

Philosophical Radicals and Political Conservatives:

The Political Views and Legacies of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss

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APSA Panel, "Roundtable on Strauss and Voegelin"
September 4, 2010 at 4:15pm, Washington, D. C.

I. Introduction:

Voegelin and Strauss were scholars in the field of political philosophy, yet they did not have an explicit political teaching. They wrote books about the great political philosophers of the past in order to learn lessons that might become living truths for today. But they did not write political treatises, defending a political ideology, for example, conservatism or liberalism, or a specific regime, such as liberal democracy or ancient Sparta or constitutional monarchy. Aside from early writings or occasional statements, their books do not contain a specific political doctrine.¹

Nevertheless, their approach to philosophy is essentially "political" (rather than metaphysical or epistemological or ethical in the narrow sense). And they are widely regarded today as "conservatives," with students and followers who are prominent conservatives of one kind or another. For example, Voegelin's legacy is carried on by scholars such as, John Hallowell, Ellis Sandoz, and David Walsh who defend the religious basis of the American founding and the Christian basis of liberal democracy. Strauss's legacy is carried on by a variety of followers – by Jaffaites defending the natural rights doctrine of the Declaration and Lincoln, by Mansfield defending the Aristotelian basis of politics, Allan Bloom's cultural critique of relativism in the academy, Michael Zuckert's Lockean view of "natural rights republicanism," the 'faith-based' Straussianism of Ernest Fortin, not to mention the infamous neo-conservative connection to Strauss.²

My questions for discussion are the following: Are there political teachings that emerge with any kind of clarity from their writings, and what kind of political legacy is fairly traceable to them?

In answering these questions, I would like to show that Voegelin and Strauss were devoted mainly to the recovery of philosophy as the open-ended quest for ultimate truth, and this led them to prefer classical or Christian models of wisdom and to become 'philosophical radicals' in the academy. It also led them to be strong critics of modern currents of philosophy for leading to totalitarianism and moral relativism; this in turn led them to endorse very sober versions Anglo-American constitutionalism as the most prudent choice in the modern world.

¹ Exceptions are Strauss' early Zionist writings and lectures defending the state of Israel. Also, Voegelin's early writings on Nazism in the Austrian State (1936) and Race & State (1933).

² See Thomas Pangle, Leo Strauss: An Introduction (2006); Catherine and Michael Zuckert, The Truth about Leo Strauss (2006), and Steven B. Smith, Reading Leo Strauss (2006).

They differed in emphasis, however. Voegelin saw the false certitude and utopianism of Gnostic ideologies as the main problem and Christianity as part of the solution, leaving a political legacy of Christianized politics that supports religiously-based, Anglo-American democracy. Strauss saw moral relativism or nihilism as the main problem, and he regarded natural right as the solution, leaving a legacy of mostly non-religious natural right thinkers who have developed political views from a combination of Aristotle and Locke. In contemporary terms, these teachings are reasonably called “conservatism,” supporting tempered versions of constitutional democracy with a Christian or classical basis. Nevertheless, the writings of Voegelin and Strauss are difficult to appropriate for any political cause, and the best description of their views might be ‘philosophical radicalism and political conservatism.’

My main criticism of Voegelin and Strauss is that they were both unfair to Edmund Burke, whose defense of Anglo-American constitutionalism is very congenial in practice to their views. Moreover, Burke is not as “historicist” as Strauss portrays him, and Burke’s thought is grounded in the kind of “experiential” wisdom that Voegelin favored.

II. The Permanent Problem of Philosophy and Politics:

Voegelin and Strauss taught political philosophy by giving a grand interpretation of Western thought. In presenting these grand ‘narratives,’ Strauss and Voegelin were primarily concerned to recover the Truth about the permanent problems of man or human nature, which it turns out are political problems in the largest sense – they arise from the relation of law to philosophy (Strauss) or the relation of political order to the quest for truth about cosmic order (Voegelin).

