The Restoration of Tradition

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A guide to the paths that remain open when "tradition falls out of existence."

The position this paper will attempt to illustrate, if not demonstrate, is that once lost or weakened the tradition of a society can be restored only by a creative and even radical reconstruction of the tradition itself. The problem to which we address ourselves is as complex as it is profound. And clear thought about it is inhibited by the corroded vocabulary and the stylized modes of conception that distort the very formulation of the problem. In a society where the substance of tradition is already thin and unpersuasive, the term tradition is taken to indicate habitual modes of behavior normally concerned with the periphery of life, reaching at most the dignity of a campus "tradition" when they rise above the level of etiquette. More obfuscating still is the conception of tradition as the element of sameness within a world of change, so that the changing and the traditional are viewed as antithetic. To be "progressive" is to be anti-traditional. The truth is that tradition itself changes in the sense of unfolds; it
undergoes permutations. So that the disruption of tradition is encompassed not simply by change but by certain kinds of change. Once “bad” change eviscerates tradition, it can be brought back to life only by vigorous and even radical “good” change. To make this point we must first refurbish the idea of tradition.

First, since social change constitutes history, we must advert to the consideration that there are two kinds of history. There is the history related in books, what Voegelin calls pragmatic history, or in Pieper’s words (The End of Time, p. 22) “the empirically apprehensible element of historical reality.” This type is concerned with chronology. The intellectual problem it raises is that of determining the causal relations in the unfolding of events through time. This type of history is present to man in the sense that man’s current condition is always the end result of a series of prior causal acts and decisions. This type of history, it is interesting to note, is not susceptible to a “break” in its continuity or an erosion of its substance. Each age is coherently related to prior ages even though the events from age to age mark the rise and fall of civilizations.

There is, however, a second type of history, spiritual history, what Voegelin calls “paradigmatic” history. It is with this type that we are concerned, for it and tradition are identical. Tradition or spiritual history also has its progressive unfolding. But this occurs in a context totally different from that of pragmatic history. For the measurement of its development is not chronology and cause but the integrity of the original compact experience of truth whose differentiation constitutes the stages of the history. In this light, let us consider the nature of tradition more closely.

For any community, tradition is nothing more than the concrete experience of truth carried distributively and in common by a multitude whom the experience unites and structures for action in pragmatic history. Tradition, therefore, is the spiritual substance that completes the distinctively human in man and constitutes the distinctively human in society. It exists as the concrete completion of human nature in a particular society. When truth is experienced within this continuum of social existence and when the experience begets a sense of communion that truth is called tradition. For above all, tradition exists as the experience of truth, as that experience has been progressively developed during the past of a people and carried forward as true to the present, where it is really experienced as true in the soul of each individual member of the community.

It follows from this approach that between tradition and community there is a real relation of identity: the community is constituted by a multitude holding the same tradition. We define society abstractly as a multitude united in pursuit of a common good. Tradition is nothing more than the concrete historical specification of the common good which is the object of common effort.

It is essential to underscore the idea that the specification is not a single hic et nunc determination deriving solely from contemporary and abstract speculation. For the community, as distinct from the theorists, it is a product of the experience of the truth through time. This addendum stresses the important factor that tradition is not a static force in society; it unfolds in the course of human experience revealing ever new dimensions of the basic experience of truth on which the community rests. Newman has analyzed the general process of this development in his Development of Christian Doctrine. Voegelin, more relevantly, has developed the concept with regard to the historical community. His theory of the “differentiation of a compact

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experience" admirably accounts for the phenomenon of continuity and identity within the process of social development. The problem proposed, therefore, is not one of man confronted with the tensions resulting from the contrariety between change and unvarying sameness. Such a dilemma is unreal. The real problem emerges when we regard it as the problem of the man confronted with spurious differentiations of tradition. What is a man's relation to tradition when the contemporary developments in his society replace the real experience of truth with unreal images of it? To put it in Platonic terms: What is a man to do when he finds his community returning to the cave, finds it beginning to dream?

