

Voegelin and Aristotle on Noesis

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Since the philosopher Eric Voegelin has come under criticism as of late for his use of politics to "stamp out manifestations of deformed consciousness," the time may be right to reflect on the motivations and limits of Voegelin's work.¹ The limits, in particular, are sometimes difficult to keep in view while Voegelin is expounding upon the totality of being, the myriad dimensions of human consciousness, and the nature of order in personal, social and historical existence. But in fact Voegelin's work is limited—more than his magisterial tone might suggest—to offering general insights into the structure of being as opposed to offering a specifically ethical or political science. That, at any rate, is what I hope to make clear in the pages that follow. And if I am right in this regard, a consequent fact will be that Voegelin stands unfairly accused if he is accused of using politics for much of anything at all; for while his investigation of the structure of being may supply grounds for a philosophical critique of various ideological programs, it certainly does not itself supply a starting point for political action. Another way of saying this is that Voegelin does not offer his readers a substantive ethical or political theory—one that, like Aristotle's, considers the question of human action in particular with an eye to being useful.² Now to seasoned readers of Voegelin this limit to his work may seem obvious, but no one to my knowledge has bothered to discuss it in writing. And yet it is well worth clarifying, not only because an awareness of it is essential to understanding Voegelin's own philosophical project, but also because the very fact of this limit raises important questions about the possibility of relating Voegelin's insights to a more substantive ethical-political theory.

¹ For this and other criticisms see Shadia B. Drury, "Augustinian Radical Transcendence: Source of Political Excess," *Humanitas* 12, no. 2 (1999): 27-45, especially p. 43.

² On the intended usefulness of Aristotle's ethics, see e.g. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 11.2: "The purpose of the present study is not, as it is in other inquiries, the attainment of theoretical knowledge: we are not conducting this inquiry in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, else there would be no advantage in studying it. For that reason, it becomes necessary to examine the problem of actions, and to ask how they are to be performed. For, as we have said, the actions determine what kind of characteristics are developed" (translation Ostwald). Of course, it is questionable in what sense even Aristotle's ethical theorizing can be said to supply a starting point for action. As Stephen G. Salkever argues, theory is by nature abstract while sound actions and policies must account for present conditions; therefore theory would seem incapable of directly determining the actions or policies we should take. See *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), especially pp. 135-150. But, at the same time, Aristotle's ethical and political theorizing does seem to me to succeed in its goal of enlightening its audience with respect to actions in a way that Voegelin's theorizing does not.

There are numerous ways to bring the limits of Voegelin's work into clearer view, but I shall do so by comparing Voegelin's understanding of *noesis* to that of Aristotle. *Noesis* is a type of intellectual activity, a seeing or apperception performed by the cognitive faculty referred to by the ancients as *nous*. *Noesis* was considered by many ancient thinkers including both Plato and Aristotle to be the most god-like human activity and the cause of our consciousness of order.³ In Voegelin's work, *nous* and *noesis* are crucially important symbols, for Voegelin was interested in the problem of rediscovering and defending human order against the ever-increasing disorder of his age. Thus Voegelin adopted the notion of *noesis* from the ancients as a way of symbolizing the human experience of order. *Noesis* figures prominently in almost all areas of Voegelin's work from his theory of consciousness to his studies in history and his analyses of modern politics. And yet when compared to Aristotle's treatment of *noesis*, Voegelin's treatment appears distinctly limited. No one to my knowledge has pointed this out. But a careful comparison of Aristotle and Voegelin on the notion of *noesis* proves to be a valuable exercise indeed, for when the limits of Voegelinian *noesis* come into view, the limits of his political science in general come into view as well.⁴ Voegelin on *Noesis*

³Literature on noesis and nous in Plato and Aristotle.

⁴Work on Voegelin on noesis

During his attempts in the 1930s and 1940s to shed interpretive light upon the mass political movements of communism, fascism, national socialism and racism, Voegelin came to realize not only that "the center of a philosophy of politics had to be a theory of consciousness," but also that the theories of consciousness supplied by the dominant paradigms of modern sociology were not up to the task. When in the course of my readings in the history of ideas I had to raise the question why important thinkers like Comte or Marx refuse to apperceive what they apperceive quite well-why they expressly prohibit anybody to ask questions concerning the sectors of reality they have excluded from their personal horizon-why they want to imprison themselves in their restricted horizon and to dogmatize their prison reality as a universal truth-and why they want to lock up all mankind in the prison of their making-my formidable school equipment did not provide an answer, though obviously an answer was needed if one wanted to understand the mass movements that threatened, and still threaten, to engulf Western civilization in their political prison culture.⁵ It was clear to Voegelin at this time that the ideological mass movements, as well as the academic paradigms of interpretation, had in some way reduced or deformed the horizons of human consciousness. What was needed was a fuller account of consciousness, the nascent form of which Voegelin had already begun to discern in himself. Voegelin's effort to clarify and to properly articulate his own "larger horizon" of consciousness would thus inevitably lead him to the ancient philosophers, for in their own attempt to articulate the right order of the soul and of society against the disorder of their own age, they created language symbols "by far surpassing in exactness and luminosity" modern symbols of consciousness.' Two such symbols, the central ones for Voegelin's purposes, were *nous* and *noesis*.

