

Establishing True Community in Philia Among Students: Teaching The Eric Voegelin Reader

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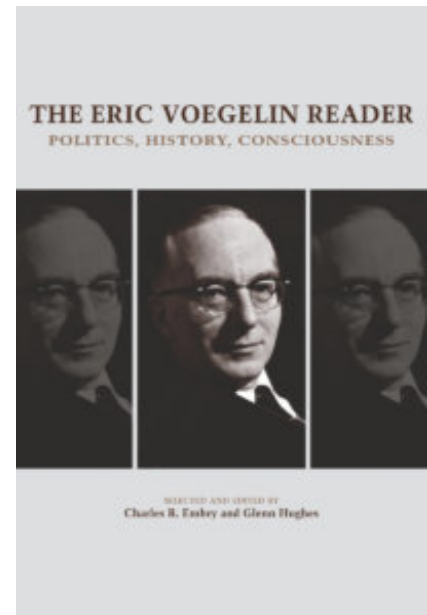
For I saw it was impossible to do anything without friends and loyal followers; and to find such men ready to hand would be a piece of sheer good luck, once our city was no longer guided by the customs and practices of our fathers, while to train up new ones was anything but easy.

– Plato, *Epistle VII*, 325d.

In Chapter Two of the *New Science of Politics*, which is excerpted in the newly published *Eric Voegelin Reader*, Voegelin brings the reader along in his reflection upon the meaning of science, and its relationship with political society:

“This is the crucial point on which the meaning of theory depends. Theory is not just any opining about human existence in society; it rather is an attempt at formulating the meaning of existence by explicating the content of a definite class of experiences.”^[1] He then refers to Plato’s and Aristotle’s descriptions of the types of character capable of formulating the meaning of existence. For Aristotle, it is the mature man (*spoudaios*) who “has maximally actualized the potentialities of human nature, who has formed his character into habitual actualization of the dianoetic and ethical virtues, the man who at the fullest of his development is capable of the *bios theoretikos*” (EVR 56-57). Further down the page Voegelin refers to Plato’s list of experiences including “love of the *sophon* . . . , the Platonic Eros toward the *kalon* and *agathon*, as well as platonic Dike, the virtue of right superordination and subordination of the forces of 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” (EVR 58-59).

After listing these experiences of the genuine theorist, he concludes: “And there should be mentioned, as close to the Platonic range, the Aristotelian *philia*, the experiential nucleus of true community between mature men; and again the Aristotelian love of the noetic self is hearkening back to the Heraclitean followership of the common Logos of mankind” (EVR 58). In several other places in Voegelin’s writings and in the *Reader*, Voegelin describes friendship or *philia* as an “existential virtue” by which, along with *phronesis* and justice, he means the virtue of the *spoudaios*, the man (or woman) who has “maximally actualized the potentialities of human nature.” To be fully human is to be a good friend. Being a good friend also has something to do with “followership of the common Logos of mankind.” Put another way:



friendship depends upon full participation in the Logos that which defines our essential humanity. Friendship among mature human beings is the “experiential nucleus” of true political community.[2] He called teaching the “art of the periagoge.”[3] This essay traces how the *Reader* represents this art.

I have recently completed teaching an undergraduate class at my university, the University of Lethbridge, in Alberta (Canada), in which one of the assigned readings was *The Eric Voegelin Reader*.^[4] Each class had a student present a reading or part of a reading, which was followed by discussion. Over the course of four weeks during a twelve-week semester, we managed to get through nearly four of its five parts, but that was enough for me to discover its effectiveness in cultivating what Voegelin calls “existential *philia*” among talented and serious students, many of whom will now go off as mature human beings and constitute the nucleus of true community. In itself the *Reader* does not create “existential *philia*.” Any text that engages students in friendly conversation over the types of questions Voegelin raises can do this. As one of my students wrote to me: “If we were asked to have a three-hour conversation on the statistics of the Bhutanese election of such and such a year, the conversations would not be possible. Presenting, especially presenting that takes up a 90min time-slot of a class, is a touch intimidating. The genuine encouragement that we give each other both before and after those presentations ties us together,” as do the conversations that take place before and after class. What follows are some reflections on how and why the *Reader*’s central focus and indeed virtue consists precisely in teaching students how they, by reading and thinking about the great swath of human experience and symbolization, participate in a community of being that is at once the goal and home of their philosophical eros, and that their shared experience of learning together constitutes the fundamental way of encountering that community and their own humanity.

Elsewhere I have reviewed the selection of contents of the *Reader*.^[5] Here I survey, as best I can, those parts of the *Reader* that most solicited philosophical wonder and response from my students. My discussion is less an exegesis of the contents of the *Reader* than an attempt to retrace the class’s steps in following Voegelin’s meditations. Before publishing it, I shared a draft of this essay with the students and thank them for their feedback; I am also pleased to report they confirmed the contents of this report.

Part One: “Intellectual Biography”

The class began by reading Voegelin’s account of his own response to contemporary disorders with wonder and philosophical searching. Part One of the *Reader* excerpts his autobiography and the class paid special attention to his visit in the early 1920s to the United States, his 1934 visit to France, along with his time in and escape from Austria in 1938. These excerpts detail Voegelin’s own escape from the cave. Or as he put it: “The experience broke for good (at least I hope it did) my Central European or generally European provincialism without letting me fall into an American provincialism” (EVR 11).