We are confronted, therefore, with the task of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" changes in the paradigmatic history of a community. This is no small task for social change runs a wide spectrum. It is doubtful whether any type of change is completely unrelated to the spiritual history of a people. But we can move most easily to the center of our problem by distinguishing three types. Although not mutually exclusive in themselves, they are still identifiable different in the type of response they invoke. First there is the change characteristic of any developing society, the type of change that normally involves shifts in the area of private interests of men. In economics these are common: changes from silk to nylon, from railroads to trucks. These divide the men involved into two groups according as their interests are advanced or injured. Such changes and their response are of little theoretical interest for our problem and scarcely deserve an attempt to name the responses. A second type of change reaches more deeply into the life of the community. It can be most easily identified in terms of the response it evokes, for with regard to the change itself, it normally follows from an accumulation of private interest changes. This is the type of change we call revolution, as in the term "industrial revolution." The significant thing here is that unlike the private interest response evoked by the first type of change, this type evokes a direct competition for possession of political authority. A new group rooted in the emerging economic or social forces competes with the older group rooted in the prior conditions. This change, consequently, touches upon the question of the common good in circumstances where policy changes can be achieved only by changes in the ruling class. Different conceptions of common good are involved, and so in a real sense the substance of consensus or spiritual continuity is involved. In the fortunate case, this change evokes what may be called a Whig-Tory split, the essence of which is that an adjustment of views has been reached and violent discontinuity in consensus avoided. The difference between the French and the English-American revolution is precisely that the French never achieved a Whig-Tory adjustment. Rather, it left the community permanently divided into irreconcilable factions. It was this perception of difference that motivated Burke's efforts to distinguish the English from the French situation.

The second type of change does not necessarily involve a breach in tradition. As shown by the French experience, however, it can. And because of this, it is difficult to distinguish the French experience from the third type of change. This third type involves a change in the very structure of the community's experience of truth in history. It involves a diminution in the intensity of communally experienced truth—in consensus—and a falling out of the area of experience large segments of previously held truth. It is only in this third type of change that the liberal-conservative
response is evoked. For this change is not a change from one positive position to another, but a change from order and truth to disorder and negation. The liberal-conservative division, we might observe in passing, is not of itself directly involved in a private interest conflict nor even in struggle between ruling groups. Rather it is rooted in a difference of response to the threat of social disintegration. The division is not between those who wish to preserve what they have and those who want change. Rather it is a division established by two absolutely different ways of thought with regard to man’s life in society. These ways are absolutely irreconcilable because they offer two different recipes for man’s redemption from chaos.2

The civilizational crisis, the third type of change raises the question “what are we to do?” on the most primitive level. For the answer cannot be derived from any socially cohesive element in the disrupting community. There is no socially existential answer to the question. For the truth formerly experienced by the community no longer has existential status in the community, nor does any answer elaborated by philosophers or theorists. In this phase of change, no idea has social acceptance and so none has ontological status in the community. An interregnum ensues in which not men but ideas compete for existence.

If we examine the three types of change from the point of view of their internal structure we find an additional profound difference between the third and the first two, one that accounts for the notable difference between the responses they evoke. The first two types of change occur within the inward and immanent structure of the society. The first involves a simple shift of interests in the society. The second involves something deeper, but in its characteristic form focuses on a shift in policy for the community, not in the truth on which the community rests. Thus in both types attention is focused on the community itself, and its phenomenological life. The third type, however, wrenches attention from the life of action and interests in the community and focuses it on the ground of being on which the community depends for its existence. Voegelin has analyzed this experience in the case of the stable, healthy community. There the community, faced with the need to formulate policy on the level of absolute justice, can find the answer to its problem in the absolute truth which it holds as partially experienced.3 This, however, cannot be done by a community whose very experience of truth is confused and incoherent: it has no absolute standard, and consequently cannot distinguish the absolute from the contingent. It has lost its ground of being and floats in a mist of appearances. Relativism and equality are its characteristic diseases. Precisely at the moment when it has lost its vision the mind of the community turns out from itself in a search for the ontological standard whereby it can measure itself. For paradigmatic history “breaks” rather than unfolds precisely when the movement is from order to disorder, and not from one order to a new order. The liberal-conservative split, to define it further, derives from a basic difference concerning the existential status of standard sought and about the spiritual experience that leads to its identification.

