

Summary Article: **Voegelin, Eric**

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One of the most creative and prolific political philosophers of recent times, Eric Voegelin (1901–85) was born in Cologne on January 3 and grew up in Vienna. He joined the Faculty of Law at the University of Vienna, beginning as an assistant to Hans Kelsen. Following the *Anschluss* of 1938, when Germany occupied and annexed Austria, Voegelin was dismissed because of his books and other work in opposition to Hitler and the National Socialists. Shortly thereafter, he narrowly escaped the Gestapo by fleeing to Switzerland and then the United States, where he resumed his academic career. Along with his wife, Lissy Onken, Voegelin was naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1944.

Academic Career

In the United States, Voegelin taught at Harvard University, Bennington College, Northwestern University, and the University of Alabama; then, in 1942, he joined the faculty at Louisiana State University, where he remained for sixteen years. He became one of the university's first three Boyd Professors and also taught jurisprudence in the law school. In 1958, Voegelin accepted an appointment as chair in political science at the University of Munich, a position that had been last held by Max Weber. There he established the Geschwister Scholl Institute for Political Science in the hope, he said, of fostering democratic free government in Germany. In 1968 he retired from this position to become the Henry Salvatori Distinguished Scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

His principal writings are gathered in the *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (hereinafter cited as CW), which among other things includes the eight volumes of *History of Political Ideas* and the five volumes of *Order and History*. The Eric Voegelin archive of over 76,000 documents is lodged in the Hoover Institution, indexed, and available on microfilm.

Political Philosophy

The hallmark of Voegelin's political philosophy is the quest for political reality and its truth and resistance to reductionist ideologies and deformations, in both theoretical and practical aspects. In pursuing this path, Voegelin elaborates a new science of politics that critically abandons the positivist mode of inquiry in favor of a philosophical science grounded in classical noesis as the new paradigm of inquiry, one empirically anchored in noetic and pneumatic (revelatory) experiences of reality. Philosophizing as the love of wisdom rather than its definitive possession is essentially exploration of the tension toward transcendent divine Being as experienced in noetic and pneumatic modes by individual contemplatives. This opening of the horizon of inquiry reaffirms the salience of commonsense experience in thought and practice and stresses the pertinence of the whole hierarchy of being from Anaximandrian *apeiron* (Depth) to divine *Nous* (Reason) for the realm of human participation and striving. As a result, human nature is understood to be the epitome of being, and every human being participates in all levels of reality from the material to the divine. As a further consequence, a satisfactory political order must take account of this range of reality in its representation of true order in society. To fail to do so or to invert lower dimensions of reality for higher ones leads to deformation of existence through reductionism. For example, such reductionism may elevate materiality as the highest being—over spiritual and intellectual spheres, as in Marxism; by the racial biologism of the National Socialists; or by the Nietzschean egophanic apocalypse of the

Übermensch, whereby the highest being for man is man himself. This line of analysis obviously involves ontology and epistemology and does so by restoring the full sphere of human reality, on one hand, and by evoking a more inclusive range of experience so as to include participation in being, on the other. All of this is generally familiar from classical and medieval philosophy, and all of it is occluded or rejected in the reigning scientific mode of analysis and paradigm of the sciences of human affairs as merely phenomenal and concerned with knowledge of things.

