

Eric Voegelin and the Languages of Science and Common Sense

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## Eric Voegelin and the Languages of Science and Common Sense

The immanentization of the eschaton, pneumopathology, Gnosticism, It-reality, balance of consciousness, apperception, *metaxy*, compact, differentiation, ecumenicity, dogmatomachy, *epekeina*, historiogenesis, nonexistence, intentionality, luminosity, second reality, and a host of untranslated Greek terms confront the unsuspecting reader of Eric Voegelin's work. His scientific terminology has turned off a lot of readers due to its difficulty. But does his scientific terminology obscure or illuminate reality? Can it communicate anything meaningful to common sense? In this paper I address the relationship between Voegelin's scientific language with his language of common sense, and point to the continuity between the two. My analysis proceeds from questions that have arisen from teaching some of Voegelin's work over the past few years to undergraduate students, my barometer for what common sense today consists.

One of Eric Voegelin's great achievements was to reestablish political science within the realm of practical wisdom: "Not without reason did Aristotle identify the *episteme politike* with the virtue of *phronesis*."<sup>1</sup> His oeuvre consists of numerous noetic examinations of political reality that shows how "the order of history emerges from the history of order."<sup>2</sup> Beginning perhaps with his first visit to the United States in the 1920s, Voegelin was impressed with common sense philosophy and the civilization that itself is based on common sense (though not necessarily

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis, Collected Works*, vol. 6, 411.

<sup>2</sup> Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1956), ix.

and exclusively on common sense philosophy). Referring to Thomas Reid, who cites Cicero, common sense is a “compact type of rationality” and “habit of judgment and conduct of a man formed by ratio.”<sup>3</sup> To speak, then, of common sense and its relationship to science is to point to two central axes of Voegelin’s theoretical preoccupations: 1) the common world of society and 2) the theoretical tools that arise from that common world and that reflect upon it. Voegelin was intensely aware of the problématique of the second axis that, one might say, is in the common world but not of it. The problem of most political science is that it is oblivious to this problématique, which leads it no longer to be even part of the common world.

Even so, claiming Voegelin as philosopher with common sense, and to some extent as a fellow-traveller of common sense philosophy, might strike many as odd because of his dense, and at times technical, exposition of political reality. His writings are notoriously demanding, which leads some to make the same criticism of him that he makes of modern political science. Even his followers have acknowledged this problem, as when, for instance, Eugene Webb published a glossary of terms Voegelin used to assist with the understanding of Voegelin’s thought.<sup>4</sup> The worst form of this criticism is that his claims and language have created a Voegelinian esoteric cult whose members claim special knowledge.

In what follows, I wish to provide a brief explanation of why Voegelin’s common sense seems at times to appear uncommon. Then I wish to consider the

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<sup>3</sup> CW6, 411.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1981), 277-89. Voegelin disapproved of this and thought it unnecessary (as explained by Eugene Webb, interview in Barry Cooper and Jodi Bruhn (eds.), *Voegelin Recollected: Conversations on a Life*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 51-2).

extent to which these moments where he appears to lack common sense can be explained in common sense terms. My approach in this paper is less a scholarly exposition of Voegelin's writings than as a suggestive inquiry based on some experience of having taught Voegelin's writings to undergraduates.<sup>5</sup> In short, I wish to explain what I have learned from Voegelin by teaching him to undergraduates.

### The Limits of Common Sense

Voegelin explains in the same discussion of common sense referred to above that common sense "presupposes noetic experience, without the man of this habit himself possessing a differentiated knowledge of noesis.... [W]e characterized this habit as that of the *spoudaios* without the luminosity of consciousness...."<sup>6</sup> Common sense participates in ratio which means that the explication of ratio itself requires one to move outside the bounds of common sense. Common sense on its own is insufficient, especially when ratio itself is threatened: "Common sense can rest assured of its ability 'to judge of things self-evident' but it cannot oppose the ideologies on their level of differentiated argumentation, common sense has at its

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<sup>5</sup> I have assigned these works by Voegelin to undergraduate and graduate students over the years. With the exception of *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* and *Hitler and the Germans*, I generally find his essays more useful than his books to assign: from CW11: "Liberalism and Its History" and "In Search of the Ground"; from CW 12: "On Debate and Existence," "Reason: The Classic Experience," "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," "Configurations of History," "Equivalences and Experience and Symbolization in History," "Gospel and Culture," "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme," and "Quod Deus Dicitur."