When disruptive change has penetrated to the third level of social order, the process of disruption rapidly reaches a point of no return. Indeed, it is probable that this point is reached the moment the third level of change begins. At that point we reach the “closed” historical situation: the situation in which man is no longer free to return to a status quo ante. At that point men become aware of the mystery of history called
variously “fate,” or “destiny,” or “providence,” and feel themselves caught helplessly in the writhing of a disrupted society. The reasons for this experience are rooted in the metaphysical characteristics of such a change.

Of all forms of being, society, or community, has the greatest element of determinability. Its ontological status is itself most tenuous because apart from individual men, who are its “matter,” tradition, the “form” of society exists only as a shared perception of truth. The ontological status of society thus is constituted by the psychological-intellectual-volitional status of society’s members. The content of that psychological status determines, ultimately, the content of civilization. Those social, civilizational factors not rooted in the human spirit of the group, ultimately cease to exist. Civilization itself—tradition—falls out of existence when the human spirit itself becomes confused. Civilization is what man has made of himself. Its massive contours are rooted in the simple need of man, since he is always incomplete, to complete himself.

It is not enough for man to be an ontological esse. He needs existential completion, he needs, that is, to move in the direction of completion. And the direction of that movement is determined by his perception of the truth about himself. He must, consequently, exist as a self-perceived substantive, developing agent, or he does not exist as man. Thus, it is no mystical intuition, but an analyzable conception to say that man and his tradition can “fall out of existence.” This happens at the moment man loses the perception of moral substance in himself, of a nature that, in Maritain’s words, is perceived as a “locus of intelligible necessities.” An existentialist is a man who perceives himself only as “esse,” as existence without substance.

Thus human perception and human volition is the immanent cause of all social change and this most truly when the change reaches the civilizational level. Thus with regard to the loss of tradition, in the change from order to disorder the metaphysics of change works itself out as a disruption of the individual soul, a change in which man continues as an objective ontological existent, but no longer as a man.

Further, change is a form of motion, it occurs as the act of a being in potency insofar as it is in potency and has not yet reached the terminus of the change. With regard to the change we are examining, the question is, at what point does the change become irreversible? A number of considerations suggest that this occurs early in the process. Change involves the displacement of form. This means that the inception of change itself can begin only when the factors conducive to change have already become more powerful than those anchoring the existent form in being. If the existent form is to be retained new factors that reinforce it must be introduced into the situation. In the case of social decay, form is displaced simply by the process of dissolution with no form at the terminus of the process. Now in the mere fact of the beginning of such displacement we have prima-facie evidence of the ontological weakness of the fading form. And when we consider the tenuous hold tradition has on existence, any weakening of that hold constitutes a crisis of existence. The retention of a tradition confronted with such a crisis necessitates the introduction of new spiritual forces into the situation. However, the crisis occurs precisely as a weakening of spiritual forces. It would seem, therefore, that in a civilizational crisis man cannot save himself. The emergence of the crisis itself would seem to constitute a warranty for the victory of disorder. And
it would seem that history is a witness to this truth.

As a further characterization of the liberal conservative split we may observe that it involves differences in the formula for escaping inevitabilities in history. These differences, in turn, derive from prior differences concerning the friendly or hostile character of change.

Unanalyzed Responses

Anxiety and deep insecurity are the characteristic responses evoked by the crisis in tradition. To experience them, it is not necessary for a people to be actively aware of what is happening to it. The process of erosion need only undermine the tradition and a series of consequences begin unfolding within the individual, while in institutions a quiet but deep transformation of processes occurs. Within the individual the reaction has been called various names, all, however, pointing to the same basic experience. Weil identifies it as being “rootless,”6 Guardini as being “placeless,”6 Riesman as being “lonely.”7 Others call it “alienation,”8 and mean by that no simple economic experience (as Marx does) but a deep spiritual sense of dislocation. Within institutions there is a marked decline of the process of persuasion and the substitution of a force-fear process which masquerades as the earlier one of persuasion.9 We note the use of rhetoric as a weapon, the manipulation of the masses by propaganda, the “mobilization” of effort and resources.

Within this context of spontaneous and unanalyzed responses to the experience of civilizational crisis, two basic organizations of response are observable: reaction and ideological progressivism. These responses are explicable in terms of characteristics inherent in the crisis. Both are predictably destined to fail.