In addition to the problems of reductionism, the ideological deformation can occur from a number of other sources, including immanentization of faith symbols as famously sketched in Voegelin's *New Science of Politics* (1952), his first book in English. Here the several aspects of the Christian eschatological faith symbols are treated (immanentized) as though they were intended to apply to temporal political processes rather than to illuminate the tension toward transcendent divine being. Thus, the pilgrim's progress or journey through time in partnership with God yields progressivism, the ultimate state of fulfillment in Beatitude; union with God becomes utopianism; and the immanentization of the entire symbolism yields the revolutionary activism of the Marxian dialectic. In this process of modern "gnosticism," the supplanting of faith by the certitude of knowledge involves moving from uncertain truth to certain untruth. The account is elaborated to include four symbolisms drawn especially from the writings of Joachim of Fiore (born c. 1130–35, died 1202) as typical of the immanentist deformation—the division of history into three ages of increasing degrees of perfection: the intellectual who knows the truth of reality basic to the gnostic dogma; the leader of the new age of truth that will lead humankind to fulfillment; and the culminating third age of history conceived as the brotherhood of autonomous persons (perfected through a free descent of Grace in Joachim) when no governing institutions will be needed and the "perfecti" can live together without coercion. (For Voegelin this narrative was adapted in the secularized narratives of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, and the National Socialist *Dritte Reich*.) All are characterized by a prohibition against questions that could invalidate the dreamworld second reality's dogmatic truth claims and restore order—as in Marx's injunction *denke nicht frage mich nicht*, since a rational man sticks to the reality under his eyes and doesn't ask questions about the Ground of being (Marx, "1844 Manuscripts").

The matrix of this critique that pronounces gnosticism to be the essence of modernity (later qualified in Voegelin's work to include also a range of additional factors such as alchemy, magic, and apocalypticism) is the constructive philosophy of consciousness and history fundamental to Voegelin's ontology. Here it must be stressed that the reality question is basic to political theory in his view. The core of that comes with the insistence from his earliest writings that an essential part of inquiry is the meditative exploration of the heights and depths experienced and symbolized as an impetus begun in the open inquiry in classical philosophical noesis as it eventually culminates in the Anselmian *fides quaerens intellectum* of faith in search of understanding. The stages of emergence of divine-human disclosure of highest truth are represented in the cosmological foundation reflected in myth; the breakthrough (leap in being) to the transcendent truth in the anthropological truth of the classical philosophers (vision of the *Agathon* or Good beyond being in Plato; the contemplative's rise to *athanatizien* or immortalizing in Aristotle; the substance of society as *psyche* so that society is Man writ large); and the further differentiation through revelation of soteriological truth as elaborated in the First Epistle of John 4 as *amicitia*. There follows Aquinas's great philosophy of man developed from it in terms of *fides caritate formata* or faith formed through love as the climax of the meditative movement of the human response to divine disclosure and truth of the participatory divine-human partnership in being that is paradigmatic and underlies the Anselmian quest ontologically.

Voegelin's path to this vision of metaxic reality (the In-Between of human existence in all times and places), the quest of a lifetime, can only be hinted at here. But the orientation toward it filled his mind and shaped his work from early on, as can be gleaned from further examples arising in his writings and reflecting his conviction of mystical philosophy as the authentic posture of open existence in all the great philosophical meditatives in the Western tradition from Parmenides onward (CW15, 279–93; CW18, 102–04).

Already in his 1928 book *On the Form of the American Mind*, the 27-year old Voegelin finds the key to Jonathan Edwards's thought in his departure from Calvinist dogma and the open embrace of a pantheistic mysticism especially in his late work. Voegelin sympathetically and powerfully relates Edwards's philosophizing to the subsequent thought of Charles Peirce, to William James's pure experience and pluralistic universe, and even to George Santayana's metaphysics, to find it uniquely and representatively American. Thus, Voegelin writes: "In the United States ... ideas did not follow any skeptical tradition but worked with the 'openness' of the self; the naive juxtaposition of God and man remains intact" (CW1, 140–42, italics added).

Five years later, in confronting Nazi race theory and its perverse reductionist biologism, Voegelin declares that the knowledge of man has come to grief and looks to Thomas à Kempis for succor. The primal image is evoked in Jesus:

Man must live according to the example of Christ and follow him... . Every day is to be lived as if it were the last, and the soul should always be anxious for the world beyond the senses. Perfect calm of the soul can be found only in the eternal gaze upon God. (CW3, History of the Race Idea, 4)

Five years later, Voegelin concludes his little *Political Religions* book with a Jeremiah-like evocation of spiritual fervor by quoting the admonitions of the anonymous fourteenth-century mystic known only as the Frankfurter, and his *German Theology* condemning as satanic the new Nazi religiosity (along with similar movements): "The inner-worldly religiosity experienced by the collective body—be it humanity, the people, the class, the race, or the state—as the *realissimum* is abandonment of God ... [it] is anti-Christian renunciation" (CW5, *Modernity Without Restraint*, 71).

