

ERIC VOEGELIN'S CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

"The motivations of my work . . . arise from the political situation. Anybody with an informed and reflective mind who lives in the twentieth century since the end of the First World War . . . finds himself hemmed in, if not oppressed, from all sides by a flood of ideological language."¹

Responding to the dramatic political upheavals of his age, Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) produced one of the most penetrating analyses of modern ideological movements the world has seen. What makes his analysis especially compelling even today is its spiritual depth. Working over many years on sources from cultures as diverse as Greek and Roman antiquity, the Christian Middle Ages, ancient Egypt, Samaria, Russia and China, Voegelin strove to articulate an empirically grounded account of man's permanent spiritual condition and the degree to which this might contain the seeds of ideological politics.² Yet Voegelin recognized that ideologies are, properly speaking, modern. What then accounts for their sudden explosion onto the scene in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Voegelin's answer has attracted many Christian readers for the degree to which it takes theology seriously. Unlike Marx and his followers, who viewed ideologies as mere byproducts of "material life conditions," Voegelin viewed them as deriving from man's most profound spiritual longings. Not matter, but spirit was decisive. However, Voegelin's analysis was not strictly speaking "Christian." What then was his spiritual critique of ideology if not (or not exactly) Christian?

While using insights from classical philosophy as well as the Judeo-Christian tradition to establish a standard of "healthy" (non-ideological) consciousness, Voegelin came to see that Christianity itself was implicated in ideology's rise. The life of Christian faith demands stamina, Voegelin observed—more than many people possess. And when the hegemony of imperial Christianity in the west began to unravel—a phenomenon that occurred just as the powers of modern science were making themselves felt—individuals were drawn to the nation-state as a potent source of meaning and community; and they began, moreover, to seek frameworks of salvation less demanding and otherworldly than the Christian framework. Without the rise and fall of Christian hegemony in the West, there would be no ideological mass movements. So Voegelin suggests. But precisely because this is so, political theorists cannot make sense of ideology without thinking in spiritual terms. These are the fascinating arguments I shall try to flesh out in the pages that follow after providing a brief sketch of Voegelin's own encounters with ideology in his youth.

In The Crucible of Events: Voegelin's Interest in Ideology

When Voegelin was born in 1901, his native Germany was still a unified empire under Kaiser Wilhelm II. Its military and economic power was rapidly expanding, as was its territory, and a radical workers' movement was erupting into mainstream politics under its new party banner, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). In Russia at this time, Nicholas II was Tsar. The Marxist Russian

¹ Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections* (hereafter AR) in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (hereafter CW), vol. 34 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), p. 118.

² Voegelin could work in ten languages. In addition to Latin, which he learned as a boy, and Greek, which he learned a bit later, he also had German (of course), English, Italian, Spanish, French, Russian, Hebrew and Chinese. His skill in these languages moreover is widely attested. The renowned biblical archaeologist William Foxwell Albright once described Voegelin's Hebrew as nearly impeccable. "Eric Voegelin's *Order and History*, with Special Reference to Vol. I," in *Theological Studies* XXII (1961), p. 275.

Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) had held its first Party Congress; and a new political party had been founded, the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, soon to split into the Bolsheviks under Lenin and the Mensheviks under Julius Martov. It was a time of great political ferment and the dawn of an exceptionally tumultuous age.

By the time of his *gymnasium* years in Vienna, before matriculating to the University of Vienna's Faculty of Law in 1919, Voegelin had witnessed World War I and its devastating effects. And just after the war, he observed with fascination the complete dismantling of the tsarist autocracy in Russia and the rise of Bolshevik communism. Voegelin was only sixteen when the Russian Revolution broke out, but his intellectual focus was already taking shape, particularly his lifelong interest in analyzing the nature of political ideology. With some humor, Voegelin would look back at his school days from later in life and remark on his early efforts to think through Marxist ideology:

Before I came to the university, in the vacation between the *Abiturium* and the beginning of my university studies in the fall, I studied the *Kapital* of Marx, induced of course by the current interest in the Russian Revolution. Being a complete innocent in such matters, I was of course convinced by what I read, and I must say that from August 1919, to about December of that year I was a Marxist. By Christmas the matter had worn off, because in the meantime I had attended courses in both economic theory and the history of economic theory and knew what was wrong with Marx. Marxism was never a problem for me after that.³

But of course Marxism remained a "problem" for Voegelin long after that, only the problem would shift from one of potential political affiliations to one of political-philosophical inquiry. What was "wrong" with Marx could be answered in a number of more or less comprehensive ways. It was one thing to understand that his economics did not work, another to understand why his ideas could spawn hordes of enthusiastic followers. Moreover, the same questions needed to be asked of other ideological movements that would so directly impact Voegelin's young adulthood: Nazism and Fascism.

Voegelin was an Associate Professor at the University of Vienna in 1938 when Hitler annexed Austria. In the two decades leading up to this life-changing event he had written a doctoral dissertation at the University of Vienna; travelled on a Rockefeller Foundation fellowship to Columbia University and Harvard, where he studied with John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead; spent a year in Paris learning French philosophy and literature as well as Russian; and returned to Vienna to work towards his *habilitation* (the official qualification for university teaching) by publishing original research. By the start of his professorship in 1936, he had written *On the Form of the American Mind (Über die Form des amerikanischen Geistes)* based on material he had researched in the United States,⁴ as well as two rather more timely books exposing the fraud of Nazi race theory, both published in 1933.⁵

³ Voegelin, *AR*, p. 38.

⁴ Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1928.

⁵ *Rasse und Staat (Race and State)* (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1933) and *Die Rassenidee in der Geistesgeschichte von Ray bis Carus (The Race Idea in Intellectual History from Ray to Carus)* (Berlin, Germany: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1933). Both texts are now available in English translation in *CW*, vols. 2 and 3.

Voegelin could denounce Nazism with impunity in his early work not because he was protected in any way, but because the Nazis were not yet in power. The year 1933, however, opened with Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany, and this changed the atmosphere almost overnight. The second of Voegelin's books on race, a study of the intellectual genesis of racial theory from the eighteenth century forward, was literally yanked from the shelves and destroyed by its Berlin publisher. And in Austria during that year, the entire political culture was galvanized by the question of how best to respond to Nazism. Three ideological camps vied for power. One consisted of Nazi sympathizers within Austria, who agitated for unification with Hitler's Germany. Another was the conservative government made up of Christian Socialist politicians with ties to the Roman Catholic Church. And the third was the Social Democratic party (SPD), whose plan (such as it was) was to use democratic procedures to secure a majority and then, as if kicking the democratic ladder out from under them, unleash a revolution in the pursuit of a socialist utopia. Voegelin was especially critical of this group, even though it included many of his close friends. "What struck me most at the time," he later wrote, "was the stupidity of ideologists as represented by the leaders of the Social Democratic Party. While I agreed with them regarding economic and social politics, the silliness of their apocalyptic dream in the face of the impending Hitlerian apocalypse was simply too much to stomach."⁶

Voegelin, for his part, preferred the Christian conservatives. At least they "represented the traditions of European culture," he thought.⁷ Voegelin was intensely interested in Catholic social thought at this time, especially the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* and the work of certain astute contemporary theologians. In the years 1933-36, he was reading A.D. Sertillanges, Jacques Maritain, Étienne Gilson, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac. The upshot of all this was that Voegelin, while wishing to preserve Austrian democracy—or rather *because* he wished to preserve Austrian democracy—saw the need for some form of authoritarian state as a protection against the Nazi threat on the one side and internal ideological extremism on the other. This was also the view, more or less, of the Christian Socialist government, which did in fact, in the Civil War of 1934, successfully suspend the democratic constitution and institute an authoritarian regime.

Voegelin invested great effort at this time formulating a defense of the role an authoritarian state could play in containing various forms of lethal extremism. This resulted in his book, *Die Autoritäre Staat*, published in 1936, his first major treatment of ideologies, left and right.⁸ Its argument was later likened by Voegelin himself to the position taken by American Supreme Court Justice Jackson in *Terminiello v. Chicago* (1949): democracy is "not a suicide pact." Sometimes in the name of democracy one must consider measures that are at least temporarily not democratic.⁹

Voegelin's *Die Autoritäre Staat* was followed by a second trenchant analysis of political ideologies entitled *Die politischen Religionen*. Here Voegelin made his own contribution to a preexisting stream of scholarship that treated ideologies as ersatz "religions." Though he would later express reservations about this way of understanding the problem—since the term "religion" seemed in

⁶ AR, pp. 68-9.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68. See further, Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2000), pp. 61-2.

⁸ *Der autoritäre staat: Ein Versuch über das österreichische Staatsproblem* (Vienna: Springer, 1936), translated into English as *The Authoritarian State: An Essay on the Problem of the Austrian State*, CW, vol. 4.

