A Note on Rationalism in Eric Voegelin

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Abstract

In his *New Science of Politics*, Eric Voegelin offers an analysis of modernity: at its heart, it is a radicalization of Christianity—a radicalization that counts as a betrayal. Like other movements of its time, Christianity judged this world in terms of another—one wherein all of us were brothers and sisters, wherein justice mattered more than victory and mercy more than justice. But rather than endure in patience their own limitations, those whom Voegelin calls “gnostics” tried to build heaven on earth—inevitably, by violence. This serves as his postmortem on the twentieth century: liberalism, communism, and fascism are all, according to Voegelin, trying to do what cannot be done—specifically, to do what Voegelin calls “immanentizing the eschaton.” Each is, in its own way, a revolt against the human condition—and so a revolt against God.

But these gnostics would hardly have seen themselves in this demonic light. Indeed, they often called themselves “rationalists” and saw themselves as a brave few who might lead humanity out of the madness of the past. Of course, Voegelin would hardly grant that Plato or Saint Augustine were less rational than, say, Thomas Hobbes. But he would certainly grant that the gnostics hoped to render the world “rational” by abolishing whatever aspects of the human condition were “irrational”—in the case of Hobbes, our capacity for mystical experience of God.

Of course, this is hardly how contemporary political scientists would explain Hobbes. In the introduction to his *New Science of Politics*, though, Voegelin offers an indirect explanation of this. He warns that the social sciences are prisoners of their idolatry of the natural sciences: they ignore any data that cannot be rendered in language that is entirely descriptive—insisting as they do so that this methodology is only “rational.”

1. Axiality.

It seems clear that one cannot reduce the work of Eric Voegelin to any one insight. But, were one to indicate the insight closest to the core of his *The New Science of Politics*, it would be this: to see politics rightly—to see it, in other words, scientifically—is to see it in the light of certain values that we, as humans, have discovered. This discovery, he notes, is not new:

The discovery… is a process that occupies about five centuries in the history of mankind, that is, roughly the period from 800 to 300 B.C.; it occurs simultaneously in the various civilizations but without apparent mutual influences. In China it is the age of Confucius and Lao-tse as well as of the other philosophical schools; in India, the age of the *Upanishads* and the Buddha; in Persia, of Zoroastrianism; in Israel, of the Prophets; in Hellas, of the philosophers and of tragedy. The period around 500 B.C. when Heraclitus, the Buddha, and Confucius were contemporaries may be recognized as a specifically characteristic phase in this long-draw-out process.[[1]](#endnote-1)

But what, precisely, was discovered in this time? Well, initially, Voegelin refers to the work of Karl Jaspers, who has this to say:

In this epoch… man became aware of existence as a whole, of his self, and of his limitations. He experienced the awesomeness of the world and his own weakness. He raised radical questions and, in his quest for liberation and redemption, came face to face with the abyss. While gaining consciousness of his limitations, he set himself the highest aims; he experienced the absolute in depth of selfhood and in the clarity of transcendence.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Inspired as they were by the existentialism of the time, the words of Jaspers are less than entirely clear; nonetheless, they seem pregnant with meaning—indeed, with many meanings. Perhaps this is the reason that, for almost seventy years, philosophers and sociologists have debated what, precisely, marks the Axial Age—and even whether there was an Axial Age; the work of Eric Voegelin is, of course, key to this debate.

No matter how one interprets the Axial Age—assuming that, in some broad sense, there was an Axial Age—it is hard to see at its root any one alteration. But perhaps Charles Taylor articulates what is the most plausible candidate:

What was the nature of the Axial Revolution? … It was a shift from a mode of religious life which involved “feeding the gods”—where the understanding of human good was that of prospering or flourishing (as this was understood), and where the “gods” or spirits were not necessarily or unambiguously on the side of human good—to a mode in which (a) there is a notion of a higher, more complete human good, a notion of complete virtue, or even of a salvation beyond human flourishing (Buddha) while at the same time (b) the higher powers according to this view are unambiguously on the side of human good. [[3]](#endnote-3)

Prior to the Axial Age, humans assumed that happiness was a matter of attaining the material: at the risk of caricature, happiness meant more food, drink, wives, sons, and daughters—and, once they became relevant, more money and possessions. For millennia, it seems, no one questioned this assumption. But then, all at once, certain men and women did—at least in China, India, Israel, and Greece; though there is hardly an exhaustive list, at the top of any list would be Confucius, the Buddha, Isaiah, and Plato.