<sup>6</sup> CW6, 411.

command no explicit noesis.”<sup>7</sup> Voegelin’s work consists primarily of an attempt to articulate an “explicit noesis,” and this endeavor required new terminologies that required him to move beyond those he inherited from the collection of symbols and meanings that human history had hitherto developed. He needed to move beyond the episteme of Aristotle and the intellectus of Aquinas. This required him to develop new symbols, and some of these (e.g., Gnosticism) he used for a while before replacing them with more refined symbols for whom those unfamiliar with his thought could be quite bewildering (e.g., pneumopathology, secondary reality, It-reality).

Common sense fails to recognize the demonism of ideologies, and, because it lacks an “explicit noesis,” it also fails to recognize the spiritual and erotic habits upon which the exercise of reason depends. Common sense lacks capacity to explain either the turning around of the soul as in the case of the philosopher, or the closure of the soul, as in the case of the pneumopathological ideologue. Common sense cannot account for the “art of the periagoge,” as Voegelin, following Plato, called the art of teaching.<sup>8</sup> In an ideological age, common sense runs the risk of becoming its own ideology on account of its being too “rest assured,” which can be seen in various forms like pragmatism or, more generally, in Tocqueville’s observation that Americans are Cartesian empiricists without ever having read a word of Descartes. In our own time, one observes how quickly rugged self-reliant libertarians and pragmatists are quick to believe in conspiracy theories about

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<sup>7</sup> CW6, 412.

<sup>8</sup> CW12, 260; Plato, *Republic* 518d.

Barack Obama, 9/11, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

Voegelin's common sense appears least common sensical in his considerations of "explicit noesis," in his analyses of concrete consciousness as well as in the deformation of reason, in his analyses of open souls and in closed souls; or put another way, in philosophical eros and in demonic eros. In this section, I shall now consider a few examples of his discussion of each to show the difficulties of his approach from the perspective of common sense because it is here where Voegelin explicates what is common to humanity in their ratio. I shall then indicate how his analyses are in fact very common sensical and, indeed, can be illustrated by comparing to common sense examples of experience. I shall also consider whether anything of the exegesis of noesis is lost by comparing these experience to common sense examples. Finally, the examples I consider are ones I have used in class; the "common sense" I have in mind is rooted in the ratio of lives lived by my undergraduate students who, like Voegelin once said of his students at Louisiana State University, are decent and have not been corrupted by ideology, though, I would add, their common sense is tempted to becoming too "rest assured."

### Why Common Sense is Vulnerable to Ideological Deformations

Most of my students are common sensical, but the common sense they manifest is limited. They are typically small-l liberals who prize maximum freedom for individuals and regard external limitations on their freedom as a form of

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<sup>9</sup> See Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2011).

coercion and therefore unjust. For this reason, they also have an instinctive distrust of religious authorities that makes them instinctively to think a free society is also a secular one. Their vision of society corresponds roughly with that sketched by John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*.

My students have not considered the philosophical, spiritual, and indeed religious preconditions for a free society. Therefore, their common sense is “rest assured” which makes them vulnerable to ideological replacements for the genuine preconditions for a free society. They tend to view theirs as an “open society” in the sense of Karl Popper, not of that Henri Bergson; Voegelin describes Popper’s version as a mechanism for preventing “public collisions between private opinions.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, speaking of Mill’s discussion of liberty, Voegelin claims “today it is the *readiness* to discuss that is the subject of investigation.”<sup>11</sup> We can no longer be as optimistic as Mill that obstacles to discussion could be “warded off through the medium of rational discussion” because *ratio* itself is now in question. And with ratio itself in question, the possibility of common sense is threatened.