⁹ AR, p. 69.

retrospect too vague—he nevertheless made headway here in understanding the way political ideologies tapped into something quite deep in the psyche of man, something which corresponded roughly to phenomena and symbols inherited from the Christian past. Unfortunately, the book was just scheduled for release when the Nazis took over in March of 1938. It therefore never reached the German public.¹⁰

As the Nazis took over in 1938, Voegelin barely escaped with his life. He had hoped that the Western democracies (in accordance with the treaties of Versailles and St. Germain) would act to prevent the union of Germany and Austria. But when these treaties were not enforced, Voegelin had to find some way to escape. Before he could arrange things, however, the Gestapo paid a visit to his house. This was not a social visit. The professor's "exile or his death was virtually certain."¹¹ But Voegelin was not at home when the Gestapo arrived. At their doorstep, his wife Lissy explained to the officers that Eric was, at that moment, with the police, trying to secure an exit visa—which was true—and this seemed to satisfy the Gestapo, at least temporarily. Later that evening, with two bags in hand, the Voegelins slipped out of Europe through Zurich to the United States.¹²

I relate these historical and biographical details in order to supply some context for Voegelin's intense interest in ideology and also to give an initial sense of the way he used the term. Specificity here is important, since "ideology" has many meanings today, including, for instance, a person's mere outlook or mindset. But this is not how Voegelin used the term. Rather, ideology designated for him a system of ideas that purports to explain reality and man's place in it, a system with political activism as its goal, but which, in fact, badly misrepresents the human condition by failing to acknowledge either its limits or its possibilities (depending on the ideology).¹³ So, for example, Marxism was an ideology for Voegelin, because it sprang from a falsely narrow belief that economic conditions could explain virtually everything in the socio-political world—eclipsing thereby the independent role that ideas and other nonmaterial factors can play.

An apt image of ideology in this sense is the proverbial "Procrustean Bed," that iron platform on which the legendary Procrustes invited passers-by to spend the night. If a guest were too large for the bed, Procrustes would simply amputate the offending excess; if too small, he would stretch the visitor (to death) until he fit at last. In this sense of forcing upon human nature an ill-fitting framework and then prescribing action (often violent action) from there, Voegelin found ideological tendencies in most modern political movements—most obviously, National Socialism, Communism and Fascism, but also Liberalism, Progressivism, Constitutionalism, and Conservatism.¹⁴ All have

¹⁰ It was, however, published a year later in Stockholm. An English translation appears in *CW*, vol. 5.

¹¹ Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), p. 6.

¹² See Barry Cooper, *Ibid.*, for a more detailed account of Voegelin's flight from Austria and for a more thorough description of Voegelin's early books against the Nazis.

¹³ Asked by a questioner after a talk what he meant by ideology, Voegelin enumerated a few elements he took to be essential: (1) apocalypse, the idea that this present world of imperfection will be followed by a more perfect phase; (2) gnosticism, knowledge of how to bring about the more perfect world (3) immanentization, that human action on earth rather than divine action in a transcendent realm will bring about the desired end; and (4) scientism, the belief that modern science will assist us in finally transforming man and his natural world into paradise. See, *CW*, vol. 11, p. 244. All these elements will be discussed below.

¹⁴ For National Socialism, see Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999); for Communism, see Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, in *CW*, vol. 5, esp. pp. 229-33, 252, 295; for Fascism, see *ibid.* p. 252 and 295; for Liberalism, see Voegelin, "Liberalism and Its History," in *CW*, vol. 11, pp.

attracted groups of adherents who are prepared to take action on the basis of a dangerously distorted account of the possibilities and limits of human life.

Of course, this prompts an obvious question: *Why?* Why would large numbers of people find a defective account of the human condition so entrancing? And what motivates the creator of such systems? These are the essential questions that animated Voegelin's research.¹⁵ But in order to speak authoritatively on such matters, more needed to be known about the fallaciousness of ideologies. By what standard could Voegelin declare them false?

Towards a Critical Standard: The Open Soul and its Limits

Voegelin's method was to read ideological writers with great care—literally taking them at their word—in order to see what they themselves thought they were doing. But before he could convince anyone that ideologues were “wrong,” he needed a critical standard of some kind, a “true” account of the human condition which might serve to expose the problem.¹⁶ Voegelin in fact spent decades poring over literature from antiquity to the present and from East to West striving to articulate an empirical conception of the human condition with its real potentialities as well as its vexing limitations.¹⁷ What he ultimately reached was a philosophical anthropology that remains one of the most lucid and comprehensive to this day.

The healthy orientation according to Voegelin can be presented in terms of the “open soul,” an expression he found in Henri Bergson.¹⁸ As it was used by the Greek philosophers, the soul (*psyche*) designated a certain range of movement in human beings, a yearning and searching for completeness. Such a search presupposes, of course, a sense of incompleteness; and Voegelin frequently stressed the degree to which this was fundamental to the human condition. Not knowing whence we come or where we are going, not knowing when we shall die or what exists beyond this

83-99; for Progressivism, see Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VIII, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*, in *CW*, vol. 26, p. 151, n. 64; and *Hitler and the Germans*, p. 72; for Constitutionalism, see *Anamnesis* p. 3; and for Conservatism, see *Anamnesis*, p. 189, along with Voegelin's letter to Peter Berger dated December 19, 1967, in *CW*, vol. 30, p. 551; and his letter to Robert Heilman dated December 19, 1955, in *ibid.*, pp. 257-9. A brief but helpful account of Voegelin's view of American conservatism appears in Michael Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2002), pp. 148-155; and readers with a good sense of humor might consult Barry Cooper, ed, *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), pp. 41-3 on Voegelin's “conversation” with Russell Kirk.

¹⁵ As early as *Die politischen Religionen* (1938), Voegelin thought the answer lay in ideology's *religious* appeal. He referred to this appeal unambiguously as “satanical,” and thus wanted to understand the “very attractive force” of evil. See *The Political Religions* in *CW* vol. 5, p. 24.

¹⁶ In a 1977 essay entitled “Remembrance of Things Past,” Voegelin recalled that as early as the 1930s he had possessed an intuitive sense how ideologies violated his own “broader horizon” of consciousness. The problem, then, was to make his broader horizon philosophically articulate and defensible. The essay is available in Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), pp. 3-13, esp. p. 5. An excellent treatment of Voegelin's development of a philosophical anthropology is Cooper, *Foundations of Modern Political Science*, ch. 5.

¹⁷ Voegelin thought that “one cannot be a successful scholar in a field of social and political science unless one knows what one is talking about,” and that means “acquiring the comparative civilizational knowledge not only of modern civilization but also of medieval and ancient civilization, and not only of Western civilization but also of Near Eastern and Far Eastern civilizations.” As far as Voegelin was concerned, “anybody who does not do that has no claim to call himself an empiricist and certainly is defective in his competence as a scholar in his field” (*AR*, p. 13).

¹⁸ Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (Paris: F. Alcon, 1932); See e.g., Voegelin, “In Search of the Ground,” in *CW* vol. 11, p. 230.

life, not knowing the very *meaning* of our existence or what we should be doing here on earth, discontent with our many imperfections, never fully satisfied in our needs or desires, we human beings are creatures of “existential unrest.”¹⁹ But, at the same time, our unrest has direction, because it is roused by specific questions for which we long to have answers. Our questions therefore condition our quest. So the Greeks suggested, but of course the Greeks were not unique in experiencing unrest, only in describing it in such an articulated way. The experiences are rather universal. *Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*, says the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, expressing similar feelings.

From the experience of direction-filled unrest, the classical analysis of the soul proceeds through a hierarchy of stages. But before describing those stages, I should stress that Voegelin’s analysis of basic unrest already carries with it implications for the study of ideology. Precisely because human beings exist in a state of unrest stemming from questions for which we desperately crave answers, we are to that extent vulnerable to artificial answers from the seemingly wise.²⁰ But at the same time, to recover the fundamental questions, as Voegelin does so cogently, helps already to dispel some of the seductiveness of ideologies. We need only bear three things in mind about our questions. First, they arise naturally from our human condition; they are not “made up,” and thus cannot be willed away as if they do not exist. Second, they point to a “beyond” as the location of possible answers; they are not answerable from our present position. And third, they are *questions* rather than answers. That is perhaps the most basic point. Mass political movements garner energy by asserting answers to the great questions of human life. But if citizens kept the questions themselves rather than bogus answers foremost in mind then ideologies would have a difficult time gaining adherents.²¹

The ascending stages of the soul culminate in something not entirely “in” us, something largely “beyond” us. This is what it means to say the soul is “open.” Following the analysis of Aristotle in particular, Voegelin catalogued the soul’s structure from lowest to highest as “inorganic nature,” “vegetative nature,” “animal nature,” “human passions,” “human reason” (*nous*). These are in one sense “parts” of the soul, but they are more accurately speaking ways in which human beings participate in Being as such. “Man’s nature is the epitome,” wrote Voegelin, “of the hierarchy of Being.”²² And that hierarchy is cumulative in a fascinating way, such that higher levels systematically contain the lower. Human beings, for example, participate fully in the lower forms of Being (we possess inorganic, organic, and animal elements), but they (the lower forms) do not participate in anything higher than their rank. Plants and animals, thus, do not share human’s distinct capacity of reason.

