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Essay by Daniel J. Mahoney

## BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

*Eric Voegelin on the right use of reason.*



ERIC VOEGELIN “WAS ONE OF THE MOST creative and prolific philosophers of the twentieth century,” but he is “only sparsely celebrated as such.” So write Charles R. Embry, professor emeritus of political science at Texas A&M University, and Glenn Hughes, professor emeritus of philosophy at St. Mary’s University, in their instructive “Editor’s Introduction” to *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness*. This 2017 volume has just been released in paperback by the University of Missouri Press. Voegelin’s “Collected Works” are available in 34 volumes from the same press, and a non-specialist reader can be excused for not having the time or energy to master them. *The Eric Voegelin Reader*, coming in at a very manageable 434 pages, is to be welcomed by all those who wish to survey Voegelin’s rich and varied reflections on political philosophy and much else.

When placed alongside his *Autobiographical Reflections* (1989), also available in paper-

back from the University of Missouri Press (and excerpted in the *Reader*), this selection of writings reveals Voegelin as a devotedly anti-ideological thinker. He kept his sights on the human quest for timeless meaning, even as he chronicled the mix of political order and disorder that characterizes the contentious “drama of humanity.”

Born in 1901 in Cologne, Germany, Voegelin became the Henry Salvatori Distinguished Scholar at Stanford University’s Hoover Institution, where he continued his work until his death in 1985. A student of the positivistic legal philosopher Hans Kelsen, Voegelin turned to classical political philosophy in the 1930s while teaching in a Vienna torn between intellectually fashionable Marxist dogmatism and the emerging “race doctrines” of a crude and cruel pagan Right. In 1933 Voegelin wrote two important books, *Race and State* and *The History of the Race Idea*, refuting the pseudo-biological theories underlying the National Socialist conception of

race. He began to perceive National Socialism as a “political religion” bereft of moderation, decency, and respect for the sacred. Voegelin fled Austria with his wife, Lissy, shortly after the Anschluss of March 1938, just in time to avoid arrest by the Gestapo. American consular officials at the time could not fathom why Voegelin was fleeing an Austria under the boot of the National Socialists, since he was neither a Jew nor a Communist. It was apparently too difficult for those officials to grasp that a civilized human being might refuse simply on principle to overlook totalitarian barbarism.

Voegelin aspired to what the editors of the *Reader* rightly describe as a “tenacious openness to what he would call the full range of human experience.” Whereas positivists like his mentor Kelsen preferred to dismiss the qualitative subtleties of life, Voegelin was determined “to recognize and accord proper attention to human experiences and symbolizations of those areas of reality dismissed



by positivism." Nonetheless, he was equally wary of fanaticism and dogmatism in all their forms. He is probably most famous for his thesis, "first articulated in *The New Science of Politics* [1951],...that modern political movements such as progressive liberalism, Marxism, Communism and National Socialism exemplify, to a greater or lesser degree, a 'secular' gnostic attitude, in that they promise through knowledge, and application of the proper principles, the transfiguration of *this* world from a realm of disorder and evil to one of social perfection." He rejected *all* species of superstition and primitivism, whether he saw them approaching from the right or from the left. The political scientist Mark Lilla, writing in *The New York Review of Books* ("Mr. Casaubon in America," June 2007), observed that Voegelin was as troubled by "the staid dummies of tradition" as by "the apocalyptic dummies of revolution." Indeed, he rather tetchily insisted that he was a "scientist" and philosopher who did not write to give comfort to the conservative movement, whether European or American, any more than to the Left. In this regard, he seemed at times to protest too much.

#### Human Questions, Divine Answers

AS ELLIS SANDOZ NOTES IN *THE Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (1981), common sense was the indispensable starting point of Voegelin's science of politics. Already in the mid-1920s, while studying in the United States for two years at Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin, Voegelin "discovered English and American common-sense philosophy." This became a vital resource for resisting ideological fanaticism and the allure of what, in *The New Science of Politics*, he would call "modernity without restraint." In the English and Scottish common-sense tradition, particularly the thought of Thomas Reid and Sir William Hamilton, he found "a philosopher's attitude toward life without the philosopher's technical apparatus." Indeed, Voegelin would come to argue that classical philosophy itself was the "technical, analytical elaboration of the commonsense attitude," an indispensable foundation which it never wholly left behind. "In the commonsense rejection of ideology and its attendant destruction of reality," Sandoz writes, "Voegelin sees...a sign of spiritual and intellectual health and existential resistance to contemporary disorder that can become the rallying point for the reconstruction of a sound philosophical science of politics."