⁵ Eric Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, ed. and trans. Gerhart Niemeyer

(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), pp. 3-4. 4

As symbols for the divine-human encounter, the terms *nous* and *noesis* date back at least to the pre-Socratics Parmenides and Anaxagoras. In his investigations into their thought, Voegelin found that each thinker emphasized different aspects of noetic experience. In Parmenides, Voegelin writes, *nous* refers to "man's faculty of ascending to the vision of being" in contrast to *logos*, which refers to "the faculty of analyzing the content of the vision." Parmenides thus emphasizes the epistemological side of *noesis*-the human side as opposed to the divine; but the engendering experience was nevertheless so intense for him, according to Voegelin, that it led to the fusion of *nous* and being, of *noein* and *einai*, into one true reality. In Anaxagoras, on the other hand, *nous* refers not so much to a faculty of the mind as to the divine source of intelligible order in the cosmos. Anaxagoras thus places the accent upon the ontological rather than the epistemological side of the experience. Voegelin's emphasis of the subtle differences between the Parmenidean and Anaxagorean formulations of *nous* serves both to supply a sense of the development of the concept as well as to set the stage for the more holistic Platonic-Aristotelian account: "the experiences of intellectual apperception and of intelligible structure to be apperceived ... were ready now to merge in the discovery of the human psyche as the sensorium of the divine *action* [cause or source] and at the same time as the site of its formative manifestation."⁸ Voegelin's treatment of *nous* in Plato and Aristotle tends to emphasize similarities

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 5.

⁷ Eric Voegelin, "Reason: the Classic Experience," in *Anamnesis*, pp. 94-5. *Ibid.* 5

⁸ *Ibid*

much more than differences: both thinkers understand *nous* to be at once human and divine, a faculty of reason and the divine ground of all being with the power to pull or attract the intellect (*periagoge*, *helkein*). But Voegelin does stress one important difference between the two thinkers: the mode of expressing noetic experience in Plato is on the one hand allegorical-one thinks of the allegory of the cave where "the prisoner is *moved by the unknown force* to turn around (*periagoge*) and to begin his ascent to the light"⁹-and on the other hand mytho-historical-Plato "developed in the *Laws* a triadic symbolism of history in which the ages of Kronos and Zeus were now to be followed by the age of the Third God-the *Nous*."¹⁰ Aristotle, on the other hand, according to Voegelin, employs a mode of expression "in the process of detaching itself from the symbolism of myth."¹¹ And while Voegelin seems to have some reservations about this break, he also recognizes that the Aristotelian vocabulary is more complete and technically precise. Voegelin's description of *noesis* in his essay "The Consciousness of the Ground" is worth quoting at some length not only to demonstrate Voegelin's preference for the technical vocabulary of Aristotle, but also to reveal precisely what Voegelin took classical *noesis* to entail. Noetic interpretations arise when consciousness, on whatever occasion, seeks to become explicit to itself... Since the prototype of such an exegesis, the classical one, was essentially successful, the present attempt can relate to it.... In the experience and language of Aristotle man finds himself in a condition of

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 94 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 90. CE Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol 3, *Plato and Aristotle* (Baton Rouge:

Louisiana

State University Press, 1957), pp. 238-9 and 253-7.

¹¹ Eric Voegelin, "The Consciousness of the Ground," in *Anamnesis*, p. 149.

ignorance (*agnoia*, *amathia*) with regard to the ground of order (*action*, *arche*) of his existence.... The restless search (*zetesis*) for the ground of all being is divided into two components: the desire or grasping (*oregesthai*) for the goal and the knowledge (*noein*). Similarly, the goal (*telos*) itself is divided into the components of desire (*orekton*) and the known (*noeton*). Since the search is not a blind desire but rather contains the component of insight, we may characterize it as knowing questioning and questioning knowledge.¹² The Greek terms are drawn mostly from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII.7-9 (cf. *Ethics* X.7-8), and suggest that for Voegelin and Aristotle alike *noesis* could be described as a quest for the ground of existence, undertaken in the always-present, guiding light of the divine. *Noesis* is thus essentially a mystical interaction with the divine source of order, performed through our divine-most faculty, resulting in a personal vision for the inquirer into the nature of order on both a human and a cosmic scale. The significance of the classical discovery of *noesis* for Voegelin's own anthropological-political analysis cannot be overstated. As he puts it the *New Science of Politics*:

