

Voegelin and Oakeshott on Hobbes:

Gnostic but not Rationalist?

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Eric Voegelin and Michael Oakeshott are famous for similar descriptions of a particular aspect of modernity that Voegelin terms **gnosticism** and Oakeshott calls **rationalism**. A common impulse informs both gnostics and rationalists: the desire to possess complete knowledge and thereby to transform the world. Gnostics and rationalists share many common traits, such as their desire to escape the anxieties of worldly existence and their reliance on ideologies as shortcuts for solving problems. Given these similar theoretical frameworks, one might expect Oakeshott and Voegelin to approach certain modern philosophers from the same vantage point. However, it will come as no surprise to readers of both thinkers that they emphatically do not. While Voegelin considers almost all the major political philosophers at some length in his corpus, Oakeshott considers only a select few in explicit detail. And since it was Hobbes to whom he gave the most attention, so it is Hobbes who provides the best **case study** for examining the thought of both Voegelin and Oakeshott. This essay first discusses gnosticism and rationalism in turn, before examining the reasons for Voegelin's perception of Hobbes as a gnostic and Oakeshott's view that Hobbes was no rationalist. Finally, it suggests several ways in which their differing views of Hobbes point to differences in Voegelin's and Oakeshott's conceptions of the philosopher—what exactly reason can accomplish, how reason ought to be oriented, and the limits of philosophical reflection.

It is necessary at the outset to describe exactly what is meant by the terms **gnosticism** and **rationalism** in this context, since both terms are used by other writers in various ways. For present purposes, gnosticism and rationalism may best be understood as technical terms meant to describe a specific and circumscribed set of phenomena, as will be discussed in the paragraphs to follow. Thus, for example, although Voegelin's term **gnostic** has its historical roots in Christian gnosticism, his use of this term considerably broadens its Christian meaning. Gnosticism is no longer solely a religious phenomenon but has moved into the secular realm of modern politics. For Oakeshott, likewise, **rationalist** is a pejorative term to be sure; but his criticism of rationalism is not meant to imply that one ought to abandon reason or ground thought and activity in something like **intuition**. Rather, Oakeshott's criticism of **rationalism** combats a quite *specific* use (or misuse) of reason.

GNOSTICISM

Voegelin describes gnosticism in two distinct ways: historically and psychologically. He sets out his conception of the historical emergence of gnosticism most explicitly in *The New Science of Politics*, where he locates the origin of modern gnostic phenomena in the person of a twelfth-century monk, Joachim of Flora. It was Joachim who first conceptualized human history as a series of three successive stages, each superseding the other and culminating in a mystical and final **Third Realm**. This periodization of history is the first symbol Voegelin identifies as an essential part of gnosticism. Following closely upon this is the appearance of the **leader**, who will emerge to guide all men toward the perfection of the final realm. The third symbol Voegelin examines is the **prophet**, whose task it is to make the inevitable course of history intelligible to all. And the final gnostic symbol identified here is the **brotherhood of autonomous persons** which will emerge to populate this final realm. No longer in need of grace, these autonomous persons attempt to perfect themselves and

society through their own efforts. These four symbols—the Third Realm, the leader, the prophet, and the brotherhood of autonomous persons—comprise the crucial parts of Voegelin's historical account of gnosticism as it has emerged since Joachim.

This account, however, is only one of the two ways in which Voegelin describes gnosticism; for his broad, historical description cannot take account of the particular psychological characteristics of the gnostic thinker himself. Thus in *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* Voegelin takes another approach which might be termed psychological, identifying six essential characteristics of the gnostic. The first and most fundamental characteristic is a dissatisfaction with the world as it is and a desire to change it. The gnostic sees the world as a prison from which an escape is desirable; he is alienated from this world and wishes for an alternative reality. Second, the gnostic places an extremely high value on human knowledge. His approach to knowing is not the love of wisdom of classical philosophy, but rather the desire to wield knowledge as a weapon and intentionally to change human circumstances. Such a view assumes (wrongly, Voegelin insists) that one can step out of experience and view the world as a whole. The third characteristic of the gnostic thinker is his construction of second realities in which skeptical questions are prohibited. In such a second reality, the gnostic surrounds himself with those who approve his view of the world and who take part in his attempts to change the structure of reality. Fourth, the gnostic believes that the world is poorly organized. Not unlike the first characteristic (a fundamental dissatisfaction with the world), such an assessment implicitly questions the goodness of God and his creation. Fifth, the gnostic believes salvation is possible through his own efforts. No longer need he depend upon a providential God; he sees the way to salvation on his own. By the same token, the Christian virtues of faith and hope are no longer required. And finally, the sixth characteristic of the gnostic thinker is his tendency to construct a formula for his own (and the world's) salvation. Seeing himself as a prophet, he will show the way to the final realm of fulfillment.