My students’ instinctive love of freedom corresponds to their unreflective readiness to characterize their society “secular.” They are not necessarily Comtean secularists because they generally wish freedom for religious people to worship the gods they choose. Moreover, they do not necessarily think being religious is a *prima facie* reason to have one’s perspective removed from public debate. However, they do not think religion should have an authoritative voice in society.<sup>12</sup> Thus, they

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<sup>10</sup> CW12, 72.

<sup>11</sup> CW6, 297.

<sup>12</sup> This helps explain their belief (and that of many North Americans) that religious

respond with perplexity and perhaps some resentment when I point out to them that reason does not stand on its own, and presupposes something like faith to sustain it. They can be like Voegelin's students who are "flabbergasted, especially those who are agnostics, when I tell them that they all act, whether agnostics or not, as if they were immortal. Only under the assumption of immortality, of a fulfillment beyond life, is the seriousness of action intelligible that they actually into their work and that has a fulfillment nowhere in this life however long they may live. They all act as if their lives made sense immortally, even if they deny immortality, deny the existence of a psyche, deny the existence of a Divinity – in brief, if they are just the sort of fairly corrupt average agnostics that you find among college students today. One shouldn't take their agnosticism too seriously, because in fact they act as if they were not agnostics!"<sup>13</sup>

The common sense, then, of today's students is not entirely commonly sensical. But notice how Voegelin frames the art of periagoge in this last sentence: "because in fact they act as if they were not agnostics." Teaching "explicit noesis," while difficult in the sense that it requires the kind of scholarly work that encompassed Voegelin's entire scholarly life, is also straightforward because it entails explaining to students what they are already doing. Teaching involves understanding and explaining the paradox of what Voegelin termed the existential virtues, and how practice takes priority to theory.<sup>14</sup> The priority of the practical

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objections to same-sex marriage are irrelevant from a public-policy perspective. Indeed, it rarely occurs to North Americans that there can be a rejection of same-sex marriage on philosophical grounds.

<sup>13</sup> "In Search of the Ground," CW11, 228.

<sup>14</sup> "Since every man participates in love of the transcendent Being and is aware of such a

takes away some of the challenge of introducing scientific terminology and analysis because teaching becomes not a matter of replacing opinions with knowledge, but of refining opinions, of gaining illumination of one's present practices. The art of *periagoge*, meant to move from common sense to "explicit noesis," entails an exploration with students of their souls, which is conducted by examining the deformations of consciousness as well as the symbols and testaments of souls that have opened. Voegelin's scientific analysis of experience always comes back to the soul's erotic yearnings, which is the locus of common sense.

### Deformations

Voegelin's writings on ideology, Gnosticism, pneumopathology, in short, on deformations of consciousness, are challenging and frequently depend on a technical terminology that daunts readers. Indeed, his later analyses in essays like "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme" (1977), in which he treats ideologies in terms of deformed consciousness, are more difficult than his earlier treatments, as

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ground – Ground, Reason, or Nous – out of which he exists, every man can, by virtue of this noetic self, have love for other men. In theory, this is the secondary phenomenon – in theory, not in practice. In practice, we love others right away without having a theory for it. But in theory that is secondary because there is no particular reason – reason, I say now – to love other men unless they also participate in that same divine Nous and have such a noetic self" ("In Search of the Ground," CW11, 230-1). This statement corresponds to the more compact statement of responsibility toward others that the common sense philosopher, Thomas Reid, affirms and that Voegelin quotes: "There is a certain degree of it which is necessary to our being subjects of law and government, capable of managing our own affairs, and answerable for our conduct towards others: this is called common sense, because it is common to all men with whom we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct" (CW6, 410-11). David Walsh emphasizes Voegelin's unfinished project of articulating the practical over the theoretical ("Voegelin's Place in Modern Philosophy," *Modern Age*, Winter 2007: 12-23).

in *New Science of Politics*, which relies more heavily on comparing ideologies to historical antecedents. “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme” is challenging because Voegelin here has developed the tools to analyze a deformation of consciousness, which requires greater introspection on the part of the reader, but it is precisely this greater introspection that makes the essay easier to understand, and more theoretically satisfying.