One of his key lessons in the United States was learning about the category of like-mindedness or *homonoia*, which he learned from John Dewey but quickly discovered was the root of political and social order in classical Greek and classical Christianity (EVR 8-9). In Paris he spent several weeks essentially teaching himself the philosophy of humanity by reading an incredibly wide range of literary, historical, and philosophical materials. His description probably fails fully to capture his joy and enthusiasm of spending his days in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Students were impressed with young Voegelin's intellectual adventure (and hard work). If one is serious about recapturing one's humanity, Voegelin's own example sets the standard. He would have been only slightly older than them. His visits to the United States and to France constituted his early turning around of the soul, his periagoge, and his intellectual liberation from the cave of European intellectual culture that World War Two would demolish. His escape from Austria constituted his and his wife Lissy's physical liberation.

Because Part One is relatively short at approximately 34 pages, I also assigned "In Search of the Ground" from Part Three. I chose that essay to complement Part One because, originally a public lecture, the essay is a fairly accessible introduction to Voegelin's thought and introduces the key themes covered in the rest of the *Reader*. Moreover, the autobiographical excerpts in Part One display Voegelin's own search for the ground, so perceptive students could move back and forth between the biographical and philosophical sections to see the significance of Voegelin's comments how one's "concrete consciousness" participates in the process of reality that moves it.

In the "In Search" essay, Voegelin describes the life of reason as it arises out of human being's questions concerning, in Leibniz's formulation, "why is there something; why not nothing?" and "why is that something as it is, and not different?" Voegelin observes these two questions correspond to the great questions concerning existence and essence. Moreover, "the question itself, you might say, implies its answer; because in raising this question the very nature of man who is in search of his ground expresses itself" (EVR 114). In only a moment of reflection, the students realize they have always been asking these types of questions that they, the youth, are prone to ask, and Voegelin provides them with validation that they are not weird (or suffer from "false consciousness") for doing so. He validates the central experience of their own humanity; they discover themselves as followers in the above-mentioned "common Logos of mankind". This realization opens the door to further searching but, insofar as they realize that others share this same experience — perhaps the person beside or across from them — they are experiencing the growth of community there in the classroom.

Later in that same essay, Voegelin writes:

"Community in the nous, carried by that noetic self, is for Aristotle the basic political virtue, the philia politike [political friendship] because only if the community is based on that love in the noetic self will it have order. A common interest in a profitable business at the expense of other people will not be a particularly sound basis for a government or for a political community. What must always rule is that ultimate reasonableness for which we sometimes use the term the common good: It is common insofar as it is the common reason that we have to control our passions. Philia politike is the noetic love; and if there is, as in inner society, a factor that

controls passions and keeps them under control (because passions are always there), then one can speak, in regard to outer society, of a homonoia, a common nous" (EVR 121).

This statement might be the most concise summary of Voegelin's political thought anywhere in his œuvre. Political friendship is the substance of politics. It can only be achieved by mature people friendly with one another and, because "*That* is reason: openness toward the ground," they are also open to one another. "Closure" signifies deformations of reason in the form, most notably, of ideology. It also signifies the lack of political friendship.

What makes "In Search" particularly valuable is that it shows and validates to students that they come to the essay already partaking in their own search. Everyone seeks the ground, and the question is really what ground provides the most humanly satisfying aim of endeavor? Voegelin's argument compares with Aristotle's at the start of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he argues that all human beings seek happiness and the question to be asked is what is happiness? What is the ultimate good? Voegelin agrees with Aristotle that all humans aim at a highest good (*summum bonum*), which is the condition of the rationality of human action. The endless quest for means is a regress.

Thus Voegelin tells his audience (recall this is a lecture) that all human beings:

"act, whether agnostics or not, as if they were immortal! Only under the assumption of immortality of a fulfillment beyond life, is the seriousness of action intelligible that they actually put into their work and that has a fulfillment nowhere in this life however long they may live. They all act as if their lives made sense immortally, even if they deny immortality, deny the existence of a psyche, deny the existence of a Divinity — in brief, if they are just the sort of fairly corrupt average agnostics that you find among college students today. One shouldn't take their agnosticism too seriously, because in fact they act as if they were not agnostics" (EVR 117)!

My students did not object to Voegelin calling them "fairly corrupt average agnostics" because perhaps they were not. Their openness to Voegelin's arguments, including his references to the divine, seemed genuine. They also seemed to understand that what ideologues try doing is not eliminate or negate the divine but to relocate it. They seemed to understand that all societies locate the sacred somewhere, whether in the nation, state, the private-sphere, notions of human dignity, or elsewhere.

