ABSTRACT

Political Philosophy and the Divine Ground:
Eric Voegelin on Plato

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Recent scholarship has shown an interest in how prominent twentieth-century thinkers have interpreted classic texts, especially those of Plato. Understanding how and why contemporary thinkers have turned to Plato promises to illuminate critical features of the contemporary thinker's work, Plato's work, and the modern situation in general. This study contributes to these efforts by examining how the political philosopher Eric Voegelin approached the Platonic texts. I argue that Voegelin's approach to Plato is distinct from other twentieth-century interpretations inasmuch as Voegelin understood Platonic philosophy as a divinely-inspired quest for the ground of being. In order to substantiate my claim, I compare Voegelin's approach to reading Plato to Leo Strauss's approach, paying attention to each thinker's antecedent intellectual commitments and specific techniques for analyzing texts. I then turn to each thinker's conclusions about the significance of three particular dialogues: the *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, and the *Laws*. I show that Voegelin's attention to the divine dimension of Plato's thought brings clarity to a number of Plato's most enigmatic passages, especially his various myths. Voegelin's interpretation also invites us to reconsider the relationship between philosophy, politics,

and history, for Voegelin's Plato was involved in the dynamic process of restoring order

within history through his loving insights into the eternal ground.

Political Philosophy and the Divine Ground:
Eric Voegelin on Plato

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This dissertation examines Eric Voegelin's interpretation of Plato and argues that Voegelin's emphasis on the divine dimension of Plato's thought distinguishes his approach from those taken by other twentieth-century interpreters. Consideration of Voegelin is important for a number of reasons, which I discuss more fully below. For now, I mention only two: first, Voegelin was a first-rate scholar whose works have received less attention than the works of his contemporaries of similar stature. This dissertation treats only one facet of his scholarship, his handling of Plato. But because Plato was so fundamental to Voegelin's own intellectual development, consideration of the way Voegelin understood Plato promises to expose some fundamental aspects of Voegelin's own political philosophical outlook. Second, Voegelin's interpretation of Plato is highly original and in fact illuminates new facets of Plato's dialogues and raises new questions about the ancient philosopher's activity. Thus, understanding Voegelin's interpretation contributes to a more thorough knowledge of Platonic philosophy in general.

Before proceeding further, let me say a few words about who Voegelin was and why his work on Plato deserves careful attention. Voegelin was born in 1901 in Cologne, Germany. He took his doctorate in political science from the University of Vienna in 1922. He taught in Europe and, following Hitler's rise to power, moved to the United States, where he spent a good part of his academic career until his death in 1985. He

maintained a rich and fascinating correspondence with many leading twentieth-century scholars, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Leo Strauss among them. And he even appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. Both his friends and critics have regarded him as one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century. Voegelin wrote 21 books and over 100 articles, treating subjects that seem at first blush extremely diverse. His intellectual quest, however, was animated by a consistent driving concern: to search for the "truth of existence" and to reveal "meaning and order in history." At the foundation of his whole project was Plato.

Almost all Voegelin's works refer to Plato directly or indirectly, and Voegelin himself understood his philosophical project as a modern version of Plato's monumental effort to resist the individual and social disorder of his age. In *The New Science of Politics*, the work most familiar to political scientists today, Voegelin argued that a restoration of Platonic political science was necessary in order to salvage the discipline; in *Order and History*, Voegelin's five-volume opus, the greater part of the central volume is dedicated solely to Plato; and in his later essays and lectures, Voegelin demonstrated a continued interest in the truths that Plato sought and tried to convey.

Voegelin's deep and abiding interest in Plato is significant in part because it places him in the company of a handful of other prominent twentieth-century political philosophers who turned to Plato for orientation—Heidegger, Strauss, Derrida, Foucault, and Gadamer, to name a few. Indeed, so prominent is the "Platonic turn" in twentieth-century political philosophy that scholars have begun to study it as a phenomenon of its own. One example is Catherine Zuckert's recent book, *Postmodern Platos*, which begins with the assertion that "the problem for all the thinkers in [her] book is that all philosophy

is a footnote to Plato."[1] Her study demonstrates the contemporary interest in modern (or

post-modern) interpretations of Plato and the need to delineate the similarities and

differences among them concerning the character and content of Plato's thought. She is

interested in the thought of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Strauss, and Derrida,

thinkers who, despite their differences, share commitments that explain why she calls

them "post-modern Platos." These include Plato's centrality to their thought and self-

understandings, and their belief that returning to the original character of philosophy will

help us move beyond modernity's incoherence.

 While Zuckert's study demonstrates the importance of the Platonic turn among

certain twentieth-century figures, it is not an exhaustive study;[2] and it is especially

unfortunate that it does not treat the work of Eric Voegelin. For, even a cursory glance at

Voegelin's writing reveals that that his approach to Plato was both methodologically

sophisticated and substantively unique. It was unique because, as I stated at the outset,

Voegelin took the divine dimension of Plato's thought seriously.[3] That is, he understood

Plato's philosophical project as an historically path-breaking attempt to symbolize man's

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[1] Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1. Other studies that explore the Platonic turn include Drew A. Hyland, *Questioning Platonism: Continental Interpretations of Plato* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004); Drew A. Hyland and John Panteleimon Manoussakis, eds., *Heidegger and the Greeks: Interpretive Essays* (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 2006); Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, and Judaism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006); and Nicholas P. White, "Observations and Questions about Hans-George Gadamer's Interpretation of Plato," in *Platonic Writings/ Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2001), 247-57.

[2] In a footnote, Zuckert admits that Voegelin, Levinas and Arendt are other scholars whose work fits the general parameters of her investigation (*Postmodern Platos*, 280, n. 9). However, she explains that she does not treat them because they "have been more concerned about saving religion or politics from philosophy than with uncovering the original character of philosophy itself." I think that Zuckert's statement presupposes Strauss's understanding of the relationship between philosophy, religion, and politics, an understanding which Voegelin did not accept.

[3] This does not mean that Voegelin "tried to defend religion from philosophy," as Zuckert seems to think.

experience of the "pull" of the divine presence and the order that follows from openness to that pull. A lifelong study of the ancient philosopher proved to Voegelin *not* that life was meaningless or that Being was unintelligible,[4] but, on the contrary, that the world was spiritually ordered, that meaning inhered in human existence, and that only through the irruption of the divine presence into the individual's soul could one's life and the life of the city become ordered.

Voegelin's interpretation of Plato occurs within his larger philosophical project— which is no easy thing to grasp. And Voegelin's method and conclusions are likewise difficult to grasp. Therefore, a single full-length study dedicated solely to Voegelin's approach is needed. In this dissertation, I systematically and thoroughly answer the questions: What was Eric Voegelin's understanding of Platonic political philosophy? What were Voegelin's methods of Platonic interpretation? Why did he think a study of Plato was important for contemporary political science? And, how does Voegelin's approach to Plato compare to other prominent twentieth-century interpretations, or in other words, what makes him unique? I address this last question by comparing Voegelin's approach to a particularly prominent and fruitful strand of twentieth-century Platonic scholarship—that of Leo Strauss. In pursuing this comparison, I focus especially on how Voegelin understood the relationship between reason and spiritual belief in Platonic philosophy. For Voegelin's Plato, philosophy was an attempt, motivated by the experience of faith in the divine ground of being, to convey truth about the structure of reality. I argue that Voegelin took seriously the references to God in Plato's work and thought that, rather than offering separate teachings to different

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[4] These are among the insights which, according to Zuckert, Derrida derived from his engagement of Plato.

audiences, Plato was as forthright as he could be with all who sought the experiential core behind his mythic symbolization.

A number of important benefits accrue from this study. First, it describes the contours of a useful method for examining Plato's dialogues which has not been widely explored, and thus gives readers new insights into the character of Plato's philosophy. It allows readers to discern what Voegelin's position was and to judge for themselves how much interpretive light it threw upon the Platonic texts. It also supplies a fresh perspective from which to consider or reconsider other twentieth-century approaches to Plato. And, finally, inasmuch as Voegelin's study of Plato occurred within his broader effort to discern order (and disorder) in twentieth-century political culture, it helps us to evaluate the political situation in which we currently find ourselves. What Zuckert says of the thinkers that are the subject of her study, one may also say of Eric Voegelin: "no one who has read their interpretations will ever read the dialogues themselves in quite the same way."[5]

Situating the Study

Although no one has yet offered a systematic and thorough explication of Voegelin's interpretation of Plato and its place in the context of other prominent twentieth-century interpreters, some studies have begun to take up related questions. A brief look at these studies will demonstrate the importance of this dissertation. Generally, studies that treat Voegelin's discussion of Plato fall into three categories: (1) general studies that examine broad topics or large questions such as Voegelin's understanding of the relation between Plato and Christianity or Voegelin's critique of modern political

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[5] Zuckert, *Post-Modern Platos*, 2.

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ideologies;[6] (2) more focused studies of Voegelin's interpretation of particular Platonic dialogues;[7] and (3) investigations of how Voegelin relates to other prominent thinkers on some particular topic.[8] Let me describe a few important studies from the second and third categories as a way of demonstrating the relevance of my project and the type of examination that remains to be done. I start with category three.

Anastaplo and Rhodes

In 1988, George Anastaplo, a prominent student of Strauss, wrote an article entitled, "On How Eric Voegelin has Read Plato and Aristotle in Modernity." Anastaplo admitted, on the one hand, that he was unsure of his understanding of Voegelin's work, but he went on, nevertheless, to furnish a scathing critique of Voegelin's approach to

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[6] Studies of this sort include Michael P. Morrissey, "Voegelin, Religious Experience, and Immortality," in *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, ed. Glenn Hughes (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 11-32; Geoffrey L. Price, "The Epiphany of Universal Humanity," in *The Politics of the Soul*, 65-86; Michael P. Federici, *Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002); Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

[7] See Terry Barker and Lawrence Schmidt, "'Voegelin not Mysterious': A Response to Zdravko Planinc's 'The Significance of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy'," in *Politics, Order, and History: Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*, eds. Stephen A. McKnight, Glenn Hughes, and Geoffrey L. Price (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 376-410; M.W. Sinnett, "Eric Voegelin and the Essence of the Problem: The Question of Divine-Human Attunement in Plato's *Symposium*," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 410-39; Zdravko Planinc, "The Significance of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 327-75.

[8] See especially George Anastaplo, "On How Eric Voegelin has Read Plato and Aristotle in Modernity," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 5-6 (1988): 85-91; James M. Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003). Also see Thomas J. Farrell, "Eric Voegelin and the Sophists," in *Communication and Lonergan: Common Ground for Forging the New Age*, eds. Thomas J. Farrell and Paul Soukup (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 108-36; Jerry Day, *Voegelin, Schelling, and the Philosophy of Historical Existence* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003); Thomas L. Pangle, "On the Epistolary Dialogue Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin," in *Leo Strauss: Political Philosopher and Jewish Thinker*, eds. Kenneth L. Deutsch and Walter Nicgorski (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994), 231-59; Peter A. Petrakis and Cecil L. Eubanks, eds., *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns: Searching for Foundations* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004). Although this last work points to the importance of putting Eric Voegelin in dialogue (or exploring the dialogue that actually occurred) with other prominent twentieth-century philosophers, it does not go into the similarities and differences between the interlocutors' interpretation of Plato, except in the last essay, Edward F. Findlay's "Politics, Metaphysics, and Anti-Foundationalism in the Works of Eric Voegelin and Jan Patočka," 145-68.

Plato, a critique that focused on several points: Voegelin's historicism, his understanding of the nature and manifestation of revelation, and his insensitivity to Aristotle's reading of Plato. Anastaplo's article raised important questions that have not to date been fully explored. James M. Rhodes, a scholar sympathetic to Voegelin's thought, did attempt to answer Anastaplo's points briefly at the end of an overview piece.[9] But the space was not sufficient for a complete reply. Meanwhile, Rhodes's book *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence: Plato's Erotic Dialogues* (2003), offers a somewhat fuller account of Voegelin's approach to Plato and its relationship to other prominent interpretations, but also leaves much to be done.

Rhodes's book is itself engaged in Platonic interpretation—specifically the interpretation of instances of Plato's "silence" in the *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Seventh Letter*. And it is in this context that Rhodes describes two fundamentally different interpretive approaches, which arrive at different explanations of Plato's purposes. Rhodes contrasts the view which he attributes to Nietzsche, Strauss, and Stanley Rosen with the view attributed to Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Voegelin, and Paul Friedländer. While the first view considers Plato's irony as a form of esotericism, the latter view, argues Rhodes, sees Plato's silence as "a response to ineffable knowledge."[10] Rhodes points to the desirability of following Voegelin's interpretation of Plato, and provides a brief discussion of Voegelin's understanding of Platonic irony. However, as Rhodes himself notes, "Voegelin's perceptions of the principles governing the reading of Plato

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[9] James M. Rhodes, "On Voegelin: His Collected Works and His Significance," *The Review of Politics* 54 (1992): 621-47.

[10] See Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 31 and chapter 2. Rhodes also treats interpreters who ignore Plato's silences, with Hegel as the key example.

would deserve a much more comprehensive summary if they were being studied for their own sake."[11] And another observer, Jodi Cockerill, has echoed the need for this kind of endeavor, arguing that "critical elements of [Voegelin's] thought have been neglected: Voegelin's intense engagement with Plato, for one."[12]

Planinc, Barker/Schmidt, and Sinnett

With respect to those focused studies which describe Voegelin's interpretation of a particular dialogue or dialogues, the most significant efforts occur in one important volume edited by Glenn Hughes, Stephen A. McKnight, and Geoffrey L. Price: *Politics, Order, and History: Essays on the Work of Eric Voegelin*.[13] In the third part of this work, which examines the themes and variations appearing in Voegelin's seminal work *Order and History*, Zdravko Planinc, Terry Barker and his co-author Lawrence Schmidt, and M.W. Sinnett address directly Voegelin's approach to Platonic interpretation. The essay by Planinc and the direct response to it by Barker and Schmidt question whether or not Voegelin's interpretation is consistent with the discoveries that issued from the larger project he was engaged in: searching for ordered reality as it becomes known to human consciousness in history. Planinc's argument answers in the negative by examining Voegelin's work on the *Timaeus* and *Critias* in his early and later career.[14] Planinc

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[11] Ibid., 105.

[12] Jodi Cockerill, "Review: In Quest of an Introduction," review of *Eric Voegelin: In Search of Reality*, by Thomas Heilke, *The Review of Politics* 62 (2000): 584-86. Cockerill's comments apply not only to a lacuna in Heilke's work (Lanham: MD, Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), but also in Voegelinian scholarship generally. Heilke's book, charged with the daunting task of providing an overview of Voegelin's work, has many admirable features.

[13] See n.6, above.

[14] Zdravko Planinc, "The Significance of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 327-75.

argues that while Voegelin's larger project evolved in depth and direction, his analysis of

Plato's project did not. He concludes by arguing that Voegelin misread Plato. Barker

and Schmidt reply by arguing that Planinc misuses some of the Voegelinian terms upon

which his argument for inconsistency rests.[15] They then try to vindicate Voegelin's

consistency by demonstrating the character of his project's development: it may have

begun under the assumption that history exhibits a unilinear progression toward truth,

meaning that the truth of later historical understandings would surpass those of earlier

ones. At its latest stage, however, Voegelin's project could be characterized as "an

integrated Classical and Christian political theory and philosophy of history."[16]

Therefore, Voegelin's understanding of both history and the respective truth of

Christianity and Platonic thought evolved simultaneously. They conclude that Voegelin

was consistent and forthright, and not proudly averse to revising his own thought. These

two essays demonstrate the ripeness of the topic I explore: what did Voegelin understand

Plato to be saying? And how did Voegelin himself come to this particular understanding.

In the same volume, M.W. Sinnett states that "What will be necessary in order for

there ever to be a responsible assessment and critical application of Voegelin's work is

the endeavor on the part of many scholars over a period of many years to explore in

detail, and in a relevant manner, the empirical bases of Voegelin's writings."[17] Sinnett's

essay is an attempt to do just that, with the *Symposium* as its subject. Like Rhodes,

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[15] Terry Barker and Lawrence Schmidt, "'Voegelin not Mysterious': A Response to Zdravko Planinc's 'The Significance of Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias* in Eric Voegelin's Philosophy'," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 376-410.

[16] Stephen A. McKnight, "Introduction," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 31. I have relied partially on McKnight's summaries in my descriptions of the essays appearing in that volume.

[17] M.W. Sinnett, "Eric Voegelin and the Essence of the Problem: The Question of Divine-Human Attunement in Plato's *Symposium*," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 410-39, at 411-12.

Sinnett argues that examining Voegelin's emphasis on critical features of the dialogues provides a useful alternative to approaches by other scholars such as Allan Bloom and R.E. Allen. We learn that Sinnett, like Planinc, doubts the consistency of Voegelin's project over time. But we learn too that Sinnett regards the study of Voegelin's approach to Plato to be valuable in its own right.

In sum, then, ample evidence suggests that contemporary scholars are interested not only in Voegelinian political philosophy in general, but also in his distinctive approach to Plato. As it stands now, the literature treats discrete parts of Voegelin's interpretation of Plato without offering anything like a comprehensive account or one which attempts systematically to compare Voegelin to other prominent interpreters. This study endeavors to address this need. Moreover, it helps explore important questions about whether or not Voegelin read Plato correctly and consistently, and whether his reading was coherent within the context of his larger project. Understanding what Voegelin had to say about Plato will help his students and critics to comprehend his project better and, potentially, shed light on our contemporary political world.

Sources and Strategies

Sources

Voegelin's corpus is immense. But Michael Federici has noted rightly that all of Voegelin's work contributes to a larger and profound project with a unified trajectory. He states succinctly: "[Voegelin's] primary concern was to engage in the open philosophical search for the truth of existence . . . to articulate the truth of existence and defend it from untruth, [which is] a part of the structure of consciousness that must be

confronted and overcome."[18] Voegelin's work on Plato was at the foundation of this

concern. That is, what Voegelin found in Plato—the uneasy search for the divine ground

of existence and the attempt to live a balanced life in this world—established the basis for

Voegelin's theoretical and experiential framework. Nevertheless, Voegelin's most

important treatments of Plato occur in a few key works that I will examine. Scholars

generally agree that Voegelin's philosophical project had three phases, each of which

includes important works on Plato. Keeping in mind that each phase is an integral part of

a singular effort, it is to a brief description of these phases that I now turn.[19]

The first phase in Voegelin's scholarship lasted roughly from 1922 through the

1940s. In the 1920s, Voegelin had studied under the positivist legal scholar Hans Kelsen,

and his first publications treated topics in legal theory, philosophy, and sociology.

Voegelin traveled to the United States and Paris for several years on a Fellowship,[20] and

returned to Vienna in 1927. He received a position at the University there, but after

publishing books that were out-of-favor with the Nazi party, Voegelin returned to the

United States in 1938 to teach at Harvard. It was there that he met an editor from

McGraw-Hill who asked him to write an introductory textbook on the history of political

ideas. Conceiving a project along the lines of George Sabine's *History of Political*

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[18] Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, xxi. Voegelin himself noted that, "The motivations of my work, which culminates in a philosophy of history, are simple. They arise from the political situation." *Autobiographical Reflections*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 93. Also see Rhodes, "Voegelin: His Collected Works," 628: "The fact that Voegelin undertook a series of new beginnings in quest of the good implies that all his changing concepts and arguments were elements in continuous threads of the one analysis that he wove."

[19] Much of this description comes from Rhodes's "Voegelin: His Collected Works."

[20] Voegelin received the Laura Spellman Rockefeller Fellowship in 1924. This provided Voegelin with the means to spend two years in the United States, where he studied at Columbia, Harvard, and the University of Wisconsin. During this time he published *On the Form of the American Mind*, in which he worked out his own liberation from the predominant intellectual culture of Central Europe. The Fellowship also allowed him to spend a year in Paris.

Theory, Voegelin began his *History of Political Ideas* (*HPI*), which examined the historical emergence of ideas about politics and their evolution.

Rhodes describes this phase of Voegelin's work as having been influenced by neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian suppositions about the means of accessing truth. These rested on the notion that ideas could be separated from experiences, and that ideas were the proper subject of inquiry. He was interested in the "order" of the soul, and he thought that the soul would respond to a correct set of ideas by itself becoming ordered. Thus good and true ideas produce a good character.

Also during this period Voegelin "conceived history as a [unilinear] flow of events and ideas in time."[21] The emphasis of *HPI* thus began to show how Western civilization grew out of the ideas of classical philosophy and Christianity. However, Voegelin gradually began to realize that the process of experiences with reality, rather than ideas about reality, was what actually constituted human history. Voegelin stated, "While working on the chapter on Schelling, it dawned on me that the conception of a history of ideas was an ideological deformation of reality. There were no ideas unless there were symbols of immediate *experiences*."[22] This conclusion led Voegelin to abandon *HPI* and, for the most part, to refuse its publication.

Although Voegelin's new insight changed the direction of his work, his understanding of divine transcendence did not change, nor did his fundamental approach

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[21] See Rhodes, "Voegelin: His Collected Works," 634.

[22] Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 63 (emphasis in original). This crucial turn in Voegelin's work reflects his understanding that ideas have no reality of their own, apart from the experiences that engender those ideas. This represents a dramatic break from the Kantian or neo-Kantian understanding that there is a necessary reality and a contingent reality that are ontologically separate. For Voegelin, human beings experience reality, not ideas, so a history of ideas would be unable to get to the core of being.

to Plato. For this reason, I am able to consult the passages in *HPI* that treat Plato, as well as other writings from this period that deal with Plato, especially "The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*" (1949), and select correspondence such as the letters to Leo Strauss written through the 1940s.[23]

The second phase of Voegelin's work, as Rhodes usefully characterizes it, constituted Voegelin's transition to a "programmatic philosophy of history,"[24] where history became a "process in consciousness."[25] The most important works of this phase include *The New Science of Politics* (1952) and the first three volumes of Voegelin's opus, *Order and History* (1956-1957). Both works will be of particular interest to political scientists interested in Platonic interpretation and the political implications of modernity. Rather than emphasizing the primacy of ideas, in these works Voegelin examined the importance of experiences of reality and how these are symbolized in history. He thought that what is crucial for the soul's health is responding properly to its experience with transcendent reality, especially as exemplified by Plato. *The New Science of Politics* (*NSP*) discusses the Platonic experiences of truth that have been abandoned in modern political science and argues for their revival.

In volume 3 of *Order and History* (*OH*), which bears the title, *Plato and Aristotle*, Voegelin discussed Plato's path-breaking (and in some ways unsurpassed) symbolization of the tension of existence, which Voegelin described as a tension between two pulls: one from the divine, the other from nothingness. Here we confront Voegelin's most

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[23] Voegelin's understanding of Plato changed in *minor* ways over time, mainly with respect to what aspect of metaxy existence Voegelin thought Plato was exploring. I disagree with Planinc's argument that Voegelin's approach to Plato failed to keep pace with developments in his philosophy of history.

[24] Rhodes, "Voegelin: His Collected Works," 630.

[25] Ibid., 634.

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penetrating analysis of Plato's *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Laws*, which is the main subject of my study. Chapters on Plato's other dialogues occur here as well. However, these have less direct relevance to my project, which is limited to Voegelin's approach to the most obviously political dialogues in the corpus. During this period Voegelin continued to correspond with Leo Strauss specifically about Platonic interpretation.

The final phase of Voegelin's work begins in the mid-1960s. Here, Voegelin's treatment of Plato focused particularly on the experiences which, according to Voegelin, led Plato to his insights concerning order and existence. Voegelin's much acclaimed work, *Anamnesis*, was written during this period, during a hiatus between the publications of volumes 3 and 4 of *Order and History*. During this time, Voegelin revisited his earlier work and once again modified his philosophical approach. History is now understood as a process of eternal being realizing itself in time, and philosophy now becomes a meditative philosophy of history—exemplified by the Platonic activity of *anamnesis*. Moreover, the health of the soul is now understood to result from the ordering that occurs through "the metaleptic mutual participation of human and divine nous."[26] *Anamnesis*, volumes 4 and 5 of *OH* as well as several of the essays published from the 1960s through 1985 display Voegelin's new approach to his project and further demonstrate his distinctive approach to Plato.[27]

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[26] I am still following Rhodes here. These are terse statements and I do not expect them to be perfectly clear to the reader unfamiliar with Voegelin's intellectual development. But this is not the place for me to elaborate too extensively on the changes in Voegelin's outlook. Besides Rhodes's useful account of these changes, one may look also to the accounts found in Michael P. Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), especially chap. 4; Thomas Heilke, *Eric Voegelin: In Quest of Reality*, especially chap. 1; Kenneth Keulman, *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelin's Political Theory* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), especially chapter 6.

[27] The later essays found in volumes 12 and 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, 34 vols. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989-2008) include: "Immortality: Experience

Looking at Voegelin's corpus as a whole, the most significant sources for me to consider are *Order and History*, *Anamnesis, The New Science of Politics*, the correspondence with Strauss, a number of his late published essays, and selections from *History of Political Ideas*. These are sufficient to demonstrate how Voegelin approached Plato, not merely at a given moment, but over his entire career. Consultation of other works by Voegelin, including his *Autobiographical Reflections* (1973) occurs as necessary for clarification of questions regarding other aspects of his philosophical project.

Strategies

In order to show how Voegelin approached the dialogues and what he discovered therein, I undertake multiple investigations. First, I describe Voegelin's broader philosophical project. Second, I examine Voegelin's treatment of specific dialogues. And, third, I compare Voegelin's interpretive approach and conclusions to those of another prominent interpreter. These investigations are arranged so as to move the reader from a general understanding of Voegelin's work to an understanding of his engagement of Plato in particular, which is necessary because Voegelin's corpus is immense and his writings involve complex vocabulary and arguments. Here, let me describe each of the aforementioned investigations in light of their unique contributions to my study and their role in guiding the reader toward the particular understanding of Voegelin's Plato.

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and Symbol" (1967); "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History" (1970); "The Gospel and Culture" (1971); "On Classical Experience" (1973); "Reason: The Classic Experience" (1974); "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation" (1983); "Quod Deus Dicitur" (1985); and "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth" (unpublished). Subsequent references to texts appearing in the *Collected Works* will include full bibliographic information the first time a volume is cited. Thereafter, citations will have the following format: *CW* volume number: page number.

My first task is to give the reader a sense of the concerns that prompted Voegelin to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the Platonic corpus. Voegelin was concerned to restore "order" to "history," which, thus formulated, seems quite abstract and in need of further elaboration. My treatment of Voegelin's broader philosophical project defines important concepts such as these and connects them to Voegelin's concrete experiences of political turmoil and the theoretical vacuity within the academy. Convinced that modern thought was incapable of critically reflecting upon its own deficiencies, Voegelin began to study the great works of history, including Plato's, in order to gain a better understanding of the political and academic disorder and to try to discover a remedy for it—that is, to try to bring politics and academics back to a state of health and order. The insights he discovered as he consulted the historical texts, particularly Plato's texts, informed the way that he engaged them. For that reason, my examination of Voegelin's approach to Plato requires me to outline the contours of this broader project which culminated in a complex philosophy of history and consciousness. This preliminary investigation prepares my discussions of Voegelin's interpretive assumptions and techniques (in chapter three) and of his conclusions about the nature of Platonic philosophy (in chapter four).

My second task is to examine how Voegelin read individual dialogues and what he concluded about them, paying attention to the relation between Voegelin's interpretations and his philosophy of history and consciousness. I have chosen to focus on Voegelin's analysis of three of Plato's most political dialogues—the *Gorgias*, *Republic* and *Laws*. Each is given its own separate chapter (chapters five - seven), and my thought in selecting these dialogues is that they will be of immediate interest to

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political theorists currently working and teaching in the field, since they emphasize the character of regimes, rulers, justice, laws, and political speech. More importantly, however, is that each of these dialogues represents, for Voegelin, a specific stage in the philosophic quest—both Plato's and Voegelin's. Examining these dialogues is therefore crucial to understanding how Voegelin himself and his Plato conceived of the philosophic quest. Each chapter is organized around four important points of interest: 1) the prior assumptions that factor into to the interpretation of the dialogue, 2) conclusions regarding Plato's development of dialogue's theme and the meaning of that theme, 3) conclusions regarding the substance of Plato's efforts to communicate and his intended audience, and 4) conclusions regarding the outcome of the dialogue, or its key teaching.

Since I claim that Voegelin's approach to Plato was unique, I must situate his interpretations of the dialogues within the context of other prominent interpretations. For reasons of space and in order to focus my study, I limit myself to comparing Voegelin to one other important interpreter of Plato, Leo Strauss. This comparison is particularly fruitful because a correspondence exists between them that explicitly addresses the question of how to interpret the dialogues and also lays out some of each thinker's intellectual commitments.[28] For example, both thinkers agreed that a literal reading of the dialogues would obscure the most important features of Plato's thought, that Platonic philosophy was a way of life rather than a dogma, and that Platonic philosophy could address some of modernity's most pressing problems. Because such similarities exist, the

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[28] David Walsh suggests that "[Voegelin's] work might be read as an extended reply to the objections [to his understanding of the relationship between reason and revelation] inconclusively raised in the letters with Strauss." See "The Reason-Revelation Tension in Strauss and Voegelin," in *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934 – 1964*, trans. and ed. Peter Emberley and Barry Cooper, 349-68 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 361.

differences between Voegelin's Plato and Strauss's Plato emerge in a powerful and interesting way. Moreover, among the "post-modern" interpreters covered by Zuckert, Leo Strauss and his students have the greatest presence in the United States today. Since they were themselves interested in the differences of approach and were moved, at times, to comment upon this, my decision to compare Voegelin to Strauss will serve their concerns as well. Beginning with chapter three, each of my chapters includes a relevant comparison between the two thinkers.

By proceeding from a general treatment of Voegelin's philosophical project to his engagement with the particular dialogues, I hope to make sense of his complex interpretation of Plato and to emphasize some of the ways in which considering Voegelin's unique interpretation promotes a better understanding of the ancient thinker. I conclude my study by standing back from Voegelin's engagement of particular dialogues and asking, more generally, what we have learned. I reflect on some of the strengths and weaknesses of Voegelin's approach, and suggest that Voegelin's (and Strauss's) engagement of Plato has broader implications for our own efforts to better understand ourselves as human beings in the political world.

CHAPTER TWO

Eric Voegelin and the Crisis of Modernity

In the previous chapter I provided a general sketch of who Eric Voegelin was and how his work fits into the context of other important twentieth-century political thinkers. What emerged was a portrait of an eminent figure whose philosophical endeavor makes significant contributions to our understanding of philosophy in general and Platonic interpretation in particular. In this chapter, I describe some of the key tenets of Voegelin's endeavor, paying particular attention to the way Voegelin's work emerged from the social and political crises of his time. I begin with an account of Voegelin's critique of modernity and then discuss Voegelin's attempt to offer a positive response to modernity's failings; this response consisted in revealing the full range of human experience in relation to divine being through a philosophy of history, consciousness, politics, and language. Although only a brief treatment of these components of his work is possible, such will suffice to prepare my analysis of Voegelin's interpretation of Plato and also to suggest why this has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves.

The Modern Crisis

In the first chapter of the American version of *Anamnesis*, Voegelin described how, in 1943, he began an inquiry into what he referred to as a "theory of consciousness."[1] At that time, he stated, "I had arrived at a dead-end in my attempts to

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[1] Eric Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, trans. and ed. Gerhart Niemeyer (1978; repr. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 3. All subsequent references to *Anamnesis* will include the chapter title and refer to this version unless otherwise specified.

find a theory of man, society, and history that would permit an adequate interpretation of the phenomena in my chosen field of studies."[2] Working within the field of political science, but not without a penetrating knowledge of most disciplines within the humanities and sciences, Voegelin sought to understand the emergence, decline, and nature of various social and political movements. His scholarly concern was intensified, moreover, by his own strong aversion to the particular characteristics of the political events transpiring in Europe in the early twentieth century. Voegelin came to understand the nature of the modern crisis by investigating two of its most important symptoms, namely, science's inability to explain and evaluate basic features of human experience and the deterioration of politics such that movements like Communism, Fascism, and National Socialism could receive widespread approbation.[3] I discuss each of these in turn, beginning with the deterioration of politics.

Ideological Politics

What Voegelin understood to be the distinguishing characteristic of modern politics was its ideological fervor. Voegelin was astonished that so many of the supposedly cultured, progressive, and liberal peoples of Europe tolerated the social and political turmoil of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which included racism, imperialism, and mass murder. In general, Voegelin found his contemporaries to be all too supportive of powerful political actors who sought to realize certain social and political ideals at any cost, even if the necessary means included thoughts, activities, and attitudes which were, for Voegelin, always repugnant to reasonable and emotionally

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 24.

healthy individuals. Nevertheless, political ideologists found ways of justifying such

means by appealing to their intended end, which was usually cast in terms of a certain

and durable cure for the ills of the human condition.

To his dismay, Voegelin found that neither ethical nor rational appeals were

sufficient to convince people that the practical means employed within the ideological

programs were morally abhorrent and plainly opposed to the end for which such practices

were undertaken, not to mention ineffective. As Voegelin noted,

> The reasons why the various ideologies were wrong were sufficiently well known
> in the 1920s, but no ideologist could be persuaded to change his position under
> the pressure of argument. Obviously, rational discourse, or the resistance to it,
> had existential roots far deeper than the debate conducted on the surface.[4]

Human beings' attachments to their ideologies were tenacious, Voegelin surmised, not

because people thought that the ideology was *true* per se, but rather because the final end

that the ideological system purported to be capable of securing was so attractive.

Further observation and analysis of these phenomena led Voegelin to suggest that

behind the various ideologies and the general willingness to subscribe to them laid a

fundamental animating, or existential,[5] principle that operated through a foreshortened

account of the order of being or a limited horizon of consciousness. Specifically, the

various modern political ideologies, which both articulated and shaped the prevailing

public sentiments, lacked adequate, potent accounts of the transcendent ground of being,

the reality of which, Voegelin thought, all human beings apprehend through their

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[4] Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, 6.

[5] When Voegelin uses the word existential, he does not refer to the existentialist philosophers. Rather, he employs it to designate that which touches every aspect of man's experience of himself. In particular, Voegelin used "existential" to refer to things that are key to individuals' self-understandings of who they are, whence they come, and whither they are going.

experiences of "creatureliness."[6] Because I discuss the complex connection between

experience and theoretical formulations more fully below, I will limit myself to only a

few remarks here. Voegelin found that modern individuals generally assumed that

modern science had disproven or rendered inconsequential the reality of divine being.

This assumption contravened basic, universal experiences that illuminate the reality of

something greater than man to human consciousness. Therefore, Voegelin suggested that

modern individuals either suppressed or lacked an awareness of those experiences,

having what he called a limited horizon of consciousness.

Because modern consciousness was limited thus, modern political ideologies

could portray man himself as the epicenter or zenith of being. As a consequence, the

various ideologies could deny man's theoretical and practical limitations as well as the

transcendent moral and ethical norms that bear on all aspects of man's existence. By

proffering rationalized accounts of being that appealed to man's desire to control his

destiny, ideologists' legitimated on the level of cognition behaviors such as arbitrary and

mass murder. Voegelin further observed that, since the tenets of the ideological schemas

contravened basic features of human experience, a crucial component of their success

laid in prohibiting questions about or reflections upon their own foundations. The

existential principles operating in modernity thus cultivated, in the realm of individual

practice, a widespread propensity to accept any appealing ideological program.

As an upshot of their denial of divine reality, modern man (according to

Voegelin's experience) proved inattentive to the ever dangerous influence of the lower

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[6] Eric Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, trans. Virginia Ann Schildhauer, in *Modernity Without Restraint*, ed. Manfred Henningsen, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, at 30. This book was originally published in 1938.

appetites on human thought and action. The general presumption was that man could free himself from the sway of the lower appetites through his own psychic discipline and self-cultivation. These ideas overshadowed the basic, universal experiences so powerfully that not even the tremendous injustice, bloodlust, and carnality of the events of the twentieth century could persuade moderns that man *qua* man simply cannot liberate himself from his animal nature. The experience of World War I, for example, was not sufficient to prevent man from resorting to similar, atrocious practices in World War II. Ideologists continued to claim—and people continued to agree with them—that it was possible to create and to make perpetual a society free from the ills which had plagued societies that had developed historically. Voegelin argued that the ideologists' claims contradicted not only the knowledge of the human condition that comes from the study of history and politics but also commonsense: suffering and imperfection somehow make sense to human beings in a way that an idealized or perfected society does not.[7]

Moreover, Voegelin observed that the widespread resort to violence as a means for securing a human good underscored the irrationality of modern politics on a number of levels. For one, the object desired, *viz*. human peace and prosperity, is undermined by trying to achieve it through unjust and violent means. Next, the practice of violence clearly undermined the popular idea of man's ever-increasing liberation from the sway of the lower passions; the ideas behind political activity that asserted as much were demonstrably false. Lastly, the use of such means was often (though not in the case of

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[7] Voegelin, "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation" in *Published Essays, 1966 – 1985*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 318-21.

Marxism or Hegelianism[8]) opposed to the internal consistency of the ideological system itself. For Voegelin, these inconsistencies violated, in addition to scientific rigor, the basic moral norms that all individuals sense as a permanent feature of their humanity.

Problems in the Academy

Voegelin thought that a fully-theorized scientific critique of the contemporary principles of political practice could counter the deformations of ideological politics. But he found that academia reflected the political milieu; it was dominated by "school-philosophies" that functioned within "a restriction of the horizon similar to the restrictions of consciousness that [Voegelin] could observe in the political mass movements."[9] The restricted horizon prevented a full understanding and accurate description of the political mass movements, and therefore led to what he found to be an entirely unscientific understanding of them. For example, while the institutional and historical causes of the movements received much attention, their spiritual motivations received hardly any treatment at all because the latter fell into the realm of "values" beyond the purview of scientific study. Voegelin therefore found himself in the position of having to develop a scientific theory that would explain and criticize not only modern political disorder, but also the situation of the academy.

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[8] On Voegelin's reading, since both thinkers conceived of history as a progressive dialectical process, they could reconcile violent, or otherwise physical, means with a peaceful, rational end. Voegelin argued that a "reconciliation" of this sort was achieved only through the "intellectual swindle" of constructing a speculative system that assimilates objections to the system's rationality into the "logic" of the system itself. In other words, both thinkers could make such claims by prohibiting questions. See Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism: Two Essays by Eric Voegelin* (1968; repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007), especially 16-21, 42, 79-83.

[9] Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, 4.

Voegelin's response, as he put it in *The New Science of Politics*, was to restore the view that science, properly understood, is no less than the full and proper study of man that originated with Plato and Aristotle. In the same work, he also suggested that political science in its "full grandeur" must be recognized as "the science of human existence in society and history, as well as the principles of order in general."[10] Following the grand scope of Voegelin's understanding of science, the fully-theorized scientific critique he proposed aimed at reorienting the contemporary principles of political practice and theory toward the principles of order generally.

Although Voegelin's critique of the academy would later blossom into a philosophy of consciousness, his efforts to explain his contemporary situation began with more basic observations. He noted that theorists' unwillingness "to ask questions concerning the sectors of reality they have excluded from their personal horizon" and their simultaneous effort "to dogmatize their prison reality as the universal truth" were closely related to the academy's general acceptance of positivistic, "value neutral," assumptions.[11] Positivism's two most destructive assumptions were 1) "that the methods used in the mathematizing sciences of the external world were possessed of some inherent virtue and that all other sciences would achieve comparable success if they followed the example and accepted these methods as their model," and 2) "that the methods of the natural sciences were a criterion for theoretical relevance in general."[12] These assumptions had led Voegelin's contemporaries to presume

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[10] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 2.

[11] Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, 3.

[12] Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 4.

that a study of reality could qualify as scientific only if it used the methods of the natural sciences, that problems couched in other terms were illusionary problems, that in particular metaphysical questions which do not admit of answers by the methods of the sciences of phenomena should not be asked, that realms of being which are not accessible to exploration by the model methods were irrelevant, and, in the extreme, that such realms of being did not exist.[13]

Voegelin's critique of modern science was that it was (1) unable or unwilling to inquire into subjects that had dominated scientific inquiry since antiquity, and (2) particularly susceptible to maintaining fallacious theories in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. Despite the "superabundance of theories of consciousness and methodologies of the sciences," the "science" of the academy could not "make the political events and movements intelligible," much less offer a rigorous critique of inadequate scholarly practices.[14] In order to tackle these issues, Voegelin would have to explain how the academy had arrived at this situation. As one commentator has observed, "What was needed was a fuller account of consciousness, the nascent form of which Voegelin had already begun to discern in himself."[15]

Voegelin's Response to Modernity

Voegelin's Fuller Horizon in Himself

In his effort to understand the root cause of modernity's ideological fervor, Voegelin did not hesitate to consider his own experiences, his own way of sensing and responding to the world around him. One reason he eventually turned specifically to a study of consciousness was that he sensed something deficient in the prevailing subject-

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[13] Ibid., 4.

[14] Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, 3

[15] David D. Corey, "Voegelin and Aristotle on *Nous*: What Is Noetic Political Science?" *The Review of Politics* 64.1 (Winter 2002): 57-79, at 59.

object model of consciousness.[16] Investigating this sensation further, Voegelin found that

ever since childhood he had been aware of aspects of his own conscious structure (such

as the experience of transcendence and participation in divine being) that were

systematically neglected by the subject-object model, since these experiences were not

properly speaking, external objects. Voegelin suggested, for example, that consciousness

itself could not be understood as an object of consciousness for the very simple reason

that it was consciousness that was doing the understanding: "An analysis of

consciousness has no instrument other than the concrete consciousness of the analyst."[17]

Voegelin therefore determined that the *character* of the analyst's consciousness

has a crucial role in whether one is capable of genuine insights. That is, consciousness

participates in the reality that it endeavors to understand and functions well only when it

has a certain ethical relation to reality, namely, one of affection and openness to *all* of its

facets and, as a result of those two, a "bewaring of premature satisfaction, and above all

[an effort] at avoiding the self-destructive fantasy of believing the reality of which it is a

part to be an object external to itself that can be mastered by bringing it into the form of a

system."[18] "Reality" had disclosed itself to Voegelin's consciousness, inviting him to

decide to "live in its truth" even though this meant that "he would know it only in the

dark glass of trust, hope, and love."[19] "Reality" in this context means the wide range of

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[16] For Voegelin's detailed critiques of the philosophies of consciousness of his time, see "On a Theory of Consciousness," in *Anamnesis*. See also, Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence*, particularly chapter 1.

[17] Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," *Anamnesis*, 4.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 45.

experiences we recognize.[20] Consequently, one's view of reality can be more or less true according to how honest one is about one's own experiences.

Voegelin sensed that his contemporaries lacked a serious appreciation for the experiences of consciousness's apperception of a discernible ground of being that transcends, obliges, and remains mysterious to human consciousness.[21] In a later essay, Voegelin described the philosopher's initial reception of a mysterious, dim vision of truth, which through "persevering study of reality and the incessant, well-ordered practice of contemplative action," becomes "the sudden vision of the Beyond that has drawn and moved the thinker in his meditative ascent" all along.[22] The primary features of human consciousness, for Voegelin, were its natural openness to this divine force that grounds being and its desire to understand the ground and its relation to the ground more fully. Voegelin's fuller horizon of consciousness enabled him to discern and to pursue the dim vision which opens up a proper understanding of reality by revealing the myriad of relations between consciousness and the reality in which it is constituted. From the vantage point of his fuller horizon, Voegelin began to formulate his critique of modern politics and science.[23]

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[20] Voegelin used the ambiguous term "reality" deliberately in order to avoid falling into the subject-object model of consciousness. As he explained in "The Consciousness of the Ground," in *Anamnesis*, "the analysis of existence can express a certain phase of its process only through an ambiguous symbol. The symbol must be ambiguous because every attempt to limit it to one or the other unambiguous meaning would destroy the insight in the structure of reality that the philosopher, within reality, has gained through participation in its process." (164)

[21] See Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993) for a fuller account of modern consciousness's imperviousness to the presence of mystery inherent within the human condition.

[22] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 363.

[23] As Morrissey notes, Voegelin was influenced by other thinkers who were interested "to recover the content of consciousness through historical restoration and original perception," including Camus,

Search through History for the Development of Full Psychological Understanding

Voegelin's quest to understand why consciousness's horizons could vary and to discover its full potential led him to the search through the records of human history. By this time, Voegelin had already undertaken a series of concrete, comparative studies of historical and contemporary civilizations—both Western and Eastern and ranging from the most primitive to the most developed—for his *History of Political Ideas*. Although he found himself compelled to abandon the textbook project for theoretical difficulties, it was out of his historical researches that Voegelin discovered the practical principles of order that one should consider when undertaking critical studies of important texts.[24] For example, one such principle is that every political society undergoes all sorts of decline. Therefore, finding a text that portrayed a society as exempt from decline would require the analyst to explain the divergence from the principle. The historical research also informed his theory of consciousness by revealing that, regardless of time or place, a constant feature of humanity is its symbolic expression of experiences of participation in reality, or the order of being discerned as a whole comprehending god and man, world and society.[25]

Bergson, Jaspers, Kierkegaard, Proust, Spengler, Toynbee, Friedlaender, and Hildebrandt. See *Consciousness and Transcendence*, 19.

[24] For a discussion of the development of Voegelin's "new science" as a response to other important historical studies (Toynbee and Spengler, primarily), see Stephen A. McKnight, "*Order and History* as a Response to the Theoretical and Methodological Problems Confronting Historians in the Twentieth Century," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 259-81.

[25] See Voegelin, "Remembrance of Things Past," in *Anamnesis*, 11.

Voegelin honed in on man's use of symbols to clarify and to convey experiences as the uniquely human activity.[26] Stephen McKnight nicely summarized Voegelin's reason for turning to the study of symbolization:

> For Voegelin, the beginning of theoretical or scientific analysis is the identification of the proper subject of study and the subsequent determination of the best method to treat that subject. For Voegelin, the fundamental subject to be studied is humanity in history. The field of study that brings the unique character of human existence to light is the symbolizations of order that represent the efforts of humankind to articulate the meaning and purpose of existence. The method for studying this subject is the comparative analysis of these symbolizations as they unfold in history.[27]

Symbolizations are related to horizons of consciousness because they express consciousness's understanding of itself and its relation to the reality in which it exists. What Voegelin found through his study of the various types of symbolizations was that man's expressions of his experiences of existence could be qualified on a range of compactness to differentiation, which corresponds to the range of consciousness's horizon. In his compact experience, man apperceives reality more simplistically and uses bulky or awkward symbols to articulate it. But those symbols often become more differentiated, evincing that a deeper stratum in the structure of consciousness has made its way into man's horizon of experience, thus broadening that horizon. As man's perspective becomes broader, he becomes aware of more of reality's facets and becomes capable of expressing the reality he experiences with increasing clarity and precision.

A comparative example will help to clarify these remarks: the Homeric epics portray the gods anthropomorphically, while Plato (according to Voegelin) preferred to

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[26] See Stephen A. McKnight, "*Order and History* as a Response," in *Politics, Order, and History*, 266-69.

[27] Ibid., 268-69.

symbolize the gods by the abstract term "the Beyond" (*epekeina*). Both symbols try to make sense of man's consciousness of an experienced relation between himself and some transcendent reality. But the Homeric symbolism is compact, while Plato's symbolism is differentiated. In the former, man and God are experienced as distinct entities though they have more commonalities (e.g. they have bodies and act capriciously) than differences (e.g. men are mortal while the gods are immortal). In Plato's symbolism, however, man and God are further distinguished from one another, indicating that Plato's horizon of consciousness extended beyond Homer's into the mysterious realm of non-material reality.

Voegelin's discovery of the relation between symbolization, consciousness, and the horizon of experience helped to explain, or diagnose, the problems he saw in politics and the academy as well as providing a starting point for redressing the modern disorder. If he understood consciousness's proper end and operation, he could begin to take the necessary steps to guide modern consciousness back to its orderly condition. It is absolutely crucial to note that Voegelin conceived of his effort to address modern disorder as a *restoration* of order rather than as a final liberation from the problem of disorder. Against the suggestion that the basic structure of human existence may be improved, Voegelin argued that "there is indeed a progress in clarity and precision of knowledge of the order of being"; nonetheless, the order of being itself "remains something that is given, that is not under man's control."[28] Therefore, Voegelin *in no way* thought that the historical movement from compact to differentiated symbolization indicated changes in the structure of consciousness or the structure of reality. In fact,

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[28] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 31and 39.

Voegelin claimed that a key feature of modern disorder was the suggestion that historical analysis proved the mutability of human nature or the order of being.

Although Voegelin thought the record of man's symbolizations illuminated the structure of humanity in history, he concluded that "What is permanent in the history of mankind is not the symbols but man himself in search of his humanity and its order." He went on to say that

> Though the issue can be stated clearly and simply, its implications are vast. For a comparative study, if it goes beyond registering the symbols as phenomena and penetrates to the constants of engendering experience, can be conducted only by means of symbols which in their turn are engendered by the constants of which the comparative study is in search. The study of symbols is a reflective inquiry concerning the search for the truth of existential order; it will become, if fully developed, what is conventionally called a philosophy of history.[29]

Symbolizations are thus the *means* through which consciousness conveys and reflects upon experiences of existence ("the constants"). They are imperfect means because experiences of reality cannot be captured adequately in language, a point which will be elaborated more fully below. Moreover, particular symbols are partially limited by the spatio-temporal context in which they occur. Therefore, in order to understand the full significance of the characteristic human activity one must look to the *pattern* of symbolization that develops historically and across civilizations. From this broader vantage point, Voegelin found a gateway into a philosophy of history (which I discuss below) based on consciousness's efforts to understand its place within the structure of being over time.

This means that, while the historical record of symbolizations exhibits advances and declines (or deformations) in consciousness's self-understanding, it reveals a more

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[29] Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History," in *CW* 12: 115-16.

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fundamental constancy: namely, that all human beings wrestle (more or less reflectively) with the question of the meaning and purpose of their existence. Voegelin claimed that the presence of the question in human consciousness, or more precisely the motion implied in the question, is an ontological necessity. Human consciousness, he argued, is constituted by its inclination to quest (through the process of symbolization) for knowledge of itself in a transcendent source, the ground of being. The ground transcends human consciousness, but consciousness recognizes that it must participate in the ground somehow, else the inclination to quest for the ground would be absurd. The broader horizon of consciousness that Voegelin sought makes it possible to recognize these features of human existence and to advance the quest for understanding.

Difficulties in Understanding Voegelin's Response to Modernity

Now is an appropriate time to mention that Voegelin's engagement with historical materials has two sides that are always present and hard to distinguish. First of all, he was *testing*, or trying to demonstrate, his theory about the divine presence and increasing revelation in human consciousness. Second, he was looking to history as a guide that could help him to better understand that process and therefore to make sense of the nature and origins of the modern situation. In testing his theory about consciousness's evolving apperception of its transcendent ground, Voegelin considered the spiritual and participatory dimensions of human experience in order to find a connection between an author's writing and his conception of the relation between the various sectors of reality. Voegelin looked for indications of the author's experience of the community of being and for the author's placement of the source of existential meaning, hoping to determine

whether and why the text developed out of a broader or more restricted horizon of consciousness.

In looking to history as a guide for understanding the process of consciousness's quest for its transcendent ground, Voegelin analyzed the attitudes, symbols, and their engendering experiences in light of other historical expressions of order and pragmatic events so as to discover the overarching logic behind the movements of consciousness toward its ground. That is to say, he sought to understand the kinds of changes that consciousness undergoes in time and what motivates those changes in order to discover what could be done to reorient modern consciousness toward its divine end.

The two sides of Voegelin's endeavor present some difficult challenges for anyone who tries to analyze Voegelin's interpretation of a philosophic text. Voegelin's analyses are undertaken from two viewpoints simultaneously, and at times the distinct viewpoints seem to merge into one, especially when Voegelin discovers that the author of a text he is analyzing was motivated by concerns similar to his own. Hans-Jörg Sigwart has remarked that in that instance "author and interpreter – the work to be interpreted and Voegelin's genuine interpretation of it – are intimately related in an intricate reciprocal or 'dialogical' complex of meaning."[30] Sigwart calls this Voegelin's "open hermeneutics" and goes on to argue that "Reading and understanding in terms of Voegelin's open hermeneutics thus constitutes an intricate dialogical interrelation between author and

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[30] Hans-Jörg Sigwart, "Some Principles of Voegelinian Hermeneutics – Eric Voegelin's Reading of Jean Bodin" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C., 2005), 2.

reader in which the text as an object of interpretation, the text as a source of inspiration, and, finally, the original philosophical questioning of the interpreter intermingle."[31]

Voegelin's Treatment of Plato Occurs within This Context

Despite the difficulties of interpreting such an interpreter of texts, it is nevertheless necessary to acknowledge that *both* sides of Voegelin's project factor into his treatment of Plato. Voegelin looked to Plato in order to test or to demonstrate his intuitions about the nature of history as an ongoing quest for order, and he found in the Platonic corpus a powerful confirmation that human consciousness is oriented toward and fulfilled in heightened participation in the divine ground. Voegelin tried to show, for example, that Plato achieved an insight of epochal significance (and he experienced the insight as having such significance) when he symbolized his philosophic activity as the soul's inspired quest for God. In addition, Voegelin looked to the Platonic corpus as a guide. He thought that by studying Plato, he could learn concretely about the quest for order from one of its masters. From both points of view, Voegelin thought that he could glean insights about the problems of modernity and how those problems might be addressed. Indeed, Voegelin thought that a return to Platonic philosophy was crucial to the effort to restore the horizon of consciousness in modernity. Without saying too much now about the precise form that Voegelin's return to Plato assumed, I will mention a few specific reasons why Voegelin thought that Platonic philosophy had such an important role in addressing the modern disorder.

One reason Voegelin focused on Platonic philosophy was that the general socio-political situation Plato faced was in many ways similar to Voegelin's own. The social

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[31] Ibid., 25.

and political upheaval in the Hellenic city-states, especially in Athens, during the 5th century B.C. resembled the chaos plaguing the West during the twentieth century. And Voegelin thought both the ancient and the contemporary disorder emerged out of a moral and spiritual crisis linked to a deformed education. Under the influence of sophistic thinkers, Athenians had lost their sense of the order of the god-governed cosmos.[32] Consequently, their individual and collective actions exhibited increasing disorder, lustfulness and violence and threatened the very existence of their society.[33] In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and with virtually the same result, the academy had become enthralled by "gnostic thinkers"—speculators who claimed to know the secret key by which man could transfigure his condition for the better.[34] In this way, Voegelin claimed, modern education emphasized immanent, rather than transcendent reality—or, to recall the Protagorean formulation, modern education touted man as the measure of truth. Considering these similarities in light of his conviction that the structure of reality and man's existential task remain constant led Voegelin to conclude that the language symbols that Plato had used to counter the sophists could be resuscitated and applied in his own effort to counter gnosticism and other disorderly forces. Moreover, what Voegelin saw as their shared sufferings—*viz*. of the disorder of their respective

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[32] Voegelin has a very broad understanding of what it means to be sophistic, which he outlines in *The World of the Polis*, vol. 2 of *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956-1987), chapter 11. There he argues, for example, that "Not too much importance, however, should be attached to the term sophist and its definition. We are less interested in defining a term that has become a historiographic convenience than in the process that we characterized as the education of Athens." (268) I discuss this feature of Voegelin's thought in the next chapter.

[33] See Eric Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, especially "Part III: The Athenian Century," p. 315ff.

[34] As with his use of the term "sophistic," Voegelin understood the term "gnostic" to apply to a broad range of characteristics and experiences. He discussed modern gnosticism in *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*.

societies—contributed to his sense of having a unique kinship with the ancient philosopher.

A second reason Voegelin emphasized the therapeutic potential of Platonic philosophy was that Plato's specific response to the general disorder was an example of what Voegelin himself wanted to achieve. In addressing Hellenic disorder, Plato went far beyond restating a traditional case for order; Platonic philosophy was *not* merely a more eloquent or more rigorous version of some older critique of the sophistic influences. Rather, through Platonic philosophy emerged a more refined consciousness and more differentiated account of man's place in the cosmos—what Voegelin referred to as a "leap upward in being" because consciousness's experience of participating in the structure of being *after* the differentiation is sensed as qualitatively different from its participatory experience *before* the differentiation.[35] Thus, Voegelin argued that Platonic philosophy represents a key moment in the history of man's understanding of himself and the divine—a moment that would forever change the way human beings experienced and articulated their place in the cosmos.

Because he thought modernity needed to be reoriented toward the divine ground, which would require a further differentiation of consciousness, Voegelin sought to recapture the experiences that led to Plato's differentiation in hopes that the human condition could be re-illuminated in his own time.[36] That is, Voegelin hoped to experience what Plato experienced in order to achieve, first, a better understanding of

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[35] See Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, vol. 1of *Order and History*, 11.

[36] Voegelin also thought that a turn to the ancients was necessary because "the philosophy of order and history is a Western symbolism" (*The World of the Polis*, 23). However, throughout history the symbols have been encrusted with speculations and dogmas that have obscured the crucial meanings of these symbols. Therefore, it is necessary to go back to their original articulations in order to discover truth about their meanings and about the meaning of Western symbolism in general.

Plato's insights, which were all but lost in the restricted horizon of Voegelin's milieu.

For example, in Plato's crucial differentiation, the individual soul is recognized as the

structure in reality that experiences its orientation toward transcendent reality. Voegelin

thought modern man needed to hear, nay experience, this message if his horizon of

consciousness was to expand. Second, Voegelin thought that by attempting to recreate

the substance of Plato's experience in his own consciousness (via imagination and

meditation), he might be able to articulate a further differentiation that would speak to the

modern situation in a particularly powerful way.

Of course, Plato was neither the first nor the last to respond to the disorder of his

society by articulating a highly differentiated philosophy of consciousness. Christianity,

Voegelin argued, also achieved a monumental feat in its differentiation between man's

striving for the divine and the divine's irruption into human consciousness. And a case

could be made that the situation that provoked Christianity's differentiation as well as the

specific nature of Christianity's response might make it a better model for addressing

modernity's disorder.[37] Nevertheless, Voegelin thought that an effort to restore order to

modernity would be better served through an encounter with Platonic philosophy than

Christianity for two reasons. First, in the Christian account, substantial emphasis is

placed on the *union* of divine and human consciousness which, Voegelin thought, might

intensify modernity's immanentizing or self-deifying fervor. While this is not the place

to delve into this aspect of Voegelin's work, it is worth remarking that Voegelin was not

an uncritical interpreter of Christianity and rather thought that some of the major figures

of the faith (St. Paul, for example) had fallen victim to ecstatic excesses in the way they

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[37] For a discussion of the criticisms of Voegelin's treatment of Christianity, see Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 166-72.

symbolized their experience of the divine.[38] The Platonic account, by contrast, had the advantage of emphasizing human consciousness's *quest for* and *distinction from* the mysterious, transcendent ground in a manner that could restore balance to modern consciousness.[39]

The second advantage Platonic philosophy offered over Christianity was that many of Christianity's language symbols had been severed from their engendering experiences and appropriated by the various ideologies, making them a contributing factor to modernity's disorder. By and large, the Platonic symbols had not been corrupted to the same extent and therefore could be directly imported into Voegelin's work. Moreover, Voegelin simply found Plato to be an especially penetrating commentator. Plato's symbolic expressions had an often-unsurpassed clarity to them and had the ability to articulate and to further Voegelin's own experiences of the "tension of existence"—consciousness's "tending or longing toward what lies beyond all the imperfections of limited existence, beyond knowledge of particulars toward the true as such, beyond particular enjoyments toward the good as such."[40] Therefore, Voegelin's

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[38] See Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, vol. 4 of *Order and History*, 241ff and 270. See also Geoffrey L. Price, "Critical History after Augustine and Orosius: Voegelin's Return to Plato," in *International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Eric Voegelin*, ed. Stephen A. McKnight and Geoffrey L. Price (Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 84-116, especially 115; M.W. Sinnett, "Eric Voegelin and the Essence of the Problem," 433. Sinnett argues that, for Voegelin, Plato's emphasis on the cosmos (versus personal consciousness) as the fount of insight helps to "preserve" and "restore" the original question of philosophy—that is, the question that initiated the quest in the first place.