And so, in decisive respects, Voegelin's political science was the political science of

#### Books discussed in this essay:

*The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness*, edited by Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes. University of Missouri Press, 434 pages, \$50

*Autobiographical Reflections: Revised Edition with Glossary*, by Eric Voegelin, edited by Ellis Sandoz. University of Missouri Press, 216 pages, \$29.95

*The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction*, by Ellis Sandoz. Routledge, 321 pages, \$170 (cloth), \$59.95 (paper)

*Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics and Gnosticism*, by Eric Voegelin, Volume 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Manfred Henningsen. University of Missouri Press, 336 pages, \$55

*Order and History: Volume IV, The Ecumenic Age*, by Eric Voegelin, Volume 17 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited by Michael Franz. University of Missouri Press, 456 pages, \$60

*Hitler and the Germans*, by Eric Voegelin, translated and edited by Detlev Clemens and Brendan Purcell. University of Missouri Press, 285 pages, \$30

*Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin 1934–1964*, translated and edited by Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper. University of Missouri Press, 368 pages, \$35

Plato and Aristotle, a science of "the right order of the soul and society." In critically examining common opinion and the full range of partisan attitudes (*doxai*), classical political philosophy addressed those contentious questions about the "advantageous and the just" that arose naturally in human and civic life. There was "nothing esoteric" about this subject matter: so writes Voegelin in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (1968), his clearest explication of *politikē epistēmē* or "political science," as "founded by Plato and Aristotle." Such political science "is concerned with the truth of things that everyone talks about": enduring questions regarding happiness, virtue, justice, education, and better and worse forms of government.

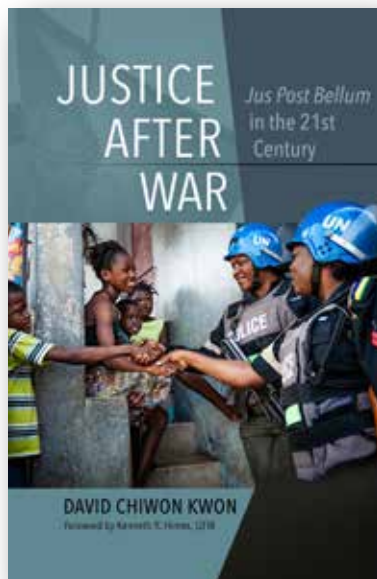
The political philosopher aims to clarify the concerns of citizens and statesmen. But in his role as political scientist, he sides with those who possess wisdom at once theoretical and practical, against those who care only about being "strong and successful." The *spoudaios*, as Aristotle calls the man who exhibits such prudence, is perhaps not always "a paragon of virtue himself." But he strives to attune himself to the "full potentialities of human nature." He is not carried away by the false allure of hedonism or power-seeking for its own sake. He thus embodies the "anthropological principle" of the classical philosophers: the city is the soul writ large, and the soul flourishes in a civic context marked by the cultivation of *phronēsis*, practical wisdom, and *philia*, civic amity. A precondition for harmony in the civic realm is order in the soul—the philosophical, moral, and political imperative par excellence. Yet this psychic and civic harmony must never be confused with the end of social and civic conflict altogether, a goal at once impossible and undesirable.

As Voegelin emphasizes with impressive clarity in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, philosophy involves the never-ending effort to maintain contact with reality by exercising a reason that is at once empirical, capacious, and open to the "divine ground" of being. In an age where thought and action have been distorted by ideological deformations that close the soul to the sources of self-knowledge, it is necessary to make a self-conscious effort to recover reality in its richness and amplitude. For Voegelin, "the most important means of regaining contact with reality is the recourse to thinkers of the past who had not yet lost reality, or who were engaged in the effort of regaining it." That means, primarily if not exclusively, a *dialectical* return to classical and Christian wisdom—rather than an "ideological" appropriation of classical wisdom or a hidebound traditionalism.