The response of reaction is dominated by a concern for what is vanishing. Its essence lies in its attempt to recover previous order through the repression of disruptive forces. To this end political authority is called upon to exercise its negative and coercive powers. The implicit assumption of this response is that history is reversible. Seemingly, order is perceived as a kind of subsistent entity now covered by adventitious accretions. The problem is to remove the accretions and thereby uncover the order that was always there. Such a response, of course, misses the point that in crisis order is going out of existence. Moreover its posture of stubborn but simple resistance is doomed to failure because of the metaphysical weakness of the existent form of order, once the activation of change has reached visible proportions. The most reaction can achieve is stasis, and a stasis that can be maintained only by the expenditure of an effort which ultimately exhausts itself.

Despite the hopelessness of the response, it is explicable in terms of the crisis of tradition itself. Since a civilizational crisis involves also a crisis in private interests and in the ruling class, reaction is normally found among those who feel themselves to be among the ruling class. Their great error is to mingle the responses typical of each of the three types of change. Since civilizational change is the most difficult to perceive and analyze, it seldom is given adequate attention. And the anxiety it generates is misinterpreted as anxiety over private interest and threatened social status.

The basic truth in the reactionary response is to be found in its realistic assumption of the primacy of the real over the ideational. But this truth is distorted by its extreme application: the assumption of the separate existence of tradition. The reactionary misses the point that tradition exists ontologically only in the form of
psychological-intellectual relations. Reactionary theories, for this reason, usually assume some form of organismic theory. In its defensive formulations, the theory will attack conscious change on the grounds of the independent existence of the community. In its dynamic form, it visualizes the community as the embodiment of an ontological force—the race, for instance, which unfolds in history. In both cases the individual tends to be treated as an instrument of the organic reality.

When the reactionary response is thus bolstered by an intellectual defense, the characteristics of that defense are explicable only in terms of the basic attitudes of unanalyzed reaction. Reaction is rooted in a perception of tradition as a whole. It is a total situation that is defended: the "good old days." There is no selectivity; even the questionable features of the past are defended. The point is that the reactionary, for whatever motive, perceives himself to have been part or a partner of something that extended beyond himself, something which, consequently, he was not able to accept or reject on the basis of subjective preference. The reactionary is confused about the existential status of a decaying tradition, but he does perceive the unity tradition had when it was healthy.

The second unanalyzed response to civilizational crisis we call ideological progressivism.10 With regard to the civilizational crisis itself, the ideological mind interprets the social disruption as a good. What the reactionary calls chaos, the ideologist calls the "open society," interpreting it as a victory for individual freedom. What the reactionary calls loss of order, the ideologist calls the disappearance of old evils, the beginning of a new rationality. The ideological progressive connives with the erosion of tradition in the name of progress. His characteristic orientation is toward the future where he discerns a new order that man will create for himself. The ideological progressive, therefore, proposes a conception of progress that involves an existential discontinuity; progress without organic evolution.

The fact of discontinuity is frequently overlooked because the order of the future is validated as the order men have always striven for. Yet the discontinuity is not only present but derives from the basic orientation of the ideologist toward social reality. Civilizational crisis, it must be remembered, is constituted by a unique type of change: existing form is not displaced by emerging form, but by emerging formlessness; the change is from order to disorder. Since the ideological mind, insofar as it seeks social order, looks to the present and the future, it finds only an ontological void. It is a matter of attitude rather than science that this void, constituted by the disruption of interpersonal relations among men, is interpreted as the good of freedom. But given the void and the attitude, the ideologist cannot conceive of himself as cooperating with an objective evolution of form. His commitment to the process of becoming consequently involves commitment not to reality but to ideas. The becoming central to his attention is a process whereby mind informs reality, a process that involves the movement from the abstract and the ideational to the real. The ideologist thinks in terms of creative action, informing action, not in terms of cooperation with an objectively emerging form. What "ought to be" is achieved by a break in being, not by an evolution of being.