[39] See Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, vol. 5 of *Order and History*, 43 and 98-99; "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 326ff and 365-71; Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence*, 97-106, especially at 105, where he observes, "with [Paul's] expectation of an imminent *parousia*, the truth of existence became unbalanced. Life in the *metaxy* was dispensed with by the eschatological hope of fulfillment beyond the *metaxy*. Paul's differentiation of pneumatic consciousness, although superior to that achieved by the classical philosophers, was not counterbalanced by the requisite noetic control of meaning, which would have preserved not only the balance of consciousness, but also the unfathomable mystery of history as well." Also see, Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 169.

[40] Eugene Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 270. For a succinct discussion of Voegelin's concept of the tension of existence, see Hughes, *Mystery and Myth*, 24-27.

efforts to recover a broader horizon of experience and to understand the implications of the broader horizon for social and political life took Plato as their primary guide.

Difficulty of Accessing Voegelin's Work

Voegelin's work is difficult to access, not because it is unavailable, but because it involves a complex philosophical vocabulary that represents equally complex ideas and insights. In the following paragraphs I try to gloss some of the difficult but important tenets of Voegelin's thought that bear on his interpretation of Plato. One of the most complex components of Voegelin's theory is his philosophy of history. As suggested above, Voegelin conceived of history as the process through which human consciousness unfolds its potential by developing more precise (differentiated) insights into the structure of being. In this way, Voegelin's philosophy of history is also a philosophy of consciousness (or a philosophical anthropology), which is how Voegelin himself frequently described it. Human consciousness is not static but evolves over time through its increasing insight into its own structure and participatory relationship to being. It is crucial to emphasize that for Voegelin these insights are always grounded in human beings' "first hand" experiences of reality. Therefore, it will be worthwhile to examine Voegelin's understanding of the *metaxy*, which is the structure in which these experiences occur; for, by doing so, the relationship between history, consciousness, and being (or reality) becomes clearer.

Voegelin borrowed the symbol *metaxy* (In-Between) from Plato's *Symposium* (see especially 202a-204c), explaining on one occasion that Plato intended it to "express the

experience of an area of reality intermediate between God and man."[41] Voegelin

conceived of this "area of reality" as the portion of the ordered structure of being in

which man finds his existence and which he knows through his experience. Voegelin

spoke of it at times as a "field" anchored by two "forces" which exert a "pull" on that

which lies between them. At one "pole" of the structure is the divine *Nous*, the ultimate

force of order which grounds being, and which Voegelin described as God, the divine

Beyond, and the One; at the other end is the chaotic Unlimited, the reserve of

formlessness that is not yet existent, and the force of disorder. Other pairs of opposing

symbols can be attached to the poles of the *metaxy* in order to convey various facets of

man's experience of his existence in the In-Between. For example, the symbols of

immortality, knowledge, eternity, and equality might help to illuminate the divine pole;

whereas the opposed symbols of mortality, ignorance, temporality, and inequality might

help to illuminate the chaotic pole.

Man, with all living creatures, finds his entire existence constituted between these

encompassing forces and he experiences their opposed pulls at once. But though both

forces penetrate into and affect the form of human existence, man is reducible to neither

one nor the other. Voegelin therefore spoke of man's existence as a *participation* in or

with both of the poles of the ordered structure of being. Glenn Hughes has observed the

importance of the concept of participation—which he glosses as the "status of something

finite in relation to its ontological perfection or fulfillment"—saying that Voegelin

"adopts it as his central explanatory term for characterizing the ontological status of

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[41] Voegelin, "Immortality: Experience and Symbol," in *CW* 12: 89. Voegelin discussed the significance of Plato's symbol of the *metaxy* in "Eternal Being in Time," in *Anamnesis*, especially at 124-36.

consciousness."[42] The key feature of man's existence in the *metaxy* is that his participation in the ordered structure of being is oriented more closely toward the divine pole of order. This is because human nature is characterized by consciousness's activity of *nous*—its receptivity to the ordering force of the divine ground.[43] Illuminated by *nous*, human consciousness is the faculty or process through which the "tension of existence" is sensed and the structure of the *metaxy* is discerned, and that discovers its orientation toward the ground.[44] Man's consciousness, or psyche, is both the "site and sensorium of participation in the divine ground."[45] Nevertheless, the pull of the force of disorder is always present in human psyche and man is free to follow it rather than the divine pull.

Voegelin's conception of human existence as a tensional movement between being and non-being has important implications for his understanding of experience, which is consciousness's primary mode of knowing. For Voegelin, "experience" means more than our ordinary interactions with the spatio-temporal world that presents itself to our bodily senses. It includes our relations to the structure of being which are discernible through consciousness's apperception of and reflection upon "its *metaxy* existence." Following Aristotle, Voegelin referred to this process as "noetic exegesis of the noetic experience."[46] Therefore, fundamental to human experience and knowledge is the

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[42] Hughes, *Mystery and Myth*, 27.

[43] Voegelin stated, "Nevertheless, even if a man "mortalizes," he cannot escape from his existence as a *zoon noun echon*." ("Reason: The Classic Experience," in *CW* 12: 282).

[44] See Voegelin, "Eternal Being in Time," in *Anamnesis*, 124-28.

[45] Voegelin, "Immortality," in *CW* 12: 90; "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *CW* 12: 271.

[46] See Eric Voegelin, "The Tensions in the Reality of Knowledge," in *Anamnesis*, 183. Voegelin, as Corey points out, was drawing on passages in the *Metaphysics* such as 12. 6-9 and in the *Nicomachean Ethics* such as 10. 7-8; nevertheless, Voegelin neglected other passages in Aristotle. See "Voegelin and Aristotle on *Nous*," 63ff.

sensation of the tension of existence, which "embraces the intellectual striving of inquiry; the emotional pulls of love, hope, fear, and despair; and the existential dispositions of trust and anxiety—all the concrete forms in which it is lived."[47] In other words, when Voegelin speaks of the different aspects of experience, he has in mind what Plato sees when he discusses the soul: that human experience comes in different irreducible forms such as the spirited, the rational, the appetitive, and so forth, which have the character of motions of aversion and attraction.

Voegelin argued that the full range of human experience is always present in consciousness, but the recognition of the various aspects of experience is itself an *achievement* in consciousness's self-understanding, or a differentiation through which our minds come to understand better their own structure and their relationship to the structure of being (considered simultaneously as a whole and as an order of partners). Such a differentiation requires, I should emphasize, that consciousness let itself be *informed* by the ground that draws consciousness, for although "human" *nous* is "conceived as both the power to *apprehend* intelligible order and the force that *creates* intelligible order," these activities are possible only through the influx of the divine *Nous* into a concrete consciousness.[48] Therefore, Voegelin argued that the *logos* of history is "realization of eternal being in history [i.e. in temporal existence]," and this occurs through progressive differentiations of man's experience of his *metaxy* existence.[49]

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[47] Hughes, *Mystery and Myth*, 26.

[48] Ibid. Emphasis in original. For Voegelin's treatment of *nous*, see "The Tensions in the Reality of Knowledge," in *Anamnesis*, 183ff.

[49] Voegelin, "Eternal Being in Time," in *Anamnesis*, 134.

Because all insights into the structure of being are experiential, reality presents or manifests itself to consciousness in a variety of modes, all of which must be kept in mind when one approaches one of Voegelin's texts.[50] Voegelin discussed three important modes of consciousness that must operate together if consciousness is to advance in its quest for understanding. *Intentional* or *reflective consciousness* is the mode in which consciousness relates to reality as a knowing subject to an object known. Experience, in other words, is reflected in "concretely embodied consciousness" so that "reality assumes the position of an object intended."[51] Voegelin also observed that "consciousness has a structural dimension by which it belongs, not to man in his bodily existence, but to the reality in which man, the other partners to the community of being, and the participatory relations among them occur."[52] Consideration of this dimension of consciousness nullifies the distinction between knowing consciousness and object known and therefore illuminates a second mode: *luminous* or *participatory consciousness*, which Voegelin also referred to as *mystery* on occasion. In this mode, reality is "the something in which consciousness occurs as an event of participation between partners in the community of being."[53] Luminous consciousness is therefore something like immediate self-knowing or upwelling of understanding, and in connection with this mode Voegelin often spoke of reality becoming luminous (to itself).

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[50] My sketch of the modes of consciousness barely scratches the surface of Voegelin's complex theory. I think *In Search of Order* and "Wisdom and Magic" are the two best primary sources for more information on the different structural levels of the relationship between reality and consciousness. Morrissey's *Consciousness and Transcendence* is an excellent secondary source.

[51] Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 15.

[52] Ibid., 16.

[53] Ibid.,15.

Finally, the third mode of consciousness is *reflectively distancing remembrance*, also described as the *balance of consciousness* or *anamnesis*, which recognizes consciousness's paradoxical relation to reality—*viz.* that reality both is and is not a datum of consciousness's experience—and tries to keep the paradox at the forefront of man's awareness. This is important because intentional consciousness takes its bearings from the human side of the human-divine relation that constitutes the *metaxy*, while luminous consciousness takes its bearings from the divine side of that relation.[54] An excess of one mode over the other would threaten to collapse the tension of the *metaxy* existence, leading to an entirely deformed view of reality.

Voegelin found that the variety of ways in which consciousness and reality relate to each other has significant implications for understanding the structure of language. In his late writing, Voegelin spoke of the paradoxical "complex of consciousness-reality-language," which inheres because "Words and their meanings are just as much a part of the reality to which they refer as the being things are partners in the comprehending reality; language participates in the paradox of a quest that lets reality become luminous for its truth by pursuing truth as a thing intended."[55] To put the matter more simply, man knows the structure of being both immediately and reflectively, and he also knows consciousness as the faculty that apprehends itself as an immediate and reflective knower of something that transcends itself. Reality simultaneously is apprehended as an object, as the subject apprehending, and as the apprehension itself together with the recognition that in none of these modes is reality's fullness exhausted. Language makes it possible to

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[54] See Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 326.

[55] Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 17.

distinguish these relations and thus to facilitate further differentiations into the structure of being. But language is simply incapable of expressing at once the variety of "perspectives" through which man experiences reality because it cannot avoid imposing limits.

Therefore, man's *participation* in reality accounts for Voegelin's emphasis on the symbolic character of all language: language itself is not an experience of reality, but only the window through which those experiences are "seen." Although language will never be able to convey a human being's full experience of reality, let alone capture the fullness of reality, language that points beyond itself to the experiences engendering it is a crucial tool for noetic exegesis and has yielded monumental gains in humanity's self-understanding.

Now that I have sketched out some of the ways in which consciousness relates itself to reality and the ground of reality, we are more prepared to understand the substance of Voegelin's philosophy of history. Consciousness is the process through which insights into the structure of being emerge, but consciousness is located in a concrete human being (or a society) who lives in time and space and who has a body through which certain perceptions of being occur. Concrete existence supplies, as it were, some of the stimuli and implements for the noetic quest, meaning that how the quest is conducted and the level of progress it achieves will vary over the course of time. The variety of symbolizations Voegelin encountered in his comparative studies revealed that over time human beings become increasingly aware of the full range and different aspects of experience and, as a consequence, reality.

Voegelin argued that because all human beings exist in the *metaxy*, an intuition of

the structure of their existence has always been present to consciousness, even if it was

vaguely or inadequately articulated—through compact symbolization that is less sensitive

to the variegated and distinct structures within the ordered structure of being. While

compact consciousness's experience (and hence symbolization) of the structure of being

is genuine, it is limited in comparison to the fuller experience of differentiated

consciousness which, by appropriating, revising, and furthering the compact insights,

apprehends the structure more precisely. Voegelin cited a number of factors that

contribute to the process of consciousness understanding itself, including political

configurations, social pressures, individual pathos, and the availability of linguistic terms.

In various ways each of these factors affects human beings' understanding of the

meaning of their existence and their quest for the ground. But the ultimate cause of the

process of consciousness understanding itself, and the crux of his philosophy of history,

is the divine ground's mysterious attraction toward and penetration into human

consciousness so as to reveal more clearly the aspects of reality.

For Voegelin, then, the substance of history is the revelatory story, enacted

through various symbolic expressions, of consciousness's growing awareness of its being

drawn toward the transcending mystery of being of which it is in search. Although this

formulation might seem to suggest that Voegelin's philosophy of history was Hegelian in

tenor, such is not the case. Voegelin, in opposition to Hegel, argued that man does not

become more divine as history moves forward because it is not possible ever to escape

the conditions of the *metaxy*. Neither did Voegelin think that the further illumination of

consciousness is inevitable, for the pull of disorder is a permanent feature of man's

existence as is his freedom to follow it. For Voegelin, rather, historical progress is mapped on the plane of understanding the *metaxy* and its various aspects. Therefore, when Voegelin referred to the process of differentiation as "revelatory," he meant that it seems to involve God's showing us his relation to us, as much as our finding it.

What history provides the theorist are, then, patterns that indicate the direction in which human consciousness must tend if it is to find genuine fulfillment rather than the pseudo-fulfillment that comes from attending to certain aspects of our being while denying the permanent pressures of others. But these patterns remain incomplete: the historical illumination of consciousness reveals that human existence is bound by the fixed structure of reality, in which final, perfect fulfillment in an absolute human-divine unity is an ontological impossibility. Although differentiations occur and may build upon each other, the highest that man is able to achieve is a more harmonious attunement to the divine ground, the result of which is a heightened ethical and cognitive apprehension of one's creatureliness and limited perspective of the fullness of reality. The structure of reality and the ultimate meaning of history cannot be fully or finally comprehended or articulated by a human being who participates in it. Against Hegel's confident and systematic claim to possess truth, Voegelin argued that any genuine philosopher would find himself possessed of something like Socratic ignorance and eros before the transcendent mystery of truth.

Concluding Remarks: Voegelin's Therapeutic Endeavor

Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness has important implications for political life. One of Voegelin's most important contributions was to show that ideological

politics involves a denial of large swaths of human experience.[56] Voegelin thought that

all social organizations and individuals, whether wittingly or not, necessarily arrange

their lives around a fundamental idea about why they should exist and are worth

sustaining and defending or, in other words, why their existence is more than "an

accident or a convenience."[57] Human societies, like individual human beings, are

constituted by consciousness that intends attunement to the divine ground and quests to

answer the question about the meaning of existence. But the answers posited by the

ideologies driving modern politics operated through symbols that did not hew to the

structure of the *metaxy*. In place of the permanent tension of existence, ideologies

proffered accounts of a soon-to-be-realized state in which the final perfection of eternity

would be instantiated in historical existence. Such accounts resulted not from intellectual

error, but from the deliberate rejection of experiences of transcendence out of pride or

fear.

Because the ideological rejection of experiences of transcendence goes against the

natural orientation of consciousness, Voegelin described it as a "pneumapathology," or a

disease of the spirit. But even in its diseased condition, consciousness cannot help trying

to formulate the meaning of existence. This is why idealized visions of what could be or

what will be are so important within ideologies. These visions, which claim to arise out

of a new or privileged insight into the order of being, appeal to man's desire to escape the

tension of existing in between divine and animal being, to escape by postulating a better

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[56] Michael Franz suggests as much in *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). Chapter 5, "Ideology, Consciousness, and History," is particularly useful for the reader who wants a fuller treatment of Voegelin's theory of ideology and modern politics.

[57] Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 27.

world and claiming special knowledge of how to get there. Voegelin referred to these supposed "remedies" to the tension of existence as "gnosticism" and to its proponents as "gnostics." Eugene Webb nicely summarizes Voegelin's understanding of gnosticism in this way:

> A claim to certainty regarding that which is known from without [as opposed to what is known experientially from within] is a claim to *gnosis*, as is also a claim to be able to bypass interpretive mediation in the knowledge even of what is known from within. Whether it claims to know from within or from without, *gnosis* claims to be an immediate perception of the real as it is in itself. It also tends to claim to be dependent neither on reasoning ability nor on moral rectitude on the part of the knower, though the gnostic may consider himself the recipient of inspiration from a higher, spiritual source. The possibilities of variation are broad, and gnosticism has manifested itself historically in many forms.[58]

The modern gnosticism of thinkers such as Hobbes, Marx, and Hegel filtered into public consciousness, rendering individuals insensitive to the experiences of transcendence and/or of our compound nature, which are necessary for proper personal and political order. By offering escape from the experienced tension of existence, gnostic systems drew passionate support from most people who failed to see the tension as an invitation to attunement to the divine presence. When the denial of transcendence and/or of our compound nature becomes socially endorsed for a long duration of time and when symbols of order lose their intimate connection with experiences of reality, consciousness's sensitivity to the divine ground's attraction atrophies. Such had happened in modernity.

Voegelin's self-reflections and historically-based theory of consciousness gave rise to a unique diagnosis of the crisis of modernity. The ideological deformations of modern politics and science appeared to be symptoms of a single spiritual disease,

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[58] Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 197-98.

namely, consciousness's closure to the divine ground of being. History proved that the closure of consciousness was not a problem specific to modernity or specific to the West: other civilizations had experienced similar deformations that were also associated with political turmoil and immanent constructions of reality. What was specifically modern was that the prohibition of analytical inquiry was made in the name of science or philosophy itself and was generally tolerated, if not condoned.[59] Voegelin thought that serious inquiry—whether undertaken through myth, science, revelation, or philosophy— reveals that human existence is precarious since it is utterly contingent upon the divine ground. Rejecting this permanent feature of reality out of a desire *to control* rather than *to understand* being, moderns constructed speculative thought systems and political programs that mistook the cause of disorder for its solution. In opposition to this deformed relation to reality, Voegelin proffered his philosophy of history, which illuminated not only the genuine cause of modern disorder, but also in so doing supplied the appropriate therapy for it.

The therapeutic remedy for the modern crisis consisted in revealing consciousness's orientation toward the ground and inviting people to undertake the existential quest for attunement to it. Voegelin was optimistic that consciousness could respond to the invitation positively if its "memory" of its fuller horizon were, so-to-speak, jogged by symbols of order that were capable of illuminating consciousness's experience of the tension of existence to itself. These symbols could exercise and condition, to extend the current metaphor, the full potential of consciousness which had atrophied under the social pressure of ideological politics, gnosticism, positivism, and the

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[59] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 15.

subject-object dichotomy. This therapeutic aspect of Voegelin's endeavor helps to explain why Voegelin often employed ancient, particularly Greek, terms and why he chose to use ambiguous or puzzling words and phrases such as "reality" or "tension toward the ground." Voegelin often puts us in the place of not knowing exactly what he means and therefore of having to search for it by taking up our own existential quest. Readers are taken on a journey in which the way to light and clarity depends, at least to some extent, on trusting the guide.

It is in this spirit that Voegelin's interpretation of Plato must be approached. Several movements proceed simultaneously and all of them involve a critical and an existential response. First, our approach to Voegelin must be informed by our willingness to be guided by Voegelin. As a consequence, Voegelin's engagement with Plato must be examined in light of Voegelin's willingness to be guided by Plato and his hope to guide others. Moreover, our approach to Voegelin's interpretation of Plato must be guided by our own willingness to discover, in a serious intellectual and ethical manner, the experiences of reality that are being explored therein. What Voegelin hoped that his readers would discover were the personal and social duties and blessings that accompany human existence. Readers would not find a cure-all for the human condition, for no such thing exists. But what they would find, if they approached the study with faith, hope, and love, was the opportunity to experience for themselves the joy of discovering the source of being, goodness, and order.

CHAPTER THREE

Voegelin's Approach to Reading Plato

In this chapter, I provide a general account of Eric Voegelin's approach to the

Platonic dialogues, paying special attention both to its uniqueness and importance. Like

other interesting interpreters of Plato, Voegelin engaged the dialogues through a variety

of theoretical and practical techniques which he deemed particularly helpful in

illuminating the meaning of the texts. Some of these techniques are used by other

interpreters, while others seem to be unique to Voegelin.[1] In order to bring out the

distinctive features of Voegelin's approach, I describe it against the backdrop of the

better-known, widely-practiced approach of Leo Strauss.[2] This comparison will be

fruitful because there are similarities and differences between the ways in which

Voegelin and Strauss approach the dialogues.

Here, I suggest that while Strauss offers an array of techniques of interpretation—

some of which Voegelin recognizes, others not—the particular direction in which

Strauss's interpretations proceed is influenced by certain antecedent philosophical

commitments that Strauss brings to the texts. In the case of Voegelin, the influence of

antecedent commitments is even clearer for, as I argued in the previous chapter, one

reason Voegelin engaged the Platonic texts was to test his theory of consciousness.

Moreover, Voegelin openly discussed how his assumptions influenced (and were

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[1] Voegelin did not conceive of his guidelines as novel. Rather he thought that he was approaching the texts as other prescient interpreters had done before him. Voegelin often noted that the truth-test of any philosophy or, by extension, any hermeneutical approach, consisted in the unoriginality of the propositions.

[2] Strauss's approach is hardly mainstream, but among thinkers concerned with "the crisis of modernity," it maintains a substantial interest and following.

influenced by) his reading of philosophic texts on a number of occasions. Therefore, I want to compare not only the interpretive techniques of each thinker but also their underlying assumptions about how to read a genuinely philosophical text and what to look for therein.

The preceding statements might give rise to the concern that interpreters who bring their own assumptions to the texts they read will focus on the aspects of the texts that speak most directly to their own interests or, in other words, that their interpretations will be biased. This concern is legitimate, but may be exaggerated. At the end of this chapter I want to suggest that we should not be as worried about this as we might initially suppose. In the first place, a reader who does not bring deep philosophical questions and concerns to the dialogues is not any kind of reader that Plato ever imagined. Secondly, I want to suggest that a full understanding of Plato may depend precisely on seeing how different readers find their own concerns reflected and refracted through the lens of the dialogues. Moreover, the more philosophically interesting the interpreter, the more we should be interested to see what he sees in Plato. And Voegelin, like Strauss, is certainly a philosophically interesting reader.

Backdrop: Strauss's Approach to Reading Plato

Like Voegelin, Leo Strauss thought that modernity was in a state of crisis. Although this is not the place to discuss his conclusions about the "Crisis of the West," suffice it to say that Strauss agreed with Voegelin's determination that the crisis of modernity was associated with modern individuals' inability or unwillingness to

penetrate to the core meanings of philosophic texts.[3] Strauss thought that three related

trends could be linked to modern misinterpretations. First, Strauss pointed to

positivism's attempt to understand all objects of knowledge under the model of the

mathematical sciences. Second, he pointed to historicism (the assumption that "truths"

are spatio-temporally conditioned) and to relativism (the view that no claims about truth

or ways of arriving at it are better or worse than others).[4] Finally, Strauss observed that

many of his contemporaries favored modern ways of thinking over ancient ways without

having a solid philosophic basis for doing so; most scholars developed a progressivist

bias without having engaged ancient thought with due seriousness.[5]

Strauss, like Voegelin, argued that these trends were neither consistent with the

nature of scientific study nor conducive to understanding philosophic texts. They not

only produced erroneous understandings, but also emerged out of interpretive errors

made by thinkers who were more concerned with questions about practice than theory.[6]

Strauss determined that one aspect of countering the modern crisis was to resuscitate

concern to uncover objective truth and thus to resurrect a theoretical basis for scientific

and moral judgments. In order to do this, it would be necessary to ascertain the nature of

philosophy (or science) by examining the history of philosophic thought as seen through

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[3] Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," *Social Research* 13 (1946): 326-67, at 331. For treatments of the connections between modern political turmoil and misunderstandings of philosophic texts, see Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*; McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity*; Thomas L. Pangle, "Platonic Political Science in Strauss and Voegelin," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 321-47; Nathan Tarcov and Thomas L. Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy," in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): 907-38.

[4] See Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?" in *What Is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (1959; repr., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[5] Strauss, "On a New Interpretation," 329.

[6] Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 121.

the eyes of the thinkers who contributed to that history. In other words, Strauss thought

that interpreters must learn to understand philosophical thinkers as they understood

themselves.[7] Explaining the meaning of this maxim, Strauss's prominent students,

Nathan Tarcov and Thomas Pangle, write:

> To try to understand past thinkers as they understood themselves required that one
> seek to suspend one's own questions to see their questions; that one attempt to
> rely as much as possible on what they say directly or indirectly, and as little as
> possible on extraneous information; and that one strive to use their own terms and
> premises and avoid using alien modern terminology and premises.[8]

These guidelines pertain not only to an interpreter's method, but also to his character.

Strauss argued that an interpreter must approach philosophic texts with a specific attitude

and practice: "To understand classical philosophy one must be seriously interested in it,

must take it as seriously as possible. But one cannot do this if one is not prepared to

consider the possibility that its teachings are simply true, or that it is decisively superior

to modern philosophy."[9] Or, as Tarcov and Pangle gloss the statement, "*One must think

the thought*: one must question an argument's logical connections and relations to the

world *in order to follow it*."[10]

Somewhere between the "methodological" and "ethical" lies Strauss's thought

concerning which historical (or "extraneous") information is able to illuminate

philosophic texts and how an interpreter ought to engage that information.[11] Contextual

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[7] See Strauss, "On a New Interpretation," 331.

[8] Tarcov and Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss," 912.

[9] Strauss, "On a New Interpretation," 331.

[10] Tarcov and Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss," 913 (my emphasis).

[11] I suggest that the following guideline is in-between ethical and methodological because it seems
to require the student to begin from an extension of the ethical principle to take seriously the author's

information could help an interpreter determine the kinds of problems that might motivate an author to write, but Strauss warned of the dangers of interpreting the "high" in light of the "low." For Strauss, the "high" was the philosophic thought and the "low" was the total configuration of a thinker's context. To interpret the high in light of the low would distort the high, whereas doing the opposite, Strauss argued, "does not deprive the low of the freedom to reveal itself fully as what it is."[12] Therefore, in applying contextual information to one's interpretation of a philosophic text, one must refrain from assuming that an author was either a mere "product of his times" or a reactionary.[13] Instead, one should pay special attention to how a philosophic text treats contextual phenomena and then examine treatments of those phenomena present in other extant sources. Specifically, Strauss thought that by approaching the texts in this way an interpreter might discover that philosophic writers might have been adapting the way they *expressed* their thought (which itself transcended or remained unchanged by spatio-temporal conditions) to the exigencies of a particular historical situation.[14]

Strauss's call to understand authors as they understood themselves applies to textual interpretation generally, but concerning Platonic dialogues, Strauss emphasized other, particular guidelines of interpretation. One crucial rule of Platonic interpretation, Strauss argued, is to keep in mind that Plato himself never speaks and therefore to use

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statements, and to treat "philosophic" authors as "high" from the outset. Nevertheless, the guideline also has a purely directive component as well.

[12] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1965; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 2.

[13] I might be stating this too cautiously. Strauss seems to go further, considering it better to begin from the assumption that the philosopher transcended his times, but I leave it to students of Strauss to determine finer points such as this.

[14] Tarcov and Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss," 914.

extreme caution in attributing any viewpoint whatsoever to Plato as opposed to one of the dialogue's characters.[15] The significance of this rule becomes clearer in light of another important guideline, namely, the necessity of paying attention both to the "words" and the "deeds" of a Platonic dialogue. For Strauss, the "words" are the overt statements made by different characters of a Platonic dialogue or by an author who writes in his own name; the "deeds" are the dramatic details of a dialogue and the structure ("the dialogic form in general, the particular form of each dialogue and of each section of it, the action, characters, names, places, times, situations, and the like"[16]) that an author imposes upon his writing. The latter, Strauss thought, provided greater (at least initially) insights into Platonic thought, for they alone could be positively identified as the deliberate effort of Plato himself.[17]

In other words, "One must pay as much attention to the How as to the What."[18] The manner of presentation is very important for determining what Plato is trying to convey through one of his dramatis personae or through the dialogue considered as a whole. The upshot for Strauss was that Plato's deliberate abstention from locating himself in one of his dialogues and his deliberate use of the dialogue rather than treatise form (both of which are Plato's "deeds") provided a clue into the Platonic teaching. Or at any rate, whatever that teaching is, it must be crucially related, Strauss thought, to Plato's choice to conceal his own views and to write in a way that mimics oral communication,

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[15] Strauss, *The City and Man*, (1964; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 50.

[16] Strauss, "On a New Interpretation," 352.

[17] See ibid.

[18] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 52.

or "that is so contrived as to say different things to different people, or that is radically ironical."[19]

Strauss suggested that an interpreter must consider the radical irony of the dialogue form and examine all of the implications thereof because, to reiterate, "One cannot understand Plato's teaching as he meant it if one does not know what the Platonic dialogue is."[20] And, as Strauss assured his readers at the beginning of the chapter from which I have quoted, "The assumption that the Platonic dialogues do not convey a teaching is absurd."[21] Therefore, to uncover the teaching also requires (on the basis of the interpretive mandate to determine the defining characteristics of the writing's form) that one assume Plato followed the guidelines for good writing that Socrates lays out in the *Phaedrus* (275d4-276a7 and 264b7-c5).[22] There, Strauss argued, Plato's Socrates postulates that

> A writing is good if it complies with "logographic necessity," with the necessity which ought to govern the writing of speeches: every part of the written speech must be necessary for the whole; the place where each part occurs is the place where it is necessary that it should occur; in a word, the good writing must resemble the healthy animal which can do its proper work well. The proper work of a writing is to talk to some readers and to be silent to others.[23]

To this description of logographic necessity, a passage from *Persecution and the Art of Writing* may be added: "The context in which a statement occurs, and the literary

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[19] Strauss, ibid., 53 and "On a New Interpretation," 350-53.

[20] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 52.

[21] Ibid., 51.

[22] Strauss's assertion of this point seems to be based on the assumption that what is posited in one dialogue illuminates the others, although he does not explicitly mention or defend that assumption. Strauss often referred to this passage from the *Phaedrus* as, for example, in "On a New Interpretation." Here, Strauss seemed not to think it problematic to equate the Socratic statements with the Platonic views. The reference to the *Phaedrus* passages was provided by Strauss.

[23] Ibid., 53.

character of the whole work as well as its plan, must be perfectly understood before an interpretation of the statement can reasonably claim to be adequate or even correct."[24] For Strauss, *everything* in Plato's dialogues was designed to illuminate his teaching, the substance of which Plato had exhausted in his own mind before he began writing the dialogues.

From the guideline to uncover the logographic necessity of the Platonic dialogues emerges a fourth interpretive guideline: one must pay special attention to the audience of Platonic dialogue. As some of the preceding remarks have suggested, Strauss's Plato was extremely cautious about who should or could access the core of his teachings. Therefore, Plato sought to write in a way that could mimic the discretion that he would use in a conversation with someone familiar to him. If Strauss was correct in thinking that the character and significance of the dialogue form consisted in its discretion—that it says different things to different readers and is altogether silent to some readers—he had to find out something about the kinds of readers with whom Plato did or did not want to share his teaching. The obvious place to look for this kind of information was in the details of the dialogues themselves, specifically in the character traits of the various interlocutors, the meaning of names, and the function of interlocutors in advancing the drama and arguments.

Through his examinations of the Platonic corpus, Strauss concluded that Plato had provided dramatic details in order to contextualize the arguments put forth in the dialogue and thus to limit their generalizability. Plato maintained his discretion inasmuch as speeches made to a particular character might not be applicable to another character or in

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[24] Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 30.

another situation. Interpreters wishing to discover a general or universal teaching would need to "de-contextualize" the speeches. For example, Strauss discovered that one important recurring pattern was that in every dialogue the conversations occur between one interlocutor who is superior to the other in intelligence and virtue.[25] Taking account of this fact, an astute interpreter would determine how the arguments would proceed if conducted between two equals and what parts of the argument applied directly and exclusively to the particular inferior interlocutor.

Strauss observed that Plato had also enriched the dialogues with other kinds of contextual details including the gestures interlocutors make, revisions of earlier arguments or material from traditional sources, and the specific times, places, and settings of conversations, to name only a few. These sorts of details also limited the reach of particular arguments by providing insights into the audience and therefore required treatment if an interpretation was to reflect Plato's intent accurately. Moreover, Strauss argued that an interpreter must take account of "the relevant 'facts' which are not mentioned in the 'speeches' and yet were known to Socrates or to Plato. . . . We are guided to those 'facts' partly by the unthematic details and partly by seemingly casual remarks."[26] This guideline goes back to Strauss's argument for logographic necessity, but in a negative way: in order to grasp to whom an interlocutor is speaking an interpreter must perceive not only the minute, explicitly-mentioned details, but also the details which

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[25] See Leo Strauss, "Plato's *Gorgias*: a Course Given in the Autumn Quarter" (transcripts from class lectures, Department of Political Science, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 1963), Lecture 1. Hereafter, references to these yet unpublished transcripts will take the following format: Strauss transcripts, year, lecture number or date, if applicable.

[26] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 60.

are implicit or omitted altogether.[27] Supplying these missing details is also then a crucial part of de-contextualizing arguments in order to arrive at Plato's universal teaching. In sum, by requiring his readers to recognize the need for, and then to undertake, a de-contextualization of the arguments, Plato had, Strauss argued, discovered how to convey his teachings in writing without, however, speaking to all readers equally or simultaneously.[28]

Fifth in my list of Strauss's principles of Platonic interpretation is the importance of examining specific structural phenomena such as titles, whether a dialogue is narrated or performed, the first, central, and last words of a dialogue or a section of a dialogue, the ways in which parts of the dialogue (or argument) are related to the whole dialogue (or argument), and the placement of speeches that seem to be "digressions" from the main emphasis. In these structural phenomena, to which the particular selection of speeches must also be added, interpreters recognize *Plato's* craftsmanship and thought rather than thought belonging to the interlocutors he created.[29] Sixth, because for Strauss "Nothing is accidental in a Platonic dialogue; everything is necessary at the place where it occurs," astute interpreters must also pay special attention to passages that are puzzling, seem contradictory, or illogical.[30] Rather than presuming sloppy workmanship on the part of Plato, interpreters must carefully inquire into Plato's reasons for deliberately employing such devices, inferring the implications of Plato's reasons on their own. The same applies to instances of rhetorical or literary "carelessness." Repetitions, incorrect

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., 53-55.

[29] Ibid., 57.

[30] Ibid., 60.

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quotations, and other "errors" are to be viewed as invitations for the kind of deeper inquiry which is the practice of serious interpreters.

Aside, perhaps, from the requirement to understand an author as he understood himself, most of the aforementioned guidelines contribute to what Tarcov and Pangle describe as "probably the most controversial aspect of [Strauss's] approach to the history of political philosophy: his suggestion that some past philosophers engaged in 'exoteric [and therefore also 'esoteric'] writing.'"[31] Many scholars have taken an interest in Strauss's conclusions about esoteric writing—what it is exactly, which thinkers have employed it and in what manner, how one identifies it, and whether Strauss himself engaged in it—but this is not the place to trace the variety of viewpoints that have arisen. Here, I will simply mention that whatever the answers to these questions are, they must depend in part on Strauss's statements about the role of irony in the Platonic dialogues. These statements seem sufficiently clear so as not to require further elaboration. Therefore, I will quote from an important discussion of irony, which will have the added benefit of preparing for a brief discussion of Strauss's approach to interpreting myth in the Platonic dialogues.

Strauss revealed the crucial significance of irony in his approach to Platonic interpretation by discussing it at the very beginning of his chapter on the *Republic* in *The City and Man*: "Very much, not to say everything, seems to depend on what Socratic irony is."[32] He then cites Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, suggesting that although

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[31] Tarcov and Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss," 914. The authors mention that Strauss doubted "that interpretation could be reduced to method" (916) and hesitated to refer to his guidelines as such. Strauss maintained, however, that his guidelines had fewer inadequacies than other established methods.

[32] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 51.

"irony is a kind of dissimulation, or of untruthfulness," if it be "properly used, it is not a vice at all."[33] A superior man like Socrates uses irony virtuously when he does not reveal the full extent of his wisdom (or some other criterion of superiority) in order either to spare his inferiors' feelings or to guard himself against their persecution. Strauss wrote that "Irony in the highest sense," which is "the dissimulation of one's wise thoughts," may take two forms:

> either expressing on a "wise" subject such thoughts (*e.g.* generally accepted thoughts) as are less wise than one's own thoughts or refraining from expressing any thoughts regarding a "wise" subject on the ground that one does not have knowledge regarding it and therefore can only raise questions but cannot give any answers.

Referencing Plato's *Rivals*, Strauss concluded that "If irony is essentially related to the fact that there is a natural order of rank among men, it follows that irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people."[34] Therefore, for Strauss's Plato, irony is at the heart of the "literary question, the question of presentation"; irony is at the center of good writing—of communication that simultaneously furthers the quest for truth and functions as the means for living together.[35]

Significantly, Strauss thought that the preceding reflections on irony had profound implications for the interpretation of the mythical passages in the dialogues. Strauss adhered to the principle "that we must interpret Plato's myths in terms of his philosophy, and not his philosophy in terms of his myths."[36] Because Platonic philosophy was

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[33] Ibid. Strauss referred to 1108a19-22, 1124b29-31, 1127a20-26, and b22-31 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

[34] Ibid. All citations in this paragraph are to this reference unless otherwise indicated. Strauss referenced Plato's *Rivals* 133d8-e1 and 134c1-6.

[35] Ibid., 52.

[36] Strauss, "On a New Interpretation," 353.

intimately linked with the "literary question, the question of presentation," Strauss found it to be quite plausible that the myths were examples of the first form of irony mentioned above—that is, irony directed toward a practical, communal end. In an otherwise highly critical review, Strauss stated that Professor Wild was "right in describing Plato's practical procedure in such terms as 'protreptic,' 'exoteric,' or 'maiutic,' and by stressing the connection between Plato's practical approach and his use of images or myths."[37] Given his well-known arguments for the strict separation and superiority of theory to practice, Strauss's concern for the myths appears to consist in their ability to contribute to an understanding of the interlocutors to whom they are directed and of the characteristics of the superior man's communication with his inferiors. Put bluntly, Strauss generally supposed that the myths functioned as "noble lies." They are "lies" inasmuch as they are postulated in full knowledge that they are undemonstrable; they are "noble" because they are necessary and, even despite their untruth, have "the obvious function of producing a salutary (civilizing, humanizing and cathartic) effect on all."[38]

A cursory discussion, such as this one, of Strauss's hermeneutical guidelines will necessarily contain omissions and points deserving of further clarification. Despite these inadequacies, the foregoing remarks should, I hope, provide a sufficient backdrop against which to examine Voegelin's sometimes similar, sometimes different approaches. To review the most important features of Strauss's approach to reading Plato: in addition to trying to understand Plato as he understood himself (which applies to interpretation generally), interpreters must (1) remember that Plato does not speak, (2) be sensitive to

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[37] Ibid., 348 (Strauss's citations omitted).

[38] Ibid., 350. See also *The City and Man*, 137 and Strauss transcripts 1963, Lecture 15.

both the "words" and the "deeds" of the dialogue as well as (3) logographic necessity, (4) pay attention to the audience, context, and the entirety of dramatic details—those present and those omitted—as well as (5) structural components of the text. One must also (6) inquire into the deeper coherence of what appear to be logical or literary flaws, and (7) familiarize oneself with the role of irony in the dialogues, especially as it affects the interpretation of myth. Strauss thought that the combination of these techniques would enable him to uncover the original character of Platonic philosophy and, therefore, to suggest ways in which the crisis of modernity could be addressed in a helpful way.

Voegelin's Approach to Reading Plato: Assumptions and Techniques

Assumptions

As I observed in chapter two, Voegelin's investigations into the history of philosophic thought gave rise to a theory of consciousness which in turn informed his analysis of texts and the events of history. Clearly, then, some specific assumptions undergird Voegelin's approach to and conclusions about the Platonic texts. On the whole, Voegelin did not hesitate to disclose these assumptions because he thought, first, that sincere scientific activity required it, and secondly, that his assumptions strengthened the force of his arguments by demonstrating their overarching coherence. Moreover, Voegelin thought that his assumptions about consciousness in particular were substantiated by the history of philosophic reflection. This added another layer of support for his arguments, since, as Voegelin liked to say, a test of truth is the lack of originality.[39] From an examination of Voegelin's writings one can identify four

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[39] Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," in *CW* 12: 122.

important antecedent assumptions that factor into his approach to reading Plato; these concern (1) the association between socio-historical events and philosophic insights, (2) the nature of the core philosophic experience, (3) the appropriate way to examine symbols of order, and (4) the level of analysis at which the author's meaning must be sought. I discuss each of these in turn before outlining Voegelin's interpretive guidelines in the same style as I used in my treatment of Strauss.

The association between socio-historical events and philosophic insights. In a 1944 essay, Voegelin argued for "the necessity of harmonizing the history of theory with political history," a principle that was absent from many of his contemporaries' treatments of political theory.[40] Voegelin's argument for *harmonization* challenged both the generally-accepted view that ideas were essentially products of or reactions to historical events and its converse—the view that ideas are the primary determinants of the course of history. Social and political events and ideas about the meaning and purpose of existence affect each other mutually. In order to understand a society or a text, one needs to ascertain the various relations between historical events and ideas. In making this claim, Voegelin was not calling for conclusions about direct causality. Rather, his principle aimed at discovering how man's spiritual orientation bears upon the quest for concrete, social and political order. Likewise, man's concrete experiences of social and political reality—its order or disorder—significantly influence all aspects of his spiritual orientation, including the starting points for philosophic inquiry, his

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[40] Voegelin, "Political Theory and the Pattern of General History," in *Published Essays, 1940 – 1952*, ed. Ellis Sandoz, vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 163.

sensitivity to the quest, and the language and images through which the quest is undertaken.

As a result of his extensive historical and comparative studies, Voegelin discovered a general pattern concerning philosophic discoveries: namely, the most significant philosophic insights arise from crises in social and political life.[41] These crises are usually characterized by the degeneration of one socially-dominant way of understanding man's place in the world—the effect of which is social and moral chaos. It will be helpful to remember that human society, as Voegelin explained in *The New Science of Politics*, is

> a little world, a cosmion, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization. It is illuminated through an elaborate symbolism . . . and this symbolism illuminates it with meaning in so far as the symbols make the internal structure of such a cosmion, the relations between its members and groups of members, as well as its existence as a whole, transparent for the mystery of human existence.[42]

A society's traditional symbols sometimes lose their ability to convey an authoritative understanding about the order of existence to part of the society. An unexpected military defeat could, for example, damage a symbol expressive of the view that the defeated city was permanently protected by the gods. The damaged symbols, Voegelin argued, leave voids of meaning that human beings then try to fill by proffering accounts of the order of existence which compete with traditional views.

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[41] See Voegelin, "Eternal Being in Time," in *Anamnesis: On the Theory and History of Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak, ed. David Walsh, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 334. Voegelin warned against treating the general pattern as "historical 'law'" in the introduction to *Order and History*, 6.

[42] Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 27. See also, *The World of the Polis*, 1-7.

The competition between and fluctuations of society's symbols, together with the impacts of the events contributing to them (such as the military defeat from the example above), create spiritual confusion that pervades all aspects of human experience.[43] In times of such confusion human beings find themselves confronted more intensely with the tension of existence. Spiritually sensitive human beings, Voegelin argued, long to diminish their confusion and ignorance by actively inquiring into man's place within the whole and into the truth about social and moral order. Since the social and political situation appears the locus of disorder, these sensitive individuals are apt to discover that genuine insights must be sought in the spirit's motions of attraction to order and repulsion from disorder. For Voegelin, of course, these psychic movements were the empirical foundation of philosophic insights. It made sense, then, that periods of social disorder, which were likely to produce doubts about the ultimate truth of temporal and immanent being, would be most conducive to promoting a better understanding of man's place within the whole. Indeed, Voegelin thought that the social disorder Plato experienced was a catalyst for his differentiated insights into the structure of human existence.

Voegelin therefore determined that Plato's philosophy was emphatically *not* "an 'intellectual' or 'cultural' activity conducted in a vacuum, without relation to the problems of human existence in society"; rather, he argued, philosophy resuscitates the city by distinguishing new symbols that express the range of human experience better than older ones.[44] Therefore, interpreters must consider how philosophic expressions of

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[43] Very early symbolizations of order can tolerate rival symbolizations of order, but as consciousness becomes more aware of its ground, human beings discover that the order of being may be represented only in one way. Voegelin suggests that the early tolerance gives way roughly during the 5th century B.C. See *The World of the Polis*, 7-11.

[44] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 169.

order are intimately linked with, and to some extent caused by, the philosopher's concrete experiences in time. In order for the full significance of Plato's dialogues (or any philosophically important text) to come to light, the interpreter must discover how the author conceived of his relationship to his milieu. The philosophic author, Voegelin thought, will draw on his concrete experiences—with a given political regime, social structure, or mythic tradition, for example—in developing clearer symbols. The author does this because, first, quite simply, those experiences are available to him and present themselves as adequate analogies to the new experiences he wishes to articulate. Second, the author's effort to *communicate* his new insights with *others* (and thereby to restore social order) has greater potential for success to the extent that his new symbols are connected to common features of everyday life. The interpreter is therefore charged with accounting for the full range of social, political, and historical factors to which the author was responding. Especially important, Voegelin argued, was that the interpreter examine and evaluate the relation between the various ontological views implied in the symbols of the author's context and in his responsive text. This would indicate the fundamental (or existential) error that the philosopher sought to correct with his work.

Lest the above remarks be taken to suggest that Voegelin was a "historicist" in the usual sense, I should emphasize Voegelin's insistence that philosophic expressions of order, as *critiques* of temporal conditions, arise from a transcending, a-temporal perspective. This aspect of Voegelin's approach resonates with Strauss's notion of permanent truths and his critique of historicism. While Voegelin sees a deep interrelationship between ideas and the times, he did not think that philosophers, or anyone else for that matter, were strictly determined by their unique historical

circumstances. What characterizes and fulfills humanity is, in fact, its orientation toward the eternal ground of being.

The nature of the core philosophic experience. Now we are led to inquire into Voegelin's assumptions concerning the nature of the core philosophic experience. Specifically, Voegelin thought the philosopher undergoes a quasi-mystical experience in which the genuine and virtually ineffable character of ontological order becomes luminous in his psyche. [45] For Voegelin, philosophy is *not* the effort to make sound formal arguments about reality; rather it is the quest to become more harmoniously attuned to reality, especially its divine ground, by seeking to understand experiences of *metaxy* existence (see chapter two). These remarks become clearer by examining the structure of the philosophic quest as it emerges in human consciousness.

Voegelin conceived of the philosophic quest as a process of experiences that begins with man's sensitivity to or awareness of various aversions and attractions, but one key attraction in particular: his desire to know more about the conditions of his existence.[46] According to Voegelin, this desire is universally present in human consciousness and functions as an invitation to man to activate what is implied in the desire's presence: namely, the essential human task of questing for knowledge. The desire also indicates the existence of something greater than and attractive to man, yet not completely foreign to him. Because the experiences that motivate the quest for knowledge are grounded in transcendent psychic, rather than sensory, perceptions, their

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[45] See ibid., 215.

[46] Voegelin described the "infrastructure of the noetic quest" quite clearly in "Reason: The Classic Experience."

causes may be sensed but not precisely determined. Nevertheless, the experiences stimulate luminous consciousness (see chapter two) and generate genuine, though ineffable insights into the conditions of human existence. Motivated by the experience of these insights, intentional consciousness further inquires into their origins and structure and thus stimulates the noetic aspect of the quest for understanding. The process is mystical because it is constituted by the experience of insight and mystery simultaneously—the experience of the luminous mystery of the tension of existence.

Voegelin thought that the philosopher in the strict sense, the genuine *lover* of wisdom (or reality), responds to this experience of luminous mystery in the manner that the luminous mystery itself reveals as appropriate. Put differently, through his willingness to encounter the reality of the luminous mystery on its own terms and to learn from it, the philosopher discovers his erotic orientation to what Voegelin described as the "*realissimum*"—the supreme or most-real reality—or the divine ground of being. Therefore, Voegelin argued, the philosopher's relation to reality and its divine ground is one of "trust (*pistis*)" in "the underlying oneness of reality, its coherence, lastingness, constancy of structure, order, and intelligibility," even though the *realissimum* lies beyond his articulate experience and has no substantive content *per se*.[47] Rather than being skeptical about aspects of reality that are imperceptible via sense perception, the philosopher recognizes through his experience of the luminous mystery that *all* knowledge stems from the human psyche's trusting movements toward the drawing of the divine ground that illuminates psyche's structure as a participation in its ultimate wisdom and reality. Moreover, psyche's philosophic movements, Voegelin argued, "will

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[47] Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," in *CW* 12: 127. See also Plato *Republic*, 511d-e.

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inspire the creation of images which express the ordered wholeness sensed in the depth."[48] These images emerge out of the participation with the divine ground, and they enable the philosopher to reflect on his mystical experiences, penetrate them more profoundly, and therefore apperceive their source (i.e. the divine ground of being) more fully.

Through the mystical experience, the philosopher not only experiences the self-evident reality of the divine ground, but also he discovers moral obligations that are intimately linked to the philosophic life. These obligations have epistemological and ontological foundations. In regard to the former, the process of knowing more about the divine ground—that is, participating more fully in its order and wisdom—depends upon and elicits a specific set of attitudes that also happen to be associated with various actions and opposed to others. In regard to the latter, the philosopher discovers that *all* human psyche participates in the divine ground and is well-ordered if it is attuned to the divine drawing. From this insight arises the philosopher's obligation to try to facilitate not only his own, but also other human beings' attunement to the ground. Although this obligation gives rise to any number of specific duties, the philosopher senses a key duty to express *publicly* his mystical experiences of the divine ground in symbols and images. Voegelin therefore thought that a crucial element of the philosophic life was the effort to rearticulate a case for order—which encompasses an understanding of the meaning and purpose of existence—against those who have either become insensitive to order or who

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[48] Ibid., (my emphasis). Voegelin explained that the "depth" could be understood by examining the experiences symbolized in a proposition such as the following: "We consciously experience psyche as a reality extending beyond consciousness. The area "beyond" is of the same nature as the reality of consciousness. Moreover, the two areas are a continuum of psychic reality in which man can move by the actions and passions symbolized as descent and ascent." (126).

try to destroy order. Because the philosopher's symbols are infused with the presence of the divine ground in a fresher way than the older symbols which have lost the ability to convey an authoritative understanding of the order of being, they are more likely to evoke similar experiences of the luminous mystery and initiate the process of attunement to the ground.

Before turning to the implications of these assumptions for the interpretation of philosophic texts, it will be helpful to point out that, although he distinguished "reason" from "revelation," Voegelin thought that "both movements are but singular aspects of that mutual participation of the human and the divine that constitutes the all-encompassing reality of existence."[49] The philosopher's wisdom depends on the presence of the divine ground in his consciousness and is thus akin to revelation; his mystical experience of the *realissimum* is akin to a conversion toward the genuine source of order. The ineffable experience of the ultimate source of wisdom leaves little room for hubris, making the philosopher a humble, though eager, seeker for the divine ground that moves his consciousness. Voegelin cautioned, however, that, far from being "the experience of a prophetic address from God," the philosopher's mystical experience with the divine ground is the process in which the "soul comes to an understanding of transcendent Being, and orients itself 'erotically' to such Being, but *without finding response*."[50]

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[49] James L. Wiser, "Reason and Revelation as Search and Response: A comparison of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 237-48 at 242.

[50] Eric Voegelin to Leo Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 87 and 82 (emphasis added).

Voegelin's understanding of the core philosophic experience has significant implications for the interpretation of philosophic texts, which I will draw out throughout the course of this study. Here, I will limit myself to mentioning only two general implications. The first has to do with identifying genuinely philosophical texts. Although all texts that wrestle with the question of the meaning and purpose of existence inform our understanding of the history of philosophy (*viz.*, by conveying consciousness's relative openness or closure to its ground), only those texts that represent genuine existential efforts to understand the transcendent source of order are philosophic in Voegelin's strict sense of the term. Therefore, when Voegelin identified a text as philosophic, he already judged the text to be an expression of its author's experience of seeking the divine ground. In analyzing it, then, he would try to identify words and images with the structure of the psychic movements, or experiences of order and disorder, expressed therein.

A second and related implication is that, since the experience of divine ground is necessarily an experience of *participation*, Voegelin thought that the words and images in a philosophic text must be interpreted as expressions of what is only partially effable. Discovering the full meaning of philosophic texts required an interpreter to go beyond the written words and images in order to penetrate to the author's experiences of questing for the divine ground that moves his consciousness. "What philosophy is," Voegelin argued, "need not be ascertained by talking *about* philosophy discursively; it can, and must, be determined by entering *into* the speculative process in which the thinker explicates his experience of order."[51] The union between interpreter and author is facilitated by the

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[51] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 170.

interpreter's imaginative and meditative re-creation of the author's experiences; it is possible because the spiritually-sensitive interpreter also experiences the divine drawing as a feature of existence in the *metaxy*.

The appropriate way to examine symbols of order. Another assumption emerging out of Voegelin's philosophy of consciousness (or history), is that the philosopher's rearticulation of a case for order typically involves advances in noetic differentiation. As I discussed in chapter two, differentiation is the process through which structures of human existence that consciousness had experienced compactly become present in new, distinctive ways that indicate heightened attunement to the divine ground. The philosopher may express his differentiated insights by infusing new meaning into older symbols of order, but sometimes his insights burst the older symbols' capacity altogether. In the latter case, he must create new symbols—new images and words—that are capable of conveying the more differentiated insights into order of existence. In order, therefore, to discover the deepest meaning in a philosophic text, an interpreter has to piece together the evolutions of consciousness that the author experiences and symbolizes through words and images. The interpretive challenge becomes (1) to identify both shifts in the meaning of words and images and the introduction of new words and images, and (2) to explain both of these in terms of a philosophy of consciousness. Meeting this challenge requires extensive linguistic and imagistic analysis—tracing the history and evolution of meanings—conducted with a view to how a philosophic author's symbols indicate his deliberate response to inadequacies in traditional or popular usages of words and images.

It would be easy to misunderstand Voegelin's call to engage in linguistic and imagistic analysis as an indication that he thought (in a fashion resembling Quentin

Skinner's approach to political thought) that an author's use of a word was governed by traditional usages. In fact, Voegelin is the opposite of Skinner in a sense. His guiding methodological principle was: "we must not search in the dialogue for direct historical information but only for information on the essence of ideas *as seen by Plato*."[52] Voegelin did *not* study the linguistic meanings of the background culture in order to determine what Plato *must have* meant—as if Plato could only mean what earlier writers meant by a word. Rather, Voegelin saw that in order to appreciate what Plato did, that is, how he *developed* words, ideas, and images, an interpreter needed to understand what the words meant before Plato handled them. The interpreter also had to be sensitive to a philosophic author's development of meaning over the course of a particular text and throughout his corpus. Especially in the case of Plato, Voegelin thought that understanding the dialogues required an interpreter to account for instances in which Plato deliberately modified his use of a word or image in order to convey a new insight into the structure of the human condition.

Once an interpreter discovers what a philosophic author meant by his symbols, he is prepared to recognize movements of consciousness, or differentiations, by situating symbols and their engendering attitudes within the complex of pressing theoretical problems of the time.[53] Voegelin observed that

> This procedure is based on the assumption that there exists an historical continuum of problems between the mystic-philosophers at the turn from the sixth to the fifth centuries . . . and Plato, whose work is preserved. With our knowledge of the *termini a quo* and *ad quem* of the problems, it will be possible to draw probable lines of their development.[54]

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[52] Ibid., 290 (my emphasis).

[53] Ibid., 291-92, 299, and 305.

[54] Ibid., 292.

The most pressing problem of Plato's time (and indeed during all times) was, for

Voegelin, to locate the source of insight concerning the essence of man and social order.

Therefore, Voegelin conducted his examinations of the Platonic symbols in light of the

attitudes toward the experiences of transcendence expressed therein; the conclusions of

those examinations then contributed to his theory of consciousness.

The distinctiveness of Voegelin's approach is evident in his analysis of Plato's

use of the terms "*physis*" and "*nomos*," a subject I discuss in later chapters. For now, let

me observe that Voegelin criticized his contemporaries because for them "the issue

Physis-Nomos [had] become a historiographic cliché which [obscured] a rather

differentiated problem."[55] Penetrating past the cliché to the spiritual and historical ranges

of meanings implied both by each term separately and as a relational pair enabled

Voegelin to conclude that, to the extent that it was a sophistic attempt to locate the source

of truth in immanent experience, Plato actually rejected the opposition between physis

and nomos. "The idea of Physis, of Nature as an autonomous source of order in

competition with Nomos can be formed," Voegelin argued, "only when the idea of a

transcendent divine Nomos as the source of order has atrophied; and that can happen in a

theoretical context only when philosophizing in the existential sense is abandoned."[56] In

the absence of the linguistic analysis, crucial aspects of Plato's meaning are lost—aspects

which reveal the extent to which Plato's thought was emphatically *not* a mere product of

his times.

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[55] Ibid., 305.

[56] Ibid., 307.

The level of analysis on which interpreters should seek an author's meaning.
From my examination of the previous assumptions, it should be clear that Voegelin thought that reading well requires the interpreter to seek a level of meaning that lies deeper than the explicit meaning of a text's words and propositions. Voegelin thought interpretation had to uncover things such as existential attitudes, experiences of the *realissimum*, movements in spiritual and historical consciousness, and psychic movements. Each of these phrases signifies a relation between what Voegelin referred to as "psychic substance" and the divine ground. The slight variations that distinguish them from one another are more a matter of emphasis than of kind. The phrase "existential attitudes," for example, emphasizes an individual's receptivity to the tension of existence, whereas "historical consciousness" suggests a way that a society experiences its ultimate meaning and purpose. But the presence of such distinctions, however slight, calls for a separate treatment of the fourth and final assumption—that reading well requires the interpreter to seek the originating experiences that an author is trying to articulate in his writing.

Voegelin conceived of philosophy as a movement of the soul toward the divine ground that draws it. Philosophers know reality primarily through their participatory experiences of it, and they know that knowing reality is their natural end. "Theoretical philosophy," as Eugene Webb observes, "will not be abstract speculation but the explication of what is already present in implicit form: the universal, constant structure of human existence as a project of active fidelity to man's transcendental calling."[57] The philosophic quest operates not through ideas, but through experiences of the basic

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[57] Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 54.

structure of human existence that find their expression in symbolic speech. These expressions themselves may be easily mistaken for *ideas about* (rather than articulations of *experiences of*) reality and, therefore, for the substance of a philosophic text. But ideas, Michael Federici points out, are "once or twice removed from the primary substance of reality, i.e., the engendering experience. Once formulated in this way, it becomes apparent that ideas are not the core of reality but malleable constructions of varying clarity."[58]   In order to understand the thought of a great philosopher like Plato, the interpreter must, Voegelin argued, determine how an author's soul was responding to the reality that it actively sought and suffered—the reality that "is known from within by a person fully involved in it, who has to struggle to understand it and to live up to the calling that this understanding makes explicit."[59] This is what Voegelin meant when he called for interpreters to penetrate to the experiences that engendered symbolisms. In other words, "The language symbols of myth, revelation, history, and especially philosophy," as Federici explains, "must be restored to luminosity—that is, reattached to the historical experiences that they attempt to convey."[60]

Part of the process of restoring symbols to luminosity consists in connecting symbols with the structures of the *metaxy* that the philosopher is exploring though the participatory movements of his consciousness. The experiential basis of the symbols must remain at the forefront of the interpreter's analysis. Consequently, symbols must neither be supposed to be static entities or propositions of a syllogism; the philosopher's

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[58] Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 37.