The crux of Voegelin's account of modern gnosticism is his contention that the gnostic has misapprehended the structure of reality; and, furthermore, that this misapprehension is not honest but deliberate. Because the gnostic lacks the strength to exist in the *metaxy* (which is the middle ground of human existence between the divine and material realms) and to endure the anxiety that comes with faith in a transcendent order, he denies transcendence altogether and attempts to save himself.

RATIONALISM

The notion that life presents a problem to be solved a predicament, as it were has much in common with Oakeshott's conception of rationalism. The emphasis throughout Oakeshott's famous essay, "Rationalism in Politics," is on the tendency of the rationalist to conceive of experience as a series of crises that call out for solution. Like the gnostic, the rationalist sees experience as fundamentally flawed, and he attempts to change a world which appears to him unsatisfactory.

Oakeshott locates the origins of rationalism in the thought of Descartes and Bacon, the latter of whom he blames for developing a corrupting technique of inquiry. Bacon's technique requires that knowledge begin with a purge of the mind and end only with conclusions that can be demonstrably proven by means of certain propositions. The talent or individuality of the inquirer is accordingly downplayed; the knowledge that Bacon values is to be attainable by all who seek it. Oakeshott sees this as the central epistemological assumption behind modern rationalism: one can (and should) abandon habit, custom and tradition as ways of knowing, since these are imprecise and uncertain. One should depend only on the sort of knowledge gained through a clearly formulated method of inquiry. But, Oakeshott argues, this is a misunderstanding of the sources of knowledge. There can be no clean slate in human experience, since we *always* depend on knowledge acquired

in diverse ways. Moreover, the personality of the inquirer cannot help but influence the study of a given subject. Thus Bacon has misrepresented the character of intellectual inquiry.

Unfortunately, this misrepresentation is widespread in the modern world. Oakeshott describes it clearly by making a distinction between what he terms **technical** and **practical** knowledge. Technical knowledge is the knowledge of the rulebook, the formulated procedure expressed in propositions and instructions for the novice (e.g., **correspondence courses** and **do-it yourself** manuals). No doubt such knowledge is valuable (a convenient way learning to sheetrock one's attic), but it is only one type of knowledge. A major problem with rationalism is that it mistakes the part for the whole, by supposing that *everything* can be learned through technical instruction.

The more important (and more often ignored) type of knowledge is what Oakeshott calls **practical knowledge**. Practical knowledge is the knowledge of the apprentice, gained only by observation of a master or **in politics** of a tradition of conduct. Practical knowledge is neither formulated in a rulebook nor is it susceptible to propositions. Though it relies on technical knowledge (e.g., one cannot learn how to play the piano *musically* without first being able to play scales) it adds something essential to this knowledge. What it adds is not more technical mastery but rather **style**, **prowess** or **expertness**. Practical knowledge is thus **having a feel** for one's pursuit or being able to adapt on the spur of the moment to any new circumstance. It is, in Aristotelian terms, a *hexis* for any given activity. Rationalists tend to dislike this **practical** conception of knowledge and activity, because it is hard to attain and there is no guarantee that one will be able to attain it. It is mysterious and egalitarian, and most certainly does not conform to any sort of preconceived method. The rationalist eschews this knowledge, preferring the shortcut that is provided by the adoption of an ideology. **Better to appeal to certain principles!** declares the rationalist, **than to orient oneself by**

one's own experience. Arguing against this sort of thinking, Oakeshott suggests that true moral education comes only in the context of an unselfconscious moral tradition.¹ [1]

