

## ERIC VOEGELIN : INTRODUCTION

Writing a book about Eric Voegelin's political theory is a challenging task. The author must explain the philosophical and historical substance of Voegelin's work, capture the importance of his contribution to scholarship and to the restoration of Western civilization, and evaluate criticisms of his political theory. Several factors, including the volume of his scholarship, make forming these objectives into a cogent study of his political philosophy a formidable project. Voegelin wrote twenty-one books and more than one hundred scholarly articles that together mark the intellectual and existential journey of a seminal twentieth-century philosopher. The philosophical density and historical scope of his work add to the challenge of explaining and analyzing his political theory. Moreover, there are several dimensions to Voegelin's intellectual achievement, including a history of political ideas, a new science of politics, a philosophy of order and history, and a philosophy of consciousness.

The volume, scope, theoretical complexity, and multidimensionality of his work make it difficult to convey the meaning of his political philosophy intricately and to connect all its aspects in a brief book. To review as much of Voegelin's political theory as possible, and to introduce it to a wide audience, it is necessary to be expository when discussing some parts of his work and analytical when discussing others. This book focuses on the central components of Voegelin's political philosophy and tries to leave esoteric issues regarding his work to more specialized scholars.

Whatever the level of analysis, explaining Voegelin's political philosophy requires both the exposition of his ideas and an understanding of the context in which they were created. The context for Voegelin's political philosophy includes the political and historical circumstances in which he wrote and the evolution of his scholarly work as a whole, with its shifts in emphasis and its development of new philosophical vistas. It is also important to have some grasp of Voegelin's biographical profile, since his political philosophy was shaped by personal encounters he had with totalitarianism and other spiritually suffocating ideologies.

But as complex as Voegelin's political philosophy may seem, there is a common thread running through his work. Whether Voegelin was focusing on the philosophy of history and order, the philosophy of consciousness, the race problem in Germany, or the history of political ideas, his primary concern was to engage in the open philosophical search for the truth of existence. The responsibility of political philosophers who make this search their lifework is to articulate the truth of existence and defend it from untruth. The search for truth and order is always met with resistance—not only in society but in the imagination of the philosopher who searches for ways to articulate truth by sifting through alternative conceptions of reality (*OH V*, 53-54). The search cannot take place outside the war in the imagination between competing perceptions of reality. The presence of untruth is a part of the structure of consciousness that must be confronted and overcome. Voegelin's search for the truth of existence included resisting prevalent ideological distortions, diagnosing their spiritual causes, and tracing their historical development. This approach put Voegelin at odds with the dominant forces of his age.

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### ***The Contemporary Context***

Our own intellectual and cultural context adds to the difficulty of explaining Voegelin's political philosophy. Voegelin's work is not well known outside a relatively small group of academics and their students. Yet within this domain Voegelin's influence is impressive. His work has inspired a growing secondary literature and his political philosophy has been applied to a variety of topics in a broad range of academic fields. His philosophy of history and philosophy of consciousness have influenced the work of thinkers who are significant in their own right. Among these are Gerhart Niemeyer, Flannery O'Connor, David Walsh, Marion Montgomery, Russell Kirk, James L. Wisner, Ellis Sandoz, Dante Germino, and Jürgen Gebhardt. Further evidence of Voegelin's influence is the creation in 1987 of the Voegelin Institute at Louisiana State University and the establishment of the Centre for Voegelin Studies in the Department of Religions and Theology at the University of Manchester. But while Voegelin's work has influenced several first-rate scholars, his political theory has not found its way into the broader culture.