The opening of the soul was an epochal event in the history of mankind because, with the differentiation of the soul as the sensorium of transcendence, the critical, theoretical standards for the interpretation of human existence in society, as well as the source of their authority, came into view. When the soul opened toward transcendent reality, it found a source of order superior in rank to the established order of society as well as a truth in critical opposition to the truth at which

¹² *Ibid.* pp. 148-9. Cf Eric Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, vol. 28 *What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), pp. 99-110. 7

society had arrived through the symbolism of its self-interpretation.¹³ Classical noetic analysis was important to Voegelin precisely because it supplied a way of experiencing and talking about that "broader horizon" of consciousness Voegelin knew to be his own. And it was also important for Voegelin in political terms, for he saw his own position as a philosopher in the midst of social disorder as closely analogous to that of Plato and Aristotle.¹⁴ Thus the potential benefits of recovering the classical noetic analysis were twofold: on the one hand, noetic analysis offered experiential insights into the order of reality along with highly differentiated language symbols to describe both the process and the results of the search for order; and on the other hand, these insights pointed out a way of diagnosing and ultimately of resisting phenomena of social disorder."

Aristotle on Noesis

But here is the difficulty: when Voegelin describes "Platonic-Aristotelian" *noesis* as a divine-human encounter through which the structure of being is apprehended, he draws from only certain passages of Aristotle that are Platonic and mystical in nature, passages such as *Metaphysics* XII.7-9 and *Ethics* X.7-8. But there are other passages of Aristotle that present

noesis quite differently, and the question is not at all obvious how these other passages are to be reconciled with the ones from which Voegelin draws.¹⁶

¹³Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 156.

¹⁴See "Reason: the Classic Experience," pp. 91 and 113. It should be noted that Voegelin thought his own noetic analysis of the structure of being went further than that of the ancients in attending to the spheres not only of man and society, but of history as well. See Eric Voegelin, "About the Function of Noesis," in *Anamnesis*, pp. 206-213. This development is not important, however, for the argument of this paper. "

¹⁵On the point of resistance, Voegelin expressly agrees with Plato that the proper response to social disorder is not revolution, violent action, or compulsion, but persuasion (*pace* Shadia Drury). See "Reason the Classic Experience," pp. 90-91. 16

¹⁶On the general problem of reconciling Aristotle's mystical and non-mystical passages, see the provocative comments of Martha C. Nussbaum in her *Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 373-377.

Among the chief differences are that in the texts Voegelin does *not* cite, Aristotle (1) explains the way *noesis* works in far greater detail, (2) discusses its dependence upon sense perception without mentioning its connection to the divine, and (3) emphasizes its role in supplying a starting point for the sciences. If it turns out that these passages cannot be convincingly reconciled with the others, it may be the case that Voegelin has presented us with a one-sided, primarily Platonic, understanding of *noesis*-his extensive use of Aristotelian terms notwithstanding. Let us examine the passages.

In *Posterior Analytics II. 19*, Aristotle describes *noesis* as a process of induction (*epagoge*) from particulars to universals.¹⁷ All animals, he says, have a capacity of sense perception (*aisthesis*), but in some animals the thing that is perceived persists in the memory (*mneme*), while in others it does not. In animals for whom perception persists in the memory, repeated memories of the same thing give rise to an experience (*empeiria*). But at this point something strange has occurred, for while the memories are numerically many, the "experience" is of a single universal (*katholou*)--*not ten* different experiences of ten different people, for example, but a unified experience of "man". And this is what Aristotle attributes to *nous*. *Nous* is simply a state (*hexis*) of the mind that arrives at a universal from the sense perception of particulars.

Aristotle illustrates the process in the *Posterior Analytics* with the famous metaphor of an army in retreat:

Universals arise from sense perception, just as, when a retreat has occurred in battle, if one man halts so does another, and then another, until the original position is restored. The soul is so constituted that it is capable of the same

¹⁷ Aristotle's emphasis on induction from particulars is meant to counter the theory of concept formation in Plato's *Meno* 81a-86c, which presents our knowledge of universals as innate and dependent upon the transmigration of the soul.

process As soon as one individual percept has "come to a halt" in the soul, this is the first beginning of the presence there of a universal (because although it is the particular we perceive, the act of the perception involves the universal, e.g. "man" not "a man Callias.") Then other "halts" occur among these <proximate universals>, until the indivisible genera or <ultimate> universals are established. ¹⁸ Let us take an example of our own. If we imagine that we have never before seen a tree, our first exposure to one through sense perception would pose something of a problem. We would see it, but we would not know what it is. What we would be lacking is the "experience," which is to say the awareness of the universal of which the thing before us is an instance. The process by which we acquire such awareness is *noesis* (another word for induction) and the faculty by which we acquire it is *nous*. *Nous*, then, is our faculty of attending to the universals that unite particular instances before us, whether these are trees, ethical actions, mathematical equations, or features of human consciousness, and it is dependent upon repeated sense perceptions mixed with memory.