Oakeshott's rationalist, therefore, may be described as follows: he favors the clean slate approach to knowledge, believes wholeheartedly in technical rather than practical knowledge, approaches experience as a series of problems to be solved, and relies on ideology as a shortcut to knowing how to conduct himself. In a word, as Oakeshott puts it, his cast of mind is gnostic, for he grasps at certainty as a way of overcoming his anxiety about his place in the world. Oakeshott's rationalism and Voegelin's gnosticism obviously have a great deal in common. The question, therefore, with which the remainder of this essay will be concerned is this: Why should Oakeshott and Voegelin have reached such radically different understandings of Hobbes? In other words, why does Voegelin see Hobbes as the quintessential gnostic while Oakeshott sees him as no rationalist at all?

VOEGELIN'S HOBBS

Voegelin's classification of Hobbes as a gnostic thinker seems intuitively correct. Hobbes, after all, is the creator of a system (that favorite pursuit of gnostic thinkers), and he goes so far as to suggest that this system can solve the problems of human nature.² [2] With his typical rhetorical style and power Voegelin thus makes a strong case for Hobbes as a gnostic, and it is worth recounting here the major components of his argument. His argument centers around one major idea: that Hobbes has collapsed the tension between immanent and transcendent being. Voegelin analyzes this collapse on two distinct levels: that of the individual and society. Given the anthropological principle that the

1 [1] Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," in *Rationalism in Politics*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 41.

2 [2] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Washington: Regnery, 1997), 71.

city is man writ large, the individual and society are of course inextricably linked. Yet it is worthwhile to clarify Voegelin's argument by considering each of these in turn.

The conception of a human being as composed of different types of being (ranging from apeirontic depth to the desire for godliness) is well known to all readers of Voegelin.³ [3] It follows from this account of human nature that some parts of the psyche are oriented toward transcendence while others are oriented toward immanent being. In a complete person all parts are constantly present and all are vital to the health of the psyche. If any part of the soul is ignored or denied, then the person suffers from various forms of deficiency and incompleteness.

According to Voegelin, Hobbes has consciously and deliberately ignored the higher realms of spirit in man by describing the soul only in terms of its passions. Passions require governance by reason, says Voegelin, and by constant recourse to transcendent reality. But Hobbes gives no such account of the soul. Hobbes moreover appears to Voegelin to have neglected the extent to which the passions are the source of corruption in man. Because [Hobbes] did not . . . interpret passion as the source of corruption in the life of the spirit, . . . he could not interpret the nature of man from the vantage point of the maximum of differentiation through the experiences of transcendence.⁴ [4] Furthermore, in focusing on passions Hobbes has chosen to ignore the objects of those passions and has thus placed himself in opposition to classic and Christian moral philosophy.⁵ [5] In other words, Voegelin believes that Hobbes has perhaps consciously misrepresented the nature of human beings. It might have been possible for Hobbes to save himself in Voegelin's eyes had he argued that the

3 [3] Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 114.

4 [4] Ibid., 180.

5 [5] Ibid., 180.

passions ought to be rightly ordered (though this begs the question of how passions could order themselves without the aid of a governing faculty of reason). But Voegelin finds that Hobbes has made no attempt at orienting passions rightly; in fact, he has perverted the classic Augustinian distinction between *amor sui* and *amor dei*. Voegelin observes that Hobbes has completely removed the *amor dei* and relied for his psychology on the *amor sui*, in his language the self-conceit or pride of the individual, alone (NSP 184). Love of self in the desire to avoid death, in the hope of preeminence, in the never-ceasing wish for more is made the organizing principle of human personality. Hobbes has thus turned the natural order of things upside down.