Whether or not it is right to see the transformations wrought by these men as simultaneous, it seems that they do arrive at the same insight: human happiness is not a matter of attaining the material. Rather, it is a matter of reordering the thoughts and desires within one—specifically, of aligning those thoughts and desires with an order in some sense prior to those thoughts and desires. For better or worse, this order is transcendent—that is, it is not immediately obvious to humans: the material world, or at least the social world, seems to ignore it. Insofar as this is true, the old conception of happiness—which assumes that happiness is a matter of attaining the material—is positively misleading; to attain happiness, we first need to combat it—both within ourselves and within society.

From this aspect of the Axial Age, it seems, two others come more or less immediately. First, whereas the old conception of happiness taught us to compete with others in order to attain the material, the new conception of happiness teaches us to treat others as more than mere competitors—at the limit, to treat them as we would want to be treated. And, second, because the social order is rooted in the old conception of happiness, the new conception of happiness teaches us that the social order ought to be radically altered; insofar as ought implies can, the new conception of happiness implies that the social order *can* be radically altered.

If all of this is so, then the Axial Age is by its nature both humane and revolutionary. This resonates with what Voegelin himself writes on the matter:

You are familiar with Plato’s often-quoted phrase that a polis is man written large. This formula, one may say, is the creed of the new epoch… The wedge of this principle must be permanently driven into the idea that society represents nothing but cosmic truth, today quite as much as in the time of Plato. A political society in existence will have to be an ordered cosmion, but not at the price of man; it should be not only a microcosmos but also a macroanthropos… It is an instrument of social critique.[[4]](#endnote-4)

According to Voegelin, preaxial civilizations—for example, the Egyptian and Persian Empires—saw themselves as aligned with the order immanent in the world; it is for this reason that he calls them “cosmic.” Since the axial is inspired by another order—one transcendent rather than immanent—it cannot but be critical of the preaxial. And, whereas the primary representation of the immanent order is society, the primary representation of the transcendent order is the individual; because of this, the axial criticism of the preaxial inevitably starts in the inhumanity of the preaxial—that is, in its willingness to steamroll individuals in the name of the preservation of social order. The trial and execution of Socrates is, of course, the paradigm of this. Perhaps this is what Jaspers means when he states this:

What took place in this axial age was the discovery of what was later to be called reason and personality.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Over the millennia, of course, “reason” and its cognates have meant different—even opposite—things. In his own *New Science of Politics*, Voegelin uses the word and its cognates both in an ironical sense and in an unironical sense. For Voegelin—as for Jaspers—what is authentically rational is what is axial:

Some religious experiences would have to be classified as higher, others as lower, by the objective criterion of the degree of rationality that they admit in the interpretation of reality. The religious experiences of the Greek mystic philosophers and of Christianity would rank high because they allow the unfolding of metaphysics; the religious experiences of Comte and Marx would rank low because they prohibit the asking of metaphysical questions.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Even as he uses the word “rational” in this way, though, Voegelin is aware that his use is not the usual one:

Such considerations would radically upset the positivistic conception of an evolution from an early religious or theological phase of mankind to rationalism and science. Not only would the evolution go from a higher to a lower degree of rationalism, at least for the modern period, but, in addition, this decline of reason would have to be understood as the consequence of religious retrogression.[[7]](#endnote-7)

“Rationalism,” as the word is usually used today, indicates what is, according to Voegelin, irrational. Of course, this assertion is inevitably controversial; this essay explores what Voegelin means by “rationalism” and whether he is right that it is irrational. As may become clear, it is not obvious how to tell whether Voegelin is right about this—for, by his own admission, his position rests on having certain mystical experiences.