Moreover, the students seemed to understand that "immortality" here means absolute concern for their souls, treating it necessarily as if it were immortal (more on this below in the discussion of "Immortality: Experience and Symbol"). In "Immortality," Voegelin warns some will consider his account of immortality "anemic." However, there is good reason to think this just masks something much more serious. Indeed, his account (like Aristotle's) resembles a point Søren Kierkegaard makes concerning judgment: "Alas, many think that judgment is something reserved for the far side of the grave, and so it is also, but they forget that judgment is much closer than that, that it is taking place at all times, because at every moment you live existence is judging you, since to live is to judge oneself, to become disclosed."^[6]

Aristotle himself puts the question of immortality to his reader in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics* when he asks whether indeed human happiness is obtainable in mortal life. The question aims straight at his very own claim concerning the rationality of human action. If humans cannot obtain happiness, then all is for naught. But where can happiness be located? If not necessarily in mortal life, then perhaps in immortal life? But what does that mean? His references to “immortalizing” oneself through contemplation in Book X constitutes the aim of that initial question concerning human happiness and its locus in Book I.

Voegelin differs from Aristotle by placing his analysis within the context of modern ideologies, with each having its own “ground” into which it wishes to bury humanity (both figuratively and literally):

“We can observe over the last two hundred years, that every possible locale where one could misplace the ground has been exhausted. This expresses itself in the fact that we have, since the great ideologists of the mid- and late-nineteenth century, since Comte, Marx, John Stuart Mill, Bakunin (and so on), no new ideologist. All ideologies belong in their origin, before that period; there are no new ideologies in the twentieth century. Even if one could find a new wrinkle in them, it wouldn’t be interesting because the matter has been more or less exhausted emotionally. We have had it” (EVR 125).

Voegelin’s version of the “end of ideology” differs from others because he does not claim one ideology, such as liberal democracy, has won out over the others, which ushers in the end of history. His argument is more radical in the sense that for him the ideological mode of thinking is finished, which renders for Voegelin a radically different account of what history means (explored in later excerpts in the *Reader*). Ideologies have exhausted themselves because each “locale,” that is, dimension of our humanity, has been tried out as a singular and reduced ground of political existence. Race, economics, instrumental reason, etc. They have all been tried out and shown to fail. At best those “locales” can be repackaged and tried again, but Voegelin seems to think those illusions of political marketing will not prove as resilient as the originals.

This insight simultaneously leaves the students wondering what to make of contemporary derangements and offers them important analytical tools to diagnose them. For example, the madness of political correctness is all around them, but it is difficult to identify a coherent ideology behind it. It seems more attitudinal than a systematic ideological program. There are intellectual influences one can study, to be sure (e.g., Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and behind them probably Marx). However, the political phenomena of political correctness that the students struggle against is too fragmented to be considered ideology.

Even so, Voegelin’s analysis enables them to discern even in these fragments a reductionistic account of the human person, one that reduces our humanity to one “locale” of our existence. Take identity. If race or ethnicity is what defines one’s identity, the justification of that position falls apart pretty quickly when one notices the intellectual pedigree of race thinking. Here one wishes the editors of the *Reader* would have excerpted something from Voegelin’s writings on race, the ones that had made him so unpopular in 1938 among the politicians of identity of that

era. Similar analyses could be offered of other contemporary forms of identity politics to show how, perhaps, such efforts, however popular today, are fundamentally “exhausted emotionally.” Including excerpts from Voegelin’s “Gnosticism” analyses (from either *The New Science of Politics* and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*) may also have enabled students to discern analogous responses to alienation in contemporary disorders. However, there is probably enough in the excerpts in the *Reader* on ideological deformations and alienation to provide students sufficient analytic tools to diagnose these disorders.

Part Two: “The Philosophical Science of Politics”

Part Two, “The Philosophical Science of Politics,” excerpts *The New Science of Politics*, along with essays including “Necessary Moral Bases for Communication in a Democracy,” “Industrial Society in Search of Reason,” and “World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind.” This Part was especially important because mine is a political science class. These excerpts show Voegelin moving from an analysis of political phenomena to reflecting upon first principles of political order. The fundamental question that unites all these essays is the good society. What is it? What promotes it? Why does Voegelin place such importance on the life of reason as its sovereign idea? What does he mean by the life of reason? Philosophy? Deliberation? Is the goodness of the students’ own regime, Canada, dependent on its ability to provide them, the students, the chance to read and think about texts like the one in front of them?

As political science students, they profited from his account of the meaning of political theory in the *New Science of Politics* excerpt. They followed his critique of positivism, including the fact-value distinction, which still dominates political science curricula in North America and Europe, upward to his account of the authentic meaning of theory, referred to at the start of this essay. They appreciated his argument that the modern primacy of method falls apart in light of Voegelin’s common-sense observation that the modes of analysis depend on the objects of study.

Concerning the limitations of fact-value, I also drew the students’ attention to a point about Max Weber Voegelin makes in a part of his *Autobiographical Reflections* not included in the *Reader*. There he observes that Weber did not in fact hold to the fact-value distinction but could not explain why:

“But of course, so far as science is concerned, that is a very precarious position, because students after all want to know the reasons why they should conduct themselves in a certain manner; and when the reasons—that is, the rational order of existence — are excluded from consideration, emotions are liable to carry you away into all sorts of ideological and idealistic adventures in which the ends become more fascinating than the means.”^[7]

The fact-value distinction that is so central to positivist social science simply cannot stand because it cannot explain the social scientist’s own activity. Is science a fact? Is it a value? These questions are nonsense. Imagine the value-free social scientist trying to exhort students, intoxicated by ideological madness, to be scientific. The students would be right to call out their professor as a fraud because his exhortation shows his science to be a value, that

is, his preference that cannot be scientifically demonstrated. The youth have good reason to be skeptical of their elders when the latter can offer no reasons for them to act according to reason.