The argument next moves to the level of society, where Voegelin finds the same corruption that existed in Hobbes's account of the individual. A fully differentiated society, on Voegelin's account, is conscious of itself as existing in a tension between divine and human reality. Members of this society know or ought to know that they will not find their fulfillment solely in their existence as citizens but rather in another realm altogether. By its very nature Christianity is a truth of the soul that lies *beyond* immanent existence; fulfillment comes not in this world but in another. Hobbes's project of constructing a civil theology, however, has collapsed the transcendent truth of divine reality into the immanent realm of political activity. He has attempted to eliminate the tension of life in this in-between state, but has succeeded only in eliminating the transcendent realm itself.

Specifically, Voegelin argues that Hobbes eliminates transcendence because he attempts to show that the immanent (civil law) can and should contain the transcendent (the law of nature). Or, put another way, for Hobbes the law of nature derives its force over men *only secondarily* by being God-given law. Its primary force comes from the fact that it is promulgated by the sovereign. Voegelin summarizes Hobbes's argument as follows: [the] law of nature, finally, is not a law actually

governing human existence before the men, in whom it lives as a disposition toward peace, have followed its precept by combining in a civil society under a public representative, the sovereign.⁶ [6] Thus divine law is made subject to a human ruler, all opportunity for public debate is eliminated, and the potentially positive tension caused by the conflict between divine and human law is removed. Hobbes has reverted back to the compactness of a society in which the distinction between immanent and transcendent is not recognized, denying the existence of a tension between the truth of the soul and the truth of society.⁷ [7] As Voegelin reads Hobbes, civil theology now exhausts theology itself. This is the crucial element of Voegelin's interpretation of Hobbes as a gnostic. With this idea . . . of abolishing the tensions of history by the spreading of a new truth, Hobbes reveals his own Gnostic intentions; the attempt at freezing history into an everlasting constitution is an instance of the general class of Gnostic attempts at freezing history into an everlasting final realm on this earth.⁸ [8]

Voegelin's analysis is persuasive, but it raises two questions. First, although Voegelin attributes to Hobbes a number of the psychological characteristics of the gnostic thinker (i.e., the desire to construct a system, the hope of achieving a permanent solution for political problems), he does not mention the fact that Hobbes's project does not fit particularly well with the historical account of gnosticism. Hobbes does not, for example, speak of a three-stage progression of history, nor of a prophet or leader; and there is no brotherhood of autonomous persons in Hobbes's thought.⁹ [9] And second, although he is quick to condemn Hobbes for trying to construct civil society

6 [6] Ibid., 154.

7 [7] Ibid., 160.

8 [8] Ibid., 161.

9 [9] The argument could be made that the Leviathan functions as the leader in Hobbes's thought. But this seems to confuse the character of the type of leader to which Voegelin refers.

on the basis of passions, Voegelin does not ask *why* Hobbes does this. He assumes the worst: that Hobbes wants deliberately to eliminate all that is good in classical and Christian thought. But it seems clear, as Oakeshott points out, that Hobbes's motives could have been good or, at the very least, not deliberately destructive. There are elements of Voegelin's analysis that seem to anticipate the outcome before the analysis itself is undertaken; and the question of Hobbes's motives is one of these.

OAKESHOTT'S HOBBS

It would seem, then, that Oakeshott has set himself a difficult task in making the case that Hobbes is not a rationalist. Oakeshott's case, however, centers around a claim about the nature of knowledge. Perhaps the most important reason that Hobbes is not, for Oakeshott, a rationalist is his skepticism and his belief in the limitedness of philosophy. One recalls that for the rationalist, reason is the answer to every problem, and the world can be explained and fixed with only the reason that resides in the rationalist himself. Nothing, of course, could be further from Hobbes's conception of reason. For while it is true that Hobbes uses reason to explain the causes of civil association and the necessary conditions for its survival, Hobbes's reason has little in common with that of Oakeshott's rationalist. It will be instructive, therefore, to distinguish these two types of reason: rationalist and Hobbesian.