Several factors have contributed to the obscurity of Voegelin's work. For one thing, as Ellis Sandoz notes, Voegelin made few concessions to those readers who were not prepared to intellectually digest difficult historical and philosophical material. While Voegelin did write some essays intended to be accessible to a wider audience, until recently many of these works were either unpublished or only available in German. In addition, the recent secondary literature on Voegelin tends to focus on his deeper theoretical work. Another factor that contributes to Voegelin's obscurity is that while he lectured at some of the leading universities in America and Europe, he spent a good part of his academic career at Louisiana State University, a school that did not provide Voegelin with institutional prestige. Furthermore, because Voegelin was so intent on working his way through a broad range of historical and philosophical sources, he generally did not take on Ph.D. students. Consequently, he has not benefited from the activity of dozens of graduate students passing on his ideas to new generations of scholars. Finally, Voegelin was often misunderstood or ignored because his political philosophy was intellectually alien to conventional ideological dispositions. Not only did the *New York Times* fail to review even one of Voegelin's books while he was living; its obituary of Voegelin conveys no sense of his contribution to scholarship, his intellectual genius, or his imaginative vision.

*Time* did publish a feature five-page article on Voegelin's analysis of gnosticism, which appeared about a year after the publication of *The New Science of Politics*. The context for the article is interesting, and it provides some sense of how Voegelin's work was perceived by the broader culture in a rare case of its popular dissemination. In the March 9, 1953, issue of *Time*, which celebrated the magazine's thirtieth year of publication, the editors put forth a list of "convictions" and a "birthday thesis" based largely—and remarkably—on Voegelin's analysis of gnosticism. The portion of the article that dealt with Voegelin's work was a rough sketch of his understanding of gnosticism and how it has influenced the evolution of Western thinking and politics. The title of the article, "Journalism and Joachim's Children," was a reference to the thirteenth-century Calabrian monk Joachim of Fiore (Flora), who figures prominently in Voegelin's analysis of the Western cultural crisis.

The response to the article was, as one might expect, varied. In the following two issues, *Time* ran several related letters to the editor. Some were comical: "I find your recent gobbledegook about Gnosticism revolting. You and the Pope can play God if you want to, but whether or not man can ultimately attain perfection is

far beyond the depth of either of you, let alone anything to do with newsreporting. . . ." Other readers applauded *Time*. One reader thanked the editors for the "absorbing synopsis of Political Scientist Voegelin's thesis." Another called the article "[t]he most realistic and mature analysis of the world situation to appear in a leading magazine." But, in general, if the almost three dozen letters to the editor were any indication of the general public's ability to understand Voegelin's work, it seems probable that popular news magazines were not the best outlet for disseminating Voegelin's political philosophy.

Further evidence of the problems one faces when explaining Voegelin's political theory is the fact that he was classified by critics and supporters alike as belonging to one or another of a broad spectrum of categories. He refused, however, to identify himself with ideological labels, and therefore there is no ready-made ideological group prepared to embrace his political theory. His political philosophy tends to attract individuals who are more contemplative than they are political, and just where Voegelin's political philosophy fits in contemporary political categories is not clear. Even today, while his followers tend to be politically and intellectually conservative, they include individuals with a broad range of political intuitions. This may be attributed, in part, to Voegelin's insistence on an open philosophical search and his rejection of political ideology. But it can also be attributed to an often lamentably high degree of abstractness in his political theory.

Chapter 1 will give readers some indication of who Voegelin was and will explain the context of his scholarly work. Later chapters emphasize Voegelin's political philosophy. It may be that this emphasis on his political writings will leave some readers with the impression that Voegelin's work on the philosophy of consciousness is less important, or that there is a lack of continuity between his political philosophy and his philosophy of consciousness. To a certain extent this implication is intentional. Voegelin's work on the philosophy of consciousness is, no doubt, a genuine achievement, and in some respects it represents a natural evolution and culmination of his work. Voegelin believed that the crisis of the West demanded a transformation of consciousness. Yet there is an extent to which his philosophy of consciousness is distant from politics, and, unlike most of his earlier work, it has less direct relevance to political life. Furthermore, Voegelin's work on the philosophy of consciousness is highly abstract and philosophically dense—it is difficult to imagine a philosophy of consciousness being otherwise. Thus, for most beginning students of Voegelin's work, his philosophy of consciousness is not the place to start. Voegelin's political writings serve as the best introduction to his political theory. Before going on to explain and examine that theory in detail, it is worth introducing the major components of Voegelin's thought.