The *Reader* also excerpts Chapter Two of *The New Science of Politics*, “Representation and Truth,” whose results I summarized at the beginning of this essay. The chapter starts with Voegelin’s famous claim that political society is a “cosmion of meaning, illuminated from within by its own self-interpretation” (EVR 47). Political science starts within this cosmion and reflects upon its symbols that claim truth. This chapter is a meditation that starts here and reflects upon the theorist’s relationship with society — within it, part of it, and apart from it. The chapter invites students to reflect on how political societies each have its own ideal of citizenship and therefore of what it means to a human being. Canada implies Canadian humanity is the greatest, the United States implies American humanity is the greatest, China implies Chinese humanity is greatest, and so forth. All political societies are “religious,” as it were, which reminds students of the excerpt from *Political Religions* where Voegelin defends his use of “religious” ideas to criticize National Socialism (21-23). Voegelin shows how political science begins with these claims and endeavors to replace these political opinions with genuine knowledge: “Obviously, the mere raising of these questions is in part the answer. In the very act of raising them the spell of monadic representation is broke; with our questioning we have set up ourselves as the representatives of the truth in whose name we are questioning” (EVR 53). No wonder Athens executed Socrates.

“Necessary Moral Bases” and “Industrial Society” continue the theme of political friendship along with obstacles to achieving it under conditions of modernity. Students are astonished to read Voegelin in the former discussing modern communications as an “intoxicant” over 60 years before contemporary manifestations of “fake news” and social media. They understood perfectly his reference to intoxicants as Pascalian *divertissements* “that will drown the anxiety of an empty life” (EVR 69). They also understood the phenomenon Voegelin describes when he states, “for men would not use media for purposes of intoxication unless they were in need of it” (EVR 70). They have spent enough time on social media to understand the truth of that statement.

The students also pondered his claim of a false pluralism in modern society. Pluralism and free speech is very much in the news and on their own minds. They are concerned about the destructiveness of political correctness, but they seem also to sense something inadequate about the standard liberal, Millian, defense of free speech. The Millian idea that the contestation of opinions will bring forth truth is too naïve for Voegelin. It resembles more a graduate seminar than political society and presumes the life of reason is intact in society.

Instead Voegelin argues that North American and European public opinion reflects different waves “that have rolled off since the Reformation” that follows a pattern of “(1) movement, (2) counter-movement, (3) wars, and (4) peace settlement” (EVR 71). Voegelin identifies the Reformation as the first of such sets of waves, the French Revolution as the second, and the third beginning in the nineteenth-century with Communism. Voegelin’s description of waves colliding with one another reflects his view of public opinion in modern society not as a

harmonious pluralism bringing truth about, but more as “dogmatomachy” (war of dogmas) that produces little but more extreme revolution and counter-revolution. His “Necessary Moral Bases” essay was published in 1956 and he states, “at present we are in the middle of the third [Communist] wave.”

Sixty years after he wrote this essay, and with Communism having either collapsed or transformed into various democratic pathologies (sometimes today called “cultural Marxism”), one wonders whether we have entered into a fourth wave of dogmatomachy, or something akin to it. Voegelin’s analysis of ideology here and in later essays raises these questions. The next essay, “Industrial Society,” concludes with a note of optimism that the life of reason in political friendship is a possibility because of and despite the conditions of industrial society. The last essay of Part Two, “World Empire,” considers primarily the meaning of Western imperialism: “the global revolution of modernity has its origin in the West” (EVR 107). If we are in a fourth wave, perhaps Voegelin’s analysis helps us see how the waves of that global revolution of modernity are washing back on Western shores. One thinks of political Islam, the European migration crisis, the rise of China, and the general malaise within the West based upon the feeling it must pay for its past imperialistic sins, which many (even in the West) think renders the Western liberal democratic form of regime illegitimate.

Part Three: Preconditions for Reason in Society

Turning to Part Three, because I had figured out early enough in the semester to assign “In Search of the Ground” along with Part One, the class could spend more time discussing “On Debate and Existence” and “Immortality: Experience and Symbol.” Those two essays (along with “In Search”) complement one another because “Debate” explicates the activity of reason in society as those reasoning seek the ground of existence, while “Immortality” provides a focused explication of the experience of the ground itself.

“Debate” covers some of the same ground as “Moral Bases” and “Search” by considering the operation of reason in society. The students found Voegelin’s use of Aristotle and Aquinas helpful to focus his discussion of the operation of reason. His analysis also provides a master class for showing how one can learn from those thinkers without necessarily retaining the entirety of their thought. The essay practices Voegelin’s historically-oriented political science that consists, he says in *The New Science of Politics*, of “a return to the consciousness of principles, not perhaps a return to the specific content of an earlier attempt” (EVR 37). In Aristotle and Aquinas, Voegelin finds “a solid core of truth in it that can be, and must be, salvaged by means of some surgery” (EVR 135). In this essay, Voegelin pares the cosmological consciousness that constitutes the starting-points of their philosophizing, and the notion of prime mover which is connected to the cosmological setting. Readers of Aristotle and Aquinas do this all the time. Does Aristotle’s virtue ethics depend on his biology? How do his views of women and slaves affect the rest of his political understanding? Is his vision of the human good restricted to the political form of polis that is now dead (and was so in his age as well)?