As noted above, reason for the rationalist is assumed to have almost magical powers. It is available to all alike, requires little in the way of prior education, and is proposed as the solution to all problems. Rationalism in politics is the politics of ideology, of the rulebook, of the politically inexperienced. But reason for Hobbes is something quite different than this. Reason merely

The gnostic leader's mandate is to lead others bravely into an as-yet unforeseen future while Hobbes's monarch functions more as an arbiter concerned to maintain the status quo.

investigates causes and effects and does not concern itself with ♦final causes♦ because, asks Hobbes, how could one know these? Its aim, when turned to theorizing politics, is merely to provide the ♦minimum conditions♦ for the establishment and maintenance of civil association. In this endeavor, Oakeshott observes that Hobbes is in good company; for his aspiration is not unlike Augustine♦s.¹⁰ [10] Civil association itself does not provide felicity or salvation; it is merely a ♦negative gift♦ which takes away some of the impediments that tend to inhibit an individual♦s search for fulfillment.¹¹ [11] In Oakeshott♦s view Hobbes, like Augustine, aims merely at peace♦not, like the rationalist, at an immanent realm of perfection.

Given his conception of reason as the investigation of cause and effect, it follows that things which do not lend themselves to this formulation are excluded from the realm of reason. And this, of course, excludes theology. One cannot assert that God is ♦caused♦ nor say exactly what the ♦effects♦ of God♦s existence are, at least not in the normal language of cause and effect. When one speaks of God one moves outside the realm of nature into the ♦supernatural♦ or ♦transcendent♦ or ♦divine♦. Whatever one chooses to call this realm, it is not part of philosophy as Hobbes understands it. Yet this does not mean that Hobbes denies its *existence*; for as Oakeshott reminds us, Hobbes denies only its ♦rationality♦.¹² [12] We can have, says Oakeshott quoting Hobbes, ♦no natural knowledge of man♦s estate after death.¹³ [13] Philosophy, in Hobbes♦s view, ♦excludes the consideration of the universe as a whole, things infinite, things eternal, final causes and things known only by divine

10 [10] Michael Oakeshott, ♦Introduction to *Leviathan*,♦ in *Hobbes on Civil Association* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1975), 79.

11 [11] *Ibid.*, 79.

12 [12] *Ibid.*, 25.

13 [13] *Ibid.*, 75.

grace or revelation.¹⁴ [14] But this only means that natural knowledge of these things is limited, not that the things themselves do not exist or that we cannot apprehend them in other ways (meditation, prayer, intuition). Now it seems evident that meditation and prayer are not Hobbes's particular gifts or inclinations, though his construction of civil association leaves a significant realm of freedom for those who do wish to pursue such intimations of divinity. But Hobbes clearly believes and here he differs from Voegelin that transcendent reality has little bearing on the practical political arrangements of a society. These must rest on a surer and more universally accepted foundation. The crux of this argument about Hobbes's skepticism is that he does not flatly deny the existence of God or transcendent reality; he merely questions our ability to know such things by means of philosophy. He is a skeptic; not a dogmatic atheist.¹⁵ [15] His civil association does not deny the possibility of faith, but does render this faith an individual matter. Oakeshott seems to agree with this assessment of things in his own philosophical writings, since in general he focuses not on divine experience but on human affairs and institutions. As he observes in *On Human Conduct*, the theorist easily understands that nothing will come of questioning everything at the same time . . . he has a heavenly home, but he is in no hurry to reach it. If he is concerned to theorize moral conduct or civil association he must forswear metaphysics.¹⁶ [16] And yet perhaps the question of the relationship between metaphysics and politics is somewhat more complicated than Oakeshott implies here. As noted in the final section of this

14 [14] Ibid., 18.

15 [15] The question of Hobbes's position on religion is, of course, much debated. The dimensions of this debate are well summarized in Ronald Hepburn's essay, "Hobbes on the Knowledge of God" in *Hobbes and Rousseau: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 85-108.

16 [16] Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 25.

essay, this question of the relationship between transcendence and politics gets at the core of the philosophical differences between Voegelin and Oakeshott.