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### ***The Restoration of Engendering Experience***

Faced with widespread and profound cultural, social, and moral decay, Voegelin theorized that the West had lost its consciousness of certain historical experiences vital to the formation of political, social, and existential order. In Voegelin's terms, historical experiences and their corresponding language symbols illuminated the truth of reality. Language was necessary to articulate "experiences of order" and preserve them over time, since such experiences were rare. The truth of existence embodied in experience was an ordering force because it attuned the open soul to the Agathon (the Good). And a just political and social order, like the just soul, is dependent on this sort of attunement.

Unfortunately, historical experience cannot have an ordering effect if the language symbols that preserve it lose their original meaning, as occurs when they are transformed or obscured by ideological movements. Such movements act to detach language symbols from their engendering experiences. To regain consciousness of the engendering experiences—and in turn to restore social, political, and existential order—the philosopher must "reactivate the engendering experience in his psyche" and "recapture the truth of reality living in the symbols." In particular, the language symbols of myth, revelation, history, and especially philosophy must be restored to luminosity—that is, reattached to the historical experiences that they attempt to convey—'before rational discussion of the questions of order can occur. This recovery of meaning requires the philosopher to recreate the experience imaginatively in an act of meditation and to create "reflective symbols" that articulate the truth of the "original symbols." This understanding of the modern crisis as a loss of consciousness of symbols and experience helps to explain why Voegelin turned to the philosophy of consciousness in his later work.

Contemporary usage of the word "philosophy" illustrates the consequences of detaching language symbols from their engendering experiences. "Philosophy" has become, in common usage, to mean the same as "ideology" or "value system." But philosophical clarity depends on distinctions such as that between philosophy and knowledge (*episteme*) on the one hand and ideology and opinion (*doxa*) on the other. The contemporary use of philosophy and ideology as synonyms implies, for instance, that the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle should not be regarded as truth-claims about reality, but simply as two ideologies among many that individuals are free to choose based on their personal preferences or political interests. The political implications of the symbol "philosophy" becoming opaque are evident in the emergence of "spin doctors," a character type that Plato classified as *philodoxers* (lovers of appearance and opinion). Their intentional distortion of reality erodes the ability of individuals to see life for what it is. Modern *philodoxers* draw their arguments from the common misconceptions of the day. In such an environment politics is not a search for either truth or the foundation of order based on that truth. Politics is rather a power game played by *philodoxers* who sell their opinions with the Sophistic understanding that what matters is merely power, not truth. This context makes it difficult to establish the existence of truth (*aletheia*) about reality, particularly transcendent reality. Indeed, references to an objective reality are now usually met with deep existential and intellectual skepticism, if not complete intolerance. Voegelin classifies this reaction to philosophical insight as "narcissistic closure." He believes that it is characteristic of the spiritual alienation and estrangement of modern man (*PE 1966-1985*, 1-35). Meaningful discussion cannot take place under such circumstances because the preconditions for rational debate do not exist (*PE 1966-1985*, 36-51).

Because important language symbols have lost their meaning, Voegelin found it not only necessary to restore the original meaning of old symbols, but also to create new terms to explain philosophical issues. Examples of Voegelin's new symbols are "logophobia" (fear and hatred of philosophy) and "pseudological speculation" (nontheoretical speculation—speculation that is closed to aspects of reality because of adherence to rigid ideological preconceptions such as that seen in "spiritually diseased" thinkers like Karl Marx). Voegelin created these terms to explain the spiritual depravity that engenders ideological systems. The creation of new terms and concepts was a necessary part of creating or restoring a new science of politics, the science of classical political philosophy, which was able to effectively analyze and diagnose the modern crisis. The combination of

unfamiliar philosophical terms and neologisms opened Voegelin to the charge of being pedantic or esoteric. But he was neither. Upon careful study of Voegelin's political theory, it becomes clear that the use of unfamiliar philosophical terms and neologisms was warranted by the nature and context of his political philosophy. Penetrating to experiential meaning and the truth of reality in an age of deforming ideologies required the reactivation of the meaning of symbols that articulated the experiences of reality, and the creation of new ones to describe complex philosophical problems. Voegelin was not being intellectually vain in his terminology; he was attempting to genuinely describe reality and to restore political science.