When this image of the soul is approached now in terms of man’s quest for the meaning of his existence, the so-called “parts” come to light as “stages.” Only humans seem concerned about meaning, but where should it be sought? It would seem absurd to attempt to locate it in the lower elements that humans share with other forms of nature rather than in that which is distinctly

¹⁹ Voegelin, “Reason: The Classic Experience,” in *CW*, vol. 12, p., 273; see also “The Gospel and Culture,” in *Ibid.*, pp. 175-6; and “Conversations with Eric Voegelin at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal,” in *CW* vol. 33, pp. 249-58.

²⁰ See Voegelin, “In Search of the Ground,” *CW*, vol. 11, p. 225.

²¹ See “Reason: The Classic Experience,” p. 268; and “On Debate and Existence,” in *CW*, vol. 12, pp. 41-2.

²² “Reason: The Classic Experience,” p. 290.

human—namely reason. The meaning of our life is not that we contain inorganic matter, or that we process food and grow, or that we have desires and locomotion like other animals. It has rather something to do with reason. But what? Voegelin, following Aristotle, went on to analyze the structure of reason itself, noticing that it too has lower and higher functions. Its lower function is “instrumental” reason, figuring out “means” to arrive at various ends. Thus we deem something “rational” if it is done by suitable means. But here a problem arises. For if this were all that reason entailed, then we would not be able to speak of the rationality of “ends,” only of means. This was in fact a serious predicament with modernity itself, which Voegelin (along with Michael Oakeshott and Hannah Arendt) criticized: reason had been reduced to instrumental reason alone. If we cannot speak of the rationality of the ends of human action except by converting them into means to further ends—which is to instrumentalize them—then human action becomes ultimately *meaningless*. As Voegelin says, “we [would] have rational adequacy in the pragmatic sense. . . but the whole chain hangs in the air and we do not know whether the whole chain is rational.”²³

The solution to this problem, as far as the Greek philosophers were concerned, lay in another, higher, function of reason called *nous*, a term that can be variously translated as intelligence, understanding or reason. But *nous* is not instrumental reason. It is rather the capacity humans have to make astounding intuitive leaps into the order and causes of things. From the experience of a few instances of a kind, humans have the ability to intuit the common essence that binds the instances together. So, for instance, from the experience of such words as to leap, to climb, and to dance, we intuit the class of verbs. What accounts for this? The truth is that the power to make such leaps is quite mysterious, and the ancients regarded it as such.²⁴ Aristotle described it as our most god-like capacity. But its powers are hardly exhausted in perceiving the ordered structure of such mundane things as verbs. Its powers are rather most impressively employed in perceiving the structure of intelligible Being at its heights. And here what comes to light is that “reasoning” of the very sort we are describing (*nous*) is itself an instance of a kind—the highest of all kinds—namely of *Nous* not human but divine. In other words, man’s search for the ground of his existence, for an “end” that is not also a means, issues in the insight that the search itself is the highest and most godlike activity. And though humans cannot fully reach or possess that ground for which we long, we can in the very search for it partake of, or participate in, it.

This leads Voegelin to a pivotal insight with respect to ideologies. While the “open soul” with its ultimate posture of “faith,” “hope” and “love” in relation to its goal is the well-ordered soul, the temptation is very powerful to *reject* openness in favor of closure.²⁵ This is because faith, hope and love seem so unsatisfactory, so incomplete—and they are. But the vexations of openness do not justify the willful act of closure, which has to be artificial in order to occur at all. What does “closure” entail in this context? It can take several forms.²⁶ One is to posit a divine ground that is less mysterious and transcendent—more knowable and active—than the God of human experience.

²³ “In Search of the Ground,” p. 227. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), and Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 157, 230 and 305.

²⁴ See further my “Aristotle and Voegelin on *Nous*: What is Noetic Political Science,” *Review of Politics* 64 (2002): 57-79.

²⁵ In his essay, “In Search of the Ground,” p. 230, Voegelin traces the symbols faith, hope and love through history and finds them in, for example, the Pre-Socratic Heraclitus, as well as in St. Augustine and the contemporary Henri Bergson.

²⁶ See “In search of the Ground,” pp. 234-5.

Something like this is a recurring pattern in religious fundamentalism of various types. Another form of closure is to deny the existence of God altogether—to embrace atheism. And yet another is to locate the meaning of life in one of the lower functions of Being (e.g., inorganic, vegetative or animal-passions). This is the way of thinkers who posit that we are nothing but matter and motion, or that we are just beasts, apes with highly developed minds. The strain of living the life of openness towards a divine ground that is all-important but not fully knowable seemed to Voegelin the key to understanding ideologies. Ideologies offer answers not to just any questions, but rather to the most fundamental questions of human life: what are we, what is our purpose, how can we arrive at a destination more comfortable than the condition in which we presently find ourselves?

A final breakthrough for Voegelin in understanding the nature of ideology came when he began to consider human life in terms of a “tension” between two “poles.” Neither of these terms appears in classical Greek psychology, though Voegelin thought a passage of Plato’s *Philebus* (16d-e) came close to what he had in mind. Voegelin’s image was one of being pulled or drawn, not simply toward the divine ground, but also toward its antipode: death, nothingness.²⁷ In Christian theological terms, one might say man experiences his condition as one of falling away from as well as rising back toward God (*exitus-reditus*). But the ultimate goals of these motions (the poles) are not actually in human reach. Like the pegs on a violin, the poles are something other, something “beyond,” that which is suspended between them, and yet they are *part of* the experience of being suspended or pulled. This way of understanding the human condition was epitomized for Voegelin by the term “metaxy,” which he found in Plato (*Philebus* 16e: *metaxu*). It means, simply, “in-between.” But for Voegelin it offered a most vivid image of the *limits* of the human condition. By inserting the Aristotelian levels of the soul into the framework of the two poles, Voegelin arrived at the “critical standard” he had desired for evaluating ideologies (See figure). And this enabled him to formulate some basic rules to resist ideological temptations.

1. Human nature participates in all levels of the grid from top to bottom. Any account of man that omits or denies one of the basic levels is *ipso facto* reductionist. This applies equally to systems that deny the upper levels as to those that deny the lower. We are neither spiritless animals nor immaterial spirits, but rather, permanently, all levels at once.
2. Any account that treats the poles of the tension as “things” or “beings” or “phenomena” *within* the metaxy is a misrepresentation. The poles transcend the metaxy. Voegelin refers to this error as hypostatization or reification—literally to “thingify” that which is not a thing. The significance of this error becomes apparent when an intellectual like Nietzsche declares that “God is dead.” Only when God is understood in reified terms is it possible to pronounce him dead.
3. Any account that presents the complete fulfillment of human longing as something achievable in the *metaxy* is false. The human condition does not include release from the human condition. An important caveat, though, relates to what Voegelin calls “genuine

²⁷ See “Reason: The Classic Experience;” and, *Order and History*, vol. IV, *The Ecumenic Age*, in *CW* vol. 17, pp. 278-9;” Voegelin does not say much about the apeironic antipode, except to mark its place as one of the two poles. In the *Philebus* the contrast is between the “one” and the “infinite” (*apeiron*). What stands between is plurality, which partakes of the one and the infinite. But Voegelin was endeavoring to make a more spiritual point.

eschatological or apocalyptic symbolisms.”²⁸ These are accounts, observable in the Greek as well as the Hebrew and Christian traditions, of an *otherworldly* fulfillment and are, as such, perfectly compatible with the genuine and thrilling experience of “divine-human participation.” The error comes only when the “beyond” is treated as an immanent possibility—usually involving mass political action (and typically some killing). Voegelin famously referred to this error as that of “immanentizing the eschaton.”

4. Man experiences the meaning of life in three different domains: in his individual person, in his society and in his sense of history. But these three domains do not share the same status. The person is the *foundation* of society and of history and thus cannot be sacrificed to them. Voegelin thus writes: “All philosophies of history that hypostatize society or history as an absolute, eclipsing personal existence and its meaning, are excluded as false.”²⁹ Moreover, any political philosophy or any philosophy of history that attempts to deny all the vertical levels of the soul is false. Man does not become more or less divine as he enters into society, nor as he moves through history. Man is what he is, and this will be *permanently* reflected in his politics and his history. Such are the limits of the human condition.