[59] Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 54.

[60] Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, xxvii.

symbols are not defined concepts or arguments that exhaustively explain what they signify. Moreover, the interpreter must remember that human experience of reality is always tensional. Voegelin observed that two tensions especially must be considered when one begins to interpret a philosophic text: "The first is the tension of the soul between time and eternity; the second is the tension of the soul between its order before and after the ontic event [or the apperception of the structure of being]."[61] Speaking of the difficulty that an interpreter might find in understanding these formulations, Voegelin went on to say that

> Because of the illuminative character of the philosophical experience the description of the tensions is inevitably burdened by the difficulty that the grammatic subjects of the statements are not names of subjects referring to the world of things. Neither the poles of the tensions nor the states of order in being are things of the external world, but rather they are terms of the noetic exegesis in which the ontic event interprets itself. Plato, whose philosophizing will serve us as an example of the tensions, has sought to express them through the symbolism of the myth.[62]

For Voegelin, then, genuine philosophy involves a gap between symbolic articulations and the underlying experiences. As we will see below, Voegelin's Plato called attention to this gap by using philosophic myth—a symbolic form that guards against literalism by self-consciously departing from propositional formulations.

Techniques

In chapter two, I suggested that Voegelin's engagement with historical texts has two sides. On one hand, he was trying to test his theory of consciousness; on the other, he was trying to better understand modern consciousness and discover a remedy for its

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[61] Voegelin, "Eternal Being in Time," in *Anamnesis*, 124.

[62] Ibid.

disorders. The assumptions that I have just discussed inform both sides of his

engagement, and this creates some difficulties for those who want to understand what

Voegelin brought to his encounter with Plato and what he derived from it.[63] Not

insensitive to these difficulties, Voegelin reflected late in his career that one of the

greatest challenges for an author or interpreter of a text is beginning at the beginning.[64]

He qualified this remark, saying that analysis could not begin, as it were, "unless it starts

in the middle."[65] What he meant was that both the urge to write and to try to understand

a philosophic text originates in the mysterious drawing of the divine ground that man

experiences because he exists in the *metaxy*. Therefore, Voegelin conceived of the

interpreter's quest for an author's meaning as a quest for the divine ground that "began"

the author's own quest for the divine ground. Uncovering the richness of an author's

work, depends on the interpreter's apperception of the middle—the *metaxy* as the

condition of human existence.

In this section, I want to try to lessen these difficulties by identifying some of the

key principles of Voegelin's interpretive approach to Plato. I distinguish these from the

"underlying assumptions" that I just discussed: the principles of Voegelin's interpretive

approach are more akin to what I earlier referred to (when discussing Strauss) as

techniques or guidelines of interpretation. I focus on Voegelin's principle (1) that an

adequate interpretation of Plato's dialogues will begin with an analysis of the literary

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[63] Planinc's highly critical discussion of Voegelin's interpretations of the *Timaeus* and *Critias* points to specific interpretive errors made by Voegelin. Planinc, who I think is insensitive to several of Voegelin's concerns, calls Voegelin's approach "self-contradictory." See "The Significance of Plato's *Timaeus*," 336.

[64] Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, chapter 1, *passim*.

[65] Ibid., 27.

structure of the dialogue. I discuss Voegelin's understanding of the significance of the

dialogue form and then mention several specific interpretive tasks associated with this

principle including (a) developing an organizational schema of the dialogue, (b)

identifying the various types of symbolic language in use, and (c) attending to the

character of the various interlocutors. I also discuss Voegelin's principle (2) that Plato's

dialogues must be read in light of the problem of language in the *metaxy*. Derivations of

this principle include: (a) puzzling formulations are intelligible on the level of

experience, even if they are paradoxical, and (b) myth is uniquely suited to express

transcendent processes or experiences and therefore is Plato's preferred medium for

communicating his highest insights. Although I distinguish between these principles and

sub-principles, it should be remembered that each one is related to Voegelin's idea that

Plato used symbols to communicate his ineffable experiences of life in the *metaxy*. By

following these principles, Voegelin hoped to respect the limits and potential of symbols'

ability to clarify Plato's experiential insights.

Voegelin's first hermeneutic principle is that the interpretive effort must begin by

examining the literary structure of the dialogue, which provides the first clues into the

substance of Platonic philosophy. Like Strauss, Voegelin ventured an explanation of

Plato's decision to adopt the dialogue as the form with which to convey his philosophic

insights, but Voegelin's conclusions differed dramatically. At the outset of his study of

Plato, he argued:

> The drama of Socrates is a symbolic form created by Plato as the means for
> communicating, and expanding, the order of wisdom founded by its hero. We
> have to touch, therefore, on the thorny question why the dialogue should have
> become the symbolic form for the new order. No final answer, however, can be
> intended with regard to a question of such infinite complexity. We shall do no

more than modestly list a number of points which under all circumstances must be taken into consideration.[66]

Voegelin thought, first, that the dialogic form absorbed from Aeschylean tragedy the concern for the psychic tension between order and passion. Since Athenians no longer experienced the tensions expressed in the tragic performances as relevant for their psychic order, Athens became the force of "passion" and Socrates became force of "order" in the new drama of the Platonic dialogue. Second, the dialogic form reflected Plato's conception of the new Socratic myth of the soul as being in engaged in actual competition with the broken order of society. The articulation of the struggle between these two forces cannot become nondramatic if the new order is not accepted by society. Third, the dialogue's exchanges preserved the communal or participatory nature of the quest for truth in a way that a treatise could not.[67] Finally, Voegelin thought that the mytho-poetic form of the dialogue was best suited to the expression of the knowledge that must be experienced if it is to be known.[68] In light of this understanding of the dialogue form, Voegelin sought to connect Plato's symbolic expressions to experiences of personal, social, and political order and disorder.

After considering the significance of the literary structure generally, Voegelin turned to the unique literary structure of each particular dialogue, which required the

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[66] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, vol. 3 of *Order and History*, 10. At the end of this passage, Voegelin cited Friedlaender's *Platon* I, describing the chapter entitled "Dialog" as the "most penetrating study of the question."

[67] See Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 87: "Insofar as the place of God as the addresser is taken by Socrates-Plato, as the speaker in the dialogue, the fullest expression of the 'theomorphic' polytheism seems to be the final reason for the dialogue form; the divine and the human are not yet completely separated"

[68] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 10-19. See also Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 87: "The problem of the Platonic myth and dialogue has a close connection to the question of revelation."

development of a schema or an outline of the dialogue as a whole. The kind of schema Voegelin sought to develop was independent of traditional divisions (Stephanus pages, books, chapters), would not operate as a table of contents, and did not have to be exhaustive. The schema served as a point of departure for ascertaining Plato's motivations, but Voegelin admitted that developing it was tantamount to beginning in "the middle." In his own words, the schema is "a construction whose validity depends on a correct interpretation of Plato's intentions. While the schema had to be given as a basis for further analysis, it now turns out to be the first step of the analysis itself."[69] Voegelin came to believe that the literary structures of the dialogues were designed to reflect the structure of being that Plato discovered and sought to convey.

Voegelin began the construction of his schema by examining the first words and scenes of the dialogues, which assemble the "dominant symbols" (or topics and themes) and indicate Plato's insights into the aspect of *metaxy* experience that best illuminates those symbols. With respect to the *Gorgias*, for example, Voegelin thought that the opening phrase "war and battle" signaled the topic—Plato's inquiry into forces that compete for influence over young souls—and provided a clue about the structure of the inquiry itself—Socrates' efforts to understand that topic emerge out of his awareness of opposed alternatives as well as make him the adversary of those who do not seek such an understanding. And with respect to the *Republic*, Voegelin argued that the opening book introduced the key symbols of the dialogue (e.g., the three generations of interlocutors, the equality of the Piraeus, and justice, to name only a few) which had to be analyzed in

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[69] Ibid., 50. In light of this statement, delineating the precise order of the steps Voegelin took in constructing his schemas becomes problematic. In the following paragraphs, my references to his "first" and "second" steps are for the sake of clarity; they do not imply a strict sequence.

light of the opening word (*kateben*, "I went down") that conveyed the experiential basis of the inquiry (the pull of the disordering pole of the *metaxy*).

A second step in constructing the dialogic schema was to discover how Plato's deliberate placement of dramatic scenes, discussions, and recurring motifs revealed various levels of interlocking meaning—that is, revealed Plato's understanding of common ontological foundations.[70] Once Voegelin identified the dominant symbols and the aspect of *metaxy* existence that best illuminates them, he looked for other passages throughout the dialogue that treated those symbols in a balancing or parallel way. The descent (*kateben*) to the Piraeus that begins the inquiry into justice in the *Republic* is *balanced* by the ascent (*epanodos*) to the *Agathon* that occurs in the central part of the dialogue and is *paralleled* by the descent (*kateben*) to Hades in the concluding Myth of Er. Although Voegelin frequently referred to Plato's "play" with the symbols, he thought Plato's use of balancing and parallel treatments, and hence the organization of the whole, was governed by the subject matter he explored rather than his concern for aesthetics. The dialogic schema had to be interpreted as one of Plato's solutions to the problem of communicating experiences that transcend the capacity of language symbols.

Another feature of Voegelin's analysis of the literary structure of each particular dialogue was to identify various types of symbolic language that Plato employed. He thought the kind of argument or the dramatic context in which some symbol occurs provides crucial information for ascertaining the meaning of that symbol. For example, a symbol that occurs in a mythical account of divine judgment could not be criticized for its failure to conform to the laws of spatio-temporal existence. Moreover, Voegelin

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[70] See, for example, Voegelin's discussion of his schema of the *Republic* in *Plato and Aristotle*, 45-62.

thought that interpreting the dialogues correctly depended on recognizing that Plato's

choice to use allegory, conceptual analysis, or myth (traditional and his new myth)

followed from the specific kind of experience he was trying to analyze and to

communicate. Plato discovered, according to Voegelin, that inquiries into the

transcendent ground were best conducted through allegory—as in the Cave Parable of the

Republic—because the form of traditional myth risked evoking a misleading association

between matter and the a-material ground. Whereas the experience of *metaxy* existence

as a whole—the tension of existence—was conveyed quite well through myth, particular

myths of judgment. An adequate interpretation of the dialogue had to be based on an

understanding of Plato's determinations about the suitability of certain types of language

to particular subjects of inquiry.

Finally, in analyzing the literary structure of the dialogues, Voegelin thought one

had to pay particular attention to the character of each interlocutor because this would

indicate how that interlocutor's speeches were to be evaluated.[71] Voegelin thought that

Plato's various interlocutors were, generally speaking, either virtuous or vicious or, in

some cases, at the verge of deciding whether to be one way or the other. Plato's basic

criterion for virtue, Voegelin thought, was the willingness to be persuaded to undertake

the quest for the divine ground. These determinations were significant because Plato,

according to Voegelin, would communicate his most important philosophic insights only

through virtuous interlocutors such as Socrates, the Eleatic Stranger, and the Athenian

Stranger, whose love of truth would prohibit them from dissimulating or otherwise

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[71] See Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 157-60, and 186.

concealing the fundamental meaning of their words.[72] Consequently, the views

expressed by vicious interlocutors were relegated to the status of *doxai*—opinions that

could not represent genuine alternatives to Plato's wisdom because they originate in an

ill-constituted soul.

The second principle of Voegelin's approach is that Plato's words and images

must be interpreted in light of the problem of language in the *metaxy*. Voegelin was

committed to the coherence and intelligibility of the dialogues: quite simply, he thought

that they "made sense." But, some passages in the dialogues seem to employ faulty

reasoning, omit key questions or topics, and contradict other passages, and therefore led a

number of Voegelin's peers to question the theoretical value of Platonic philosophy.

Voegelin also noted that the dialogues were not "abstract." Plato's investigations reflect

Plato's own assumptions about what philosophy is and how it arises. Just as philosophy

arises from "existential," i.e., particular social, experiences, so too do the dialogues deal

with particular issues felt by particular people. The concrete, experiential basis of the

dialogues is, therefore, the level on which the coherence and the intelligibility of the

dialogues are to be sought. But the full range of man's experiences cannot fully be

conveyed through language, which operates by distinguishing and imposing limits (e.g.

the subject-object distinction). Plato, Voegelin argued, was well aware of the

problematic features of communicating insights into reality and his writings must be

interpreted as his solution for addressing those problems.

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[72] Voegelin thought that the virtuous characters might present a deliberately inadequate myth in order to illuminate truth by way of its opposite. But in these rare instances, the philosophic character would be sure to indicate the untruth of the myth. In the *Statesman*, the Eleatic stranger employs this procedure at 302b-303c. See *Plato and Aristotle*, 157-60.

Thus, Voegelin's second interpretive principle responds to those who would question the intelligibility or the concreteness of Plato's writings by calling attention to their symbolic character. Plato let his words and images "emerge from the loving quest for the divine ground," hoping that they would reveal the fundamental experiences of *metaxy* existence that engendered them. Therefore, Plato's texts must not be read as if they were syllogisms, and Platonic philosophy cannot be debunked by pointing to logical flaws in the speeches. For Voegelin, reading well means not making the mistake of treating symbols as airtight concepts or arguments that exhaustively explain what they point to. Understanding the dialogue requires the interpreter to connect Plato's language symbols to the forces of order and disorder that one experiences in both personal and socio-political existence. Such experiences have a variety of aspects including, for example, what Plato symbolized as the desiring, spirited, and rational inclinations that are present in both the individual psyche and the civic body. Plato's use of the various types of symbolic forms, Voegelin argued, was an effort to bring greater (not complete) clarity to these experiences by investigating them from many perspectives and through different sorts of lenses.

For Voegelin, this means that every type of language (or symbolic form) Plato used in the dialogue had to be recognized as partially capable of revealing Plato's insights. This applies just as much to Plato's "cognitive inquiry" into the paradigm of the good polis (*Republic* 420b-543c) as it does to Plato's various myths. Although this might seem to imply that Plato's effort to communicate is crippled by the limitations of language, Voegelin thought that Plato's recognition of the problem of language in the *metaxy* actually opened up more avenues through which he was able to communicate his

insights. If all kinds of language (including the symbolic forms of history, myth, philosophy, science, etc.) have their limits, they also have their unique potentialities for clarifying features of *metaxy* existence. Voegelin argued that Plato embraced paradoxical or enigmatic formulations and the form of myth in order to cope with the challenges or opportunities created by *metaxy* existence. These passages are high points in Plato's work: they respect and focus readers' attention on man's participation in transcending reality by departing from conventional ways of arguing and making demonstrations and by hearkening back to the traditional understandings of sacredness and mystery. Understanding such passages requires one to interpret them as efforts to communicate (and thereby to evoke) essentially ineffable processes that transcend the individual consciousness—processes such as the experience of the mysterious ground, the other human being, or man's relationship the cosmos.[73]

Strauss and Voegelin Compared

At this point, we might be tempted to say that Strauss and Voegelin differ insofar as the latter brings certain assumptions to the table before he starts interpreting— assumptions that partially determine the character of what he finds in Plato. But to criticize Voegelin for this while exempting Strauss would not be quite fair. For Strauss does something similar, even if he is not as explicit about it as Voegelin was. In particular, Strauss comes to the dialogues with prior commitments about what philosophy *is*. Voegelin, as I have shown, also approaches the Platonic texts with a particular conception of philosophy in mind, but the differences between his conception and Strauss's give rise to significantly different accounts of Plato's work. Because of the way

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[73] See Voegelin, "On a Theory of Consciousness," in *Anamnesis*, 22-24.

Strauss defines philosophy, for example, he believes that it is necessarily in tension with

the moral commitments of "the city." Strauss therefore determines that Plato's primary

thematic concern is to treat the tensions between philosophy and civic life.[74] Upon

reflection, this assumption is no less grand and determinative than Voegelin's assumption

that Plato is a mystically informed defender of order against the disorder of his age. In

the following section, I draw out some of the most important implications of the

differences in Strauss's and Voegelin's assumptions.

What Philosophy Is

For Strauss, philosophy is the quest for correct knowledge of the whole, or

cosmology.[75] This quest begins in experiences with reality, but in Strauss's view neither

experience nor reality has the profound, participatory and transcendent features that

Voegelin attributes to them. Experience in Strauss's view is limited to the data that are

acquired through sensory perception of the world; reality, as a corollary, is the sum total

of the data that may be perceived.[76] Philosophy begins when an individual notices

logical disjunctions in experience. Opinions regarding what is good or just, for example,

may conflict with each other, thus inviting someone with a keen intellect and a desire to

know which opinion is correct to try to solve the conflict through logical deductions and

inductions. For Strauss, the principle of non-contradiction lies at the heart of the

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[74] This is evident in the titles of Strauss's works on Plato (e.g. *The City and Man*, and *Philosophy and Law*). His concern with this theme is also stressed in *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 93-94 and 221-22, *Natural Right and History* (1950; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 257 and 262. See also, "On a New Interpretation," 360-61ff.

[75] See Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, 11.

[76] See Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 217-33, at 219.

philosophic quest and motivates the philosophic individual to pursue adequate

intellection of reality. Strauss saw no basis for doubting the veracity of what one

perceived through the senses, and he determined that these perceptions, or pretheoretical

experiences, were the surest foundation for adequate intellection. Nevertheless, he

thought that a genuinely philosophic individual would be in persistent doubt about the

conclusions he reached, which would compel him to continue to seek a better

understanding of the whole.[77]

In comparison to Voegelin, then, Strauss saw a more limited role for mysterious,

transcendent reality within the philosophic quest. This kind of reality, of which Strauss's

philosopher has no immediate or direct experience, is apprehended through faith (or

revelation) rather than philosophy (or reason). For Strauss, faith and philosophy are

distinct modes of questing for the truth. This is a crucial difference between the two

thinkers, one which Strauss addressed in a letter to Voegelin:

> There is a double reason not to obscure this essential difference [*viz.* between
> reason and revelation] in any way. First, it is in the interest of revelation, which is
> by no means merely natural knowledge. Secondly, for the sake of human
> knowledge, *epistēmē*. You yourself have said that science matters very much to
> you. For me, it matters a great deal to understand it as such. Its classics are the
> Greeks and not the Bible. The classics demonstrated that truly human life is a life
> dedicated to science, knowledge, and the search for it. Coming from the Bible the
> *hen anagkaion* is something completely different. No justifiable purpose is
> served by obscuring this contradiction. . . Every synthesis is actually an option
> either for Jerusalem or for Athens.[78]

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[77] See Pangle and Tarcov, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss," 919-21. The authors provide several useful citations to Strauss's works. Also see Pangle, "Platonic Political Science."

[78] Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, 25 February 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 78.

Strauss went on to say that Voegelin seemed "to be quite sure that the Platonic myths are intelligible only on the basis of postulating a 'religious' experience underlying them," and then to admit that he himself was "not so sure about that."[79] Rather, Strauss wrote,

> This much, I believe, emerges throughout from Plato, that he was less anxious to induce the better readers to believe than to induce them to think. And for that there is in fact no better means than the enigmatic quality of his work in general and the myths particularly.[80]

Strauss's Plato and Strauss's Socrates therefore remain in ignorance about matters of divine reality and are not primarily concerned to remove that ignorance because the modes of inquiry into divine reality are not scientifically valid—that is, they are not based in sense perception and logic. Strauss's philosopher must exhaust scientific channels of investigation before taking up other types of inquiries. As he stated at the conclusion of *The City and Man*, "Only by beginning at this point will we be open to the full impact of the all-important question which is coeval with philosophy although the philosophers do not frequently pronounce it—the question *quid sit dues*."[81]

Voegelin, as I mentioned above, thought that faith and philosophy were analogous movements in which consciousness becomes better attuned to the divine ground. For Voegelin, faith was not, as Strauss seemed to suppose, appropriating or assenting to a set of dogma or doctrine. Neither was philosophy limited to cosmology, understood in Strauss's terms—the whole that we are able to know through sensory-based reasoning. By extension, Voegelin did not accept Strauss's clear distinction of theory, which is the

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[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid., 79.

[81] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 241.

concern of philosophy, and practice, which is the concern of faith. The implications for

his interpretation of Plato, which he conveyed to Strauss, are clear:

> I see [the Platonic-Aristotelian problem] in the following way: at the center of
> Platonic *political* thinking stand the *fundamental experiences*, which are tied
> together with the person and death of Socrates—catharsis through consciousness
> of death and the enthusiasm of eros both pave the way for the right ordering of the
> soul (*Dike*). The *theoretical* political-ethical achievement seems secondary to
> these fundamental experiences. Only when the fundamental order of the soul is
> defined, can the field of social relations determined by it be systematically
> ordered. In this sense, I understand the theoretical-scientific achievement of Plato
> as founded in myth (which he conveys as the representation of the fundamental
> experiences in the *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, the *Republic* and the *Laws*).[82]

Voegelin understood philosophy to be an act of discovering and instantiating the proper

order of the soul. In contrast to Strauss's statements about *epistēmē*, Voegelin suggested,

> Ontological knowledge emerges in the process of history and biographically in
> the process of the individual person's life under certain conditions of education,
> social context, personal inclination, and spiritual conditioning. *Epistēmē* is not
> just a function of understanding, it is also in the Aristotelian sense, a dianoetic
> *aretē*. For this *non*cognitive aspect of *epistēmē* I use the term "existential."[83]

In other words, Voegelin's Plato desired to think rightly about the cosmos, but this

required a certain ethical relation to the whole of reality—both the reality that is

perceptible through the senses and cognition and the reality that becomes luminous only

in the deep movements of the psyche. Plato's great accomplishment was not to point

capable students toward the set of "permanent problems" that characterize the human

condition; rather, it was to use the symbolic form of myth to evoke, for a potentially wide

audience, the experiences of order and disorder which are the basis for knowledge of

metaxy existence and existential morality. Basing the philosophic myth in the life and

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[82] Eric Voegelin to Leo Strauss, 9 December 1942, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 8 (emphasis in original).

[83] Eric Voegelin to Leo Strauss, 2 January 1950, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 64.

death of Socrates was an indication both of Plato's spiritual sensitivity to the revelation of truth in history and his concern to connect his philosophy to an experience with which most Athenians could relate.

Philosophy and the City

Because Voegelin thought that all human beings are capable of and obliged to undertake the quest of attunement to the ground, neither he nor his Plato saw a necessary conflict between philosophy and civic life. In fact, Voegelin's analysis of the Platonic texts emphasizes the extent to which Plato was concerned to instantiate the divine paradigm of order within the concrete experience of the polis in history. For Strauss, this was not the case. Strauss thought that the philosopher could not avoid finding himself opposed to the city and its morality since the latter proffers an ultimate account of the good and just that is based on authoritative, ancestral teachings rather than the universally-valid principles of philosophy (or science).[84] In Strauss's view, philosophy is the intellectual endeavor which only a few gifted human beings are capable of undertaking. The "many" who constitute the city are, in the main, unsuited for the intellectual rigors of philosophic skepticism and therefore find themselves best able to organize their lives around a traditional, uncriticized account of justice. Since his quest for truth reveals the contradictions within the traditional morality, the philosopher finds it necessary to obscure the nature of his activity. This is both for the protection of the moral foundations upon which the existence of the city depends and for the protection of the philosopher himself, whose explicit questioning of civic morality could evoke the ire of the city against him. The conflict between philosophy and the city was key among the

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[84] See Pangle, "Platonic Political Science," 220-31.

"permanent problems" which Strauss's Plato investigated and sought to convey to other philosophers through his enigmatic texts.

Lest Voegelin's view come across as overly simplistic or optimistic, it should be mentioned that Voegelin's philosophers quite often found themselves in opposition to the dominant strata of civic life. In Voegelin's account, Plato's arch-nemesis was the sophist (or the product of sophistic education, the ridiculous intellectual who was the enemy of the spirit[85]), and Athens was the sophist writ large.[86] But this conflict was neither necessary nor insurmountable; it was not a *permanent* problem, even if it was a generally intractable one. Indeed as Voegelin's analysis of the *Gorgias* suggests, Plato seriously attempted to come into "existential communion" with his sophistic interlocutors so that they might experience the movements of the psyche which would reveal the importance of being attentive to transcendent reality. Of course the sophistic interlocutors in the *Gorgias* do not accept Socrates' invitations, but rather than giving up on all sophistic types or on the sophistic society, Voegelin's Plato searched the contours of reality for a remedy that, if it would not cure the immediate sophistic disorder, would at least attenuate it and leave open a greater possibility that sensitive individuals could transcend the disorder of their circumstances.

Strauss, by contrast, thought that interpreting the Platonic texts depended upon recognizing how the necessary conflict between philosophy and the city influenced the form of Plato's writing. The protection of the city and the philosopher was a crucial consideration for Plato's decision to use obscure and puzzling formulations and to

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[85] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 267-70; *Plato and Aristotle*, 25.

[86] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 62-63 and 70 (citing Plato *Republic* 492b).

employ the stylistic devices that I mentioned in at the beginning of this chapter. To keep

the many in the dark about the nature and conclusions of philosophy would allow

philosophy to continue as the private intellectual pursuit of the keenest human natures. In

Strauss's view, moral considerations are important only to the extent that they can be

demonstrated as natural—that is, as having a logical basis in the order of the cosmos.[87]

The philosopher's moral consideration, which consists in his decision to obscure the

nature of philosophy from the unfit and therefore to allow them to remain without

knowledge of the truth, is based upon his discovery that the philosopher is, by nature,

superior to other sorts of human beings. This superiority is logically deduced from the

determination that the capacity for reason is the defining characteristic of human beings

and from the fact that philosophers' capacity for reason is greater and more proficient

than that of the non-philosophers.

On these points, Voegelin strongly contested Strauss's view. He thought that

human beings are ontologically equal insofar as they all find their existence in the

metaxy, where only limited, though substantial, understanding is possible. To interpret

the Platonic texts required an understanding of the experiences of *metaxy* existence, in

which the immortal, embodied soul reaches out toward the transcendent ground of being

that it discerns "as if through a glass darkly." From these key differences between

Voegelin and Strauss, a number of specific divergences on the stuff and substance of

Platonic philosophy arise. It is to these that I now turn.

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[87] See Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 262-63. See also Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 113 and 117; Pangle, "Platonic Political Science," 330-31.

Specific Interpretive Issues

First among the important divergences between Voegelin and Strauss is the

former's view that the Platonic dialogues are "saving" by nature. Voegelin wrote that

> Philosophy in this sense, as an act of resistance illuminated by conceptual understanding, has two functions for Plato. It is first, and most importantly, an act of salvation for himself and others, in that the evocation of right order and its reconstitution in his own soul becomes the substantive center of a new community which, by its existence, relieves the pressure of the surrounding corrupt society. Under this aspect Plato is the founder of the community of philosophers that lives through the ages. Philosophy is, second, an act of judgment. . . Since the order of the soul is recaptured through resistance to the surrounding disorder, the pairs of concepts which illuminate the act of resistance develop into the criteria (in the pregnant sense of instruments or standards of judgment) of social order and disorder. Under this second aspect Plato is the founder of political science.[88]

The philosophy conveyed in the dialogues saves the individual and society from falling

into the ruin that results from the failure to appreciate the proper ordering of human

affairs in relation to the divine and to nothingness. The dialogues "save" by articulating

visions of order and correcting the assumptions of the destroyers of order, thereby

facilitating greater spiritual attunement to the divine ground of being and participation in

the *realissimum*.

For Voegelin, diagnosing disorder is the first step in remedying it, so the

dialogues' revelations of order and disorder have practical as well as theoretical

importance. This is, of course, a crucial difference from Strauss, who assumes an

insurmountable disjunction between philosophy and politics. For Strauss, philosophy is

not as political by nature as it is for Voegelin; nor is it possible for it to take a saving role

for politics because it has its own interest over and against the political. Strauss therefore

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[88] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 68-69.

thought that genuine philosophy was above and beyond ethics, and that Plato's dialogues were only exoterically concerned with morality.

A second divergence hinges on the role of irony in the dialogues.[89] For Strauss, irony was a means the philosopher employs in order to mediate the opposition between politics and philosophy. But for Voegelin, irony had a different function: he saw it as an expression of meaning which may be understood only by those who share a certain existential outlook. This is different from Strauss's determination that the double meanings of ironic passages enable philosophers to speak to each other in a world where not everyone is fit to understand the content of their speech because Voegelin thought that everyone is capable of developing the existential outlook that makes understanding possible. Voegelin saw irony as one of Plato's instruments for dealing with the situation that spiritual order does not always penetrate the structures of pragmatic order. By illuminating the situation, Plato encouraged readers to reflect upon the structures of existence that allow for such a limited instantiation of the divine paradigm of order.

Interestingly, their differences over the function of irony are associated with Strauss's and Voegelin's differences concerning tragedy and comedy in the dialogues. Strauss emphasized the comic elements of the dialogues and pointed out that Socrates laughs rather than cries.[90] At the same time, tragedy enters into his analysis to the extent that chance or fortune determines whether one will be capable of philosophy or not. For

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[89] For a useful discussion of how several interpreters of Plato, including Voegelin and Strauss, have read the role of irony in the dialogues, see Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, chapter two.

[90] Strauss noted this difference between himself and Voegelin in Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, 4 June 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 91. Zuckert discusses Strauss's comic view of the dialogues in *Postmodern Platos*, 148.

Voegelin, by contrast, the dialogues are too serious to be considered comical.[91] But

neither are they totally tragic, for indeed they convey the potent message of salvation to

those who wish to be saved. Nevertheless, considering the practical effects of the

dialogues illuminates the tragedy of the human condition, namely, the fact that the

possibility of right order is often neglected or rejected by the human beings who would

be benefitted by pursuing it. The tragedy of the human condition weighs down heavily

on Voegelin's Plato, who discerned his partnership with the other members of the

community of being (god and man, world and society).

Third, Voegelin was quite comfortable attributing the views expressed in the

dialogues to Plato himself and he often equated Socrates and Plato, using the phrase

"Socrates-Plato" on numerous occasions. While this equation is not an unusual practice

in Plato scholarship, it is one that Strauss and his students are generally unwilling to

make. Moreover, because Strauss emphasized Plato's silence, he thought that interpreters

must remain open to the possibility that Plato expressed his views through a disreputable

character. Voegelin, by contrast, thought that Plato never would have expressed his

views through a vicious character because the adequate apperception of order and

disorder depends upon having a well-ordered, virtuous soul. Plato's use of vicious

characters functioned, rather, as examples of the effects of pneumapathology and as foils

for the presentation of order. In Voegelin's analysis, Plato used oppositional pairs—the

order of the philosopher versus the disorder of the sophist, for example—because he

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[91] See Sinnett, "Eric Voegelin and the Essence of the Problem," 437. Sinnett discusses the
philosopher's astonishment at the negative reception of his saving tale. Voegelin's Plato was optimistic in
his younger years, but learns later in life that the prospects for general salvation are slim. This gives rise to
the "darker Question" that became thematic in *The Ecumenic Age*.

thought that truth is illuminated by opposing it to untruth.[92] This kind of opposition

mimics the *metaxy*, which is anchored by the opposing forces of order and disorder.

A fourth divergence lies in the historical emphasis of Voegelin's approach to

interpreting Plato. As I showed in chapter two, Voegelin thought that knowing the

objective truth was not only a genuine human possibility, but also the only way of life in

which all human beings find their ultimate fulfillment. He thus shared Strauss's

convictions about the dangers of modernity's acceptance of historicist assumptions. But

where Strauss's adverseness to historicism was associated with the view that philosophy

was essentially independent from any spatio-temporally conditioned knowledge,

Voegelin determined that the philosophic quest had both temporal and a-temporal

features. The latter's emphasis on history and the way that human understanding of order

becomes increasingly refined over time led him to view Plato in much more historical

terms.

For example, Voegelin's Plato occupies a particular (and preeminent) moment in

the story of philosophy, and Plato's understanding of the human soul evolves over his

lifetime. The insights he conveys in the *Laws*, for example, reflect a deeper or more

differentiated understanding of *metaxy* existence than those which he conveyed in the

Republic. The order in which the dialogues were written is therefore significant for

Voegelin; it was so not for Strauss since he was less interested in, if not hostile to,

exploring the features of Platonic philosophy which were not permanent. Voegelin, in

other words, sees a dynamic process at work in Plato, whereas Strauss sees a static

thinker, however, brilliant. Voegelin also thought that Plato's reflections on his

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[92] See Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 62-70.

philosophic debt to the existential quests of his predecessors, such as Aeschylus, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Anaxagoras, helped him to uncover the nature of that dynamic process and develop a philosophy of history.

Fifth, Voegelin viewed myth as Plato's way of solving the inescapable limitations of *metaxy* existence. Voegelin thought that by the time of the *Timaeus*, Plato had discovered a philosophy of myth in which "the psyche [had] reached the critical consciousness of the methods by which it symbolizes its own experiences."[93] Voegelin argued that Plato accepted the myth "as a medium of symbolic expression, endowed with an authority of its own, independent of, and prior to, the universe of empirical knowledge constituted by consciousness in attention to its objects."[94] In other words, myth *is* philosophy at its highest reaches because it is through myth that experiences of order and disorder are conveyed and evoked most accurately and profoundly. Platonic philosophy culminates in myth. But for Strauss, myths are not, properly speaking, philosophical at all. They are the philosopher's ironic efforts to produce a salutary effect for his inferior interlocutor. These efforts employ traditional symbols not, as Voegelin thought, because the traditional symbols conveyed genuine, if compact, experiences of order and disorder; rather Strauss thought that the philosopher's use of the traditional symbols was related to the philosopher's concession to the ordering force of civic poetry and ancestral morality. For Strauss myth is evidence of the philosopher's subjection to necessity. For Voegelin,

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[93] Ibid., 183. See also 183-94.

[94] Ibid., 184.

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myth is a form of symbolic play which attests to the philosopher's freedom in "the influx of the spirit, which abolishes absolute determinism."[95]

Finally, Voegelin and Strauss differ on whether or not Plato and his Socrates maintained spiritual beliefs. By now, it should be clear that Voegelin insisted that Plato was a mystic and a believer in divine being and its relevance for human life. Strauss did not attend to these aspects of Plato's work and, according to some commentators, he denied that genuine philosophy can be spiritual.[96] Accordingly, Strauss viewed many of the dialogues' references to god or the gods as ironic or artistic rather than containing the most serious themes of Platonic philosophy. The starkness of contrast will be evident if we recall how Voegelin interpreted 278d of Plato's *Phaedrus*:

> In the *Phaedrus* Plato has Socrates describe the characteristics of the true thinker. When Phaedrus asks what one should call such a man, Socrates, following Heraclitus, replies that the term *sophos*, one who knows, would be excessive: this attribute may be applied to God alone; but one might well call him *philosophos*. Thus "actual knowledge" is reserved to God; finite man can only be the "lover of knowledge," not himself one who knows. In the meaning of the passage, the lover of the knowledge that belongs only to the knowing God, the *philosophos*, becomes the *theophilos*, the lover of God.[97]

Concluding Remarks on Interpretive Pluralism

As the following remarks have demonstrated, Voegelin and Strauss arrive at significantly different conclusions about what Plato was doing and saying. The differences are explicable, at least in part, by the prior commitments that enter into each

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[95] Ibid., 258.

[96] See, for example, Timothy Fuller, "Philosophy, Faith, and the Question of Progress," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 281-95; Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Philosophizing in Opposition: Strauss and Voegelin on Communication and Science," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 249-59; Stanley Rosen, "Politics or Transcendence? Responding to Historicism," in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 261-66.

[97] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 31.

thinker's analysis and inform the direction in which the Platonic texts are interpreted.

But while both thinkers' prior commitments and posterior conclusions differ

significantly, they both claim to be interpreting Plato as he understood himself. This

raises the problem regarding the objectivity of each thinker's analysis: through their

interpretations, both Voegelin and Strauss seemed to find in Plato what he expected to

find there. For Voegelin, Plato was a mystic who symbolized the soul's quest for its

divine ground in the hopes that other individuals and society would become attuned to it.

For Strauss, Plato was a rational skeptic who hoped to protect the private pursuit of

intellectual wisdom from the encroachments of civic life.

Students of Voegelin and Strauss, not to say Plato, are left wondering whether

studying their interpretations of Plato is overly problematic—that is, whether their

interpretations altogether fail to produce genuine insight into what the ancient

philosopher was doing and thinking? I suggest, however, that the differences in their

interpretations are overly problematic only if we think that we need a single univocal

account of the Platonic endeavor. But if we think that Plato is an author whose fecund

writings stand to illuminate our own experience in various ways and that he therefore can

reflect and refract ourselves, the interpretive differences are a crucial source of richness

and knowledge. That is to say, if we regard Plato as a mirror of sorts—a very complex

mirror which returns a good bit of what we put into it, but also more—then we very much

benefit by seeing what various interpreters find when they read Plato. At the very least,

reading Voegelin's and Strauss's analyses of the dialogues provokes myriad questions

and directs a careful reader back to the original texts in search of answers. And it seems

difficult to imagine that that effect would be in any way contrary to what Plato intended,

be he a mystic or a skeptic.

CHAPTER FOUR

Voegelin's Plato

Voegelin's unique way of interpreting philosophic texts leads to an understanding

of Plato that is distinguished from (and in some ways anathema to) other twentieth-

century thinkers' understandings of Plato. In this chapter, I describe who Voegelin's

Plato was and what specifically he was trying to do by writing the dialogues. My

analysis focuses specifically on three important (and intertwined) roles Plato held: first,

that of a political actor, second, that of a mystic, and third, that of a "scientist."[1] I then

mention some specific characteristics of the philosophical soul and conclude with a brief

comparison of Strauss's Plato with Voegelin's.

Plato Was an Involved Political Actor

One of the most important characteristics of Voegelin's Plato is his genuine

concern for understanding Hellenic politics in order to improve it, a task which he

thought the philosopher was morally obliged to undertake. By examining, first of all,

Plato's dialogues and other writings (including the *Letters*), and then the record of

important social, political, and historical events and ideas (especially those surrounding

the death of Socrates), Voegelin discovered that the social and political crisis of the

Hellenes deeply affected Plato. Therefore, a number of practical political concerns

animated Plato's writing including, for instance, to promote a unified Hellas, to discover

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[1] As I make clear below, I do not use the word "scientist" here in the typical modern sense of someone whose efforts to understand something are guided and validated by the employment of a fixed empirical method but rather to designate someone characterized by the desire to know, the willingness to employ any method that illuminates that which he desires to know, and the ability to make accurate, principled connections between the various aspects of reality that man experiences.

the optimal size of a polis, and to counter the materialist and sophistic *doxai* that were popular during his time. He was especially concerned to provide a remedy to the deformed way of speaking (i.e. rhetoric) that was popular in Athens during the fourth century. Voegelin was able to identify these concerns and others because he assumed that it was possible to discern Plato's thought by examining the words of the dialogue and paying attention to thematic repetitions. In other words, he did not believe that interpreters must limit themselves to statements about what any particular interlocutor might mean; we can know what Plato meant too.

Besides examining the importance of Plato's explicitly stated political goals, Voegelin also looked at how Plato's political efforts were influenced by his experiences with the chaos of Athenian politics in the 4th century. Voegelin wanted to know the answer to a very basic, yet important question: What were "the motives which induced the young man of a well-connected family not to pursue his natural career in the politics of Athens but instead to become a philosopher, the founder of a school, and a man of letters?"[2] In order to answer that question, Voegelin conducted an historical investigation, which is recorded in *Order and History* 2 and 3. There, Voegelin described Plato's social and political milieu. It will be helpful to mention some its most important characteristics, for this contributes to an understanding of Plato's experiences of disorder that motivated his philosophic quest.

Voegelin thought that Plato's Athens was sophistic and deformed. Voegelin thought the term "sophist" could be applied to Hellenic society as a whole. Almost everyone—even Athenian citizens—exhibited the traits of a sophistic education, making

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[2] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 15.

them deserving of that title.[3] Although the sophists achieved important theoretical

advances in pedagogy, history, and politics—some of which were appropriated by Plato

himself—the sophistic form of "communicating" separated language symbols from

existential experiences, thus obliterating the intelligible point of reference from which

meaning can be discerned. Rather than facilitate genuine knowledge and understanding,

the sophistic education taught one how to manipulate speech in order to obtain one's

ends, without regard for others or for the experiences of transcendence that were, for

Voegelin's Plato, the desideratum of right thought and action.[4] Moreover, the combative

nature of sophistic techniques contradicted the primary experience of man's participation

in the community of being and the philosophic discovery that men share a common

condition based in their participation in the divine *Nous*.[5]

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[3] Voegelin, T*he World of the Polis*, 268-69. Voegelin's ideas concerning what made someone a sophist or sophistic derived from the Platonic portrayal of the sophists as those whose speech had become severed from the experiential knowledge of being as a consequence of attempts to achieve personal success at the expense of attunement to the divine order.

[4] For Voegelin's characterization of the new sophistic education and its mode of conveying itself, see, *The World of the Polis*, 270: "The mastery of typical situations and arguments in public debate, a stock of thorough knowledge with regard to the public affairs of the polis in domestic and imperial relations, a ready wit, a good memory improved by training, a disciplined intellect ready to grasp the essentials of an issue, the trained ability of marshaling paradigmata, and sayings drawn from the poets for illustrating a point, general oratorical perfection, skill in debate leading to more or less graceful discomfiture of an opponent, a good deal of psychological knowledge in handling people, good appearance and bearing, natural and trained charm in conversation—all these were required in the competitive game of the polis. Anyone would be welcome who could train the mind in arriving at sound decisions and in imposing them on others in this new form of politics through debate, speech, argument, and persuasion." Voegelin accents the divisive rather than unifying quality of sophistic education.

[5] For an analysis of Voegelin's treatment of the sophists, see Farrell, "Voegelin on Plato and the Sophists," in *Communication and Lonergan*, 108-36. Voegelin's treatment of the sophists in *The World of the Polis* shows the connections that link Parmenides and the pre-Socratic philosophers to the historical sophists such as Protagoras and Prodicus. In some respects, Voegelin was sympathetic to the sophists' attempts to discover the truth about man, which were notable as inquiries, but whose answers were misguided. His main criticism of the sophists, however, was aimed at their closure to experiences of transcendence that led to the formulation that "Man is the Measure." Interestingly, Voegelin's discussion of the historical Gorgias of Leontini in his late essay "Wisdom and Magic," suggests that Gorgias was spiritually open to experiences of order and disorder, but was unable to clarify them beyond a compact symbolization.

Mass acceptance of sophistic teachings was prepared by the pre-Socratic philosophers' insights into *individual* noetic experiences of the structure of being. By emphasizing the importance of individual souls' perceptions of the Truth, the pre-Socratic insights undermined the polis's authoritative role in ordering human life toward the good, which was a key feature of the old cosmological symbolism. As people began to accept the more differentiated account of individual psychic order, Athenian *aristocracy* lost its ability to reflect the general consensus concerning the source of personal and political order. A *democratic* regime seemed better suited for a society of persons whose proper order lay in a configuration of the individual soul.[6] Democracy, however, brought with it the dangerous consequence that the ends most appealing to unphilosophic or spiritually hardened individuals become the ordering principles of society. The old educational and political order, whose standard for virtue was set by the authority of honorable ancestors and heroes, the paradigmatic displays of valor, and the exhortatory sections of the epic, was replaced by a new sophistic (dis)order, whose "virtue" and education aimed at democratic political success, i.e. ruling popular opinion.[7]

The pre-Socratic insights, the political disorder of regime change, and the sophists' rhetorical techniques that equated the "right" with the politically efficient, combined to undermine Athenians' belief in an ultimate standard of order and meaning against which the existence of the political organization and the individual could be evaluated. Simultaneously, commercial trade was to introduce new cultures and practices

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[6] To be sure, it was not just the philosophic insights that paved the way for democracy. As noted in chapter 1, Voegelin thought that political disorder gave rise to philosophic insights which, challenging the adequacy of the old order's symbolisms of the truth, could eventuate in further disorder on the level of pragmatic history.

[7] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 272.

into the Athenian way of life and to produce wealth sufficient to allow ample leisure to engage in empirical studies.[8] The people of Athens came to believe that knowledge came from the objective study of the external world, that language was an instrument of power, and that "order" was something to be imposed upon politics by majority rule. The majority of Athenians supposed that natural justice consisted in the "right of the stronger."

Voegelin associated the general acceptance of sophistic teachings and the concomitant closure to experiences of order with the Athenian political turmoil. This turmoil, in turn, created mass confusion concerning the right way to live and seemed to prove empirically that disorder was the permanent feature of the human condition. In Voegelin's view, Plato was deeply disturbed by these events. He was particularly troubled by the sophists' denial of an immutable, transcending source of order and truth. That denial had severe political consequences: Athens not only failed to promote right order, but also had an active role in subverting right order altogether. The execution of Socrates confirmed the point: life in Athens made living well—to live in such a way as to be found blameless before the gods—a practical impossibility.[9] Therefore, per Voegelin's Plato, the city lost its claim to be the existential representative of the people because its rulers put mundane concerns over the spiritual good. Participating in such a corrupt order would be ineffective and hazardous to the health of Plato's soul.

In his attempt to discover the reason Plato abstained from the practice of politics, Voegelin also consulted the *Letters*. Unlike some interpreters, Voegelin thought the

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[8] See Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 281: "The sophist, by virtue of his comprehensive mastery of all things human, would become an epitome of humanity—but he would be such an epitome by the omniversality of his skills, not by the universality of his essence."

[9] See Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, chapter 1.

Letters could be attributed to Plato and he thought the autobiographical statements

contained therein were genuine representations of Plato's attitude regarding political

affairs. Voegelin turned especially to the *Seventh Letter* which, Voegelin argued, "ranks

equal in importance with the *Republic* and the *Laws* for the understanding of Platonic

politics."[10] In the *Letters*, Voegelin found that early on Plato was enthusiastic about

politics and hopeful for "the new rulers [*viz*., the oligarchs, later dubbed the "Thirty

Tyrants"] to lead the polis from an unjust life to a just one."[11] That early enthusiasm

gave way, Voegelin argued, to Plato's "disillusionment" and "disgust" with the oligarchs

and then to his recognition that "a reform cannot be achieved by a well-intentioned leader

who recruits his followers from the very people whose moral confusion is the source of

disorder."[12] The rulers and people had proven their injustice by accusing, condemning,

and killing Socrates, who was, for Voegelin's Plato, the very representation of the divine

order on earth.

Since Athenian politics were incapable of establishing a just order, the restoration

of order had to originate in a source not only outside of the ordinary political channels of

action, but also beyond the range of human experience that was common at the time—in

a source altogether transcendent. Voegelin thought that Plato had made a crucial

discovery with this point; indeed, he modeled his own political endeavor on Plato's

undertaking. As Michael Federici observes,

> Drawing on Plato's political philosophy, Voegelin believed that political and
> social order could only be restored by ordering souls. . . . Voegelin thus placed his

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[10] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 15.

[11] Ibid., 4.

[12] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 5.

hope for restoration in philosophy, not politics, for it was philosophy that had the capacity to regenerate political leadership and in turn political and social order.[13]

In Voegelin's view, therefore, Plato's political undertakings were not primarily "political" in the conventional sense even though they sought political change and had real political consequences. Voegelin consistently argued that Plato's politics were driven by spiritual, rather than institutional or constitutional concerns. As he said in his analysis of the *Laws*, "The assumption that Plato had thought for a moment that the political problems of a civilization in crisis could be solved by tinkering with constitutional provisions would pervert the meaning not only of the *Laws* but of *the whole work of Plato*." To think Plato's endeavor was simply pragmatic would be "wildly erroneous."[14]

Although Voegelin's Plato finally determined that the particular situation of Athens (and the other Hellenic poleis) was beyond repair through conventional approaches, he never gave up on the political situation in general. Voegelin took seriously the line of the *Seventh Letter* that indicates Plato's resolution to meet the political disorder with an "effort of an almost miraculous kind" aimed at restoring the bond between pragmatic power structures and spiritual substance that had broken.[15] Voegelin's Plato was enough a part of his polis that he was passionately concerned for its order and well-being, but he was not strictly a product of his polis. On the contrary,

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[13] Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 23.

[14] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 246-47 (my emphasis).

[15] Ibid., 5. I assume Voegelin is referring to the final line of paragraph 44, which J. Harward translated thus: "After much effort, as names, definitions, sights, and other data of sense, are brought into contact and friction with one another without ill will, with a sudden flash there shines forth understanding about every problem, and an intelligence whose efforts reach the furthest limits of human powers." Plato *Seventh Letter*, The Internet Classics Archive by Daniel C. Stevenson: The *Seventh Letter*, trans. J Harward, http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh_letter.html (accessed January 27, 2012).

Voegelin's Plato was able to analyze the Athenian order (or lack thereof) from a transcending perspective, and this enabled him to discern the nature of Athens' disease and of a possible remedy. This higher perspective also enabled Plato to recognize that he was morally obliged to undertake a restoration of Athenian order in opposition to the forces of disorder that predominated. Thus, Voegelin's conclusions about the specific dialogues always touch on how Plato intended his spiritual insights to have a concrete impact on Athenian political order.

So what, then, was the substance of Plato's political endeavor? Voegelin answered that the dialogues themselves constituted Plato's almost miraculous (political) effort "to renew the order of Hellenic civilization out of the resources of his own love of wisdom, fortified by the paradigmatic life and death of the most just man, Socrates."[16] As a counter to the deformations of language (such as sophistic rhetoric) and existential closure (an attitude of unwillingness to seek truth in non-immanent experience) of his times, Plato offered up his dialogues to everyone who wanted to read them.[17] By basing his dialogues on the concrete events surrounding Socrates' life and death, Plato grounded his broad-based appeal in a common, provocative experience that would, he hoped, make it more effective. The dialogues aimed at reforming politics by illuminating a fuller range of human experience to individuals and creating a more adequate philosophical vocabulary (or new symbols of order) so that divine order could flow into mundane order and thereby restore "the common order of the spirit that [had] been destroyed through the

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 12.

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privatization of rhetoric."[18] This, then, is the substance of Plato's political effort: to save

social, political, and individual existence from falling into ruin.

Plato understood the existential message conveyed in the dialogues to be, in a

sense, self-evident. The longing for attunement to divine being that constitutes the

human psyche causes sensitive individuals to apperceive that the existential message is

true and has a direct bearing on human thought and action. Sometimes this apperception

occurs at such a deep level of the psyche that it is not recognized consciously, but Plato

aimed at awakening individuals to such insights through his differentiated symbols of

order. Of Plato's differentiation Voegelin stated:

> The discovery of transcendence, of intellectual and spiritual order, while
> occurring in the souls of individual human beings, is not a matter of "subjective
> opinion"; once the discovery is made, it is endowed with the quality of an
> authoritative appeal to every man to actualize it in his own soul; the
> differentiation of man, the discovery of his nature, is a source of social
> authority.[19]

Plato's symbols, in other words, functioned as authoritative calls-to-action. Some of the

most important of these symbols were, for example: the *metaxy*, which expresses the

insight that human beings exist somewhere between divine being and nothingness; the

zetema, which conveys the infrastructure of the quest for wisdom; and the "Mover of the

Pieces," which expresses god's ontological relation to man.[20] Unlike the sophistic

symbols, Plato's newly differentiated philosophical symbols emphasized that human

knowledge is conditioned by his participation in reality and depends upon the divine

presence in the activity of the psyche. They pointed back to experiences with the

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 186-87.

[20] See Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *CW* 12: 269-73, for further examples of symbols and references to the classic texts in which they occur.

transcendent source of order. In this way, Plato's symbols functioned as the new myth that could structure human psyche and enable it to resist disorder.

In sum, by proffering these symbols, Plato was not only resisting the spiritual disorder of his time and its socio-political manifestations, but also promoting right insight and expressions about personal and political order. These symbols sought to evoke existential responses on the part of the dialogues' audiences so that genuine order—order having its source in the human beings' attunement to divine being—could make its way into individuals' lives as well as the social and political situation. Voegelin's Plato never gave up on this task even when, in his old age, he grew skeptical about humanity's ability to instantiate the divine paradigm of order. The *Laws*, which Voegelin thought was Plato's final effort to deal with the relationship of political and divine order, makes several concessions to human frailty, but does not abandon the hope that the "golden cord" of right order could influence political organization and action.

Plato Was a Mystic

For Voegelin, Plato's concern for pragmatic political order was sincere and a key factor in motivating his philosophic writings. Nevertheless, Voegelin also argued that Plato's political efforts were animated by his conviction that the health and salvation of the soul were man's primary concern. He meant this in the existential sense: the soul must flee non-being, temporality, and disorder and become lovingly attuned to the ground of being, eternity, and order. Therefore, Plato determined that socio-political configurations were appropriate subjects for philosophic inquiry and therapy because they shape man's thoughts and attitudes about reality and its ground and thereby influence his chances of existential attunement. While we need to recognize the

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significance of Plato's political concerns, we must realize that Voegelin's Plato was first and foremost a mystic who sought attunement to the divine ground of being for its own sake. Platonic philosophy was, in Voegelin's view, the loving quest for the divine ground of being.

Therefore, the relationship between Plato's more obviously political efforts and his existential, philosophic effort is complex. This complexity itself became a motivating force for Plato's philosophic inquiry and insights. The socio-political disorder burdened Plato concretely and made him desire a remedy for it. This experience was like a strengthening exercise for his soul: the movements of aversion and attraction to pragmatic phenomena facilitated Plato's sensitivity to the soul's experiences of ontological disorder and order. At the same time, Plato must already have been psychically sensitive enough that the socio-political disorder would be experienced as psychically burdensome and having spiritual significance. After all, the sophists and political men of Athens (on Voegelin's reading) were largely unfazed by Athenian decline, if they even recognized it as such. Plato must have had, in other words, an insight that originated in a transcendent and mysterious source that was nevertheless present in his struggle to cope with the disorder of his society. Voegelin would argue that the dialogues were written in order to make this complex and puzzling relation between Plato and his society more luminous.

In Voegelin's view, then, *the mystery of how and why* Plato experienced and perceived disorder (psychic and political) had the character of an efficient as well as a final cause of Plato's quest for the divine ground. Plato wanted to know what it was that responded with aversion to his political milieu, how it did so, and why it did so. Plato

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found that the struggle to answer such questions was a source of the insights he sought—the soul's movements were the gateway to knowledge of reality and its order. Since the soul or psyche "is not an object of sense experience, but is rather a reality that becomes noetically illuminated by the one who suffers its movement toward the transcendent [ground of being] in his or her consciousness," the inquiry into the mysterious experience would have to be conducted by examining the experience itself.[21] Moreover, because of its status as "non-object" reality, psyche cannot be adequately or comprehensively captured in language, which treats everything as an object and presents everything to consciousness in that mode only. Psyche, like the all-comprehending structure of reality in which psyche participates existentially, is ineffable.

Since language is thus deficient, both the quest for genuine insight and the insight itself must arise out of the immediate experience of the psyche's movements within the *metaxy*, its participation in both ontic order and disorder, and its quest for the divine ground. To intensify these experiences therefore became critical to Plato's inquiry. Throughout his lifetime, Plato became more sensitive to the psyche's movements within the structure of reality and recognized that certain activities were appropriate ways of trying to dispel the mystery of how human beings experience and know truth and order. One of these activities is meditation, which seeks to heighten an individual's participation in and apperception of the *metaxy* structure in which he finds his existence and thereby to generate further articulations of order against the disorder of the age. Voegelin thought that recognizing the role of meditation in the dialogues provided the conditions under which the dialogues make sense. He also thought understanding the dialogues required

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[21] Morrissey, "Voegelin, Religious Experience, and Immortality," 19.

the interpreter to undertake these activities on his own, which would enable the interpreter to penetrate to the author's experiences with ontological order.

Voegelin argued that meditation is the proper mode of investigating reality because man participates in the reality that he seeks to understand; reality is the foundation in which experience occurs. Human beings know reality as an object when they employ intentional or reflective consciousness, but that understanding is partial and must be supplemented by luminous consciousness—the structure of consciousness which apperceives reality in its fullness experientially and immediately (see chapter two). In meditation, consciousness opens itself to the mystery of reality that it actively seeks to understand, allows itself to be informed by the divine ground's penetration into human consciousness, and thereby approximates health, salvation, and orderliness. Plato's openness to meditation put him at odds with sophistic Athens because meditation is an integral process concerned with apperception of the oneness of reality (and its symbolizations). It is thus opposed to deformations of consciousness and language, like those of the sophists, which try to understand reality as if it were an object by suspending existential consciousness and "fragmenting [reality's] parts into pseudoindependent topics of discussion."[22] Meditation, as Eugene Webb puts it, "is a process of looking beyond all particular forms of reality, all finite objects of contemplation and enjoyment, toward absolute perfection of being."[23] Platonic philosophy is, therefore, the meditative quest for divine being rather than the effort to make thought accord with sensory perceptions and logical reasoning.

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[22] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 349.

[23] Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 26-27.

Plato's dialogues are all meditative inasmuch as they convey Plato's experiences of responding to the divine drawing that is present in human consciousness. Their symbolizations are imaginative efforts to articulate Plato's experience of a "vision" granted by the divine ground and thereby to further the quest for insights. For Voegelin's Plato, *noesis* (man's attraction to and pursuit of the ground) and vision (the ground's revelation to man) are not easily distinguished.[24] It is nearly impossible to pinpoint where one begins and the other ends, even when one becomes aware that both (along with the pull of disorder) play a role in the philosophic experience. This theme is central to all of Voegelin's writings about Platonic philosophy, but is especially important in Voegelin's later works, which focus more explicitly on Plato's mystical ascent toward the divine than on his critique of politics. For example, Voegelin emphasized that Plato's meditative endeavor enabled him to realize and beautifully articulate the insight that the human desire to know

> is surrounded by the divine mystery of the reality in which it occurs. The mystery is the horizon that draws us to advance toward it but withdraws as we advance; it can give direction to the quest of truth but it cannot be reached; and the beyond of the horizon can fascinate as the "extreme" of truth but it cannot be possessed as truth face to face within this life.[25]

Meditation informs human consciousness by raising this insight to critical consciousness while preserving the immediacy of the divine-human encounter. By becoming aware of the tensions inherent in human consciousness's apperception of reality and in reality itself and by constantly reflecting on them, the philosopher exercises intellectual and emotional

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[24] For a helpful discussion of vision's relation to noesis and the knowledge constituted by faith, hope, and love, see John J. Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 239-40.

[25] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in CW 12: 326.

restraint. He submits himself more fully to the structure of reality in which he participates rather than controls and thus achieves greater attunement to the divine ground, the source of vision and insight. Webb explains that acknowledgment of ignorance and the recognition that ignorance is essential to the meditative quest are "essential to the meditative quest, because what is looked toward is a fullness that is not only beyond the limits of all present conceptual forms but beyond all possible conceptual limits."[26] On Voegelin's interpretation of Plato, then, Socratic ignorance and other examples of puzzling formulations are not "ironic" in the sense intended by Strauss; rather they are symbols that capture the luminous mystery of human existence in the *metaxy*.