### ***Rejection of Dogma and Doctrine***

Although Voegelin recognized the practical need for doctrine and dogma, he was philosophically opposed to the codification of the good as dogma, doctrine, or "ism." For Voegelin, the philosophical objective was to get beyond traditions and codifications of reality to the "predogmatic reality of knowledge" (A, 189), by which he meant the engendering experiences with reality that revealed the truth of the human condition. The problem was that experiences and symbols are apt to diverge when original experiences are formulated into doctrines. That is, the process of doctrinalization shifts the focus of human consciousness from experience to dogma. The separation of doctrine and experience is problematic because dogmatism and doctrinalization prohibit philosophical searching, since such searching is seen as infidelity to established principles.

Given this understanding of engendering experience and its relationship to language symbols, it is not surprising that Voegelin was so adamant in opposing doctrinalization. In fact, it has been suggested that one of the central components of his philosophy is not merely antidoctrinalization but de-doctrinalization. But although doctrinalization is an obstacle to the recovery of experience, how can the engendering experiences of reality be maintained as a living force without some degree of codification? Voegelin's answer will be discussed in chapter 7. Most people are incapable of the meditative exercise that Voegelin believed necessary to imaginatively re-create such engendering experiences. So how can they participate in the good without recourse to doctrine? Voegelin was acutely aware that human beings were prone to fall from the truth of order and that it had to be regained repeatedly. Yet it is illuminating that although Voegelin recognized this fact he nonetheless stridently opposed doctrinalization in the work of philosophy.

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### ***Voegelin's New Science of Politics***

Diagnosing the Western crisis requires the creation of a philosophical framework that can identify the sources of disorder and penetrate to their spiritual causes. This effort gave rise to Voegelin's "new" science of politics. His approach was new in the sense that it was a radical break from the dominant ideologically driven methodologies of his day. Yet it was old in the sense that Voegelin's conception of science was a return to the classical approach of Plato and Aristotle. This reconstituted approach to scientific analysis was necessary because of the existing state of scholarship in the twentieth century. Ideologies like positivism place methodological demands on scholars that make it impossible to accurately diagnose the ills of the Western world. These ideologies are inadequate because they are philosophically closed to the complete scope of reality—that is, their methods and presuppositions prohibit theoretical analysis of

questions regarding transcendent reality. Ideologies are obstacles to scientific and scholarly analysis of the modern crisis and indeed are part of the crisis itself.

Reawakening Western consciousness to the experiences of order that are the very substance of civilization demands an open and complete search for the divine source of order. This process of remembrance (*anamnesis*) suggests that the truth of experiential reality has not been lost forever but rather lies dormant in the Western mind, waiting to be imaginatively aroused by a spiritually sensitive soul. Voegelin's philosophical framework attempted to break down the ideological barriers to the search for order and the recovery of transcendent consciousness, which is why he devoted a significant portion of his scholarship to the problems of ideology and methodology. It is also why he rejected doctrines of order (as opposed to the philosophy of order) and why he devoted so much of his effort to the openness of the search (*zetema*). Voegelin's political philosophy illuminated a path; it embodied the spirit in which the search for the transcendent source of order should be conducted; it did not create an ideological system, political program, or social doctrine. The primary objective of this political philosophy was not to recover historical information but to recover an understanding of the process by which man becomes conscious of transcendent-divine reality.