Ideology as Spiritual Disease

In light of his investigations into the open soul and its limits, Voegelin could maintain that ideologies were a “diseased” response to the human condition, and he dubbed this response one of “spiritual revolt.”³⁰ To understand his meaning it is necessary to separate the question of the *character* of the human condition from the question of how it is *received* by any particular person or group. The “mood” of reception is decisive. That there are indeed soaring possibilities and yet frustrating limits inherent in the human condition suggested to Voegelin that the healthiest mood was one of “balance.”³¹ He thus spoke of the “balance of consciousness” in the same breath as the “well-ordered soul” and the “open soul.” What “balance” signifies in this context is the ability to preserve the genuine experience of the metaxy without either (*a*) becoming so excited by the experience of a divine pull that one forgets one is still human or that the world remains unchanged, or (*b*) becoming so frustrated with the evasiveness of divinity that one rejects it altogether.³² The problem of an imbalanced mood tended to take these two forms: one of disregarding the world in favor of divine transfiguration of some kind, the other of disregarding the divine in favor of humanism, materialism or atheism.

²⁸ “Reason: The Classic Experience,” p. 290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ This is the focus of a superb monograph by Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1992). Voegelin used the phrase “antispiritual revolt” to describe modern scientism as early as 1948; see his essay “The Origins of Scientism,” in *CW*, vol. 10, p. 170. For his analysis of ideology in terms of spiritual “disease” and “revolt,” see e.g., Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, *CW*, vol. 14p. 24: “Ideology is existence in rebellion against God and man. It is the violation of the First and Tenth Commandments, if we want to use the language of Israelite order; it is the *nosos*, disease of the spirit, if we want to use the language of Aeschylus and Plato.” See also Voegelin, “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” in *CW*, vol. 12, p. 322.

³¹ See Franz, *The Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology*, p. 28

³² See Kenneth Keulman, *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelin’s Political Theory* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), pp. 20-1 and 167-8.

Voegelin supplied arresting historical examples of both types of imbalance. The first, he thought, was exemplified by the prophet Isaiah in the eighth century BC, who departed from what might be called Israel's historic "balance of consciousness." Israel was well aware, on the one hand, of being the Chosen People of God, and, on the other, of certain permanent necessities of earthly existence (particularly military necessities). Against this "balanced" view, however, Isaiah counseled Israel to rely exclusively on Yahweh (or rather on Isaiah's prophetic presentations of Yahweh's will) *rather* than on military power or military alliances. According to Voegelin, the error was classic. From the spiritual insight that God wants Israel to survive, Isaiah inferred that nothing further need be known or done than to trust in God. Isaiah thought that his own "prophetic charisma" could stand in place of weapons on the battlefield.³³ The possibility of knowing *something* of god had blinded this prophet to the permanent conditions of the world. But, Voegelin insisted, "the constitution of being is what it is, and cannot be affected by human fancies."³⁴ Michael Franz has shown that Voegelin saw at least some evidence of this type of spiritual imbalance in such diverse sources as "the apocalyptic strains of Old Testament Prophecy and early Christianity, the Gospel of John, the Epistles of Paul, ancient Gnostic and Manichaean writings, the millennial 'heresies' of the Middle Ages, and the tracts of militant Puritanism."³⁵

The second type of imbalance was epitomized for Voegelin by the figure of Prometheus, the Titan who revolted against the Olympian gods in the interest of mankind. The core of this psychic disease is hubris, Voegelin thought: the rejection of the true divine and the substitution of oneself in its role. And Voegelin documented myriad instances of this across human history from Israel to Greece to Rome.³⁶ He was especially impressed though by the deliberate appropriation of the Prometheus legend by modern writers such as Karl Marx, who prefaced his doctoral dissertation with the following blasphemous claim:

Philosophy makes no secret of it. The confession of Prometheus—"In a word, I hate all the gods"—is its [philosophy's] own confession, its own verdict against all gods heavenly and earthly who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the supreme deity. There shall be none beside it.³⁷

Some intimate link seemed to connect the Promethean strand of imbalance to many of the "-isms" of the modern age, and Voegelin argued for the association repeatedly.³⁸ But the precise nature of this linkage still needed to be worked out. Was it a direct line of historical influence or a mere family resemblance? Were modern ideologues the direct heirs of various ancient schools of thought, or were they rather reenacting afresh certain psychological tendencies that are a permanent feature of the human landscape?

³³ *Israel and Revelation*, p. 506.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Franz, *The Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, p. 7. Franz usefully divides this type of imbalance into two subtypes: metastatic faith and parousiasm.

³⁶ See "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," p. 322.

³⁷ Quoted in Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, p. 269.

³⁸ Franz, *The Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, p. 8, supplies references in Voegelin's corpus for his "promethean" interpretation of Anarchism, Behavioralism, Biologism, Constitutionalism, Existentialism, Fascism, Hegelianism, Liberalism, Marxism, Positivism, Progressivism, Psychologism, Scientism, and Utilitarianism.

Such questions will be addressed below, but the point to stress here is the following: human experience of divine transcendence, on the one hand, and the real limits of the human condition, on the other, give rise to a variety of possible responses. One is the “balanced” consciousness. The others are forms of escape or revolt. This framework seemed to Voegelin pregnant with possibilities as a tool for understanding modern ideological mass movements. Ideologists seem to be suffering from an imbalanced mood.

But here a problem arose, for the imbalanced moods that Voegelin noticed go back in history to some of the earliest written records.³⁹ Yet ideology in the form of mass movements seemed to him a strictly modern phenomenon. How then could this matter of mood explain their rise? The answer is that it could not, unless it were considered in a more dynamic way. What was needed, Voegelin realized, was not just a philosophical anthropology, but also a dynamic account of the way man’s reception of the human condition changes under different historical conditions. And this is where Voegelin’s account of Christianity as a historical force comes into play.

Christianity, Scientism and the Rise of Ideological Movements

Historically, Voegelin attributed the rise of modern ideologies to three pivotal events, none of which, alone, would have been sufficient. They are, in chronological order of impact, (a) the advent of Christianity, (b) the decline of Christianity as an imperial power in the West after the Reformation, and (c) the rise of modern scientism. All three factors will need to be elucidated in order to render Voegelin’s theory intelligible, but what is perhaps worth stressing at the outset is how Voegelin’s approach was unique. It was so for two reasons: first, because it pushed the causes of modern ideology further back in time than other analysts had done; and second, because it located the true roots of ideology not in the economic or political domain, as was typical, but in the spiritual domain.

On both points, Voegelin objected to Hannah Arendt’s analysis of ideology in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Writing to Arendt in 1951, he censured her for equating the origins of totalitarianism more or less with the origins of anti-Semitism, that is, of allowing “the Jewish question” to distort her analysis. “One cannot be an anti-Semite (in the modern sense) as long as one is a Christian,” Voegelin protested; and thus the “decay of Christianity in the sociological sense, as a force that determines the character of civilization” is a precondition for the rise of ideologies. This means that the search for ideology’s causes cannot be limited to the late-modern era. Moreover, Voegelin wrote, “the totalitarian catastrophes cannot be explained exclusively by the political, social, or economic situation . . . [but] have to be interpreted in terms of the state of health, or disease of the order of the soul.”⁴⁰

³⁹ See for example Voegelin’s stirring analysis of an anonymous Egyptian text from ca. 2000 B.C. entitled, “The Dispute of a Man, Who Contemplates Suicide, With His Soul,” in “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” *CW*, vol. 12, pp. 58ff.

⁴⁰ Letter to Arendt dated March 16, 1951, in *CW*, vol. 30, pp. 69-72. These arguments spilled over into Voegelin’s famous review of Arendt’s book in the *Review of Politics* 15 (1953), in *CW*, vol. 11, pp. 15-23. According to Manfred Henningsen, *CW*, vol. 5, pp. 2-3, Voegelin and Arendt became friends after their exchanges on her work, and they remained close until her death in 1975. Barry Cooper, *New Political Religions, Or An Analysis of Modern Terrorism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004), pp. 5-6 warns that the differences between Voegelin and Arendt can be “easily exaggerated,” and he helpfully highlights their common concerns.