Before commenting on the deformation of consciousness in its extreme form, consider how Voegelin treats the precondition for this extremism in a slightly earlier essay, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol” (1967). There, he explains deculturation and how opaque symbols create the conditions where ideologies thrive. Experience of transcendence (or “phenomena of original account”) degenerates into dogmatic exposition, which then gets rejected by skeptics, while those seeking the “ground” that produced the original experiences go looking elsewhere for ersatz grounds. For example, Plato’s *Republic* becomes Platonism, which eventually produces the host of modern ideologies; or, the Gospel splits into theology and philosophy, as well as fundamentalism, which also fosters modern ideologies.

I explain this process to my students in common sense terms of toddler humor. First, the toddler understands the punch line of the joke because she understands the punch line reveals an absurd situation, which is the essence of comedy. This is comparable to the original experience. But then the toddler will forget that the punch line is only funny on account of the context in which it is delivered, and will repeat, usually ad nauseum and always without context, the

punch line to whomever is present. Fundamentalism and doctrine correspond to the toddler's delivery of the punch line without context. The next stage is reached when the toddler repeatedly and obnoxiously screams the punch-line, usually in the form of a word or two, with the expectation everyone will laugh. The ideologue's *Zauberwort* is the toddler's punch line. Except the toddler usually grows up whereas the ideologue does not.

Voegelin's discussion of pneumopathology and secondary reality pose the challenge of convincing students that, indeed, there is a common world and that some people choose to opt out of it. This argument smacks them of "elitism" or intellectual snobbery because it implies that some people are more enlightened than others. Moreover, it stokes their skepticism that there is no genuine distinction between knowledge and opinion, that philosophy is merely the replacement of opinion with another opinion. More on philosophy below. Voegelin's praise of Christianity in works like *New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* also stokes their skepticism.

Even so, it helps that in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin frames the discussion in light of erotics immediately at the beginning of the work: "In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man became philosopher."<sup>15</sup> Voegelin's statement points to the restoration of political science I shall discuss in the last part of the paper, but it is important to highlight this passage for students in order always to have it present to

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<sup>15</sup> CW5, 259.

them while they proceed through his subsequent argument.

The demonism of ideology can be seen most vividly in his exposition in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, of Karl Marx and of Friedrich Nietzsche. Ideologies are self-referential systems whose aim is not to illuminate our understanding but to change existence. The system is sustained by a considerable amount of world play that simultaneously confuses in order to defuse questioning, and explains phenomena in terms roughly similar to the classical tradition in order to provide a semblance of familiarity and intelligibility to the system: “The purpose of this speculation is to shut off the process of being from transcendent being and have man create himself. This is accomplished by playing with equivocations in which ‘nature’ is now all-inclusive being, now nature as opposed to man, and now the nature of man in the sense of *essentia*. This equivocal wordplay reaches its climax in a sentence that can easily be overlooked: ‘A being that does not have its nature outside of itself is not a natural being; it does not participate in the being of nature.’”<sup>16</sup> Pointing out equivocation, which in this case almost amounts to Marx contradicting the law of non-contradiction, shows to the person of common sense how Marx breaks the ratio of common sense.