### ***Voegelin and Christianity***

One of the most intensely debated areas of Voegelin's work, especially within the political Right, is his analysis of Christianity. Voegelin is criticized from the Right for his treatment of Christian doctrine and his apparent depreciation of Christianity in *The Ecumenic Age*. It is thought by some that he did not sufficiently embrace Christian faith, including the divinity of Christ and the Resurrection. Furthermore, Voegelin placed a significant part of the blame for the modern crisis—particularly its gnostic character—at the feet of Christianity. His analysis of thinkers who contributed to the Western crisis included St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. John the Evangelist. Their "eschatological pathos" (*NSP*, 108) provided the spiritual impetus for millenarianism and other immanentizing aspects of modern ideologies. Voegelin's Christian critics, in short, charge that he portrays Christianity as more a cause of than a cure for the modern crisis.

### ***Framework for Studying Voegelin's Work***

The historical range, volume, and philosophical complexity of Voegelin's ideas require the author who is charged with explaining and analyzing his work to weave together a series of threads in his thought that span roughly sixty years of a prodigiously productive career. The different aspects of Voegelin's thought can be better analyzed if Voegelin's major works are divided into four parts: (1) early works; (2) *History of Political Ideas*; (3) *The New Science of Politics; Science, Politics and Gnosticism*; and the first three volumes of *Order and History*; and (4) the final two volumes of *Order and History*. This framework makes it easier to identify and explain the two significant shifts or developments in his work that came when he broke with his *History of Political Ideas* project and when he revised the framework for *Order and History* after volume three. If carefully examined, the changes in the direction of Voegelin's work are evidence of his philosophical quest for truth. Looking back from the end to the beginning of his philosophical quest, it is apparent that his commitment to philosophical inquiry (*zetema*) is so ardent that his search is directed by the pull (*helkein*) of truth (*aletheia*) rather than by the desire to create a closed ideological system for political and social action. The consequence of Voegelin's philosophical searching is that the direction and path of his work is not straight and narrow. There is a central direction, a focus, to his quest, but retracing his philosophical

steps creates a kaleidoscopic view of his search for order. Depending on what part of the journey is examined, the picture provides different, but not incongruous, perspectives.

Readers who are more experienced students of Voegelin will find something of interest in this book. In chapter 7, for example, Voegelin's critics are addressed in a way that should provoke discussion and debate among those who share his desire to ground political science in transcendent reality. Yet the focus of this volume is to disseminate Voegelin's political theory to a broader audience than seems to have been reached by the existing literature. This book will be one of the first to provide a basic introduction to Voegelin's political theory; its intention is to encourage the study of Voegelin's work by providing an outline of his political philosophy. If the book leads the reader to further explore Voegelin's books and articles, then it will have accomplished its main objective. Given the reputation that his work has as intellectually intimidating, if not impenetrable, a book of this kind is justified as a way of facilitating the study of Voegelin, especially at the undergraduate level. But no scholarly work, however well written, will substitute for reading primary texts. Nor will an introductory book eliminate the frustration and difficulty that often accompany the study of Voegelin's works. Deep and philosophically penetrating works require an investment of mind and soul that is bound to be as challenging as it is rewarding; there are no shortcuts. Part of the value of great philosophical thinkers is the struggle one must undertake to re-live their intellectual and existential journey imaginatively. Appreciating Voegelin's work requires one to replicate his existential journey to some degree. What took Voegelin a lifetime to understand and explain cannot be known in a brief period of time or by reading one monograph about his political theory. But the investment of time and intellectual energy is well worth the effort. The reward for studying Voegelin is a greater understanding of the Western crisis and an encounter with a prescription for restoration that is among the most philosophically penetrating in modern and postmodern times. Voegelin's historical, political, and philosophical insights provide the reader with a level of theoretical understanding that can be used to make sense of a historical period that cries out for explanation. Moreover, a necessary stop on the road to postmodernity is some understanding of what modernity is and what it means in the larger historical and philosophical context. Getting beyond modernity requires that the ideological deformations of the modern period be purged from the soul and consciousness of Western man. On this score, Voegelin has few rivals.