A.) For Strauss, the permanent problem is the relation of the Philosopher and the City, as expressed above all in Plato’s dialogues. This relation is an inevitable tension between the need of the political community for an authoritative law – ultimately based on divine law – and the erotic need of the philosopher for rational knowledge of the whole. An inherent conflict lies in the need of the city to be “closed” in the sense of believing in a particular religion and form of government as the only true or authoritative law, and the neediness of the philosopher to be “open” to questioning all received opinions in order to ascend from opinion to knowledge or from convention to nature.

For Voegelin, the permanent problem is found in the relation of the “truth of the soul” and the “truth of society” (NSP, 156-57). Voegelin, like Strauss, views this relation as a tension between two needs. On the one side, there is the openness of the soul to the “divine ground of being” – an unending quest for “transcendent order” in the cosmos, understood in terms of “experiential reality” and “symbols” (“ideas” are one aspect of symbolization). On the other side is the more or less “closed” nature of civil society which needs a “civil theology” to express its notions of legitimate authority or “representations” of order.³

³ Voegelin adopts the language of “open” and “closed” like Bergson in Two Sources of Morality & Religion, but he strongly criticizes Popper’s misappropriation of the terms.

The similarity of Strauss and Voegelin in their understanding of the permanent problem of philosophy and politics is striking. Both see it as inherent tension or conflict in human nature which never changes and will never change, despite the attempts of the Enlightenment to remove the tension.

Their main point of disagreement concerns the quest for truth. Strauss describes their disagreement by saying “philosophy is radically independent of faith” (FP, 72), whereas Voegelin views philosophers and Christian believers as engaging in the same quest for knowledge of transcendence while using different symbolizations to express their insights (hence, revelation and reason are doing the same work, seeking to know the ever-elusive “divine ground of being”).

B.) Following this logic, Strauss and Voegelin also agree on crucial points in the narrative of Western civilization, but they diverge on the role of Christianity in shaping the West.

They agree on the superiority of pre-modern philosophy to modern philosophy. However, Voegelin sees the unfolding of Western thought as a religious drama (“history is Christ writ large”) meaning Christianity under the influence of Augustine’s *Two Cities* “de-divinized” the political realm and that change eventually led Joachim of Flora and others to “re-divinize” politics through various forms of Gnostic ideologies – movements driven by deformed spiritual knowledge seeking to create heaven on earth, as manifested in Puritanism, progressive liberalism, socialism, positivism, communism, and fascism.

Strauss sees the unfolding of Western thought as a philosophical drama – classical philosophy under the influence of Christianity “aimed too high,” and this provoked the modern philosophers to lower the aim of politics but also to “master nature” or “conquer chance” in order to establish the sovereignty of man, leading to the complete oblivion of eternity or anything above man.

Both Voegelin and Strauss formulated their scholarship as a kind of “recovery” of ancient wisdom, and this, I believe, was the main bond of cordial friendship and professional collaboration between the two. However, Strauss sought a recovery of Socratic skepticism that still allows for natural right, while Voegelin sought a recovery of “mystical-philosophy” that insists on openness to transcendence with a recognition of the Christian role in advancing human dignity (leading Voegelin to embrace a Christianized history of consciousness and a type of Augustinian personalism).

III. Sober Politics: Anglo-American Constitutionalism

At the end of *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin devotes two pages to explaining his preferred alternative to the ideological distortions caused by Gnosticism. He argues that the political regimes most closely approximating the “truth of the soul” in the modern world are found in England and America – products of the 1688 Glorious Revolution and the 1776 American Revolution. Historically, they took place in a period when “tradition” – ie, classical and Christian thought and aristocratic statesmanship – was still alive, and they produced stable constitutions and institutions. Voegelin is hopeful that the Anglo–

American constitutional democracies will maintain their dominant power in the world (although he also castigates them for leaving Eastern Europe to the Soviets at the end of WWII, based on “dream-world” assumptions of perpetual peace, just as he castigates Weimar Germany for not using force to suppress the Gnostic ideologies of communism and fascism).⁴ This is Voegelin’s hard-headed political realism in defense the Western democracies.