The true discontinuity occurs, moreover, in the content of what "ought to be." For when tradition begins to "fall out of existence," the essence of the "fall" lies in the withdrawal of ideas from the concrete historical integration called society into the isolation of an ideational existence in the minds of unrelated individuals. Thus the
ontological disruption of society is concealed by the perdurance of ideas in the minds of men. But even here in the realm of thought there is a further discontinuity. For in their movement from the real to the ideational, the substantive ideas undergo a sea change, a metamorphosis of meaning. When the ideas had ontological status in historical society their meaning was determined by their position as part of a complex of ideas polarized into a world view. In their ideational existence they become merely the debris of the earlier tradition and their meaning changes, for the ideas lose their coherence. They become individual absolutes. Where they once were the form of the society, they now become the goals of creative action.

In pursuit of these goals, the ideologist, like the reactionary, depends on political authority in its coercive form. The end of authority, however, is not to repress change, to recover form, but to create and impose form. Government thus is conceived of as having a creative role among men. And its action is validated by the goals which in seeking to realize, it represents. The claim is that the new order is what the people want. Therefore, by the principle of consent, the government, in imposing order, represents the people who are the recipients of that order. Involved in this way of thinking is a profound confusion concerning the ontological status of ideas. The people, unformed because they need to be informed, are considered the source of the form to be imposed. This way of thinking, of course, can be sustained only by virtue of a confusion between the ideational and the real. However, once the confusion is achieved, the ideas which are the prototype of the new societal form may be imposed politically without prior debate in the democratic process. Nor need they be sustained by theoretical argumentation. For they are, as the Declaration of Independence tells us, self evident. Those who oppose them are obviously corrupt and can be handled only by coercive repression. Thus by a curious development, the proponents of the open society become the champions of the closed idea. The chief evidence for this development may be found in the substitution of propaganda for discussion in the conversatio civilis. Men become the matter to be informed. It is claimed that they want to receive the form possessed by the ideological mind. Propaganda, which imposes forms in the human intellect without the process of persuasion, becomes a kind of divine praeveniant action whereby the ideologists enable men to act freely.

Thus the essence of the ideological progressive response is to be found in the primacy of mind over reality and in a utilitarian test of truth. Both these premises necessarily follow from the ideological conception of the problem of order. The ideologist finds himself with a set of ideas that seemingly by their very essence call for ontological existence among men. In this posture there is no universale in re, for social reality is "open." Nor is there a universale post rem, for the idea in the mind was not derived from reality but acquired by virtue of the transubstantiation of ideas during their depolarization. There is only a universale ante rem: the ideas that exist in the ideologists mind as the unmeasured measure of reality. From this it follows that the only standard of truth in human action can be that of the utility of the action for implementing the model ideas. If something is necessary, it is legitimate by that very fact. This standard is not applied universally. Where the central model ideas are not involved the ordinary standards of morality are retained. But when they are involved, the model in its capacity as ultimate standard becomes the source of a new morality.

Thus both unanalyzed responses come to
the same general authoritative conclusion by different routes, one by demanding submission to an ontological necessity, the other to a self-imposing ideational entity. Both, moreover, feel in a blind, groping fashion for something to assuage the deep anxiety evoked by civilizational crisis.

**Analyzed Partial Responses**

Two other responses to crisis can be identified: economic individualism and spiritual individualism. Here we can give only a simplified characterization of each position. For unlike the unanalyzed responses, these are based on a conscious and thoughtful analysis of social problems. Consequently, the proponents of each position vary, and sometimes notably, in the particular development of their ideas. They all have certain features in common, however, which distinguish them from reactionary and ideological thought. Both define problems that are real in contemporary society. Both are rooted in individualistic premises. However, they also have a defect in common. In selecting problems for definition they both focus on social conditions evoked by the unanalyzed responses to disruption. Thus they are conscious responses to blind response. To be sure they rightly analyze basic consequences of reactionary and collectivistic policy. They propose remedies for these, remedies, let it be added, that must be involved in a total remedy. But, because they miss the crucial issue in the crisis, when accepted as adequate responses, they permit the crisis in paradigmatic history to gain momentum. We call them partial to stress the contention that they neither confront nor respond to the central problem of civilizational crisis.