Common sense is also affronted by Voegelin’s observation of Marx’s removal

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<sup>16</sup> CW5, 262, quoting Marx, “Nationalökonomie und Philosophie,” in Karl Marx, *Der Historische Materialismus: Die Frühschriften*, ed., Landshut and Meyer, (Leipzig, 1932), 333. Voegelin focuses on Marx’s earlier, more “metaphysical,” writings. Raymond Aron focused on Marx’s later economic writings and also found them “equivocal,” especially his discussion of “social class,” a fact that Marx himself admitted (Brian Anderson, *Raymond Aron: The Recovery of the Political*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 79, citing Marx’s letter to J. Weydemeyer (March 5, 1852)).

of personal existence from his system and construction of history.<sup>17</sup> The expectation of the transformation of history is “supported by nothing but the empty formula of a ‘being’ which determines ‘consciousness’ and the equally empty assumption that a sinful humanity can be liberated from its libido dominandi through the revolutionary dictatorship of libidinous dreamers who pretend to be the vanguard of a sinless ‘proletariat.’ In brief, there is nothing in reality to support the expectation....” He concludes by contrasting wryly the ideological dreamworld with the place of the *spoudaios* in society according to Plato and Aristotle: “In the dreamworlds... the personal pièce de résistance of order and imperfection is eliminated by the dream of a Mature Man who, beyond freedom and human dignity, will no longer raise questions concerning the meaning of existence.... Just as frequently as with Utopianism and Absurdity, we meet in their language with the symbols of a New Humanism and a New Humanity.”

By observing these and other examples, the student understands that the ideologue is not interested in sharing a common world of understanding. He understands the implications of Marx’s claim in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that he is not interested in understanding the world, but in remaking it.

With Voegelin’s subsequent discussion of Marx’s prohibition of questioning, we get to the heart of his intellectual swindle and the demonic violence at its root. That this reminds some students of Orwell’s view that a key method of control used by totalitarian regimes is to ensure people are incapable even of entertaining certain thoughts, suggests that common sense can, with guidance, enter the deepest

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<sup>17</sup> “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” CW12, 320-1.

malebolges of the closed soul.<sup>18</sup> This discussion also illuminates a limitation of common sense on its own terms because it shows how problematic common sense can be. Despite common sense being “rest assured,” the individual of common sense is haunted by the possibility that not everything before his eyes is what it seems.<sup>19</sup> Unlike the ideologue, though, who simply treats the world of common sense as the world of deception (and his ideology as the key to unlock the door to higher consciousness), Voegelin raises common sense on its own terms; common sense is expanded, not displaced.

Even so, Voegelin’s comment on Marx’s prohibition, or rather, what he leaves out, has implications for our common sensical elucidation. For Marx, the question of human origins is nonsensical abstraction because it eventually leads to an infinite regress, “which in Ionian philosophy led to the problem of the *arche* (origin).”<sup>20</sup> In his late writings, Voegelin would reject the mode of such questioning of *arche* in Aristotle or in Aquinas’ so-called proofs of God for being too rooted in cosmological experience, and not in the nature of ratio itself. If our common world is to be apprehended through our soul, the sensorium of transcendence, then that common world must come through our soul and not through the cosmos. As with Augustine, the *arche* is to be found within, and not in the cosmos.

Turning now to the “trick action” that the ideologue seeks to transfigure reality, we must recognize that Voegelin’s analysis emphasizes the root of the “trick

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<sup>18</sup> CW5, 262-4.

<sup>19</sup> Thus, as Tocqueville observes, the tendency of democratic souls who are otherwise practical and common sensical to be drawn toward grand abstract visions of humanity, history, and society. At a more vulgar level, this might help explain the persistence of conspiracy theories in our own day (see Kay, *Among the Truthers*).

<sup>20</sup> CW5, 262-3.

action” and not specific linguistic and sophistic tools to mislead; it looks at the deception itself. Because the ideologue wishes to transfigure reality – or, pretend to transfigure reality – he wishes to master history, which is to say to master the beyond of the horizon that surrounds human beings as questioners. The magic of the extreme “charms”<sup>21</sup> because it mimics the erotic attraction we have to the beyond of the horizon: “The mystery of the horizon that draws us to advance toward it but withdraws as we advance; it can give direction to the quest of truth but it cannot be reached; and the beyond of the horizon can fascinate as the ‘extreme’ of truth but it cannot be possessed as truth face to face within this life.” The ideologue seeks mastery out of a wish to possess truth “face to face.” He is in a rush; he wishes to confront truth and confront others, on his own terms and only wishes what he wishes to see. As Voegelin writes in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, the ideologue wishes certainty over truth. Translating the “face to face” Biblical metaphor into contemporary idiom for common sense students, the ideologue is like someone who prefers Facebook friends to real, embodied friends because Facebook enables him to control the experience of friendship, of controlling one’s own face that one presents to the world, and in controlling what face(s) appear to him.<sup>22</sup>

