

VOEGELIN'S CRITIQUE OF IDEOLOGY

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(Presented by Elizabeth Corey)

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My husband David Corey and I are writing a book called *Political Philosophy against Ideology*, and a significant portion of the book will be devoted to Voegelin. As this audience knows well, a critique of ideology is central to Voegelin's political philosophy, and we want to help keep his valuable insights alive. Especially important, it seems to us, is the success with which Voegelin defended the classical and (to some extent) Christian anthropology and demonstrated how this could be used as a critical standard by which to judge ideological systems. And the fact that he defended this anthropology not as a particular metaphysical view—something unavoidably contestable that one might “take” or “leave”—but rather as a collection of fundamental experiences, noetically apperceived, seems to us of utmost importance. Noetic insights cannot be demonstrated in the form of a proof; they cannot be “falsified” in the manner of a Popperian experiment. And yet they may, for all that, be true. Indeed noetic insights supply the starting point for all scientific knowledge.

So Voegelin will figure prominently in our work, and what we'd like to do here is to sketch out the arguments we intend to make about him. We've asked ourselves: if one wanted to communicate Voegelin's career-long engagement with ideology to a non-specialist audience, where would one begin? How would one proceed? And we came up with something like the following outline. We're interested to know whether anyone here thinks we should add, subtract or otherwise change anything.

BIOGRAPHICAL BEGINNING

We've thought it best to begin in a biographical manner, using the *Autobiographical Reflections* to describe Voegelin's encounters with mass political movements as a young man,

and using “The Remembrance of Things Past” to recount Voegelin’s first steps in thinking critically about ideology. Voegelin wondered: how do I know that ideologies are distortions? Where and how did I come to be conscious of a broader horizon in myself, a horizon which reveals instantly the reductivism of ideology? Also in a biographical manner, we plan to mention the way Voegelin searched in vain among the reigning political scientific schools for tools to criticize ideology. What Voegelin wanted was a theory of consciousness that could scientifically validate what he experienced in his own consciousness. If he could find something like this, he would be able to speak authoritatively against ideology. But he, of course, would not find this in the reigning paradigms of political science. He would have to work out his own theory of consciousness.

THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Thus we turn next to Voegelin’s “theory of consciousness” as it developed in conversation with Alfred Schütz against the backdrop of Husserl’s theory of consciousness. Husserl’s theory was inadequate because it focused too narrowly on sense perception. Voegelin’s theory, as we see it, has four essential aspects. Without going into any further detail, let me just say what these are: first, the “fundamental experiences” that animate the soul to wonder—for instance the sense that we are not self-created and do not carry the meaning of our existence within ourselves. Second is the account of the soul’s order, which Voegelin recovered largely from Plato and Aristotle. This includes the parts of the soul and also the soul’s place in the totality of being. Here, the experience of participation in the *metaxy* is of central importance. Third is Voegelin’s view of the “limits” of the human condition. For instance, the poles of the *metaxy* cannot be treated as material objects in the *metaxy* (hypostasized), and so on. There are several such limits. And finally we discuss the “mood” in which such limits are received.

This last aspect of the theory of consciousness is absolutely crucial for thinking about ideology. The human condition has radical limits, and humans do not feel perfectly comfortable (to say the least). But it is not “ideological” to feel dissatisfaction or to desire something more perfect than what we have. Indeed such feelings as disquiet, anxiety, frustration and even alienation are, according Voegelin, normal.¹ “Man is in deadly anguish,” writes Voegelin, “because he takes life seriously and cannot bear existence without meaning.”² For reflection on the limits of the human condition to give rise to ideology, a certain “mood” must be present.

What is this mood? It is the mood not only of alienation but of revolt. Ideology involves the active *revolt* against existential truth and the effort to construct a different world. Voegelin designates this mood as “pneumopathological,” a term he found in Schelling. It is the feeling of “estrangement from the spirit” so intense that it entails a willful closing of the soul to the transcendent.³

A WORD TO THE SKEPTIC

After outlining the four aspects of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness, we raise the question: Why should anyone believe Voegelin? What about those who would dismiss him on the grounds that “he has his view of consciousness, while I have mine.” The question is legitimate (though somewhat overplayed by our current generation). But happily Voegelin himself took that question extremely seriously, and to my mind, he *answered* it. He did so through his account (borrowed from Aristotle) of the way *nous* works. *Nous*—a word which can refer either to the highest element in the human soul that grasps general insights, or to the divine

¹ Voegelin traces the *language* of alienation to the Stoics, for instance, and he traces the bare *experience* of alienation as far back as an anonymous Egyptian text from 2000 BC; but neither the Egyptian nor the Stoic was an ideologue. See the “Dispute of a Man, Who Contemplates Suicide, With His Soul,” in “Immortality: Experience and Symbol,” *CW* 12, p. 58.