SOME TOPICS CONSIDERED

The foregoing pages have suggested that the primary reasons that Oakeshott and Voegelin read Hobbes differently are because of their quite different understandings of philosophy and transcendence. Voegelin thinks that Hobbes has ignored the fundamental structure of reality by collapsing immanent and transcendent and is therefore a gnostic, while Oakeshott sees Hobbes's reason as skeptical and his project as limited, and so he is not a rationalist. But such observations beg the questions of exactly *how* and *why* the two philosophers differ so dramatically. What is it about transcendence that makes it essential for Voegelin's political philosophy but not for Oakeshott's? Do Voegelin and Oakeshott conceive of transcendence in the same way? If not, how do they differ? And why does Oakeshott believe that philosophy and practice are separate realms while Voegelin argues that practice *must* be guided by a proper philosophical understanding? These are only some of the crucial questions that a comparison of Oakeshott and Voegelin brings to the fore. And while the present essay cannot, of course, treat any of these differences in appropriate detail, it is worthwhile to suggest the basic outlines of some of them as well as why they are provocative starting points for future discussion.

APPROACHES TO PHILOSOPHY: TELEOLOGY AND CRISIS

Oakeshott's and Voegelin's conflicting analyses of Hobbes illuminate a fundamental difference in their views about the nature and function of philosophy. For while gnosticism and rationalism are similar constructs, their general philosophical projects differ significantly. Oakeshott tends to consider the world in more circumscribed segments, as in his discussion of modes of

experience. His analyses focus on particular levels of being, (to borrow a Voegelinian phrase) although Oakeshott does not in general distinguish levels in a vertical hierarchy like Voegelin's. Voegelin, on the other hand, tends to relate all phenomena to the measuring stick of the entire realm of experience, ranging from immanent to transcendent. Indeed not to do so is, for Voegelin, a violation of the order of being which permeates all of existence. In simplest terms, Oakeshott focuses on particular problems: political activity, poetry, or education, without feeling the need constantly to relate these to an overarching and governing purpose. Voegelin, on the other hand, suggests that this purpose must always and everywhere be recognized.

To put this point another way, the two philosophers differ over the question of teleology. Oakeshott has often been chided for following Hobbes in throwing out the *summum bonum*, for to do so is seen as relativistic and perverse. The *summum bonum*, according to Voegelin, is the essential condition of rationality itself. In his discussion of Hobbes Voegelin writes the following: "Now, Hobbes knows that human action can be considered rational only if it is oriented beyond all intermediate stages of ends and means to a last end, this same *summum bonum* . . . if there is no *summum bonum*, however, there is no point of orientation that can endow human activity with rationality."¹⁷ [17] The question this raises, however, is twofold. First, does Hobbes know that human action is rational only if it is oriented to a last end? The possible answers are (a) that he does know this and purposely ignores it (as Voegelin assumes) or (b) that he knows no such thing. If he knows no such thing, we must consider a second question: if there are other ways of orienting one's action besides the *summum bonum*, what would these be? And what exactly is Hobbes's (and, for that matter, Oakeshott's) problem with the idea of a *telos*?

¹⁷ [17] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 70.

These questions, of course, require a far more careful treatment than this paper can give. But one answer immediately suggests itself. It relates, once again, to the thought of Hobbes, and particularly to his skepticism. The problem with teleology, for Hobbes and Oakeshott alike, lies in our ability to know what our *summum bonum* consists in. While there are any number of goods that one might aim at in a more intermediate fashion, postulating a final good for man lies beyond the scope of philosophy for both Hobbes and Oakeshott. Is our final good the life of pure contemplation? Or is it the life of the religious mystic? Or might it be a simple life lived in devotion to one's family? Selfless devotion to one's country? Any of these goods is good, but they are vastly different, and each requires distinct choices and sacrifices. Neither Oakeshott nor Hobbes can postulate one of these alternatives as the *summum bonum*, nor would either philosopher find much use in talking abstractly about the good without specifying what it is for a concrete human being. Thus they conceive of rationality as something other than orienting oneself toward a far-off good; and so it is possible for Hobbes *not* to have known that action can be considered rational only if it is oriented . . . to a last end.^{18 [18]} Voegelin certainly believes that action must be oriented this way, but it seems to remain a rather more open question than he allows. In simplest terms, the core question is the following:

How can we know our *summum bonum*, and if we know it, how exactly does it help us in choosing our actions?