What remains for Voegelin, which is really more fundamental, are the above-mentioned experiences of Eros, Agathon, Dike, and Thanatos that are at the core of the “anthropological” mode of truth that, in Voegelin’s understanding of history, superseded the cosmological. Voegelin focuses upon the operation of the intellect in reality. Voegelin goes further with this by highlighting the interface between reality and the human intellect the common Logos mentioned at the start of this essay: “This intellect is as much part of human existence as it is the instrument of its interpretation. In the exegesis of existence intellect discovers itself in the structure of existence.... The intellect discovers itself, furthermore, as a force transcending its own existence; by virtue of the intellect, existence not only is not opaque, but actually reaches out beyond itself in various directions in search of knowledge” (EVR 137). The intellect experiences itself as a “force transcending its own existence.” This is the insight of the students discovering themselves and each other of their humanity.

It is the subject of the “Immortality” essay. All human beings seek immortality insofar as they seek the divine ground. But what does immortality mean? Does it mean afterlife? Immortal fame? In anticipation of these sorts of questions, I prepared the students for this discussion by suggesting that Voegelin’s discussion is informed by Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium* (some students had read it with me the previous semester), which treats eros as a restless striving between what Voegelin calls the poles of existence. Immortality has something to do with their own erotic yearnings for wisdom, completeness, and happiness.

The students understood immediately that there is a difference between symbols of immortality (e.g., images of eternal paradise) and its experience. We spent some time discussing what Voegelin might mean by “nonexistent reality” (EVR 148) and I was pleased they could think of experiences that cannot be contained by the language of things. Voegelin lists them: mortality, immortality, time, eternity, and all the other poles of metaxy the students were getting accustomed to reading about. They appreciated the cycle of phenomena of “original account, dogmatic exposition, and skeptical argument as a sequence that can attach to every experience of nonexistent reality” (EVR 150). After Plato there were Platonists, after Christ there were Christians, after Buddha there were Buddhists, etc. After Voegelin would there be Voegelinians? We hoped not!

The students were taken by his exposition of the ancient Egyptian text, “Dispute of a Man, Who Contemplates Suicide, With His Soul,” which oscillates between the sequence of experience, dogma, and skepticism. Voegelin’s choice of this text is brilliant because its age and geographic origin gives it a universal appeal. Moreover, it cannot be claimed by anyone. There no ancient Egyptians as there would be Christians who could claim the New Testament as a source text for discussing immortality. All readers of “Dispute” are equidistant from it, and they can become intimate equally with it. I also made sure to point out Voegelin’s observation that one of the causes of the author’s despair is that his society lacks “*philia politike* in the Aristotelian sense” (EVR 157).

Voegelin’s analysis of ideological deformations of immortality is instructive. He focuses on the modern objector’s “*pièce de résistance*: ‘The experience is an illusion’” (EVR 163). The students understood at least in a provisional sense Voegelin’s point that the experience is

never an illusion. It is an experience. But of what? And where is Voegelin going with his analysis? Before turning to the ideological significance of claim of illusion, I had to help the students understand the claim itself, which Voegelin calls an “intellectual trick” (EVR 165) (actually he identifies two intellectual tricks in the move). I drew an example from the recent novel *Submission* by Michel Houellebecq. There he has the main character, François, who suffers a serious case of modern ennui, visit sanctuary of Rocamadour in southwestern France. He wistfully wishes for a mystical experience that might offer him meaning in life. He thinks he may have had a mystical experience, but then immediately convinces himself it wasn’t real: “Or maybe I was just hungry.”[8] Did he experience the divine or was it just his stomach? That is the question of interpretation. This somewhat funny example (humour is almost always good pedagogy) clarifies the interpretative question immediately. It had to be followed up with more serious considerations including how we might distinguish the feeling of having an empty stomach from having an empty soul. It is an important question. It is the first temptation of Christ, after all.

The question of empty soul is the focus of the “Immortality” essay, especially its discussion of alienation to which the students could relate. To illustrate the problem of interpreting the experience, I drew a comparison with a point that Kierkegaard and others make about trying to prove the existence of God. The problem of proving the existence of God is that one requires an external or superior standard of truth by which to prove God’s existence. Yet this is impossible if God is higher than what can be thought. If one could find a higher standard, then that would be God. And so on. One must find another route. One must be able to identify that it is the soul that is empty. Then one must ask how it is we experience our souls as empty, which implies perhaps a prior experience of its fullness? Where do we get that experience of fullness from, especially if (almost by definition) we are not the agents of filling it up? One can see the parallels between Voegelin’s reflections and Socrates’ speech in the *Symposium*. Augustine’s reflections on soul in his *Confessions* are another exemplar of this type of meditation.