Before closing this section, it will be helpful to note that meditation may seek or emphasize various "objects" and thus have different "types." One type that holds a preeminent place in Voegelin's thought (because of its importance in Platonic thought) is *anamnesis*, which is an exploration of consciousness's "past." I have put quotations around the word "past" because Voegelin had a complex view of the relation between time and eternity, another subject that becomes central in Voegelin's later writings. He thought that through the philosophic experience human consciousness could become aware of the "indelible present" or "flowing presence"—the "temporal flow of experience in which eternity is present."[27] In his book entitled *Anamnesis*, Voegelin argued that "this flow cannot be dissected into past, present, and future of the world's time, for at every point of the flow there is the tension toward the transcending, eternal

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[26] Eugene Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 29.

[27] Voegelin, "Eternal Being in Time," in *Anamnesis*, 133.

being."[28] *Anamnesis* seeks awareness of that very flow and tension because human beings exist in the intersection of being and becoming and all insight is conditioned by it. Put differently, *anamnesis* is the meditative activity in which consciousness seeks to "remember" its eternal or ever-present experience of being aware of itself and reality—an experience which may have been "forgotten" as a result of the forces of disorder and deformations that surround and bear down upon the concrete human consciousness.

Voegelin thought that Plato was supremely concerned with anamnetic exploration of reality, and in his analysis of the various dialogues, Voegelin devoted significant attention to the types of time and eternity that operated therein. For example, Voegelin thought that the puzzling formulations of the *Timaeus*, with its various cosmic and divine forces, were anamnetic exegeses of the time-eternity relationship that Plato experienced.[29] Recognizing that that experience motivated the puzzling formulations (and trying to become aware of one's own experience of the time-eternity intersection) would go far toward making the dialogue more intelligible. Moreover, Voegelin argued that Plato was the first to articulate fully the luminous complexity of this relationship and was the first to recognize that that attribute of the structure of reality called for philosophic investigation to operate through the symbolic form of myth. Myth recognizes the essential ineffability of the time-eternity relationship, refrains from purporting to explain it exhaustively, and advances philosophy by inviting individuals to undertake anamnesis for themselves. Voegelin suggested that all of the dialogues—early

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[28] Ibid.

[29] See Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 175ff, 183ff, 192-204; *In Search of Order*, 91ff. Many scholars think that Voegelin's analysis of Plato's *Timaeus* is crucial to understanding Voegelin's own philosophic endeavor as well as his interpretation of Plato. See, for example, Planinc, "Significance of Plato's *Timaeus*."

and late—were anamnetic, but Plato became critically aware of their anamnetic character only later in the revelatory process that governed his philosophic experience considered as a whole. When Plato became aware of anamnesis's function in illuminating the structures of reality, he understood even his own early formulations more clearly. Voegelin, too, upon discovering Plato's awareness of the process of anamnesis, revisited the earlier dialogues in order to determine how their more compact symbolizations intimated the differentiated insights present in Plato's later work.

In sum, Voegelin determined that *all* of the dialogues aimed at essentially the same thing: expressing and thus furthering the mystical insights into man's psychic participation in the divine ground and existence in the *metaxy*. Voegelin thought that all of Plato's symbols "emerged from the loving quest" for divine being. That is, they all—despite the stage of Plato's journey they convey—have their origins and ends in Plato's psychic participation in the basic structure of existence. The symbolizations of participatory experiences arose in consciousness through the mystical activities in which the tension of existence becomes more intense and the experience of eternal being becomes more luminous. These activities are present in every "stage" of Plato's philosophic quest, although Voegelin seems to have thought that Plato engaged in them most reflectively (or discerned them as modes of noetic participation) only later in his quest, as a result of being more attuned to eternal being.

Plato Was Also a Scientist

Although Voegelin thought Plato was a mystic whose symbolizations were divinely inspired, he credited Plato with important, if not the *most* important, scientific discoveries. Voegelin, like other thinkers, often used the words "philosophy" and

"science" interchangeably. The philosophic activity is mystical at its core and is the basis

for genuine science in the sense of knowledge—*episteme*—and as opposed to opinion.

To that extent, science, too, is a mystical activity. It is motivated by the wondering desire

to know man's place in the world, the psyche's longing for attunement to the divine

ground, and the sense of the oneness of reality. But surveying Voegelin's writings

reveals that sometimes his use of the words suggested accents of meaning that make it

possible to distinguish them. Voegelin often referred to activities that recognize the

distinctive or differentiated aspects of reality. These include exegesis, analysis, and

critical inquiry.

The complex relationship of philosophy and science may be clarified by

examining a similar relation in language. In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin

pointed out that theoretically significant language symbols (the symbols that human

beings use to convey their understanding of reality) are of two kinds:

> the language symbols that are produced as an integral part of the social cosmion
> in the process of its self-illumination and the language symbols of political
> science. Both are related with each other in so far as the second set is developed
> out of the first one through the process that provisionally was called critical
> clarification. In the course of this process some of the symbols that occur in
> reality will be dropped because they cannot be put to any use in the economy of
> science, while new symbols will be developed in theory for the critically adequate
> description of symbols that are a part of reality. . . . *Hence, neither are there two
> sets of terms with different meanings nor is there one set of terms with two distinct
> sets of meanings; there exist rather two sets of symbols with a large area of
> overlapping phonemes. Moreover, the symbols in reality are themselves to a
> considerable extent the result of clarifying processes so that the two sets will also
> approach each other frequently with regard to their meanings and sometimes
> even achieve identity.*[30]

Mirroring the relation between self-interpretive symbols and scientific concepts,

philosophy and science are distinct, yet intimately related. Both are related in the process

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[30] Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 28-29 (my emphasis).

of *nous*, the infrastructure of which Voegelin described as being constituted of a noetic experience and noetic exegesis of the noetic experience. The noetic experience is most closely related to philosophy and the mystical union with the divine ground (and self-interpretive symbols of reality). Noetic exegesis is most closely related to science (and theoretical concepts that explicate symbols), which operates on the experience, but also constitutes the experience. The complexity of this relationship derives, of course, from metaxic existence. Since I have already discussed the mystical-philosophical aspect of Plato's efforts, I now turn to the critical-scientific aspect.

Plato Pioneered an Ontological Understanding of Transcendence

Voegelin thought that Plato made a critical discovery in the philosophy of history—one that drew from the insights of poets, historians, and pre-Socratic philosophers, but surpassed them in symbolic clarity and made scientific analysis a genuine possibility. Although his predecessors were engaged in the same existential quest for the ground of being, Plato was (somewhat miraculously) able to bring to light the structure and orientation of the quest in a way that recognized both the difference between human and divine being as well as the participatory relation between the two. Plato discovered the psyche as the process that quests for its ground that it recognizes as distinct from itself and as the process in which the divine presence manifests itself so that the quest and its insights may occur. In other words, *nous*, which is the faculty that illuminates psyche, must be "both the god beyond man and the divine entity within man," which are held apart by the tension of existence.[31] With the articulation of this insight, Plato proffered an account of the order of being that has a transcending ground (the

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[31] Voegelin, "Immortality," in *CW* 12: 89.

Beyond or *epikeina*) which is nevertheless present in all things as "the source of their reality and ordering form."[32] Before this differentiation, Voegelin argued, there was no consciousness of the specific character of man. Afterward, however, humanity understood itself as "the creature who has consciousness of a [specific human character] which is self-reflective and produces such linguistic symbols and so on."[33]

Voegelin argued that "the decisive event in the establishment of *politike episteme* was the specifically philosophical realization that the levels of being discernible within the world are surmounted by a transcendent source of being and its order." He went on to say that "this insight was itself rooted in the real movements of the human spiritual soul toward divine being experienced as transcendent."[34] What distinguishes Plato's discovery and symbolization of psyche from his predecessors and makes it deserving of the title *scientific* was that his "differentiation of the psyche [expanded] the quest of the ground by the dimension of *critical consciousness*" and thus recognized that the experiential processes of the psyche are the empirical source from which symbols of order derive their validity.[35] Symbolic expressions concerning the order of being—especially those concerning the relationship between human beings and the gods—could be scrutinized in light of the Platonic assumption that knowledge concerning the order of being is "objectively ascertainable," an assumption that is confirmed in the experience of

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[32] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 345.

[33] Voegelin, "The Drama of Humanity," in *The Drama of Humanity and Other Miscellaneous Papers, 1939 – 1985*, ed. William Petropulos and Gilbert Weiss, vol. 33 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 203.

[34] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 13-14.

[35] Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *CW* 12: 271 (my emphasis).

the psyche's movements toward the ground.[36] Plato recognized that human beings are characterized by their desire to know, which means to participate more fully in, the transcendent cause of their being. The desire itself attests to human beings' partial, yet luminous, communion with the transcendent ground and reveals the point of communion as the force of order in human life. A new invisible standard, *viz.* the divine ground of being, therefore became the criterion for scientific truth over and against the compact symbolizations of order (the "old myth" and the pre-scientific insights) and "the multitude of sceptic, hedonist, utilitarian, power oriented, and partisan *doxai*" that were prevalent in fourth-century Athens.[37] Voegelin argued that Plato's discovery of the transcendent ground proved that "a new image of order [could] be formed that would not also bear the marks of a nonbinding, subjective opinion (*doxa*)"; with that discovery the science of politics came to be.[38]

Plato's scientific analysis aimed at uncovering "knowledge of the order of being, of the levels of the hierarchy of being and their interrelationships, of the essential structure of the realms of being, and especially of human nature and its place in the totality of being."[39] This knowledge would emerge, Voegelin argued, through a negation of a negation of the truth. Deformations of adequate symbolizations of the truth are experienced as misrepresenting the experience of reality. This, then, motivates an individual who is existentially open to try to correct or counter the deformed view with a better articulation of the structure of experiences of reality. Positive propositions about

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[36] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 13.

[37] Ibid., 11.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 13.

reality, such as those Plato articulated with his differentiated symbols of order, emerge in opposition to concrete instances of human foolishness, as when the sophists proposed that (1) nothing exists, (2) if it exists, it is unknowable, and (3) if it is knowable, it is incommunicable.[40] In other words, truth emerges through the *via negativa*. True propositions, moreover, do not constitute "a 'proof' in the sense of a logical demonstration, of an *apodeixis*, but only in the sense of an *epideixis*, of a pointing to an area of reality which the constructor of the negative propositions has chosen to overlook, or to ignore, or to refuse to perceive."[41] Voegelin credited Plato with these epistemological insights as well, saying, "That the negative propositions are not a philosopher's statement concerning a structure in reality, but express a deformation of the 'heart,' is the insight gained by Plato."[42]

Plato Pioneered a Conception of Philosophy and Theology

Plato's insights called for a major revision of Hellenic thought concerning epistemology and ontology. This revision countered the sophists who either doubted or denied the reality of the gods (attitudes which were conveyed in the popular expression that "Man is the Measure") and who therefore thought that knowing reality consisted in knowing information about an object and accruing sets of technical skills.[43] The Platonic revision also, though in a more sympathetic way, countered the symbolisms of the poets,

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[40] See Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 273ff; "Conversations with Eric Voegelin at the Thomas More Institute for Adult Education in Montreal," in *CW* 33: 318; "Quod Deus Dicitur," in *CW* 12: 386ff.

[41] Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur," in *CW* 12: 388.

[42] Ibid.

[43] See Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 283-85 and 294ff, especially at 298, where Voegelin argued that Plato understood that expression to mean that "things are to every man as what they appear to him, and no truth about things can be reached independent of their relation with the perceiving subject."

historians, and pre-Socratic philosophers' whose symbols had become inadequate to convey the new insights into the structure of being.[44] Voegelin argued that this revision consisted of the differentiation of philosophy as an existential quest for a "true theology," a theology upon which depended 'man's existence in truth or falsehood."[45] In Voegelin's view, then, Platonic philosophy had everything to do with the divine ground, which penetrates into human consciousness and prompts consciousness to respond to its appeal. Plato's scientific understanding of philosophy led to the insights (1) that philosophy is the existential quest for God, and (2) that the insights arising from the philosophic quest pertain to divine being. God rather than man is the measure of knowledge and order.

Voegelin thought that Plato was the first thinker to use the term "philosophy" in order to signify the tension of existence that separates man and the divine, but which invites man to quest for and generates insights into the divine. Of course for Voegelin, the term "philosophy" was much more than a name for a type of intellectual activity. Rather, it was a symbol that intended to evoke the experience of the tension of existence and that encompassed the entire human activity of searching for the divine ground, the "infrastructure" of which Plato conveyed throughout the various dialogues. Voegelin described that infrastructure in his essay "Reason: The Classic Experience," paying special attention to how the Platonic vocabulary symbolizes the psyche's concrete experiences of the movements and countermovements of attraction which constitute the divine-human encounter. Some of these symbols include include: wondering (*thaumazein*), seeking and searching (*zetein*), search (*zetesis*), and questioning (*aporein*,

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[44] See Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12:353ff for a discussion of Plato's efforts to counter both "sophistic" and "Eleatic" contractions of the *metaxy*.

[45] Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur," in *CW* 12: 389.

diaporein).[46] "The philosopher," Voegelin argued, "feels himself moved (*kinein*) by some unknown force to ask the questions; he feels himself drawn (*helkein*) into the search."[47]

Philosophy in the Platonic sense is something both active and suffered, and it illuminates the union and difference between human and divine being. The symbol "philosophy" conveys the experience of man's *love* for the transcendent force of order and his willingness to exhibit in his own life the attraction to the ground that inheres in the structure of reality as a whole. Crucial to the Platonic formulation is the emphasis on the psyche's outreaching movement that is indicated by the word *philia*. "In the experiences of love for the world-transcendent origin of being, in *philia* toward the *sophon* (the wise), in *eros* toward the *agathon* (the good) and the *kalon* (the beautiful), man becomes the philosopher."[48] As I noted earlier, Voegelin suggested that in Plato's view

> 'actual knowledge' is reserved to God; finite man can only be the 'lover of knowledge,' not himself the one who knows. In the meaning of the passgage, the lover of the knowledge that belongs only to the knowing God, the *philosophos*, becomes the *theophilos*, the lover of God.[49]

These experiences go beyond thought to touch on man's deep passions, but it is through critical analyses of such experiences that man discovers exactly who he is and what it is that consciousness intends.

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[46] Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience" in *CW* 12: 269. The following statements paraphrase Voegelin's account in this essay.

[47] Ibid., 270.

[48] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 14.

[49] Ibid., 31. Voegelin referenced *Phaedrus* 278d.

Voegelin identified several implications flowing from Plato's discovery of philosophy as the existential quest for the divine ground. I have touched on some of these points in earlier chapters, but it will be worthwhile to mention them briefly once again because they highlight the scientific aspect of Plato's endeavor. First, Plato discovered that insights into order occur simultaneously with the perception of disorder. Scientific inquiry and the articulation of scientific insights require that the thinker pay sufficient attention to both the orderly and disorderly condition of phenomena. In his own work, Voegelin argued, Plato was careful to use pairs of symbols—one orderly, one disorderly—to investigate the contours of reality. For example, the symbol of the sophist, or the "philodoxer", is contrasted with the symbol of the philosopher, and the symbol of justice is contrasted with the symbol of injustice. Neither one nor the other can be fully apprehended in isolation. Operating through these pairs of symbols not only brings phenomena to analytical clarity, but also invites readers to engage in the scientific quest for themselves. This is because the tension between the two symbols evokes the readers' experience of the existential tension of life within the *metaxy*. To arrive at a true theology, therefore, one would have to consider the experiences with divine being and the effects of consciousness' obscuring or denying those experiences.

This brings us to a second important discovery: the connection between the diagnostic and therapeutic functions of philosophy.[50] The love for divine being that constitutes philosophy brings order to the human intellect, enabling human beings to discern what things are and to evaluate them according to their coherence with the structure of reality. "Diagnosing disorder," or identifying the mode of existence of some

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[50] See Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, xiv.

entity (*viz.*, in truth or untruth), achieves more than accurate classification. Rather, the diagnosis is the first step in the process of instantiating right order because *nous* is activated by genuine insights. Voegelin thought that the various typologies that occur throughout the Platonic corpus aimed at revealing disorder so that order could be restored to personal, social, and political life. And in order to facilitate true speech about divine reality, the false and unseemly speech would have to be illuminated as such.

A third implication is that the quest for the ground eventuates in important conceptual formulations. Although Voegelin consistently criticized modern "theorists" for focusing their investigations on ideas rather than the reality that such ideas intend to express, he did not think that meditative experiences alone were sufficient for an adequate understanding of reality. Plato's mystical ascent toward the divine did not culminate in a denial of the need for critical reflection or in a retreat from language to "interior silence."[51] Rather, experiences have to be reflected to consciousness through the medium of language in order to arrive at general propositions about reality. These propositions may be detached from their motivating experiences without losing their ability to describe reality accurately; they are scientifically valid. Voegelin credited Plato with arriving at a number of these important propositions which have restorative force and are still valid today. According to Voegelin, any system of thought that implies to the contrary could itself be falsified.

Voegelin's analysis of the Platonic corpus emphasizes a particular class of these scientific propositions—propositions relating to god or the gods, or theology. One of

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[51] See Webb, *Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, 44. Webb makes this observation of Voegelin, but it applies equally well to Plato, from whom Voegelin took his bearings. For an account of Voegelin's and Plato's theology that emphasizes the meditative aspect (while giving due attention to critical reflection), see Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence*, especially the "Introduction."

Plato's most important contributions to humanity's self-understanding was his insight that sophistic *doxai* were, at their core, an incorrect or negative type of theology. This, in turn, led to his efforts to negate the negation of truth by articulating a true theology. Plato identified sophistic *doxai* of the type mentioned above (regarding the existence of nothing and so on) with an existential denial of divine reality, to which he forcefully responded in the *Republic* and *Laws* with a "positive triad: The gods do exist; they do care about man; you cannot make them accomplices in your crimes by pacifying them with offerings out of your profits."[52]

Plato revealed that man has a necessary relation with the divine, which he recognizes as such in his depths, and which, as the *ground* of reality, does not operate in the same mode as material reality. Plato's positive theology was also a revision of the traditional views about the gods, which did not exhibit the sophists' egophanic revolt against divine reality, but understood the gods through compact symbols that had become unseemly. Plato realized that only a certain kind of speech was properly scientific, or appropriate to the exegesis of divine being: allegory and conceptual symbolizations, which constitute the substance of philosophic myth. For conveying human experiences, however, symbols from the old myth would still suffice. Plato's differentiated symbols for divine reality include *nous* and *epikeina*, both of which recognize that man and god are related in the tension of existence. Voegelin attributed the term "theology" to Plato

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[52] Voegelin, "Conversations with Voegelin," in *CW* 33: 318.

and argued that Plato understood his philosophy to be theology. [53] He understood himself as a theologian.[54]

Plato's Ontological Understanding Lead Him to Propositions about Political Order

Plato's understanding of the order of being as an order of love led him to formulate the anthropological principle and the measurement principle.[55] From these two propositions, which Voegelin thought were of epochal significance, flow all of Plato's specific conclusions regarding the nature of political order and disorder. The measurement principle states that "the truth of man and the truth of God are inseparably one. Man will be in the truth of his existence when he has opened his psyche to the truth of God; and the truth of God will become manifest in history when it has formed the psyche of man into receptivity for the unseen measure."[56] The standard for evaluating the goodness or justice of society is the man whose soul is ordered by the transcendent ground. Doctrines such as consensus or power-politics cannot legitimate any political order (or justify any conception of the gods) because they are decidedly immanent in nature. Plato's soul became the standard for evaluating Athens because he was attuned to the invisible harmony of the divine measure.

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[53] See Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur," in *CW* 12: 389; "Conversations with Voegelin," in *CW* 33: 298, 318. Voegelin also thought Plato probably coined the term "transcendence." See "The Drama of Humanity," in *CW* 33: 202.

[54] Voegelin, "Conversations with Voegelin," in *CW* 33: 248.

[55] On the order of being as an order of love, see Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 332ff.

[56] Voegelin , *New Science of Politics*, 69.

The anthropological principle links political order not only with the order of the cosmos but also with the order of individual souls.[57] Voegelin went on to distinguish two aspects of this principle: "under the first aspect it is a general principle for the interpretation of society; under a second aspect it is an instrument of social critique."[58] Political orders reflect the way that their members answer the question regarding the meaning and purpose of existence. If the majority of those members has a mistaken view of the gods or are closed to divine reality altogether, the society will be disordered, and it will be up to an individual like Plato to make the disorder known and to attempt to restore social order.

These two principles rest on the assumption that psyche pervades the entire structure of human existence. The cosmos as a whole is receptive to the divine ordering force, which puts the "substance" into psyche. This substance—or the attunement to the divine ground—unites all the partners of the community of being (god and man, world and society) with each other so that what happens to one partner affects all the others. For Voegelin's Plato "existence in truth" or attunement to the ground was a task for all participants. As more participants experienced attunement, reality as a whole would become more attuned, thereby heightening the attunement of individual participants. This relationship is at the foundation of Voegelin's conclusions regarding the philosopher's moral and political obligations, which I discuss below. It is also at the foundation of Plato's thought concerning the relationship of rulers and dominant groups to the individual members of society and the relationship between *nomos* and *physis*.

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[57] Ibid., 61.

[58] Ibid.

Plato thought that political leaders reflect the mode of existence of a society at large, which reflects the modes of existence of a majority of society's members. Society is not only determined by individuals' existences, it also plays a role in determining those existences and therefore is obliged (by the transcendent order) to facilitate, or at least not to inhibit, individuals' attunement to the divine ground. In other words, society plays an important role in shaping its members' understanding of the meaning and purpose of human existence, but it cannot fulfill this task if it is composed and guided by individuals or groups who exhibit disorder in their soul. Plato determined that the political turmoil of fourth-century Athens was a spiritual disorder consisting of an inappropriate existential attitude toward the gods and which caused severe disruptions in concrete, observable events. One of the most powerful disruptions was Athens' trial and execution of Socrates, which proved that Athens was not a legitimate authority. It had lost its claim to represent justice and order and would have to depend on an injection of restorative order from an external source—the philosopher who understood the proper function of political order to be caring for the spiritual health of the souls of its members.

One of the main culprits in the deformed existence of the Athenian people was the sophistic distinction between *physis* and *nomos*. In *The World of the Polis*, Voegelin describes how the sophists appropriated these symbols from the pre-Socratic philosophers, but without regard to their experiential bases, in order to get an advantage over others in speech and power. For Voegelin's Plato, the opposition between "nature" and "convention" was not a necessary one. Society could reflect the divine paradigm of order, which is the genuine standard of "nature." And society could arrive at such a reflection through conventions or traditions, so long as they aimed at and encouraged

man's quest for understanding. Voegelin described the positive effects of the epic poets

and tragedians, whose efforts were compact attempts to understand justice and order.

Their investigations shaped individuals' and the public's mind about such things in a way

that facilitated attunement to the ground (even if the ground had not yet been articulated

in a differentiated way), proving that *nomos* and *physis* could be in harmony. Voegelin

emphasized Plato's philosophical debt to the old myth and argued that it explains the

ambivalence toward the old myth in the dialogues. Nevertheless, harmony between

nomos and *physis* is tenuous, and once the old myth had been damaged by sophistic and

philosophic influence, it would be undone.

Plato discovered that the divine paradigm of order must permeate the *nomos* in

order to reinstate a harmonious relation between socio-political tradition and the nature

befitting individuals and societies. This permeation depends upon introducing into the

city the proper education (*paideia*)—one which facilitates proper thought and attitudes

about the God by awakening individuals to the full range of human experience. Plato's

philosophy of education depends on a conversion (*periagogé*) toward the ultimate source

of order (the *Agathon*). Platonic education is Platonic theology. Both are existential

endeavors that have a necessary relation to political order and operate through the "idea-

word." This symbol comes from the *Phaedrus* (267a) and indicates "the vehicle of

communication by means of which the erotic souls attune one another to the harmony of

the cosmos; and it is the fragile vessel in which the god becomes incarnate in

community."[59] Platonic education is never compulsive. Mimicking the delicate drawing

of the divine pole of the *metaxy*, the philosophic education operates through persuasion

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[59] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 19.

(*peitho*), inviting others (individually and collectively) to abandon disorder and to experience the blessing of attunement with the ground.

Of course, the philosopher's education is often a rejection of the dominant way of thinking about (or failing to consider) the question about the meaning and purpose of existence. So while *nomos* and *physis* are not necessarily opposed, neither are they necessarily in harmony. Order is always a genuine possibility, but, as Plato realized more acutely over the course of his philosophic quest, the "human vessel" is quite often too fragile or too recalcitrant to accept the divine paradigm of order. People who are living in a disordered spiritual state may be ignorant of the tension of existence or they may recognize it and stubbornly reject it. The Platonic dialogues demonstrate how the latter group recognizes the revolutionary nature of the philosopher's education—that it is "directed at the untruth of existence in particular men" and touches on "every level of human existence."[60] Those who knowingly rebel against the tension of existence generally convince dull or ignorant people to do the same because their dream-version of reality is often more appealing than the strenuousness of life implied by the tension of existence. The philosopher (and the prophet, for that matter) finds himself opposed to his society, especially the powerful forces therein. Voegelin observed that for Plato, the doleful condition of humanity and its greatest source of error was "the pride of human wisdom" that rebels against "obedience to the god."[61]

Although the main culprit of disordered personal and political existence is the conscious revolt against the tension of existence, Plato became aware that the more

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[60] Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, 15.

[61] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 7.

benign forces of apathy, ignorance, and timidity also made a significant contribution to the pervasiveness of disorder in human existence. Coming to terms with this intractable feature of political reality, Plato discovered that the philosopher's education will not be effective on a grand scale. The conversion to the Good is too strenuous for many people and the rigor of philosophic inquiry can disenchant people who have received their theological guidance from the old myth. Plato therefore found it to be a permanent feature of political existence that the philosopher's education would have to be attenuated as to its content and institutionalized in the form of laws and institutions. Also, the philosopher would have to incorporate the symbols of the old myth into his new philosophic myth—which Plato does throughout his corpus. It must be emphasized that, in Voegelin's view, the Platonic concession did not signify Plato's acceptance of the necessary opposition between *nomos* and *physis* or his abandonment of his insight into humanity's common characteristic of *nous*. Rather, it meant that as he became more attuned to the divine reality, his attunement to his compatriots diminished. He could not restore political order through existential communion. Instead he had to inject the divine substance into pragmatic structures that would, he hoped, stave off the forces of disorder for as long as the god would allow.

Some Specific Attributes of the Philosophic Soul

By now, it should be clear that Platonic philosophy is not only an adequate way of thinking about reality, but also is a way of acting in and as reality. Platonic philosophy is emphatically relational and theological, aiming at achieving a specific relation with the divine ground, which then impacts one's relations with other partners in the community of being. Voegelin's Plato thought that the moral imperative of the philosophical life was

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to live "lovingly" and with an orientation "toward death." Voegelin explained this "great theme" of Plato's work thus:

> Death and Love are intimately related as orienting forces in the soul of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* philosophy is the practice of dying; in the *Symposion* and *Phaedrus* it is the eroticism of the soul for the Idea which creates the procreative community among men. Eros dominates his life because it is a life towards death; and his Eros is powerful because existence in the expectation of catharsis through death gives the proper distance to the incidents of earthly life.[62]

Voegelin's Plato thought that sensitivity to the divine ground's penetration into human consciousness illuminated the fact that human beings will have to make an account of their temporal actions to the God after death. Of course, Voegelin understood this formulation symbolically and refrained from speculating about the nature of such a process. Nevertheless, he argued that all human beings experience their accountability to the God in the experience of the tension of existence. They also experience that the God is good and that acting in a manner pleasing to the god will bring order and salvation to existence. Loving the divine order, human beings will be courageous enough judge all of their actions, attitudes, thought, etc. from the divine perspective—the perspective of eternity. At their core, Voegelin argued, the Platonic myths aimed at illuminating the forces of death and love in the human psyche.

For Plato, the moral life could not be achieved merely by conforming one action's to law or social mores because they often fell short of the divine measure. The moral life depended, rather, on having a pure soul. Examining the dialogues revealed a host of virtues that characterize the pure soul. These include *eros*, *thanatos*, *dike*, *philia*, *phronesis*, and *peitho*, among others. According with *metaxy* existence, each of these virtues has an active and a passive aspect: the individual actively desires their objects,

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[62] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 14.

thus becoming receptive to the penetration of the divine formative presence into the individual's soul. The precise nature of these virtues will become clearer in the treatments of the individual dialogues. For now, suffice it to say that *eros* is the active desire for the good, *thanatos* is the desire to have all evil removed from one's soul, *dike* desires order in the soul, *philia* and *phronesis* are the quest for existential harmony, and *peitho* is the desire for existential communication (communication that facilitates attunement). In order to perfect these virtues, and approach purity of soul, the philosopher must engage in the meditative processes described above, have the courage to refute instances of injustice and to promote justice, never harm others, and strive to help others. Also, the philosopher must be humble and have a deep understanding of what he does not and cannot know about the divine ground. He must constantly be aware that there will always be a "blind spot at the center of all human knowledge."[63] For the philosopher, like all men, "the role of existence must be played in uncertainty of its meaning . . . Both the play and the role are unknown. But even worse, the actor does not know with certainty who he is himself."[64]

Voegelin's Plato recognized man's essential ignorance but without despairing about human knowledge and attunement to the divine ground. The complicated and mysterious situation of man's existence motivated Plato to achieve as great an understanding as humanly possible through concerted and constant efforts at symbolizing his experiences of existing in the in-between and drawing closer to the divine ground that was drawing him. The Platonic corpus symbolizes Plato's quest for existential salvation

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[63] Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, 2.

[64] Ibid.

and his efforts to help others achieve the same. He recognized that no single symbolization could exhaust the luminous mystery of human existence, so he used a variety of images and types of language to convey the essential ineffable, but restorative, experiences of transcendent order. This was his attempt to help his city recover and be well-ordered. Little did he know, Voegelin suggested, that his symbols would transform the course of Western history by initiating a trajectory of thinking about the meaning of existence that could be deformed but never undone.

Concluding Remarks

On Voegelin's reading, Plato's life was characterized by his desire to understand the basic structure of human existence. He sought this understanding for its own sake, recognizing through his quasi-mystical experience that man's highest purpose and calling is to draw near to the divine ground that illuminates human *nous*. Plato also sought to understand the basic structure of human existence because he sensed that if an attempt to restore order to politics was to be effective, it would have to be grounded in an ontological understanding of transcendence. These features of Plato's life led Voegelin to conceive of Plato as *the* exemplar of the philosophic soul.

Strauss also conceived of Plato as a (if not *the*) preeminent model of the philosophic life, but for reasons different from Voegelin's. Both Strauss and Voegelin agreed that Platonic philosophy was a way of life and non-dogmatic and that it sought an adequate cosmology, or understanding of "the whole." But what distinguishes Strauss's Plato from Voegelin's was that Strauss conceived of cosmology more narrowly than Voegelin. For Voegelin, the term "cosmos" is an evolving symbol that intends to imply the entire range of experience that is luminous in human consciousness. When he spoke

of Plato as a cosmologist, Voegelin meant that the ancient author sought to understand the *logos* of all sectors of reality that man is aware of, including the ineffable areas of reality that man knows only through the deep, participatory movements of the psyche toward its ground. Strauss, by contrast understood cosmology as the pursuit of nature, or, in the words of Pangle, as the quest for "demonstrative knowledge that starts from truly self-evident premises that must be granted by all thinking men (e.g., the existence of oneself as thinking and willing, the duty to do what is truly right, the visible motions, causality)."[65] For Strauss, the philosopher *qua* philosopher doubts that which he cannot prove through "universalizable logic and dialectic, inspired to some crucial degree by the model of mathematical knowledge."[66] Therefore, the philosopher's cosmos and his noetic pursuit are limited to the phenomena that can be perceived by the senses and analyzed through consistent speech.[67]

Strauss's understanding of Plato as a cosmologist led him an entirely different view of the relationship between philosophy and theology than that held by Voegelin. Strauss's formulation of the unmediable opposition between reason/philosophy and revelation/faith is well known and need not be elaborated here. Suffice it to say that the subject that theology aims to illuminate—that is, the divine reality—is something that Strauss's Plato did not experience in a way that met the criteria of philosophic inquiry. Therefore, when Strauss's Plato has one of his philosophic interlocutors treat the subject of theology, we must understand that treatment from the perspective of *political*

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[65] Thomas L. Pangle, "Platonic Political Science," 331.

[66] Ibid., 334.

[67] See Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," reprinted in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 217-33 at 219, where Strauss translates *noēsis* as "awareness," and states that philosophic awareness "is never divorced from sense perception and reasoning based on sense perception."

philosophy rather than from the perspective of philosophy in the strict sense.[68] In other words, the philosopher's concern for theology, which he sees as grounded in indemonstrable accounts and beliefs, derives primarily from his practical consideration of the best way to portray philosophy to the many. This is in stark contrast to Voegelin's Plato, whose most important goal was discover true propositions about and seemly symbols for the divine reality that was at the core of his philosophic experience.

Another distinction between Strauss's Plato and Voegelin's Plato emerges in consideration of the Socratic maxim that virtue is knowledge. For Strauss's Plato, the "knowledge" that is virtue consists in a correct theory of the cosmos and its parts; the philosopher's excellence is not primarily moral, but intellectual.[69] The upshot is that justice is not the preeminent virtue for Strauss's Plato, but is rather a practical requirement stemming from his need to protect the city from philosophy and vice-versa. Of course, the city and philosophy find themselves at odds with each other because the philosopher's excellence (i.e. his knowledge) reveals its superiority to as well as the irrationality of the political life, which does recognize justice as the preeminent virtue.[70] This situation led Strauss to suggest that Plato conceived of two distinct forms of justice, the higher philosophic justice and the lower political justice.[71] Voegelin's Plato would

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[68] The way I have formulated this sentence illuminates another difference between Voegelin and Strauss. Voegelin did not hesitate to equate Socrates or the Athenian Stranger with Plato, so he often spoke of Plato as being in quest of a correct theology. For Strauss, it was important to distinguish Plato from his interlocutors, so even to say that Plato treats theology from the perspective of political philosophy is risky; the safer course would be to say that Plato's interlocutors do that.

[69] See Leo Strauss to Eric Voegelin, 25 February 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 78, where Strauss argues that "The classics demonstrated that truly human life is dedicated to science, knowledge, and the search for it."

[70] See Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 148.

[71] Strauss's development of this point occurs in *The City and Man*, which I discuss in chapter 5.

admit no such distinction: for him justice is one thing for all persons, the proper order of the soul which is attunement to the divine ground. Since Voegelin's Plato conceived of knowledge as the result of the interaction between human *nous* and divine *Nous* (and therefore having both intellectual and moral aspects), he could simultaneously assert that justice is virtue and that virtue is knowledge without contradiction.[72] Quite the contrary, in fact: taken together the two formulations would illuminate the noetic activity better than either one in isolation from the other.

Given the foregoing considerations, the main difference between Strauss's Plato and Voegelin's Plato seems to be an issue of epistemic posturing. For Strauss, Plato is a skeptic. His philosophic journey was motivated by a fundamental experience of doubt, which, as Pangle clarifies, is

> not the "feeling" or "sentiment" of doubt, not guilty doubt ("doubting Thomas"), but the erotic doubt of the scientist or philosopher such as that young Socrates who knew something about the criteria of validity or clarity, and whose soul was electrified by the recognition or admission of his overwhelming *certainty* that he did *not* know the answer to certain specific moral and human questions on which his whole life depended.[73]

Philosophy begins in doubt and moves toward certain knowledge, but the endeavor reveals that certain questions or problems simply cannot be clarified. In that instance, the philosopher finds he must make a choice between two alternatives. That experience reveals the contradictory character of reality as it presents itself to human reason and motivates the philosopher's quest for a coherent and universalizable account of the whole.

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[72] Voegelin discussed the Socratic formulation that "virtue is knowledge" in the German version of *Anamnesis*. See, "John Stuart Mill: Freedom of Discussion and Readiness for Discussion," in *Anamnesis*, in *CW* 6: 309.

[73] Pangle, "Platonic Political Science," 334-35. My comments here follow Pangle.

Voegelin's Plato is better characterized as knowing questioner rather than a skeptic. For Voegelin, the philosophic quest begins in response to deep, ineffable experiences of order and disorder, that is, of attraction to the force of the divine ground and aversion to its opposite. The divine ground penetrates into the depths of human consciousness, authoritatively or compellingly revealing reality's unity and intelligibility and illuminating *the* direction that the philosophic quest must take. For Voegelin's Plato, then, it is better to speak of transcending mysteries rather than permanent problems. The genuine philosopher never finds himself at a true impasse with regard to knowledge, though he might, for a time, suffer diminished acuteness of his perception of the divine drawing that gives direction to his quest. Reality, as Voegelin's Plato sees it, will never be *fully* intelligible to man, but there is always the discernible possibility (which for Voegelin implies a duty to try to realize it) that reality will be *further* intelligible. This possibility is the core of the philosopher's knowing questioning: he knows—he has a definite certainty—that he does not and cannot know all, but he also knows—with the same degree of certainty—this insight is genuine knowledge and that the inexhaustible potential for further insight is a basic feature of human existence. As we will see in the following chapters, Strauss's and Voegelin's conclusions about the dialogues bring into sharp relief their different understandings of Plato and the substance of Platonic philosophy.

CHAPTER FIVE

Voegelin on Plato's *Gorgias*

Now that I have discussed Voegelin's approach to the Platonic dialogues and his

understanding of who Plato was and what he was doing, I can turn to Voegelin's

treatment of individual dialogues. Doing so will help to demonstrate the theses from

chapters three and four as well as show how Voegelin's philosophical and hermeneutical

commitments yield fascinating interpretations of the dialogues. In the introduction to the

Collected Works edition of *Plato and Aristotle*, the editor suggests that Voegelin's

chapter on Plato's *Gorgias* is "arguably the greatest chapter of this great work."[1]

Voegelin's treatment of the dialogue that, as one scholar notes, "has always been

regarded as one of Plato's greatest works" and "has been popular in every age in which

Plato has been read, including his own," is an appropriate point from which to begin to

uncover how Voegelin interpreted Plato's philosophical activity.[2]

I have suggested that Voegelin takes his bearings from the Platonic texts but also

from his philosophy of consciousness. Voegelin's interpretation of the dialogues

therefore differs significantly from other prominent thinkers' interpretations. Such

diversity is a source of richness that helps inquisitive readers to understand Voegelin and

other important interpreters better. Moreover, it provokes further questioning into the

meaning of the dialogues themselves and thereby facilitates a more robust understanding

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[1] Dante Germino, introduction to *Order and History, Volume 3: Plato and Aristotle*, by Eric Voegelin, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 5.

[2] Devin Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's* Gorgias (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

of the great ancient thinker. Working under these assumptions, I have chosen to begin

the chapter on Voegelin's interpretation of Plato's *Gorgias* by discussing Strauss's

interpretation of the same dialogue. For brevity and because Strauss never published his

analysis of the dialogue, my treatment will be essentially a sketch compiled from

Strauss's lectures on the dialogue and his prominent students' reflections about what

Strauss might have written. Although such a sketch must necessarily be incomplete, it

will serve the purpose of highlighting the uniqueness of Voegelin's conclusions—

conclusions arrived at by methods which are at times very similar to Strauss's own.

Also, the methodological differences between Voegelin and Strauss will emerge in

sharper relief.

Both my sketch of Strauss's interpretation and my longer analysis of Voegelin's

interpretation will develop around four key topics: 1) what each thinker brings to his

respective interpretation of the dialogue, 2) how the theme of war is developed and what

it means, 3) the intended audience and substance of Socrates' efforts to communicate

truth, and 4) the outcome or effect of the dialogue, in other words, its key teaching.

Before beginning this investigation, it will be helpful to review the plot, characters, and

themes of the *Gorgias*.

The Drama of the Gorgias

Plato's *Gorgias* takes its name from the famous rhetorician with whom Socrates

holds his first lengthy conversation in this performed dialogue. At the outset of the

dialogue Socrates and his friend Chaerephon arrive at the home of the Athenian politician

Callicles in order to converse with Gorgias, who is staying there. Callicles informs them

that Gorgias has finished making his speeches, but suggests that they might yet hear a

speech and perhaps have a conversation with Gorgias. Socrates and Chaerephon initiate a conversation with Gorgias which is joined abruptly by Polus, Gorgias' younger student. The dialogue is typically divided into three main sections, characterized by Socrates' primary interlocutors.[3]

The section with Gorgias is first, in which Socrates raises questions concerning the nature of rhetoric and its relation to teaching justice. Specifically, Gorgias is confronted with the question whether and how the rhetor should make sure that his pupils use rhetoric justly. Gorgias commits himself to contradictory positions, thus undermining his reputation as a rhetor and demonstrating the problematic relationship between rhetoric and the unspecified concept of justice. Next, Socrates speaks with the feisty Polus about what the power of rhetoric is and whether people actually wish to do justice or injustice. Polus believes that everyone wishes to have the tyrant's power, despite one's public statements to the contrary. Nevertheless, he cannot refute the Socratic speeches that prove that the tyrant is powerless to secure his own best interest. At the end of their conversation Polus is silenced, but not convinced, by Socrates' arguments that the best use of rhetoric is to accuse oneself and one's kin when one has committed an injustice and to undergo the just punishment in order to restore equilibrium to one's soul.

Finally, in the most heated section, Socrates and Callicles argue about the essence of justice according to nature and convention, about whether pleasure consists of indulging or moderating desire, and about the attributes of the good statesman. Callicles initiates the "battle" with Socrates by questioning the sincerity of Socrates' arguments

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[3] One obvious exception is Leo Strauss and another scholar who has studied Strauss's *Gorgias* lectures, Devin Stauffer. See Stauffer, *The Unity of Plato's* Gorgias.

concerning rhetoric and punishment and by arguing that the Socratic formulation contravenes public order and the nature of justice. Socrates, Callicles claims, is placating the masses of powerless people with his arguments for virtue. In the face of Callicles' stubborn refusal to be persuaded by Socrates' arguments for justice and virtue, Socrates asserts that, since he alone is concerned for the health of souls, only he possesses the political art and true title to govern Athens. Socrates concludes the dialogue with a myth that describes how men's souls will be judged by the Sons of Zeus in the afterlife. Many more important themes are discussed in these sections, but even this bare sketch will serve to prepare the way for the difficult questions of interpretation which shall be my primary concern.

<center>*Backdrop: Strauss on the* Gorgias</center>

This treatment of Strauss's analysis of the *Gorgias* draws primarily on his "conversations" about the dialogue—transcripts from two lecture courses delivered at the University of Chicago—and not his writings because Strauss did not publish on the dialogue. These fascinating lectures provide key insights into Strauss's thought and have prompted Strauss's student Catherine Zuckert to suggest what Strauss might have written about the *Gorgias* in her book, *Postmodern Platos*.[4] Among other things, Zuckert argues that Strauss would "probably have stressed the explicit opposition Kallikles draws in the third part of the dialogue between politics and philosophy."[5] For Strauss, this theme drives the particular subject matter of the dialogue, which is war, and its development throughout the dramatic presentation. Strauss's determinations about the parties engaged

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[4] Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 179-80.

[5] Ibid.

in that war and its nature then inform Strauss's conclusions regarding Plato's intended audience and the substance of what Socrates (and/or Plato) desired to communicate. I argue that Strauss's reading leads to some specific conclusions about the philosopher, the city, and nature of rhetoric.

What Strauss Brings to His Interpretation of the Dialogue

For Strauss, a crucial part of understanding any Platonic dialogue was to determine how the conversations and speeches "abstract from" important subjects and themes and, therefore, provide an incomplete picture of the phenomenon in question. What is *not* said about the phenomenon—whether it is a feature of political life, a certain quality of an object, or a characteristic of human desire, for example—is at least as important, if not more so, for understanding the nature of that phenomenon as what is stated explicitly about it. Strauss thought Plato or his Socrates left certain important things unsaid for a variety of reasons including: pedagogical concerns, his assessment of the capacities of the interlocutor or other listeners, or *the political risk to himself of stating certain truths too openly*. Strauss's lectures suggest that the *Gorgias* is a powerful presentation of how the tension between the city and philosophy affects the philosopher's speech by compelling him to engage in such abstractions. In order, therefore, to understand Strauss's interpretation of the *Gorgias*, it is important to examine the dialogue's prominent abstractions and to determine how Strauss links them to the conflict between the city and philosophy.

One of the most important abstractions of the *Gorgias* is the abstraction from pleasure.[6] Strauss pointed out that most of Socrates' arguments in the *Gorgias* hinge on denying the coincidence of the good (understood in terms of utility) and the pleasant and on identifying the whole of pleasure with only that part of it which pertains to the body and the fulfillment of bodily desires. Socrates seems to present a conflicting duality between body and soul in a way that the good—linked to the soul—has a radically ascetic quality.[7] In his discussions with Polus concerning rhetoric's power to secure desired ends and with Callicles concerning whether or not the good life consists in the constant fulfillment of one's desires, for example, Socrates does not speak of (i.e. abstracts from) those things which are both good and pleasant to the soul such as honor or wisdom.[8]

Moreover, Socrates' arguments suggest that the urge to protect one's physical existence is a base concern. According to Strauss, Socrates' incomplete picture of pleasure is no oversight; rather, it serves his attempt to demonstrate that rhetoric is a low form of speech. Since Socrates argues that rhetoric (unlike dialectics) is concerned with pleasure, it cannot be good; because knowledge is good, rhetoric must be a kind of flattery rather than an art and therefore must be unjust. Strauss suggested that this argument might be superficial and constitute the salutary teaching that Polus and

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[6] See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lectures 5, 6, and 12. During Lecture 6, Strauss observed, "The abstraction from pleasure is perhaps the formula for the *Gorgias*."

[7] The asceticism occurs on the two levels. First, bodily needs (i.e. life itself) are subordinated to the soul's needs. Second, what is pleasant cannot coincide with what is good. See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 15: "That philosophy is both the best and the most pleasant, that there can be arts which while pursuing the good, necessarily pursue the pleasant belonging to that, this is abstracted from, as we have seen. Owing to this ultimate coincidence of the good and the pleasant, the abstraction from it, philosophy comes to sight as mere duty, the ascetic character of the dialogue follows from that. Philosophy is demanded from everyone, like moral virtue. And then of course this leads to a very negative judgment about the human race. All, or most all, are very bad."

[8] The abstraction from honor leads to an abstraction from politics and the abstraction from wisdom leads to an abstraction from philosophy.

Callicles need.[9] He arrived at this conclusion because, he argued, a more comprehensive

picture of rhetoric emerges if one considers that which has been the subject of

abstraction—phenomena that are both good and pleasant—and if one examines the

dramatic details in order to determine to whom Socrates' profound arguments are

addressed—Gorgias, in this case.

Strauss proposed that the reason Socrates superficially downplays the usefulness

and nobility of rhetoric might have been so that his unphilosophic interlocutors (Polus

and Callicles) would reassess the value of their own beliefs and activities according to a

more consistent standard of the good—a standard that is directed toward ends determined

by *knowledge* of what is beneficial.[10] In this way, the political order might be improved

by judging itself by the standard of philosophy. Strauss argued, however, that the

presentation of philosophy in the *Gorgias* is missing its "peak."[11] The picture of

philosophy given by Socrates to Polus and Callicles is concerned with justice, caring for

souls, and the true political art—all of which are useful (or good) for civic life, but often

without pleasure or even unpleasant for their agent.[12] The dialogue's abstraction from

pleasure leads to an abstraction from philosophic eros and thus portrays philosophy as an

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[9] See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 7.

[10] Strauss emphasizes that the Polus section treats the good in terms of utility: the good is always what is beneficial to someone rather than what is good in itself, the latter being a subject which is probably beyond Polus' capabilities. See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 7.

[11] See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lectures 13 and 15.

[12] Strauss thought that Socrates arrogation of the true title to rule was to be taken ironically since Plato thought that philosophy was a largely private endeavor and that the rule of philosopher-kings was impossible. Because Socrates could never rule, claiming the title to rule could not be taken literally. See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lectures 11, 12, and 14.

activity devoid of pleasure.[13] That is, philosophy is not presented as a way of life that is

satisfying in itself and, therefore, does not appear to pose any serious danger to the

political way of life. Rather, philosophy as presented in the *Gorgias* simply purports to

uplift politics by injecting consistency into its practice and especially into its speech:

rhetoric, which is the mode of speech associated with politics, needs to give way to

dialectics, which is the philosopher's speech, for the benefit of politics. Socrates makes

the case for this by showing that, despite its pleasantness, rhetoric is a sham art which is

incapable of bringing about what one truly desires. But as I show below, given the fact

that the dialogue is missing its peak—it abstracts from philosophic eros—the conclusions

about the kind of communication the philosopher uses might require reconsideration.

How the Theme of War Is Developed and What it Means

Strauss observed that a major theme of the *Gorgias* is war; the dialogue begins, in

fact, with the phrase "war and battle." The radical dichotomies between the body and the

soul, rhetoric and dialectic, and between pleasure and the good emphasize the theme of

war and lead to an even more intense conflict between the philosophic and political ways

of life. The philosophic (and good) way of life represented by Socrates is the opposite of

the political (and pleasant) way of life represented by Callicles. Callicles is concerned

with the "right of the stronger," or idea that the satisfaction of desires by those who have

the power to do so is just regardless of the consequences for the health of others' souls.

Socrates, by contrast, argues in favor of utility, that is, for doing what is in one's best

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[13] Strauss also mentioned the dialogue's abstraction from politics, which arises partly from the abstraction of honor and partly from Socrates' assertions that tyrants have no power and that all rhetoric is a sham. Since these assertions would only make sense in a society of philosophers (in which politics is an unnecessary art), the political never comes to light in this dialogue. See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 6.

interest, which quite often is opposed to doing what one thinks one desires. Importantly, Socrates does not convert Callicles (or Gorgias or Polus, for that matter) to the philosophical way of life even though his interlocutors find themselves unable to refute Socrates' dialectical arguments. That the city remains intransigent to the philosopher's attempts to refine common opinions concerning the nature of justice led Strauss to conclude that Plato was trying to communicate the permanent conflict between philosophy and the city. Strauss's conclusion is based on a complex analysis of Socrates' "deeds," which has significant implications for Strauss's understanding of philosophy's relation to rhetoric. This is because examining Socrates' deeds reveals that the philosopher was not so opposed to the use of rhetoric as he explicitly proclaimed.

The Intended Audience and Substance of Socrates' Efforts to Communicate

If the dialogue's main conflict is between the philosophical and political ways of life, one must ask where Gorgias, who seems to be opposed to Socrates but is not a politician, fits into the adversarial scheme. For Strauss, asking and answering this question was crucial to understanding the dialogue's form and substantive teaching.[14] A superficial reading of the dialogue leads to the conclusion that Socrates was wholly opposed to the use of rhetoric, and the scenes where Socrates forces the rhetor Gorgias into contradictory statements seem to be a dramatic reinforcement of that conclusion. However, Strauss thought that before a single dialogue could be understood, one must first understand Plato's corpus as a whole and how any particular dialogue fits into that

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[14] In the 1957 transcripts, Lecture 1, Strauss noted that the *Gorgias* is one of the Platonic dialogues that leads up to a teaching or a principle as opposed to leading up to a question concerning that which is generally accepted as true. Socrates' "explicit" teaching to his interlocutor is true enough, but it may not be the whole truth that Plato's dialogues invite their readers to explore.

larger body of dialogues. Two of Plato's other dialogues, the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, present a favorable view of rhetoric. Plato's deeds—writing dialogues that are sympathetic to rhetoric as well as hostile to it—require an astute interpreter to question the explicit statements in any particular dialogue about the subject. The harsh critique of rhetoric and of Gorgias that emerges on a surface reading of the *Gorgias* needs to be corrected by penetrating to a deeper level of analysis.

Examining the relation of the three dialogues further, Strauss found that the two which were sympathetic to the use of rhetoric (or poetry, which is a form of rhetoric) did not abstract from eros and philosophy as the *Gorgias* did. In other words, the good rhetoric that is guided by philosophic eros and which is the subject of praise in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* is absent from the explicit speeches in the *Gorgias*. The task of the diligent reader is to recognize the how the absence of the theme affects the meaning of the explicit speeches—the "words" of the dialogue. When the missing theme is considered, a more complete or truer meaning of the words emerges which may be tested by examining the dramatic context and action—the "deeds" of the dialogue.[15] By reconsidering how the abstraction from pleasure, which leads to an abstraction from philosophic eros, affects Socrates' arguments, Strauss found that Plato esteemed the kind of rhetoric exemplified in Socrates' deeds: namely, rhetoric in the service of philosophic ends. The dialogue's simple dichotomies break down on the deeper levels of analysis.

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[15] The reader must also question why Socrates did not present the full picture of philosophy in the *Gorgias*. As we will see below, the abstraction from philosophy is necessary because the political multitude (represented by Callicles) is unfit for philosophy. Plato has his Socrates present a low picture of philosophy to Callicles in order to show the careful reader that the philosopher needs to hide his activity from the non-philosophic majority.

This conclusion helped to explain where Gorgias fit into the dialogue's war and battle and to link Socrates' use of abstractions to an intelligible cause, namely, the conflict between the philosopher and the city. Regarding the latter, the city depends for its survival on protecting itself from internal and external threats, and this requires reverence for traditional accounts of the gods and right living. The philosophic way of life, by contrast, questions the city's account of right living, threatening its civic spiritedness and willingness to defend itself. Perceiving philosophy's threat to its survival, the city tries to eliminate the philosopher. This situation explains why the dialogue's explicit statements present the philosopher as hostile to rhetoric even while the action of the dialogue presents the philosopher using rhetoric (i.e. abstractions) very skillfully. If the philosopher uses rhetoric to conceal the extent to which his activity threatens the city's existence, he may not be threatened by the city.

Therefore, in terms of his place among the two conflicting parties, Gorgias, Strauss argued, is on Socrates' side. Gorgias' art is also Socrates' art and, like Socrates, Gorgias finds himself in conflict with the city. He depends for his livelihood on instructing students in the arts of speaking, but, as Socrates points out, the very nature of that instruction can undermine Gorgias' well-being. Socrates' initial conversation with Gorgias is designed to reveal an important paradox concerning the power of *logos*. Strauss observed that Socrates "traps" Gorgias into assenting to two contradictory positions: Gorgias agrees that *logos* both is and is not omnipotent.[16] That is, in Gorgias' speech the rhetor is immensely powerful: he makes his students just by teaching them the

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[16] Strauss's discussion of what Socrates is doing is full of the language of coercion. Socrates "traps," "fetters," and "binds" his interlocutors, mimicking the necessity of resorting to force in order to settle disputes. See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lectures 2, 4, 6, and 9.

just things through rhetoric; and the rhetor is endangered: he faces accusations on account of his students' unjust actions.[17] Both positions have important consequences for the teacher's morality and safety: "Rhetoric can safely be unjust if rhetoric is omnipotent, and, the alternative, rhetoric cannot be safely unjust; rhetoric is not omnipotent."[18] Socrates' position is analogous. He depends on the city to meet his physical needs so that he can continue his quest for truth. But his quest puts him at odds with the city because he challenges its understanding of living well. In the interest of its own well-being, the city seeks to silence Socrates' questioning; likewise, Socrates uses rhetoric because it conceals the disparity between the city's interests and his own, and therefore contributes to his well-being. As for the substance of what Socrates is trying to communicate, he seems to want to show this situation, or permanent problem, to Gorgias in the hopes that the latter will comport himself more carefully, which is in everyone's best interest.

The Outcome or Effect of the Dialogue: the Key Teaching

Both Socrates' "deeds" (leading Gorgias into such a contradiction and using a host of other rhetorical techniques) and Plato's "deeds" (linking Socrates and Gorgias together through their art and tensional relation with the city and writing dialogues with contradictory speeches about phenomena such as rhetoric) become intelligible by considering the superficial and the more profound aims of the Platonic writings. On the superficial level, Socrates leads Gorgias into this contradiction in order to refute the Gorgian rhetoric and thereby to refine the common opinion concerning the power and goodness of rhetoric. Such a refinement might have salutary personal and political

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[17] See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 4.

[18] Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 4.

effects. On the more profound level, the deeds reveal that Plato's question concerning

the omnipotence of *logos* pertains both to Gorgias' rhetorical *logos* and to Socrates'

scientific or dialectic *logos*. At the heart of this problem is whether any kind of speech is

powerful enough to translate individual thought about the good into goodness when most

individuals by nature are driven by their passions and are able to understand truth only

partially. On Strauss's reading, Gorgias, like Socrates, is a philosopher, a cosmologist—

one interested in discovering the truth about the whole. Socrates' later speeches with

Polus and Callicles (the non-philosophers) are demonstrations to Gorgias of the results of

his teachings so that Gorgias may become a better, or more cautious, philosopher. For

Strauss, therefore, the dialogue as a whole has the character of an object lesson for

Gorgias and, by extension, for the careful reader. Rhetoric, so it seems, is located

somewhere in the middle of the conflict between philosophy and the city. Used well, it

can mediate the conflict or bridge the gap between the two; used poorly, it can intensify

the conflict and lead to severe consequences for the health and safety of the combatants.

In Strauss's view, therefore, the *Gorgias* shows that despite Socrates' explicit

emphasis on virtue and the common good, Plato's philosopher was ultimately interested

in his own self-preservation. Satisfying this desire tragically necessitates the use of

untruths, specifically the untruth that the philosopher cares for the city for its own sake.

Thus, any benefits the city or non-philosophic individuals receive from the philosopher's

activity are purely incidental to the philosopher's self-gratification. Of Socrates' attempt

to be freed from the greatest evil, Strauss stated:

> Charity begins at home. This "selfishness" of Socrates must of course never be
> disregarded. The greatest evil is ignorance in important matters, i.e., false opinion
> of course. Right opinion, which is not knowledge, is not an evil. It is also not a
> very great good compared with knowledge. But we must keep in mind that most

of the time, most men must leave it at right opinion. So this, then, is the situation.[19]

Socratic rhetoric paradoxically shows that the selfish concern for the truly pleasant and good "cannot be satisfied adequately except by complete dedication to the common good."[20] Strauss, then, seems to have suggested that Platonic justice might really be the "right of the stronger," when the stronger is understood in terms of having the natural gifts for philosophizing. The philosopher's natural right makes the philosopher's use of rhetoric just. For philosophers, the ends do justify the means.

Voegelin on the Gorgias

Voegelin's most extensive treatment of the *Gorgias* occurs in chapter two of *Plato and Aristotle* (1957), and it is this treatment is the primary subject of my analysis. This chapter was previously published in 1949 as an essay entitled "The Philosophy of Existence: Plato's *Gorgias*," from which only a few minor revisions were made, the main one being Voegelin's removal of the phrase "The Philosophy of Existence" from its title. Really this was a restoration rather than a revision since the phrase was an editor's addition to Voegelin's essay. In a letter to Strauss, Voegelin, who thought the phrase would confuse readers, took the occasion to explain that his use of the term "existential"—which occurs frequently in his analysis of the *Gorgias*—did not refer to the popular conception in which "existential truth" was opposed to theoretical or

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[19] Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 4.

