Eric Voegelin is one of the most insightful and prolific philosophers of the twentieth century. His life (1901-85) spanned two world wars, the rise of totalitarianism, and the spread of modern ideologies that undermined the philosophical foundations of the Western political tradition. These experiences of political, social, and economic turmoil were the inspiration for his political theory. Taken as a whole, they constitute what has been called the crisis of the West, a period of unprecedented violence, war, revolution, and social upheaval that brought into question the very identity and health of Western civilization. Voegelin's work is in one sense an attempt to answer the question: why was the twentieth century so disordered?

As Voegelin explored the complexities of modernity and its particular problems of political order, he became convinced that insight and understanding require historical and philosophical depth. He studied a variety of civilizations, philosophers, and texts in search of patterns and evidence that would provide theoretical clarity to the meaning of human nature and historical existence. The philosophical scope of his work is astounding as well as daunting to students who wish to explore the political philosophy of such a seminal and influential thinker.

Throughout the course of his teaching career, Voegelin primarily taught undergraduate courses and, thus, did not attain a following of graduate students who became intellectual disciples. His influence was primarily due to his scholarship and is evident in the works of a substantial number of scholars, including Ellis Sandoz, Barry Cooper, Glenn Hughes, David Walsh, Jürgen Gebhardt, Paul Caringella, and Thomas A. Hollweck, among others. His writings influenced the works of Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Russell Kirk, and Gerhardt Niemeyer, as well as public intellectuals like William F. Buckley. The Voegelin Society, housed at Louisiana State University where Voegelin taught for sixteen years, typically sponsors more than a dozen panels annually at the American Political Science Association meetings and has done so for decades; they are among the best-attended panels at the annual meeting. The Voegelin Society was an outgrowth of the Voegelin Institute, created in 1987. In 2008 the Center for Voegelin Studies was created at the University of Gent, and Geoffrey Price founded the Center for Voegelin Studies at the University of Manchester, which he directed for several years.

Voegelin's collected works have been published in thirty-four volumes. Knowing where to begin reading is a difficult choice. The quantity, philosophical density, and new theoretical direc-

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tions of his scholarship, which spans decades, make the initial experience of reading his work difficult to navigate. If one chooses his final book, *In Search of Order* (1987), as a starting point, it is impossible to understand the decades of work that led him to focus on a theory of consciousness. Starting at the beginning presents its own challenges. Voegelin’s early works are not necessarily representative of his political theory. They focus on theoretical and historical problems related to the rise of totalitarianism and positivism and his discovery of the Anglo-American commonsense tradition. His best-known work, *The New Science of Politics* (1952), comes in the middle of his professional career and marks a new direction, if not a break from his earlier writings. This middle period focuses on the development of a philosophy of history and comes after Voegelin abandoned his *History of Political Ideas* project, a seven-volume work published posthumously (1997-1999).

Fortunately for readers interested in studying Voegelin’s work, Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes have published *The Eric Voegelin Reader* with the intent of providing a starting point for the study of Voegelin’s challenging essays and books. The introduction concisely explains the various parts of Voegelin’s work, its changes in direction, and its contribution to the philosophy of human nature, the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of consciousness. A brief biographical overview, including his escape from the Nazis and intellectual response to totalitarianism, is provided. The introduction also suggests and describes six principles or themes in Voegelin’s work: resistance to positivism; recovery of historical wisdom (especially from the ancient Greek experience); deliberate human participation in the open search for meaning that has as its end knowledge of the transcendent ground of being; differentiation or stratification of consciousness into transcendent and immanent dimensions; modernity as corrupted by gnostic ideologies that distort reality by engaging in reductionist thought; and philosophy as the open and endless search for truth that rejects the closed systems of ideology. The combination of these parts of the introduction provides context for studying and understanding Voegelin’s political philosophy.

Voegelin scholars may quibble about the editors’ selections from his writings, but it is difficult to argue with the organization of the chosen texts into five sections. Each selection includes a brief introduction that puts the text into context. The selections begin with chapters from Voegelin’s *Auto­biographical Reflections* (1989) and the preface from his early (1939) book *The Political Religions*. The second section includes selections from *The New Science of Politics*, the book that widened his influence and set the stage for his study of order and history. It also includes essays that are representative of his critique of modernity. Part 3 includes three of Voegelin’s most important essays that explain the primacy of historical experience and its relationship to language symbols. Part 4 focuses on consciousness and divine reality, and is followed by the final section on philosophy of history. The book includes useful lists of further Voegelin readings and secondary readings about Voegelin and his works as well as a substantial index.

Undertaking the task of studying Voegelin is not for the faint of heart. It requires a commitment to read what is often dense philosophy with a language that is likely to be unfamiliar to the novice. At some point in the journey, the language and ideas begin to click and the powerful insight of Voegelin’s philosophy is revealed. These insights are aptly identified by Embry and Hughes in their introduction and in the selected Voegelin texts. They include resistance to positivism and other reductionist ideologies, recovery of experiences of order, a theory of consciousness that can aid the recovery of experience, the differentiation of consciousness, analysis of modernity as gnostic, and the meaning of philosophy. What unifies the various parts of Voegelin’s work is the philosophy
of human nature, an enduring search for the meaning of human existence.