I had then to explain to the students how this claim of illusion sustains the ideological claim that all notions of God, immortality, etc. are merely manifestations of the “psychology of projection” (EVR 165). What’s important to the ideologue is not the divine but what human beings *make* of the divine: “Marx relied on Feuerbach’s psychology [of projection] but elaborated it further by the introduction of ‘Being,’ in the sense of *Produktionsverhältnisse*, as the cause of the various states of consciousness which induce or prevent the illusory projections” (EVR 165). In other words, the Marxian “means of production” that produces the ideological superstructure and truth-claims of society presupposes the projectionist psychology that presumes immortality is an illusion, or rather, that it locates immortality in the means of production. This is why, for instance, as Voegelin describes in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (not in the *Reader*), Marx claims that “socialist man” does not ask questions about immortality. It would not occur to him. Voegelin’s analysis got the class into some fairly deep philosophical questions, including whether modern knowledge is power, the difference between *episteme* (science) and *technē* (production), and whether technology is the essence of modern understandings of reason. It may be the case that the modern identification of reason with technology is predicated upon the psychology of projection. It may be the case

that the productive ambition to control the “means of production” is the modern version of Thrasymachus’ “justice is the will of the stronger.” After all, does not Hobbes produce Leviathan to be a “mortal god”?

The final theme the students focused upon in the “Immortality” essay was Voegelin’s critique of the formula, “We are living in a post-Christian age” (EVR 169). This slogan gets thrown around frequently in modern debates, but its meaning necessarily gets obscured. Many simply think of it as the passing away of Christian belief. Fewer people go to church and society is happily getting secularized and therefore becoming more tolerant and pluralistic. The students seem instinctively to have understood that theirs is not a terribly tolerant and pluralistic society, and that it is beset from extremists who wish to impose dogmas (e.g., political correctness, alt-Right). They recognize almost instinctively Voegelin’s claim that “post-Christian age” means that people now seek salvation in other ways, and ones that are not necessarily salutary. Or as I quipped to them, if you did not like the Christian Right, just wait for the post-Christian Right.

As previously mentioned, I was pleasantly surprised by my students’ openness towards Voegelin’s arguments. Part of this was simply due to their having been put back on their heels by the difficulty of this and the other texts. For instance, in the middle of presenting one of the previous essays in the *Reader*, the student paused to apologize for struggling because the difficulty of the essay took her out of her “comfort zone.” I responded by announcing that creating “unsafe spaces” is what university is all about and that I was proud of her for pushing herself (and the others). She and the other students caught my reference and we all had a chuckle, which broke the moment of strain that was followed by very fruitful discussion.

The students struggled to understand “Immortality” and the other essays, and took pride in that struggle. Judging from their written assignments and class discussion, they pretty much understood his arguments in their fundamentals. More importantly, they seemed to have accepted his claim that he was engaging in philosophical analysis and not theological dogmatics, despite his references to the divine that, perhaps for some readers of a positivistic persuasion, appears as theologizing. My students seemed to have understood his statement that:

“In the intellectual climate of the age, our analysis of equivalent symbols may lead to misunderstanding. Let me caution therefore: the philosopher can help to make revelation intelligible, but no more than that; a philosophy of consciousness is not a substitute for revelation” (EVR 175-76).

The seminar was not church, and noesis is not revelation. This seminar was the common adventure to understanding our essential humanity in universal humanity. Our friendship was the result.

Part Four: Philosophy as *Therapeia* and as Immortalization

Turning to Part Four of the *Reader*, we had time only to discuss “Reason: The Classic Experience” and “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History.” The latter essay is presented first in the *Reader*, but I decided the “Reason” essay is more accessible and

made more sense to discuss first. Just as “Immortality” focuses upon one’s experience of the “immortality” pole of human existence, “Reason” focuses upon the experience (and discovery) of reason as constituent of our humanity. While it covers similar topics to previous excerpts, this one is focused upon reason as our constituent humanity and reason’s deformations.

I shall focus upon our discussion of deformations, which caused some excitement among the students because of Voegelin’s usage of the term, “psychopathology.” Some of the students thought Voegelin was out of his league with his use of the term, and that modern psychology offers better cures for the psychological illness that beset many people today. My university has well-regarded psychology and neuropsychology programs and Voegelin’s discussion seemed amateurish when compared to their scientific prestige. While not rejecting that there are numerous physiological ailments that cause psychological problems, these comments did give us the opportunity to raise the problem of soul more generally. It gave us the opportunity to consider how their initial objection was based upon the assumptions of scientism whereby modern science/rationality is the sole authority of the soul, and whether its reduced and largely materialistic account of human psyche adequately reflected reality. I suggested that if the diagnosis is restricted to physiological causes, then the prescription will necessarily be pharmaceutical.

I also reminded the students that before they read Voegelin this semester, they had read *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville who provides an extensive diagnosis of the pathologies of democratic souls that they had largely accepted. Voegelin’s diagnosis of the state of alienation, with reference to Cicero’s diagnosis, that souls who have rejected some aspect of their essential humanity, with reason (Nous) as the core, is not all that different from that of Tocqueville: “restless moneymaking, status seeking, womanizing, overeating, addiction to delicacies and snacks, wine tippling, irascibility, anxiety, desire for fame, stubbornness, rigidity of attitude, and such fears of contact with other human beings as misogyny and misanthropy” (EVR 230). This list is by no means exhaustive and obviously excludes the more serious pneumopathologies associated with ideology and the closure of the soul. Even so, the students could see how the rejection of reason distorts the soul and human behavior in numerous ways that today could be diagnosed in terms of modern reductionist psychology.