² *Ibid.* p. 59.

³ See “The German University and German Society,” in *CW* 12, pp. 5-6.

One that is the source of Being—was a major part of classical anthropology that we’ve lost sight of today. The importance of it lay in the fact that it explained how humans come to know of all kinds of things that cannot be proven. Noetic insight and deductive reasoning (i.e., proof) stand opposite each other as if they represent two sides of a Gothic arch. Nous reasons upward on one side of the arch—reasoning from particular experiences to universal insights. Deductive reasoning works its way down the other side, moving from universals (e.g., All men are mortal) to a particular again (Socrates is a man). The upshot? You can prove that Socrates is a man because you know the universal. But you cannot prove that all men are mortal. All you can do is point to the experiences that lead one to make that intuitive leap.

Now in terms of the pesky but (again) legitimate question: “why should I believe your theory of consciousness, Mr. Voegelin?” The answer is that it is arrived at noetically. Thus there can be no “proof” of it, but there can be a demonstration. The demonstration is: “look and see if this is not the case.” Of course noetic insights can sometimes be wrong; we can make rash generalizations. But these are gradually corrected over time in the light of further experience, and one of the strengths of Voegelin’s analysis is, again, that it draws upon millennia of experience.

WHAT IS IDEOLOGY?

After defending Voegelin’s approach methodologically in this way, we turn to his analysis of ideology. What is ideology according to Voegelin? Again, see if you think anything should be added here, but what we find essential is the following.

(1) Ideology is Modern

Ideology is a strictly modern phenomenon according to Voegelin. And that’s because the mood that generates it develops out of two historical events. One is Christianity, the other is modern technology. Speaking very generally here, Christianity alone supplies the philosophy of

history that degenerates into ideological historical speculation. Christianity offers a narrative of salvation—albeit not one that will occur in this world, but salvation nonetheless—and it’s this salvation narrative that gets reworked, through immanentization and speculative retelling, into the ideological constructs of self-salvation in time. And why does Christian eschatology degenerate into ideological speculation? The answer must include the fact that Christianity “dedivinized” the classical world, and that such a dedivinized world seems to lack meaning. Voegelin points out that the life of faith that takes the place of pagan religion demands courage and stamina, and not everyone can bear it. Also, the answer must include the fact that the Christian symbols relating to the narrative of salvation tended over time to become doctrinal and hypostasized (treated as material entities). And this led to the possibility of someone declaring them meaningless, untrue or “dead.” Thus did Christianity pave the way for modern ideologies, and I think Voegelin would say that Christianity was one of the necessary preconditions for ideology. No Christianity, no ideology.

But it was not only Christianity. Modern technology also plays a crucial role here because it creates a sense of enthusiasm about our power. It gives man the sense that no limits really contain us, that every obstacle can be overcome.

[T]he ideological revolt against the older type of doctrine derives . . . the better part of its strength from the contemporaneous experience of power to be gained over nature through the use of science and reason. Ideology is a commensal of modern science, drawing both its pathos and aggressiveness on the conflicts of scientists with church and state.⁴

Thus it seems that Christianity *combined* with modern technology constitutes the deadly combination. Dissatisfied with the limits of the human condition and equipped with tremendous technological power, we become giddy about the possibilities, and it occurs to us to “revolt”

⁴ “Immortality,” p. 75.

against the limits of the human condition by trying to fix things ourselves. Something like this seems to be Voegelin's view.

(2) Ideology Involves Historical Speculation

If that's all correct, then we can say something more about Voegelin's understanding of ideology, which is that it necessarily involves a view of history. So Voegelin, in one of those rare moments when he offers something approximating a definition, says: "The conventionally so-called ideologies are constructions of history which interpret the doctrinal mode of truth as a phase of human consciousness, now to be superseded by a new phase that will be the highest as well as the last one in history."⁵ This comes at the tail end of a discussion of the way Christian symbols degenerate into doctrine, and Voegelin has people like Feuerbach, Freud, Jung, Marx and Comte in mind as examples of thinkers who reinterpret the dead symbols as "projections" of the world-immanent consciousness of man.

But the crucial point here is that ideology is not mere projection-theory; it's also, necessarily, a philosophy of history. The earlier phases of history are now reinterpreted as benighted. The present and future is defined by clarity about the immanent nature of man and his power to transform his world through technology.