Voegelin was especially interested in the rise of gnostic ideologies, what he sometimes referred to as political religions, that were closed to the open philosophical search for truth. Gnosticism is inspired by several factors, including a deep dissatisfaction with the world as it is. The injustice of the world is seen as the consequence of poor organization that can be remedied by using gnosis, secret knowledge, that can solve the problems of social, economic, and political life. Once empowered, gnostics reorganize society and the world in revolutionary ways that promise permanent relief from evil, thus Voegelin’s often repeated phrase of immanentizing the eschaton. Nazism, communism, and positivism are examples of gnostic ideologies that are pernicious because they distort reality and truth by substituting dogmatic propositions for historical experience, and in doing so truncate human understanding of reality. Recovering experience is a matter of getting beyond symbols or ideas to the engendering experience that gave the symbols life. Philosophers attempt to recall experiences of order to consciousness so that they become a living force in contemporary life and can counter the ideological distortions of gnosticism. Plato’s description of the struggle of philosophers to counter the doxa of the sophists inspired Voegelin’s view of gnosticism and philosophy.

Embry and Hughes emphasize that Voegelin’s philosophy does not claim to have created a system or discovered a complete understanding of reality. Rather, it comes to the more modest conclusion that philosophical search is ongoing and that while truth exists, human understanding of it is incomplete. Aspects of reality remain a mystery and, thus, philosophers must maintain a degree of humility in the search for truth. Voegelin did, however, employ the word “differentiated” to suggest that human understanding can be deepened as human experience is enriched through the ages. He did not believe that the human mind can reach a final or complete knowledge of reality, and thus his opposition to ideologies that claim comprehensive truth. The enduring search for truth itself is part of what defines human nature and philosophy.

Among the philosophically penetrating passages included in the book is the opening sentence of *The New Science of Politics*: “The existence of man in political society is historical existence; and a theory of politics, if it penetrates to principles, must at the same time be a theory of history” (p. 36). This sentence identifies Voegelin as someone who opposes the ahistorical character of much of modern philosophy, including social contract theory and its foundation, an ahistorical state of nature. Voegelin also emphasized the need to search for the truth of reality in all of its experiential dimensions, including transcendence. As political science and the academy were becoming more secular, positivistic, and ideological, Voegelin was intent on pushing against these trends by echoing the classical and Judeo-Christian traditions’ discovery that “the Ground of existence is an experienced reality of a transcendent nature toward which one lives in a tension” (p. 119). The psyche is the sensorium of transcendence, the part of human consciousness that experiences the tension. Humans are, however, divided by the conflicting inclinations of virtue and vice, episteme and doxa, justice and injustice, to name a few. To experience existential tension is to be pulled in contrary directions, toward transcendence and away from it. Community is possible in so far as the experiences of transcendence become a living force in society. It was Voegelin’s contention that the West was losing its memory of the experiences of transcendence and replacing it with “second reality,” ideologically derived partial truths (Nazism, Communism, positivism) that distort the understanding of the meaning of human existence. Voegelin’s work attempts to restore consciousness of these experiences that form and animate civilization. Thus, Voegelin stated in the
preface to *Israel and Revelation* (1956), “Amnesia with regard to past achievement is one of the most important social phenomena” (p. 290). Part of the Western crisis was caused by a failure to employ what Edmund Burke called “the wisdom of the ages” in the drama of order and history. That wisdom and its experiential foundations were preserved in the culture, in other words, the myths, symbols, religions, literature, and art of particular societies and civilizations.

These basic tenets of Voegelin’s political theory should be kept in mind as one works through the various aspects of his writings. He witnessed in a dramatic way, as the Nazis drove him from his home, and communism followed in its wake, the crisis of order in Western civilization. Restoration was first and foremost an exercise in scholarly study of the causes of order and disorder in particular historical societies and in the circumstances of the twentieth century. Voegelin spent a lifetime searching for the experiences of order that could be used to rebuild civilization. It was these historical experiences and not merely their derivative ideas that provided the necessary insights into the meaning of human nature. Art, poetry, and philosophy, for example, when at their best, are capable of conveying insights about human nature. They share a state of consciousness where humans experience order and the tension of life that includes a transcendent pull toward the highest part of human nature. Consequently, Voegelin insisted on an openness toward the ground of existence.

Modern ideologies provide a contrast to philosophical openness. Ideologies close the search for truth by truncating reality. Class and race, for example, are used by communism and Nazism, respectively, to eliminate the need to search for a deeper understanding of human nature. Their simplified version of reality (second reality) not only are substitutes for philosophy rightly understood but also empower those who propagate the ideology to silence those who engage in open philosophical search. The trial and death of Socrates is an example from classical experience of sophistry destroying philosophy. Voegelin’s analysis of the problem of ideology is aptly covered in the three essays included in chapter 3: “In Search of the Ground,” “On Debate and Existence,” and “Immortality: Experience and Symbol.”

*The Eric Voegelin Reader* is a valuable addition to the literature on a leading political philosopher. It provides a glimpse into the thirty-four volumes of Voegelin’s works that will inspire readers to explore more of his writings as a way to understand defining aspects of the modern world. With Voegelin, there is always more. His books and articles are never about just one topic. They link various academic disciplines and range across cultures, civilizations, and historical time. Embry and Hughes make a compelling case for why reading Voegelin’s work is an investment that is well worth the time and effort. Once Voegelin’s ideas are applied to politics, history, and the study of human nature, one may not always agree with his conclusions, but it is difficult not to appreciate his accomplishment and the wisdom of his insights.
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