology and theology. As Voegelin maintains reflecting on the race doctrine, «one of the most deplorable consequences of the nineteenth-century cult of science is the

⁵² Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 70.

⁵³ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 70.

⁵⁴ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 40.

⁵⁵ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 209.

superstition that everything in this world can be proved "scientifically". In this comes to the fore a weakness of the personal encounter, a lack of trust in it, a flight from psychic reality. Everyone must bear *responsibility* before community and history for his personal encounters and the convictions and attitudes that spring from them. Pretending that these convictions are scientific propositions is an abrogation of responsibility [...]. Hence what we demand is more realism, more tidiness, more responsibility, and less escapist yearning for a refuge behind pseudoscientific propositions that absolves us of responsibility»⁵⁶.

THE ORIGINS OF THE RACE IDEA

It is precisely the kind of responsibility advocated by Voegelin that leads him to draft the historical and cultural development in which the race theories emerge. Race theories do not spring up from the fantasy of some eccentric scientist, but have been shaped within a specific context, that emerges analysing the origin of race ideas as body ideas. Race idea – Voegelin argues – is a political idea which does not draw a mere description of reality, «[...] does not attempt to describe social reality as it is, but it sets up symbols, be they single language units or more elaborate dogmas, that have the function of creating the image of a group as a unit. [...]. What welds the diffuse mass of individual life into a group unit are the symbolic beliefs entertained by the members of a group»⁵⁷. Not any aspect of reality, however, can be used as starting point for creating symbols: only «[...] certain basic universal experiences regularly tend to become the material starting point from which the transformation into a symbol begins»⁵⁸. Taking the example of the symbol of a biological unit by descent, Voegelin shows that it is based on an element of reality but it cannot describe it (within a family, for example, the parents are not blood relatives, therefore the symbol of family relations as blood relations is not valid from a cognitive point of view).

⁵⁶ Voegelin, *The Race Idea and Science*, pp. 15-16.

⁵⁷ Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 28.

The element in question is used to represent «[...] a diffuse field of reality as a unit»⁵⁹.

In 1933, however, Voegelin did not make use of the term “symbol”. A similar concept was indicated by the term “idea”. In *Race and State* Voegelin intended to discuss body ideas «[...] as one of the elements producing political communities»⁶⁰: it is precisely because person and community are grounded in the body, that among political ideas “body ideas” are so important and co-constitutive of the reality of the State⁶¹. The race idea – Voegelin argues – belongs to the class of body ideas: «by a *body idea* we understand any symbol that integrates a group into a substantial whole through the assertion that its members are of common origin, and any symbol that has used in its evolution a body idea in the stricter sense, however far the transformation may have gone»⁶². The major cases of body ideas according to Voegelin are the Greek *polis*, the Kingdom of Christ, the modern race idea. The latter emerged when the body idea of the Kingdom of Christ was superseded by a “mystical” idea: subsequently, «even though the idea of reason still preserves the universalism inherent in Christianity, it is obvious that once the problem of community is reduced to the problem of finding a spiritual bond, new symbols may arise that do not cover all mankind but only particular groups, as in the case of the national spirit idea or the idea of the workers’ class»⁶³. In this sense the race-symbolism presupposes the symbolism of the mystical body, and precisely a non-Christian anthropology, in which the existence of the single person is not determined by his relationship to God but by his «[...] status as a member in relation to a particular

⁵⁹ Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 1. Concerning the problems of the idea of the State and the form of the State, Voegelin says what follows: «[...] I support the thesis that the so-called forms are ideas, once again with the trenchant sense of *models*, and indeed models with a specific content, in which the reality of the political community is built up for the members of the political community. These ideas of the State are not a science of the State but an essential part of the reality of the State itself. The contents of these State ideas essentially originate in the fundamental human experiences already mentioned – they are ideas pertaining either to persons or to communities» (Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 4).

⁶¹ See Voegelin, *Race and State*, p. 5.

⁶² Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 30.

⁶³ Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 37.

community»⁶⁴: «the particular spiritual units arising out of the medieval unit are residuums; they are Christian units minus the Christological element; and in this sense they are products of the decay of the Christian community. Because of their essentially fragmentary character they are capable of evolving almost any new set of symbols out of elements that are offered by the civilizational situation of the moment. The residual symbol may become the core of a pagan nationalism as well as of an equally pagan internationalism; and it may integrate into a new symbolic system economic factors, as in the case of Communism, as well as biological factors, as in the case of racism»⁶⁵.

What emerges from Voegelin's analysis is a view of the human being as a unified whole. The whole can, of course, be considered from different perspectives, but in order for any perspectives to be plausible, it must start precisely from that experience of unity. The value of science, which is one of those different perspectives, is, according to Voegelin, enormous. Such a value, however, can be preserved and incremented only to the extent that science accepts to use a method of investigation proper to its object: life as a whole is a mystery that can be investigated but cannot be fragmented into parts independent from one another (or reduced to one another) without being destroyed. When the last hypothesis happens that what science describes is no more life, then an unscientific "system of dogmas" is substituted for the real object and science becomes incapable of describing reality. Voegelin does not intend to appeal to a separation and juxtaposition of different kinds of knowledge in order to make room for other kinds of wisdom: on the contrary every form of knowledge is advocated to start from the experiences of unity and mystery that characterize each human being. Only to the measure in which knowledge is informed by this awareness will it be fertile and truly scientific.

⁶⁴ See E. Voegelin, *Race and State*, in Id., *Published Essays, 1934-1939*, pp. 40- 53. The quotation is from page 43. The original essay was entitled *Rasse and Staat* and appeared in *Psychologie des Gemeinschaftslebens*, ed. by O. Klemm, G. Fischer, Jena 1935, pp. 91-104.

⁶⁵ Voegelin, *The Growth*, p. 38.