The significance of this description becomes clearer when Aristotle contrasts *nous* with other intellectual faculties such as *episteme* ("science") and *phronesis* ("practical wisdom") in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2-8. *Episteme* is a faculty by which we know things to be demonstrably true; it is a faculty used for all sciences that proceed by syllogism. ¹⁹

¹⁸ Aristotle *Posterior Analytics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical Library, 1976), 10002-W.

¹⁹See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VD. Aristotle restricts the meaning of *episteme* in the *Ethics* to its most precise sense—conclusions reached by demonstration concerning things that are imperishable, exist of necessity and cannot be otherwise (one thinks of the conclusions reached by math and logic). But Aristotle often uses *episteme* in a less restricted sense to refer to deductions reached in the realm of changeable things such as plants, animals, souls and even individual and political actions. For the purposes of this paper, I am using *episteme* in the less restrictive sense. For an admirably clear and helpful discussion of *episteme* and *nous* in Aristotle's *Ethics*, see C.D.C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992). I am not, however, persuaded by Reeve's unorthodox argument that Aristotle understood ethics and politics to be pure sciences in the most restrictive sense.

Phronesis is a faculty for deliberating well about what is good and advantageous for oneself, and is the primary faculty used in ethical and political action.²⁰ But *episteme* and *phronesis* are nothing without *nous*, for they depend upon it for their beginning. As Aristotle sometimes formulates it: *nous* moves from what is "better known to us" (i.e. particulars) to what is "better known in itself" (i.e. universals), while *episteme* and *phronesis* take the road back from universals to particulars.²¹ In other words, *nous* establishes the universals or first principles (*archai*) from which scientific demonstrations and ethical deliberations proceed.

Now the question is how are we to relate *nous* in these passages to the so-called "Platonic-Aristotelian" *nous* we find in Voegelin? It is a difficult question to answer because the sources seem so different in spirit. But, in a sense, we might say they are similar. For *nous* functions in both cases as a faculty through which we apprehend the order of reality. When, in Voegelin, *nous* is said to apprehend the internal structure of consciousness and the divine ground of being, it is certainly apprehending the order of reality; and likewise when, in *Posterior Analytics*, it is said to apprehend universals from sense perception it is apprehending the order of reality as well— for universals are the means by which the world of particulars makes sense to us; universals bring order to particulars. The problem remains, of course, that Aristotle does not associate *nous* with "the divine" in the *Posterior Analytics* as he does elsewhere and as Voegelin is wont to do; but something is clearly going on in the *Posterior Analytics* that cannot be fully explained in terms of sense perception and memory. How, after all, does a universal take a stand in our mind? Sense perception and memory are of particulars; repeated sense perceptions and memories are still of particulars. So, whence our experience of the universal? We are indeed tempted to view *nous* as an act of participation with the divine, even if Aristotle sometimes fails to mention it.²²

But why does Aristotle *not* mention the divine in the passages discussed above, and why does he place so much emphasis upon sense perception and the formative role *nous* plays in science and ethics? The answer, I believe, is that there are two distinct uses to which the universalizing powers of *nous* can be put: one that necessarily casts attention upon the divine, and another that casts attention more locally upon *episteme* and *phronesis*. Unfortunately, we run into a problem of terminology at this point, so for the purpose of clarity let me differentiate these two uses of *noesis* with the adjectives "theological" and "scientific-practical." I hope it will become clear what I have in mind .²³

Scientific-practical *noesis* is the exercise of *nous* with an eye to engaging in various sciences, ethics and politics. In this mode, *nous* does its universalizing work upon all sorts of puzzling pluralities from trees and animals to human actions and constitutions, attaining for the inquirer various universals from which deductions and deliberations can proceed. But this use of *noesis* is at once complete and incomplete. It is complete in terms of the sciences it makes possible. Sciences proceed from noetic

²⁰See Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics VI.5, especially 1139b33.

²¹In the case of *phronesis*, the particular that is reached is an action. Aristotle realizes of course that we do not always employ reason in right action (we sometimes rely on luck or chance), but when we do we make use of reason, we employ a kind of loose syllogism often termed (though not by Aristotle) a "practical syllogism" in order to connect our universal knowledge as best we can to particular circumstances and actions.