Even so, the ideologue’s “magic trick” of controlling reality is only a trick because his desire to control reality is only made possible by reality: “the potential

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<sup>21</sup> The title of Voegelin’s essay of course derives from Nietzsche: “The charm (Zauber) that works for us... is the magic of the extreme, the seductive force that radiates from all that is utmost” (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 749) (quoted, CW12, 324). At one point, Augustine claims sin is rooted in the love of a false good that charms (need to find citation).

<sup>22</sup> See Roger Scruton, “Hiding Behind the Screen,” *The New Atlantis*, Summer 2010 ([http://www.thenewatlantis.com/docLib/20100914\\_TNA28Scruton.pdf](http://www.thenewatlantis.com/docLib/20100914_TNA28Scruton.pdf)).

of deformation is inherent in a form that does not exist other than in the process of formation.”<sup>23</sup> The ideologue wishes to master the “experiences of a human questioning (*aporein*) and seeking (*zetein*) in response to a mysterious drawing (*helkein*) and moving (*kinein*) from the divine side.”<sup>24</sup>

Voegelin’s discussion of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 to describe the charm in the extreme is a masterful elucidation of the lust of domination:

Mad in pursuit and in possession so  
Had, having, in quest, to have extreme  
A bliss in proof and proved a very woe  
Before a joy proposed behind a dream<sup>25</sup>

“The temptation of the ‘extreme’ will always endanger the balance, and the imbalance will enver be quite unconscious of its madness.”

As a somewhat common sense way of illustrating the ideologue’s “imbalance” of living in reality and in the dreamworld, I frequently use the example of erotic obsession. Whereas undergraduates may be unfamiliar with thinking about ideology in terms of erotic obsession, as young and somewhat unformed souls, they are likely to be familiar with the experience in their own lives and where it can lead. A recent example of a “celebrity stalker” makes my point: “The accused, who lives in High River [Alberta], said he first saw [the actress] when she was in a recent parade. ‘She was apparently smiling and waving and he took this (to mean) there was something special between them,’ he said. ‘Since then he was repeatedly going to the

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<sup>23</sup> “Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme,” CW12, 326.

<sup>24</sup> “Wisdom,” CW12, 326.

<sup>25</sup> “Wisdom,” CW12, 329.

Heartland set trying to get in, dropping off notes and stuff.”<sup>26</sup> Erotic obsession leads one to imagine a narrative where individual events and gestures take on special meaning, and necessarily for the sake of the one erotically obsessed, around which the narrative revolves. This helps students relate better to Voegelin’s claim that the ideologue who speculates a transfiguration of history also places himself at the center of the new vanguard, that the individual magician is necessarily the one who represents the new Humanity. Historical transfiguration, like erotic obsession, is always about the activist. Any undergraduate can also see the violence embedded in this erotic obsession, as they each know that no “stalker” can compel one to love. Love cannot be forced, and the one who thinks it can be is dangerous indeed. We turn now to love and Voegelin’s restoration of political science.

## Restoration

In a 1965 lecture delivered to the Thomas More Institute in Montreal, and later published as “In Search of the Ground,” Voegelin observes that when society has been deculturated the ground of existence, the precondition to our existence and knowledge of our existence and love of our existence, has become obscured. It is not that the ideologue ignores the ground but that he displaces it elsewhere in motives such as power, profit, productivity, race, and so forth.<sup>27</sup> As suggested above, Voegelin’s concern for deculturation was one he shared with the ideologues,

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<sup>26</sup> “High River Man Charged With Stalking Heartland Star,” *Calgary Sun*, June 23, 2011 (<http://m.calgarysun.com/2011/06/23/high-river-man-charged-with-stalking-heartland-star>)

<sup>27</sup> CW11, 235.

and the large part of his work consisted of restoring for civilization a sense of the divine ground that those ideologues distorted.