[20] See Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 9. Here, Strauss discussed Socrates' abstraction from honor in his discussion with Polus. Strauss suggested the difficulty of distinguishing the tyrant from the just man when both desire immortal glory. Since immortal glory depends on serving the common good, it is impossible to tell whether rule is based on superior strength or superior wisdom. Strauss goes on to note that securing immortal glory ultimately depends on overcoming the influence of chance, the possibility of which is the substance of Plato's noble lie (i.e. the logographic necessity of his works).

objective truth. [21] Rather, as I noted earlier, Voegelin employed the term to refer to "a dianoetic *aretē*," the "*non*cognitive aspect of *epistēmē*" through which "ontological knowledge emerges in the process of…the individual person's life."[22]

When he wrote his main analysis of the *Gorgias*, Voegelin was interested in the relations between the various phases of humanity's quest for the divine ground and the concrete actions and arrangements of political societies. Within the process of history in which the quest takes place, man's experiences of order and disorder in the events of pragmatic history facilitate or hinder knowledge of the ground. Accordingly, much of Voegelin's treatment of the *Gorgias* during this time focused on the interactions between Plato's personal spiritual order and the disorder of his civilizational context and their implications for the historical process of discovering the science of order. Moreover, Voegelin's references at this time indicate that his understanding of Plato's *Gorgias* influenced his own convictions concerning the forms that philosophy and politics should take.[23]

From 1966 on, Voegelin came to realize that a true philosophy of history depended more intensely upon meditative exegeses of the experiences in which eternal being realizes itself in time. In his later meditative philosophy of history, Voegelin emphasized the soul's activity of *anamnesis* and examined how Plato's psychic

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[21] Eric Voegelin to Leo Strauss, 2 January 1950, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 63-64. Voegelin reiterated his concern over the additional phrase in his letter to Alois Dempf, February 20, 1950, in *CW* 30: 48.

[22] Ibid.

[23] See the discussion of existential representation in chapters 1 and 2 of Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*.

perception of the divine becomes both more acute and more tenuous.[24] It makes sense, then, that Voegelin's frequent references to the *Gorgias* during this phase of Voegelin's career center less upon Plato's philosophy of order and his resistance to disorder than on Plato's conceptions of time and the examination of conscience and on the nature of Plato's attempts to express noetic insights in language.

What Voegelin Brings to His Interpretation of the Dialogue

In addition to his assumptions concerning a philosophy of history and philosophy of consciousness, Voegelin brought to his interpretation of Plato's *Gorgias* convictions concerning the disorder of his times. We must remember that Voegelin thought philosophical insights arise in times of social crisis because it is during such times that human beings are more likely to quest for order; and Voegelin, like Plato and Socrates experienced a breakdown of order. Specifically, Voegelin approached the *Gorgias* with a profound sense of astonishment and disgust that Hitler's cruel and irrational regime was so popular among both ordinary citizens and his fellow academics. Such experiences colored Voegelin's reading in a number of ways.

First off, he saw in the dialogue an illuminating expression and analysis of a situation that resembled his own. Like Voegelin, Socrates found himself at odds with both the politicians (represented by Callicles), the old guard of the academy (represented by Gorgias), and the younger generation of intellectuals (represented by Polus) who had been trained by the old guard. This statement holds both for Socrates' (and Plato's) concrete situation—their strained relationships with Athens and the sophists—and for Socrates' dramatic situation in Plato's dialogue. Because of the similarity, Voegelin

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[24] See Ranieri, *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society*, 237-44.

thought Plato's dialogue could help him understand his own situation better and therefore address it with a more effective remedy. Plato had, for example, provided a useful catalogue of deformations of speech, a scientific assessment of the trajectory of political decline, and had discovered that the source of disorder lies in the soul's relation to its transcendent ground. Moreover, Voegelin thought that his own experiences of disorder had prepared his psyche to penetrate to, and thereby to experience for himself more intensely, the ontological forces motivating the Platonic expression. For Voegelin this was a crucial part of developing an adequate interpretation of a text, and, in both respects, Voegelin's determination that the dialogues are saving by nature is evident.

A second way that Voegelin's experiences influence his reading of the dialogue is the level of intensity which he attributes to the Platonic expression. Voegelin described the *Gorgias* as Plato's "spiritual outburst" against the corrupt Athenian order. He meant that the dialogue was motivated by Plato's immediate mystical insight into the divine order and the gross social disorder and his simultaneous repulsion at the latter. Plato suffered under his society's existence in untruth—that is, its spiritual disease of insensitivity to the *pathos* and its denial of divine reality—and could not help but respond strongly to its threat to the health of his and others' souls by vehemently rearticulating a case for order. On Voegelin's reading, Callicles represents the "murderer" of Socrates, who is the city's sacrificial victim. Both Socrates' and Callicles' speeches are charged, Voegelin argued, with an awareness that both personally and politically, the existence of man in history is at stake.[25]

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[25] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 28.

Voegelin's interpretation of Plato's spiritual outburst is charged with a similar sense of urgency regarding the real threat of twentieth-century disorder and the importance of countering it. Commenting on Socrates' interchange with Callicles at 512e, for example, Voegelin stated, "The situation is fascinating for those among us who find ourselves in the Platonic position and who recognize in the men with whom we associate today the intellectual pimps for power who will connive in our murder tomorrow."[26] Not only Socrates' and Plato's experienced situation, but also their mystical experiences of the divine ground, resembled and illuminated Voegelin's experience. These and other similarities contributed to Voegelin's view that the *Gorgias* was an earlier expression and investigation of phenomena with which he himself was concerned and they help to explain Voegelin's use of modern categories (e.g. "intellectuals") in order to convey Plato's meaning to contemporary readers.

How the Theme of War Is Developed and What it Means

Voegelin argued that the *Gorgias* symbolizes Plato's experience of the antagonism between the forces of order, which lie in the person of Socrates, and the forces of disorder, which are present in Socrates' interlocutors and Athenian society as a whole. Although Voegelin drew from his own experiences and his philosophy of consciousness in arriving at this conclusion, he found evidence for it in Plato's text. Voegelin's analysis begins with the following statement: "'War and battle' are the opening words of the *Gorgias*, and the declaration of war against the corrupt society is its content."[27] "War" is the aspect under which the dialogue is to be examined. Unlike

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[26] Ibid., 37.

[27] Ibid., 24.

Strauss, who suggested that the war was between the philosophers, represented by Socrates and Gorgias, on the one hand, and the city, represented by Polus and Callicles, on the other, Voegelin thought that the battle lines were drawn along to the interlocutors' "attitudes toward the [dialogue's] enumerated topics," which include "the function of rhetoric, the problem of justice, the question whether it is better to do injustice or to suffer injustice, and the fate of the soul."[28] Socrates is on one side of each issue while each interlocutor is on the other. Accordingly, Voegelin thought that the dialogue suggested answers to each of those topics which were either orderly or disorderly, but could not be both. As he does with each of the Platonic dialogues, Voegelin identified opposing pairs of symbols which, he thought, helped to illuminate Plato's experience of existence in the *metaxy* as being penetrated by antagonistic, or "warring," forces.

At first, Voegelin's determination that the *Gorgias* operates through pairs of opposing symbols may seem somewhat more naïve than Strauss's interpretation. Strauss, we remember, thought that the initial dichotomy or "war" between rhetoric and dialectics broke down upon consideration of the dramatic action and of Plato's other writings. Voegelin would admit no such mediation of the conflict, yet his analysis and conclusions are no less sophisticated or interesting than Strauss's. For Voegelin, Plato's symbols arose through Plato's loving reflection upon his immediate psychic experiences of the divine ground penetrating into his consciousness and illuminating reality. In other words, the symbols emerged in the mysterious intersection of forces human and divine, temporal and eternal, and therefore refer to states of the soul in its various experiences of the divine ground: personal, social, and historical. The variety of these experiences endowed

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[28] Ibid.

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the symbols with subtle nuances of meaning that are a source of richness in the dialogue.[29] An example will help to clarify Voegelin's thought.

Voegelin argued that the symbols of "life" and "death" are particularly important in the *Gorgias*. The concluding myth of judgment is an early expression of Plato's philosophy of order and history.[30] Through the myth, Plato "plays" with these symbols in order to illuminate *metaxy* existence and to draw out its implications for the aforementioned topics of rhetoric, justice, suffering, and the fate of the soul. Voegelin pointed out that the myth's invocation of the symbols (523b, 523e), Socrates' explanation of them (524b-526d), and Socrates' evaluation of their meaning for human life (526d-527a, 527d-e) is prepared by numerous passages throughout the text (e.g. 493a, 522e) as well as in other dialogues (e.g. *Phaedrus* 250b and *Cratylus* 403-404b). Plato's symbols of life and death, upon Voegelin's reading, represent the *opposing* sides of the war and battle even though Socrates states at 526e, "I shall try *both* to live and to die…"[31] Voegelin explained this situation by referring to the experiential level on which Plato intended his symbols to operate. In terms of the personal dimension of one's experience of reality, Voegelin thought the Platonic symbols could be explained thus: "Death can mean either the entombment of the soul in its earthly body, or the shedding of the body. Life can mean either earthly existence or freedom of the soul from the frenzy of the body."[32] On the level of history, Voegelin argued:

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[29] Ibid., 42.

[30] Ibid., 40.

[31] Plato *Gorgias*, trans. and ed. James H. Nichols (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). Unless otherwise specified, all references to Plato's *Gorgias* are from Nichols's translation.

[32] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 42.

those who live lustfully like Callicles are 'dead,' entombed in the passion and frenzy of their body; they are judged by the 'living,' that is, by the philosophers who let their souls be penetrated by the experience of death and, thus, have achieved life *sub specie mortis* in freedom from somatic passion.[33]

He went on to explain, citing the mythical transition from the Age of Cronos to the Age of Zeus (523c), that the understanding of the "tension between the life of the soul and the tomb of the body" was a relatively new development in Socrates' time and had the character of what Voegelin called elsewhere a "leap in being."[34] This means that the notion that right order is above all a spiritual condition with a spiritual source is compelling to consciousness; it is experienced as a genuine insight into the order of being, which supersedes past articulations of order. Living well now means to live in attunement to the divine ground during one's earthly existence as did Socrates: to live perpetually in the spiritual experience of divine judgment, which the myth symbolizes as occurring in death. For Voegelin, Plato was articulating the crucial insight that the eternal order of being penetrates into temporal existence through the human psyche. The well-ordered psyche—the philosopher's psyche—is the standard by which thought and conduct are to be evaluated. Therefore, the concrete political society is to be understood as dead if its conventions contravene the new philosophic insight, which now has become the foundation for genuine community.

In terms of existential order (which encompasses all of the dimensions of human existence), the soul that is penetrable by the ordering force of the divine presence is living while the soul that is impenetrable is dead. Mimicking the structure of the *metaxy*, the living and the dead exist in perpetual opposition to each other. Therefore, on one side of

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[33] Ibid., 40.

[34] Ibid., 42.

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the war and battle are those who reject the newly discovered tension, preferring the life of the body and the gratification of temporal desires (including the desire to continue to order one's life by the old myth) to the genuine life of the spirit. On the other side are those who accept the tension and try to live as if they were already "dead" (in the presence of the divine judgment), even though such behavior may bring about the death of older symbols of order as well as of the body. Accepting or rejecting the new articulation of the tension is an existential matter insofar as the tension obliges man to live in a certain way and the willingness to accept it depends on the degree to which one allows one's psyche to receive insights from a source beyond itself. In this way, we can see how, by examining the various levels of each symbols' meaning, Voegelin identified a fuller range of significance for the theme of war and was able to explain Socrates' statement that he will try both to die and to live without nullifying the opposition between life and death.

Plato's Intended Audience and the Substance of Socrates' Efforts to Communicate

Although it should be clear by now, it will be worth emphasizing that the war and battle between the "living" and the "dead" is a symbol for the conflict that arises between men who have different existential stances—that is, between men who, on the one hand, think that the source of order and meaning is transcendent and, on the other hand, think that it is immanent. One's existential stance ultimately determines one's attitude toward the topics of the dialogue: rhetoric, justice, etc. Thus, for Voegelin, the dialogue does pitch two distinct and mutually exclusive ways of life against each other; but unlike Strauss, who suggests that an individual's way of life is determined by the caprices of nature, Voegelin thinks that whether or not a person lives in openness to the divine

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ground is attributable, at least in some degree, to the way human beings choose to respond to the philosopher's attempts to communicate insights into the source of order. Certainly, social influences play a key role in shaping individuals' openness to the divine ground; they account for Socrates' outburst against Athens (represented by Callicles) and individual sophists as well as for his "transfer of authority" from the reigning political figures to himself. And it is because the socio-political milieu endangers the souls of the younger generation by obscuring the genuine human task that Socrates must fight the existential battle against Athens. Nevertheless, Voegelin was convinced that Plato held out the possibility that individuals, the younger generation, and even sophistic Athens herself, might allow themselves to be persuaded by the philosopher's insights.

Crucial to Voegelin's conclusion on these points was his determination regarding Plato's choice of the dialogue form. Where Strauss thought the dialogue form was a way of speaking differently to different audiences (and, by extension, that the *Gorgias* contains a demonstration primarily aimed at Gorgias' edification), Voegelin thought that Plato chose the dialogue form because it most accurately symbolized the experience of existential "war" simultaneously enacted in Athens, in the individual soul, and in the cosmos as a whole. The dialogue itself, like the dramatic speeches contained therein, was not intended to be primary subject of concern. Rather, the dialogue points behind itself to the deep psychic experiences of order and disorder, thereby becoming a luminous invitation to choose whether to be on the side of corrupt society or on the side of genuine existential justice. The dialogue's structural representation of the existential tug-and-pull of the forces of order and disorder intensifies the invitation. Socrates, in Voegelin's view, genuinely attempts to bring his interlocutors into a right relationship with the divine

by exposing them to experiences of right order just as Plato does by using the dialogue form instead of a treatise: "The dialogue is the symbolic form of the order of wisdom, in opposition to the oration as the symbolic form of the disordered society. It restores the common order of the spirit that has been destroyed through the privatization of rhetoric."[35] Plato's dialogues hearken back to the public cult of tragedy, which, according to Voegelin, involved the community in a common experience directed at illuminating the nature of justice and living well. But since the public order had broken down, the dialogue—which private persons could access on their own—became the more appropriate form.

Voegelin therefore thought that Plato intended the dialogue to speak sincerely and consistently to any individual who wished to read it just as Socrates spoke to his interlocutors. "The personal conversation between Socrates and the individual Athenian citizen," Voegelin argued, "is continued through the instrument of the dialogue."[36] In another place, Voegelin noted, "The Socratic soul draws into its dialogue the companions, and beyond the immediate companions, all those who are eager to have the dialogues reported to them. . . . and the reporting continues to this day."[37] Instead of being chosen for its ability to make a demonstration to another philosopher while keeping others unaware, the dialogic form is chosen because it is appropriate when the political situation is constituted by a contest over the souls of the young and when the ability and willingness to converse sincerely about matters of ultimate importance has atrophied in the concrete society. Plato chose the dialogue form, in other words, because he thought it

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[35] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 12.

[36] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 12.

[37] Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 186.

was best suited to convincing young souls to opt for the philosophic order over social disorder. Human beings can be convinced of the truth and the philosopher must do all he can to try to realize the goal of furthering human beings' perceptions of the movements of the divine ground. Voegelin argued that the *Gorgias* makes sense only if one assumes that Socrates' efforts to enter into existential communion with his interlocutors are sincere.

This does not mean that Socrates' manner of approaching each of his interlocutors will always be identical, for again, individuals have some freedom with regard to how they respond to the deep psychic movements of order. The *Gorgias* symbolizes this feature of human existence by depicting a succession of interlocutors who are increasingly hostile to the divine ground and exhibit concomitant deformations of speech. This means that Socrates' invitation to order (or revelation of disorder) must assume a slightly different character with each interlocutor. Nevertheless, the Socratic message is the same for everyone, dramatis personae and readers alike: success, justice, order, and goodness depend upon one's having a right relation with God and with others.

The importance of having a right relationship with God is the topic that structures all of the other aspects of the *Gorgias*, and it is introduced early on in the dialogue. One's relationship to the divine ground depends on how one responds to "the decisive question"—the "existential" question that Socrates tells Chaerephon to pose to Gorgias: "Who he is?" (447d).[38] The exchange in which this question occurs proceeds thus:

> Socrates: What you say is good, Callicles. But then, would [Gorgias] be willing to talk with us [*dialegesthai*]? For I wish to learn from him what the power of the man's art is, and what it is that he professes and teaches. As for the other thing, the display, let him put it off until afterwards, as you are saying.

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[38] Ibid., 24.

Callicles: There's nothing like asking the man himself, Socrates. And indeed this was one aspect of his display; just now at any rate he was calling upon anyone of those inside to ask whatever he might wish, and he said he would answer everything.
Socrates: What you say is fine indeed. Chaerephon, ask him!
Chaerephon: What shall I ask?
Socrates: *Who he is.*
Chaerephon: How do you mean that?
Socrates: Just as if he happened to be a craftsman of shoes, he would answer you, I suppose, "a cobbler." Or don't you understand what I'm saying?
Chaerephon: I understand and I'll ask. Tell me, Gorgias, is what Callicles here says true, that you profess to answer whatever anyone asks you?
Gorgias: True, Chaerephon. I was just now making exactly those professions; and I say that no one has yet asked me anything new for many years. (447b-448a)[39]

In this exchange, Voegelin argued, the lines of the battle are drawn: Socrates and his young friend Chaerephon will confront Gorgias, his young student Polus, and the politician Callicles. Among the influential persons of Athens, Socrates alone, Voegelin argued, is concerned with discovering the essence or nature of man, which is the goal of speech, thought, and action.

While Voegelin did not provide an extensive analysis of this exchange, consulting his philosophy of consciousness helps us to understand his argument that the short line at 447d "is for all times the decisive question, cutting through the network of opinions, social ideas, and ideologies. It is the question that appeals to the nobility of the soul; and it is the one question which the ignoble intellectual cannot face."[40] Asking Who man is? is, in Voegelin's view, the essential characteristic of humanity: man is constituted by his desire to understand his purpose and his origins. This line of questioning *naturally* leads, Voegelin argued, to man's quest for insights into the divine—insights which end up placing a significant intellectual and ethical obligation on man and therefore have

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[39] Plato *Gorgias* (my emphasis).

[40] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 24.

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existential importance. Raising that question indicates that both Plato and Socrates were inviting individuals to take up the existential quest for the divine ground. Socrates' interlocutors' unwillingness to follow the question to its natural end indicated, so Voegelin thought, their prideful rejection of the transcendent ground's penetration into the human psyche and revelation of how human beings should think, feel, act, and speak. That the Platonic and Socratic appeals were rejected (by Athens and by Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, respectively) underscores the level of social corruption that Plato experienced concretely; it does not prove that Plato or his Socrates was esoteric or that human beings have no choice in their existential response.

Voegelin pointed out other features of the dialogue that indicated that Plato and Socrates were genuinely engaged in inviting individuals to experience for themselves the deep psychic movements of order and disorder. Since Voegelin thought the *Gorgias* revealed Plato's *earliest* perceptions of the structure of being, it makes sense that Socrates' efforts to communicate center on revealing the disorderliness or inconsistency in each of his interlocutors' speeches, attitudes, and actions. Plato's science of order, as we shall see in the next chapter, is symbolized in the *Republic*, which Voegelin thought was written after the *Gorgias*. Socrates' revelations of disorder in speech, attitudes, and action—his attempts to get his interlocutors to recognize this basic level of incoherence— might, according to Voegelin's Plato, induce them (and the reader) to quest for genuine order. For example, Socrates uses two means to try to persuade Gorgias that his activity undermines personal and social order.

First, Socrates explicitly states that the appropriate way to handle a youth who is vicious and impervious to correction is to banish the youth from one's presence and wash

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one's hands of him.[41] Gorgias must estrange himself from his student because his

teaching has undermined the student's concern for justice and proven the student's

unwillingness to undergo a genuine learning experience. Second, Voegelin thought, like

Strauss, that Socrates tried to show, not just tell, Gorgias something. Socrates' exchange

with Polus is intended to teach Gorgias something about himself, and Voegelin describes

it as a "glaring object lesson of the evil consequences of [Gorgias'] corrupting activity."[42]

But Voegelin thinks the level on which the object lesson is likely to be successful is not

Gorgias' intellect, but his sense of shame. For Voegelin, Gorgias' embarrassment reveals

that Gorgias might yet be sensitive to the deep psychic sensations of order and disorder.

The possibility that Gorgias might change his ways upon experiencing Polus' uncouth

behavior—that is, by his psychic aversion to Polus' existential closure—makes sense of

Socrates' long exchange with the latter and explains why "Gorgias is let of comparatively

lightly."[43]

Polus exhibits none of Gorgias' sense of shame, which indicates that he is less

sensitive to the deep psychic movements than his teacher. Therefore, Socrates must use a

different approach that consists in revealing the absurdity of Polus' arguments and firmly

enforcing the basic rules of decorum in conversing. Voegelin thought that the depiction

of Socrates' exchange with Polus was Plato's way of communicating to his readers the

personal crassness and incoherence as well as implications for speech that are associated

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[41] Ibid., 25.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid., 24. Voegelin's analysis of Gorgias the person is particularly interesting because it reveals
Voegelin's willingness to revise his own arguments. In volumes 2 and 3 of *Order and History*, Voegelin
criticized Plato's character Gorgias as well as the historical Gorgias of Leontini. By the time he wrote the
essay "Wisdom and Magic," Voegelin was more sympathetic to both Gorgiases, suggesting that Plato's
dialogue aimed to clarify some of the historical Gorgias' compact expressions of order. See *The World of
the Polis*, 273-75; "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 322.

with closure to the divine ground. By illuminating the disorder (personal, social, and in phenomena like speech) for what it was and showing how ridiculous it is in the face of rational argumentation, Plato hoped to generate therapeutic insights into genuine source of order.

In Plato's diagnosis, Polus' level of existence is constituted by a separation of the deep, insight-generating movements of the soul in response to the poles of the *metaxy* from his reflective consciousness. His language symbols (which shape reflective consciousness and audible speech) are divorced from their experiential ground. This explains his lack of embarrassment over his crassness and incoherence and proves that his speech aims not at discovering truth, but rather at securing a verbal victory over his interlocutor even if the "victorious" position is patently opposed to the reality that all men experience. For example, at 486c, Polus loses all composure in the face of the arguments' conclusion that tyrants are powerless to do what they truly will. In Voegelin's view, Plato discovered an important correlation between the separation of spirit and intellectual thought and deformations of speech: Polus' attempts to circumvent the rules of discussion are his way of trying to avoid confronting Socrates' call to harmonize his speech and action according to the transcendent standard of reason.

Socrates' exchange with Callicles provides the strongest evidence that Plato and his Socrates were genuinely interested in persuading individuals to open themselves to the deep psychic perceptions of order and disorder. Voegelin argued that level of communication that Socrates sought with Callicles had to lie deeper than either the principles of conduct or politics because, as the exchange with Polus had shown,

"intellectual agreement is not followed of necessity by existential understanding."[44]

Existential understanding is the ultimate aim of Platonic communication and it requires

communication on the level of the pathos. In order for the exchange with Callicles not to

be a mere repetition of the exchange with Polus, Voegelin argued, an interpreter must

suppose that Socrates thought it possible to bring about some sort of mutual

understanding between himself and Callicles. Voegelin found textual support at 481c-d,

where Socrates suggests that both he and Callicles are lovers. In bringing up this

experience, this pathos, Voegelin thought Socrates was trying to awaken Callicles to the

common human condition of suffering that touches man at the core of his being:

> Behind the hardened, intellectually supported attitudes which separate men, lie the
> *pathemata* which bind them together. However false and grotesque the
> intellectual position may be, the pathos at the core has the truth of an immediate
> experience. If one can penetrate to this core a reawaken in a man the awareness
> of his *conditio humana*, communication in the existential sense becomes
> possible.[45]

In sum, Platonic communication aims at heightening the attunement of the entire

community of being to the ground by revealing the ontological basis for knowledge and

linguistic symbols—the deep psychic perceptions of order and disorder.

As I have mentioned, Voegelin did not doubt that Plato intended his dialogues to

make sense and to promote order. Given this conviction, he had to explain the situation

that none of Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias* begin the existential quest for

attunement. Gorgias "has to lapse into an embarrassed silence," and Polus "is

intellectually beaten, but his defeat cannot touch off a spark of decency in him."[46]

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[44] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 29.

[45] Ibid., 30.

[46] Ibid., 25 and 28.

Moreover, Socrates' effort to communicate with Callicles proves unfruitful because, although Callicles perceives the psychic movements more acutely than Gorgias or Polus ("Callicles has rightly sensed the revolution in the words of Socrates."[47]), he rejects their insights, preferring instead to formulate a "second reality" in which "Nature is the fundamental reality, and the victorious assertion of *physis* is the meaning of life."[48] Callicles' second reality directly contravenes Socrates expression of the tensional harmony of the cosmic order at 507e-508a. In this passage, Socrates states, "The wise say, Callicles, that heaven, earth, gods, and human beings are held together by community, friendship orderliness, moderation and justness; and on account of these things, comrade, they call this whole an order, not disorder and intemperance."[49] On Voegelin's reading, Socrates' articulation of the love or friendship (*philia*) that binds together all of the partners in the community of being, is a symbol that illuminates the deep psychic perception of *metaxy* existence. And Socrates' concluding myth of judgment is another expression of order aimed at persuading Callicles (527c) to live in attunement to the divine ground. Even when presented with these powerful expressions of the order of reality, Callicles remains closed to the invitation to enter into existential communion with Socrates.[50]

In order to make sense of the dialogue, Voegelin argued that one must consider the various levels of meaning on which Plato's symbols operated. The interlocutors' rejection of the Socratic communication, combined with Socrates' statement that he alone

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[47] Ibid., 28.

[48] Ibid., 32.

[49] Plato *Gorgias*, 508a.

[50] See Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 36.

practices the true art of politics (521d), indicates that historically, Athens had lost its claim to be the existential representative of men:

> The authority of public order lies with Socrates. With regard to the relation of Plato to Athens the claim stigmatizes the politicians who are obsessed by the "love of the people" (*demou Eros*, 513c) as the "adversaries" (*antistasiotes*, 513c) of the existential order represented by Socrates-Plato; the authoritative order is transferred from the people of Athens and its leaders to the one man Plato. . . . Plato's revolution is a radical call for spiritual regeneration. The people of Athens has lost its soul.[51]

Socrates-Plato found it almost impossible to communicate with his fellow citizens, but that does not mean that the existential conversation must cease. Rather, the dialogue's final myth of judgment "formulates the conditions under which the community of mankind can be maintained even when on the level of concrete society it has broken down. The condition is the faith in the transcendental community of man."[52] Plato will become the leader a new community of human beings united in the conversation of the dialogue and their willingness to apperceive the divine ground.

The Outcome or Effect of the Dialogue: the Key Teaching

Voegelin suggested that the key teaching of the *Gorgias* was that genuine communication intends to advance existential communion and attunement to the divine ground of being. The purpose of speech is to help human beings penetrate to the full significance of their experiences of order and disorder and to discover that the essential feature of human existence is the desire to understand *Who man is*—the question that naturally leads one to search for the truth about God. If one is isolated from the other partners in the community of being, this all-important question cannot be approached

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[51] Ibid., 38-39.

[52] Ibid., 30.

adequately. Individuals depend foremost on the influx of the divine presence into their psyches, but they also need to have encounters with other individuals, with society as a whole, and with the cosmos if they are to understand the full range of experience that goes into asking and answering the existential question. Therefore, rhetoric, which pits individuals against each other and destroys community by eclipsing the necessary relation between linguistic symbols and deep psychic experiences of order and disorder, can never be the language of philosophy. The proper function of language, for Voegelin's Plato, is to illuminate reality rather than posit false, though seemingly advantageous, depictions of it.

In his efforts to foster existential communion—community based on shared experiences of order and disorder—Plato demonstrated that the philosophic quest has moral and ethical as well as intellectual requirements. Trying to understand and to instantiate the moral and ethical order of the philosopher, Plato distinguished several key experiences or forces that act upon and shape the existentially open soul. Philosophy depends on being sensitive to the deep psychic movements, orienting one's Love (*eros*) towards the Good (*agathon*), and restraining disturbing passions through Measure (*sophrosyne*).[53] Moreover, the philosopher must undergo the experience of *Thanatos*, the catharsis through which the soul becomes desirous of ridding itself of all impurities and liberating itself from bodily and temporal existence. Only when he undergoes these experiences can the philosopher achieve genuine insights into the order of being. Philosophic language, therefore, must aim at evoking these experiences and making them luminous as the source of knowledge and order.

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[53] Ibid., 36.

Voegelin understood Plato's more poetic passages (e.g. the cosmic *philia* passage at 508a, the invocation of Euripides' question "Who knows, if living is being dead, and being dead is living?" at 492e, and the concluding myth of judgment, which begins at 523a) in the *Gorgias* as examples of language that seeks to evoke the transformative psychic experiences of order and disorder. Through Socrates' mythical language, and particularly in the concluding myth of judgment which Socrates himself describes as a "rational account" (522e and 523a), the dialogue becomes, Voegelin argued,

> an attempt to submit the others, at least tentatively, to the catharsis of death. The judgment of the dead thus is enacted in part in the dialogue itself, concretely, in the attempt of Socrates to pierce through the "body" of his interlocutors to their naked souls. He tries to make die, and thereby to make live, those who threaten him with death.[54]

In this way, the poetic or mythical formulations enable Plato to direct attention to the fundamental reality of *metaxy* experience so that the eternal substance—the new order of the soul revealed by Socrates—can penetrate into temporal existence.[55] Allowing this penetration is "the criterion of the curable soul," or the soul which can be reconciled to God. Conversely, the incurable soul that rejects the philosopher's myth in effect excommunicates itself from the existential community: "The revelation of the divinity in history moves on; the authority rests with the men who live in friendship with God; the criminal can achieve nothing but the perdition of his soul."[56]

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[54] Ibid., 44.

[55] Ibid., 43.

[56] Ibid., 45.

Concluding Remarks

From the preceding discussion, it should be clear that Voegelin and Strauss arrived at some different conclusions about what Plato was trying to convey through the *Gorgias*. This short chapter (and the other chapters that follow) cannot exhaustively treat the catalogue of disagreements between Voegelin and Strauss or the significant implications of those disagreements, but it can point out that a, perhaps the, core point of difference between the two lies in the relation of the philosopher to the city. For Strauss, the philosopher and the city have opposing interests that can never be reconciled. For Voegelin, that necessary opposition does not exist, although in practice the philosopher and the city might find themselves adversaries in an existential war. Two important conclusions arise from this disagreement which concern: 1) the relation of poetry to philosophy, and 2) the philosopher's concern for others and his use of rhetoric. Some of these conclusions have been mentioned above, but in concluding, it will be fruitful to mention them again briefly.

Both Voegelin and Strauss agreed that poetry—in particular the old Homeric myth—is the basis for Athens' civic education. They also agreed that Socrates thinks that it portrays the gods in an inadequate way, either because it proposes a model for human morality that is dangerous or because the portrayals are untrue to the reality that is their subject. But that is perhaps the extent of their agreement. Voegelin thought, for example, that the old myth was true on its own level as a compact expression of the perception of *metaxy* existence. Nevertheless, the sophistic way of life symbolized by Socrates' interlocutors in the *Gorgias* has nullified the ordering force of the old myth both by demonstrating its illogical features as well as hardening individuals to the

experiences of order and disorder that the old myth intended to explore. Philosophy counters both the sophistic way of life and the old myth but, in Voegelin's view, is much more sympathetic to what the old myth was trying to do—that is, to explore the perceptions of the divine. Although the expressions of the old myth are proven "unseemly" in light of the philosophic discovery of the "new myth of the soul," the sophistic education, with its emphasis on immanent conceptions of order and propositional speech, is the far greater threat to the health of the soul. For Voegelin's Plato, poetry, myth, and other types of speech that point behind their language symbols to the experiences of order that give rise to them, is essential to communicating the ineffability of the transcendent ground. The concluding myth of the *Gorgias* is an appropriate way to convey the core philosophic teaching, which intends to evoke experiences of the divine ground for each individual who cares to understand.

Strauss, on the other hand, saw no "breakdown" in the old myth or in the city's *nomos* and does not emphasize the particular opposition between the way of life represented by Polus and Callicles, on the one hand, and the old myth or the city's customs, on the other. Socrates was not, therefore, engaged in an effort to refine the old myth with a new philosophic myth in Voegelin's sense. Strauss's philosopher is concerned with the practical function of the myth, which is to preserve civic order rather than to generate further metaphysical insights into the structure of human existence. Strauss's philosopher recognizes that the city depends on the old poetry (understood as charming tales, rather than as divinely-inspired articulations of order) for its own survival. The charm of poetry or myth entices citizens to defend the public order against all sorts of threats, internal and external, and is the basis for the city's moral education.

Strauss's philosopher tries to refine the poetic accounts by making them more rational and consistent with the standard of nature. But this effort leads him into conflict with the poets.[57] There are, then, "two bars" of justice—the philosophic and the civic or poetic. The best that human beings can hope for is to arrive at a mitigation of the tension through certain practices; in the case of the *Gorgias*, the practice under consideration is the use of rhetoric. The philosopher must obscure the deepest implications of his thought and speech for the benefit of the city, which in the final analysis, is revealed to be for his own benefit. By making philosophy appear to be no serious threat to the health of the city, the city will not try to eliminate the source of the philosophic threat and might even act upon some of the philosopher's helpful suggestions for improving the political landscape.

This brings me to the second implication concerning the philosopher's concern for others and his use of rhetoric. For Strauss, evaluating Plato's view of poetry (or his view of rhetoric since the two are closely related in Strauss's view) is complicated because Plato is certainly poetic. Strauss stated that Plato's poetry consists in the employment of "the deliberate untruth, that there is no chance, [this] is the principle of the Platonic dialogues."[58] For Strauss, the poetic logographic necessity of Plato's dialogues is incoherent with the reality that human beings know through commonsense, but that incoherence is essential to Plato's teaching. Poetry, understood to be very similar to rhetoric, emerges as a necessary way of bridging the gap between the philosopher and the city. This is because Socrates, whose life is the only life that is both good and pleasant and ends in death at the hands of the city, perhaps was not poetic or rhetorical

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[57] That is, they will be in conflict until philosophers become political philosophers, or until the philosopher adopts the method of the poets.

[58] Strauss transcripts, 1957, Lecture 1. See also, Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lectures 1 and 12.

enough. Plato himself makes up for this crime against nature by couching his philosophy in the poetic form of many dialogues, which is able to present Socrates' life as both good and pleasant (thereby revealing the nature of philosophy to the few) while averting the city's punishment. In Strauss, the philosopher's concern for the health of others' souls is limited by his desire to protect his own activity, and there is thus an ambiguity concerning whether poetry or philosophy is truly the highest way of life.

Voegelin, however, is convinced that the philosopher is engaged in the concrete activity of trying to save souls—all souls—by awakening them to the divine ground of being that unites all participants in the community of being in a tensional harmony. The philosopher will never try to obscure reality through his use of language because that directly contravenes his mystical insight into the community of being and *metaxy* existence. The philosopher's primary concern is attunement to the divine ground of being, which eventuates in a genuine (i.e. not a self-interested) concern for others' well being. The various literary devices found throughout the Platonic corpus indicate Plato's discovery that the structure of reality is beyond the capacity of linguistic symbols. Nevertheless, by employing a variety of words and images that seek to evoke experiences of psychic order and disorder, Voegelin's Plato thought he could best communicate his mystical insights into the divine ground.

The significance of the *Gorgias* was, for Voegelin, the powerful way in which Plato raised *the* timeless question of political philosophy: the question regarding who man is in relation to God. Plato's genius was to raise the question as his opposition to the spiritual closure of the sophistic way of life; the question was both a diagnosis of that disorder and its healing remedy, revealing that the experience of death illuminates the

way to life. Besides articulating the "decisive question," Plato's *Gorgias* symbolized

with unsurpassed clarity the relationship between individual character and knowledge of

the order of being as it is discerned in one's exchanges with others, and Plato developed a

timeless portrayal of the enemy of the philosophic life. Plato's investigation of

existential communication and conclusions regarding the importance of a shared

understanding on the level of *pathos*, moreover, would become the basis for Voegelin's

approach to philosophic texts and his own mode of communicating his insights into the

order of being. Finally, Voegelin continually returned to the *Gorgias* throughout his

career for its ability to illuminate the "intelligible advance of meaning in the process of

history, marked by the irreversible appearance of the philosopher," and its insight that

"man's life is structured by death."[59] Although he thought it was Plato's earliest and

most passionate expression of his insights into the quest for God, Voegelin argued that

the *Gorgias* contained within it a complete account of the philosophic life and all the

seeds of Plato's mature vision of order.

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[59] See Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 187; "Immortality," in *CW* 12: 91.

CHAPTER SIX

Voegelin on Plato's *Republic*

Voegelin once had the opportunity to remark that "The *Republic* is no system. It

is an analysis of order in society based on the insight concerning the *epekeina*, the divine

reality in the beyond." He clarified what he meant by adding: "The Platonic *epekeina* is

not a philosophical notion. It is the expression of an experience of tension in relation to a

beyond of *ta onta*, of the things in the cosmos."[1] Voegelin thought the *Republic*

contained Plato's reflective analysis of who the philosopher is, what experiences he

undergoes, and his relation to the other participants in the community of being. I

discussed Voegelin's conclusions about Plato's view of philosophy and the philosopher

in chapter four. Therefore, even though the *Republic* was, according to Voegelin, the

dialogue that illuminated Plato's thought on these subjects, I use this chapter to examine

how the dialogue treats the particular theme of justice, which is the order of the

philosopher's soul. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to remember that Voegelin thought

Plato's philosopher was the individual who lovingly sought the divine reality that he

recognized as being simultaneously beyond human experience and the measure of and

force of order in human experience. The *Republic*'s Cave Parable provides a masterful

expression of this discovery, while its concluding Myth of Er articulates the

consequences of the situation for the health of the individual soul: unless one lives

permanently in awareness of the tension of existence and allows himself to be formed by

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[1] See Voegelin, "Structures of Consciousness," in *CW* 33: 368-69. The occasion was a panel held
in 1978 at York University in Toronto.

the divine measure, one's "life" will indeed be characterized as death. Voegelin thought

that the latter insight was a "saving tale" that "must be saved."[2] That is, the order of the

soul exemplified by the person of Socrates and expounded in the work of Plato had to be

brought to the fore of human consciousness in order to prevent it from falling into

oblivion.[3]

This chapter proceeds along the lines of the previous one. After providing a brief

overview of the dialogue, I outline Strauss's interpretation as a useful backdrop to

Voegelin's interpretation. Then I turn to Voegelin's analysis of the *Republic* and situate

it within the context of his corpus. The examinations of Strauss's and Voegelin's

interpretations will focus on the same four key topics: A) what each thinker brings to his

interpretation of the dialogue, B) how the theme of justice is developed and what it

means, C) the intended audience and the substance of Socrates' (or Plato's) efforts to

communicate, and D) the outcome or effect of the dialogue, its key teaching. Because

both Strauss's and Voegelin's analyses of the *Republic* are quite lengthy, which is

appropriate since Plato's dialogue was too, this chapter will be longer than the previous

one. Even so, many important topics must, of necessity, be left untreated.

<p style="text-align:center;">*The Drama of Plato's* Republic</p>

The *Republic* is probably the most-widely read of Plato's dialogues. It is a

narrated dialogue, divided into ten books, and is primarily concerned with the nature of

justice. Socrates is compelled to take up the question by a group of men whom he

encounters on his way back to Athens. Socrates had been attending a festival at the

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[2] See Voegelin, "Structures of Consciousness," 368. See Plato *Republic*, 621c.

[3] See Voegelin, forward to *Anamnesis*, in *CW* 6: 37.

Piraeus when Polemarchus suggests that Socrates and Glaucon (Socrates' younger companion and Plato's brother) join him and the others at his home for dinner and conversation, after which they will attend the later events of the festival together. The question concerning the nature of justice arises out of a discussion between Socrates and Polemarchus' aging father Cephalus. Several possible definitions of justice are articulated, including: 1) telling the truth and giving back what is due to others, 2) benefiting friends and harming enemies, and 3) whatever is in the interest of the stronger person (or persons). None of these answers is fully satisfactory to the group and, at the beginning of Book Two, Glaucon and Adeimantus (Plato's other brother) passionately urge Socrates to praise justice for its own sake. The young men want to know what it is and how it contributes to human happiness.

In a long series of complex arguments, Socrates and the others look for justice in both the city and the individual soul. The city in which justice is sought is one which the group founds together in speech and it has three key phases. First is a "healthy" city, in which each citizen performs the art for which he is best suited and only the most basic needs are fulfilled. Second is the "luxurious" city, which is founded after some of the interlocutors protest that the healthy city, given its austerity, is hardly a place where human beings will be happy. However, the introduction of luxuries into the city brings with it a whole host of other concerns that must be addressed (e.g. a greater and more diverse population and the need for warfare), and the group discovers that it must be "purified" of its feverishness through a specific educational program for the guardian class. Third is the city that is ruled by philosophers—an arrangement which Socrates says will be met with more astonishment than the community of wives and children

which was included in the purified city. In this context, the question of education is revisited and Socrates introduces the Forms, which somehow ground human knowledge of everything that is. Here also are found the famous Cave Parable and the depiction of the divided line of knowledge.

The group also looks for justice in the individual soul, working under the assumption that there is a correspondence between the soul and the city. Socrates suggests that just as there are distinctive parts of a city (the artisans or producers, the warriors or guardians, and the philosophers or rulers), there are also three parts of the soul, *viz.* the desiring, the spirited, and the rational. Souls, like cities, may be ordered well or poorly depending on which part guides the operations of the whole. The group undertakes to see what justice looks like for the individual and whether individual justice does, in fact, simulate the justice of the city. In Book Eight, the argument concerning the nature of injustice, which was raised at the end of Book Four, is resumed with a special emphasis on the correspondence of city and soul. The group investigates the four forms of corrupted men and cities. At the end of this treatment, they arrive at the conclusion that the philosopher, who is most just, is indeed happier than the tyrant, who is most unjust. The dialogue then moves toward conclusion with a reconsideration of poetry and the appropriate way to portray human beings' virtues and vices. At the very end of the *Republic*, Socrates relates a tale told by the Pamphylian, Er, which emphasizes the importance of being just in this life so that, when one is faced in Hades with the choice of a paradigm of life, one may be able to choose wisely.

Backdrop: Strauss on the Republic

Leo Strauss's primary treatment of Plato's *Republic* occurs in a lengthy chapter in *The City and Man*, a challenging work that developed out of a series of lectures the Professor delivered in 1962. Aside from a short introduction, the chapter on the *Republic* holds a central place in the monograph. Strauss's treatment of the *Republic* is situated in a work which was conceived as a response to the crisis of the West through the serious investigation of the claims of classical political philosophy. We do well to remember that for Strauss a "serious investigation" required one to begin, as it were, by understanding ancient authors as they understood themselves. Strauss emphasized this guideline by mentioning "the fact that there is a difference between Christian and primitive Platonism," and by beginning his chapter with a short refresher on how one should approach the enigma of the Platonic dialogue. Although restrictions on length preclude me from treating Strauss with the concern with which he treated his ancient subject, I here try to show how Strauss's quest to understand the *Republic* as its author originally intended yields an interesting interpretation significantly different from Voegelin's.

What Strauss Brings to His Interpretation of the Dialogue

In the previous chapters, I have showed that Strauss thought two key considerations factored into an adequate interpretation of the Platonic texts. The tension between philosophy and the city is the first of these, and the second—the importance of accounting for "abstractions" in the texts—is critically related to it. That is, the tension between philosophy and the city requires the philosopher to incorporate abstractions into his work, but it is only when an interpreter notices and unravels these implicit abstractions that he discovers the existence and nature of that tension. Like his lectures

on the *Gorgias*, Strauss's interpretation of Plato's *Republic* is predicated upon these considerations, and for that reason arrives at similar conclusions regarding the teaching that Socrates intended to convey, which I address below. Also, because the tension between philosophy and the city is central to Strauss's analysis of the theme of the *Republic* (justice), I will treat it in the next section. Here, therefore, I examine the particular abstractions that Strauss found in the *Republic* as well as some other considerations that factor into his treatment.

Strauss mentioned several specific, yet related, abstractions that illuminate the teaching of Plato's *Republic*: the abstraction from procreation, from the body, from eros, from the soul, and from nature. The first three of these are given the most attention throughout Strauss's treatment of the *Republic*, and the gist of Strauss's complex argument goes something like this. The just or good city (as it emerges in speech from the healthy city) depends on the institution of communism which includes limitations on private property, the sharing of women and children, and not distinguishing on the basis of sex in matters of education and activity. The communistic practices, Strauss argued, were incredible to Socrates' interlocutors because they failed to take into account—or abstracted from—the normal way of doing things. In the first stage of the founding (the "healthy city"), Socrates mentions bodily needs like food, housing, and clothing, but does not speak of procreation, "that natural need which is satisfied naturally."[4] The needs he does mention are provided for through man's art, a point which Strauss thinks is crucial to Socrates' effort to portray the healthy city as an association of artisans and "to effect as

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[4] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 96.

complete a coincidence as possible between the city and the arts."[5] By abstracting from

procreation, and by thus emphasizing the importance of art, Socrates was trying to show

that *knowledge* of what is useful could direct private interest toward the service of the

public good.[6] Because procreation is natural, directed toward the exclusive interests of

the individuals involved (rather than the common good), and is motivated by desire rather

than knowledge, Socrates strategically leaves it out of his discussion of the healthy city.

In this way, Strauss argued, "we are forced to reconsider the natural character of the

healthy city."[7] But before suggesting that the healthy city is under divine providence,

which is the alternative to nature, one must, Strauss argued, note the "silence of Socrates

and Adeimantus about the gods' efficacy in the healthy city."[8]

　　For obvious reasons, the abstraction from procreation is connected to the

abstractions from the body and from eros that Strauss saw in Socrates' further

development of the city in speech.[9] The dialogue abstracts from the body because justice,

which is concerned at least in some degree with relations between individuals, depends

upon transcending the radically private and self-interested force that is constituted by the

body. Strauss argued that "That which is by nature private or a man's own is the body

and only the body (464d; cf. *Laws* 739c) . . . The needs or desires of the body induce men

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　　　[5] Ibid.

　　　[6] See ibid., 79, 112, and 135: "The preference given to the arts proper which are concerned with the useful rather than with a certain kind of the beautifully pleasant (389e12-390a5) is in agreement with the notion that the good city is a city of artisans or with the abstraction from *eros*."

　　　[7] Ibid., 96.

　　　[8] Ibid.

　　　[9] Ibid., 111.

to extend the sphere of the private, of what is each man's own, as far as they can."[10] The

dialogue also abstracts from eros (in a qualified way, since philosophy becomes thematic

in the dialogue[11]) because

> It seems that there is a tension between *eros* and the city and hence between *eros*
> and justice: only through the depreciation of *eros* can the city come into its own.
> *Eros* obeys its own laws, not the laws of the city however good; lovers are not
> necessarily fellow citizens (or fellow party-members); in the good city *eros* is
> simply subjected to the requirements of the city.[12]

In Strauss's view, therefore, Plato—or at least Plato's Socrates—conceived of "love of

one's own" as the primary obstacle to harmonious social living. Since all human beings

depend upon the city, the natural love of one's own must be mediated by some force that

aims at promoting and protecting the common good. For the philosopher, this force is

knowledge—especially the knowledge that his way of life is intrinsically satisfying and

that the maintenance of that way of life requires a social order that is at least not hostile to

it. Because the philosopher's eros is properly directed toward what is good in itself,

wisdom, it is unproblematic in the good city.[13] The forceful subjugation of eros, the

body, and procreation, are not necessary for the philosopher. Therefore, the abstractions

from them function as rhetorical or pedagogical devices designed by the philosopher for

the benefit of the non-philosophic individual whose eros is not guided toward what is

good in itself. By depreciating eros, Socrates is able to moderate the natural desires of

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[10] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 115.

[11] Ibid., 112.

[12] Ibid., 111.

[13] Ibid., 127ff. Strauss noted throughout his chapter that the drama reveals the good city to be impossible. Nevertheless, as the good city emerges in speech, the philosopher proves to be just in the two senses Strauss explored: first, self-sufficiency, and second, serving one's fellows or obeying the law. Strauss also argued that the abstraction from eros prevents the suggestion that the philosopher's rule is motivated by love for his country.

his interlocutors, replacing private ends such as glory, honor, wealth, or power with public ends, especially civic virtue.[14]

By considering the abstractions from procreation, the body, and eros, the careful reader or potential philosopher might discover two other significant abstractions. As Strauss pointed out,

> The *Republic* cannot bring to light the nature of the soul because it abstracts from the body and from *eros*; by abstracting from the body and from *eros*, the *Republic* in fact abstracts from the soul; the *Republic* abstracts from nature; this abstraction is necessary if justice as full dedication to the common good of a particular city is to be praised as choiceworthy for its own sake; and why this praise is necessary should not be in need of an argument.[15]

Strauss went on to suggest that the careful reader might discover that the necessity of such abstractions is tied to Plato's efforts to show the natural limits of the city (especially regarding its ability to be just and to be in accord with nature, i.e. the philosophic, or highest, nature), to raise and to help other individuals to raise the question about the "whole," and to illuminate the permanent features of political life.[16] If Strauss was correct in suggesting that Plato sought these things, his argument that the *Republic* as whole was meant to be an exercise in moderation would certainly find support.

How the Theme of Justice Is Developed and What it Means

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Strauss's interpretation of the *Republic* is his treatment of the theme of justice. After reflecting on how one should interpret any

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[14] See especially ibid., 60: "the first thing which Plato does to his readers is to make them austere"; and 64-65: "The action of the *Republic* thus proves to be an act of moderation, of self-control regarding the pleasures and even the needs, of the body and regarding the pleasures of seeing sights or of gratifying curiosity."

[15] Ibid., 138.

[16] Ibid.

Platonic dialogue (guidelines that I discussed in chapter three), Strauss begins his

analysis of the *Republic* by noting the setting in which Plato chose to locate the

conversation about justice and the types of characters that were involved. That the

dialogue takes place during a novel festival among a company of Athenians and

foreigners, some of whom have names of historical persons who would become "victims

of an abortive attempt made by most unjust men to restore justice," signals that the

political circumstances back of the speeches were characterized by decay.[17] Old Athens

was in decline, yet the new, democratic climate seemed unsuited to restore political

health. Such a setting prepares the reader, Strauss argued, "for the possibility that the

restoration attempted in the *Republic* will not take place on the political plane."[18] For

Strauss, therefore, a tension emerges insofar as justice in the city was integral to political

health even though politics would prove incapable of securing justice in the highest

sense.

Strauss thought that the different suggestions concerning the nature of justice had

to be considered in light of the interlocutors who presented them, with special attention

given to each interlocutor's preoccupations, interests, and concerns. For example, in

order to ascertain the full meaning of Cephalus' implication that justice is truthfulness

and paying one's debts, Strauss thought an interpreter must consider the several qualities

particular to Cephalus that are explicit or implied in the text: he is a wealthy father who

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[17] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 63. Voegelin too thought that one must consider the dialogues in light of Athenian decline.

[18] Ibid. Voegelin would agree that the restoration would not occur in the realm of politics, but that seems to be the extent of his agreement. Voegelin would make the case that the restoration was a spiritual one with a genuine possibility of harmonizing political institutions and the philosophic quest; Strauss did not venture such a conclusion. He was more cautious, suggesting that through the Socratic restoration "the feeding of the body and of the senses is replaced by the feeding of the mind." (64).

seems to stand for the most natural authority and represents the order founded on reverence for the ancestral; as a young man he was driven by his sexual desires, now he is on the verge of dying and has become concerned with his fate in the afterlife. His arguments concerning moderation, with one exception, pertain to his present state only. And, because he does not stay for the entire discussion of justice, Cephalus' justice, Strauss inferred, was "not in need of speeches or reasons."[19] Each of these details qualifies the definition of justice Cephalus puts forth and helps Plato's reader to understand how different types of people arrive at their particular conceptions of justice. Strauss noted similar types of details about each of the important interlocutors. Thrasymachus, a foreign rhetorician, shares Socrates' eroticism and is the only one who has an art to defend; Polemarchus is set to inherit his father's wealth and has democratic tendencies; Glaucon loves honor, poetry, and luxuries; and Adeimantus is stern, austere, and anti-democratic. Because Strauss thought Plato's texts were governed by logographic necessity, culling out each of these details and determining their bearing on the definitions of justice that were presented became a crucial feature of Strauss's interpretive endeavor.

In addition to figuring out the specific characteristics of each interlocutor, Strauss's effort to uncover the full extent of Plato's meaning led him to investigate the logic behind Plato's placement of the various definitions and groupings within the overarching scheme of the dialogue, paying special attention to the positions at the centers of these placements. This point will become clearer with examples. Examining the three successive views of justice presented in Book One in light of Plato's literary

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[19] See ibid., 65-69.

structure, Strauss thought that Plato might have been implying that the third view

presented by Thrasymachus (*viz*. that justice is the advantage of the stronger) was the

most important:

> The discussion with [Thrasymachus] forms by far the largest part of the first
> book, although not its central part. In a sense, however, it forms the center of the
> *Republic* as a whole, namely, if one divides the work in accordance with the
> change of Socrates' interlocutors: (1) Cephalus-Polemarchus (father and son), (2)
> Thrasymachus, (3) Glaucon and Adeimantus (brother and brother); Thrasymachus
> stands alone as Socrates does but his aloneness resembles rather that of the
> impious Cyclops.[20]

This passage shows one of the many ways Strauss thought Plato deliberately grouped the

interlocutors. Plato did so, Strauss postulated, in order to help careful readers to consider,

for example, how the similarities and differences between Socrates and Thrasymachus

and between natural communities and private individuals affect the theme of justice.

Later on in his chapter, Strauss would note that Cephalus' definition of justice is "a

subdivision of justice in Thrasymachus' sense," and that "Polemarchus and Socrates

belong together as defenders of the common good."[21] Whereas the grouping discussed in

the block quotation is based on the interlocutor's relations with each other, the later

coupling of Polemarchus and Socrates is based on the implications of the interlocutors'

respective definitions of justice. Both groupings, however, mirror some aspect of the

"heterogeneity of being" that Strauss thought Plato was exploring. Knowing what Plato

thought of the whole of being, or the whole of any of its parts (e.g. the phenomenon of

justice), depended on identifying and integrating the various groupings, along with the

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[20] Ibid., 74.

[21] Ibid., 77.

order of their evolutions, into a coherent theory concerning what drove the logographic necessity of the Platonic text.

Looking at these and other factors, Strauss came to the conclusion that Plato made the ambivalence of justice a core topic of his dialogue. The *Republic* treats two "senses" of justice: the highest justice, or the philosopher's justice, is distinguished from the inferior justice, the type associated with the city and non-philosophic individuals. The philosopher's justice is "natural" in the sense that its superiority derives from the logical order of the cosmos, which the philosopher knows through reasoning. The city's justice is "natural" in the sense that it entails the most common, seemingly efficient way of doing things and opining about morality. Although both senses of justice were present in Plato's mind from the beginning, the careful reader discovers them only by paying attention to the dramatic details that contextualize the various speeches. Without such careful attention to Plato's literary devices, neither the questions raised about justice nor justice itself come into full view. Some of the dialogue's most important questions about justice include whether justice is simple or complex, that is, whether it is one thing in all circumstances or whether it has various particular manifestations. Also, justice seems on the one hand to require complete self-sufficiency—it is present in a city, which is, unlike the (non-philosophic) individual, is an exclusive and autonomous entity. On the other hand, however, it is a social or relational virtue that consists in giving to others what is fitting for them and therefore presupposes individuals' dependence upon one another and upon the city as a whole. Further, Strauss noted the important question concerning whether justice aims at securing the individual's good or the common good. And, finally,

the drama considers whether justice is for the sake of the useful (the good) or the beautiful (the noble).

Each of these questions points to a tension within justice and, one would hope, helps even not-so-careful readers to develop a sense of how complex something like justice is. In other words, raising these questions might help any reader to gain some insight into his own ignorance. For the more careful reader, however, these tensions generate, in addition to an awareness of fundamental ignorance, a more thorough understanding of the permanent problems that inhere in the human condition. It is on this level that the *Republic*'s restoration will occur: the philosophic individual's mind. Strauss argued that the "part of the *Republic* which deals with philosophy is the most important part of the book. Accordingly, it transmits the answer to the question regarding justice to the extent to which that answer is given in the *Republic*."[22] The answer, which speaks to each of the questions or tensions detailed above, is that "only the philosopher can be truly just;" only he is capable of discovering an adequate cosmology, derives happiness from his intrinsically satisfying activity, and is self-sufficient.[23]

This "answer" cannot be the whole answer to the question (or questions) concerning justice, however, if one supposes that Plato had a good reason (that is, a reason directed toward furthering insight rather than aesthetic enjoyment alone) for having his Socrates converse with men who were primarily concerned with civic life and pursuits other than philosophy. The fuller answer to the question regarding justice emerges upon consideration of the possibility that Plato was trying to alert careful readers

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[22] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 127.

[23] Ibid.

to the tension between the philosopher and the city which occurs because the philosopher and the city each desire very different and often conflicting kinds of things. Socrates' intimations about the philosopher's justice (Strauss cited *Republic* 487a2-5 and 583a in particular) are qualified by the requirement that philosophers be compelled to rule the city, which is justice in a different sense, *viz.* serving one's fellow men and obeying the law.[24] The dialogue, however, obscures this distinction and thereby obscures the conclusion that only the philosopher's justice is choiceworthy for its own sake, without regard to the consequences, rather than being merely a necessary feature of political life.[25]

Why Plato would obscure this point is intelligible in light of Strauss's determination that the philosopher finds it necessary to mediate the opposition between himself and the city upon which he depends. The transformation of philosophy into political philosophy was, for Strauss's Plato, justice in what might be called the second-highest sense. Justice in the highest sense is purely philosophic. It is simple, grounded in self-sufficiency, secures the individual philosopher's good, and is for the sake of the beautiful; it is, as Strauss suggested "the advantage of the stronger, *i.e.* of the most superior man."[26] But given the contours of the human condition, the highest justice will never become a political reality; the just city is only, Strauss argued, a fiction developed in speech. The best human beings can hope for, even in the fictitious city, is rule by philosophers who, looking at the consequences attending the various types of justice, will

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[24] Ibid., 128.

[25] Ibid. See also 122, where Strauss suggested that "in the *Republic* philosophy is not introduced as the end of man but as a means for realizing justice and therefore the just city."

[26] Ibid., 128.

choose to concern themselves with the city or, in other words, with the "advantage of the weaker, *i.e.* of the inferior men."[27] In actual cities, the prospects for highest justice are even lower. As in the *Gorgias*, Strauss thought the *Republic* implied that the philosopher must enlist the help of rhetoric in order to convince the city of the superiority of the second-best justice to the justice that is most natural to it.[28] The justice that is natural, or common, to the city is *analogous* to the highest, philosophic justice (which seeks its own good, etc.), but insofar as it lacks the guidance of wisdom, it is far inferior to the second-best justice that occurs at the intersection of philosophy and political power.

The Intended Audience and the Substance of Socrates' Efforts to Communicate

Strauss's Plato intended to speak to both potential philosophers and non-philosophers, but had different teachings for each group. Strauss stated this at the outset of his chapter on the *Republic*:

> We may conclude that the Platonic dialogue says different things to different people—not accidentally, as every writing does, but that it is so contrived as to say different things to different people, or that it is radically ironical. The Platonic dialogue, if properly read, reveals itself to possess the flexibility or adaptability of oral communication.[29]

On Strauss's reading, therefore, Plato's Socrates seems able to tailor his speeches to the needs of his interlocutors in order to convey Plato's teaching to his various audiences. An astute interpreter discovers the general themes that Strauss's Plato was concerned to

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[27] Strauss, *The City and Man*, 128.

[28] See ibid., 123-24. This is a complex point, for Strauss argued that Thrasymachus' art is necessary for persuading "the many" that the philosopher's justice is salutary for the city, but he qualified the argument by noting that "the many" to which Socrates' statements are relevant exists only in speech. At 127, Strauss suggested that rhetoric will ultimately prove insufficient to bring about the best type of justice for the city. This complex point was also at the heart of Strauss's discussions of the *Gorgias*.