Voegelin was confident that the advent of Christianity had a significant impact on the problem of “mood” referred to above. The reason is twofold. First, the form of redemption offered by Christ raised questions and posed problems for those who followed him. Christianity emerged as a Jewish messianic movement, but the Jewish expectation was that God would redeem the world in history. Christ, though, said his kingdom was “not of this world.” Thus the earliest Christian communities oscillated anxiously between the eschatological expectation of the Parousia and the notion, eventually adopted by the church, that redemption would come in the form of a *transcendent* perfection. Such uncertainty was difficult enough, but the eventual position adopted by the church posed its own challenges for people unaccustomed to thinking of redemption in such terms. The expectation of an imminent coming of the realm could be “stirred to white heat again and again,” because the idea of a trans-historical salvation was so very difficult to accept.⁴¹ Voegelin, in fact, interpreted the Revelation of St. John as a throwback to Jewish apocalyptic and pointed to certain fateful consequences of its inclusion in the canon.⁴²

The second reason that Christianity impacted the “mood” of believers relates to its conception of God. Just as salvation becomes trans-historical, so too does the divine become transcendent. But a transcendent God meant that the longstanding traditions of paganism with its more tangible, more human-like gods had to go. This process, which Voegelin called the “de-divinization of the world,” was of course a gradual one, but it was nevertheless massively disorienting:

The feeling of security in a “world full of gods” is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen. Ontologically, the substance of things hoped for is nowhere to be found but in faith itself; and, epistemologically, there is no proof for things unseen but again in this very faith. The bond is tenuous, indeed, and it may snap easily. The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty which if gained is loss—the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience. The danger of a breakdown of faith to a socially relevant degree, now, will increase in the measure in which Christianity is a worldly success. . . . The more people are drawn into or pressured into the Christian orbit, the greater will be the number among them who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity; and the likeliness of a fall from faith will increase when civilizational progress of education, literacy, and intellectual debate will bring the full seriousness of Christianity to the understanding of ever more individuals.⁴³

Of course, Christianity was not the first movement in history to view God as transcendent. Both the ancient Israelites and the Greek philosophers possessed this insight. But these were not mass movements on the order of Christianity. Both in a geographical and a sociological sense, Christianity

⁴¹ See Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 176; for a fuller discussion of Voegelin’s critical attitude toward St. John (and St. Paul) see John J. Ranieri, *Disturbing Revelation: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin and the Bible* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), ch. 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ See Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 187-8; cf. *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, p. 310.

was universal, a message for everyone. Yet it was a message that presumed a great deal. The human quest for meaning and fulfillment is so intense that it may not recognize an unworldly god as any kind of answer. The thin thread of faith can easily snap. Thus Voegelin viewed the epiphany of Christ as “the great catalyst that made eschatological consciousness an historical force both in forming *and deforming* humanity.”⁴⁴

Moving forward fifteen-hundred years, the significance of the breakup of the universal church for the rise of ideology relates precisely to this problem of stamina. Difficult though it was, the tenuous life of Christian faith happened to be greatly aided by a community of believers—the larger the better—and by uniform teachings on core beliefs. This, among other things, is what imperial Christianity in the West supplied. Thus Voegelin thought that one factor which certainly aided the rise of modern ideologies was the fracturing of Christendom; and this had a tangible political aspect. Because the universal church was not only a community of believers but also a political power that held Europe together, its sudden atrophy flung the door wide open for religious sects to seek political power. “The experience of a plurality of churches, each claiming to represent the true faith,” thus led to wars for religious control of the state.⁴⁵ These were ideal conditions for a renewal of apocalypticism, the thought that God might, after all, bring about his kingdom here on earth, by *political* means.

In his abandoned, but posthumously published *History of Political Ideas*, Voegelin analyzed a dozen or more movements that seemed like prototypes of later ideological movements, and he observed a striking change in the “social relevance” of these groups before and after the Reformation. Before the Reformation, they appear only as fringe movements and are dealt with either by incorporation into the Church or by annihilation. Voegelin analyzed such groups as the quasi-Manichean Paulicians who flourished between 650 and 852 in Armenia, the Joachites, a millenarian group that arose from the Franciscans in the thirteenth century, the Albigensians, a group defeated under Pope Innocent III in the Cathar Crusade (1209-1229), and the Ortliebians, the thirteenth century followers of Ortlieb of Staussbourg (also condemned by Pope Innocent III) who maintained a doctrine of self-deification. What is significant about these groups besides their general ideological character is how *minor* they were. Neither their numbers nor their social impact was very significant.

But after the Reformation, things changed dramatically. Groups of mystical activists now saw an opportunity to achieve something on the political plane. Voegelin’s generic name for such groups—a name culled from their own tracts—was the “People of God.”⁴⁶ This included, for example, the “the Anabaptist movement that spread from Holland to Switzerland and from Alsace to Moravia,

⁴⁴ Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age*, in *CW*, vol. 4, p. 66 (my italics).

⁴⁵ Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. 5: *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, in *CW*, vol. 23, pp. 134-5; cf. *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, pp. 309-10. Voegelin’s argument that modern ideologies would be unthinkable without the Reformation should not be taken to imply an endorsement of Roman Catholicism at the time of the Reformation, nor, alternatively an endorsement of the reformers. In his analysis of this great upheaval, Voegelin pointed out, “when a popular movement of mass relevance is forming in opposition to an institution, this formation is the definite proof that the institution has somehow failed in handling the problems entrusted to its care. . . . The formation of such a movement, however, is never a proof that the direction in which it is moving is endowed with any intrinsic value.” Voegelin, *History of Ideas*, vol. 4, *Renaissance and Reformation*, in *CW*, vol. 22, p. 134; cf. his critique of the Church in *History of Political Ideas* vol 6, in *CW* vol. 24, pp. 52-3.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Heilke, *Eric Voegelin: In Quest of Reality* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), pp. 91-123, for a detailed account of Voegelin’s work on the “People of God.”

with its continuation in the sect life of Holland, England and America,” but it is not limited to the Anabaptists. Voegelin analyzed the tracts of several individual writers,⁴⁷ and he linked them explicitly to modern ideological movements:

The transformation of the mystical symbol of perfection into a political program for ‘activists’ lies at the core of modern political mass movements. It is not confined to Christian sectarianism in politics in the narrow sense; the transformation remains a constant into the atheistic and anti-Christian political sects of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

In other words, Voegelin argued for a connection—if not of direct lineage then of recurrent patterns—between the first activist sectarian movements of the Reformation and the ideological mass movements of the twentieth century. To this extent, Voegelin thought that ideologies were a modern phenomenon. Their roots were not modern at all, but their “social relevance” was modern insofar as this presupposed the disintegration of Christianity at the dawn of the modern era.⁴⁹ And Voegelin saw concrete similarities between the outcomes of mystical activism and those of ideology: “the dictatorship of Cromwell in the wake of the revolution of the saints,” would be echoed by “the dictatorship of Robespierre and Napoleon in the wake of exuberant freedom in the French Revolution, [and] the dictatorship of Lenin and Stalin in the wake of the Communist revolution.”⁵⁰

Summarizing, then, Voegelin thought that the advent of Christianity as well as its unraveling as a spiritual and political force exacerbated what might otherwise have remained a culturally insignificant problem—that of spiritual rebellion against the limits of our nature. The problem of spiritual rebellion grew in size because Christianity—the “good news” of which is difficult to bear—spread so far; and because, having failed to meet the challenges of maintaining itself institutionally, it opened the door for rival sects to battle each other on the political plane and to dream political dreams. The final element in the surge of ideologies heading into the contemporary era was (and is) the rise of “scientism.”

Scientism is not mere science but a set of beliefs *about* science, particularly about its potential to transform the human condition. Voegelin was actually an accomplished student of modern science. Having picked up a copy of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity when it first appeared in 1919 (Voegelin was still in high school), he worked through it with a friend and was shocked by its simplicity: “We understood it perfectly well but could not believe that something so simple could arouse such a furor as a difficult new theory.”⁵¹ Voegelin was thus no critic of science *per se* and rather acknowledged its “rational core.” “If we have knowledge of causal relations we can form means-end relations; if we have the means we can achieve the end; hence knowledge in this sense is eminently useful.”⁵² But Voegelin thought that this “rational core” had over time acquired the character of “a cancerous growth.”⁵³ Science became scientism. Why? In part this was due to a doctrinal hardening of the scientific outlook under the pressure of the church: scientists “had to suffer from the persecutions of literalist [Christian] doctrinaires, . . . and the memories of the struggle are the

⁴⁷ Voegelin, *Renaissance and Reformation*, pp. 131-214.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁴⁹ See Voegelin, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, pp. 134-5.

⁵⁰ Voegelin, *Renaissance and Reformation*, p. 175.

⁵¹ Voegelin, *AR*, p. 37.