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Recovering Socratic questioning and inquiry is at the core of Voegelin's "new science." Sandoz suggests that "the life of Socrates... is then the empirical evidence of the true order of the soul; and philosophy in its climax in Plato and Aristotle is an *imitatio Socratis*." The Socratic philosopher combines contemplative reflection with "resistance to the forces in society which seek to corrupt him and alienate him from the true order of existence and reality." This made Voegelin a die-hard opponent of all who would shut off this kind of questioning, including Karl Marx, Auguste Comte, Friedrich Nietzsche, and ideologues closer to home. In *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin even calls Marx an "intellectual swindler" for refusing to answer objections made against Communism in the name of religion, morality, justice, and "eternal truths."

### The Highest Thing in Man

IN VOEGELIN'S PRESENTATION, MODERN rationalism has diminished reason, reducing it to pragmatic or instrumental rationality. This kind of rationality covers "all rational action in the sciences of the external world, the development of technology, and the coordination of ends and means as they apply to the external world." All of that has its legitimate place. But reason in its full capacity must aim more broadly and deeply. The inquiry into the truth of society and the soul, a "highly developed life of reason" in the "noetic" or philosophical sense, is not identical with technological aptitude. As Voegelin points out, noetic reason could flourish "in the Athens of Aeschylus or Plato" without any significant "expansion of the sciences of the external world." Likewise, the "development of pragmatic rationality" was "quite compatible with a high degree of irrationality in the sphere of noetic reason." Voegelin gives as an extremely pertinent example the Soviet Union, an ideological despotism that was quite capable of building an industrial society, even of a distorted sort, at least for a time. Like Leo Strauss, Voegelin argues that "mere life" must be complemented and governed by a rational and affective concern for the "good life" in all its manifestations.

A lucid 1965 essay entitled "In Search of the Ground," also included in *The Eric Voegelin Reader*, is perhaps Voegelin's most succinct and satisfying articulation of noetic reason and its relationship to what he called the "divine ground." Voegelin strictly distinguished noetic reason, man's rational inquiry into the ground of existence, from the "pneumatic" activity whereby God takes the initiative to reveal himself to human beings. This latter kind

of contact between human and divine is the subject of the luminous first volume of *Order and History*, entitled *Israel and Revelation* (1956). But in the 1965 essay, Voegelin's focus is on man's search for the ground, rooted in two vital questions about the *existence* and *essence* of things: first, "Why is there something; why not nothing?" Next, and inevitably: "Why is it as it is, and not different?" These questions come naturally to human beings.

In decisive respects, *nous*—i.e., reason, spirit, or intellect—turns out to be both the faculty or capacity that allows us to search for the ground, and the ground itself. In the life of reason, human beings experience the pull of "transcendent Being." Reason thus points to a divine element within the psyche or soul. It is an insight at once simple and profound, fraught with significance: the soul is the "sensorium for transcendence," the organ of perception where what is highest in human beings, and that which is above and outside them, come most fully into view. *Nous* gives access to the *Metaxy* or "In-Between" (a term Voegelin adopted from Plato's *Symposium*), where the human and "the higher than human" meet in more or less fruitful tension.

As becomes clear elsewhere in *The Eric Voegelin Reader*, Voegelin's assessment of *nous* arose from an analysis of Aristotle's account in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book X (Chapter 7.8). In that rich if enigmatic passage, Aristotle observes that "the life of intellect (*nous*) is higher than the human level; not in virtue of his humanity will man achieve it, but in virtue of something within him that is divine; and by as much as this something is superior to his composite nature, by so much is its activity superior to the exercise of other sorts of virtue." Voegelin emphasizes that *nous* "is something divine in comparison with human life," as Aristotle suggestively puts it. Aristotle goes on to state that a mortal exercising his more-than-human intellect should not have "thoughts of mortality" but instead ought to "immortalize" (*athanatizein* in Greek). He ought to do this "as much as possible and do everything toward a life in accordance with the highest thing in man." The human and divine dimensions of *nous* meet in the sensorium that is the human soul.