In these contexts, it is striking that Voegelin never mentions Reinhold Niebuhr or Edmund Burke as influences. Voegelin’s ‘real-politique’ is Niebuhrian Christian realism.⁵ And Voegelin’s whole critique of modern utopianism and praise of Anglo-American constitutionalism is a page right out of Burke (with Voegelin replacing Burke’s “abstract theory” with Gnostic ideologies and replacing Burke’s “prescription” with “tradition” based on “experiential” wisdom). The reason for the omission (I suppose) is that Burke was anti-theoretical, whereas Voegelin supports his own sober, conservative, Anglo-American constitutionalism with a philosophical teaching about human nature (the truth of the soul vs. the truth of society as the permanent tension in politics).

Strauss says practically nothing in NR & H about his preferred alternative to the modern philosophers who caused the demise of natural right and the rise of historicism in the 19th century. The two villains are Rousseau and Burke – Rousseau for denying human nature and Burke for beginning the historical school of thinking. Strauss leaves the reader hanging in suspense, without even the cursory nod to Anglo-American constitutionalism provided by Voegelin. One is left to infer that Strauss is calling for a revival of natural right as the antidote to historicism and positivism. The opening pages praise the American Declaration of Independence for its natural rights doctrine and the confidence this doctrine gave to Americans in becoming the most powerful nation in the world (this line seems to be the textual basis for ‘neocons’ as well as certain Jaffaites to embrace the universal cause of modern natural rights found in the Declaration). In order to clarify his viewpoint, Strauss adds a new preface to NRH (1971), saying that nothing “has shaken my inclination to prefer ‘natural right,’ especially in its classic form, to the reigning relativism” and that appealing to “higher law...understood as ‘our’ tradition as distinguished from ‘nature,’ is historicist in character, if not in intention” (vii).

Strauss’s message seems pretty clear: he embraces a return to classical natural right, not modern natural rights, and that Burkean traditionalism is historicism rather than natural right or natural law thinking. One is left to conclude that we need to return to something like Plato or Aristotelian natural right, prudently applied to the modern world.

In reflecting on these themes, I am often struck by the thought that both Voegelin and Strauss are unfair to Burke – Voegelin by omission (not one reference to Burke, even in From Enlightenment to Revolution or his Autobiographical Reflections). Strauss is also unfair in the sense that he could have interpreted Burke differently to bring out more emphatically Burke’s numerous appeals to a natural law rooted in providential order –

⁴ NSP, 172, 144

⁵ NSP, see 78 for reference to H. Richard Niebuhr on The Meaning of Revelation, but not Reinhold on politics or Christian realism.

something Peter Stanlis corrects by documentation, and Harvey Mansfield by way of argument in his introduction to Burke's Letters.⁶ Moreover, a careful reading of NRH reveals numerous endorsements by Strauss of Burke's remarkably sound political judgments in rejecting modern ideologies and embracing sound classical prudence (188, 318). My conclusion is that Voegelin and Strauss were considerably more Burkean than they wanted to admit, apparently out of a concern for being too closely identified with conservative parties or for encouraging anti-theoretical traditionalism.

IV. The Political Legacies of Voegelin and Strauss:

Both scholars have produced influential legacies in the academy and beyond that are associated with different brands of conservatism.

Among followers of Voegelin, I would cite the writings of three esteemed scholars:

- John Hallowell, The Moral Foundation of Democracy (1954),
- Ellis Sandoz, Republicanism, Religion, and the Soul of America (2006) and The Roots of Liberty: Magna Carta, Ancient Constitution, and the Anglo-American Tradition of Rule of Law (1993); and
- David Walsh, After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom (1990) and The Growth of the Liberal Soul (1997).