Voegelin's late writings display his response. His meditations in volume five and "Quod Deus Dicitur" overturn traditional and compact subject-object dichotomies. Now, to put it very simplistically, one's participation in "nonexistent reality" is a matter of being conscious of God's participation in the meditative process: "divine is itself an event within the reality we are questioning."<sup>28</sup> Voegelin agrees somewhat with Marx's rejection of the Ionian quest for the arche because it is too firmly rooted in cosmological experience. Aquinas's five proofs of the existence of God are also too firmly rooted in the cosmos, despite Aquinas having had "attained a certain degree of clarity about [the] paradoxical structure" of the quest.<sup>29</sup>

Even so, Voegelin's characterization of participation in "nonexistent reality" where "divine is itself an event within the reality we are questioning" risks falling into the same obscuration as Marx's empty categories of universal humanity and end of history. Does "nonexistence" signify nothing? Does having the divine "itself an event" mean "God is on our side" as part of some religiously-oriented revolutionary vanguard? Of course not. As Ellis Sandoz has argued, Voegelin's choice of terms and understanding of these meditations is inspired not only by Plato, but by the medieval mystics including the author of the "Cloud of Unknowing." He, like they, understood the limits of language and also understood that words, insofar as they are things, cannot possibly capture reality that transcends thingness. Thus Voegelin knew he had to develop a philosophical language about the quest's

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<sup>28</sup> CW12, 376-77.

<sup>29</sup> CW12, 378-380.

“paradoxical structure” that surpassed even Aquinas’s “certain degree of clarity.”<sup>30</sup>

Even so, just as Plato has Socrates frequently observe the difficulty of communicating the truth of philosophy to a city who knows only sophists, so too does Voegelin’s philosophical questioning run the risk of appearing as ideology. We are back to figuring out how philosophic language can meet the language of common sense.

Voegelin elaborates a greater degree of clarity in “Quod Deus Dicitur,” the final work he dictated, and which crystallizes his thoughts on the meditative quest found in previous writings. There lists seven pairs of symbols “dominating reflective language on the fringe of compactness and differentiation” that include philosophy and religion, philosophy and theology, faith and reason, science and religion, and so forth.<sup>31</sup> Today one might also add secularism and religion, and secular society and religious society. Each of these pairs is familiar to common sense, as they convey a set of experiences in our deculturated landscape. In other words, “rest assured” common sense, as seen in the opinions of my students, takes it for granted that each term among these sets of pairs refers to something, and the other term refers to a something that is its opposite. As Voegelin observes, “each of these dichotomies furnishes the occasion for indefinite debate on the compact level, without ever penetrating to the fundamentally paradoxical structure of thought that is

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<sup>30</sup> This leaves aside the question of whether silence would have been a superior form of signifying nonexistent reality, as even words, no matter how carefully used, still reify. But silence, as a mode of communication, has its own problems, as debates over esotericism show (see James Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato’s Erotic Dialogues*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), chaps. 1-2.

<sup>31</sup> CW12, 378.

peculiar to the participatory relation between the process of thought and the reality in which it proceeds.”