⁵² Voegelin “Origins of Scientism,” p. 189.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

solid ground on which the ideologue can take his stand.”⁵⁴ But also, scientism emerged through the very success of science and the “prestige effect” that this brought about. Science, particularly natural science, really had improved physical life on earth; and the thought naturally occurred that perhaps such improvements could be reproduced in every aspect of life. Thus Voegelin defined scientism in terms of three creedal assumptions: “(1) that the mathematized science of natural phenomena is a model science to which all other sciences ought to conform; (2) that all realms of being are accessible to the methods of the sciences of phenomena; and (3) that all reality that is not accessible to sciences of phenomena is either irrelevant or, in the more radical form of the dogma, illusionary.”⁵⁵ These three beliefs are maintained in a spirit of soaring optimism about the potential of science in all areas of life, but they in fact amount to a restriction of the horizon of science, such that an authentic science of human affairs is completely eclipsed by empirical studies on the model of natural science. Voegelin saw this clearly and suggested a memorable term to describe the narrowly scientific outlook: “We suggest the term ‘spiritual eunuchism’ for the designation of [these] personality traits, . . . as well as for the designation of the traits which a society acquires when this human type gains social ascendancy.” Voegelin went on to claim that the nineteenth century was simply unsurpassed in world history “as a period of rapid transformation of a civilization through the eunuch type, preparing the spiritual anarchy of the twentieth century.”⁵⁶

From Voegelin’s account of scientism, one can specify two ways in which this widespread attitude fed concrete ideologies. The first is the crippling effect it had on man’s understanding of the soul as a tension between two transcendent poles. The growth of science begins with a mere “underrating and neglect” for the life of spiritual longing and striving. It ends, though, in a colossal misunderstanding of the very terms (or, in Voegelin’s words, the “symbols”) by which the spiritual life has been described through the centuries. Words like “soul,” “God,” “divine,” “ground,” and “heaven,” do not refer to physical beings or locations (obviously), nor in the context of the spiritual quest do words like “love,” “hope,” and “faith” refer to mundane objects of orientation. These are rather designations for various stations in the spiritual movements of the soul towards its transcendent poles. But with the advent of scientism, such descriptors lose their meaning. Because the scientist takes seriously only the physical world amenable to his technique, all the symbols associated with the spiritual quest must be either rejected or transformed. Typically, they are transformed, Voegelin thought—hence his insistence on the first and second rules of the open soul mentioned above. Voegelin offered numerous terms for the illegitimate misinterpretation of spiritual symbols as material things: Whitehead’s “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” “reification,” “hypostatization” and “immanentization.”⁵⁷

The second way in which scientism feeds ideological activism is through the sense of power it engenders. Under its influence the belief spreads that there are no limits that cannot be overcome, that every problem can be scientifically solved. Voegelin thought that scientism encouraged people to recast their religious expectations into mundane possibilities, for instance, the hope of salvation

⁵⁴ Voegelin, “Immortality,” p. 75. Hence the commonplace ideological response to any and every challenge to science today: “Yes, but Galileo was once persecuted for arguing that the earth revolves around the sun!”

⁵⁵ Voegelin, “Origins of Scientism,” pp. 168-9

⁵⁶ Voegelin, “Origins of Scientism,” p. 194.

⁵⁷ For Voegelin’s invocation of Alfred North Whitehead, see “Immortality” p. 65; the other terms abound in his corpus, but see especially, Voegelin, “The Beginning and the Beyond,” in *CW*, vol. 28, p. 179, for reification and hypostatization; and see Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 186 for immanentization.

or heavenly paradise. Since hypostatized symbols such as “paradise” do not go away, but linger on as words with new meaning, they continue to attract human beings in the fashion of a dream that might someday be fulfilled. And scientism suggests the means. As Voegelin powerfully described it:

The technique by which the symbols of the dream are produced is well known. The shell of doctrine, empty of its engendering reality, is transformed by the *libido dominandi* into its ideological equivalent. The *contemptus mundi* is metamorphosed into the *exaltation mundi*; the City of God into the City of Man; the apocalyptic into the ideological millennium; the eschatological metastasis through divine action into the world-immanent metastasis through human action; . . . [and] the center from which the particular symbols receive their meaning is the transformation of human power over nature into a human power over salvation.⁵⁸

Voegelin goes on to say, bleakly, that some such transformation of religious symbols simply must occur for modern man. For, given the rejection of genuine fulfillment in a transcendent “beyond,” only two alternatives remain: either the creation of a dream-paradise on earth, or death in the hell of our own banality.⁵⁹

The dream of creating heaven on earth is accompanied by another scientific fantasy: that of altering the biological human to the point of godlike perfection. The “dream of creating the superman, the man-made being that will succeed the sorry creature of God’s making,”⁶⁰ has, it seems, become only more intense in the years since Voegelin’s death. The complete candor with which contemporary Liberals such as Alan Wolfe, for instance, speak “in praise of artifice” only confirms Voegelin’s sense that this obsession is found “not only in the totalitarian movements in the narrower sense, . . . but also in the so-called liberal or progressive movements.”⁶¹ “Should we,” Wolfe asks rhetorically, “try our best to live according to the limits placed upon us, whether those limits grow out of respect for God the Creator or nature the designer? Or do we have an obligation to take what nature offers to us and transform it for our purposes, using all those powers we have at our disposal?”⁶² Wolfe rejects the “limits argument” as more or less regressive, and he counsels those who think otherwise as follows: “Becoming so fearful of new advances in technology that we refuse to take steps that would alleviate human suffering represents a form of cruelty alien to liberalism’s promises of freedom and equality. We should never become so afraid of choice that we leave too much to chance.”⁶³ Voegelin, of course, adamantly opposed this type of pandering to the eunuch type. “Plain nonsense,” according to Voegelin, is “the idea that the nature of man can be abolished without abolishing man, or that the spiritual order can be taken out of existence without disordering existence. Any attempt at its realization can lead only to the self-destruction of a

⁵⁸ Voegelin, “Immortality,” p. 76.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77. The seeds of this theory were, amazingly, already in place in *Die politischen Religionen* (1938): “When God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods; when the symbols of transcendent religiosity are banned, new symbols develop from the inner-worldly language of science to take their place.” See, *CW*, vol. 23, p. 60.

⁶⁰ Voegelin, “Origins of Scientism,” p. 191.

⁶¹ Voegelin, “Origins of Scientism,” p. 190.

⁶² Alan Wolfe, *The Future of Liberalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 55.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 60. For an admirable attempt to temper such enthusiasm, see Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*. Unfortunately, Sandel’s resistance rests on an untenable foundation, a de-spiritualized notion that our nature is a “gift,” and therefore should be cherished not changed. Compare Voegelin’s analysis of the early Egyptian text in “Immortality.”

society.”⁶⁴ Voegelin thought that in retrospect, “the age of science will appear as the greatest power orgy in the history of mankind.”⁶⁵ And the cause is not science itself. The cause is rather the transformation of science into scientism, into a “terrorist’s dream of power over man, society and history.”⁶⁶

The three historical forces I have discussed here—the advent of Christianity, its political collapse, and the rise of scientism—are what Voegelin took to be essential for the birth of modern ideologies. Before turning to a brief discussion of some of ideology’s calamitous effects in the modern world, I should offer one caveat about my presentation of these three factors. For purposes of exposition, I have treated them in isolation; and to a certain extent that is justifiable by the chronological gap between, say, the advent of Christianity and its fragmentation into sects during the sixteenth century. But in fact such compartmentalization of causes does not do justice either to Voegelin’s understanding of these developments or to history itself. Christianity is born anew every day for new believers, and the struggle which the life of faith entails for Christians thus continues to have a potential impact in contemporary life. Moreover, the beginnings of the “new science” occur almost simultaneously with the fracturing of the Church so that, in Voegelin’s hands, these factors can and must be intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Thus it should not be surprising if, while Voegelin sometimes claims that the waning of faith in the West was caused (in part) by the birth of modern science, he also maintains that the growth of scientism was made possible by the waning of faith.⁶⁷ In Voegelin’s writing, as in reality, these forces worked together.

The Effects of Ideology

Voegelin did not spend much time, relatively speaking, describing the effects of twentieth-century ideological movements, since the destruction was there for all to see. An estimated eleven million people were killed during the Holocaust, six million of them Jews. The figures for Stalin are still contested, but twenty million is a conservative estimate. And World War II in general left fifty million people dead. It was all too obvious that the great ideologies had left human carnage and cultural ruin in their wake. Voegelin did, however, remark on some less obvious effects of ideologies, and the insights he offered still seem relevant today.

The most interesting effect was a politically perilous phenomenon Voegelin called “loss of common experience.” He argued that the life of spiritual openness to the divine ground, life within the permanent limits of the human condition, constitutes our “common humanity.” This just *is* what all men have in common. And this has implications for politics, because politics presupposes some degree of commonness.⁶⁸ If we lose sight of what we have in common, politics can be nothing but a tournament of individual wills. The problem with ideology in this light is that it substitutes for our common humanity a manufactured “system” or “second reality,” which is in fact not something we have in common because it is not even legitimate.⁶⁹ Voegelin could thus contrast the Greek *koinon*

⁶⁴ Voegelin “Origins of Scientism,” p. 190.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 191.

⁶⁶ Voegelin, “Immortality,” p. 76.

⁶⁷ Both causal claims are made in “The Origins of Scientism.”