[29] Ibid., 52.

communicate (*viz.* the intrinsic goodness of philosophy and the resulting tension between the philosopher and the city) by examining the ways that Plato's Socrates (and other interlocutors) engage each other and the particular themes of interest. In the case of the *Republic*, Socrates' most important interlocutors seem to be, according to Strauss, Thrasymachus and Glaucon. The lesson Socrates will teach Thrasymachus is his role within the just city. To Glaucon, Socrates will teach the desirability of defending the common good and will give him glimpses of the philosophic life in order that, if his soul has the potential for nobility, he might direct his eros toward the pursuit of wisdom.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Strauss was interested in the alliance of the rhetorician (Gorgias) and the philosopher (Socrates).[30] Both are united in their common task, Strauss commented in his lectures, of persuading the demos to obey the philosophers and therefore to promote the establishment of the best political order possible.[31] The pairing occurs again in the *Republic*, this time with Thrasymachus holding the title of rhetorician. And, although Strauss argued that Polemarchus' definition of justice was closely linked to Socrates' insofar as both were concerned with the common good, he also argued that Thrasymachus and Socrates were united in their erotic nature and conception of justice as an art—something that is directed by knowledge and can be taught.[32] Moreover, both Thrasymachus and Socrates have a personal interest in the spread of both senses of justice—justice understood as the

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[30] Strauss mentioned this parallel at ibid., 134.

[31] Strauss transcripts, 1963, Lecture 10.

[32] On Socrates' agreement with Polemarchus, see Strauss, *The City and Man*, 77. Socrates' understanding of justice is still more profound than Thrasymachus' because the latter does not raise the question of what is just according to nature. Still, by "elaborating a Thrasymachean point" Socrates shows that he thinks Thrasymachus' view contributes something to the arguments (86).

advantage of the stronger and as giving to one's fellows what is good for them. For Thrasymachus, who is the only interlocutor that practices an art for his living, justice is something which guides (and is thus superior to) lawmaking and something which treats the private good as supreme. Socrates compels Thrasymachus to admit that justice needs to benefit both givers and receivers, but does so on dubious grounds which leave Thrasymachus' principle intact.[33] On Strauss's reading, "the difference between Socrates and Thrasymachus is then merely this: according to Thrasymachus, justice is an unnecessary evil whereas according to Socrates it is a necessary evil."[34]

If Socrates and Thrasymachus share a basic understanding of the fundamentals of justice, it remains to say what Socrates might be trying to communicate to the feisty rhetorician. We remember from the chapter on the *Gorgias* that Strauss thought Plato was trying to show that rhetoric might be able to bridge (though only partially) the gap between the city and the philosopher. In the *Republic*, Thrasymachus is the rhetorician and he is or plays the city.[35] Examining the kinds of arguments that Socrates uses against Thrasymachus and looking at how the latter's comportment evolves over the course of the dialogue, Strauss suggested that Socrates' engagement with him was an effort to tame him, to purge him of his desire to teach, and thereby to incorporate him into the just city. This engagement becomes effective by Book Six, where Socrates asserts that he and Thrasymachus have become friends even though they were never enemies before (*Republic* 498d). Thrasymachus' art, directed by philosophy, critically contributes to the

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[33] Ibid., 82.

[34] Ibid., 83.

[35] Ibid., 78. Strauss stated both that Thrasymachus is the city and that he is not the city, but only plays or imitates it, being rather a distorted image of it.

task of persuading the multitude of non-philosophers to allow themselves to be ruled by the philosophers. Nevertheless, Strauss reminded his readers that Socrates' just city is only a fiction and its multitude, which is persuadable by Thrasymachus, is very different from the actual *demos*. Here again, Strauss's Plato was teaching the careful reader about the permanent problems.

Commenting on Socrates' arguments in Book One, Strauss stated: "What Socrates does in the Thrasymachus section would be inexcusable if he had not done it in order to provoke the passionate reaction of Glaucon, a reaction which he presents as entirely unexpected."[36] Strauss suggested that many of the *Republic*'s speeches are directed toward the education of Glaucon, the young interlocutor who, like Socrates, has an erotic nature. A question arises as to whether the education of Glaucon is primarily intellectual or moral, that is, whether Socrates held out the possibility that Glaucon had the natural gifts for philosophy or whether he was merely capable of having his thumotic nature directed toward the common good and being made to see how philosophy could help to promote civic order. Strauss noted that, on one hand, Socrates' discussions of the highest themes in the *Republic* occur mainly with Glaucon, and it is Glaucon who seems uniquely situated by nature and by circumstance to exercise political power under the tutelage of philosophy. On the other hand, Glaucon contributes little substance to the arguments; rather, he is led by Socrates to the various conclusions. Moreover, at the end of the dialogue (to say nothing of Socrates' discussion of the Ideas), Socrates finds himself returning to the theme of poetry and resorting to the language of myth, or of rhetoric.

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[36] Ibid., 85.

The importance of this return should not be understated. Strauss noted,

> The second discussion of poetry constitutes the *center* of that part of the *Republic* in which the conversation descends from the highest theme. This cannot be surprising, for philosophy as quest for the truth is the highest activity of man and poetry is not concerned with the truth.[37]

In Book Ten, Socrates speaks poetically about the immortality of the soul and the rewards and punishments (both human and divine) that a man will receive for justice both while he is alive and in the afterlife.[38] On Strauss's reading, these discussions are not philosophical: they are tailored to fit Glaucon's moral needs and they demonstrate the extent to which Glaucon is incapable either of knowing what the just man is or of being just for its own sake. The philosopher must deign to speak in an inferior manner because, Strauss suggested,

> It cannot be the duty of a genuinely just man like Socrates to drive weaker men to despair of the possibility of some order and decency in human affairs, and least of all those who, by virtue of their inclinations, their descent, and their abilities, may have some public responsibility. For Glaucon it is more than enough that he will remember for the rest of his days and perhaps transmit to others the many grand and perplexing sights which Socrates has conjured for his benefit in that memorable night in the Piraeus.[39]

For Strauss, therefore, Socrates was trying to communicate a moral teaching to Glaucon and the arguments in the *Republic* must be considered in light of the needs of Glaucon's soul, which are themselves considered in light of the needs of the philosopher and the city. Recognizing such a fact depends on being acutely aware of the dramatic details in

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[37] Ibid., 134 (my emphasis).

[38] Ibid., 137. Strauss thought the "proofs" offered by Socrates were based on faulty logic or were, in other words, rhetorical.

[39] Ibid.

Plato's text and leads the interpreter to discover what Plato was trying to convey about

the prospects for philosophy and the way a philosopher must treat those around him.

The Outcome or Effect of the Dialogue: the Key Teaching

In the previous chapter, I discussed Strauss's conclusions regarding the key

teachings of the *Gorgias*. Many of those conclusions are repeated in Strauss's evaluation

of the *Republic*. For example, in the *Gorgias*, Strauss thought Plato was questioning the

effectiveness both of philosophic and rhetorical *logos*. That question is raised again in

the *Republic* through the creation of a fictional just city and through the dramatic, though

ultimately ineffective, effort to persuade Glaucon to take up the quest for wisdom.

Strauss argued in his chapter on the *Republic*:

> It is against nature that there should ever be a "cessation of evils," "for it is
> necessary that there should always be something opposed to the good, and evil
> necessarily wanders about the mortal nature and the region here." It is against
> nature that rhetoric should have the power ascribed to it: that it should be able to
> overcome the resistance rooted in men's love of their own and ultimately in the
> body; as Aristotle puts it, the soul can rule the body only despotically, not by
> persuasion; the *Republic* repeats, in order to overcome it, the error of the sophists
> regarding the power of speech. . . . the *Republic* conveys the broadest and deepest
> analysis of political idealism ever made.[40]

Plato's dramatic critique of political idealism aims at moderating individual's

expectations concerning the potential of either politics or philosophy to dissolve the

permanent tension between the city and man. In other words, Plato's *Republic* seeks a

kind of justice on the part of every individual that consists in recognizing the limits of the

human condition. To be sure, the permanent tensions may be mediated, and the *Republic*

raises some possible ways of doing this. For example, a balanced education that focuses

on music and gymnastic coupled with a variety of institutional and rhetorical devices can

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[40] Ibid., 127. Strauss's quotations refer to Plato *Theaetetus* 176a5-8; *Laws* 896e4-6.

help to train souls to tame their instinctive love of their own. Nevertheless, the city as city will never know genuine justice as such; and the philosopher, who might know genuine justice, will never be able to put it into practice in an unadulterated way. To teach individuals to how to comport themselves given this situation (even if most individuals failed to understand the situation fully) was the ultimate aim of Plato's great political dialogue.

<p align="center">*Voegelin on the* Republic</p>

Before examining Voegelin's interpretation of the *Republic*, I briefly situate his treatment of the dialogue in the context of his corpus. Because I have described the contours of Voegelin's career in previous chapters, the following remarks will be summative only.

Voegelin's primary analysis of the *Republic* occurs in *Plato and Aristotle*. Voegelin found in the *Republic* a science of order that could provide general theoretical principles capable of functioning as instruments of social critique. He looked at the dialogue as Plato's therapeutic response to Athenian political and spiritual decline and discovered in it various insights into the structure of politics and the soul. In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin paid special attention to this aspect of Plato's science of order and argued that a genuine understanding of politics required one to confront the Platonic insights into the structure of personal and political order. Voegelin's analysis in *Order and History* as well as in *The New Science of Politics* concerned itself primarily with the ways in which the transcendent ground penetrates into individual and social psyche and thereby facilitates the manifestation of existential order and leads to theoretical insights into a philosophy of history.

As Voegelin's interests became more meditative, he came to emphasize in a more complex way the problems of language and theology that Plato symbolized in the *Republic*. For example, in the German version of *Anamnesis*, Voegelin examined how Plato's mythopoesis was an act of "remembrance"—of bringing back to the fore of human consciousness in a more precise way the knowledge that had been submerged by closure to mystical experience.[41] At a conference in 1978, Voegelin continued to explore how the Beyond (Plato's *epikeina*) motivated the symbolization of "saving tales" and gave rise to the insights concerning whence such tales arose. And in the essay "Quod Deus Dicitur," Voegelin would emphasize Plato's understanding of the negative character of human knowledge concerning the divine Beyond. Whereas during the time when Voegelin's interests focused on a philosophy of history and examined the significance of Plato's articulation of new symbols to express the human-divine encounter, his later investigations centered on probing the extent to which Plato thought "knowing" the divine meant having a profound glimpse into what humans cannot know about the divine; and that even that recognition of ignorance derived from an acute sense of human foolishness rather than an accurate sense of the transcendence of the divine.

What Voegelin Brings to His Interpretation of the Dialogue

Voegelin's treatment of the *Republic* is less impassioned than his treatment of the *Gorgias*. This shift coincides with the mood Voegelin attributed to Plato as he wrote the dialogue. Whereas the *Gorgias* had the character of a "spiritual outburst," Voegelin thought that the *Republic* was a more reflective inquiry into and articulation of a science of order. Because Voegelin thought that understanding Plato's insights depended on

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[41] Voegelin, forward to *Anamnesis*, in *CW* 6:37.

imaginatively recreating Plato's experiences, Voegelin adopted a similar reflective mood

and tone as he wrote in his chapter on the *Republic*. He still, to be sure, related the

ancient insights to his contemporary situation and was critical of other interpreter's

treatments of the texts.[42] But this time Voegelin couched his application of the Platonic

insights to contemporary phenomena in more restrained language.

One example of this restraint is that rather than criticizing the gnostic motives of

his contemporaries, Voegelin chose to examine how they had overlooked Plato's

preferred method of using opposing pairs of symbols in order to convey the concrete

struggle against disorder. Voegelin treated the mistake as an oversight: because Platonic

philosophy had triumphed over its opponents in the historical struggle for order, the

opponents' symbols had fallen into disuse. "The loss of the negative half of the pair,"

Voegelin argued, "has deprived the positive half of its flavor of resistance and opposition,

and left it with a quality of abstractness which is utterly alien to the concreteness of

Plato's thought."[43] Voegelin's analysis aimed to correct such interpretive errors by

reinstating the lost half of the pair and it aimed to show how Plato's science of order not

only illuminated the basic structure of human existence, but also explained the

occurrence of such interpretive errors. Voegelin, like his Plato, was creating a science of

order amidst the disorder of his times and paying special attention to how speech could

reflect the experience of existence between the opposing poles of the *metaxy*. Since the

initial psychic aversion to disorder, which spurs the quest for order, had already occurred

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[42] See for example, *Plato and Aristotle*, 80, where Voegelin links the final stage in Plato's exegesis of the stages of social corruption (at *Republic* 362a) with the tactics of the modern political mass movements. Also, speaking of Plato's construction of the "noble lie" (413c-415d), Voegelin stated that it was "one of the bitterest pages in a work that heaps so much bitter scorn on Athens" (106).

[43] Ibid., 65.

(as was symbolized in the *Gorgias*), the constructive efforts to build a science of order could operate through more analytical, restrained language; this is precisely how Voegelin's *Republic* chapter comes across and how Voegelin thought Plato intended the *Republic* to be read.

The form of Voegelin's analysis of the *Republic* helps to demonstrate the extent to which he thought interpreting a philosophic text required the interpreter to recreate the author's original experiences for himself. As I observed in chapter three, he began by constructing a detailed schema of the organizational structure of the *Republic*, which he identified as the first step of analysis insofar as it had to be based "on a correct interpretation of Plato's intentions."[44] Of course, Voegelin thought that Plato intended to convey a science that could explain how social and personal order penetrate the human condition and he thought that Plato used the literary structure of the dialogues to mirror the *metaxy*. Voegelin's rendition of Plato's schema is therefore organized around the central part of the dialogue (471c-521c), which symbolizes "an embodiment in historical reality of the idea of the Good, of the Agathon."[45] The central part, in other words, expresses the formative influx of the divine ground into the individual's psyche and from there into concrete socio-political structures. Radiating from that center are successive peripheral parts which comprise the "main body" of the dialogue and treat the embodiment, genesis, and decline of the Idea—the divine force of order—in both material and psychic reality.[46] The main body is also framed on either side by an

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[44] Ibid., 49.

[45] Ibid., 47.

[46] Ibid. Voegelin offered a prefatory analysis of the schema at the outset of his chapter and situated it within the context of other significant schemata, including those of Professors Francis Cornford

Introduction and a Conclusion, and by a Prologue and Epilogue. Among other things, these endcaps contain important symbolizations of the psychic experiences that illuminate the nature of the noetic quest and the structure of the *metaxy*. Voegelin thought that Plato's careful construction of the schema grew out of the attunement of his soul to the divine ground, and he thought that the construction was intended to be salvific—that is, the construction was aimed at evoking experiences of order on the part of the reader.

In order to understand Plato's *Republic*, Voegelin determined that his analytical procedure would be to "trace the dominant problems through the work, following the order of their appearance in the chain of motivating experiences."[47] The dialogue employs a set of recurring symbols, which are assembled at the outset, that reveal the problems with which Plato was concerned and the experiences that give rise to them. Examining each symbol, as well as the complex of problems they communicate, in light of various levels of meaning (e.g. the structure of history, the structure of language and symbolization, the structure of ontological insights, and the structure of consciousness) enabled him to deduce the lessons Plato sought to convey, the logic guiding Plato's choice of symbolic form, the function of the symbol in the overarching scheme of the *Republic* and Plato's corpus as a whole, and some of Plato's general commitments about order. In general, the *Republic* contains the drama of Plato's resistance to the destruction of *Arete* in the soul, which "culminates in the evocation of the paradigm of right order."[48]

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and Kurt Hildebrandt. Even Voegelin's prefatory remarks are complex and deserve more attention than the space I have here allows.

[47] Ibid., 52.

[48] Ibid., 71.

Beginning from these assumptions, Voegelin determined that Plato was

symbolizing his own mystical experience toward the *Agathon*—the symbol he developed

to express psyche's experience of a transcending force and criterion of order. The

philosopher's experience was set in opposition to the spiritual atrophy of the surrounding

society, which had become sophistic or, in other words, characterized by the tendency

willingly to treat opinion (*doxa*) as if it were reality (*aletheia*). If the *Gorgias* presented

Plato's initial experience and exegesis of the social and spiritual crisis of his times, the

Republic presented Plato's therapeutic differentiation of the individual psyche that is

constituted by its quest for the divine ground. The *Republic* is a climax in the history of

the search for order because in it the quest for the meaning of existence is itself

recognized as a source of order in existence, its structure is explored, and a language that

can express the recognition is created.[49] Voegelin concluded that Plato's therapeutic

"effort was so successful, with regard both to the classification of experiences and the

development of concepts, that the first philosophy of order is still the classic work of its

kind to which we must always return for information on material detail, as well as on

methods."[50] Voegelin's concern with the logic of Plato's symbolization was governed by

assumption that it was uniquely capable of illuminating the ineffable experiences of order

that were at the core of Platonic science.

How the Theme of Justice is Developed and What it Means

Hardly any serious student of the *Republic* would deny that justice is a key theme

of the work and Voegelin is no different. However, Voegelin's understanding of Plato's

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[49] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 352.

[50] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 83.

thought concerning the essence of justice is uniquely spiritualized. Justice certainly

consists in a certain order of the soul and "tending to one's proper sphere of action."[51]

But Voegelin's understanding of Plato's conception of "one's proper sphere of action"

entails an existential conversion (*periagogé*) "from ignorance to the truth of God" which

culminates in "setting aright the relation between man and God."[52] According to

Voegelin, Plato thought justice was a transformative force of order—something human

beings suffered and actively engaged in—that had massive implications for material and

psychic aspects of human experience. In *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin stated:

> The truth of man and the truth of God are inseparably one. Man will be in the
> truth of his existence when he has opened his psyche to the truth of God; and the
> truth of God will become manifest in history when it has formed the psyche of
> man into receptivity for the unseen measure.[53]

Unlike Strauss, who conceived of Platonic justice as something primarily political and

distinguishable from philosophy proper (which is a private endeavor), Voegelin thought

Platonic justice and Platonic philosophy merged into each other and he conceived of both

as having moral and intellectual causes and effects. Simply put, justice, for Voegelin's

Plato, consists in having a well-ordered soul, which translates into existential openness to

and love of the divine drawing that becomes the supreme force of order in the individual

and social psyche.[54]

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[51] Ibid., 68.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 69.

[54] See ibid., 111.

"The concept of justice is developed," Voegelin argued, "for the purpose of criticizing the sophistic disorder."[55] Of course, the greatest danger of the sophistic disorder is that it obscures man's essential humanity as the questioner for the ground of his existence. Glaucon and Adeimantus implore Socrates to help them discover what justice is because their society has failed to supply them with a satisfactory answer to that question; the various popular *doxai* concerning justice fail to compel their assent because the *doxai* lack the experiential validity that the human psyche seeks and recognizes. For Voegelin, Glaucon and Adeimantus' reaction to the experienced social pressure was Plato's way of symbolizing the psychic aversion to the suppression and perversion of the psyche's natural end, namely, the quest for the divine ground. Moreover, Voegelin thought that the opinions expressed by the young interlocutors were presented by Plato as opinions—that is, Plato never intended them to be taken seriously in their own right. On the level of history, Glaucon and Adeimantus represent the younger generation which suffered under the deformed views of justice that had become predominant in Athens: the "sequence of Cephalus, Polemarchus, and Thrasymachus," Voegelin argued, "dramatizes the aetiology of decline to the point where the crisis becomes articulate in the sophist who proclaims his disease as the measure of humanity and social order."[56] But justice will come to light precisely because Glaucon and Adeimantus sense that something is awry and try to determine what it is and how to fix it. Justice therefore emerges through Plato's symbolic exegesis of the motions of the soul in response to concrete experiences of disorder.

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[55] Ibid., 64.

[56] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 71.

The tone and subject matter of the investigation are prepared by the first word of the dialogue, *kateben*, "I went down."[57] This symbol illuminates several aspects of human experience: Socrates physically descends from Athens to the Piraeus, Athens makes its downward "way from Marathon to the disaster of the sea power in time," and spiritually there is a decline from the recognition of an authoritative order to the equal esteem for foreigners and Athenians as well as their respective deities.[58] Given his understanding that societies embody a particular answer to the question concerning the meaning and purpose of human existence, Voegelin regarded Plato's symbolization of the equal moral and spiritual stature attributed to the domestic and foreign practices and deities at the festival at the Piraeus as an indication of Plato's deep concern with the apathetic relativism that had come to characterize the social milieu of Athens. Athens had abandoned the view that such things as genuinely right conduct and thought, or justice, were of personal or socio-political importance. In the schema of the dialogue, it is the experience of relativism that gives rise to Glaucon and Adeimantus' confusion concerning the nature of justice.

Voegelin referred to the experience as "depth" and the way to it as "descent." He found the exegesis of the experience of depth and descent repeated in Er's descent into Hades in Book Ten and in the philosopher's entrapment in the cave in Book Six. Taken together, the connected symbols help the reader to understand the anxiety of moral and spiritual confusion: it is like being threatened with superior force, realizing that one is

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[57] Voegelin discussed this in *Plato and Aristotle*. He also discussed the importance of the *kateben* at a 1978 panel with Allan Bloom and Hans-Georg Gadamer. The text of the latter may be found in "Structures of Consciousness," in *CW* 33: 373.

[58] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 52-53.

unaware of the rules by which one will be judged, and finding oneself in a dark, shadowy, or unfamiliar place. Voegelin also thought that the symbol's various aspects of motion—spatio-temporal, historical, and spiritual—were designed to help convey the richness of the experience of the depth and the many related levels on which such an experience can occur. Examining how Plato's symbolism extended to a philosophy of consciousness, Voegelin discovered that Glaucon and Adeimantus also illuminate the universal experience (especially its attendant anxiety) of individuals who find themselves ignorant of what is required for the health of their souls. Therefore, the characters' particular attributes (which were emphasized in Strauss's interpretation) are not as significant as the characters' general ability to represent states of the soul in its quest for the divine ground.

In the *Republic*, Plato shows that insights into genuine justice depend on the perception of the tension of existence. "The depth of experience is not unrelieved night; a light shines in the darkness," Voegelin argued. "For the depth can be sensed as misery, danger, and evil only because there is also present, however stifled and obscured, the sense of an alternative."[59] Another psychic experience, "direction," also motivates the inquiry into justice by revealing the inquiry itself as something which is indeed capable of producing the kind of insight the soul desires. Again, Voegelin emphasized how the quest for right order emerges out of the opposing pulls of the *metaxy*: the moral confusion is dissipated by the deep psychic aversion to the disorder it experiences but may not be able to articulate. The effort to escape from this disorder leads, according to Voegelin's analysis of the dialogue, to the quest for a "savior" or a "helper" who is capable of

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[59] Ibid., 84.

guiding the individual away from the anxiety of confusion and out of the misery, danger, and evil of the depth. This explains Glaucon and Adeimantus' appeal to Socrates to help them find the knowledge desired by the soul, namely, why justice (or its order) is preferable to injustice (the soul's disorder). Like the experience of depth, the experience of direction finds multiple symbolizations in the dialogue.

Justice begins comes to light out of the descent, but its full luster emerges only in the ascent toward attunement with the divine ground of being. "Plato speaks of the *epanodos*, the ascent of the soul from the day that is night (*nykterine*) to the true (*alethine*) day, and uses the term almost technically as a definition of 'true philosophy' (521c)."[60] Socrates, Er, and the philosopher are the earthly guides toward the divine light that they have experienced. Socrates leads the way up from the relativism of the Piraeus just as Er brings the saving tale up from Hades, and the philosopher of the Cave Parable ascends to the *Agathon* to discover the ultimate source of truth and order. In each of these symbols, we can see the three roles Voegelin attributed to Plato: that of mystic, scientist, and political actor. Moreover, each symbol illuminates some facet of Plato's own experience and contributes to the expression of the full philosophic experience. The dialogue symbolizes the ascent as the *zetema*, the nature of which is "a self-illumination of the soul through augmentation of its Logos."[61] Importantly, Voegelin's Plato was concerned not to imply that he himself or any of the earthly guides initiated the quest. In each of his symbols, there are unanswered questions that imply the presence of a

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[60] Ibid., 59.

[61] Ibid., 85.

mysterious force that acts upon the earthly guide so that he can help others to embark

upon the ascent. As Voegelin pointed out:

> Plato descends to the Piraeus with Socrates as everybody does, to the Hades with Er as every man, and he is chained in the Cave as are his fellow prisoners. But not everybody is held by the depth. The Socrates of the Prologue subtly breaks the friendly bonds, and those who wanted to hold him are drawn into the charmed life of his discourse. One of the prisoners in the Cave is forced to turn around and is dragged up to the light. And the Er of the Epilogue is sent back by the Judges as the messenger to mankind.
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> Hence, there is the Plato who resists the spiritual death and disorder of Athens, symbolized by the Piraeus, and brings to life the new order of the soul—and we may ask: From where comes that new life and its strength of resistance to death? Then there is the Plato who is forced and dragged up to the light—and we may ask: What power forces him and drags him? And, finally, there is the Plato who is sent by the Judges as the messenger to mankind—and we may ask: Who are the Judges who send him?[62]

Voegelin thought that Plato's unanswered questions exhibited a moral openness

associated with the key insight of Plato's thought, namely, that justice—or the proper

order of the soul—has its source in something that is wholly transcendent and for that

reason essentially ineffable. Nevertheless, that transcendent something penetrates into

human experience, and reveals the quest for justice as an essential constituent of

humanity.

Voegelin's Plato was deeply disturbed by Athens's spiritual apathy and set out to

counter it by articulating both what justice is and how justice manifests itself in the

individual psyche and political order. Plato was able to discover something about justice

because he himself experienced the depth of moral and spiritual confusion concerning the

meaning and purpose of human existence. Taken together, his various symbolizations are

designed to evoke an existential response on the part of Plato's reader and to draw him

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[62] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 61. See also 134.

passionately into the ordering quest for knowledge about justice. The relationship

between reader, author, and the divine ground that supplies and motivates the connection

between the two provides the basis for the conceptual understanding of justice that

emerges in the main parts of the dialogue.

Plato's Intended Audience and the Substance of His Efforts to Communicate

Plato's dialogues were addressed to anyone who cared to read them—primarily

individuals since the Athenian society had ceased to be the representative of existential

order.[63] Although they supplied a teaching, Plato's dialogues were not dogmatic because

in articulating them, Plato himself was suffering and seeking the mysterious ground;

indeed, the *Republic* gives expression to these movements. We remember that Voegelin

had no qualms about identifying the speeches presented by Socrates (or other virtuous

interlocutors) with Plato's own. Therefore, Voegelin, in contrast to Strauss, thought the

question regarding Plato's intended audience could be answered rather simply. It is

worthwhile to note that Voegelin thought the *Republic*'s conversation with the younger

generation was also addressed to the older generation in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*,

dialogues that Plato had connected to the *Republic* in order to form a trilogy. This further

confirmed to Voegelin that Plato's message was aimed at mankind.

Voegelin's Plato tries to communicate crucial insights into the structure of justice:

"Justice, the keystone of the system of ordering powers [in the psyche], is that disposition

of the well-ordered soul by virtue of which each part fulfills its proper function."[64]

Justice coordinates the ordering powers of *sophia*, which operates on the rational part of

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[63] See my previous chapter on Voegelin's analysis of the *Gorgias*.

[64] Ibid., 108.

the soul, and *andreia*, which operates on the spirited part, and *sophrosyne*, which is "conceived as an agreement, or consent, of the elemental forces to the claim of the highest force to rule the soul."[65] Although *sophia* is in a sense the highest virtue, it is, Voegelin argued, "still of no avail unless a virtue higher than wisdom sees to it that wisdom will indeed prevail in the soul over the passions. That higher virtue is Dikaiosyne."[66]

What might seem like an ambiguity to Plato's classification and ranking of the various virtues could be explained according to Voegelin's theory of language and consciousness: Plato was wrestling with a problem that burst the bounds of the language available to him and, indeed, all language. Drawing on this assumption and his determination that Plato was the subject of a mystical experience with transcendent reality, Voegelin concluded that justice is capable of ordering the whole soul because it originates outside the human soul: "The place of Dikaiosyne in the model points toward transcendent reality as the source of order."[67] The soul itself must be understood to be constituted by participation in the divine ground; its proper order is heightened attunement to the ground, which both is and facilitates justice. That is to say, justice consists in being attuned to the ground and therefore having the capacity to order the various parts of the soul so that even more harmonious attunement may occur. Since *sophia* can operate best only in a certain orderly vessel, the task of justice is to ensure that the human psyche conforms as much as possible to the contours of that vessel.

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid., 111.

[67] Ibid.

Voegelin's highly spiritualized understanding of Platonic justice might seem altogether indifferent to the political function of justice, but that is not so. Voegelin did think that justice had consequences for the organization of civic life, but his Plato, we remember, understood the essence of politics as primarily spiritual rather than legal or institutional. In the *Republic*, Plato articulated the key insight, which Voegelin referred to as the "anthropological principle," that society represents not only cosmic truth (i.e. it is a microcosmos), but also the truth of man (i.e. it is a macroanthropos).[68] The psychic substance that animates societies and individuals is the same. A well-ordered society must concern itself with what is best for its members, and what is best for human beings both individually and collectively, is to strive to understand the divine ground of being that penetrates into consciousness and transforms human thought and action. Voegelin's Plato therefore teaches that the political function of justice is, therefore, not to regulate the pragmatic or concrete activities and structures of society, but rather to facilitate existential harmony with the divine ground, which is individual justice and is a prerequisite for genuine community. Plato emphasized the need to establish a public concern for psychic substance because (on Voegelin's reading) the sophistic way of understanding life took the body as the fundamental reality and suggested that the relations between men were governed by competing interests.[69]

In order for the city to become just, a well-ordered ruler or founder, a philosopher, must "stamp the pattern of his soul on the [polis's] institutions."[70] In terms of political

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[68] Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 61.

[69] I discuss this more fully below.

[70] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle* , 87.

practice this means that the ruling philosopher will endeavor to create symbols of order, concrete experiences, and social arrangements that facilitate the quest for the divine ground. The well-ordered polis will, on Voegelin's reading, encourage each one of its members to take up the philosophic quest in existential openness so that each one may know the genuine, formative source of order. Moreover, the order or justice of the philosopher's soul becomes the standard by which every concrete polis is to be measured. And since the philosopher's justice originates in the ordering force of the divine ground that attracts human consciousness, the *Republic* approaches the principle, later to become explicit in the *Laws*, that truly "God is the Measure" of individual and social order.[71]

A key part of the philosopher's spiritual-political activity is therefore to create the "substance" of justice in the souls of all individual's who are willing to open themselves to his help—what Voegelin often referred to as the philosopher's act of salvation for himself and others. "Substance" is the life-determining understanding that the meaning and purpose of human existence consists in seeking the divine ground that draws man to it.[72] In order to create it, Plato's philosopher reveals the new education (*paideia*) that aims at developing a specific ethical character as well as a correct theology.

The philosopher's education, in contrast to the sophistic education and the moral education of the old myth, carries within itself both the answers and questions that generate genuine insight. It is clarified in the Parable of the Cave, where (518a) Plato-

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[71] See ibid., 111; *New Science of Politics*, 68; "What Is History?" in *What Is History? And Other Late Unpublished Writings*, ed. Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, vol. 28 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, 21-22.

[72] See *Plato and Aristotle*, 91, where Voegelin argued that Glaucon and Adeimantus' request that Socrates help them become capable of guarding their virtue was "the correct formula for the right order of the soul." The term "formula" here is non-dogmatic since it is based on a response to a unique experience of the divine drawing.

Socrates describes in allegorical language the *periagogé*—the turning around of the soul. In contrast to the sophists and the old bards, the philosopher posits an education that requires an experience that completely changes the way an individual understands the structure of reality. He discovers that reality is anchored by the divine ground, which Plato symbolized by the *Agathon*—that which is most real, good, and penetrates everything else so that it becomes intelligible. The philosopher's education raises to consciousness the fact that the transcendent *Agathon* itself is the animating psyche behind all order and justice, personal and political. The *Agathon*, "by an inrush or influx of the divine light (*Republic*, 508b)," creates an excellence in the soul—*phronesis* (see *Republic*, 518e)—that is "thoroughly forming of all existence, within which formation only the system of the cardinal virtues operates."[73] Justice, in other words, which guards the over-all order of the soul, is dependent upon the existential virtue of *phronesis*.[74]

Moreover, the philosophic *periagogé* illuminates the situation that knowledge is possible only because the divine ground penetrates human consciousness and reveals the structure of reality, *not* because one has uttered correct or logical statements about reality. An individual who has undergone such a conversion will *continue* to quest for the ground; he will engage in the transformative *zetema*, experience the augmentation of Logos in his soul, and become capable of creating and, in fact, obligated to create, new symbolizations of the experienced insights into the order of being. Since the quest and its creation of new symbols must be ongoing, static propositions about reality simply could not facilitate the kind of knowledge that is the end of Plato's new education. For

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[73] Voegelin, "The Beginning and the Beyond: A Meditation on Truth," in *CW* 28: 229; *Plato and Aristotle*, 113; "What Is Right by Nature?," in *Anamnesis*, 66.

[74] Voegelin, "What Is Right by Nature?," in *Anamnesis*, 66 and 68.

Voegelin's Plato, both the philosopher's revelation of the new education and other

individuals' openness to it were supreme acts of justice and constituted the proper order

of the soul.

Voegelin adamantly asserted the ethical and moral features of Platonic *paideia*, in

part because he opposed interpretations that made Plato into a dogmatic ontologist. But

we must remember that Voegelin thought the new *paideia* was not merely ethical and

moral, but was existential and therefore had to shape human thinking too. In other words,

the ethical aspect of the philosopher's education is inseparable from theoretical insights

into the basic structure of existence. On Voegelin's reading of Plato, the philosophic

paideia must also produce an adequate conceptual understanding of the divine ground of

being or, in other words, a correct theology.[75] A correct theology, as I described in

chapter four, emerges out of a negation of a false theology. At *Republic* 365b-e,

Voegelin found Plato's presentation of the false theology, propagated by the sophists, that

was popular in Athens and had contributed to the experience of psychic depth in the

dialogue.[76] Recounting common *doxai*, Adeimantus questions Socrates:

> What about the gods? Surely, we can't hide from them or use violent force
> against them! Well, if the gods don't exist or don't concern themselves with
> human affairs, why should we worry at all about hiding from them? If they do
> exist and do concern themselves with us, we've learned all we know about them
> from the laws and the poets who give their genealogies—nowhere else. But these
> are the very people who tell us that the gods can be persuaded and influenced by
> sacrifices, gentle prayers, and offerings. Hence we should believe them on both
> matters or neither. If we are just, our only gain is not to be punished by the gods,
> since we lose the profits of injustice. But if we are unjust, we get the profits of

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[75] To be sure, Voegelin conceived of Platonic theology as being grounded in experience, so his theology does not apply only to the linguistic expressions. His theology certainly was not doctrinal.

[76] Voegelin, following Plato, thought insights into order emerged out of perceptions of disorder. Both poles of the *metaxy* are transcendent and can contribute to ontological insights. In Voegelin mind, Plato's recognition of this distinguished him from representatives of Christianity.

our crimes and transgressions and afterwards persuade the gods by prayer and escape without punishment.[77]

The experiential core of this passage can be expressed in the set of negative propositions that were mentioned earlier in this study (see page 127). In the *Republic*, Voegelin argued, Plato described arguments such as these as types of theology (*typoi peri theologias*, 379a) that were symptoms of "existential disease" or "pneumapathology."[78]

To some extent the disease in the soul—in particular the sophistic penchant for detaching the pre-Socratic philosophers' symbols from their motivating experiences—arose because the traditional stories about the gods failed to express adequately the experiences of the tension of existence and reveal their structure as invitations to attunement with the ground.[79] Therefore, while the philosopher's education must certainly begin with an effort to correcting the pneumapathology through the *periagogé*, it must culminate in "seemly" expressions also. In the *Republic*, the orderliness of Plato's soul flows into the community through his creation of a whole host of new symbols to replace the unseemly, yet popular, expressions about the divine reality. Plato coined a new theology (379a-386a) based on the two all-important rules: "(1) God is not the author of all things but only of the good ones (380c), and (2) the gods do not deceive men in word or deed (383a)."[80] In addition to propositions such as these, Plato employed terms, especially those intending to symbolize the God, with a new technical precision.

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[77] Plato *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, revised by C.D.C. Reeve, 2nd edition (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992). Voegelin pointed to this passage (and the passages immediately preceding it) as presenting the false theology in "Beginning and the Beyond," in *CW* 28: 200, and in "Quod Deus Dicitur," in *CW* 12: 386.

[78] Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur," in *CW* 12: 389.

[79] The diagnosis of disorder is another theoretical accomplishment.

[80] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 68.

For example, Plato used the word *epikeina* to designate the *Agathon*, or the transcendent

ground of being that is greater than justice and the other virtues (504d) and is the measure

of the less perfect things (504c).[81] On Voegelin's reading, the use of this term expressed

"the fundamental insight of Platonic ethics," namely, that "concerning the content of the

Agathon nothing can be said at all. . . . The transcendence of the Agathon makes

immanent propositions concerning its content impossible."[82] It is also important to note

that Plato presented both the negative, or sophistic, theology as well as the positive, or

philosophic, theology. This decision was deliberately made, Voegelin argued, in order to

"represent the verbal mimesis of the human tension between the potentialities of response

[and] nonresponse to divine presence in personal, social, and historical existence."[83]

The whole of the *Republic* is an inquiry into the nature of justice—of the proper

order of the soul in relation to its divine ground. That inquiry blossoms into a

comprehensive science of order that examines whence order originates and how it is

manifested into personal and social or political existence. The inquiry itself is a source of

order, for it is the concrete quest for the ground which constitutes human nature and

flourishing. But the inquiry also produces insights that may be, for purposes of furthering

the quest, separated from their motivating experiences. The *Republic* contains several of

those insights, perhaps the most important of which is that education is not what the

sophists claim it to be: the mastery of a way of speaking that will secure one's own

advantage without regard for moral and spiritual formation. Rather, the Platonic

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[81] Ibid., 112.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Voegelin, "Quod Deus Dicitur" in *CW* 12: 389.

education recognized that "if order is to be restored, the restoration must begin at the strategic point of the 'ignorance of the soul' by setting aright the relation between man and God."[84] Consequently, it consisted of a real existential conversion toward the source of order that lies beyond ordinary human experience but penetrates into the human psyche in a luminous and formative way.

The conversion of Platonic *paideia* not only furthers eros toward the ground, it also produces genuine intellectual insights concerning man and his condition. Through his ascent toward the *Agathon*, man discovers that his existence, essence, and his capacity to know derive from his necessary participation in the divine ground that draws his psyche. He also learns more about the limits of his capacity to know and to articulate his intellectual insights into the ground. Plato, of course, expressed this situation most clearly through his act of creating new symbols for the ground and his decision to use allegorical language when inquiring into the structure of being (considered as an "object" of experience).

The "substance" of justice, therefore, is the orderliness of the soul that recognizes the superiority of the ground and quests for it. Because the philosopher's soul is the most just, political justice depends upon the philosopher's injection of order into society's arrangements through his efforts to turn souls toward the *Agathon*. Of course, the philosopher can do no more than point out the way to human flourishing. He cannot compel recalcitrant individuals or societies to take up the philosophic quest. His potency is limited by the luminosity of his symbols and the existential situation of his audience. Still, he is bound by his own understanding that full existential attunement to the ground requires him to try to create order in all souls. Therefore, he must try to persuade others

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[84] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 68.

to take up the philosophic quest. On Voegelin's reading, therefore, justice becomes the effort to make philosophy—the loving quest for the divine *sophon*—the concern of every individual and society.

The Outcome or Effect of the Dialogue: the Key Teaching

A chapter of this length cannot cover every important component of Voegelin's analysis of the *Republic*. Therefore, I have not commented on Voegelin's identification and exegesis of key passages in the dialogue, instead choosing to focus on the key theme of justice as the penetration of the divine ground first into human consciousness and from there into concrete community. In this final section, I mention a related theme that deserves to be highlighted in its own right: Plato's differentiation of the autonomous soul as the site and sensorium of the transcendent ground.

At *Republic* 591c-e, Socrates describes the "politeia within oneself" as the concern of the wise man. Voegelin thought the exchange between Glaucon and Socrates in which this phrase occurs was "an artistic miracle" because

> without change of terminology, through a slight switch from metaphor to reality, the inquiry into the paradigm of a good polis is revealed as an inquiry into man's existence in a community that lies, not only beyond the polis, but beyond any political order in history. The leap in being, toward the transcendent source of order, is real in Plato. . . The soul is a one-man polis and man is the "statesman" who watches over its constitution.[85]

Beyond the accomplishments of Homer, Hesiod, the pre-Socratic philosophers, and Aeschylus, Plato had discovered the soul as "a field of forces which can enter into various configurations, the *eide*, or characters."[86] Moreover, Voegelin thought Plato

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[85] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 92.

[86] Ibid., 110.

began the effort, which Aristotle would continue, to develop a theory of the soul's problems and to classify its various faculties, forces, and dispositions.[87] Voegelin concluded that Plato discovered that the soul's character will be measured by the divine paradigm of order. Voegelin took Plato quite literally when his Socrates asserts, at 611a-612a, that he is compelled to believe that the soul is immortal and that discovering its true nature depends upon looking at it as something that longs for communion with (because it is akin to) "the divine and immortal and what always is."[88] Plato began to see the individual lover of the divine ground separating from the concrete community as the bearer of cosmic truth on earth. Man will be judged, not by his peers or by the Olympian deities, but by the transcendent ground of being that he will never fully comprehend or describe; and he will be judged favorably if his whole life is animated by the quest for attunement to the divine ground.

Although Voegelin argued that Plato's differentiation of the individual soul constituted by its attraction to the ground was of epochal significance, he admitted that "the Platonic notion of a spiritually formed personality is still embedded in the compact myth of nature. Body and psyche, in spite of their admitted separability, are still fundamentally inseparable."[89] With the discovery of the autonomous soul, the status of political life falls below the eternal life of the soul. Nevertheless, Voegelin's Plato was deeply concerned with how his polis—and the Hellenes as a whole—could receive and reflect the divine paradigm of order in its concrete existence. This concern drove Plato's construction of the community of wives and children, for example. Such constructions

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[87] Ibid., 111.

[88] See ibid., 130. I have paraphrased Grube's translation (which was revised by C.D.C. Reeve).

[89] Ibid., 119. See Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 82-87.

show that the notion of a community grounded purely in spirit was not yet achieved even though the community of philosophers, or the participants in the dialogue, approximates it.

On Voegelin's reading, Plato's interest in the somatic structure of the polis was addressed to a contemporary problem that, to be sure, indicated a fundamental tension concerning human nature. Commenting on the historical situation, Voegelin reflected:

> In order to understand the motivation of the strange program [*viz.* the community of wives and children], we have to recall the fundamental problem of all Hellenic politics, that is, the inability to overcome the gentilician cohesion and to create political institutions on a regional or national scale. . . . The idea of personal membership in a community of the spirit, irrespective of family ties, was still in its infancy.[90]

Plato's differentiation of the individual soul is limited by a problem that he would continue to wrestle with throughout his corpus: the situation that men both are and are not equal. The identification and expression of this problem was a key achievement of the *Republic*. This theme was raised in the Piraeus and Hades scenes, the Phoenician Tale, and is again taken up in Plato's construction of the community of wives and children. From a historical point of view, Plato wanted his fellow Athenians and Greeks to begin to recognize themselves as participants in a brotherhood based on a shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of human existence (or an "ordering myth") over and against barbarian peoples. From a spiritual point of view, Plato discovered that men share a fundamental equality in their psyche's orientation toward the divine ground. In practice, however, the Athenians were not yet brotherly enough, they needed the philosopher's myth (for example, the Phoenician Tale, which asserts their common descent) and *paideia* as well as "a concrete somatic substance as the basis for the spiritual

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[90] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 119.

community."[91] Voegelin did not think Plato wanted to see the community of wives and children put into practice in Athens, however; that institution was designed specifically for the polis in speech. Its significance derives from its ability to point to Plato's concern with the problems of how psyche forms material reality.

Although Plato sought to engender a heightened sense of the equal position of all human beings in relation to the divine ground, he never abandoned the idea that on the level of the soul there was one correct way of living in favor of moral relativism. Societies and individuals may have different external forms, but at the core level of the psyche, humanity's health depends on proper attunement to the ground. Moreover, Plato was, Voegelin often noted, a sober realist. He understood that, while all men are equal in relation to the divine ground, they will experience various levels of attunement to it. Those who are more attuned to the divine ground and who have experienced the leap in being are, in a real sense, superior to those who are less attuned. The philosopher is more divine and therefore unequal to his fellow citizens, and this is why it becomes the philosopher's duty to inject the order of his soul into his society through the new myth, education, and (to a lesser degree) institutions. The Phoenician Tale seems to confirm this fundamental inequality in its classification of souls as metals of various degrees of worth. Voegelin thought Plato struggled with the question of his own divinity and viewed himself as a mouthpiece of the divine truth to humanity. Importantly, Voegelin's Plato did not attribute his semi-divinity to his own agency. Rather, the philosopher's "golden soul" is expressed in the myth as the result of a mysterious dispensation of the

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[91] Ibid.

god, and the burden of having a "golden soul" is to try to clarify existential questions such as the one concerning the equality and inequality of human beings.[92]

Concluding Remarks

On Voegelin's interpretation of the *Republic*, Plato was engaged in a theoretical investigation of who the philosopher is and the nature of his activity. Of course, for Voegelin, a theoretical understanding has existential, and hence moral and ethical, consequences. Justice is revealed as the practical order of the soul that orients the soul's activities toward the quest for the divine ground. The just philosopher, in his quest for the divine ground, tries to restore personal and political well-being by creating symbols that illuminate man's existential task. The *Republic* is one of Plato's greatest attempts to do this. In contrast to the *Gorgias*, the *Republic* is more reflective and self-conscious about revealing the proper end of all human activity: it mimics the noetic quest in its structure as well as taking up the theme of the noetic quest in various images and conceptual language. The dialogue also explores the ontological relation between material and psychic reality and, from that exploration, arrives at various propositions concerning the structure of reality. Another feat of the dialogue is that it introduces new terminology into the timeless quest for the divine ground.

The contrasts between Voegelin's interpretation and that of Strauss should be obvious. For Voegelin, justice is one thing for all human beings and societies: the orientation of the soul toward the divine ground that draws it. And it is the responsibility of the philosopher to try to encourage everyone to become just in that sense. For Strauss,

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[92] For examples of other existential questions and a discussion of myth's ability to convey the transcending experience of simultaneous equality and inequality, see Voegelin, "On the Theory of Consciousness," in *Anamnesis*, especially 20-24.

the justice of the philosopher and the justice of the city differ and it is up to the philosopher to mediate that conflict through his speeches and deeds. The different readings point to another difference in each thinker's understanding of Plato's thought concerning the relationship of one man to another. Strauss's Plato recognized a fundamental inequality between the philosopher and non-philosophers (individually and collectively) that could not be overcome through teaching and presented certain intractable problems for political order. In particular, the legitimate, yet irreconcilable, claims of both groups to have the right to secure their own best interests created a permanent division between members of the community. Since bringing attention to this division leads to political instability, it is not discussed openly and most individuals therefore lack genuine understanding of the world in which they live.

This is not the situation for Voegelin's Plato, who recognizes a core equality among men that is constituted by the penetration of the divine ground into every human consciousness. How individuals respond to the penetration may differ dramatically, but such differences are accidental rather than necessary. Individuals who are most just— who are better attuned to the divine ground—have a duty to try to turn the accidents of individuals' experiences into genuine understanding. One of the most important ways of doing this is to draw on common experiences and language for the creation of compelling symbolizations of order. Voegelin's Plato expressed the differentiated truth of the soul in language that was both new and old. It was designed to evoke images that would stir the *pathemata* and the intellect in order to help individuals sense the disorder of Athenian society and quest for the order that derives from the transcendent ground. This explains Plato's use of myths that hearken back to the old poets in the dialogue that harshly

criticizes poetry. Voegelin's Plato recognized that, by accident, the symbolic form of the old myth had become unseemly. But that accident contributed to a greater understanding of the divine ground, which is the timeless end of man. Voegelin suggested, therefore, that Plato intended his dialogue—which is a unique synthesis of myth and speculation— to be the new symbolic form in which the divine truth revealed itself to human beings. In the *Republic*, Plato only "hints" at this conclusion; it is not until Plato's articulation of the *Timaeus* and the *Laws* that Plato wholly accepts that the proper language of philosophy is myth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Voegelin on Plato's *Laws*

This dissertation has suggested that Voegelin's interpretation of Plato is distinguished by its emphasis on the divine dimension of Plato's thought. Plato, Voegelin argued, underwent a mystical experience in which he sought and suffered the revelatory movements of the divine ground. Although each dialogue conveys Plato's quest for God, the *Laws*, according to Voegelin, makes explicit "the final expression of Plato's thought on God and the destiny of man."[1] At the end of his lifetime, after witnessing the further breakdown of Hellenic politics and the failure of his earlier articulations to bring order to individual souls, Plato's most intimate insights into the quest for the divine ground emerge. At this time, Plato became acutely aware that the best way to symbolize the substance of his noetic quest was not to speak of it as man's quest for the ground that draws him, which is the symbolism of the earlier dialogues. Instead, the aspect of the divine ground's revelation in Plato's psyche becomes more prominent. At the same time, Plato apperceived that the experience of "counterpulling" (*anthelkein*, the existential field of disorder; see *Laws* 644-45[2]) had to be incorporated into his symbolization of the structure of human existence. These new insights contribute to Plato's accentuation in the *Laws* of the element of suffering that constitutes the philosophic quest. Only the divine ground is orderly; disorder plays too great a role in

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[1] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 257.

[2] Voegelin, "The Gospel and Culture," in *CW* 12: 185.

human experience for man to arrive at genuine insight by his own agency; the philosopher's insights are, therefore, rightly understood as revelations from God.

In light of these conclusions, it makes sense to say that the *Laws* contains, for Voegelin, the ultimate justification for emphasizing the divine dimension of Plato's thought. The *Laws* expresses Plato's last reflections on the substance of his philosophic quest, arriving at the realization that each of his prior efforts to articulate a case for order was, in effect, a communication from God. Voegelin argued, moreover, that Plato recognized that even his more thorough understanding of his own activity was caused by the divine ground's illumination of his consciousness. In this chapter, I show that Voegelin's treatment of the *Laws* centers on Plato's investigation of God's complete, yet mysterious, hold over the human condition. This chapter is quite lengthier than the preceding chapters for three reasons. First, the *Laws* itself is very long, containing twelve books. Second, I compare Voegelin's interpretation of the *Laws* to a monograph that Strauss wrote rather than to a chapter. Third, one of the key points of this dissertation is that Voegelin argued that Platonic philosophy was essentially a quest for God. The *Laws* plays a critical role in Voegelin's argument because, he claimed, its primary theme and its end is God. The organization of this chapter follows the manner of the previous chapters but, because of its length, contains additional subsections.

The Drama of Plato's Laws

The *Laws* is often considered to be Plato's final dialogue both because it seems to present a less optimistic characterization of the human political condition and because its

formal features seem to lack the polish of other dialogues.[3] The performed dialogue

takes place in twelve books, the first three of which are filled with discussions of general

and theoretical matters, while the final nine attend more to particular, practical concerns.

The drama takes place on a pathway, located outside the polis, which leads upward from

Cnossos to the temple of Zeus. An Athenian asks two Dorians, the Cretan Cleinias and

the Spartan Megillus, whether they say that their laws are of human or divine origin.

This question leads the three to consider the nature of law in general—that is, what its

appropriate form and intent are—as well as the fitness of specific legal provisions that

exist in or could be introduced into their respective regimes. The three also consider the

various institutions that arise in cities and help to cultivate civic character. In the initial

conversations, the Athenian discusses symposia and tries to show the Dorians that the

institution particular to Athens has an important role in educating citizens, provided it is

overseen by wise men who are conscientious of the common good. Several key themes

of the dialogue emerge from the treatment of symposia, namely: the importance of

subjecting *nomos* to bold, yet structured, scrutiny; the function of *prooemia*, or

persuasive prefatory remarks appended to legislation; and the place of ritual and festival

in education and civic life.

      The conversations occur on the longest day of the year among men who are aged.

Cleinias, we learn, has been charged with developing a new constitution, which gives the

conversations practical significance. At the end of the speeches the Dorians realize that

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[3] Voegelin thought that the *Laws* was Plato's final dialogue, and Strauss began his commentary by noting its place according to the traditional ordering of the Platonic corpus. Recently, Catherine H. Zuckert has suggested that the *Laws* was Plato's earliest, not latest, work (*Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2-5. I discuss the significance of this specific issue in my conclusion.

the successful founding of the city depends upon the Athenian's participation and they

agree that they must make him take part in it. The dialogue ends, however, without a

response on the part of the Athenian, thus leaving in doubt whether the cooperation

between the philosopher and the two political men will occur and whether the polis of the

Laws is a model for an actual city or, as in the *Republic*, is confined to the city in speech.

Backdrop: Strauss on the Laws

Strauss's analysis of the *Laws* is found in his 1975 book, *The Argument and*

Action of Plato's Laws. Thomas Pangle made the following remark about the "dense and

obscure book":

> Strauss has constructed a commentary that remains almost impenetrable until one
> has gained an intimate and long-mediated familiarity with the *Laws*; but when one
> turns to Strauss after having begun to secure such familiarity, one realizes that
> Strauss intends to indicate what he regards as the most important observations that
> must be made in studying the *Laws*, and the order in which these pieces of
> evidence must be considered. . . One [becomes] engaged in a kind of fascinating
> argument or dialogue with Strauss about the *Laws*—wondering why Strauss
> stresses what he does, in the order that he does.[4]

Another scholar noted in a review that Strauss's "commentary" goes beyond that—

Strauss leaves it to the reader to figure out how he diverges from the original text of the

Laws.[5] These statements, by distinguished scholars who are sympathetic to Strauss's

project, provide insight into the care with which Strauss crafted his monograph and

intended it to be read. Moreover, Pangle suggests that Strauss aimed his work at a rare or

restricted audience. My discussion of Strauss's interpretation of the *Laws* is neither the

fruit of nor an adequate substitute for the careful reading that Strauss desired. Rather, in

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[4] Thomas L. Pangle, "Interpretive Essay," in *The* Laws *of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (1980; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xiii-xiv.

[5] David Bolotin, review of *The Argument and Action of Plato's* Laws, by Leo Strauss, *The American Political Science Review* 71 (1977): 668-70, at 669.

using Strauss's book as a backdrop for Voegelin's interpretation of the *Laws*, I have

attempted to identify some of the most important analytic differences by relying on

Strauss's explicit statements. In the interest of brevity, the order in which such

statements occur as well as a consideration of any implicit reconsideration of them has

been neglected.

What Strauss Brings to His Interpretation of the Dialogue

Strauss's commentary begins with a quote from the Arabic scholar Avicenna's

work *On the Divisions of the Rational Sciences*: ". . . the treatment of prophecy and the

Divine law is contained in . . . the *Laws*."[6] The opening juxtaposition of "rational

sciences," on the one hand, and "prophecy and the Divine law," on the other, is pregnant

with meaning.[7] As he did with Plato's other dialogues, Strauss approached his analysis

or commentary of the *Laws* from the premise that the city and the philosopher are in

permanent tension with each other because the city's determinations concerning what is

good and right depend on a revelatory standard the philosopher cannot accept. Strauss

explored how Plato's philosopher—this time the Athenian Stranger rather than

Socrates—navigates this tension for the benefit of himself and the city "in deed."[8]

Strauss suggested that in the *Laws*, which he referred to as both "the most political work

of Plato" and "Plato's most pious work," Plato endeavored to formulate a political

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[6] Strauss, *The Argument and Action of Plato's* Laws (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1.

[7] Joseph Cropsey's forward to Strauss's book as well as Catherine Zuckert's discussion of it in *Postmodern Platos* note the significance of Strauss's use of this epigraph.

[8] Strauss pointed out that in the *Laws* the drama aims at constructing a city viable in practice rather than, as was the case in the *Republic*, only in speech (*Argument and Action*, 1) . But later on in his book, Strauss seems to suggest that both the city of the *Laws* and the city of the *Republic* are understood to exist in speech only (181-86).

compromise between the viewpoints of reason and revelation while provoking the few potential philosophers to question the tenability of explanations based in accounts of the gods.[9]

For Strauss, one of the most conspicuous features of the *Laws* is that "Philosophy as philosophy, in its nakedness, would be out of place in the *Laws*, at any rate in the beginning."[10] This is because, according to a careful analysis of the Athenian Stranger's speeches, most men, including the Athenian's Dorian interlocutors, are convinced by poetic accounts of what is good and right and what the gods are and lack the capacity to undertake the rigors of philosophic inquiry. Indeed, the life of the city—or at least its guiding legislation—depends upon the fact that "the higher [philosophy, or the philosophic intellect] is in the service of the lower [the requirements of conventional justice and moderation]," which is "strictly speaking against nature."[11] Through the conversations with Cleinias and Megillus, a Cretan and a Spartan, respectively, the "truly most noble Muse" that is philosophy is discerned only "as if through a veil."[12] Strauss noted the contrasts between the Athenian Stranger's old, foreign interlocutors and Socrates' young, Athenian interlocutors in a passage that suggested how the *Laws* and the *Republic* complemented each other:

> One could say that both the perfect city of the *Republic* and the perfect symposion of the *Laws* are utopias—blueprints of what one would wish or pray for and at the same time of what is possible—and accordingly that the *Laws* obscures the

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[9] See Nathan Tarcov and Thomas L. Pangle, "Epilogue: Leo Strauss and the History of Political Philosophy," in *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, 3rd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 927.

[10] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 35.

[11] Ibid., 9.

[12] Ibid., 35.

difference between an "idea" and a "utopia." This difference between the *Laws* and the *Republic* corresponds to the difference between Kleinias-Megillos and Glaukon-Adeimantos, between the manifest absence and the manifest presence of philosophy.[13]

Strauss thought philosophy's greater prominence in the *Republic* could be demonstrated by the fact that the *Republic* goes farther in making important intellectual distinctions, which is at the core of philosophic activity. On Strauss's reading, the *Laws* seems to blur such distinctions and its chief interlocutor noticeably avoids discussing subjects necessary to a thorough philosophic inquiry. For example, in what seems to be "a comprehensive if extremely succinct summary of the task of the legislator," the Athenian neglects "the two highest themes: the gods and the regime (*politeia*)."[14] This omission causes the Athenian's non-philosophic, politically-minded interlocutors to miss the implication that "the whole legal order must, according to the Athenian, be subservient to justice and moderation, i.e., not to good sense, let alone Intellect."[15] In other words, the philosopher obscures the fundamental irrationality of the city to those who find themselves in a position to institute a constitution.

The Athenian does not bring to light for his interlocutors the true nature of the city and its *nomos* because he discerns their limitations—limitations that are representative of the city's dependence on poetic accounts of virtue.[16] Although he does try to educate them, he skirts the crucial "What Is?" question.[17] "The level of

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[13] Ibid., 14; see also 27-28, 31, and 59.

[14] Ibid., 9.

[15] Ibid.

[16] See ibid., 21, where Strauss compared the political art with the ability to discern people's natures and knowing how to treat them.