²² Aristotle's failure to mention the divine on certain occasions appears to have frustrated Voegelin. See, especially, his discussion of Aristotelian *phronesis* in "What is Right by Nature?," in *Anamnesis*, pp. 65-66. 11 ²³There is no perfect adjective to describe the *noesis* of *Ethics X* and *Metaphysics XII*, where the *nous* essentially performs *noesis* on its own content and arrives thereby at a sense of the divine. I have chosen the term "theological" after rejecting two alternatives which Voegelin would certainly not have liked: metaphysical and ontological. I

derive support for the term "theological" from Voegelin's late essay "Anxiety and Reason," pp. 106-7. 12

universals, and thus once these universals are attained, they invite the inquirer to arrest his noetic quest and to reap the rich harvest of deductions. But this use of *noesis* is also incomplete-and this is where theological *noesis* comes in. It is incomplete insofar as the inquirer is still confronted with a plurality of objects, now a plurality of noetic universals and of derivative sciences, the common element and interrelationship of which are yet unknown. The very fact of this plurality calls for a re-engagement of the *nous*, only this time upon the noetic universals themselves.²⁴ Now the purpose of this re-engagement is clearly not to improve the sciences, for these were engaged at a lower level of noetic insight; its purpose is to push noetic insight to the point of unity, allowing the common element or ground of all noetic insights to take its stand in our mind. Its purpose is to attain a vision of the internal structure of noetic order itself by pursuing it to its highest, most unified source.

These two modes of *noesis* cannot be simply collapsed into one. The reason is that they direct us to different and mutually incompatible sorts of activity and thus, ultimately, to different ends. To seek the universal of a certain tree or man or action is to seek something only one step removed from sense perception and to seek it for a specific purpose; when that universal is discerned, we turn immediately to the work of science-the work of understanding and explaining particulars in terms of the universal. The ultimate end, therefore, of scientific-practical *noesis* is an understanding of particulars, whether these are particular trees in the case of biology, particular actions one

²⁴See especially Aristotle *Metaphysics* XII.7, 1072b15ff. The language I use to describe the two different modes of *noesis* owes a debt to Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 11, who speaks in similar terms of the theorists' engagement to be perpetually *en voyage*. It is worth noting, however, that Oakeshott differs from Aristotle and Voegelin in removing all sense of a *telos* or divine ground as the ultimate goal of the search. For him, "theorizing has revealed itself as an unconditional adventure in which every achievement of understanding is an invitation to investigate itself and where the reports a theorist makes to himself are interim triumphs of temerity over scruple."

should take in the case of ethics, or particular policies one should adopt in the case of politics.²⁵ But the ultimate end of theological *noesis* is different. For it is not an understanding of particulars we seek when we engage in the quest for the ground of all universals, but rather insight into the ultimate universal. *Nor will such insight shed light on the particulars of sense.*

This last point is precisely the point that Aristotle makes in *Ethics* 1.6, where he addresses the irrelevance of the Platonic "form of the good" to the science of ethics. Perhaps one may think that ... by treating the absolute Good as a pattern, we shall gain a better knowledge of what things are good for us, and once we know that, we can achieve them. This argument has, no doubt, some plausibility; however, it does not tally with the procedure of the sciences. For while all the sciences aim at some good and seek to fulfill it, they leave the knowledge of the absolute good

out of consideration. Yet if this knowledge were such a great help, it would make no sense that all the craftsmen are ignorant of it and do not even attempt to seek it.²⁶

Ethics is the science of deliberating well about particular human actions, and such deliberation indeed depends upon a noetic universal." But the universal in question is not the universal of all universals, nor would that assist us in ethical deliberations. The universal in question is the common element shared by all human actions thought to be good, and this common element or universal is the propensity of certain types of action to promote human happiness.²⁸ Thus the first principle of ethics is *not* the ground of being, nor is an investigation into the ground of being a contribution to the science of ethics.

²⁵ See note 19.

²⁶ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Englewood Cliffs: Library of Liberal Arts, 1962),

1096b35-1097a8. All following quotations from the *Ethics* use the Ostwald translation.

²⁷For a more detailed account of the way *noesis* supplies the first principle of ethics see *ibid.* 1143a35-b5.

²⁸It should be stressed here that Aristotelian ethics, though similar in structure to the other sciences in reasoning upward noetically to a first principle (*arche*) and then downward deductively to particulars, is different from other sciences on account of its imprecision. Thus it may well tell us what *general types* of action are worthy of pursuit, but it cannot tell us *precisely* what to do on any given occasion; such knowledge would always involve consideration of particular circumstances.