This essential element of ideology—its historical element—is what led Voegelin to analyze it in terms of "Gnosticism." Ideology is like Gnosticism because it claims to have special knowledge (*gnosis*) about the way to salvation. Moreover, it resembles Gnosticism in viewing the human condition as we know it as something awful, a curse or a prison, from which one must escape. However, Voegelin's use of Gnosticism as a tool for analyzing ideologies gives rise to a question. (And we really don't know the answer to this, so any help would be appreciated). Did Voegelin view the ideological mass movements of the 20th century as *analogous* to Gnosticism

⁵ Ibid. p. 69.

or as a *form of Gnosticism*? Of course, Voegelin could not have regarded all Gnosticism as ideological. Ideology is modern, Gnosticism originates in antiquity. But could he have regarded modern ideology as a late form of Gnosticism? Voegelin's efforts to trace an historical line from figures such as Joachim of Fiore forward certainly gives readers this impression. But in some places, Voegelin treats Gnostic speculation and ideological speculation as slightly different things.⁶

Our hunch is that while Voegelin thought ideology resembled Gnosticism in several respects, he did not think the precise genealogical path from ancient Gnosticism to modern ideology really mattered. It didn't matter because the experiences that underlie the Gnostic reaction to the world are perennial. And when you combine these with hypostasized symbols and modern technology, the ideological result is possible, whether it follows seamlessly from earlier Gnosticism or not.

(3) Ideology is not Modernity Itself

Another point we'd make about Voegelin's understanding of ideology is a significant qualification. We've said so far that ideology is distinctly modern, deriving its inspiration from Christianity combined with technology; and that it necessarily entails a view of history. But though ideology and modernity go together, Voegelin did *not* hold the view that modernity and ideology were identical. In other words, unlike many Christian apologists today who view modernity as an ideology plain and simple, Voegelin saw good things in modernity and thus separated it from ideology. His ambivalence is captured in a brilliant passage from his essay 1967 essay, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," which reads as follows:

⁶ For instance, "Immortality," p. 81: The complex of symbols representing man's experience of time and timelessness varies historically in terms of relative weight any particular thinker puts on one or another of the symbols. "The accents may fall on the consequences of immortality for the ordering of existence in earthly life, as in classical ethics. The tension . . . may snap, so that the injustice of social order will appear irreparable in the present *aion* and just order is to be expected only from a metastasis of the world through divine intervention, as in apocalyptic; or it may be deformed by the libidinous attempt at pulling the timeless into identity with time, as in ideological speculations on politics and history. [Or] the cosmos may be considered a demonic prison, so that the purpose of human action will be reduced to finding the means of escape from it, as in gnosis."

And with the seventeenth century begins the incredible spectaculum of modernity—both fascinating and nauseating, grandiose and vulgar, exhilarating and depressing, tragic and grotesque--with its apocalyptic enthusiasm for building new worlds that will be old tomorrow, at the expense of old worlds that were new yesterday; with its destructive wars and revolutions spaced by temporary stabilizations on ever lower levels of spiritual and intellectual order through natural law, enlightened self-interest, a balance of powers, a balance of profits, the survival of the fittest, and the fear of atomic annihilation in a fit of fitness; with its ideological dogmas piled on top of the ecclesiastic and sectarian ones and its resistant skepticism that throws them all equally on the garbage heap of opinion; with its great systems built on untenable premises and its shrewd suspicions that the premises are indeed untenable and therefore must never be rationally discussed; with the result, in our time, of having unified mankind into a global madhouse bursting with stupendous vitality.

Yes, ideology and modernity go together, but they are not identical. It seems possible to speak of a non-ideological modern existence. We'd value any comments our audience may have on that point—do you think that's right or wrong as an interpretation of Voegelin's view? If it's right, it would distinguish Voegelin markedly (and favorably in our view) from all those critics who are inclined to condemn modernity without recognizing the very real benefits it has delivered.

(4) Second Reality, Systemization and the Prohibition of Questions

The final point we would make about ideology is that it involves the creation of a “second reality.” This is a term Voegelin borrowed from Robert Musil.

When the first reality, which is the expression of spiritual substance, cannot be developed because of the absence of such substance, in its place there will develop an artificial

reality—that is, a reality that has the external form of reality but which is not substantially supported by the spirit, which finds its representation on the plane of politics in the ideological mass movements.

Voegelin goes on to describe the origin of the second reality in the refusal of apperception.

When elevated to a system we get the “world view.” And in order to sustain belief in the false world view, we get the “prohibition of questions” which Voegelin described in his short book, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*.

POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Those are the main components of Voegelin’s view of ideology as we see it: ideology is a modern revolt against the limits of the human condition, a revolt in which man strives for his own world-immanent salvation through historical speculation. It involves the creation of a second reality, works this up into a systematic view of the world, politics and history, and prohibits the questions that would expose it as a fraud. From here, our chapter would turn to the political consequences of ideological systems. So let me say a brief word about what those might include.