In his exegesis of this passage, Voegelin indicates that Aristotle has deliberately confused "two modes of experience and symbolization." He has used the language of traditional Greek mythology, which divides the world "compactly" into immortal gods and mortal men. But he is really describing a much more finely differentiated continuum between human and divine, the philosophical "tension of existence with its poles of mortality and

immortality." A life lived in accord with noetic reason is therefore highly suspect and sometimes outright offensive to the "guardians of tradition." Traditionalists succumb to what is commonly called superstition and "believe in gods and men as distinct entities" within the same cosmic order. Philosophers, in contrast, "have discovered that man is not quite mortal but partakes of divine immortality." In ways both overt and subtle, "the philosophers abolish the gods of the polytheistic tradition and identify their own God as the *nous* who reveals himself, through noetic search, as the Ground of existence." The philosopher is thus an atheist or unbeliever only from the perspective of the most elementary or "compact" civic piety. God as such—the true divine reality—is very much alive in *nous*.

It follows that atheism and dogmatism are the two enemies of the philosophical effort to do justice to the Real. Man's existence in the *Metaxy* is marked by an uncertainty which is too much for some souls to bear. But all attempts to abolish the "In-Between" character of human existence will inevitably set us at war with the structure of reality in a misguided effort to establish paradise on earth. In his early work, Voegelin identifies this effort as "Gnosticism," although in an "immanentized" and modern secular form. It takes wisdom and rare self-mastery to live well with the tension-ridden coexistence of "imperfection and perfection, time and timelessness, mortality and immortality" that defines the human condition. Operating in this intermediate realm is the task of being human, and philosophy's highest aim is to assist in that task.

### Between Heaven and Earth

WHERE DOES CHRISTIAN REVELATION fit into all this? Writing in the *Review of Metaphysics* in 1958 ("Critical Studies: Order and History," December issue), Stanley Rosen, an early Straussian critic of Voegelin, accused him of conflating Plato with Christianity and of succumbing to historicism. The first charge is demonstrably false. The second is based on a cursory examination of Voegelin's writings about the relation between philosophy proper and a philosophy of history.

To begin with the second charge: The *Voegelin Reader* opens with a letter from Voegelin to his friend, the political scientist Robert B. Heilman. In this letter Voegelin makes clear that a broadly philosophical inquiry "into the nature of man...excludes historicism," even as it must include a properly historical appreciation of the human condition. In this letter, and throughout his work



as a whole, Voegelin insists it is “peculiar to the nature of man that it unfolds its potentialities historically.” At the same time, he argues that one can best discern the nature of man by studying the classics “with loving care.” The “great dialogue” throughout the centuries “among men about their nature and destiny” is fundamentally about truths that do not change.

But the unchanging truths articulated in Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics* show only the results of Aristotle’s reflections, not the process by which he arrived at them. In his 1965 lectures entitled “The Drama of History,” Voegelin proposes that though “the stable features” of politics are rooted in human nature, they “are discovered at a certain point in history.” Thus, he provocatively intimates that the *Ethics* and *Politics* need to be completed by a *Historics*, a volume Aristotle never thought of writing. One can understand the five volumes of *Order and History*—especially the first three, *Israel and Revelation*, *The World of the Polis* (1957), and *Plato and Aristotle* (1957)—as a massive effort to address this conundrum without succumbing to historicism on either the theoretical or practical planes. That is a tightrope act, to be sure, but one that Voegelin walks with measured self-assurance.

The first three volumes of *Order and History* seemed to suggest that Voegelin saw Christian revelation as the most elevated articulation of the possibilities inherent in the human soul. He initially intended a fourth and fifth volume, *Empire and Christianity* and *The Protestant Centuries*, to be followed by a concluding volume on *The Crisis of Western Civilization*. It is clear from this plan that Christendom was to represent, in decisive respects, the culminating height of his philosophy of history. But when Voegelin finally published the fourth volume of *Order and History* in 1974, after a hiatus of more than 15 years, it was entitled not *Empire and Christianity* but *The Ecumenic Age*. He had revised his original design in a most significant way.