The point of citing the passages above is to show that Aristotle recognizes the potential of using *noesis* in two ways. Like Plato and like Voegelin, he recognizes the potential of using it to ascend to a vision of the divine ground of being, but he also recognizes the potential of using it to launch forays into the various fields of science from biology and zoology to ethics and politics. Voegelin, by contrast, views *noesis* strictly in the theological way. His noetic visions are of the sort that reaches to the very boundaries of human consciousness, to the universal of all universals, to the divine ground from which the structure of human consciousness and of reality becomes luminous.

Now if I am right to view Aristotelian *noesis* as functioning in two distinct ways and toward two distinct ends, then the question must be asked why Voegelin has appropriated the theological but not the scientific-practical experiences behind the symbol. Did Voegelin not recognize the scientific-practical use of *noesis*? Did he recognize it but reject it for some reason? Did Voegelin perhaps suppose (contra Aristotle) that meditation on the divine ground of being would supply the starting point for ethical-political deliberation? These are questions that cannot be easily answered, as far as I can tell, based on what Voegelin has written. One possibility is that Voegelin did recognize the scientific-practical use of *noesis* but simply thought that Aristotle had said what needed to be said regarding its formative function in ethical and political science. But the way that Voegelin writes about *noesis* seems to me to tell against this view. I have in mind Voegelin's commentary on a particular passage of Aristotle where the scientific-practical use of *noesis* comes up.

In *Metaphysics II.ii.9-10*, Aristotle is in the process of showing that the causes of things cannot regress infinitely but must stop somewhere and, in order to demonstrate this, he turns his attention briefly to the so-called "final cause" (*to hou heneka*) of human action. The text reads as follows:

Further, the Final cause of a thing is an end [*telos*], and is such that it does not happen for the sake of something else, but all other things happen for its sake. So if there is to be a last term of this kind, the series will not be infinite [*apeiron*]; and if there is no such term, there will be no Final cause. Those who introduce infinity do not realize that they are abolishing the nature of the Good [*agathoul*] (but no one would attempt to do anything if he were not likely to reach some limit [*peras*]); nor would there be any *nous* in things, for the man who has *nous* always acts for the sake of something, and this is a limit [*peras*], because the end is a limit.²⁹

What I take to be the "limit" of human action-that for the sake of which human action is undertaken-is not the Good in the most universal sense, but happiness. We can assume this because of what Aristotle says in *Ethics 1.6* (above).³⁰ Thus, Aristotle is in effect making an analogy here. He is illustrating a very general statement about the function of the Good as a limit for all things by reminding us of how the good functions in ethics. As far as the general function of the Good goes, the passage is in agreement with the Platonic outlook of *Republic VI-VII*: the Good supplies a limit (*Peras, telos*) for all things. But with respect to the particular example Aristotle chooses, that of human action, the good in question is not the Platonic Good-in-itself but the particularly human good of happiness. By the same token, the *nous* in man that constitutes knowledge of the end of human action is analogous to (perhaps even a part of) the *nous* in things more generally; but they are not identical. The passage is not problematic so long as we keep Aristotle's remarks from the *Ethics* in mind.

²⁹ Aristotle *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1989), 994b9

16. I have chosen to simply leave "nous" in the Greek; Tredennick translates it as intelligence (a common rendering).

³⁰ See also Aristotle *Ethics* 1.12, 1102a32-1102a4: "For our present purposes, we may draw the conclusion from the preceding argument that happiness is one of the goods that are worthy of honor and are final.

This again seems to be due to the fact that it is a starting point or fundamental principle, since for its sake

all of us do everything else. And the source and cause of all good things we consider as something worthy of honor and divine."

But when Voegelin considers this passage in his essay "What is Nature?" he determines that "the passage stands in need of a discursive loosening-up to comprehend it fully."³¹ Unfortunately, I find Voegelin's "loosening" hopelessly unintelligible.³² However, the conclusions he reaches are

for our purposes clear enough. Voegelin finds that the "*nous*" referred to in the passage is really "the openness of the questioning knowledge and the knowing questioning about the ground," and that the "limit" (*Péras*) referred to in the passage "really has nothing to do with chains of causation composed of phenomena in the world, but it has to do with the coming-to-be out of the ground of being, which does have its limit in that ground."³³ In other words, Voegelin ultimately collapses the distinctions that Aristotle makes between the two types of *nous* and the two types of noetic limit.

³¹Eric Voegelin, "What is Nature?" in *Anamnesis*, p. 84.