⁶⁸ See e.g. Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 235: “the order of the life in community depends on *homonoia*, in the Aristotelian and Christian sense, that is, on the participation in the common *nous*.”

⁶⁹ Voegelin liked the term “second reality” to describe the ideological outlook. He adapted it from Robert Musil’s novel, *The Man without Qualities*. See Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, pp. 154, 239 and 243.

(common) with the Greek word *idiotes* (private individual, or, literally, idiot). “He who closes himself against what is common, or who revolts against it, removes himself from the public life of human community.” Voegelin continues:

Now it is possible . . . and it occurs all the time, that the *idiotes*—that is, the man estranged from the spirit—becomes the socially dominant figure. The public life of society is thus characterized not only by the spirit, but also through the possibility of estrangement from it. Between the extremes of the spiritually genuine public life and the disintegration of a society through the radical privatization of its members, lie the actual concrete societies with their complex field of tensions between spirit and estrangement. Every concrete society, therefore, has its own particular character of public life through which the genuineness or sickness of its spirit can be recognized.⁷⁰

This insight is part of Voegelin’s explanation of how Hitler came to power and managed to go about his wicked work without significant opposition from the citizenry. Why was there not a mass resistance? Voegelin’s answer was that German citizens, having become private in the profoundest sense because of ideology, no longer took an interest in politics (the realm of the common). They had simply lost sight of man’s common humanity. That something like this is indeed likely to have contributed to the chaos is corroborated by Hannah Arendt, who similarly explained Hitler’s success in terms of the loss of a genuinely public realm and the rise of the private—though Arendt did not describe the “public” in such spiritual terms.⁷¹

Another observation Voegelin made about the effects of ideology (again, one that seems readily applicable today) was that ideologues make irrational policy decisions. His particular example in the *New Science of Politics* focused on the waging of war, but he also cast the problem in general terms. Consider how germane his insights are to our current world of budget deficits, health care fiascos and loss of our consulate in Libya.

The identification of dream and reality as a matter of principle has practical results which may appear strange but can hardly be considered surprising. The critical exploration of cause and effect is prohibited [by ideological distortions]; and consequently the rational coordination of means and ends in politics is impossible. Gnostic societies and their leaders will recognize dangers to their existence when they develop, but such dangers will not be met by appropriate actions in the world of reality. They will rather be met by magic operations in the dream world, such as . . . declarations of intention, resolutions, appeals to the opinion of mankind, branding enemies as aggressors, [etc.]. The intellectual and moral corruption which expresses itself in the aggregate of such magic operations may pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum, as we experience it in our time in the Western Crisis.⁷²

Serious crises are not met with the appropriate responses because ideological politicians take their bearings from the wishful thinking of the dream world rather than from the realities of the human condition. Thus Voegelin did not limit himself to observing the death toll caused by ideologies. He

⁷⁰ Voegelin, “The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era,” in *CW*, vol. 12, p. 7.

⁷¹ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, esp. ch. 2.

⁷² Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, p. 227.

looked behind those atrocities for some underlying causes and saw that lack of “commonness” as well as irrational policy formation each had an important role to play.

Voegelin’s Critical Reception and Abiding Importance

Voegelin’s theory, then, stated in the simplest terms was that the ideological mass movements of the twentieth century (some of which are still with us today) such as Communism, Fascism, Nazism, Progressivism and some forms of Liberalism and Conservatism can be understood as forms of “unbalanced consciousness” in which the “open soul” is artificially closed through spiritual rebellion. The modern manifestations of spiritual rebellion differ from more ancient examples first in their “social relevance,” which is to say, the degree to which they are capable of attracting adherents, and in their lust for power over (a) political territory, (b) the natural world, and (c) human biology. As such, ideology is a modern phenomenon with ancient roots. Voegelin thus felt confident in saying that the twentieth century ideologies were secularized versions of the age-old problem of spiritual rebellion.

Criticism of Voegelin’s thesis has centered on three points, the first of which I believe can be dispensed with fairly easily. During a certain phase of his research (unfortunately a highly visible phase) Voegelin was so struck by the resemblances of certain aspects of twentieth century ideology to the Christian heresy of Gnosticism that he tended during this time to treat ideology, and indeed modernity itself, as a form of Gnosticism.⁷³ He was especially struck by similarities between the apocalyptic speculations of the twelfth-century mystic, Joachim of Fiore, and the historical speculations of the Nazis. Both divided history into a series of ages culminating in a perfect Third Realm (*Dritte Reich*).⁷⁴ But Voegelin’s “Gnosticism thesis” ran into serious difficulties, not least of which was that, with the discovery of the Coptic Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi in 1945 and its subsequent translation beginning in 1956, it became clear that for the classical Gnostics the goal was not to transform the world but to *reject* it. Were the real Gnostics, then, not “gnostic”?

The criticism can be dealt with fairly easily, though Voegelin never, regrettably, made the appropriate correction. He should have abandoned the use of the term Gnosticism or at least retracted the way he had collapsed so many apocalyptic thinkers and groups into the gnostic category.⁷⁵ That he never made such adjustments might be explained by his “habits of scholarly work”—he rarely modified his work or even polished it up for publication once he had finished with it.⁷⁶ But in the case of the Gnosticism thesis, this led to unnecessary confusion. Significantly, Voegelin did eventually realize that the term Gnosticism was misleading. In his later work, he spoke less of Gnosticism and more of “hermeticism,” “alchemy” and “magic” as antecedents to the ideologue’s pseudo-methods of transforming the world. And he even admitted in the late 1970s that he would “probably not use the word Gnosticism if he were starting over again.”⁷⁷ I therefore

⁷³ See, e.g. his essay “Gnostic Politics” from 1952 in *CW*, vol. 10, pp. 223-40; *New Science of Politics*, ch. 4; and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*; consider also the many passages on “gnosis” that permeate *Order and History*, all of which appear in the indexes to those volumes.

⁷⁴ See *New Science of Politics*, p. 112-113.

⁷⁵ See Klaus Vondung, “Eric Voegelin, the Crisis of Western Civilization, and the Apocalypse,” in *International Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight and G. L. Price (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p. 119.

⁷⁶ Manfred Henningsen, “Editor’s Introduction,” *CW*, vol. 5, p. 14.

⁷⁷ Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), p. 200.

agree with Michael Franz that it is best to “make a clean break with the term,” and use more precise language.⁷⁸ As we do so, however, I think it important to remember that an essential feature of modern ideology is the pretense to knowledge about the future and how to change it. If this pseudo-knowledge is not labeled, “gnosis,” then it needs another name.

A more challenging criticism of Voegelin’s theory of ideology concerns its vagueness on the matter of historical causality. I touched on this briefly above, but let me now reintroduce the issue: When Voegelin posited a link between modern ideology and such examples of “unbalanced consciousness” as the ecstatic faith of Isaiah, the hubristic revolt of Prometheus, the millenarian expectations of the Joachites, or the political fantasies of the Protestant “People of God,” was he arguing for an actual genealogical connection or something else? And if it is something else, then would this not be too vague to count as science?⁷⁹ That a genealogical connection might, in some cases be conceivable, has fascinated some of Voegelin’s followers. Eugene Webb, while admitting that Voegelin was not always arguing for a strict genealogy nevertheless thought he may have frequently had one in mind: “[Voegelin] has not felt obliged to prove that Marx knew of Joachim’s thought, because anyone who has studied Marx can be expected to know that he was an admirer of Thomas Münzer . . . and that Münzer in turn considered himself a follower of Joachim.”⁸⁰ But it is clear that a genealogy cannot and should not be established in all of Voegelin’s cases. A link between the book of Isaiah and Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, for instance, is untenable.

But this objection, while warranted by Voegelin’s own lack of clarity on the point in such works as *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*,⁸¹ turns out to be misplaced and, indeed, serves to obscure one of the most important methodological insights of Voegelin’s whole career. I say it is misplaced because Voegelin himself addressed the issue—though nowhere (to my knowledge) as clearly as in his unpublished *History of Political Ideas*—when he first tried to draw a line from the seventh-century Paulician movement in Syria to the rise of Socialism in the West:

The drawing of this genealogical line immediately suggests the difficulties that must beset a closer investigation of the process, particularly in its early phases. The movement, up to the sixteenth century, is an undercurrent in civilizational history. It is essentially a movement in the strict sense of a religious movement in the souls of single individuals and of such followers as they may be able to gather. These movements do not easily crystallize into a rational system of ideas that could be transmitted as a body of doctrine, in the manner in which a body of Aristotelian writings could be transmitted to the Arabs and the Western scholastics. It is very difficult, therefore, to establish whether one can speak of a “history” of the movements in a more rigorous sense at all. They are clearly related to each other through the centuries by the general structure of their sentiments and attitudes; but whether this affinity is always due to an actual historical influence from one wave of the movement to the next, or whether the experiences that supply the drive of the movements

⁷⁸ Franz, *The Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, p. 19.