[17] See, for example, ibid., 6, 11, 14-15, 17, 18, 27, 31, and 59.

discussion," Strauss therefore asserted, "is sub-Socratic."[18] Instead of provoking the old

Dorians to become philosophic, the Athenian's conversation aims at helping them refine

civic institutions and beliefs and institute more rational laws. In this way "the many"

who constitute the city benefit from a better political order, that is, one that is based on

the Athenian's "salutary *logos* about the good life" rather than the "Dorian law of

laws."[19]

Strauss thought that the spurious logic of the Athenian's arguments suggests (to

the careful reader, not to the Dorians) that Plato was showing in deed the tragedy of

politics: "a legislator who is not altogether useless must dare to teach an untruth for the

benefit of the young; deliberately teaching a salutary untruth is an act of courage."[20]

Only the gifted private individual can live by the "true account (*logos*) within him

regarding those things that drag us"; the city, by contrast "must take over an account from

some god or from him who has acquired knowledge" and incorporate it into laws backed

by brachial force.[21] Interpreting the Myth of the Puppet Player (*Laws* 644d-645c),

Strauss glossed Plato's thought thus: "Those who are guided merely by the law, however

reasonable, without knowing (knowing through themselves) that it is reasonable, are as

much puppets as those who are dragged only by their passions, although they are of

course superior to the latter."[22] The Athenian's conversation therefore aims not at the

highest education—the betterment of souls through the enlargement of intellect—but

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[18] Ibid., 17.

[19] Ibid., 31.

[20] Ibid., 30.

[21] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 18.

[22] Ibid., 18-19.

rather at a desirable, yet inferior, moral education that is effected through noble lies and myths and leads to better treatment of bodies.[23] The philosopher, whose ultimate concern is truth, finds himself constrained to relate to the many through untruths. Still, because his myths are undergirded by the true logos, the beliefs and practices they engender are decided improvements over those elicited by accidental, conventional stories about gods, right, and justice.[24]

How the Theme of Nomos Is Developed and What it Means

The Athenian asks the Dorians the question that opens Plato's *Laws*: "Is it a god or some human being, strangers, who is given the credit for laying down your laws?" (624a)[25] The Athenian's question signals his interest in knowing something about the relation between *nomos*, which extends beyond legal code to beliefs, customs, traditions, and habitual practices, and the gods.[26] By having his Athenian inquire into the *common opinion* concerning the promulgation of the *nomos*, Plato raises the question of the *nomos* regarding the *nomos*—that is, the Athenian makes the traditional account of tradition his subject. On Strauss's reading, the importance of "the god" is thus circumscribed within the larger context of tradition, opinion, and the practices to which those give rise. This accords with Strauss's commitments to the irreconcilable tension between reason and revelation, which prevents the philosopher from rationally assenting to claims made on

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[23] Ibid., 18-19, 26-27, and 31.

[24] Ibid., 102-103.

[25] Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Plato's *Laws* are from Thomas Pangle's translation: *The* Laws *of Plato*, trans. Thomas L. Pangle (1980; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[26] I use the word "*nomos*" throughout my discussion in order to preserve the broad range of meaning that it has in the Greek. I use the word "law" when the more limited meaning of a legal code is appropriate.

the basis of revelation.[27] The philosopher may examine *claims* about the gods, especially

as to their logical coherence and implications for human action, because the claims are

part of the reality he perceives with his senses. But because Plato's philosopher has no

direct experience with the gods, his examination with the Dorians never proceeds into a

serious inquiry concerning their nature—it would be irrational, not to mention

dangerous—even though Strauss admitted that the Athenian, being a philosopher, was

"concerned about the truth of the gods."[28] From the Athenian's perspective, then, the

beliefs that uphold the city's guiding principles are incapable of rational defense. This is

true in two senses. First, the Dorians prove largely incapable of giving an account of

their *nomos*, which suggests that the city, or the many, whom they represent acts on the

basis of incomplete understanding.[29] Second, the *nomos* itself seems fundamentally

irrational because, owing to its basis in claims about the gods, the most rational man

cannot provide an account of it either.

Strauss focused on the intersection between *nomos* and education that becomes

thematic throughout the *Laws*. He suggested that the principal difference between the

Athenian's education and the kind of education the Dorians supported or were

accustomed to lay in the way that each informed the *nomos* by shaping an individual's

sense of *aidos*, or reverence or fear. The Dorian education, Strauss argued, produces

primarily the virtue or habit of *aidos* for the laws (instead of courage or moderation)

which, it teaches, are divine in origin. This positive teaching accounts for citizens'

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[27] Strauss justified his assumption on the basis of passages like this one.

[28] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 141.

[29] See, for example, ibid., 106.

loyalty to their regime, its durability and victories in war.[30] The *Laws* thus shows that such an education is politically useful even if the *nomos* does not meet the standard of the intellect and even if citizens fail to recognize that fact. This conclusion comes to light in two ways. In the first place, the Spartan regime has demonstrated its durability and the Dorians' speeches and actions demonstrate that their attachment to their cities is genuine and potent. In the second place, the desirability of the Dorian education is confirmed through the Athenian's deeds—for him, virtue is knowledge; yet he helps the Dorians to refine their practice rather than their thought. In other words, the philosopher's deeds underscore the reasonableness of working within the parameters of civic or moral education, even though it does not lead to knowledge, because the city depends on it.

Although the dialogue shows the usefulness of the civic education and *nomos*, it also presents a critique of it. The philosopher tries to educate his interlocutors in a negative way. He encourages individuals to question conventions and subject them to the critique of nature. In this way, his education turns on the diminution of *aidos*: the Athenian tries to loosen the Dorians' commitments to the sacredness of their beliefs and the institutions based upon them so that they might be receptive to his questioning, political suggestions, and intellectual clarifications. Only by moderating what is the result of the Dorian education—the reverence that enjoins critical examination of the city's *nomos*—does it become possible to come to a genuine understanding of either the nature of *nomos* in general or the specific laws, customs, and beliefs of any given city in particular.

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[30] See ibid., 19-20.

The dialogue therefore presents three different types of education that have various results for an understanding of *nomos*. The "pure" Dorian education—that is, the education promulgated by the Dorian regimes—leads to an uncritical reverence for, even a deification of, the city's ancestral laws. The "pure" philosophic education leads away from given conventions and supernatural explanations toward nature as a standard for what is right and just. And there is a "mixed" education—the Dorian education refined by a limited willingness to improve upon the old ways of doing things. The mixed education, which results when philosophy becomes political philosophy, produces *aidos* for the law that derives from reason rather than revelation, without, however, illuminating the natural (rather than divine) origins of such law. *Nomos*, therefore, emerges as something that does not necessarily lead to *the* best way of life although it goes far in forming good citizens.

The Intended Audience and Substance of the Athenian's Efforts to Communicate

For Strauss, determining the intended audience and substance of the Athenian's teaching required one to confront the fact that the Dorians themselves do not receive the highest benefit from the philosopher's new clarification, as can be seen from the "manifest absence of philosophy" in the dialogue. They fail, for example, to see that the speeches about *nomos* and education lead, as it were, to the conclusion (also present in the *Republic*) that there are two kinds of justice—civic and philosophic.[31] Neither do they perceive that the "rule of law" is not in fact "the rule of the god," but is in reality "the rule of laws laid down by human beings."[32] Rather than achieving or even

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[31] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 59.

[32] Ibid., 58.

approximating intellectual mastery of the phenomena discussed, the Dorians are, at best, persuaded to incorporate the Athenian's *logos* into their efforts at political construction.[33] Certainly teaching political men to desire to make their legislation more reasonable is a significant accomplishment. Nevertheless, in line with his analysis of other dialogues, Strauss thought the key insights of the dialogue accrued to the potential philosopher, the careful reader who devoted himself to an intensive examination of the drama of Plato's text.

A feature of the dialogue that would stand out to such a careful reader is the fact that the lessons concerning *nomos* and education are situated within the drama of wine drinking. Drinking parties are not only the subject of the speeches; the dialogue itself becomes a symposium as the interlocutors partake in the "intoxication" of inquiry. The Athenian's speeches, like wine or the proposed fear drink, induce the old Dorians to indulge in the exhilaration, self-confidence, hopefulness, and daring that make individuals "able and willing to say as well as to do everything with utmost freedom."[34] Specifically, the dramatic wine drinking helps the Dorians to become as bold youths. Strauss argued:

> In retrospect it appears that in answering the Athenian's initial questions, Kleinias has forgotten *aidos*, i.e., he has severed the connection between the divine origin of the Cretan laws and the end to which they are devoted (victory in war) and thus has weakened the hold of those divine laws. As can be seen from the Athenian's silence on *aidos* in his summary of the natural order of laws and their ends (631b3-632b1), Kleinias' oblivion enables him to become a partner in the Athenian's inquiry.[35]

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[33] They want to compel the Athenian to be present at the founding of the new city, but the dialogue ends without securing the Athenian's agreement to do so. This demonstrates that they are not independently capable of the political art, much less philosophic inquiry.

[34] Ibid., 20.

[35] Ibid.

The result of the Athenian's education is that his interlocutors become more open to seeing the irrationality of the *nomos* that undergirds the political order. The goodness of the "ancestral laws"—the "unchangeable customs which are the foundation and the safeguard of the laws proper"—is no longer simply assumed because the Athenian shows "that what is correct is according to nature and that nature is more ancient than any custom."[36] This is important because a key premise of the Dorians' thought is that the oldest is also the best; the Athenian's speeches indicate that what the Dorians thought was the oldest and best was neither oldest nor best. To repeat what was stated earlier, whereas the Dorian education upholds traditional beliefs about the gods, the Athenian education leads away from the *nomos* and the accounts of the gods constituted therein toward the standard of nature.

The dramatic wine drinking that takes place both reveals and conceals the fact that *nomos* and philosophy are opposed to each other. The Dorians, especially Kleinias, who is the more spirited interlocutor of the two, become willing to question their traditions and even to recognize the necessity of presenting "innovations in the garb of ancestral laws."[37] Even so, they are led to do so not out of love of wisdom but because engaging in such an inquiry could prove to be salutary for political order. Moreover, the Athenian is not completely candid with them. Considering the "sub-Socratic" discussions of the *Laws* in light of the drama led Strauss also to conclude (according to Zuckert) that "the clarity of the mind of the philosopher must be reduced, as if he too were metaphorically feeling the dulling effects of wine on the sharpness of the intellect,

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[36] Ibid., 101-102. See *Laws* 793b.

[37] Ibid., 110. I assume that Strauss's conclusion on this point was based on *Laws* 814c, although he does not include a specific reference to the text.

so that his unphilosophic interlocutors can understand him."[38] Plato thus leaves it to the

careful reader first to recognize the taming of philosophy that occurs in the dialogue in

which Socrates' absence is conspicuous and then to ask why it is necessary.

Strauss thought that the answer to the question was that Plato was pointing to the

permanent irrationality of the *nomos* in a manner that, because of its indirectness, would

not incur the ire of the many and hence bring about the fate meted out to Socrates.[39] In

the *Laws*, the Athenian seems to the two Dorians to be a friendly, if provocative,

interlocutor because he (unbeknownst to them) refrains from subjecting their beliefs to

the most rigorous philosophic critique. This is a model for philosophic speech because it

achieves the desirable effects of improving the city's institutional and educational order

and protecting the life of the philosopher, while provoking potential philosophers to

investigate, if not suggesting conclusions about, the actual structure of the cosmos. In

other words, the *Laws* does not portray a world any less tensional than the dialogues in

which Socrates appears, although to the many it appears so. Zuckert summarized

Strauss's view thus:

> the tension between the philosopher and the fathers can never be entirely
> eradicated; it is impossible for a philosopher to be a philosopher without raising
> questions about the validity of inherited views. The tension between philosophy
> and politics can at most be meliorated, as it was in both Xenophon's and Plato's
> writings, by the presentation of the philosopher primarily as a *phronimos*, a man
> of practical wisdom willing to teach potential princes. But, as Plato indicates in
> his depiction of both Socrates and the Athenian, there are limits on the extent to
> which the philosopher is willing to dedicate himself to playing such a role.[40]

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[38] Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 160. I think this point is plausible, but needs further support since
every dialogue could be said to mimic the intoxication of wine drinking even if that subject is not taken up
explicitly. And Strauss noted in *The City and Man* that each dialogue contains speeches between a superior
and inferior man but, of course, Plato did not find it necessary to treat symposia in every dialogue.
Therefore, it seems that the particular significance of the explicit discussion of wine drinking may lie
elsewhere.

[39] See Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, 163-64, on this point.
[40] Ibid., 163.

If the Athenian's willingness to act as political educator has its limits, so does his

willingness to act as philosophic guide for the many: he conceals, Strauss argued, the

situation that "the whole legal order" fails to meet the standards of "good sense, let alone

Intellect." Moreover, he finds it necessary to remain "silent on piety or the divine things

proper in his summary of the natural order of the laws."[41] This silence is occasioned by

the incapacity of his interlocutors to hear such things without reacting in a way that

would threaten either the life of the philosopher or the city.[42] Through the model of the

Athenian stranger, Plato suggests how the practice of philosophy must be moderated in

order to benefit both the philosopher and the city. Like Plato, the Athenian incorporates

his *logos* in writings that are fully accessible only to a select group of individuals.

The Outcome or Effect of the Dialogue: the Key Teaching

Strauss thought that Plato's *Laws* not only demonstrated the manner in which the

permanent tension between the philosopher and the city requires a moderation of

philosophic speech and deed. He also thought the dialogue explored a specific feature of

that tension, one to which he called attention by prefacing his commentary with the

epigraph from Avicenna. The epigraph prepares readers for Strauss's identification of a

critical theme of the dialogue—what he called "the problem of the gods."[43] In examining

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[41] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 9.

[42] See ibid., 20-31, where Strauss discussed how the "noble lie" finds its treatment in the *Laws*. In that dialogue, as opposed to the *Republic*, the necessity of having recourse to a noble lie does not itself become a topic of discussion possibly because to do so "might lead very far." The more philosophic interlocutors in the *Republic* are better suited to discussing explicitly the noble lie, which is "devoted to the belief that renders possible the best city as distinguished from the best human being" (31). The noble lie, Strauss said, "is the theme of the *Republic* as a whole" (31).

[43] Joseph Cropsey, who wrote the "Forward" to Strauss's book, seems to agree. See *Argument and Action*, vii. Examples of Strauss's references to this phrase occur at 110 and 129.

Plato's development of this theme Strauss found it helpful to consider the relation

between the *Laws* and the *Apology of Socrates* because the *Laws* begins with the word

"god" and contains "a law against impiety which would have been more favorable to

Socrates than the corresponding Athenian law."[44] Assuming that logographic necessity

governed the Platonic corpus, the *Laws'* revised law against impiety, combined with the

fact that the *Apology* ends with the word "god," might have been Plato's signal that the

two dialogues were intended to be read as companions and that their various treatments

of phenomena should be compared if a complete picture of those phenomena were to

emerge.

Considering the dialogues in light of each other supported Strauss's general

conclusion that Plato intended to depict two alternative ways (and their concomitant

outcomes) of practicing philosophy. In the *Apology*, Socrates' public inquiry leads to the

accusation of impiety, and his trial, conviction, and capital punishment. By contrast, the

Athenian stranger of the *Laws* conducts his conversation outside of the city and with old

men, and even though, according to Strauss, his speeches come close to blasphemy, he

avoids Socrates' ultimate fate.[45] Importantly, the difference between the two alternatives

does not ultimately turn on the dramatic setting, even though it is significant. What is

conspicuous about the Athenian's comportment is the degree to which he is silent about

the divine things even in his private conversation with the political men.[46] Careful

analysis of the Athenian's speeches may lead potential philosophers to investigate,

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[44] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 2.

[45] Ibid., 29.

[46] Strauss mentioned this silence on numerous occasions. See, for example, ibid., 9, 41, 44, and 136.

without reverence or fear, the divine things, but as they are directed to the Dorians, his

speeches are generally characterized by piety. And even where his speeches are "verging

on blasphemy," his *logos* nevertheless "persuades a man, if nothing else can, to be

resolved to life a holy and just life."[47] Strauss observed that, in his conversation with the

Dorians, the Athenian stranger refrained from discussing the "vanishing of divine

providence" that the stranger of Plato's *Statesman* spoke about with Socrates (274d3-6).

The Athenian's restraint pointed to the existence of "the problem of the gods" and to a

way of navigating it that is beneficial to both the philosopher and the city.

 "The problem of the gods," as Strauss understands it, seems to pertain to

demonstrating the existence of the gods.[48] The presence of the problem, Strauss thought,

is signaled by the various oaths which occur at strategic positions throughout the dialogue

(e.g., 660b, 720e, 905e); and it is "directly faced" in Book Ten—"the only philosophic

part of the *Laws*."[49] At the outset of his chapter on Book Ten, Strauss argued that the

Athenian Stranger is either "compelled or enabled to discuss what Adeimantos calls

theology (*Republic* 379a5-6)," and that "almost his whole teaching seems to stand or fall

by the belief in the gods."[50] The "problem" seems to be that piety is a crucial part of

living the just life, but piety has two different and conflicting forms according to whether

it is the property of the philosopher or the many. The city's piety derives from believing

that "the gods are as the laws declare them," but the philosopher's piety is characterized

by the opposite position. The philosopher "is concerned with the truth about the gods"

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[47] Ibid., 29-30.

[48] See ibid., 129. The only other place where he uses the phrase "the problem of the gods" is at 110.

[49] Ibid., 129.

[50] Ibid., 140.

and must look for positive proof concerning their being and power; this is the form of his piety and it causes a rift between him and the many.

Strauss observed that the proofs that the Athenian discusses with the Dorians and which help to evoke the kind of belief in the gods that will uphold his teaching are shown to lack philosophic rigor; for the philosopher the discussed "proofs" are not *logoi*, but rather *mythoi*. The Athenian's ironic proofs seem to put him in the same camp as the "ironical deniers" of the conventional beliefs concerning the gods who "compel the nonironical legislators to prove the existence of the gods."[51] Since the legislators, represented by the Dorians, fail in that effort, it appears that the philosopher's piety "comes only from the study of the soul and of the intellect regulating the whole."[52] That study leads the philosopher both away from and toward myth: he himself is liberated from the conventional myths, but is constrained to create new myths (in the sense of noble lies) about the gods for his own good and the good of the city. In this way, he acts semi-divine or takes the place of the gods, which from the perspective of the city can hardly be conceived of as pious. Moreover, his semi-divine activity mimics the contradictoriness that characterizes the poets' portrayals of the gods: to the extent that the superhuman philosopher's highest concern to seek truth is undermined by his promulgation of noble lies, the conventional tales regarding the gods' arbitrary activity achieve more legitimacy.[53]

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[51] Strauss, *Argument and Action*, 141.

[52] Ibid., 184. Strauss thought that the Athenian's remarks left open the question of whether the gods are superseded by the soul; see 148.

[53] Ibid., 165-67.

This interesting conclusion coincides with Strauss's preoccupation with the quarrel between philosophy and poetry that finds its ultimate expression in Plato's life and writings. In his commentary on Book Four, Strauss noted that Plato himself disobeyed or contradicted, by not taking a wife, the command of "his own legislator, i.e., of the dispensation of the intellect; yet, as we see, he did not disobey since his action was involuntary."[54] Strauss went on to say, "If one wishes, one could say that, by not marrying, Plato did what according to him the poets do: he contradicted the law and thus himself."[55] From the perspective of philosophy, contradictions are useful only to the extent that they provoke the quest for the correct account; philosophy seeks to dispel contradiction. Yet to suggest that Plato was unphilosophic would be absurd: he was both a philosopher and a poet, and well-aware of the fact. Plato captured the ironic situation of the philosopher-poet in the Athenian's speeches, which Strauss described in a section worth quoting at length:

> [According to the Athenian's recital of "an ancient story always told by the poets and agreed to by all men,"] the poet is compelled to say different things on the same subject, whereas the legislator in his law must say only one thing on each subject . . . We note that the poet, when speaking of the poets' self-contradiction, contradicts himself: the poet does not contradict himself by making different characters contradict one another; the Athenian abstracts and at the same time does not abstract from the dramatic character of the poets' works. Besides, the poet is not simply ignorant of which of the contradictory statements is true; the utmost that one could say is that he regards the question as to the truth of the contradictory statements as secondary to the question as to their fitness for human beings of contradictory dispositions. Contrary to the ancient story, originated and propagated by the poets, the poets, and especially the dramatic poets, know very well what they are doing; they present themselves as less wise than they are; they speak ironically (cf. 908e2), whereas nothing is more unbecoming for a legislator

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[54] Ibid., 63-64.

[55] Ibid., 64.

than the use of irony: he must always, to all human beings, say the same things on the same subject. [56]

The truth, and particularly the truth about the gods, must be disguised by the philosopher-poet who has knowledge of "the great variety among the natures and habits of the souls (cf. 650b6-9)."[57] Strauss's cross-reference to *Laws* 908e2 links the philosopher-poet with the naturally just ironic man "who doesn't believe the gods exist at all" (*Laws* 908b). Knowing that belief in the gods and divine providence is salutary for the many who require hope to act on a grand scale and thereby to achieve political felicity, Plato's philosopher uses poetry to occlude the coincidence of philosophy and doubt about the gods' existence.[58] The resolution to the "problem of the gods" is for philosophers to make it appear that philosophy is in service to the city and superficially to agree with the Athenian when he stated at 812a, "With regard to the greatest god, and the cosmos as a whole, we assert that one should not conduct investigations nor busy oneself with trying to discover the causes—for it is not pious to do so. Yet it's likely that if entirely the opposite of this took place it would be correct."[59]

Voegelin on the Laws

As I have done in the preceding chapters, I begin my examination of Voegelin's interpretation of the *Laws* with a general sketch of his concern with the dialogue. In brief, references to Plato's *Laws* occur throughout Voegelin's corpus, but become more frequent in the later stages of his career.

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[56] Ibid., 61-62.

[57] Ibid., 62.

[58] See ibid., 41.

[59] Strauss cited this passage at ibid., 113.

The main analysis of the dialogue occurs in *Plato and Aristotle*, with several

references to the dialogue occurring in the second and fourth volumes as well. In *The*

World of the Polis and *The New Science of Politics*, Voegelin paid special attention to the

way that the dialogue illuminates Plato's philosophy of history and his theory of politics

in opposition to other accounts of order. For example, Voegelin examined Plato's

reasons for bringing together interlocutors who represent the successive phases (Minoan,

Spartan, and Athenian) of Hellenic history. Through these symbols, Plato linked the

chronological story of the Hellenes to the spiritual movements toward or away from the

divine drawing that find their expression in each polis's respective institutional and

mythic traditions, and which constitute the substance of history.[60] In addition to the

discernible movements, moreover, the "contraction" of the three phases reveals Plato's

insight into the "indelible present—the movement within the *metaxy* that is timeless

because of the participatory pull of the divine ground.

In reference to political order, Voegelin concentrated on examining how Plato

refined the symbols of the old myth (e.g., the *nous* replaces the gods of Crete) while

simultaneously revealing that the older symbols were more conducive to right order than

the deformed sophistic symbols of his day (e.g., the Cretan institutions appear to be more

perfect than the Athenian ones insofar as their origins are more closely tied to the

divine).[61] As in *The World of the Polis*, Voegelin's treatment of the *Laws* in *The New*

Science of Politics is significant for its opposition to the Protagorean "Man is the

Measure," with the new insight that "God is the Measure," of education and political

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[60] See Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 43ff.

[61] See ibid. and *Plato and Aristotle*, 239.

order. In his middle writings, Voegelin's considerations of the important images of the Puppet Player (*Laws* 644d-645c) and the Mover of the Pieces (*Laws* 903b-d) focused especially on how they illuminate Plato's late understanding of human agency and the composition of the soul (both the individual and social psyche) and therefore help to explain changes in Plato's political thought.

Voegelin's later meditative writings understandably focus on the images of the Puppet Player and the Mover of the Pieces as the outgrowths of Plato's mystical insight into the realm of reality that lies beyond the experienced tension of existence and stretches into the thoroughly transcendent.[62] As a consequence, Voegelin's late writings move away from questions of political order and the intersection of spiritual and pragmatic history in order to focus on Plato's answer to what Voegelin referred to as the "darker question"—the question about why the question about the meaning of one's existence remains pertinent even when the answer is found.[63] That is, the late writings prefer to examine Plato's insights into the structure of the ontological process in which the cosmic consciousness reveals itself to its constituent consciousnesses, located in individual human beings. In *The Ecumenic Age* as well as in several of the late published essays, Voegelin concentrated on the *Laws*' theological and revelatory insights and suggested that Plato conceived of, and sought to express, his insights into the mysterious beyond as a vision (*opsis*) arising out of an experience that surpassed noetic activity.[64]

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[62] See, for example, Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 230; "Gospel and Culture," in *CW* 12:184ff.

[63] See Voegelin, "Gospel and Culture," in *CW* 12: 185; *The Ecumenic Age*, 316-30. For a secondary treatment of the "darker question," see Sinnett, "Eric Voegelin and the Essence of the Problem," 433-35.

[64] See, for example, Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, 230-38; "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 357-68.

What Voegelin Brings to His Interpretation of the Dialogue

As he did in his analysis of the *Republic*, Voegelin began his study of the *Laws* by addressing what he thought were misconceptions in the scholarship treating Plato's dialogue. He argued against interpreters who conceived of the *Laws* as either "reactionary" or "less idealistic" than the *Republic*. In the case of the former, Plato's critics took issue with the theocratic institutions of the dialogue, and in the case of the latter, they praised the dialogue for recognizing the advantages of rule of law rather than rule by a philosopher-king. Voegelin thought that in neither instance did interpreters grasp the mystical ontological insights underlying Plato's expression of order. Specifically, they failed to see that an "ideal" in the normal social-scientific use of the term "has no meaning in a Platonic context." Rather, Voegelin asserted, "The Idea is Plato's reality, and this reality can be more or less well embodied in the historically existing polis."[65] The theocratic character of the *Laws'* polis, therefore, is not to be understood simply as the product of an old man's frustration with the decline of virtue in his society.[66] Neither does the move from the *Republic* to the *Laws* indicate Plato's "compromise with reality." Voegelin's Plato was more attuned than ever to the divine reality that he understood as the cause, process, and end of his philosophic quest, and the political structures of his late dialogue emerge out of and reflect that experience.

The most egregious misconception, Voegelin thought, was that the *Laws* was formally inferior to the other dialogues, signaling that Plato's faculties of composition

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[65] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 218.

[66] Ibid., 215-20.

were waning.[67] Voegelin conceded that the *Laws* contains some "stylistic defects and minor inconsistencies which betray that it has not undergone a final revision." But it does not follow that Plato's artistic and philosophic prowess was in decline. On Voegelin's account, rather,

> The work glows with a ripeness of style that is peculiar to some of the greatest minds when their vitality remains unbroken into the later years. The subject matter is now entirely at the disposition of the master; the process of creation seems effortless; and the conspiracy of content and expression is so subtle that the creator almost disappears behind a creation that resembles a necessary growth.[68]

The *Laws* is governed by an internal organization that most accurately expresses the confluence of symbolic expression and consciousness of the basic structure of human existence. The dialogue, Voegelin, argued, was Plato's "religious poem," a philosophic myth that evokes an immediate mystical experience of the structure of the divinely-grounded cosmos, explores that structure and its implications for human action through reflective consciousness, and conveys the appropriate manner of communicating such revelatory insights.[69] As the creator of the poem, the "religious artist" Plato self-consciously surpassed in authority, potency, and attunement to the ground any actual or paradigmatic lawgiver.[70]

Interpretations of the *Laws* that place primary emphasis on the political features of the dialogue, suggest that Plato's intellectual powers were fading, or criticize the

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[67] Ibid., 215.

[68] Ibid., 216.

[69] See Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 87: "The intimate relation between dialogue and myth reaches its high point, to my mind, in the *Laws*. . . Just to hint at the principle: the arrangement of the dialogue into episodes, just as the contents of the episodes, follows a cosmic analogy that, in the explanation of the institutions of the polis, becomes the contents of the dialogue."

[70] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 228.

theocratic character of the work miss the crucial point about Plato's thoroughgoing

appropriation of the myth as the ultimate expression of his insights into the transcendent

source of order. After examining Plato's earlier work in the *Timaeus*, Voegelin argued

that Plato recognized the impossibility of advancing "verifiable propositions concerning

the psychic nature of [cosmic] order." Plato came to the conclusion that

> the "truth" of the myth will arise from the unconscious, stratified in depth into the
> collective unconscious of the people, the generic unconscious of mankind, and the
> deepest level where it is in communication with the primordial forces of the
> cosmos. On this conception of a cosmic *omphalos* of the soul in the depth of the
> unconscious rests Plato's acceptance of the myth as a medium of symbolic
> expression, endowed with an authority of its own, independent of, and prior to,
> the universe of empirical knowledge constituted by consciousness in attention to
> its objects.[71]

Voegelin went on to argue that "The *eikos mythos* carries its own *aletheia* because in it

we symbolize the truly experienced relation of our separate conscious existence to the

cosmic ground of the soul. The theory of the myth is itself a myth; its truth is not of the

intellect but the self-authenticating truth of the psyche."[72] The *Laws*, therefore, must be

understood as Plato's conscious play with the myth, which was neither fully under his

control nor wholly compelling. In articulating his experience, Voegelin found, Plato

became acutely aware of the mysterious intersections between time and timelessness,

action and suffering, and knowing and not-knowing that constitute the human condition

and must be elucidated through the language of myth.

Voegelin's emphasis on the *Laws* as the culmination of Platonic myth did not

diminish his concern with the relation between concrete politics and Plato's expressions

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[71] Ibid., 184.

[72] Ibid., 198.

of order. In a subsection of his chapter entitled "The Platonic Theocracy," Voegelin

argued that

> The evolution of Plato's conception of order toward the position of the Laws must be understood in the context of Hellenic politics. . . The need for a more comprehensive organization must have been so obvious at the time, that Plato's vision of an Hellenic empire had nothing extraordinary on principle.[73]

Voegelin took seriously the political reforms set forth in the *Laws*: Plato desired a united

Hellenes—a solution to the general disorder of Hellenic unbrotherliness—that he hoped

to secure through a combination of persuasion and force. Drawing from his philosophy

of history, Voegelin argued that the *Laws'* political solution reflects Plato's position

between the myth of nature and Christianity's further differentiation of the universal

spiritual substance: Plato's trajectory "is toward ecclesiastic universalism; the result

remains theocratic sectarianism."[74]

Voegelin continued to examine Platonic politics as an effort at spiritual reform.

Plato's concern was always to see the embodiment of the Idea (the divine substance in

psyche) in a concrete polis; by the time of the *Laws* Plato did, however, come to see that

the "human material" was largely incapable of being animated by the Idea unmediated.

In comparison to the glorious restoration of order envisaged in the *Republic*, the *Laws'*

restoration is indeed "second-best" in terms of the intensity of its attunement. Now the

Idea must flow into the soul of the semi-divine lawgiver (the Athenian Stranger in the

dialogue, Plato himself in history) who then imposes its divine stamp into the law

(*nomos*) that urges citizens toward virtue. Therefore, what seems to be Plato's move

toward an institutional solution to the political problems of his day was that, but not only

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[73] Ibid., 223.

[74] Ibid., 227.

that because, in Voegelin's terms, "Power and spirit can indeed not be separated."[75] In

other words, pragmatic disorder is inextricably linked to existential disorder. Law and

institutions necessarily affect man's relation to the ground, either facilitating or inhibiting

attunement, and it is by that criterion that they are to be judged. The same holds true for

the philosopher's actions. Therefore, the existential gulf between Plato and his fellow

citizens (of which Plato had become painfully aware) did not and could not justify a

restoration of order through forceful or unjust means. Instead, Plato continued to

articulate—contrary to the sophists—the luminous insight that genuine personal and

political order depends upon and facilitates man's loving quest of God. And in the final

dialogue, that therapeutic response took the form of a religious poem that attempts to

save obdurate men by persuading them to live by the divine-infused *nomoi*.

How the Theme of God Is Developed and What it Means

Throughout this dissertation, I have called attention to Voegelin's emphasis on the

divine dimension of Platonic philosophy. Voegelin supported his emphasis with

evidence from the entire Platonic corpus and especially from the *Laws*—the dialogue

which, according to Voegelin, contained Plato's insight that reality as a whole, the

cosmos, has its beginning and ending in God. The dialogue, which Voegelin likened to

the "*Summa* of Greek life," conveys Plato's "mature wisdom on the problems of man and

society" and presents "the grand view of human life in its ramifications from birth to

death."[76] No interpretation of the *Laws* would be complete without treating the full range

of meaning implied in the title, and Voegelin's concern with Plato's exploration of the

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[75] Ibid., 225.

[76] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 216.

God did not preclude him from undertaking a detailed explication of the new socio-political arrangements. For example, he suggested that the mixing of democratic and monarchic elements in the election of the Council (*Laws* 756e-758a) functioned to create existential *philia* (not merely to balance competing powers) in a city of men who are mostly incapable of virtue. Nevertheless, Voegelin's analysis of *nomos* is subordinated to the theme that organizes the various aspects of the dialogue: the God who governs the entire process of order and history. *Nomos* (in the sense of legal statutes, traditions, or a polis' historical arrangement), he argued, has substance and is orderly only to the extent that it is informed by the divine wisdom.[77] To understand that divinity must, therefore, be the primary concern as one approaches a study of the *Laws*.

Voegelin determined that God is the theme by examining the structure of the Laws. Voegelin's conclusion that the God was the key theme of the dialogue derived, in the first place, from an examination of the structure of the dialogue. As he did with the *Republic*, Voegelin tried to identify how Plato's structure revealed Plato's evolving intentions and insights. He noticed that the predominantly "internal organization" of the *Laws* is formed "through the recurrence of dominant motifs in a flow of associations."[78] The form and the content of the dialogue merge together into the revelation that the mystical insights become luminous in light of the experience of symbolizing them   This is a shift from Plato's *modus operandi* in the *Republic*, where the dialogue's material (*viz.* Plato's experiential insights) is organized externally into divisions and subdivisions that

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[77] Voegelin discussed the various meanings and uses of the term "*nomos*" in *The World of the Polis*, 305-12.

[78] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 216.

mimic the structure of the *metaxy*. Plato's *Republic* symbolization seems to weigh more

heavily on the side of reflective consciousness, and the deliberateness of the construction

focuses the reader's attention on the person of Plato. In contrast, the symbolization of the

Laws is balanced toward participatory (or luminous) consciousness inasmuch as the

entire dialogue takes the form of a "religious poem," that is, a work of art that is inspired

by God and which aims at fostering a right relationship between man and God. In this

last work, Plato lets himself fade into the creation (the key interlocutor is a Stranger) so

that the expression of order and the divine ground that prompts it are the key focus of the

work.[79]

    In addition to the principle of internal organization that governs the dialogic

structure, several structural features function to show that the proper end of human

striving is God and that the proper mode of such striving is religious poetry. For

example, the opening word (*theos*) and the place where the speeches occur (the pathway

that leads to Zeus' temple) indicate Plato's concern with man's struggle for attunement to

the divine ground. Voegelin argued that, "God is the motif that dominates all others; and

the dialogue, while winding its path through the world that is embraced by God, will not

lose its direction in spite of the long digressive rests in the groves."[80] At the center of the

dialogue, the Athenian gives his Great Address (715e-734e), which is divided into three

parts: the first section (715e-718b) treats of God, the second section (726d-734e) treats of

Man, and between these is an interlude, on persuasion, that bridges the gap between man

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[79] There are other reasons why Plato fades from the audience's view: for example, Plato recognized that among his fellow Athenians, he was unique in his attunement to the divine ground and was therefore as a "stranger" among them. The other reasons have their cause in Plato's new insight into the God.

[80] Ibid., 228.

and God.[81] The core of Plato's religious poem expresses and evokes the insight that man

and God are held together by the divine speech that bends human reason toward the God.

And the final scene confirms that the dialogue reaches its end in the God. On Voegelin's

reading, Megillus' statement that the Athenian must be made to cooperate in the Dorians'

founding effort evinces his recognition of the divine wisdom in the Athenian's speeches.

Through the course of the dialogue, the three interlocutors enter into genuine existential

community, the bond of which is psychic attunement to the God. Plato's composition of

the dialogue's literary beginning, middle, and ending thus points to the God that prompts

the human quest for himself by his presence in psyche.

Voegelin further argued that the dialogue's initial question opens up a scientific

framework in which the entire structure of being is held together by God.   The question

concerning the origins of *nomos* sets in motion the first three books of the dialogue,

which present episodes that occur in the following order: 1) the god as the source of

institutions, 2) man and society's orientation toward the god, and 3) the course of

institutions through history, the cycle of which is set moving by divine agency.[82] The

episodic structure treats of God, Man, and Society and underscores the divine permeation

of the three dimensions of human existence that Voegelin described in "Reason: The

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[81] See ibid., 253-55.

[82] Ibid., 237. Voegelin thought it appropriate to conclude that the investigation of lawgiving takes place "under the sign of the God" because the society the interlocutors examine came to be out of the "god-sent catastrophes which have destroyed the previous civilization." Voegelin did not cite a specific passage from the *Laws*, so I assume he is referring to the Athenian's line at 677a, where he invokes the "ancient sayings" that "tell of many disasters—floods and plagues and many other things—which have destroyed human beings." The Athenian does not explicitly mention divine agency here and a case for his naturalism certainly could be made. However, the mythical context of the statement—it occurs in a myth of history and is attributed to ancient sayings—lends a quality of mysteriousness to the passage, which Voegelin would have no trouble equating with the divine.

Classic Experience": the personal, political, and historical.[83] Voegelin inferred that the

principles concerning "how a polis is administered best and how the individual man may

best conduct his personal life" (*Laws* 702a), which are treated through the three episodes,

make sense only in light of Plato's concrete, participatory experiences of the divine

ground. [84] The quest for the origins of *nomos* blossoms out into an inquiry that treats an

enormous range of human experiences that, on Voegelin's reading, are commensurable to

the extent that they are all constituted by the necessary relation between man and God.

Plato's scientific investigation of the *nomos* did not aim at merely at a cognitive

comprehension of discreet phenomena, but sought to evoke experiences of the

transcendent *Nomos* that pervades all structures of being. To this end, the inquiry of the

first three books is conducted through, and therefore subordinated to, myth, which helps

prevent interpretations that would fail to account for the motivating experiences. The

theme of God, then, is developed through a comprehensive, experiential inquiry into all

dimensions of existence.

Having thus established that theory (i.e. the principles of order) 1) derives from

experiences of the transcendent ground, and 2) reveals God as the origin and end of

ontological striving, the Athenian then suggests that the principle must be tested (702b).

In Book Four, "it is man who has to show his skill in lawgiving, not God."[85] On

Voegelin's reading, this shift does not imply Plato's effort to substitute a natural order for

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[83] See Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *CW* 12: 290. The episodes of the three books represent only one instance of Plato's treatment of God, Man, and Society. Also, "world," the fourth participant in the community of being, is evoked in the consideration of the whole dialogue, which itself reflects the "pulsing" or tensional harmony of the cosmos that is permeated by divine psyche. I discuss this below.

[84] The translation is Voegelin's; see *Plato and Aristotle*, 237.

[85] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 237.

a supernatural one. Rather, the human construction of laws begins from the premise that the God governs all and, from Book Four forward, the subject of the *Laws* is how the divine logos informs man's concrete struggles for order. Voegelin identified two "high points" of the second part of the dialogue, namely, the discussions of education that occurs in Book Seven and of religion in Book Ten. Each of these discussions recalls the dominant motif of the first part of the dialogue, "the symbol of the God who plays the game of order and history with man as his puppet," thus indicating Plato's intent to make God the primary focus of the entire work.[86]

Plato's God. Until now, I have concentrated on how Voegelin identified the theme of the *Laws* by examining Plato's development of the dialogic structure. It remains to say something about the content or character of the God who had revealed himself to Plato through the process of Plato's articulation of his mystical insights. Voegelin found that two crucial passages help to illuminate Plato's God: the image of the Puppet Player and the Mover of the Pieces. In addition, the themes of harmonious cosmic psyche and number, which find their expression throughout the dialogue, speak to the nature of Plato's God. Considering these passages led Voegelin to a conclusion similar to what he observed in the *Republic*: that Plato's key insight was that man is incapable of expressing completely what he discovers about the divine ground (or the *Agathon*), both because of his own limitations and because of the ultimate transcendence of the mysterious God. But despite the similar conclusion, Voegelin maintained that the *Laws* was indeed an expression that signaled an advance in Plato's mystical understanding of the God. This is because the symbols Plato developed to express the

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[86] Ibid., 216.

mystical understanding penetrate further into the tensions of psyche and are therefore capable of clarifying both a broader range of experience and a more acute perception of it. To Voegelin's analysis of these symbols I now turn.

The Puppet Player—The image of the Puppet Player first occurs in Book One, at 644d-645c, and is then elaborated in Book Seven, at 803a-804b. The Athenian's first articulation of it is made in order to clarify the interlocutors' agreement "that the good are those able to rule themselves, and the bad are those who cannot" (644b). The later elaboration is undertaken within the discussion of education and aims at demonstrating the root cause of educational breakdown, *viz*. that "men have forgotten that they are the playthings of God and that this quality is the best in them."[87] The myth portrays man as a "divine puppet" moved about by various "cords." According to the Athenian, only the single golden cord is divine and leads the "voyage of existence on the best way of life" (803b). Genuine self-rule is to follow its pull, and each man is capable of doing this by virtue of his possession of *logismos*. Cities as well are able to live by the golden cord if they "incorporate it into a law" and "live by it in domestic relations as well as in relations with other poleis (644d-645b)."[88]

Voegelin argued that Plato's new understanding of God could be inferred by examining the explicit statements of the image as well as by analyzing the experiences that the image intends to convey. He further argued that the Athenian (or Plato, as it were) was speaking genuinely and literally when he stated 1) that the myth would generate better understanding of the meaning of the previous speeches, 2) that the God is,

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[87] Ibid., 232.

[88] Ibid.

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by nature, worthy of complete seriousness on the part of man, 3) that the God indicates how men should live their lives in accordance with nature, and 4) that all these things were spoken under the influence of his experience of the God.[89] Together these statements convey Plato's reception of a mystical communication which revealed the God who communicates with man through myth. The divine communication surpasses all other forms of expression because it best generates genuine insights into the structure of living well, which is revealed to be the serious pursuit of the most serious thing—God. The generality and ambiguity of the insights into the God might at first seem to undermine Voegelin's idea that the *Laws* contained a deeper understanding than the other dialogues; we hardly know any more about the divine player than we know about the *Agathon*. But Voegelin's experiential analysis of the myth clarifies Plato's new differentiation, which must be examined in light of Plato's late anthropology and philosophy of existence.

First, let us examine the experiential analysis from the anthropological perspective. Voegelin pointed out that the cords, which represent various influences on human action, are contracted into the soul of the individual human being: each man is drawn violently toward the region of vice and gently toward the region of virtue. The various metals that make up the cords recall Hesiod's characterization of the different ages of man, an image Plato had used previously in the *Republic* (415a-b). But in the *Republic* the metals represented classes of men who were distinguished from each other by a predominant character flowing from the order of the psyche. In the *Laws'* image, Plato penetrated "beyond the virtues into the movements of the soul, into the realm of

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[89] See Plato *Laws* 644c, 803c, and 804b.

pathe, and into the consciousness of values, the *logismos*."[90] Now, the sway of deeper and stronger forces renders virtue impotent to engender such a stable character. Individual souls, rather than classes, are the field of existential tensions where the forces of order and disorder vie for hegemony in the psyche, and this is the basis for Plato's new understanding of the basic equality of mankind (or the equality of Hellenic peoples[91]).

The new differentiated understanding of the human psyche is simultaneously a differentiation of the divine ground because psyche exists in the *metaxy* and to consider the human pole separately would destroy Plato's experiential insight. What is discovered about the God is that his drawing (i.e. the golden cord) is subtle almost to the point of being imperceptible and that the only way man knows anything about God is through that very subtle experience. But the image also shows that "the pull of the steely cords is just as divine as the pull of the golden cord" and that the burden of choosing which cord to follow lies unequivocally on man. [92] The force of disorder which was symbolized by the Cave in the *Republic* is now clearly placed in the hands of God, giving rise to the "darker" question regarding God's relationship to man. Plato's answer reiterates what he said of the *Agathon* in the *Republic*. At *Laws* 644d-e, the Athenian states: As to why man exists as a puppet or as to why the God made man his puppet, we know nothing.[93] That the structure of man's existence remains ultimately mysterious does not mean that a new understanding of the divine ground has not occurred. In fact, Voegelin argued, "Behind

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[90] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 233.

[91] Voegelin thought that Plato *approached* the Christian conception of a universal human nature constituted by its relation to the divine ground, but did not fully reach it because his experience was still circumscribed by the life of the polis.

[92] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12:337.

[93] Ibid.

the truth of the discord there lies the mystery of the reality in which the discord becomes luminous as its truth. The 'true story' is true because it raises the question to which no further answer in truth is possible."[94] In other words, it is through the experience which gives rise to consciousness of the question that man participates more fully in the divine ground and apperceives through luminous (not reflective) consciousness the veritable structure of reality.

Now that Voegelin's take on Plato's late anthropology (which we must also consider a theology in order to avoid hypostasizing Plato's or Voegelin's symbols) has been discussed, we can turn to Plato's late philosophy of existence. Right or orderly existence still consists in following the divine drawing, but now only the subtle *attraction* of the divine presence—rather than the presence itself—is in the human psyche. And for most men that attractive force is present only as a decree of the polis which was promulgated by some divine lawgiver. "The gentle pulling of the golden cord which man should follow," Voegelin argued, "has replaced the ascent from the cave to the immediate vision of the Idea; the full stature of the man whose soul is ordered by the vision of the Agathon has diminished to that of a plaything (*paignion*) of conflicting forces; the sons of god have become the puppets of the gods."[95]

Only the person of Plato, who saves the saving tale of the myth (645b) has proven capable of an immediate ordering experience of God. He must infuse the civic *nomos* with the divine presence—which is the *Nomos* in the strict sense—so that by participating

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 234.

in the civic rituals men can hope to become attuned to the divine *direction*.[96] The *Laws'*

symbolization thus shows that "God does not speak unmediated, but only as mediated

through Socrates-Plato," or in this case, the Athenian Stranger-Plato.[97] In Plato's final

dialogue, God and man are almost completely separated except in the case of the genuine

lover of wisdom who, Voegelin argued, quests for experiences of the ground, seeks to

articulate them in symbolic language, and thus participates in the interaction of *noesis*

and *opsis* (vision) that reveals something about the structure of God. Therefore, the

consequence of philosophic experience is a mystical transformation that estranges the

philosopher from most other men. Voegelin argued that the Puppet Player symbol "gains

its intensity because it is drawn, not from the experience of the puppet only, but of the

player too."[98] But the divine presence in the symbol is simultaneously too overwhelming

and too gentle for most men. For the very few who genuinely undertake the quest for

God, the symbol has ordering power. But for the majority of people, the philosopher's

symbol must undergo the mediation of solidification into a civic decree.[99] Not through

their own psychic experience, but through their acceptance of a dogma that is infused

with the philosopher's wisdom (such as the positive theological triad at 885b) do most

people think anything about the divine ground. And even then, they are hardly conscious

of the real meaning and experiential significance behind the dogmatic propositions.

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[96] Ibid., 235.

[97] Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 87.

[98] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 234.

[99] When Voegelin stated (ibid., 236) that the meaning of the Puppet Player symbol was "easily understandable through the experience of the pulls in every soul," I do not think he meant that most people would understand the full meaning of the symbol that emerges upon consideration of its presence within the sequence of myths in the *Laws* (which I discuss below). The human experience might be generally accessible, but access to the divine experience that was indeed present in the symbol usually requires a helper—such as Voegelin—to reveal it.

The Mover of the Pieces—Voegelin said that the *Laws* was "a grandiose manifestation of Plato's imaginative genius" because in it Plato expressed his experiential insights through a sequence of myths that advance from compactness to differentiation. In Voegelin's complex terminology, the sequence "is a remarkable device to make the truth of reality intelligible as reality in the process of becoming truth." The fundamental insight governing Plato's construction of the sequence, he added, is "that the truth of the process is limited by the mystery of the process."[100] In simpler terms, this means that the quest for order, or the quest for attunement to the divine ground, is capable of producing a better understanding of the basic structure of existence in the *metaxy*. But because the quest reveals that human existence is in the *metaxy*, the poles of which transcend human experience and insight, the best one can hope for and must seek is further, not complete, dissolution of the ontological and existential mystery.

The Puppet Player Myth respects this "process of reality" by answering certain questions about man's relationship to God, but self-consciously stopping short of offering an answer to what Plato experienced as an unanswerable question. But Plato's quest does not end there, for in the construction of the *Laws*, the image of the Mover of the Pieces (903b-d) further clarifies the mystery of the God who pulls man's strings. From the "cosmic depth in the soul of Plato" emerges a vision (Voegelin called it "the most awesomely intimate revelation") of God "who broods over the board of the cosmos and moves the particles of the Great Soul according to their relative merit, distinguished from the puppets by His perfect will of fulfillment under Fate."[101] By situating this further

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[100] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 336.

[101] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 236.

clarification in the sequence of myths, Plato conveyed his realization that genuine

insights are possible only to the extent that one recognizes oneself participating in a

divinely guided process that properly leads toward God.

Only a few details about Mover of the Pieces image need to be mentioned.

Although Voegelin did not use the term in his analysis of the *Laws* (he used it in the

analysis of the *Republic*), he suggested that Plato's vision is the final step in his theodicy.

Glossing the image, Voegelin posited:

> [Plato's] argument is climaxed by the vision of the creator-god as the player at the
> board who shifts the pieces according to the rules. When he observes a soul, now
> in conjunction with one body and then with another, undergoing changes through
> its own actions as well as through the actions of other souls, there is nothing left
> for the mover of the pieces but to shift the character (*ethos*) that has improved to
> the better place and the one that has worsened to the worse place, thus assigning
> to each the lot that is due its fate (903b-d).[102]

Now human beings—indeed all the "particles of the Great Soul"—are recognized as

ultimately responsible for their existence in order or disorder. For Voegelin, this does not

mean that each individual can control every aspect of his moral, ethical, or intellectual

constitution or that it is possible to transcend fully one's circumstances. Rather, it means

that whatever the mysterious order of human agency and responsibility is, one must

accept as true that the God 1) "has disposed all things for the weal and virtue of the

whole," 2) does not compel human action, and 3) does not judge arbitrarily.[103] Moreover,

the mystery itself is not for the human pieces to dispel; it is a divine thing that the human

pieces must accept. This explains why Voegelin abandoned the term "theodicy": the

order of God is not now and never will be fully intelligible to man. Still, man

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[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

experiences the God's movements of the particles, and it is through this experience that man is able to apperceive the divine order to which he must attune himself.

Cosmic psyche—In order to round out Voegelin's conclusions about Plato's God, another important symbol should be examined: this is the "Great Soul" mentioned in the foregoing section, or the cosmic psyche, as it is called elsewhere. Voegelin argued that Plato previously developed this symbol (in the *Phaedrus*, *Statesman*, and *Timaeus*) in order to represent the overarching order of the historical oscillations between order and disorder and to explain how he could assert the reality of the Idea despite its failure to be embodied in any polis Plato knew of. Cosmic psyche symbolizes psyche's penetration of the entire order of being and its function as the bridge for the gap between the "primordial forces of the cosmos" (*viz*. the transcending poles of the *metaxy*) and the individual consciousness. The "bridge" is located in the "generic unconscious of mankind," and through it stream communications, sometimes barely perceptible, with the divine ground.[104] The ongoing communication between all consciousness and the transcendent ground explains how and why true myths emerge in the philosopher's consciousness: the myths are anamnetic insights into the fullness of consciousness that has been forgotten under the pressures of spatio-temporal existence. In the *Laws*, Plato continued to explore this symbol, this time accentuating its ability to convey the experience of eternity in time and to facilitate an understanding of political cycles.

Voegelin thought that the symbol of cosmic psyche emerges in various passages through the dialogue. For example, it is embedded in the Mover of the Pieces myth where Plato states that God has ordered the whole—the actions of which involve embodied

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[104] See ibid., 184.

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souls (903d, 904a)—toward virtue (903b, 903d, 904b, 904e-905d), and that "all things that partake of soul are transformed, possessing within themselves the cause of the transformation, and, undergoing transformation, are moved according to the order and law of destiny" (904c). Voegelin also thought that the dialogue as a whole had been constructed so as to mimic the experience of cosmic psyche and thereby to generate insights into the divine ground. How Voegelin arrived at this conclusion is complex and fascinating, but space constraints permit only this brief explanation here. The historical, political, mythical, and social experiences of Hellas are symbolized in the persons of the three interlocutors who have gathered together on the solstice (the "timeless apex") in order to close out one cycle and to initiate another. The cycle includes sequences of progress and regress in terms of man's understanding of order, yet the constant of the cycle is the divine presence.

In the *Laws*, Plato developed the symbol through the principles of "contraction" and "distention." Time is distended insofar as the day of the speeches spans the range of experiences of Minoan through Athenian civilization; time is contracted insofar as this long range of experiences is concentrated into the "timeless" day of speeches and into the "timeless poem" of Plato's final dialogue. These principles are particularly important for Plato's new symbolism of the cosmic psyche because they help to communicate its "tensional pulsing," or the ineffable experience of eternity in time. Plato wanted to illuminate the situation that while neither time nor eternity can be experienced purely, and while they are impossible to reconcile with each other, man experiences the eternal ground in temporal existence. Moreover, man recognizes and understands (at a very deep, even unconscious, level) this mysterious situation, which has important

implications for personal and political life: now man's existence is fully constituted by the tension between time and timelessness. All the forces of order and disorder have their place within the individual soul, the polis, and the cosmos. This gives rise to a new understanding of existential community as the object of philosophy and politics: before, *philia* bound together "the equals in the spirit," but now it binds together "the noble and the vile"[105] By the time of the *Laws*, Plato's God is both more intimate with man (pervading every particle) and more mysterious than ever before. God is the measure of every human action and suffering, yet man's ability to become akin to God is diminished radically: the best he can do is to limit his concessions to the forces of disorder as much as possible.

Revelation and myth. Plato's *Laws* depicts the divinity as mysterious, orderly, the source only of good (though the forces of disorder are also considered transcendent or divine), ever present to man, and too "pure" to be experienced in an unmediated way. The God permeates the cosmos in its entirety and has a structural form that exhibits the harmony of numerical relations. Plato presented these insights through the form of the myth for reasons that I have mentioned throughout this dissertation: myth is suited to conveying experiences of order that would make nonsense of propositional language, it points back to the motivating experiences, and Plato saw it as an alternative to the sophists' rhetorical speech. Beginning with the *Timaeus* and climaxing in the *Laws*, Plato discovered and sought to convey the most important reason why the philosophic quest should be conducted through the medium of myth: God's nature is such that his communications with man necessarily take the form of myth, of symbolic speech.

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[105] Ibid., 250.

Because attunement to the divine ground requires man to become godlike, Voegelin argued that man, too, must express the most important insights in the divine form of the myth.

According to Voegelin, Plato wrestled with the question of his own divinity: "Plato propounds no truth that had been revealed to him; he appears not to have had the experience of a prophetic address from God."[106] Nevertheless, he did understand the process of constructing the dialogues and the emergence of their images in his consciousness as a Vision (*opsis*, *hora*)—what Voegelin described as "participatory experience of 'seeing' the paradox of a reality which depends for its existence, formative order, and luminosity on the presence of 'the god' who . . . is a nonpresent Beyond of the being things in which he is present."[107] That Plato found myth to be best suited to exploring the Beyond because it illuminated what was previously obscure was evidence enough that the God reveals himself to man through myth, for the illumination of reality is a divinely guided process. As Voegelin argued on a number of occasions, "the fact of revelation is its content."[108]

Voegelin also pointed out that the *Laws* contains Plato's conscious investigation of the structure of Vision. At *Laws* 715d-e, Plato's Athenian stranger states that, "every young human being sees such things indistinctly, when he looks by himself, but when old sees them with great sharpness."[109] This passage is introduced by Cleinias' question,

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[106] Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 87.

[107] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 362.

[108] See Voegelin, *New Science of Politics*, 78; Voegelin to Strauss, 22 April 1951, in *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 82.

[109] Where Pangle translates *hora* as "seeing," Voegelin preferred "vision in such matters."

"Who is this god?" (713a), and, Voegelin argued, "is deliberately placed between a "theogonic *mythos* of the epic type (713b-714b) and the Orphic *logos* (715e-716b)."[110] Immediately following, at 716c, is the Athenian's conclusion that God is the Measure of all things and that the human task is to become dear to the God by emulating him. Voegelin thought the mythical construction of this section of the dialogue revealed the God who is "manifestly present in the loving movements of the soul as it strives for perfection beyond the experienced imperfection of things."[111] The passage accentuates the experience of psychic striving (individual, social, cosmic, and divine) through the historical process, which Plato understood as a "flux of divine presence."[112] By situating his vision between the old myth and logos, Plato acknowledged his debt to others who had sought existential insights and he recognized the truth of other symbolic expressions of order even as he articulated new, authoritative insights. Plato's concern with striving and process also acknowledged "man's ability to deform the formative event"—the event in which a differentiation of reality occurs. Thus, Plato's vision "reveals the dynamics of the flux by revealing itself as a dynamic event within the flux."[113] Plato revealed that the process of *metaxy* experience which gave rise to his new philosophic insights was best conveyed through myth because myth preserves and reveals the paradoxical situation that "the noetic thinker has to symbolize the experience of something that he experiences as lying beyond the symbolization of being things."[114]

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[110] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 358.

[111] Ibid., 345.

[112] Ibid., 346.

[113] Ibid., 347.

[114] Ibid., 361.

Plato's revelatory expression of *metaxy* experience blurred the distinction

between himself and the God of whom he was in search even as it had monumental

importance for differentiating the various structures of the *metaxy*. In fact, Plato's blurry,

yet distinguished, symbols of the human-divine participatory relation evinced, in

Voegelin's mind, the truth behind Plato's experience of his semi-divinity. Avoiding the

temptation to portray reality in a manner that would make sense to his readers and

probably secure for him the rewards of wealth and fame, Plato opted to preserve the

paradoxical nature of the reality he experienced by using myth. He thus maintained a

balanced consciousness; playing his part as a divine puppet, he symbolized the limits of

the philosophic quest—that it "can do no more than explore the structures in the divine

mystery of the complex reality and, through the analysis of the experienced responses to

the tensional pulls, arrive at some clarity about its own function in the drama in which it

participates."[115]

The Substance of Plato's Efforts to Communicate

The great theme of the *Laws* is the God who governs the processes of order and

history, who obliges, but does not compel, man to quest for him, and who reveals himself

through visions granted. The upshot of this is that man finds himself existing in "the

unfinished struggle for the truth—a struggle not to be observed from the outside, but to

be conducted within the historical process by the men who are graced, by the unknown

divinity, with the vision and who respond with its articulation."[116] According to

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[115] Voegelin, *In Search of Order*, 106. Voegelin purposefully speaks of the quest for truth (not the philosopher) as coming to understand its function in the drama of reality.

[116] Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 348.