Instead of a spiritual maturation of the human race marked by the dual, overlapping contributions of classical philosophy and Biblical revelation, Voegelin now saw distinct “spiritual outbursts” and “theophanic events” that went back and forth in no discernible ascending or hierarchical order. His task was now to find “equivalences” among “symbolizations” that revealed a common human nature and a common quest to explore glimpses of transcendence. Christianity no longer held pride of place, at least in any “historical” sense. Voegelin’s thought became less Eurocentric and more multicultural. He now saw

multiple ways by which human consciousness “differentiates” the cosmos of mythology “into a finite world and a divine Beyond, while human consciousness stratifies into worldly and transcendent dimensions.” In this variegated process of ongoing differentiations, the “personal God revealed through the prophets in Hebrew and Christian cultures” is one among many more or less “equivalent” symbolizations of the divine.

But one can ask: is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Moses, and Jesus Christ simply “equivalent” to the “transcendent *Agathon* or self-sufficient *Nous* in Greek philosophy,” not to mention “an impersonal *Brahman* or *Tao* in Hindu and Chinese traditions”? Does that not risk reducing Christianity (or classical philosophy for that matter) to something other than itself—a comparable entrant in an ecumenical pantheon? In *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin pointedly criticizes the doctrinal formulations articulated at Nicaea and Chalcedon that allow Christianity to truly understand, if only analogically, the encounter between God and man in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. This delicate edifice is replaced by what Voegelin calls the “Pauline

### In Voegelin’s presentation, modern rationalism has diminished reason.

experience of the Resurrected,” a poor substitute for a more robust theological affirmation of the God-Man Jesus Christ. In his learned and challenging 1971 essay “The Gospel and Culture,” also to be found in the *Reader*, Voegelin observes that the Christian account of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection “is considerably more complex than classical philosophy” as an answer “to the question of life and death.” At the same time, Christianity is deeply attractive to ordinary people because of its spiritual universalism and its “appeal to the inarticulate humanity of the common man.” But Voegelin also faults Christianity for its comparative “neglect of noetic control” and “its bias against the articulate wisdom of the wise.” He sees Christianity as more “unbalanced” than classical philosophy because of what he does not hesitate to call its “apocalyptic ferocity.” Ultimately, then, for Voegelin it was not Christ but Plato who achieved the most sublime negotiation between the human and the divine. In chapter 5 of *The Ecumenic Age* (“The Pauline Vision of the Resurrected”), he writes: “Plato kept the theophanic event in balance with the experience of the cosmos.

He did not permit enthusiastic expectations to distort the human condition.... Plato did not allow the theophanic event to grow into the apocalyptic ‘great mountain that filled the whole world’ (Daniel 2:35).”

#### Theophany versus Egophany

VOEGELIN’S OFTEN RIGID OPPOSITION to any kind of dogmatic formulation made it difficult for him to understand Christianity as it understood itself. In his very fine book *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* (1990), David Walsh has shown that Voegelin’s entire intellectual enterprise would be unthinkable without Christianity and that “many quotations have been adduced to support the fundamentally Christian thrust of his enterprise.” But Walsh, an independent-minded Catholic personalist philosopher who remains indebted to Voegelin, maintains that “there is something missing.” That “something” is the capacity truly to look at Christianity from within. As Pierre Manent has written, “The Christian teaching has an emphatically *objective* character”—its claim to absolute truth makes up part of its essential content. By reducing Christian theology to one among a number of ways to “symbolize” the divine, Voegelin ends up with a Christianity that no truly devout Christian could readily recognize or affirm.

Nonetheless, for Voegelin, both classical wisdom and Christian wisdom are indispensable allies in the common struggle against what he calls “the egophanic deformation of history.” In the philosophies of history put forward by Nicolas de Condorcet, Johann Fichte, G.F.W. Hegel, Comte, and Marx, so-called “theological and metaphysical conceits” are left behind. Self-assertion, bordering on self-deification, becomes the order of the day. God is dead (or “murdered,” as Voegelin had already put it in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*), so that the “egophanic God-man or superman (Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche) can establish the final realm of freedom in history.” But without a place for “theophanic experiences and their symbolization,” the soul becomes desiccated. Liberty and human dignity are subjected to sustained assault. These God-denying ideologies have no capacity to build anything permanent or humane. The promised Apocalypse turns out to be pure negation, demonic in aspiration and utterly destructive in practice.