⁷⁹ This is the criticism of Bernard Yack, *The Longing for Total Revolution: Philosophic Sources of Social Discontent from Rousseau to Marx and Nietzsche* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 10-18.

⁸⁰ Webb, *Eric Voegelin*, p. 201-2.

⁸¹ “Lack of clarity” may be too charitable, since Voegelin says quite plainly that modern ideology “has its origins . . . in Christianity itself, deriving from components that were suppressed as heretical by the universal church” (*New Science of Politics*, p. 175.)

spring up anew every time, without close determination by preceding similar movements, is largely an open question.⁸²

Here Voegelin himself raised the question that would later be thrown back at him in the form of a criticism. His answer: it was “an open question.” In part the question could not be closed because Voegelin himself had not reached closure in his research on the matter and maybe never would. Because the movements in question were uniformly *rebel* movements, the “physical destruction of the adherents and of their literary productions leaves us with the reports of the adversaries as the only sources over vast stretches of the process.”⁸³

But anyone who knows Voegelin’s corpus and his biography even minimally well should recognize in the passage quoted above another, more fundamental, reason why he would have willingly left the question of genealogical connections “open.” In fact, the passage perfectly foreshadows the methodological insight that would eventually lead Voegelin to abandon his *History of Political Ideas* after composing eight volumes (more than four thousand pages).⁸⁴ He abandoned that project because he realized that political “ideas” do not move through history in tidy genealogical chains, as if the historian could or should spend his time tracing the links. Of course one idea *might* lead to another in the way that Locke’s “state of nature” derives from Hobbes “natural condition of mankind,” but this is neither the only nor the most interesting way that political ideas emerge. In their most potent forms, political ideas emerge from the ways human beings react to their experience of the human condition; and because this condition is in many ways permanent, so too is the possibility of certain classes of reactions occurring independently across time and space. This is what Voegelin would come to understand as the “equivalence of symbols.”⁸⁵ Thus, in light of this insight, Voegelin *did not need* to supply concrete genealogical links. What he needed to do instead was to catalog the types of movements and trace them back to their engendering experiences—the project he actually undertook in his magisterial *Order and History*.

A final criticism of Voegelin’s theory of ideology comes from within the circle of his own admirers and, I think, should be taken with the utmost seriousness. It is that he failed to make proper distinctions between the most virulent ideologies with which he grew up and other, less harmful ones—between, for example, Nazism and Liberalism. In fact, Voegelin sometimes seemed to go out of his way to assert that movements such as Liberalism and Progressivism were not exempt from the depravities of ideological politics.⁸⁶ And in his famous review of Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, he wrote as if every corner of the Western world had been contaminated by the plague that had destroyed his native Germany:

The putrefaction of Western civilization, as it were, has released a cadaveric poison spreading its infection through the body of humanity. What no religious leader, no philosopher, no imperial conqueror of the past has achieved—to create a community of

⁸² Voegelin, *Renaissance and Reformation*, p. 139.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Heilke, *Eric Voegelin*, pp. 91-123, also draws attention to the passage quoted above from the *History of Political Ideas* and stresses the relevance of Voegelin’s methodological shift in general to the problem raised by Yack.

⁸⁵ Voegelin, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History,” in *CW* vol. 12, pp. 115-133.

⁸⁶ See for instance Voegelin, “Prospects of Western Civilization,” in *CW*, vol. 11, p. 117; “Origins of Scientism,” p. 487; and *Anamnesis* pp. 145-6.

mankind by creating a common concern for all men—has now been realized through the community of suffering under the earthwide expansion of Western foulness.⁸⁷

For Michael Franz, who offers a helpful corrective on this score, “it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that . . . ideological consciousness varies widely among the set of movements” Voegelin studied, and that his “work is poorer for the lack of distinctions that would do justice to the extent of this variation.”⁸⁸

This problem becomes even more troubling in light of Voegelin’s assumptions about the consequences of ideology—the most extreme of which seem radically less apt for Liberalism than for Nazism and Communism. Because to change the human condition and the nature of man is largely impossible, the effort itself leads to “the self-destruction of society,” to the nightmare of aggressive wars, concentration camps and murders.⁸⁹ That Voegelin regarded murder as an essential element of ideology was one reason for his career-long hatred of it: “I have an aversion to killing people for the fun of it,” he explained in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, and such killing was essential to “National Socialism and other ideologies.”⁹⁰ But, at the same time, Voegelin knew that Liberalism was less violent than other ideologies and that, especially in its Anglo-American form, was capable of remarkable resistance to ideological politics through its long tradition of “common sense.”⁹¹ So while his tendency was to condemn ideological politics *in toto* as ultimately destructive, he did recognize differences of type and of cultural conditions.

But before we rush to exempt Liberalism, Progressivism and even Conservatism from the full force of Voegelin’s critique, we might want to think again. To be sure, the forms of murder and societal self-destruction would have to look quite different in Liberal and totalitarian regimes, if they were to be found in Liberal regimes at all. But are they, in fact, right under our nose? Could the fifty-two million abortions that were performed in the United States since the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 have something to do with an ideological revolt against the limits of the human condition, with “the dream of power over man, society and history,” with the gradual withering away of a spiritual sensibility that might recognize more in human beings than just matter? I would be surprised if a better analysis of the motivations behind American murder on so vast a scale (compare the holocaust figures above) could be found than the basic framework offered by Voegelin.

So too with “societal destruction.” True, we are not rounding up dissidents and throwing them in jail or undertaking aggressive foreign policy initiatives that are likely to land us in world war. But, at the same time, we are living in an age in which the Internal Revenue Service targets political enemies and subjects them to what amounts to high “fines” for holding conservative views; and we have seen terrible consequences come from the patently ideological belief that every country around the world has a “right to democratic government,” even if they must be forced to free. Most of all, on the matter of societal destruction, we are witness to a problem with liberal democracies that stems directly from ideological causes: our financial deficits have swelled to obscene sizes and are simply not sustainable. We seem to have a hard time saying “No” to any program that promises to make

⁸⁷ Voegelin, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” p. 15.

⁸⁸ Franz, *The Politics of Spiritual Revolt*, p. 130.

⁸⁹ Voegelin, “Origins of Scientism,” p. 190.

⁹⁰ Voegelin, *AR*, p. 46.

⁹¹ Voegelin, “Liberalism and Its History,” p. 512; *Anamnesis*, p. 213.

the human condition better. We fund them all. And yet, since the problems of the human condition, including inequality and poverty, cannot be finally solved, there seems no end to the amount of money it would require to “solve” them. This looks to me like ideological irrationality and “self-destruction of society.”

The previous paragraph is meant merely to be suggestive. It is no substitute for a real analysis of American politics through the lens of a critical concept of ideology such as Voegelin supplied. Such an analysis is possible, I believe, but needs its own space to be done. This brings me to a closing reflection on the abiding importance of Eric Voegelin’s work on ideology.⁹²

The academic disputes over Voegelin’s presentation of Gnosticism, over the question of establishing genealogical links between one form of spiritual revolt and another, and over other aspects of his scholarship are certainly worthwhile and understandable as scholarly pursuits, but they should not distract us from the relevance of Voegelin’s work to our present political situation. To a large extent, the academic debates center on matters of history. And I do not want to deny that history matters when it comes to understanding the present. Indeed, Voegelin’s basic strategy was to thrust a historical argument into the teeth of the present—the argument that the dominant political movements of Western modernity derive from heretical Christian sects. Unfortunately, that argument proved hard to make historically. The word “derive” happened to be too strong. However, in the process of pursuing this argument—searching for evidence and clarifying the actual processes of historical change in the West—Voegelin produced two conceptual apparatuses that are of permanent value to anyone interested in ideology. One is his account of the healthy soul with its posture of non-dogmatic openness to transcendent reality. The other is his account of the various ways in which human beings bridle under the weight of the human condition and attempt to escape it. The healthy “type” and the ideological “types” are put on display in a manner every bit as powerful as Plato’s analysis of soul-types in book 8 of his *Republic*. But Voegelin’s analysis went further. It was adapted to our present situation—a religiously pluralistic and yet increasingly secularized age, obsessed with the powers of science to affect our world. Voegelin often described himself as a Plato for our times, and the description is apt. Ultimately, the value of Voegelin’s work for present-day political life lies not in specific historical claims about Gnosticism, but in his ability, on the basis of his philosophical anthropology and his account of spiritual revolt to say, “*Don’t do this!*” His counsel carries great weight, resting as it does, on an impressive body of research and on his personal experiences of ideological destruction. All we have to do is heed his advice.

⁹² Federici, *Eric Voegelin*, pp.183-190, discusses seven areas in which Voegelin made a lasting contribution. My discussion is limited to the topic of ideology.