The students’ response to Voegelin’s discussion of psychotherapy also gave us the opportunity to discuss the original meaning of philosophy in terms of *therapeia*,^[9] and I mentioned the use of philosophical therapy by some clinical practitioners. Indeed, because Voegelin discusses anxiety (and in the “Immortality” essay), I pointed out that therapists, including those who do not explicitly use philosophy in their practice, often treat patients suffering with anxiety with a kind of Socratic know thyself dialectic whereby they try to uncover and to understand memories in order to get a hold of patients’ experiences and thereby to have control over them (instead of being controlled by them). This discussion was quite valuable as a way of pointing out how Voegelin’s philosophical approach can either surpass or at least complement the “scientific” psychologies of our day.

I should also mention that some of the students had taken an interest in Jordan Peterson, a University of Toronto psychologist whose writings and online videos have recently become a

worldwide phenomenon. One student told me she had “gone down the Jordan Peterson rabbit hole” and had spent a lot of time watching his online videos. In addition to criticizing “political correctness,” he also provides his audience with moral guidance on a variety of issues. Several of my students expressed admiration for his criticisms of political correctness, but I sensed they were less impressed with the depth of his moral guidance and soulcraft, and inquiries into what counts as a meaningful life. I pointed out to them that Voegelin criticizes the types of Jungian archetypes that informs Peterson’s psychology.[10] I wondered whether Voegelin’s soulcraft offers a more adequate account of souls and suggested that the students could always create their own online lectures on these topics.

Finally, I pointed out that they had read Tocqueville diagnosing democratic pathologies as matters of “individualism” and loneliness. Recall Voegelin in “Immortality” points out the same phenomenon in the Egyptian text, “Dispute of a Man, Who Contemplates Suicide, With His Soul.” I mentioned that many governmental and scientific authorities have proclaimed loneliness a public health emergency and that many see friendship as a prescription. For example, Great Britain has appointed a “minister of loneliness” to deal with the problem.[11] Loneliness is associated with numerous physical and mental health issues plaguing modern individuals, and of course costing public health system lots of money. Understanding what friendship is, with the help of philosophically informed analysis, would go a long way toward helping formulate prescriptions.[12] I have made inquiries with my university’s faculty of Health Sciences but have been informed none of my colleagues works on the problem. So much for scientism.

“Reason” concludes with Voegelin supplying a diagram summarizing the “dimensions of man’s existence as a person in society and history” (EVR 243). The essay and this diagram helped the students identify the constituent parts of their humanity that are expressed in political symbols, and enabled them to be on guard against reductionistic ideologies that would reduce their existence to only one or a few of those parts. Dakota Boser has given me permission to reproduce below the photo of his own diagrams that accompanied his presentation of the “Reason” essay. His diagrams remind me of the photos I have seen of Voegelin’s own blackboard diagrams that accompanied many of his own lectures.

“Equivalences” is a deceptively formidable essay and time constraints prevented the students from discussing it in depth. Its formidable character is deceiving because Voegelin introduces in a straightforward manner by promising to “search for the constants of human order in society” (EVR 198). This essay promises to provide guidance in what today is called comparative political philosophy. The reader might even expect to be taken on a “National Geographic” tour of symbols and civilizations, and to delight in their exoticism and diversity. In a time of globalization and increasing sense of cosmopolitan dispositions, the essay appears to provide insights into Voegelin’s own “ecumenic” outlook. How can he guide us in the comparative study of societies and civilizations? While this essay does indeed provide such guidance, it does so in a way that undermines the reader’s (and student’s) expectations of what the essay does.

Halfway into the essay, Voegelin appears to contradict his original purpose when he states:

“There is no constant to be found in history” (EVR 215). Why is this? Why does Voegelin appear to contradict himself? Has his inquiry proven fruitless? Further down in that same paragraph, Voegelin elaborates: “For we have not found a constant in history but the *constancy of a process* that leaves a trail of equivalent symbols in time and space” (EVR 215; emphasis added). The essay is a meditation that not only explains that “process” but also enacts it. Symbols of diving into the depth below consciousness, his discussion of Plato’s *Timaeus*, and other literary symbols serve his purpose of enacting the “process” of meditation that constitutes the constancy that enables equivalent symbols to the identified.

The essay is formidable, and retracing Voegelin’s own meditative enactment of the process is beyond the scope of this essay, but the point is rather simple. Once again, I referred to the problem of trying to prove the existence of God. In order to do so would necessitate identifying a standard of truth by which God’s existence could be ascertained. This cannot be the case if God is that to which nothing greater can be thought. Otherwise, that standard would be God.

Similarly, when it comes to the search of equivalent symbols across cultures, it is wholly inadequate to treat the symbols on their own and isolated from the engendering experiences from which they emerge. That is the flaw in the archetypes identified by Jung and his acolytes. To illustrate this point, I drew the students’ attention back to Voegelin’s description of his own “process” of recovering symbols in the Part One autobiographical section of the *Reader* (EVR 26). There he refers to classic philosophy and those who recovered their meaning in the twentieth-century, Patristic and Scholastic philosophy and its students, the ancient Near East and its students, comparative religion including the achievements of Mircea Eliade and others, and, finally, the study of early symbolisms “extending back to the Paleolithicum” (EVR 26-27).