The common ground of these writings is the inspiration drawn from Eric Voegelin's quest for order in the divine ground of being. The authors give a defense of a Christianized version of liberal democracy and the Anglo-American common law tradition. Their key insights are a rejection of utopian freedom and the recovery of order in Christianity, natural law, and English common law for supporting the dignity of the human person in a free and morally regulated society of democratic constitutionalism. As if correcting Voegelin's omissions, Sandoz gives much credit to Burke and Tocqueville for seeing the necessary connection between English common law, Whig politics, Protestant Christianity, the mixed regime, and the Anglo-American tradition of law. David Walsh is critical of Voegelin for slighting Catholic Christianity, but he follows Voegelin in arguing that the "growth of the liberal soul" is bound up with Christian notions of human dignity; hence, Walsh says, "Just as Christianity is in some fundamental sense the truth of the liberal conception, so the liberal order can be considered the political truth of Christianity" (201). This reflects Voegelin's Christianized historicism, leading to the claim that Christianity and liberal democracy share a common conception of human dignity. Overall, I would say that Voegelin's followers are rather faithful to Voegelin's political leanings, while correcting the silence about Burke and spelling out more elaborately the commitment to Anglo-American liberal democracy.

⁶ Selected Letters of Burke (1984), ed. Mansfield. But even Mansfield understates Burke's natural law side: Mansfield says Burke's prescription is a 'great fundamental part of natural law,' but Burke that "does not require that human law be seen as an application of natural law" (Introd. 21).

For contrary evidence, see Burke's Tract on Popery Law: "they [the people] have no right to make a law prejudicial to the whole community... because it would be made against the principle of a superior law, which is not in the power of any community to alter – I mean the will of Him who gave us our nature, and in giving, impressed an invariable law upon it."

Strauss's political legacy is more controversial and disputed, since his recovery of natural right against historicism and nihilism is more complex – it is shrouded in 'esotericism' and in ambiguities about the viability of classical natural right. Those who draw support from Strauss for defending modern natural rights (Jaffa, Zuckert) are on solid ground in opposing historicism or nihilism, but on shaky grounds in equating natural right with the modern doctrines of Locke, Jefferson, or Lincoln. The neoconservative connection to Strauss takes the praise of the Declaration's universal principles of natural rights much too far. Strauss clearly stated his preference for classical natural right, which entails Aristotelian notions of virtue and mixed-regimes, rather than democracy and natural rights. I find the best interpretations of Strauss's political teaching in Mansfield's "Liberal Democracy as a Mixed Regime," and Nasser Behnegar's "The Liberal Politics of Leo Strauss."

Behnegar's argument is that Strauss understood the prudential teaching of classical natural right to be a combination of two principles – wisdom and consent – and this combination is best realized in the modern world in republics like America. This seems like a reasonable interpretation of Strauss's written statement that "liberal or constitutional democracy comes closer to what the classics demanded than any alternative that is viable in our age."⁷

V. Conclusions:

Strauss and Voegelin were philosophical radicals in seeking to recover ancient wisdom in the modern age; but they were political conservatives because they thought that the permanent tension between philosophy and political society would never be overcome – and that it is undesirable to try to remove the tension. Their political views were a secondary but logical inference from their recovery of true philosophy against the ideologies of modernity. But important differences exist between the two, along with some ironies in their legacies. Voegelin's politics were more directed than Strauss's against the dangers of false certitude or false absolutism and more open to Christianity and historical tradition, making Voegelin an unacknowledged Burkean and giving his followers a keener and more accurate appreciation of Anglo-American constitutionalism than Straussian reconstructions based on Aristotle and Locke. At the same time, Strauss is less historicist and more concerned with differences between faith and philosophy, giving him a keener appreciation of the problem of ultimate Truth and a more varied and controversial political legacy. Both Voegelin and Strauss are great men and great scholars who have enriched our thinking, and it is only natural that we can do only partial justice to their thought and legacies.

⁷ Nasser Behnegar, "The Liberal Politics of Leo Strauss," in Political Philosophy and The Human Soul: Essays in Memory of Allan Bloom, eds. Palmer and Pangle (Rowman, 1995), p. 260, quoting Strauss' On Tyranny.