But although contrasting approaches to the question of teleology are important in understanding Voegelin and Oakeshott's philosophical differences, there is also another important contrast that has more to do with style than content. In his introduction to *Leviathan*, Oakeshott reminds his readers that one would do well to consider the temperament, cast of mind, and style of

18 [18] Ibid.

writing of a philosopher as a means of better understanding him.¹⁹ [19] And this holds true for Oakeshott and Voegelin, too. It is a simple point: Voegelin sees philosophy as therapy for a disordered age, while Oakeshott sees it as a pursuit that can offer us no *direct* guide to conduct. Voegelin observes that the gnostic impulse may pervade a society with the weird, ghostly atmosphere of a lunatic asylum, as we experience it in our time in the Western crisis.²⁰ [20] The gnostic's attempt at world destruction will not destroy the world, but will only increase the disorder in society.²¹ [21] Philosophy's task, therefore, is to combat this disorder. Voegelin's work is a forceful and direct response to the atrocities of the twentieth century, and he finds the roots of these atrocities in long-established intellectual currents.

Oakeshott, on the other hand, rarely speaks of crisis. His style is detached, urbane, skeptical and some would say, ultimately unsatisfying, since he offers us no solution to the problem of modernity. But then again Oakeshott does not necessarily see modernity as a problem, and this distinguishes him from Voegelin and others of his generation. Oakeshott is not, however, uncritical, nor does he accept without question the values of modern society; but Oakeshott understands himself as a philosopher, and he understands philosophy itself to stand apart from politics, even as it considers politics a subject worthy of examination. Ultimately the political philosopher, in Oakeshott's view, can do little to affect the politics of his own time; and if one wants to have an effect, he should be a politician, not a philosopher. This is, admittedly, a very unusual view, and it has appeared to many critics as if it unduly discounts the position of the philosopher. But here it is possible

19 [19] Michael Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, 9.

20 [20] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 170.

21 [21] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 9.

to see clearly why he and Voegelin are at odds: Voegelin argues throughout his corpus that a proper understanding of philosophy is essential for understanding politics; and that without the right philosophical grounding society is in grave danger. Oakeshott, on the other hand, categorically separates philosophy and politics; and one should remember that Oakeshott offers us no solution to rationalism, for to do so would be to concede the battle itself. Indeed, the problem/solution construct is largely absent in Oakeshott's thought, whereas it is central to Voegelin's.

WHAT HOBBS KNEW

As has been implied in the paragraphs above, Oakeshott and Voegelin disagree in their assessments about Hobbes's intentions. As Oakeshott reads Hobbes, he is a true skeptic: with Hobbes the prime mover was doubt.²² [22] His conception of reason/philosophy is limited to the categories of cause and effect, and because of this he excludes a number of realms of experience. Hobbes does not consider transcendence as part of philosophy, *not* because he is certain it doesn't exist, but because he doubts his own ability to apprehend it. So much for Oakeshott's view.

Voegelin, however, sees things quite differently, as is evident from his use of language. He regards Hobbes as a thinker who has *willfully* misrepresented his own knowledge; he accuses Hobbes of saying things that he knows to be untrue. In his discussion of Hobbes's views on teleology Voegelin asserts that Hobbes *knows* that human action can be considered rational [only if is oriented toward the *summum bonum*].²³ [23] Elsewhere, Voegelin attributes to Hobbes a very clear intentionality in deciding the course his civil philosophy would take. He solved the conflict [between private

22 [22] Michael Oakeshott, Introduction to *Leviathan*, 11.

23 [23] Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, 70, italics mine.

individuals and public order] by *deciding* that there was no public truth except the law of peace and concord in a society . . . In order to support his *decision*, Hobbes used the following argument . . .²⁴

[24] Now Voegelin may or may not be right in attributing to Hobbes a moment of conscious decision in which he oriented the whole of his philosophy. But what is transparent in Voegelin's use of the language of decision is that Voegelin finds Hobbes unphilosophical, at the very least. Decision is no part of philosophy as either Voegelin or Oakeshott understands it (with the exception perhaps of the original decision to submit to philosophical reflection). Philosophy is the examination of postulates (Oakeshott) or of the order of being (Voegelin), but it dictates its own subject matter and cannot be decided upon. Voegelin's use of the language of moral choice to describe Hobbes implies that Hobbes knew exactly what he was doing, knew it was wrong, and chose it anyway. This reading of Hobbes discounts the skepticism that Oakeshott attributes to him.