2. Rationalism as Doctrine.

What, then, does “rationalism” usually mean today—that is, within modernity? Well, perhaps one ought to start with a consideration of the man whom Voegelin seems to assume is the paradigmatic modern political philosopher—that is, with Thomas Hobbes:

Hobbes used the following argument… There is conscious to man a dictate of reason that disposes him to peace and obedience under a civil order. Reason makes him, first, understand that he can live out his natural life in pursuit of his worldly happiness only under the condition that he lives in peace with his fellow-men; and it makes him, second, understand that he can live in peace, without distrust of the other man’s intentions, only under the condition that every man’s passions are curbed to mutual forbearance by the overwhelming force of a civil government.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The key move, of course, comes with the word “reason”: we, as humans, want *worldly* happiness. We treat others humanely only because—or, better, only insofar as—we would be hurt otherwise.

“Rationalism,” as the word is usually used today, indicates the rejection of the axial conception of happiness: modern political philosophers trade alignment with a transcendental order for the attainment of food, drink, wives, sons, and daughters—and, for that matter, money and possessions. Perhaps the paradigmatic modern statement of this rejection is this one:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.[[9]](#endnote-9)

By “happiness,” of course, Thomas Jefferson means precisely what John Locke means by “property”: Locke, inspired by Hobbes, has reconceived happiness as a matter of the material. Both men have returned, whether or not they see it, to a preaxial conception of happiness—even as they keep faith with the axial in its humane and revolutionary aspects.

Whether or not this is a contradiction is a crucial question—but it is outside the scope of this essay. More relevant is what Thomas Hobbes and other modern political philosophers took themselves to be doing: for them, rooting society in the axial conception of happiness was a sort of madness. As evidence for this position, they needed only to cite the Thirty Years’ War or the English Civil War—each apparently a conflict between rival interpretations of transcendent order: to modern political philosophers, these conflicts revealed that one interpretation of transcendent order was as arbitrary as any other. For the very idea of a transcendent order was a sort of insanity—was, in a word, irrational. Perhaps the most insistent statement of this position is that of Jeremy Bentham—a statement that itself contains a sort of poetry:

Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think: every effort we can make to throw off our subjection, will serve but to demonstrate and confirm it. In words a man may pretend to abjure their empire: but in reality he will remain subject to it all the while. The principle of utility recognizes this subjection, and assumes it for the foundation of that system, the object of which is to rear the fabric of felicity by the hands of reason and of law. Systems which attempt to question it, deal in sounds instead of sense, in caprice instead of reason, in darkness instead of light.[[10]](#endnote-10)

It cannot be that we ought to align our thoughts and desires with some transcendent order—for ought implies can, and there is no order of this sort. Not, anyway, an order that we can know—for we are but animals: we are the sum of our desires and our fears.

According to Voegelin, of course, there is another explanation for the pointless brutality of the Thirty Years’ War and the English Civil War: the issue was not the transcendental conception of happiness itself but rather the attempt to render this order entirely present here and now—that is, to do what Voegelin calls “immanentizing the eschaton.” This was, apparently, the task of the men and women of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation:

The life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace, trembling on the verge of a certainty that if gained is loss—the very lightness of this fabric may prove too heavy a burden for men who lust for massively possessive experience.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Tired of waiting for heaven—that is, for a condition wherein the transcendent would no more have to compromise with the immanent—these men and women tried to render it here on earth. Because this cannot be done, they could not agree on how to do it; because they could not agree on how to do it—and yet agreed that it needed to be done—they tore one another to shreds.

Whether or not Voegelin is right in his analysis is a crucial question—but it is outside the scope of his essay. More relevant is that Voegelin is not *obviously* right in his analysis: it is not obvious that Thomas Hobbes, Jeremy Bentham, and other modern political philosophers were wrong in their rejection of a transcendent order. Indeed, Voegelin apparently admits that modern political scientists continue to see this rejection as *right*. For his position to be plausible, then, Voegelin owes us an error theory: he owes us an explanation of how, assuming that he is right, his opponents—specifically, modern political scientists—continue to disagree with him.