Economic individualism is rooted in a radical call for the liberation of individual energy. Its concern is not so much for economics as it is for freedom. One of its root propositions is that economic freedom—private property and a free market—are essential prerequisites for human freedom. Following on this, its second root proposition is that social reconstruction is possible only given the intelligent and spontaneous action of vigorous individuals. The argumentation in support of these propositions is varied, erudite, and persuasive. In its most thoughtful formulations it is enhanced by a theory of social order that gives the position a positive character. Nevertheless the position is motivated by opposition to the collectivism that results from unanalyzed responses. In its essence it is ordered to breaking down the massive legal and bureaucratic controls that substitute for the missing order inherent in healthy and integrated societies. At its crucial point, however, it relies on freedom to produce basic societal order. We hold exactly the opposite to be true. Given fundamental order, freedom is the source of the variegated fullness of life that constitutes high civilization, but freedom itself is a product of a prior substantial order. A civilizational crisis is not a crisis about human freedom but about human order. The collectivism of blind response sometimes conceals this basic factor.

Therefore, despite the nobility of the appeal to liberty, to courage, the conclusion is inescapable that this position does not appreciate the nature of the spiritual crisis we face. Man cannot bear to be insecure about his own existence as man. When insecurity touches the very meaning of his existence he abandons all else in an attempt to recover the roots of that existence. If the attempt is enlightened he has hope of success, if it is unenlightened, then it becomes frantic and blind. But enlightened or not, this search takes priority over all else. Not even liberty has meaning when meaning threatens to drain out of human life entirely. Therefore, to approach the
problem of paradigmatic crisis as though it were a crisis about liberty gravely misinterprets the problem.

It is clear that a true response to crisis is less likely, and, if discovered, will be less able to win general acceptance in proportion as unanalyzed responses pre-empt social policy. Consequently, the challenge to collectivism contained in economic individualism is a necessary preliminary to the development of a total response to crisis. But of itself economic individualism offers no such total response to the threat of anxiety. If accepted as adequate, therefore, there is a danger that the truth to be found in the position may be lost. For if, in the crisis of meaning, liberty is defended on inadequate grounds, there is danger that the true defense of liberty will be compromised.

Spiritual individualism seems, at first glance, to differ radically from the position of economic individualism. The issue between the two centers around the nature of the problem of liberty. The spiritual interpretation argues that the issue of the spirit of man is prior to that of his economic condition. Between the two there is a grave division on the issue whether a human freedom rooted solely in economic freedom can solve any problems. The spiritual position insists that freedom enables problems to be solved only when the free man is also virtuous. The economic position does not say virtue is not necessary. But it does not cope directly with the issue, being satisfied to rest in the faith that men, if left alone, will solve the problem of order.

But if the position of spiritual individualism is examined closely, it becomes apparent that it formulates its problem in much the same way as economic individualism. The difference is to be found on the objective situation on which each focuses its attention. Spiritual individualism is preoccupied with the "objectification" of society. By that is meant, the position is acutely aware of the increasingly non-human character of the relations among men, of the predominance of things in human relations including economic things. Now this awareness is precisely a critical awareness of the substitution of legal for human relations, and the displacement of a government of men by an administration of things. And this awareness of the social fact is dramatically intensified by the realization that the most influential policy preferences tend to increase the "dehumanization of societal relations." By doing so, they further reduce the distinctly human element in man, contribute to his "falling out of existence." This in turn reduces man's capacity for freedom. In response to these insights, the spiritual individualist formulates his solutions in terms of the defense of freedom against the objectification of society. In this defense of freedom he rejects the contemporary society, because of its ontological inadequacy as a human system. Along with this, however, he frequently rejects also the idea that society is a necessary context for human life. Consequently, the spiritual individualist neglects the problem of right social order and in doing so, neglects the central problem of civilizational crisis. The spiritual individualist tends to suspect society as the villain of the piece. And solutions are sought finally in the realm of the individual's return to truth by paths sometimes solitary and stern.

Both analyzed partial responses follow the same method in formulating the problem of crisis: an examination of the objective condition of man, followed by the defense of some aspect of man from the dehumanizing processes emerging from the loss of societal coherence. This sameness of method leads us to the ultimate similarity in both positions, their individualism. Neither position will commit itself, as a...
position, on questions of substantive truth. Neither, consequently, will commit themselves to the restoration of tradition. Both defend only process truth about man, his need for freedom. For both fear that an assertion of substantive truth would become the occasion for further political control over man in the name of that truth. This fear, seemingly, arises from the policy oriented point of view from which both positions develop. While neglecting the problem of society as an ordered whole, both positions seek to discover the policies society should adopt to solve its problems. Since the objective societal situation is characterized by a progressive loss of truth, these policies can only be identified as procedures, and the basic value can only be liberty which is the mode of action, not its substance. The consequences of this preoccupation with policy suggests that the real issue in a civilizational crisis is not political at all but meta-political. We can learn from these positions their explicit teaching, that state action can only hinder problem solving. For totalitarian rule inevitably follows when a disrupted society attempts to reconstruct itself by political means. It follows, that is, if the crisis occurs on the level of substantive meaning itself.