One might be left with the impression that Eric Voegelin was so “high-flying” a thinker that he provided little or no guidance for the comprehension of concrete political matters. To be sure, he made significant



demands on his readers. But if one wants to see Voegelinian political science at work in a truly admirable and accessible form, there is no better place to look than the posthumously published book *Hitler and the Germans*, which first appeared as volume 31 of the *Collected Works* (1999). The book had its origin in Voegelin's lectures at the University of Munich in the summer semester of 1964. Voegelin was appalled by the "collective silence" that prevailed in Germany as it failed to reckon with the history of Nazism in the 1950s and early 1960s. The excessive concern for alleged "victims of denazification," and the illusory confidence that the Federal Republic of Germany was now more or less a normal society, fed laxity toward former Nazis and risked undermining the new republic's democratic *bona fides*.

For Voegelin, the German descent into racialist totalitarianism marked a "systematic regression from the rationality of common sense," as University of Notre Dame's Brendan Purcell puts it in a discerning opening essay on the "philosophical context" of the lectures. Such "radical stupidity," as Voegelin called it, had its roots in a "willful resistance to creatureliness," a metaphysically mad project to put the human libido "at the center of the universe." With rare passion, Voegelin demonstrates how "such dedivination leads all too quickly to a dehumanization." As Purcell ably highlights, Voegelin deplored "pneumapathology," a sickness of "the human spirit" that already led Novalis to proclaim "The world shall be as I wish it!" Here we see the egophanic revolt at work. In *Hitler and the Germans*, Voegelin painstakingly retraced the moral abdication of almost every group—the intellectuals, the universities, the churches, the mainstream political parties—in a political order losing its contact with reality. In such an order, those attached to the old and enduring verities and

decencies, without which humankind perishes, "can only commit high treason" because of their refusal to abandon intellectual and moral integrity.

### The End of Ideology

**I**N "IN SEARCH OF THE GROUND," VOEGELIN argued that the ideological project in its various manifestations had reached a point of exhaustion. He even went so far as to state that "ideologies are finished"—that they had played themselves out in competing displays of political and spiritual negation. On one level, he was undoubtedly right: as Augustine said of evil, ideologies are mere privations of the good. They are spiritually parasitic on the reality that they refuse to acknowledge. But the postmodern quest to "deconstruct" everything real and inherited, which the late Roger Scruton memorably called the "culture of repudiation," makes clear that Voegelin's hope for a comprehensive recovery of common sense was premature at best. There are innumerable proponents of "modernity without restraint" among us who need analysis, critique, and resistance both theoretical and practical.

Students of Voegelin have rightly seen his own work—his new but old "political science"—as an effort at spiritual recovery and ascent after the destructive nihilism of all the old ideological deformations had been made manifest. And Voegelin-influenced scholars and thinkers such as Gerhart Niemeyer, Ellis Sandoz, Brendan Purcell, and David Walsh have ably used Voegelin's categories to illuminate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's efforts at recovering a sensitivity to the enduring drama of good and evil in the human soul, and with it, genuine openness of the soul to God's grace. This is a prime example of a political science open to the truth of the soul and "the drama of humanity" as lived in the In-Between that is human existence. Voegelin himself saw a sim-

ilar movement of spiritual ascent evident in Albert Camus's 1951 book, *L'Homme révolté*, where the famed French writer jettisoned existentialist voluntarism, repudiated all bloody efforts to transform human beings into gods, and made his peace with human nature.

Recovering a full sense of our humanity will mean freeing reason from its positivistic, scientific, and dogmatically atheistic blinders. Voegelin once praised the French anti-totalitarian political thinker Raymond Aron, Camus's contemporary, for his keen appreciation that "reasoned discussion" and "reasonable debate," capaciously understood, are the centerpiece of the Good Society and the "cornerstone of western belief in constitutional government." In response to Voegelin, Aron expressed agreement with the commonsense foundation of Voegelin's political science: "[T]he necessary condition for a philosophical discussion is not to be ideologists, not men of opinion, or *doxa*, to borrow a word from Plato. If we are merely men of *doxa*, all we can do is contradict each other's views, and reasoned discussion becomes impossible."

Before there is any prospect for philosophical or spiritual ascent, we must begin in the beginning, with "reasonable debate" rooted in common sense. Along with the necessary critique of ideology, this is the first step toward reopening the human spirit to truth in our day. The luminous works of Eric Voegelin stand as powerful reminders and guides to this two-fold task.

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