The problem with ideological politics – actual policies that stem from the second reality of self-salvific historical speculation – is that it *doesn’t work*. But why doesn’t it work? A few things should be mentioned: loss of common experience, bad policy decisions, and of course mass murder.

The most abstract and philosophical of these is the first (loss of common experience); but it would seem that Voegelin has sensed something important. He argues that the life of spiritual openness to the divine ground, a life that recognizes the permanent limits of the human

condition, constitutes our “common humanity.” This just is what all men have in common.⁷ And this has implications for politics, because politics presupposes some degree of commonness. 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 true. Voegelin can thus contrast the Greek *koinon* (common) with the Greek word *idiotes* (private individual, or, quite literally, idiot). “He who closes himself against what is common, or who revolts against it, removes himself from the public life of human community. He becomes thereby a private man, or in the language of Heraclitus, an *idiotes*.”⁸ 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 of sickness of its spirit can be recognized.⁹

This quotation, which comes from “The German University and German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era,” is part of Voegelin’s explanation of how Hitler came to power and managed to go about his wicked work without significant protest from the citizenry. Why

⁷ See e.g. *New Science of Politics*, p. 180: “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.

⁸ “The German University and German Society,” p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*

was there not a mass resistance? Voegelin's answer is 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) because they'd simply lost sight of man's common humanity. That something like this must 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, of course, did not understand the “public” in spiritual terms, as Voegelin uniquely did.¹⁰

So ideology has political implications because it destroys our commonness and turns us into idiots (so to speak). That's a heady idea. But other effects of ideology are not so heady. Voegelin points out in the *New Science* that ideologues necessarily make bad policy decisions. His particular example focuses on the waging of war, but he puts things in a general way at one point. Consider how accurate Voegelin is. In fact, think about our deficit crisis today and see if these words don't speak to us. Here's Voegelin:

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 co-ordination of means and ends in politics is impossible. Gnostic societies and their leaders will recognize dangers to their existence when they develop [*read: insolvency*], 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 [*read: stimulus spending and construction of light rail systems*] . . . 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

¹⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*.

pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum, as we experience it in our time in the Western Crisis.¹¹

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. I think this general point holds true in many aspects of politics today, and so Voegelin’s analysis remains enlightening.

And then come the murders. We do not live in a country in which domestic mass murder is committed in the name of political progress. Or do we? One does not want to overlook the abortion numbers. Nor should we dismiss entirely the lone ideologue who walks into a movie theater or a school and opens fire in the name of some twisted cause. I also think the kind of character assassination that occurs daily in politics is an imitative form of ideological murder, and one never knows when things will get worse. For his part, Voegelin regarded murder as an essential element of ideology. In fact he says in the *Autobiographical Reflections* that one of the chief reasons he rejected the ideologies of his youth was that he had “an aversion to killing people for the fun of it.”¹² Not so for ideologues, as Voegelin learned.

I’ll close now with a quick remark about the enduring power of Voegelin’s analysis for our time. One of the things Voegelin always regarded as concomitant with ideological politics was the corruption of language. In fact he thought it so central that he was moved to say in the *Autobiographical Reflections* that “if *anything* is characteristic of ideologies and ideological thinkers, it is the destruction of language, sometimes on the level of intellectual jargon of a high level of complication, sometimes on a vulgarian level.” He’s right, of course, and examples abound. But Voegelin has done his readers a tremendous service on this score. He has not only

¹¹ *New Science*, p. 170.

¹² P. 46.

identified the corruption of language as something to watch out for, he's analyzed some of the most seminal linguistic corruptions of our time and explained precisely how they operate. Beyond this, and perhaps more importantly, he has rejuvenated and in many cases created anew a set symbols that accurately reflect, once again, the fundamental experiences of the human condition. Voegelin's terminology is not easy (it's a frequent complaint among novices), but it does precisely what it needs to do. It avoids ideologically ruined words and gives readers a chance to undergo personally the journey of the mind through the stations of the Greek and Christian ascent. And finally, like Plato, Voegelin assembled a powerful *critical* vocabulary that could be used to combat ideology in the trenches. Terms of this kind include narcissist, idiot, intellectual pimp, swindler, magician, Gnostic, cultural illiterate, dreamer, sleeper, second reality, hypostatization, immanentization and so on. Voegelin seems to have realized that if ideology is going to take the fight to the level of language, then the resisters of ideology had better have an arsenal of words for fighting back. And when one finishes reading Voegelin's work against ideology, one feels well equipped for the fight.