3. Rationalism as Method.

According to Voegelin, rationalism is a colossal error. Why, then, are modern political scientists unable to see it as such? Well, perhaps one ought to start with a consideration of the man whom Voegelin seems to assume is the paradigmatic modern political scientist—that is, with Max Weber:

The movement of methodology, as far as political science is concerned, ran to the end of its immanent logic in the person and work of Max Weber… On the one side, there were the “values” of political order beyond critical evaluation; on the other side, there was a science of the structure of social reality that might be used as technical knowledge by a politician.[[12]](#endnote-12)

For Weber, political science is not a matter of reordering our society in terms of the transcendent: it is rather a matter of exploring the various orders that a society can have. The question of which order a society *ought* to have is, for him, illegitimate:

Weber recognized the “values” for what they were, that is, as ordering ideas for political action, but he accorded them the status of “demonic” decisions beyond rational argument. Science could grapple with the demonism of politics only by making politicians aware of the consequences of their actions and awakening in them the sense of responsibility.[[13]](#endnote-13)

But why does Weber see the question of values as an illegitimate one? Well, he is—like Hobbes and Bentham—a modern, and so he doubts that there is a transcendent order that we can know. This is so, according to Voegelin, even though Weber felt the loss of this conclusion:

The evolution of mankind toward the rationality of positive science was for Comte a distinctly progressive development; for Weber it was a process of disenchantment… and de-divinization… of the world. By the overtones of his regret that divine enchantment had seeped out of the world, by his resignation to rationalism as to a fate to be borne but not desired, by the occasional complaint that his soul was not attuned to the divine… he rather betrayed his brotherhood in the sufferings of Nietzsche.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Weber is paradigmatic of modern political scientists insofar as he does not admit that anything is valuable—not, anyway, in itself: something has the value that it does only insofar as we happen to desire it. But this—rationalism as methodology—is related intimately to rationalism as doctrine: each is rooted in the denial that there is a transcendent order with which we ought to align our thoughts and desires.

If anything, though, rationalism as methodology is even more seductive than rationalism as doctrine: natural science is, for modernity, the paradigmatic science—and natural science has achieved all that it has by rejecting all questions of value. No more do physicists and biologists refer to what Aristotle calls “ends”—that is, to the state that something *ought* to attain. In their admiration for all that modern science has done, political scientists try to do the same—assuming that, just because rocks and trees have no obvious ends, humans also have no obvious ends.

4. Mystical Experience.

What Voegelin presents is, in short, an error theory: it is true that, among modern political scientists, he alone sees the doctrine of rationalism for what it is—but this is because the doctrine of rationalism and the methodology of rationalism are two sides of the same coin, and the methodology of rationalism prevents one from seeing the doctrine of rationalism for what it is. And there is an obvious circularity to this.

Of course, not all circularity is bad. But how does one break into the circle? To his credit, Voegelin is fairly clear on the answer to this question: one breaks into the circle by having certain experiences. But these are not at all what we usually call “experiences”—are not, that is, experiences of the material world:

To the previously mentioned love of the *sophon* may now be added the variants of the Platonic Eros toward the *kalon* and the *agathon*, as well as the Platonic Dike, the virtue of right superordination and subordination of the forces in the soul, in opposition to the sophistic *polypragmosyne*; and, above all, there must be included the experience of Thanatos, of death as the cathartic experience of the soul which purifies conduct by placing it into the longest of all long-range perspectives, into the perspective of death… To the three fundamental forces of Thanatos, Eros, and Dike should be added, still within the Platonic range, the experiences in which the inner dimension of the soul is given in height and depth. The dimension in height is scaled through the mystical ascent, over the *via negativa*, toward the border of transcendence—the subject of the *Symposion*. The dimension of depth is probed through the anamnetic descent into the unconscious, into the depth from where are drawn up the “true logoi” of the *Timaeus* and *Critias*.[[15]](#endnote-15)

For those of us who read Plato with reverence, there is a sort of poetry in this list. But this poetry obscures even as it reveals. For how do we know that these experiences do not mislead us? How do we know, for example, that what we have experienced as the right superordination and subordination of the forces in the soul *is* the right one? How do we know, for that matter, that the *logoi* that we seem to remember—that is, the *a priori* synthetic concepts by which we are apt to structure our intuitions—*are* the true ones? How do we know, indeed, that these are not merely arbitrary conventions that we have invented for ourselves—or, even more likely, into which we were socialized when young? Though he does not seem to realize it, what Voegelin writes in the following paragraph shows that these questions are legitimate even in the case of Plato:

The discovery and exploration of these experiences started centuries before Plato and continued after him. The Platonic descent into the depth of the soul, for instance, differentiated experiences that were explored by Heraclitus and Aeschylus… For the *via negativa* Plato could draw on the mysteries as well as on the description of the way toward truth that Parmenides had given in his didactic poem.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Did Plato have a mystical experience of absolute truth and absolute justice, or did he just happen to read Heraclitus and Parmenides with reverence? Certainly he could not prove the former—could not prove, in other words, that his devotion to what he called “truth” and “justice” was more than his own arbitrary preference. To his credit, Voegelin seems to admit this:

Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity. The feeling of security in a “world full of gods” is lost with the gods themselves; when the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of Heb. 11:1, as the substance of things hoped for an the proof of things unseen. Ontologically, the substance of things hoped for is nowhere to be found but in faith itself; and, epistemologically, there is no proof for things unseen but again this very faith.[[17]](#endnote-17)

It is not entirely clear, but what Voegelin seems to mean is that the only result of an experience of the absolute—that is, of what we may call “God”—is the mysterious conviction that truth and justice have an absolute value. Indeed, the only evidence that one *did* have an experience of the absolute is that one now has this conviction. Uncertainty is at the heart of Christianity insofar as one cannot prove to others—or, for that matter, to oneself once the mystical experience has ended—that one has heard the voice of God.

“Hearing the voice of God” is, of course, merely a metaphor—but it is a metaphor that Plato puts into the mouth of his own teacher, Socrates:

This is something which began for me in childhood: a sort of voice comes, and whenever it comes, it always turns me away from whatever I am about to do.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Some, at the report that Socrates heard the voice of a *daimon*, assume that he was afflicted by what we now call “schizophrenia.” But, whatever the wisdom of psychiatric diagnosis across millennia, this is hardly a charitable reading: it seems more likely that Socrates was trying to express in metaphor a mystical experience—specifically, an experience of truth and justice as having an absolute value. Assuming that Plato is to be trusted, Socrates really did esteem truth and justice in this way: he died for them, just as he had lived for them. Certainly this experience was, at least in his time, quite rare:

My case—the demonic sign—isn’t worth mentioning, for it has perhaps occurred in some one man, or no other, before.[[19]](#endnote-19)

But what would it be to have an experience of this sort—to hear the voice of God in the relevant sense? Well, it seems that it would not have to be *especially* mysterious. One need only feel, as Socrates apparently felt, that it is better to die than to live complicit with falsehood and injustice:

The unexamined life is not worth living.[[20]](#endnote-20)

But is this true? Certainly it cannot be proven to those less than ready to hear it; Socrates did not even try to prove it to his jury—unless his defiance of that jury was itself an act of pedagogy.

All of this merely renders our initial question more pointed: *did* Socrates have an experience of the absolute? Or was he delusional? No doubt the readers of this essay—and, for that matter, its author—feel that they have had *some* experience of the absolute, no matter how attenuated. No doubt they bear the conviction that truth and justice have absolute value. At any rate, they doubtless feel that the unexamined life is not worth living—even if they never seem quite able to prove this to their students.

To those inside the circle—to those, in other words, who have the relevant mystical experience—it seems obvious that truth and justice have an absolute value and that the unexamined life is not worth living. But to those outside the circle—to those, in other words, who continue in the doctrine and the methodology of rationalism—this seems to be madness, for *nothing* has an absolute value. Not even dying for truth and justice.[[21]](#endnote-21)

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2. Jaspers, Karl. 1948. “The Axial Age of Human History: A Base for the Unity of Mankind.” *Commentary* 6: 431. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Taylor, Charles. 2012. “What Was the Axial Revolution?” in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Bellah, Robert and Joas, Hans ed. Cambridge: Belknap Press. 30–31. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 136–137. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Jaspers. “The Axial Age of Human History.” 432. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 212. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jefferson, Thomas. 1776. The United States Declaration of Independence. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bentham, Jeremy. 2000. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Kitchener: Batoche Books. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 187–188. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 104–105. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Voegelin. *The New Science of Politics*. 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Plato, *Apology*, 31d. In Plato and Aristophanes. 1998. *Four Texts on Socrates*. Revised edition. Edited and translated by Thomas G. West and Grace Starry West. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Plato, *Republic*, 496c. 2016. Third edition. Edited and translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Plato, *Apology*, 38a. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For inspiring the conclusion of this essay, I thank Michael Hickman, my colleague and my friend. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)