³²What Voegelin seems to want to do is to raise the question of the precise relationship between the limit of human action and the limit in the ground of being (or, in other words, the limit supplied by scientific-practical noesis and the one supplied by theological noesis). And although this is not a question that Aristotle himself raises at this point, it is a tremendously important one. Voegelin's answer (as best I can make it out) seems to go like this: there would appear to be two "limits" discovered by *nous*, one human and one divine; but to recognize this distinction is to beg the question of the relationship between the two; and the only way to understand their relationship is to have an understanding of the divine ground; but that would mean turning our attention to the divine (engaging in what we have called theological noesis); therefore, the very fact of the human limit necessitates theological noesis and the whole distinction between the human and divine limit ought to be dropped (see especially *ibid.* p. 86; and cf, Eric Voegelin, "What is Right by Nature," in *Anamnesis* p. 66). 11 ³³Voegelin, "What is Nature?" pp. 86-7. 17

But why would Voegelin do that if, as we postulated above, he not only recognized the scientific-practical use of *noesis* but also thought that Aristotle had said what needed to be said regarding its formative function in ethical and political science? There seem to me to be two possibilities: one is that Voegelin actually failed to recognize the distinction between scientific-practical and theological *noesis*; the second (and much more likely) is that Voegelin dismissed the distinction as somehow wrongheaded; but I have found no clear explanation in Voegelin's writing for such a dismissal. It is easy to see why Voegelin would have been drawn to the theological use of *noesis*: motivated by his desire to expose the ideological and philosophical reductionism of his age, he found in theological *noesis* not only a means of apprehending the horizon of reality but also a symbolization of reality's highest knowable. But it is hard to see why Voegelin would not also have been drawn to the scientific-practical use of *noesis*, for it would seem to be as relevant to the problems of ethical and political science in the twentieth century as the theological use of *noesis* was to a theory of consciousness. But let us set aside the question of why Voegelin was not concerned with scientific-practical *noesis* and ask instead what the consequences of this might be for Voegelin's ethical and political science.

Implications for Voegelin's Ethical and Political Science

Does Voegelin, by not attending to the scientific-practical use of *noesis*, forfeit the ability to offer a substantive ethical and political science? The answer seems to be yes. For there would appear to be a sort of trade-off, which the philosopher Michael Oakeshott has described in the following way:

[T]he unconditional engagement of understanding must be arrested and inquiry must remain focused upon a *this* if any identity is to become intelligible in terms of its postulates. An investigation which denies or questions its own conditions surrenders its opportunity of achieving its own conditional perfection; the theorist who interrogates instead of using his theoretic equipment catches no fish.³⁴ In other words, *noesis* can be used to order the objects of our experience and to present us with coherently unified fields for theoretical exploration; but in order to explore these fields, we must at least momentarily arrest the noetic quest. Not to arrest it means simply not to explore the fields. A noetic understanding of the totality of being, is not an understanding of ethics any more than it is an understanding of the life of the fern. These sorts of sciences require investigations of their own.

Oakeshott's view of this matter squares well with the procedures we find employed by Aristotle.³⁵ The intellectual activity that Aristotle terms *theoria* in *Ethics* book 10 involves *noesis* and is an essential and supremely excellent human activity, but it neither is, nor does it substitute for a science of ethics or politics. This is why, when Aristotle comes to talk about *theoria* in the *Ethics*, he cuts the discussion rather short, claiming that "a more detailed treatment lies beyond the scope of our present task."³⁶ Similarly, theorizing about the structure of the human soul, while perhaps preliminary to the study of ethics and politics, does not exhaust or in any way substitute for these latter

³⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, 11.

³⁵ My claim here is only that Oakeshott and Aristotle share a similar view of the autonomy of ethical and political inquiry from the study of metaphysics or "first things." When it comes to the substance of ethical and political science, however, Oakeshott and Aristotle disagree in important respects centering mostly on Oakeshott's rejection of the teleological approach set out by Aristotle in *Ethics I* and *Politics I*. Thus, where Aristotle explains human action in terms of its ends (*telos*) and in terms of the function of the human life, Oakeshott explains human action in terms of its "postulates." See Michael Oakeshott, "Logos and Telos," in *Rationalism and Politics and Other Essays*, Timothy Fuller, ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991); on "postulates," see *On Human Conduct*, pp. 9-12.

³⁶ *Ethics I* 178a 23. 19

sciences. For the study of the soul is essentially a biological investigation, even though the human soul transcends the souls of most other animals in possessing reason (in the most pregnant sense of the term). But the study of ethics and politics is something different still—it is to inquire not only into the human soul—and thus the distinctly human function—but also to ask what it would mean to be a human being in action.³⁷ Thus, to employ *noesis* always in the theological manner and never to employ it in relation to human action is, if Aristotle and Oakeshott's view of the matter is correct, to forfeit the possibility of a science of ethics and politics. This would lead us to the following conclusion: Voegelin cannot offer a substantive ethical or political science based on *noesis* because he does not employ *noesis* in a manner that would establish the first principles of such a science.