What do these have in common? If we look only at symbols, we shall be faced with a plethora of symbols and be confused whether they share anything in common. What does Plato’s cave, the Cross, Egyptian pyramids, fertility symbols found the Papua New Guinea jungle, and cave paintings of bulls and deer all have in common? The symbols themselves do not reveal anything. One must enter into the “process” of engendering experiences to uncover that. One must study them all very carefully, as Voegelin himself tried to do. More than that, one must be willing to dive into the depths that engendered those symbols to understand their evocations of cosmic and divine order. One cannot truly understand those symbols without also understanding what they signify.

Conclusion

And that is how our reflections on *The Eric Voegelin Reader* came full circle. We began the *Reader* by considering Voegelin’s autobiography and ended it by returning there to the beginning. Between those two moments we followed him, as best we could, in a meditative process into the depths and discovered very important insights regarding our common humanity. From this common adventure, we discovered that we were not simply reading about Voegelin but re-enacting the experiences that constitute our humanity, thereby making them our own, individually and together. True community had begun to form.

The great advantage to Parts Three and Four especially is that it got students thinking about how it is we as human beings can think. How is it that reality is intelligible to us? How is it that reality reveals itself to us? How is it that our intellect finds similitude in the reality it seeks? How is it that in order for our intellect to find similitude, that reality itself must “seek” us? These are the experiences that make thought possible but also community, as expressed in the existential virtues of *phronesis* and *philia*. These are the experiences that led the classic philosophers to see correspondence between Nous and our noesis. They led Leibniz to ask why is there something and why not nothing? And why is it as it is and not otherwise? And so on.

Overall, I judge my use of the *Reader* with my undergraduates a success. I think the greatest measure of that success is its ability to provide a therapeutic cure (in the philosophic sense) to the disorders of our age. Voegelin provides not just “answers,” but an existential answer to the needs of the souls of undergraduates whose lives are fractured amidst the cultural devastation of our age. He gives them reason to trust that their existential yearnings do in fact point to something real. By naming alienation and other disorders, they can get a handle on the disorders they sense but previously could neither identify nor judge as disorders (at least as corruptions as goods that humans are better off cultivating and nurturing). He diagnoses their souls and provides them a therapy of the highest kind.

At several points in the *Reader*, Voegelin points out that the good society is rooted in the friendships of mature men (and women to add today). The capacity of the existential virtues, and existential *philia*, is the root of the good society. The *Reader* does a splendid job not only helping undergraduates understand what that is, but by also inviting students to accompany Voegelin’s meditations, in an almost real-time mode, into their source, students get to be transformed, to become those mature men and women, and to practice existential *philia* with one another.

Notes

[1] Eric Voegelin, *The Eric Voegelin Reader*, edited by Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2017), 56. Hereinafter EVR.

[2] Voegelin’s core concern for “existential *philia*” prompt my own theorizing about its political meaning (John von Heyking, *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship*, (Montréal-Kingston: McGill Queens University Press, 2016) and *Comprehensive Judgment and Absolute Selflessness: Winston Churchill on Politics as Friendship*, (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2018).

[3] Heyking, “The Art of the *Periagoge*: Eric Voegelin as Teacher,” in *Teaching in an Age of Ideology*, edited by Lee Trepanier and John von Heyking, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 87-113.

[4] The other primary text was *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville and they also read *Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt for a book review assignment. We also welcomed Professor Leah Bradshaw of Brock University as a guest speaker, who spoke of the “crisis of

democracy.” What unites these readings, and to large extent Bradshaw’s presentation, is the obstacles of political friendship under modern conditions.

[5] “A Cosmion of Greatness: Introduction to Symposium on *The Eric Voegelin Reader*,” *Perspectives in Political Science*, forthcoming.

[6] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), II.ii.

[7] Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, in *Collected Works*, volume 34, edited by Ellis Sandoz, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 40.

[8] Michel Houellebecq, *Submission*, translated by Lorin Stein, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015), 136. For discussion, see my “Polygamy and the Political Problem of Eros in Houellebecq’s *Submission*,” in *Decline and Submission: Michel Houellebecq, the Cassandra of Freedom*, edited by Michael S. Kochin and Alberto Spektorowski, Faux Titre Series on French Literature, (Leiden: Brill Publishing, forthcoming).

[9] See Robert E. Cushman, *Therapeia: Plato’s Conception of Philosophy*, (New York: Praeger, 1976).

[10] Peterson mentions one of Jung’s followers, Erich Neumann, author of *The Origins and History of Consciousness* and *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, as having made a profound impact on his own thinking about analytic psychology:
<https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/916062675196633088?lang=en>

[11] Jason Daley, “The U.K. Now Has a ‘Minister for Loneliness.’ Here’s Why It Matters,” *Smithsonian.com*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/minister-loneliness-appointed-united-kingdom-180967883/#a7wiXCkJOeeBcRcz.99>

[12] One of my motivations for writing *The Form of Politics* is the inability of people in modern society even to formulate what friendship is. Our language is dominated by scientism and by romanticism, neither of which give full weight to the experience of friendship. Upon reading some of the medical literature on loneliness, I conclude that even I underestimated the extent of the crisis.