Many other examples come to mind, of course. The very opening line of *Order and History* (written in 1956) glows with the insight of the mystic philosopher and is unintelligible apart from its illumination: "God, man, world, and society form a primordial community of being." In the preface to the book occurs a definition indicative of the meditative scope of the enterprise: "Philosophy is the love of being through the love of divine Being as the source of its order" (CW14, 39, 24).

Nearly a decade later on (1964), in his lectures introducing political science to students in Munich, Voegelin stressed the ontological perspective controlling the discourse and the ambiguity of the term *present*, which can mean a point lying between past and future and the

other meaning of the present, in which the present is always related to the existence of man in his presence under God. [Thus], while existing and acting in immanent time—man [also] exists under God, he has presence [so that everyman lives not only] within the immanent process [but also] under the judgment of the Presence. (CW31, 71)

This abiding dimension of reality is sturdy enough to withstand all human rebellion, as Voegelin stresses.

“Even if Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche thoroughly murder God and explain him away as dead, divine Being remains eternal and man must still get on with living his life sealed by his creatureliness and by death” (CW31, 262).

Finally, twenty years later in his deathbed meditation “Quod deus dicitur” (1985), the old mystic philosopher finds in Anselm's *Proslogion* the optimal form of philosophizing itself whereby the open inquiry into the heights and depths of reality arrives at the pinnacle moment as the meditative consciousness prayerfully attains the limit of the soul's noetic ascent: “O Lord, you are not only that than which a greater cannot be conceived, but you are also greater than what can be conceived.” Voegelin comments,

The noetic quest of Anselm thus assumes the form of a prayer for an understanding of the symbols of faith through the human intellect... . The true source of the Anselmian effort [is] the living desire of the soul to move toward the divine light. The divine reality lets the light of its perfection fall into the soul; the illumination of the soul arouses the awareness of man's existence in a state of imperfection; and this awareness provokes the human movement in response to the divine appeal. (CW12, 383)

By Voegelin's analysis, a theory of politics if it penetrates to principles must at the same time become a philosophy of history (CW5, 88). This, in turn, is conceived not as an account of pragmatic events but essentially as an account of participatory experience of divine disclosure with the ineffable thereby becoming effable in the metaxic reality of divine-human participation over time and, thereby, an ontology empirically grounded in theophanic events. This differentiating unfolding of experience is the source of truth and order in politics and history as it becomes articulate in the lives and work of the great contemplatives from its mythic beginnings through individual philosophers' noesis and the revelatory experiences—symbolisms of individual prophets and apostles in the Judaeo-Christian horizon—with comparable *equivalent* events discernible in other civilizational horizons. The differentiating movements are not a simple progression but are marked by complex contracting defections from truth through corruption, concupiscential rebellion, egophany, and various other derailments that structure the dynamics of existence including those mentioned as reductionist and immanentist. The open quest for truth-reality produces no system to end all systems but continues into the present as a living search for order in the various modes of participation identified especially with philosophy and revelation in the West and with the great spiritualists of other traditions such as Confucius, the Buddha, and the Hindu meditatives. The privileging of philosophy does not amount to Eurocentrism but to a recognition of the noetic superiority of the life of *Reason* as it emerges from the whole of human contemplative endeavor evinced over time as indispensable in the process of reality-experienced. Of this singularity Voegelin comments,

*[T]he *Analytica Posteriora*, the fundamental work on analytical thinking to this day, was created, not perhaps in China or India, but in Hellas ... the Europocentrism of position and standards cannot be abandoned by the philosopher of history, because there is nothing he could put in its place. History is made wherever men live, but its philosophy is a Western symbolism. (CW15, 90)*

See also Comte, Auguste; German Political Thought; Ideology; Marx, Karl; National Socialism; Political Philosophy and Political Thought; Religion and Western Political Thought; Totalitarianism; Twentieth-Century Political Thought; Utopianism

Further Readings

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