The refusal to consider the issue of substantive truth, then, follows from a difference of interpretation on the issue of the nature of the crisis. But this difference in turn, is rooted, (at least in the two positions now under discussion) in an ultimate premise common to both, individualism. Let us immediately specify that neither position is rooted in philosophical individualism. Both of them have taken their positions in response to the collectivism that follows upon the blind attempt of an evading society to pull itself together. Nevertheless, this response makes it inevitable that the problem of civilizational crisis as described in our opening pages will be rejected as the basis of a search for solutions. For as the interpretation offered there implicitly suggests that the real problem in the restoration of tradition is precisely that of recovering the social experience of truth. Freedom follows on this, it does not precede it.

The Prophetic Response

The true response to the civilizational crisis of our day has not yet been elaborated. The work of identifying the substantive elements in a restoration of tradition has only just begun. And this work cannot be completed in a short essay. My purpose is simply to point a finger toward the truth in this matter. Fortunately the crisis in our age is not unique in Western history, at least as regards its form. At least twice before in that history the unfolding of tradition has reached periods of crisis. And the crisis in each case has evoked a response that seemed to be adequate: the response of Plato to the collapse of the Greek City State, and the response of Augustine to the collapse of the Roman Empire. Behind both these responses there stands as a model and paradigm, the response of the Israelitic Prophets to the crises of Jewish life under God. Therefore, we borrow from Voegelin the term, and we hope the meaning, “Prophetic Response.” From these precedents we cannot, it is true, discover the substantive content of an adequate response to our own crisis. But we can, by studying previous crises and responses discover the nature and form of both crisis and response. For in each crisis the form of the response is dictated by the general nature of the problem while the substantive content is dictated by the content of the threatened tradition and the experience of losing that tradition.

Since the erosion of tradition consists in its “falling out” of social existence, the true
and adequate response to the crisis must be found in the attempt to restore tradition to its ontological status as the form of society. From our opening analysis of crisis, it is clear that such restoration can be achieved only through a corporate re-experience of the tradition, a re-experiencing, that is, which begets that agreement which turns a multitude into a society. The defects of the reactionary response makes it clear that this cannot be achieved by a return to a status quo ante. The excesses of ideology stress the need for a reintegration of truth within the context of social experience. For the restoration of tradition involves the reconstruction of community, but this can be achieved only by the communal experience of truth. In this context, the essence of the prophetic response lies in its attempt to evoke a common awareness of a truth that had been lost. In a real sense the prophet calls truth from the limbo of memory back into the dynamism of knowledge and re-establishes it as the form of interpersonal union.

This return of truth to social existence is complicated by one basic factor. The truth to which men return cannot be the identical truth that was lost. As innocence once lost cannot be regained but must be replaced by virtue, so truth once lost can only be regained in a new and more sophisticated version. The newness in this case will be found in the character of the polarization, the integration, through which individual truths are experienced as the truth about man. When paradigmatic history breaks down all that is left socially is the experience of the breakdown itself. The social reconstruction must begin with this experience, and, under the guidance of the prophet, build up again its experience of truth. The prophet is that man or men in whose souls the order of the society has survived, but survived in a critically puri-

fied manner due to the challenge of its social decay.

The first stage in the re-integration of truth shattered by civilizational crisis demands criticism. Two stages of critical thought can be identified. The first centers upon an examination of the unacceptable responses described earlier. From this we learn that the proper response must be meta-political, for truth cannot be given ontological status in society by sheer command. We learn also, from the partial responses, that the problem is social rather than individual, and so cannot be solved by withdrawal from society. The second critical stage centers upon a totally different object: the distorted society itself in its condition of decay. What was wrong with that society? What weakness or imbalance in its integration was responsible for its disruption. No society is perfect. Every one has the seeds of its own destruction planted in its way of life. When these grow to the point where they cause disruption, thoughtful men become aware of them. Such awareness is not easy to achieve because it involves not only self-awareness but in addition, a grasp of the relation of the defective principle to the general integration of the socially held truth. The problem here is to level the profoundest sort of criticism against the corrupting principle without rejecting the rest of the tradition. For the principle in which dissolution originates is itself part of the tradition.