TRANSCENDENCE IN POLITICS

The question of transcendent experience in politics is, of course, an extraordinarily complex one; and it is also closely tied to the question of teleology, since on many accounts man's *telos* is his reconciliation with God. Voegelin's conception of transcendence is that it somehow permeates all of political activity, as explained in his famous principle of completeness.²⁵ [25] And on an even more immediate, individual level, an experience of transcendence lies at the heart of human experience itself, according to Voegelin: Man experiences himself as tending beyond his human imperfection toward the perfection of the divine ground . . . any construction of man as a world-immanent entity will

24 [24] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 153, italics mine.

25 [25] Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 114.

destroy the meaning of existence, because it deprives man of his specific humanity.²⁶ [26] Now it is hard to argue with this formulation; for certainly most human beings perceive that they are not complete in themselves, and that there exist realms of being of which they are only dimly aware. What is less clear is exactly *how* this transcendence ought to structure political existence in the world. It would seem to be possible to admit transcendence as an essential part of human life without making it a part of all political theorizing. It is important to recall that for Hobbes and Oakeshott political activity is one of the *least* transcendent of human undertakings: it provides the minimum conditions for peace so that people may be free to seek transcendence where they may find it. How ought one to reconcile the directly conflicting views of Voegelin, on the one hand, and Oakeshott, on the other? The question may also be put this way: how exactly does Voegelin expect transcendence to structure the life of a society, when transcendence can only be experienced by individuals?

Perhaps a starting point for thinking about this problem is to observe that Oakeshott and Voegelin come to political philosophy with quite different assumptions. Voegelin's conception of politics might be called *broad* and Oakeshott's *narrow*, in that when Voegelin speaks of political activity he seems to mean far more than attending to the institutional arrangements of a society. Political life for Voegelin seems to consist not only in politics as it is usually understood but also in moral and religious activity of all sorts. Indeed, as Voegelin writes in the introduction to *The New Science of Politics*, his analysis of politics is an exploration of the symbols by which political societies interpret themselves as representatives of a transcendent truth.²⁷ [27] Oakeshott, on the other hand, sees no such function for politics. The civil condition, in his view, is something that exists for

26 [26] Ibid., 103-104

27 [27] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 1.

human beings in their particularly human situation; the philosopher's task is to discern the mode of intelligent relationship it postulates.²⁸ [28] In designating a limited scope for politics Oakeshott appears particularly modern, particularly in contrast to Voegelin's expansive, classical conception. But the crucial questions regarding Oakeshott and Hobbes in this respect would have to be, first, *why* they limit politics in the way they do, and second, whether or not this limitation eliminates transcendence altogether from human life or, instead, somehow recasts it.

This essay began by describing a similarity between Voegelin and Oakeshott (their constructs of gnosticism and rationalism) but it has ended by observing that the two philosophers differ in significant ways. And yet it is worth pointing out their similarities on a number of questions: they object to the excesses of the modern scientific method in politics and find positivism a deeply flawed approach to inquiry; they are both fundamentally conservative; and they are both devoted to the life of philosophy. In other words, they share a sense of having emerged from a common tradition; and while their responses to the world are different they do speak directly to the same issues. The present essay makes no pretense of having answered the sorts of major questions it has posed: i.e., how do Oakeshott and Voegelin differ philosophically? And how do they understand transcendent experience and its place in politics? But this preliminary inquiry does function as a way of getting at the substantive philosophical issues that distinguish these two philosophers. As Oakeshott observes, Hobbes's philosophy has always aroused strong feelings in his readers; and the investigation of those strong feelings tends to reveal as much about those readers as it does about Hobbes.

²⁸ [28] Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 114.