However, this conclusion should be refined by at least two additional considerations. First, Voegelin may yet offer his readers a "substantive" ethical and political science even if he does not employ *noesis toward* this end. We should remember that scientific-practical *noesis* is only one among many methods of making sense of ethical deliberation and action. There is also revelation through divine vision or scripture, as well as "common sense."³⁸ However, Voegelin does not to my knowledge offer a substantive political science based upon these modes of apprehension either. In fact, he understands revelation much like he understands *noesis*-as an expression of the tensional structure of existence supplying insight into the ground of being.

³⁷ "Biological" in the Aristotelian sense. For an insightful discussion of the biological underpinnings of Aristotelian ethics and politics, see Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean*, pp. 137-142. On the distinction between studying the soul as an end in itself and studying ethics and politics, see Aristotle *Ethics I. 13*: "The student of politics must obviously have some knowledge of the workings of the soul but he must do so with his own aim in view, and only to the extent that the objects of his inquiry demand: to go into it in greater detail would perhaps be more laborious than his purposes require."

³⁸On the nature and limits of common sense, see Eric Voegelin "About the Function of Noesis" pp. 211 - 13; and cf. Eric Voegelin, *On the Form of the American Mind*, trans. Ruth Hein, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Jurgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, vol. I (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), pp. 29 ff.

Secondly, while the use that Voegelin actually makes of *noesis* may not tell us what types of actions and policies are ethical, it may yet lead us to rule some out, at least indirectly. In the appendix to his essay "Reason: the Classic Experience," Voegelin presents the classical insights into the structure of consciousness on a grid. On the vertical axis, he places the hierarchical levels of being experienced in the human psyche: inorganic nature, vegetative nature, animal nature, passions, reason and divine *nous*. On the horizontal axis, he places the widening contexts of human consciousness in person, society, and history.³⁹ The directional flow of order in the diagram is important. On the vertical axis, order flows upward in a "foundational" way (one cannot have divine insights without an inorganic and vegetative nature as a foundation), but at the same time order flows downward in a "formative" way (the divine "informs" reason; reason "informs" the passions, and so on). On the horizontal axis, by contrast, order flows only in the foundational way from person through society to history. Now with these noetic insights in view, Voegelin articulates three fundamental principles "to be considered in any study of human affairs".⁴¹ The "principle of completeness" tells us not to view any single sector of the grid autonomously, neglecting the entire context.⁴¹ The "principle of formation and foundation" tells us not to reverse or otherwise distort the directional order. And the "principle of metaxy reality" tells us not to immanentize the experiences of a

³⁹Voegelin, "Reason: the Classic Experience," in *Anamnesis*, pp. 112, 113-115. The noetic differentiation of man's historical consciousness is Voegelin's own addition to the classical analysis.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 113.

⁴¹ I do see possible grounds for a Voegelinian critique of Aristotle here: in isolating the human good in his study of ethics, and in seeking the noetic first principles of ethics without reference to the divine ground, Aristotle violates Voegelin's "principle of completeness". One line in Voegelin's "What is Nature" even hints at Voegelin's having intended such a criticism: "Aristotle's idea of man as an immanently formed thing having its fulfillment in a this-worldly happiness is something definitely influenced by [reduced to?] the model of an organism." (See "What is Nature?" p. 84.) But if Voegelin intended to make such a critique of Aristotle, it is muted, to say the least. 21

Beyond by viewing divine perfection as something either in us or attainable in society or history. As these principles make clear, there is a certain applicability of theological-noetic insights to politics, but it is a merely negative one. Theological-noetic insights supply an "instrument of critique" by reference to which the fallacies and reductionisms of the ideologists become clear.⁴² Thus, insofar as actions and policies are motivated by systems of ideas, Voegelin's insights have political importance of the first order. Voegelin's philosophy may not tell the Nazi soldier how to act, but it will tell him in no uncertain terms that his political motivations are fallacious.

Conclusion

But an "instrument of critique" is not the same thing as a substantive ethical and political science, one that tells us not only about the structure of reality, but also about the types of actions and policies are most likely to prove satisfying for us over the long term. Nor does Voegelin give us reason to reject such a science. And it is precisely in these considerations that I see the limitations of Voegelin's political science mentioned at the outset of this essay. By grounding his science in the mode of noesis that we have called "theological" and by neglecting the mode we have called "scientific-practical", Voegelin forfeits the ability to offer the kind of ethical and political science we find in Aristotle—one that explains or illuminates human actions and policies with an eye to being useful. This does not mean, of course, that Voegelin's writings have no use for the problems of twentieth-century political life—they do indeed, as we have just seen—but it does mean that their use is more limited than is often realized; and it also means, among other things, that Voegelin cannot be fairly accused of using politics to stamp out manifestations of deformed consciousness.

⁴² *Ibid.* p. 113; cf. p. 115 22