Granted the critical operation, one finds himself at that stage faced, at least intellectually, with a completely dismantled tradition. The ontological collapse of the tradition leaves its component ideas scattered through the multitude without social existence. The intellectual critique results in a further theoretical disturbance of the integration. For the polarization of ideas into a coherent unity is destroyed by the subtraction of even one basic element. And at
this point the prophetic response is confronted with the task of discovering the new principle on the basis of which the old truths may once again come together to give a coherent and persuasive account of the order proper to man.

The order sought at this point is not the order of politics, but the order of society. Between this order and the order appropriate to the inner life of each individual there can be no difference. For the order of society comes into existence precisely when a multitude agrees about the hierarchic structure of the goods proper to human life. Social order is nothing more than the extension into the area of interpersonal relations of the order present to or desired by the individual members of a multitude. The attempt to reconstruct a community, therefore, necessarily involves the attempt to reconstruct man.

This relation between inner and social life determines the strategy of reconstruction. The new order, derived from a new integration of a truth must above all be persuasive. The basis for its persuasive quality must be found in its appeal to the truths still recognized by the individual although no longer enjoying social status due to their depolarization. What is sought is the description of a new way of life that presents itself to the multitude as a way superior to the old, but a way that achieves its superiority through reform and critical purification rather than through creative innovation.

The idea of reform leads us to the final characteristic of the prophetic response. Reform is a temporal concept: it involves the idea of good change within a continuum of historical experience. And this is precisely what is sought objectively once a break in paradigmatic history occurs. The experience of a break must be experience ultimately as an enlightenment if the break is to be repaired. But since the break is basically irreparable, the prophetic response must ultimately express itself as a new interpretation of history itself in which the break, the dissolution, becomes part of a larger pattern of purpose. All human order is essentially the organization of purpose in human life. Imperfect man is cursed with an ontological inability to rest and enjoy himself in his earthly existence, for whatever the goods a man may possess, the good is not yet his. Life in time, therefore, has meaning only when man experiences an ordering of action which promises movement toward this good. Every socially persuasive way of life, therefore, must express itself as a philosophy of history in which each individual in the society is ordered to the achievement of a good in which he can rest. The theories of progress so characteristic of ideological thought are rooted in a basic hopelessness with regard to this ultimate good. To each generation they offer, not personal achievement, but submission to a collectivity. And they find their response in man's desperate need to achieve significance through union, if not union with the ultimate good, at least union with destiny. And they call upon man to empty himself since he cannot achieve fulfillment. Against this, the truly prophetic response must see the loss and recovery of meaning in life to be part of the historical experience through which men perceive new and more brilliant facets of that good which is the good for man.

Those familiar with Eric Voegelin's work will recognize that my indebtedness to him is so pervasive that, to avoid a clutter of footnotes, I simply note the fact at this first explicit citation. I have drawn chiefly on his New Science of Politics, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1952), and his three volumes, Order and History, (Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1956-57).
The liberal-conservative division according to this interpretation has occurred not more than four and most probably three times in Western history; at the collapse of Greek City State order, at the collapse of the Roman order, and in contemporary times. Whether or not the 16th-17th century saw the same division is debatable.


J. Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses (1932).


In this analysis, in addition to Voegelin, I owe a debt to a brilliant essay by William Oliver Martin, Metaphysics and Ideology, (Marquette Univ. Press, 1959). The vast majority of books on “policy” are examples of this position.

The writings in these responses, because reflective, vary a good deal from man to man. Since I treat the position selectively here, I would not care to identify particular writers. Therefore I include here only those writers with a philosophical concern for the problem. The pure economist of the classical tradition is concerned with a different problem.

I have restricted the discussion to the restoration of tradition to its world immanent aspects. One must at least note that there are other aspects equally important.