It is unnecessary to summarize Voegelin’s subsequent meditation, but only to point out that Voegelin overturns these common sense and yet sterile dichotomies. He does so not by displacing common sense as the ideologue does, but by expanding common sense. Referring to Leibniz’s *Principles de la nature et de la grace*, Voegelin cites Leibniz’s two questions concerning sufficient reason: why is there something rather than nothing? and why are the things as they are? Voegelin comments are worth quoting at length:

The experience of contingent reality implies a noncontingent reason for what is experienced as contingent.... What comes to the fore now is the inherence of the answer in the event of the question. And that imaginative characteristic which goes beyond the simple assumption of a revelatory symbol is due to the Cartesian insight of the answer being contained in the act of doubting and desiring. The experienced transition from an apparently certain *cogito ergo sum* to an imaginatively doubting and desiring ego is the meditative source of the understanding that there is no ego without a comprehending reality to be symbolized as the perfection toward which the imaginative ego strives. An ego that doubts and desires to go beyond itself is not the creator of itself but requires a creator and maintainer of its doubting existence, and that cause is the “God” who appears in the analyses of the *Third Meditation* and the *Principles*. There is no doubting contingency without the tension toward the necessity which makes the doubt evident as such.<sup>32</sup>

This and Voegelin’s subsequent meditation shows that expansion of common sense entails the enlargement of reason because instead of appealing to the arche, which remains bound to cosmological experience, Voegelin appeals to the conditions of reason itself. Human beings reason about existence with their reason,

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<sup>32</sup> CW12, 380.

and Voegelin illuminates the precondition of that activity. Students are thereby suddenly struck by the fact of their participation in existence. They are struck by the their newly expanded common sense observation that to question is to have the answer embedded in the question, and to question means also to be questioned. Those inclined toward religiosity see the “religious” roots of their rationality, and those inclined to be secularists see the insufficiency of their secular reason and recognized an expanded reason that is no longer hostile to faith. The “rest assured” dichotomies of common sense have broken down and given way to an expanded noetic existence.

Just as Voegelin’s meditations invite the common sense student to deepen her noetic existence, so too do they invite the student to get more comfortable with her erotic restlessness. Their “doubting and desiring” is caused by their previously unrecognized participation in reality, and one that is drawing them toward itself. Having been plagued by the modern’s anxiety that their experience of immortality is an illusion,<sup>33</sup> they now see their immortalization is in fact real because they now have a coherent set of symbols with which to symbolize the activity of immortalization toward the ground. They recognize that the fool who says there is no God is genuinely a fool because “God” for them is no longer a reified symbol but a constituent partner in their own search whose stakes now have never been higher. Most undergraduate students then recognize the continuity between their questioning and the prayers of Anaximander, Plato, Anselm, Goethe, and of course Aquinas that conclude the essay.

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<sup>33</sup> CW12, 67.

## Conclusion

Voegelin frequently referred to teaching as the “art of the periagoge,” which is certainly at the root of his meditations in the late writings. However, Voegelin’s approach differs from that of Plato to a certain extent. Plato’s description of the ascent from the cave to the light is embedded in a cosmological context in which the inquiry takes place in a well-defined, if not static, place, though it is true that Plato illuminates the divine event partnering in the quest when he mentions that the prisoner is forced to get up. Even so, Voegelin’s meditations and “corrections” of Aquinas, for instance, suggest the light, for its part, had to do some further turning around. This is an admittedly poor way of formulating how Voegelin understood his project of providing an “explicit noesis” that took in the range of empirical materials of history. Even so, the advantage of this poor formulation is that it illuminates Voegelin’s acknowledgment that common sense, as deficient as it is in matters concerning its own ground, sensed problems with ways philosophers had hitherto formulated the ground of existence. As much as Marx displays a disease of the spirit, one can take some pity on him because his common sense at least recognized the deculturation of his society when it had displaced the ground to economic forces and production.

My experience of teaching Voegelin to undergraduates has taught me that while he is very demanding, he is also very common sensical (though, as their teacher, I need to help them along with this). They are consistently dumbstruck at

how simple and yet profound his reflections are because the common world his philosophical and scientific terminology illuminates is one that they, as the young, feel perhaps more poignantly than most. I once heard Barry Cooper tell prominent American political theorist John Gunnell that his undergraduates distinguish between Voegelin and Leo Strauss better than most academics do. Now I know why: undergraduates are more erotic and most of them have yet to be corrupted by positivist social science terminology. Common sense is fragile, but it is alive and well, and willing to be expanded by “explicit noesis.”