Voegelin, these visions or experiential insights are the primary substance of what the *Laws* intends to convey to readers. By articulating the insights, Plato hoped to help individuals and his polis to become more temperate and orderly so as to become like the God and dear to Him.[117] In this respect, what Plato sought to communicate through the *Laws* is essentially the same as what he sought to communicate through each one of his dialogues. But the Plato who wrote the *Laws*, Voegelin argued, had drawn nearer to the God and therefore had a better understanding of the human condition. Seeing that his earlier philosophic efforts had failed to slow his polis' existential decline, but not relinquishing his adamant concern for its welfare, Plato included in the *Laws* a revised theory of order and history that not only penetrated further into the divine wisdom but also became intensely more practical. Considered from the perspective of practice, the topic of the *Laws*, Voegelin argued, "was the foundation of a savior polis in the hour of Greek decay."[118] Voegelin's Plato tried both to communicate the late theory of order and history as well as to establish a political structure appropriate to his new understanding of the human condition.

Plato's new anthropology and philosophy of existence and the new role of institutions in the city. By the time of the *Laws*, Plato had come to recognize man's general unwillingness and inability to perceive the deep psychic experiences, let alone to allow them to become a formative force of personal and political order. Plato's late dialogue, Voegelin argued,

[117] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 254. He referenced *Laws* 716a, ff.

[118] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 44.

is written under the assumption that the free citizenry will consist of persons who can be habituated to the life of Arete under proper guidance, but who are unable to develop the source of order existentially in themselves and, therefore, need the constant persuasion of the prooemia as well as the sanctions of the law, in order to keep them on the narrow path.[119]

Moreover, the Idea, rather than having the capacity to preserve itself as an ordering force in human life, now "waxes and wanes in the rhythms of incarnation and disembodiment."[120] Therefore, Plato's effort to restore order to Hellas, Voegelin argued, "evolves from heroic appeal [directed to individuals in *Republic* and *Statesman*] to ecclesiastic statesmanship."[121] Even though he recognized that the polis was not likely to undergo the full spiritual regeneration he had hoped for, Plato conceded that it was the medium through which the mass of individuals could be led to achieve the level of virtue of which they were capable. In his theocratic polis, institutions add the necessary compulsion to Plato's effort to persuade his fellows to live in harmony with the divine presence that is mediated through the *nomoi*. In a tone that conveyed his deep empathy with Plato's frustrations about man's limitations, Voegelin stated, "All that is left of the *Republic* is its spirit; the divine sermon recedes into the place of the heroic counsel; and of the spirit there will live in the institutions no more than is possible."[122]

Plato's new anthropology and philosophy of existence make it necessary for the Athenian to mediate the Idea for those who lack the intensity of his own attunement, but are more spiritually sensitive than the mass of men to whom they, in turn, must instruct in the way of orderly existence. This explains the need for *nomos* understood as merely a

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[119] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 222.

[120] Ibid., 227.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

civic decree (rather than the divine presence that is *Nomos* in the highest sense), and the more or less direct instruction of the Dorian interlocutors—for example, when the Athenian gives them patterns of institutions and posits a minimum theological creed that citizens must accept. Hence, part of what the Athenian intends to communicate approaches the status of doctrine or dogma. Nevertheless, these "formulaic teachings" are embedded within a more robust theory of order that the Athenian seeks to communicate to his interlocutors and that Plato sought to communicate to all interested readers, even if he doubted the success of his effort. This late theory of order includes a philosophy of history which reveals that all facets of personal and political experience are to be judged by their attunement to the divine measure. In keeping with Voegelin's procedure, both aspects—what I have called the "formulaic teachings" and the theory of order—of what the Athenian, or Plato, as it were, endeavored to communicate must be treated together.

The cornerstone of Plato's late theory of order, Voegelin argued, is the insight that *cosmos* is fully penetrated by the divine psyche even though the intensity of that penetration, or the level of attunement to the divine ground, varies from time to time. What ultimately causes these variations remains shrouded in mystery, but human actions certainly contribute. In the *Laws*, Plato explored this complex relation between the eternal Idea and its temporal vessel in order to make sense of situation that the divine ground is both a constant and a variable in human experience. For Voegelin's Plato, we remember, the theoretical effort has a diagnostic and a therapeutic function. As a diagnosis, Plato's effort clarified Athens' place within the broader context of Hellenic history so as to reveal where the Athenians had made existential progress and regress—

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that is, to reveal the vacillating embodiment of the Idea of the course of Hellenic experience.[123] Plato honed in on Athens' regressive subscription to the sophistic and democratic arguments that make man the measure of orderliness, a derailment that pervaded all aspects of Athenian political life and culture (*paideia*).[124] Specifically in the *Laws*, Plato was concerned with the association between the waning of the Idea and the corrupt ritual culture. In what had become a "theatrocracy" (see 701a), the "tyrannical imposition of the tastes of the illiterate rabble [became] the standard by which success or failure on the public scene is decided."[125] Athens' theatrocracy diminished man's capacity to conform even to the mediated Idea by intensifying the "discrepancy between the feelings of joy and sorrow . . . and the objective good" that constitutes human psyche.[126]

If human action could prevent or inhibit the embodiment of the Idea into temporal reality, it could also promote that embodiment by elevating the quality of human psyche. Thus, Plato's diagnostic effort bleeds into therapy: by revealing, one, that the genuine criterion of order is the God who governs the motions of *cosmos* and, two, that the general human tendency is to fall short of that criterion, Plato hoped to convince spiritually serious men to "prevent the corruption of the polis right at its source, that is, in the corruption of the ritual culture of the community."[127] Plato thought that imitating previous generations' sincere and robust, if compact, ritual culture would activate the

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[123] I discuss this theme in more depth below.

[124] Voegelin translated *paideia* variously as "culture," "formation," and "education."

[125] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 261.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Ibid., 241.

presence of the divine ground in Athens. This restorative effort clearly is more modest than the *Republic*'s call for men to submit themselves to the conversion (*periagogé*) by the *Agathon*. Civic *nomos*, not individuals' psyches, must be the starting point for spiritual healing. Plato reveals that men must educated as if they were children, through the play (*paidia*) of civic festivals, rites, and music which cultivate and preserve genuine standards of order (i.e. those which are based in the divine wisdom) regarding individuals' pleasures and pains.[128] Thus, Plato's therapeutic response hinges on placing the social environment under the control of spiritually serious elders who will comply with his formulaic teachings and thereby inculcate right thinking about the relationship of man to God. In this way, Plato hoped to shape the human material into a more suitable vessel for the Idea in order to reverse, or at least to slow down, its waning from the experience of Hellas. If most souls were impervious to spiritual regeneration, controlling the *nomos* might at least limit the sophists' influence and foster a sense of community that could aid Hellas in countering Persian aggression.

In the action of the dialogue, the Athenian attempts—successfully, Voegelin thought—to equip his Dorian interlocutors with a formal pattern of institutional arrangements that could bring about attunement to the divine ground. He tries to teach the characteristics of a good ruler, how to mix properly the various elements of a regime, what form education should have and what its end should be, and how laws should be presented to citizens. Voegelin argued that the peculiar characteristics of these arrangements derived specifically from Plato's new insights into the structures of the soul and polis, which are elaborated in the Puppet Player myth and Book Three's mythical

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[128] Ibid., 261.

inquiry into the origins of cities, respectively. In this way, the Athenian and Plato try to show that establishing political order depends upon the knowledge which emerges in the participatory encounter between consciousness and its transcendent ground. Because all reality is penetrated by the divine psyche, any pragmatic structure must be based on an adequate ontological theory; and for Voegelin's Plato, theory is grounded in and shapes experience. In the *Laws*, then, Plato pays special attention to elaborating the relationship between spirit and matter and showing that genuine political order depends on incorporating the proper balance of each into the city's institutions.

An example I used earlier will help to clarify Voegelin's analysis of Plato's late thought concerning the relationship between spirit and matter and his late conception of the partners in the community of being. Voegelin argued that the Athenian proposed a combination of monarchic and democratic procedures for selecting the city's Council (*Laws* 756e-758a) *not* because he thought that balancing competing powers or interests would provide a remedy for political problems. Rather, the arrangement is based on Plato's new anthropology in which every individual has each kind of metal or element (symbols for the various qualities of influences in the psyche) simultaneously present in his soul. That human beings usually, but not necessarily, follow the pulls of inferior metals explains the variations in the intensity of the divine presence's penetration into the facets of human experience.

The new anthropology also gives rise to a new understanding of the polis as a structure whose harmonizing function begins with matter and extends to spirit only to the extent that the virtue of its members will permit. Even so, to create *philia* between the participants in the community of being remains an existential obligation for the polis; but

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the meaning of *philia* suffers a diminution in Plato's late theory. Whereas, in the

Republic, Socrates uses *philia* to mean "a sentiment which binds in existential

community the equals in the spirit," the Athenian uses it to mean "a sentiment which

binds into a communal whole the noble and the vile."[129] The combination of electoral

procedures (a lottery and aristocratic election) is designed to harmonize the sentiments of

those who do and do not follow the golden cord "in such a manner that the inflexibility of

the spiritual postulate shall not lead to an explosion of the lower instincts of the mass,

while at the same time the inevitable concession to the mass shall not destroy the spiritual

substance of the community."[130] In Plato's late theory of order, therefore, well-designed

institutions supply a remedy for the defect of human psyche; they shape passions,

behavior, and speech in order to promote an arrangement that approximates the divine

paradigm on an infinitely lower existential level.

     In this way, Voegelin argued, Plato helps his readers to understand that pragmatic

structures are to be judged by the divine measure. Plato's institutions are good and

orderly because they promote attunement to the divine ground and aid in preserving the

spiritual substance of the polis. Put differently, the criterion for judging political form is

whether it enables the polis to save itself and to facilitate salvation for its citizens.[131]

Against the sophists, Plato argued that the city's decrees, traditions, festivals, and

education—its *nomos*—are good to the extent that they accomplish this goal by

harmonizing man's passion and what his insight (*logismos*) discerns as noble and good

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[129] Ibid., 250.

[130] Ibid., 249.

[131] See, for example, ibid., 266, and *Laws* 960b-962c.

and by curtailing the "*nosos* of spiritual disorientation."[132] With this political lesson

Plato hoped to counter the "agnosticism and the spiritual aberrations of the age."[133]

Besides attending to the goal and actual effect of institutions, Plato communicates

another sense in which institutions must be judged by the divine measure: the specific

patterns for good and orderly institutions emerge through a revelatory experience in the

consciousness of one who is attuned to the divine measure. In other words, the working

structure of institutions must cohere with *metaxy* existence as it is experienced by the

mystic philosopher. The mystic philosopher's acute perception or revelatory vision of

the structure of the *metaxy* is the sure foundation for designing institutional forms capable

of facilitating attunement to the divine ground.[134]

In Plato's late theory of order, Voegelin thought, the art of politics is to bind

together in community men who are both equal and unequal and to facilitate

immortalizing movements (motions toward the divine ground) within temporal

experience. Institutions have a critical role in this effort because they, in contrast to

human psyche, may be formed into "the vessel that will hold the spirit and not burst

under its pressure."[135] In order to be adequate vessels for the spirit, institutions must be

arranged by the philosopher in light of his experience of the eternal, transcendent order,

the attunement to which is equally the end of every man in the strict sense. But this

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[132] See ibid., 244 and 264, and *Laws* 689a and 888b.

[133] Ibid., 264.

[134] Indeed, it is Plato's heightened attunement that accounts for the new emphasis on institutions inasmuch as his better perception of the human condition justifies a political form that was associated with a more compact understanding of the human-divine relationship. The advance in order consists in the psychic rationale for institutional constraints. Contrast the Spartan constitution with the polis of the *Laws*. The latter imitates the former in some of its institutional structures, but the Spartan constitution sought a balance between material forces whereas the polis of the *Laws* sought to balance elemental forces of the soul.

[135] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 250.

experience also reveals that, despite the best efforts to infuse institutions with the divine spirit, temporal circumstances inhibit man's capacity to encounter the fullness of the eternal order and limit institutions' capacities to resist decay. Therefore, the political art acknowledges that, because the tension of existence is a permanent feature of the structure of reality, the most any institution can accomplish is to inject and to preserve as much of the eternal pattern of order in the temporal reality as is possible. For Voegelin's Plato, the institutions of the *Laws* attempt to do this by imitating (albeit imperfectly) the perfect cosmic order man that experiences in pre-existence.[136] First, they are patterned on the mathematical form of the cosmos, using the number twelve as the basis for a series of perfect ratios among the various parts. Second, by balancing into a harmonious entity the order of the spirit and the disorder of human action and passion, the institutions reflect the structure of the *metaxy*—the orderly field that is anchored by the forces of order and disorder. In this way, the polis of the *Laws* aims not only at guiding human practice, but also at stirring the strata of psyche through which man may participate in a remembrance of the divine order. Nevertheless, Plato's late theory of order concedes the improbability that man or polis will seek the divine order and therefore emphasizes the importance of achieving a balance between psychic forces.

Plato's philosophy of history. On Voegelin's reading, Plato's intended audience came close to being universal. Although he admitted that Plato's efforts were circumscribed by the Hellenic experience, Voegelin thought that the magnitude of Plato's soul diminished the rigidity of the boundaries which contained it. Plato's *Laws* therefore contains not only a specific message for Hellas but also a broader lesson: because the

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[136] Ibid., 251. Voegelin drew on Plato's *Timaeus* (44a and 90c-d) in making this point.

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cosmos is fully penetrated by psyche, and because the constant of human experience and its ordering force is man's struggle to come to terms with the divine ground, an adequate evaluation and ranking of any human configuration depends on its level of embodying the Idea, or attunement to the divine ground. In other words, Plato's last dialogue teaches that theory or science culminates in a philosophy of history in which history is the process—governed by God, yet subject to the caprices of human nature—through which man tries to become akin to the divine. Therefore, having a right view of history has ethical and intellectual significance. From the perspective of ethics, the philosophy of history is integral to the existential quest because it encourages brotherliness among men (by limiting the extent to which one person or polis could assert superiority over others) and develops a better sense of the divine ground that is always present in human experience. From the perspective of an adequate understanding of reality, the philosophy of history reveals the relationship between spirit and matter and the nature of each.

On Voegelin's reading, Plato illuminated the relationship between personal and political order and history in order to reveal the basis for genuine historical progress and to inaugurate a new stage in man's existential quest. To continue my focus on the political aspect of Plato's late thought, the philosophy of history contained in the *Laws* reveals the ultimate criterion of political order as spiritual and independent of conventional beliefs about what is good or just or true.[137] Nevertheless, conventional beliefs and material arrangements are important determinants in whether a certain configuration is orderly or disorderly because they reveal and shape communal attitudes or existential positions (responses to experiences of the tension of existence).

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[137] This is a point on which Voegelin and Strauss would agree: the good as such is independent of man's beliefs about it.

As evidence for his conclusion, Voegelin cited several features of the dialogue including the discussions of various types of constitutions (683d-686b), the proper conditions for instituting political order (709b-c), and the historical survey of the gods (713b-714b). Also, in what is one of the real highlights of his analysis, Voegelin explained that Plato's symbolic play with the three interlocutors aimed to convey the insight into the process of history and political order. Examining this last point will clarify Voegelin's claim that Plato hoped to communicate a grand philosophy of order and history.

Voegelin thought that, by bringing together a Cretan, a Lacedamonian, and an Athenian, Plato symbolized the whole course of Hellenic history through which were made various attempts at understanding and instantiating order. The symbolic characters represent different political and institutional arrangements, anthropological thought, mythical traditions, and, ultimately different accounts of the relationship between God and man (individually and collectively). For example, Voegelin argued that

> The nameless Athenian, Plato himself speaking, personified the youngest area of Greece that had grown into its intellectual and spiritual center; the Spartan stood for the political virtues and military strength of the older Doric institutions and the Cretan represented the Minoan period. The Hellenic renaissance since Homer, the savage, primitive, disciplined warrior communities of the Doric centuries, and the mythical golden splendor of the Minoan sea empire gained life in the three venerable elders who discussed the foundation of a rejuvenated, healthy polis on the island [Crete] that had once been the center of political power.[138]

Voegelin's Plato certainly used the Cretan to represent meritocracy and kingship, the Athenian to represent freedom and democracy, and the Spartan to represent an institutional balance between the Cretan and Athenian forms. But Plato's key concern with the various regime types, Voegelin argued, centered on their bases in certain

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[138] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 43-44.

configurations of human psyche toward the divine ground. Therefore, the presence of each interlocutor symbolizes different ways of thinking about the public good as a function of attunement to the divine ground and the different ways of trying to make those thoughts socially effective.

Voegelin based his claims on what he saw as the connections between the constitutional types and the political cycle evoked in Book Three. Plato describes four phases of growth in the cycle of political development—rule of elders (677b-680e), aristocracy or kingship (680e-681d), *politeia*, which comprises the variety of actual political societies and their constitutions (681d-682e), and *ethnos*, or the nation (682d-683b). Voegelin thought that Plato's first phase of the cycle was associated with Cretan civilization not on the level of institutions, but rather on basis of the Athenian's characterization of the members of the first city: "They believed that what they heard about the gods as well as about human beings was true, and lived according to these things. That is why they were in every way as we have just described them." (679c) In other words, Plato wanted to show that man's attitude or relation toward the gods is what ultimately characterizes all facets of his existence. And the specific contours of the attitude or relation links the members of the first city with the Cretans, who believed that their institutions originated in oracles of Zeus. Moreover, both configurations occurred very long ago in a divinely instituted mythical past—in the myth, the political cycle commences with a disaster wrought by the gods, and, according to tradition, "Crete is the omphalos at which the Hellenic world is bound to its Aegean prehistory."[139]

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[139] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 230.

Plato developed similar connections for the Spartan and Athenian civilizations, revealing that the political cycle, and history itself, has been driven by men's attitudes toward and insights into the divine ground. He also showed that, from the mythical past of Crete, down through the Spartan and Athenian civilizations, the polis's relation to the divine ground had derailed: the Spartans erred in structuring its organization "for war but not for the serious play of the spirit in peace," and the Athenians erred in their disregard for the goods of the soul: they tolerated an excess of liberty, judgments based on pleasure without insight, the "general impudence of disregard for the judgment of one's betters," and, finally, "disregard for oaths and pledges and contempt of the gods."[140] The trajectory of spiritual derailment finds its symbolic expression in the Athenian's line at 682c:

> It's likely that they [the inhabitants of the third city] were possessed by an amazing degree of forgetfulness regarding the disaster just now discussed, when they thus set up a city close to a lot of rivers flowing down from the heights, putting their trust in some hills that were not very high.

Here, Voegelin argued that Plato wanted to show how the materialistic impulse overshadows anamnetic insights, revealing the diseased state of psyche. Significantly, this phase of the political cycle, Voegelin pointed out, "comes closer to the light of history [insofar as] . . . Under the constitutional form (*politeia*) of the polis of the plains are comprised all the forms and vicissitudes (*pathemata*) of historical political societies and their constitutions."[141]

If Voegelin was correct in suggesting that Plato conceived of the process of history thus and that Plato thought that Hellenic history was a story of existential decline,

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[140] Ibid., 247 and 245.

[141] Ibid., 242.

two points need further explanation. First, the concrete features of each civilization's

political structure do not seem to be perfectly correlated to men's attitudes toward the

ground. Lacedaemon, Voegelin noted, was relatively successful in surviving the Persian

aggression and reasserting its place within the Dorian Federation because, "by divine

providence, its constitution contained the balances which made for stable order."[142]

Second, Voegelin consistently maintained that the philosophers—who were, of course,

associated with Athenian civilization—had made discoveries of "epochal" significance

when they evoked new symbols with which to convey their insights into the divine

reality. The first point seems to imply that the Lacedamonian regime was better

organized, or was a better vessel for the Idea's embodiment, than the Cretan regime, or

the Athenian regime, for that matter. The second point seems to reverse the implied

historical decline: the philosophers' insights signaled a higher level of attunement than

that which could be inferred from the Cretan myths. Voegelin thought the confusion

could be dispelled by considering the complexity of the relation between concrete and

spiritual aspects of reality—one aspect can exhibit progress while the other is in decline

even though neither aspect is independent of the other.

In order to make sense of the paradox, and therefore to make sense of Plato's late

theory of order and history, Voegelin examined more symbolic connections within the

Laws and other dialogues. He argued, after all, that in interpreting Plato's works, "it is

impossible to isolate topics for special study without doing violence to the whole

structure. Wherever one tries to draw a strand from this associative network for closer

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[142] Ibid., 244.

inspection, the whole fabric follows the pull."[143] He thus found that Plato linked the

symbolisms of the interlocutors and the political cycle with the mythical survey of the

gods that occurs at *Laws* 713b-714b, which was itself, Voegelin argued, tied to the

Statesman's myth of cosmic cycles. In the *Statesman*, Plato showed that:

> the Age of Zeus was not to be followed again by an Age of Cronos, for in the Age
> of Zeus there had arisen a new factor, *i.e.* the autonomous personality of the
> philosopher, which made the return to the Golden Age both impossible and
> undesirable; the redemption from the evils of the Age of Zeus would have to
> come from a human agency that would take the place of the shepherd-god, that is
> from the Royal Ruler.[144]

Voegelin went on to say that:

> Now, in the *Laws*, the ages of Cronos and Zeus both belong to the past; Book
> Three of the *Laws* has given the historical survey and shows the necessity of a
> new start. And at this end, as in the other symbols of the dialogue, we return to
> the beginning; the new life beyond the Age of Zeus will imitate the Age of
> Cronos in so far as it will reabsorb into its human institutions the guidance of the
> god. This god, however, no longer is Cronos; he is the new god of the Platonic
> *kosmos empsychos*, the creative and persuasive Nous.[145]

These reflections help to clarify Plato's insight that every "Age" is defined by a mythical

deity that represents a stage in the development of the existential quest. The three

successive regime types are linked to the mythical deities in order to reveal Plato's

insight that every political configuration is predicated on an account of the relationship

between God and man, which is the standard by which they may be judged.

In his late philosophy of history, Plato tried to show that progress in the historical

quest for attunement to the divine ground requires a certain balance between the ethical

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[143] Ibid., 241.

[144] Ibid., 239. See also 151-62.

[145] Ibid.

and intellectual aspects of the account of the relationship between God and man.[146]

Continuing to illuminate order by opposing it to disorder, Plato depicted how in the Age

of Cronos, or the Cretan experience, man's attitudes or emotions—the ethical aspect—

toward the human-divine participation was orderly, but his symbols—the intellectual

aspect—were attenuated because of the accidental features of his existence. But in

Athens or the Age of Zeus, man's more differentiated symbols for the divine-human

relation became opaque to the extent that his attitude toward his relation to the divine

ground became hostile or apathetic. As the Spartan example shows, the opaque

propositions can be the basis for relatively stable political arrangements. But ultimately

the neglect for instantiating an orderly attitude toward God resulted in "spiritual

stagnation" and an end to "the development of political form."[147] The case of Athens

goes even further, depicting a hostile attitude toward the gods and also a return to the

beginning of the mythical political cycle, "for the old Titanic nature breaks through, and

the Titanic fate of a life of endless evil is re-enacted (700a-701c)."[148]

The broader historical and political lesson of the *Laws* is that the process of

history and the political art aim at harmonizing the ethical and intellectual aspects of the

account of man's relationship to God. In other words, history and politics are rightly

ordered if they give rise to myths or symbols that facilitate the attunement of human

psyche and soma toward the divine ground. This lesson is qualified by the further insight

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[146] For Voegelin and for his Plato, the intellectual and ethical aspects were integrally linked. Intellection, that is, is grounded in experience and requires a certain character. I am distinguishing between the two aspects in order to make clearer the kind of existential attunement that Plato foresaw as a possibility during his later years. Since he recognized the limits of man's intellect, Plato's last dialogue accented the ethical (even behavioral) aspect of man's attunement.

[147] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 248 and 244.

[148] Ibid., 245.

that human psyche is free to ignore or to reject harmony and attunement, and therefore that history and politics often fail to accomplish their goal. Considering these lessons helps to clarify the meaning behind Plato's choice of the three interlocutors by revealing that the symbolism expresses both sequences of existential progress and regress and a timeless event in which the "indelible present" is experienced. Voegelin thought that Plato's conscious play with the tension between time (the sequential aspect) and timelessness (the event aspect) was one of Plato's most important insights into personal order—that is, the insight's primary formative force pertains to the individual psyche's meditative effort to better understand the structure of reality. Although, especially in Voegelin's later writings, the implications for personal order take on greater significance than the implications for political order, here I focus on the relevance for politics in order to preserve the focus of this section. I turn first to the sequential aspect of the symbol and then to the symbol under its aspect as an event.

When Plato brought together interlocutors from the various stages in Hellenic history, he was trying to create a sense of the progressive movement from compact symbolization of the human-divine relationship to a more differentiated symbolization. The Athenian philosophers' historical differentiation of symbols such as *nous* and *kosmos empsychos* is a genuine advance over the compact myth of nature that provided the rationale for Cretan and Spartan institutions. Connecting the Athenian to the survey of the gods results in the understanding that the Age of *Nous* has relegated the Ages of Cronos and Zeus to past experience that is sealed off from those who have experienced the differentiated account of the deity. The formative force of Homer's and Hesiod's symbolic constructions is diminished by the luminosity of the philosophers' symbols of

order. The advance in attunement is also conveyed by the fact that the Athenian most clearly expresses insights into the *metaxy* and their implications for pragmatic order. In other words, the intellectual and ethical aspects of his account of the human-divine relationship—that is, his symbols about reality and his openness to the formative force of reality—are harmonized according to the divine measure in a way that neither of his Dorian interlocutors exhibit. In fact, Voegelin argued, this existential advance is what explains the Dorians' references to the Athenian as "Stranger": the Athenian, also representing Plato himself, has moved "toward the divinity, into the neighborhood of the God who pulls the strings."[149]

Voegelin thought that the sequence of interlocutors conveys not only a progressive movement, but also incorporates humanity's regressive movements into Plato's science of order. Once again, the connection with the political *cycle* is important, for Athenian society is situated within the rhythm of decline; the Athenian describes Athens' political form as one of the two types of "unmeasured," or disorderly, regimes (693d-e). Under the influences of sophistic education, the breakdown of the old myth, and the theatrocracy, the account of the human-divine relationship derailed, engendering a general view of institutions, society, and history as human processes with human ends. The general neglect of the divine origin of order is a real loss of existential substance and the fact that the differentiated symbols were luminous to individual philosophers, not to the city as a body, reveals a rift within the community of being. Therefore, to the extent that a genuine concern for the divine substance undergirded Cretan and Spartan institutions and to the extent that those institutions harmonized disparate forces in their

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[149] Ibid., 234.

respective societies, the Cretan and Spartan configurations were nearer to perfection than Plato's Athens had become.[150] In other words, the Idea was more fully embodied in the civilizations existing within the Ages of Cronos and Zeus whose more compact symbols had not contributed to man's deification of himself. Also significant is the fact that, while the Cretan and Spartan symbols conveyed a less differentiated understanding of man and the gods, their institutions ("by divine providence") were better suited to Plato's late anthropological insights into man's general inability to experience the divine presence in psyche. This explains Voegelin's conclusion that "the simultaneity of the three wanderers who mark the end and the beginning" was Plato's way of calling for a "return to the youth of Hellas" and a closer relationship to God.[151]

Plato's exploration of the two directions of the sequence shows that the progressive movement from Crete to Athens was driven by advances in the intellectual aspect of the account of the divine-human relation: the more differentiated symbols more adequately expressed the structure of reality than the old myth. In spite of that advance, the ethical aspect of the account had deformed: the formative force of the adequate symbols waned in light of the people's moral and ethical disorder. Plato discovered that the older, more compact symbols were less adequate to the divine reality they intended to express but were more appropriate to the human material they intended to form. These discoveries complicate Plato's understanding of history because the process of history as the formative illumination of the human-divine relation is limited, in practice, to the very few genuine philosophers—Voegelin thought Plato conceived of his own experience as

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[150] Voegelin, *The World of the Polis*, 43ff.

[151] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 230.

unique—who are fit to be called "the sons of God." Nevertheless, Voegelin thought that

the philosophy of history did intend to promote brotherliness or *philia* not only within a

particular polis, but also across the span of Hellenic experience. Therefore, the

philosopher must consider as his brothers an even wider range of people.

Under this understanding, historical progress is recognized as an extremely slim

possibility for the polis and Voegelin argued that Plato closely approached Christianity's

distinction between spiritual and temporal historical order.[152] Nevertheless, because

Plato's insights developed within the "boundaries drawn by the myth of the cosmos," he

did not advance to that differentiation.[153] For Voegelin's Plato "the spirit must manifest

itself in the visible, finite form of an organized society."[154] Therefore, historical progress

had to remain a genuine possibility for the polis and, that being the case, Plato's

understanding of the fundamental equality of all human beings is preserved even though

it occurs on the lower existential level. Voegelin thought that this feature of Plato's late

philosophy of existence explained the *Laws'* acute concern with the civic *nomoi*.

Although the majority of human beings will never experience the luminosity of

consciousness that arises in the *periagogé* of the *Agathon*, their flourishing still depends

on attaining the level of attunement of which they are capable because all psyche is

oriented toward the ground. What I have called the ethical aspect of man's account of the

divine-human relation in a sense becomes more important for most men than the

intellectual aspect because the former is easier to manipulate. In other words,

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[152] Ibid., 227.

[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

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recognizing the general inability of human psyche to engage in the existential quest for God led Plato to conclude that the order of human psyche depends on forming orderly habits and thoughts. Through persuasion and a touch of coercion, the divinely infused laws induce men to take pleasure in what is good and to accept a seemly dogma concerning the nature of man and God. The effect of the laws, therefore, is not so much to form the existential core of man or to augment his *nous* as it is to foster actions and speech that support public order. In this way, the material foundation for society's historical progress is maintained.

In addition to its aspect as a sequence, Plato's symbolism has the character of a static, complete, or timeless event which conveys Plato's experience of what Voegelin described as the "indelible present" (discussed in chapter four). In other words, Plato symbolized the omnipresence of the divine ground by bringing together the three interlocutors on the day of the solstice.   Each phase in the course of Hellenic history is "contracted" into a single moment, signaling Plato's recognition that the accidental features of any given socio-political configuration—the prevailing views about justice, for example—do not change the fact that attunement to the divine ground is *the* standard of right order. Voegelin thought, moreover, that because each interlocutor stood for both a political configuration and a pattern of the individual soul, Plato's contracted symbol conveyed an important ontological and epistemological insight: the whole of Hellenic history is a reflection of the process of individual history, that is, the individual's movements and countermovements toward the divine ground. The entire quest for order (or the neglect of that quest) that has occurred in time is experienced as eternally present in psyche and can be explored through anamnetic reflection. Man's understanding of

order approaches fullness when consciousness recognizes the eternal omnipresence of the ground and begins to see that its illumination (which is a better understanding of the *metaxy*) requires not only attunement to the ground but also the attunement of all psyche to all psyche—embodied and disembodied, past, present and perhaps even future. Absent this attunement, the structure of human existence and order remain elusive, for their further illumination depends upon experiential insights into the myriad ways that psyche can experience its participatory relation to its ground.

In terms of political order, Voegelin argued that the institutional arrangements of the *Laws* are drawn from Plato's experience of the indelible present. Plato's symbolizations of the Spartan and the Cretan were not fictitious images; rather, they were drawn from Plato's own experience of the divine ground moving in his psyche, which he apperceived as the same ground that moved in psyche embodied in a previous time. The Athenian Stranger incorporates Cretan, Spartan, and Athenian (and Persian, as the case may be) elements into the *Laws'* theocratic state in order to facilitate a new Age in the history of order—an Age in which Plato's experience of tension between the temporal and eternal poles of the *metaxy* becomes the criteria for judging human action and arrangements.

The Outcome or Effect of the Dialogue: the Key Teaching

On Voegelin's reading, the *Laws* aims to show that man's crucial concern is to "play the serious play," which consists in acting the part that God has ordained for him in the drama of existence. This conclusion follows naturally from Plato's principle that God, not man, is the force and criterion of order and it is made explicit in the Athenian Stranger's Great Address, beginning at 716c, "on the purpose of life and on the nature of

that conduct (*praxis*) that is dear to the God and a following of Him."[155] Man must direct

his thoughts, actions, and attitudes toward what is divine; he must accept the inescapable

limits of his ability to understand and to control reality even while he seriously attempts

to become more akin to the mysterious God. To "play the serious play" is to concern

oneself with the augmentation of spiritual substance, to follow the guidance of reason and

the pull of the golden cord. Taking literally the Athenian's speeches, Voegelin argued

that the lesson of the *Laws* is that "the man who is temperate and ordered (*sophron*) will

be loved by God, for his measure is attuned to God's measure; while the disordered (*me

sophron*) man is unlike God."[156]

The dialogue concedes that most men are too dull to apperceive the experiences

that confirm the truth of these insights and convey their urgency. Therefore, most men

play their roles, for good or for ill, unwittingly. Often, the best that they can do is to obey

the civic *nomos*, recognizing the importance of submitting themselves to an order of

greater temporal duration and which claims a broader tradition of meaning. Plato

therefore stresses, Voegelin argued, that the *nomoi* must be permeated by "the divine

spirit of the *nous*," for only in this way "will obedience to the laws result in the

eudaimonia of man and the community."[157] The existential seriousness of the serious

play justifies the city's use of compulsion to cultivate *philia* among individuals and the

broader community of being.

Plato also recognized that, if the city's decrees and customary practices were to

help to form man's character in accordance with the divine paradigm, they would have to

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[155] Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle*, 253.

[156] Ibid., 254. See *Laws* 716a, ff.

[157] Ibid., 253.

respect man's freedom to follow or to ignore the pull of the golden cord because, even considering the *Laws*' conception of man's diminished existential capacity, psyche is akin to the divine and its goods are superior to the goods of the body. Plato's orderly lawgiver and guardians of the *nomoi* would not compromise their psychic order by promoting laws that operated on bodies only or under the misconception that psyche can be perfectly shaped by material rewards and constraints. The serious play of the spirit must be infused with playfulness: the education to virtue must occur through rituals and festivals whose pleasantness helps to persuade men to conform to their ethical teachings. And the laws must be appended to expository *prooemia* that have the appeal of musical compositions.[158] Voegelin argued that "the literary form of the Prooemium, thus, becomes the mediator of the *nous* for the polis of the *nomoi*."[159] Persuasion creates *philia* in the city by revealing the attractiveness of the divine order and of playing the serious play in a manner that is pleasing to free men.

Plato's concern with play and playfulness does not derive merely from its effectiveness in bringing about a desired result. Rather, in Plato's philosophy of order, play attests to the nature of human existence and its ultimate meaning and purpose. Plato reveals the significance of play by making it the "all-pervasive category of the dialogue."[160] Voegelin spoke of play as

> an "overflow" beyond the "normal" level of existence, a source for the creation of new worlds of meaning beyond the everyday world. By virtue of this quality of transcendence play could become the vehicle of cultural growth through the

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[158] Ibid., 256.

[159] Ibid., 257.

[160] Ibid., 259.

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creation of spiritual worlds in religions, legal institutions, languages, philosophy, and art.[161]

In Plato's last dialogue, the lesson concerning the serious play of the spirit is deliberately situated into a dialogue that has the character of a religious poem. Poetry is the result of play and by directing his poetry toward the illumination of the divine ground, Plato has created the sacred art form for the polis. Plato engages in the serious play not by promulgating a political constitution or by writing a treatise on education, forms which tend to circumscribe the free play of the spirit that is necessary for further differentiation of symbols of order. Plato's insights into political arrangements, specific duties and prohibitions, and even into the structure of human existence are, rather, subordinated to the effort of articulating a hymn to the God. Plato's poetic response to the drawing of the divine ground preserves and conveys the spiritual, existential, and open-ended nature of the serious play. In this way, Plato teaches by example that the highest actualization of the serious play is the philosopher's articulation of true myths that, through their illumination of the *metaxy*, persuade others to play their roles in faith and in seriousness.

Concluding Remarks

Voegelin thought that Plato's philosophic effort aimed at saving man by saving the saving tale. Through the dialogues, Plato communicates insights into the structure of human existence that, once revealed, facilitate man's attunement to the divine ground. Every dialogue contains a message, anamnetically drawn from the depths of Plato's soul, that aims at instantiating order in human psyche. But in the *Laws*, the effort to save the saving tale is taken one step further inasmuch as that effort becomes luminous as the

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[161] Ibid., 258-59. Voegelin cited Jan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Basel, 1944).

process of salvation itself; thus, the *Laws* itself indeed becomes the saving tale. In his

final dialogue, Plato reveals that salvation is man's effort to become akin and dear to the

divine measure which is experienced more immediately in his pre-existence, which he

experiences in his reflections on the order of the cosmos, and which moves in the almost

impenetrable depths of his psyche. This quest to become dear to God is realized through

the process of attempting to articulate myths that better illuminate the experience of the

tension of existence and the reality that lies beyond that tension: the Beyond. What the

Laws provides is Plato's true myth that, if met with the proper existential response, will

establish genuine existential community and salvation by revealing the structure of man's

relation to the divine ground. From Plato's own perspective, the *Laws* is the process

through which he worked out his salvation, recognizing that his whole life had been an

effort of drawing near to the ground that motivated his quest.

Considered thus, Voegelin's analysis seems to suggest that Plato's *Laws* answers

the questions that initially motivated Plato's philosophic quest. The meaning and

purpose of human existence is shown to be the quest for God, and the order of politics is

the cultivation of order in the soul through an institutional arrangement based in the

philosopher's mystical, participatory revelation from God. This is true, but not complete,

for Voegelin thought the *Laws* expressed Plato's most acute perception of mystery, or of

what simply cannot become fully luminous in human consciousness. Why the gods made

man their puppet is a question that, according to Voegelin's Plato, transcends human

understanding. One of the dialogue's highest achievements, in Voegelin's mind, was that

it held together a whole host of paradoxes such as this. Plato's symbolism attests to

Plato's "balance of consciousness" (see chapter two) and, even more so than the deliberate effort of the *Republic*, mimics the structure of the *metaxy* and its beyond.[162]

On this point, Voegelin's interpretation of Plato's *Laws* differs significantly from Strauss's interpretation although the Plato whom Voegelin found in the *Laws* might first appear somewhat similar to Strauss's Plato. Voegelin's conclusion that Plato's experience of his semi-divinity isolates him from most other Athenians resembles Strauss's idea that the philosopher and the city find themselves at odds with each other. And Voegelin's thesis that the *Laws'* brings to light certain political lessons while conveying the ultimate mysteriousness of the cosmos is close to Strauss's thesis that Plato was concerned with the permanent problems. Nevertheless, these apparent similarities should not obscure the crucial differences between the two interpretations. For Strauss's Plato, the permanent problems are intelligible to the philosopher, but insoluble in practice, while for Voegelin's Plato, no such division exists between theory and practice, and it is the apperception of ultimate mystery that attests to genuine philosophic activity. Moreover, Voegelin argued that Plato's heightened attunement to the divine measure actually generated an intense awareness of the core equality of mankind and the penetration of all reality by the divine ground. Where Strauss's Plato was committed to the heterogeneity of being, Voegelin's Plato experienced the unity of being through temporality and eternally. The whole of the *Laws* revolves around the God who governs the process of order and history and whose reality prescribes the criteria of order for all facets of human life.

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[162] See Voegelin, "Wisdom and Magic," in *CW* 12: 326-39. A "balanced consciousness" does not give in to ecstatic distortion after one begins to have pneumatic insights.

Voegelin also argued that the *Laws* contains the highest expression of Plato's serious—nay, sacred—play with the myth. Content and form are indistinguishable in Plato's religious poem, evincing Plato's emphasis on deep psychic experience as the process through which the divine wisdom illuminates human consciousness. Here again is a crucial difference from Strauss's interpretation of the *Laws*, which focuses on the philosopher's use of poetry and irony as a means of safeguarding the philosophic quest. On Voegelin's reading, myth communicates mystery, paradox, and ineffable experiences in the most luminous way possible, and the *Laws* is self-reflective on this point: in elucidating the myth, Plato becomes the myth. Plato becomes the voice for the formative experience of the Idea, an experience in which even the myth needs its own myth: the structure of myth itself, which is a carefully balanced interaction between noetic activity and revelatory visions, is a mystery revealed in human consciousness. If these remarks seem susceptible of infinite regress, they are well-suited to what Voegelin thought Plato wanted to achieve, namely, anamnetic meditation on the mysterious structure of human experience. For it is only through this activity (or suffering, as it were), that man has any hope of encountering the revelation of divine wisdom that makes human order a real possibility. Therefore, Voegelin thought that the *Laws* was both Plato's most meditative and most practical work. He would, I imagine, have agreed with the letter of Strauss's suggestion that the *Laws* was Plato's most pious and most political work.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

In this study I have attempted to show how Eric Voegelin approached the Platonic corpus, what he discovered in individual dialogues, and how his study of Plato informed his own philosophical project. I have drawn attention especially to Voegelin's effort to penetrate behind Plato's symbols to his experiences of the structure of being and its transcendent ground in order to understand the substance of the ancient author's ontological insights as well as the process through which those insights emerged. Voegelin sought this understanding for its own sake and because he thought that experiencing what Plato experienced would enable him to better comprehend and counter twentieth-century disorder. Specifically, Voegelin's encounter with Plato helped him to see that modern disorder (like the disorder of Plato's time) was at its core a failure of the soul to seek lovingly its transcendent ground. He also learned how to address that disorder as well as the limits of any restorative effort.

On Voegelin's reading, each of Plato's dialogues conveys an experience of participating in the reality of the divine ground. The corpus as a whole reveals different aspects of that participatory experience and illuminates the course of Plato's spiritual journey and existential quest. If we examine the course of Voegelin's career, with its various shifts in method and emphasis, we find a striking resemblance to what Voegelin found in Plato. The three dialogues I have examined here trace Plato's journey from his spiritual outburst in the *Gorgias*, his reflective analysis in the *Republic*, and his religious poetry in the *Laws*. Voegelin's path from attempting a history of political ideas (in

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opposition to rival theorists), to developing a programmatic philosophy of history, to his final meditative inquiry into the mysterious intersection of human and divine *nous* mimics the structure of Plato's quest. Both thinkers' journeys are characterized by a succession of the forces of *Thanatos*, *Dike*, and *Eros* and are governed by the forces of *Phronesis* and *Philia*, from the side of man, and *Sophia*, from the side of God. For Voegelin, the crux of genuine philosophy—Plato's and his own—was to understand the nature of this quest and thereby to become attuned to the divine ground that prompts the quest.

Voegelin thought that Plato's spiritual insights had important practical effects and his interpretation shows Plato's acute perception of the symptoms of spiritual disorder. To recall only a few highlights: Voegelin found that the *Gorgias* powerfully depicted the deformations of speech and friendship that result from closure to the divine ground. The *Republic* traces the pattern of generational decline from (compact) openness to the ground and reverence for authority to the self-centered chaos of democracy. And the *Laws* connects the denial of divine reality with vulnerability to external threats and the crassness of the theatrocracy. In addition to the symptomatological insights, Plato discovered important principles of personal and political order, the two most significant of which are the anthropological insight found in the *Republic* and the measurement principle found in the *Laws*. Voegelin thought that both kinds of insights represented key discoveries into man's individual and social nature that illuminated the human condition throughout the ages.

Even more important was Plato's insight that the perception of disorder and order must occur simultaneously. Of course this epistemological insight is inextricably linked

to the ontological insight that man exists in the *metaxy* and experiences the pulls of the forces of the divine ground and its opposite. Plato articulated man's existence in the In-between more clearly and powerfully than his predecessors and many, if not all, of his successors. I have tried to show how, for Voegelin, Plato's meditative exploration of the structure of the psyche in relation to the ground was the ultimate therapy for the disorder he experienced. Plato invited his fellow men to see that all embodied consciousness yearns for attunement to the divine ground, which consists in consciousness's recognition of its intimate participation with and ultimate distinction from the transcendent poles of the *metaxy*. On Voegelin's reading, Plato also tried to show how such spiritual attunement would have significant practical effects: the symptoms of disorder such as rhetorical deformations of speech and theatrocratic rule would be alleviated by restoring order to the psyche through persuasion (*peitho*) and education (*paideia*). Thus, Voegelin's Plato was neither an isolationist mystic nor a fatalist critic. Rather, Voegelin's Plato was convinced of the intimate relationship between spirit and matter or meditation and politics, and he sought not only to diagnose the failures of his society but also to redress them.

Voegelin's interpretation of Plato is fascinating and plausible. He attends to a dimension of Plato's thought that has been generally neglected or dismissed by other interpreters and he is able to assess Plato's work both as culmination of traditional attempts to understand human existence and as a revolutionary take on the structure of the human-divine relationship. Moreover, he makes sense of the difficult question concerning the function of Plato's myths in a theoretically compelling and empirically

grounded argument for their function as exegetical inquiries into the experiences of psyche.

Despite these advantages of his interpretation, Voegelin, like any interesting commentator, is not without his critics. Throughout this study, I have tried to highlight the uniqueness of Voegelin's reading by contrasting it with Strauss's reading, noting specific instances where they disagree on the nature of Platonic philosophy or on the key features of a particular dialogue. But I have not yet addressed some of the direct criticisms of Voegelin's work that bear on the illuminative value of his interpretation of Plato. In general, Voegelin's criticisms have been aimed at his broader philosophical project rather than at his interpretive approach to Plato (which, before the present study, has not been treated exhaustively). Nevertheless, three general and two more specific criticisms, which might impact our evaluation of Voegelin's approach to Plato, deserve to be mentioned.[1]

The first general criticism of Voegelin's philosophical project is that its emphasis on the oneness of being obscures important phenomenological distinctions. As a mystic philosopher, Voegelin meditatively sought the answer to the primary question about the structure of human existence as well as the answers to other important or interesting questions concerning the motions of consciousness toward its divine ground. In this formulation, consciousness designates both embodied and not-embodied consciousness that pervades all things; just as the divine ground is simultaneously present in and beyond

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[1] As I note in my introduction, scholars have taken issue with Voegelin's treatment of specific themes in particular dialogues and with the consistency of Voegelin's analysis of specific themes in Plato over the course of his career (See, for example, Planinc, "Significance of Plato's *Timaeus*, in *Politics, Order and History*). I do not discuss these criticisms because they deal with dialogues I have not covered and because they are tied to specific themes which are tangential to my general study of Voegelin's interpretation of Plato. One exception is Planinc's suggestion that Voegelin's linguistic analysis was often defective.

all consciousness. Although Voegelin accentuated the radical transcendence of the

ground, his work shows that, at is core, reality is a unified, if tensional, whole.

Emphasizing this feature of Voegelin's work, Paul Caringella noted that *The Ecumenic

Age* contains

> a clear articulation of the "cosmic bond" of the four partners in the primordial
> community of being. *Metaxy* now is the symbol that expresses their unity at all
> levels and for each of the partners in their relationship with the divine ground and
> with each other. And "History" now becomes visible as the personal Vision that
> holds the partners, especially the partner "society," together with the others. It is
> the Vision of the "horizon of divine reality" equivalent to the "*Okeanos*" of the
> *Okeanos-oikoumene* symbolism of the myth.[2]

The insight into the unity of the *metaxy* drives all Voegelin's work, including his

interpretation of Plato, with the result that Plato's different "symbols" almost completely

merge together—e.g. justice and philosophy in the *Republic*. In arguing that each symbol

conveys a different aspect of Plato's experience of *metaxy* existence, Voegelin seems to

neglect the possibility that Plato conceived of justice and philosophy, or any number of

other such "symbols," as genuinely distinct things. A similar tendency can be seen in

what Voegelin brings to his interpretation of Plato. As I mentioned in chapter four,

Voegelin used the term "sophist" applied to anyone who exhibited the traits of a sophistic

education, following what he thought was Plato's equally broad usage. Thus, in nearly

collapsing or extending the meaning of the ideas, themes, and symbols that are integral to

the dialogues, Voegelin risked arriving at conclusions that might not adequately reflect

Plato's thought.

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[2] Paul Caringella, "Voegelin's *Order and History*: A *Civitas Dei* for the Twenty-first Century?"
(paper presented at conference: *Voegelin's Vision of Order and the Crisis of Civilization in the Twentieth
Century*, University of Manchester, England, July 1994), 25. Cited in Frederick G. Lawrence, "The
Problem of Eric Voegelin, Mystic Philosopher and Scientist," in *International and Interdisciplinary
Perspectives*, 35-58, at 41.

Moreover, Voegelin's tendency to emphasize the unity of being and to blur distinctions might be problematic for someone interested in understanding Platonic science. Voegelin's "science" turns into a meditative journey into the structures of consciousness that—despite his insistence that the meditative insights illuminate concrete features of reality—often undermines the importance of understanding things *qua* things rather than *qua* processes or indexes in the structure of reality. In other words, if attending to the particular characteristics of things is integral to a scientific (i.e. not science in Voegelin's sense of the term) understanding of them, Voegelin's interpretation of Plato might not illuminate that kind of science. David Corey makes a similar point in an article on Voegelin and Aristotle. Voegelin, Corey observes, conceived of *nous* as the faculty that "performs *noêsis*, which is to say it seeks an understanding of itself and, in the process, grasps an insight into the divine." By contrast, for Aristotle, "*nous* performs induction, which is to say it moves from sense perception and memory to universal insights and starting points for deductive reasoning in the sciences."[3] Corey highlights this difference not to suggest that Voegelin read Aristotle incorrectly (though he states that Voegelin neglected certain passages) or that Voegelin's *nous* cannot be reconciled with Aristotle's *nous*, but rather to point out that Voegelin's philosophical project might fail to produce the kind of substantive ethical and political science that Aristotle was able to develop by recognizing the importance of induction. Although Plato's dialogues differ from Aristotle's treatises in important ways, what is true of Voegelin's failure to attend to the non-meditative cognitive processes in Aristotle probably applies to his encounter with Plato as well.

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[3] Corey, "Voegelin and Aristotle on *Nous*," 67.

These considerations are related to the second general criticism of Voegelin's work, which, in the words of Michael Federici, is "that Voegelin's understanding of transcendence is *radically* transcendent, that is, ahistorical and ethically and politically abstract."[4] The most important theme in Voegelin's own work, and what he saw as Plato's ultimate concern, was to understand the divine ground. In light of such an understanding, human action could become orderly. While recognizing that Voegelin's treatment of transcendence aimed to correct the neglect of that theme in modern thought and scholarship, critics charge that

> [Voegelin's] understanding of transcendence conceives of universality as so radically transcendent that it tends to the opposite extreme of modern philosophy. Modern philosophy radically immanentizes the transcendent. Voegelin overreacts to modern immanentization and radically transcendentalizes the universal. At issue is the relevance of Voegelin's conception of transcendence to political life and order.[5]

Stephen J. Tonsor put the issue quite pointedly when he asked, "No doubt [Voegelin's work] is very satisfactory as a contemplative guide for a fourth-century anchorite but is it a satisfactory life-guide for a late-twentieth-century man?"[6] If these criticisms are valid, two questions arise: one, whether Voegelin's understanding of the role of transcendence in Platonic philosophy is adequate, and two, if it is adequate, whether Plato can speak to contemporary political issues. Although the latter question probably seems absurd to those who are interested in Voegelin (or Strauss, for that matter), Claes G. Ryn suggests

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[4] Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 143. My discussion of this criticism follows Federici's chapter 7, entitled "Voegelin's Critics." See also Ernest L. Fortin and Glenn Hughes, "The Strauss-Voegelin Correspondence: Two Reflections and Two Comments," review of *Faith and Political Philosophy*, in *The Review of Politics* 56 (Spring, 1994): 337-57, especially at 341.

[5] Ibid., 156.

[6] Stephen J. Tonsor, "The God Question," review of *Eric Voegelin, Published Essays, 1966-1985: The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12*, edited with and introduction by Ellis Sandoz, in *Modern Age* 35 (Fall 1992): 67. Tonsor is cited in Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 156.

that Voegelin's reading of Plato was adequate and that Plato, just as much as Voegelin, proffers a highly idealized vision of politics.[7] Thus, for Voegelin and for Plato, "the life of philosophy becomes an escape from political responsibility."[8]

The third and final general criticism of Voegelin's thought is that he fails to respect important distinctions between theory and practice. Voegelin argued that the insight into the structure of order reveals not only the What of human existence, but also the Whereto and the Why. Once man experiences his *metaxy* existence and apperceives his orientation toward the divine ground, his moral and ethical duties become clear: he must strive for order in every aspect of his life, the substance of which is attunement to the divine ground. Voegelin tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice through his understanding of participatory experience as the source of *all* insight, but for some readers this explanation remains unsatisfactory. Strauss is the obvious example of someone who thought that Platonic philosophy aimed to know what things are rather than how they should be, and who found Voegelin's understanding of experience overly broad (to the extent that it includes intuitions of the ineffable ground) and too limited (to the extent that Voegelin thinks some crucial experiences are available only under certain spatio-temporal conditions).

In addition to these general criticisms, I will mention two criticisms that relate more specifically to Voegelin's approach to Plato. Both are concerns for scholars who are sympathetic with Strauss's approach to Plato, although in these brief paragraphs I do

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[7] Ryn's argument is glossed in Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 163-66. See Claes G. Ryn, "The Politics of Transcendence: The Pretentious Passivity of Platonic Idealism," *Humanitas* 21, no. 2 (1999): 4-26. Federici also references Shadia B. Drury, "Augustinian Radical Transcendence: Sources of Political Excess," *Humanitas* 21, no. 2 (1999): 27-45.

[8] Federici, *The Restoration of Order*, 165.

not elaborate the criticisms from Strauss's perspective.[9] The first is methodological in nature and the second is primarily substantive (though it is related to his method as well).

The methodological criticism is that Voegelin's reading of Plato relies too heavily on the chronological schema of the dialogues. Voegelin thought that the problems Plato treated in the later dialogues were driven by the problems remaining from his philosophical reflections of the earlier dialogues. Voegelin certainly was not alone in approaching the Platonic corpus thus: he drew upon a general scholarly consensus regarding the order of Plato's dialogues and identified important textual connections between the various works. Nevertheless, as recent scholarship has questioned the traditional order of the corpus, the plausibility of Voegelin's interpretation would be greater had he undertaken a defense of his chronology.[10] That is to say, if the recent scholarship is correct, some of Voegelin's conclusions would need to be reassessed.

Finally, Voegelin's interpretation has been criticized for "Christianizing" Plato. Voegelin argued for the equivalency of experiences and symbolizations—that the universal experience of the *metaxy* existence is the common reference point for analyzing man's various articulations of his place within the whole. And he suggested that Christian thinkers had discovered an aspect of the *metaxy* that remained obscure to Plato. These claims have led some critics to say that Voegelin has brought Christian ideas to

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[9] For a fruitful discussion of the debate between Strauss and Voegelin on these points, see Fortin and Hughes, "The Strauss-Voegelin Correspondence."

[10] See, for example, Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers*, 2-5. Zuckert cites other studies on this subject including: Kenneth Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato's Eleatic Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Jacob Howland, "Re-Reading Plato: The Problem of Platonic Chronology," *Phoenix* 45 (1991): 189-214; Debra Nails, *Agora, Academy, and the Conduct of Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995); C. C. W. Taylor, "The Origins of Our Present Paradigms," in *New Perspectives on Plato, Modern and Ancient*, ed. Julia Annas and Christopher Rowe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). She also cites several studies that defend the traditional chronological schema.

bear on the ancient author's writings and has "found" those ideas in Plato's work. Some also claim that Voegelin appears to be guilty of "relegating 'philosophy in the Platonic sense' to an outmoded past."[11]

Despite the foregoing criticisms, Voegelin's approach to Plato deserves serious consideration. Although for reasons of space it is not possible to undertake a more thorough defense of Voegelin here, I think that several of the foregoing criticisms have been addressed throughout the course of this study.[12] That is not to say that the criticisms have been obviated, but rather to say that a careful examination of Voegelin's works complicates them in ways that should provoke further study of Voegelin and Plato. For example, Voegelin's emphasis on the oneness of being, the tendency of his understanding of transcendence to appear radically abstract, and his leap from theory to practice were each related to the pedagogical aim of his endeavor: that is, to bring dominate paradigms of thought into question and to expand the modern horizon of consciousness. And in this way his endeavor certainly seems coherent with Socratic practice. Regarding the second, more specific, set of criticisms, the charge that Voegelin has "Christianized" Plato or has subordinated Platonic philosophy to Christianity is probably the more unfounded of the two. If anything, the charge should probably be made in the reverse: that Voegelin judged Christianity and its representatives by the standard of Plato. But in either case, the charge would miss the fundamental point, which is that Voegelin sought to understand what was *constant* in the human condition while attending to the particular

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[11] Fortin and Hughes, "The Strauss-Voegelin Correspondence," 355.

[12] Several scholars, including those whom I have referenced in this section, have defended Voegelin on these criticisms. See also John J. Ranieri, "Grounding Public Discourse: The Contribution of Eric Voegelin," in *The Politics of the Soul*, 33-64.

features of spatio-temporal existence that distinguish some men from others. As for the issue of the chronological schema of Plato's corpus, the point is valid, but perhaps not too significant. As research into this question progresses, we will be able to understand the work of Voegelin and Plato better.

More importantly, however, for our assessment of Voegelin's treatment of Plato are three significant advantages of his conclusions and approach. First, Voegelin is able to illuminate features of the dialogues that other interpretations treat only insufficiently or neglect altogether. Second, Voegelin's approach has a broad empirical foundation that duly regards Plato's position as a man of his times and as one whose perspective transcended his unique circumstances. Finally, Voegelin reflections on Plato's specific scientific and political insights can help us better understand our own time. In regard to the first advantage, it should be noted that Voegelin's approach to Plato was guided by his concern to bring to light features of the dialogues that other interpreters had overlooked, especially the role of Plato's experiences of transcendent reality. My comparisons between Voegelin and Strauss, who did not focus on the divine dimension of Plato's thought, point to areas of Platonic thought that becomes clearer or at least deserve further examination as a result of Voegelin' s approach. Voegelin, I have tried to show, highlighted different features of the dialogues than Strauss did and treated the same features in a unique way.

The most obvious area is Plato's myth. Strauss's account of the various myths hinges on their moral or political function: Plato's philosophic interlocutors rely upon myth to help guide other interlocutors toward thought and behavior that will help to lessen the negative practical consequences of the tension between the philosopher and the

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city. From this perspective, the distinctive features of each myth are important only to the extent that one wants to know more about the specific interlocutor to whom the myth is addressed (or for whom, as Strauss put it, the myth serves as a mirror of the soul) or about the philosopher's rhetorical techniques. From Voegelin's perspective, by contrast, Plato's philosophic myth is *the* symbolic form for conveying insights into the structure of human existence.[13] Voegelin's reading therefore highlights the importance of myth not only for moral and practical concerns, but also for theoretical ones. Moreover, Voegelin's treatment preserves the importance of the unique details of each myth, relating them to Plato's own experience as well as the universal experience of consciousness in relation to its ground. Voegelin also points out fascinating and plausible connections between Plato's myth and previous attempts (by Homer, the pre-Socratic philosophers, and others) to articulate a case for order.

In like manner, Voegelin's interpretation makes sense of puzzling or contradictory formulations and references to the god or gods without always invoking irony.[14] For Strauss, Plato or his philosophers, cannot rationally speak to the nature of the gods and cannot frankly speak to the natures of philosophy and civic life. They are therefore compelled to include riddles in their speeches which function as gatekeepers, allowing the full disclosure of meaning only to those who are fit to receive it. Although it seems possible that some of the dialogues' references to the gods and puzzles occur in this way, it also seems possible that others do not. Voegelin's reading respects this

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[13] Voegelin's Plato did recognize the validity of other symbolic forms, as my chapter on the *Laws* showed.

[14] I do not mean to imply that Strauss *always* invokes irony, but that irony plays a much more important role in Strauss's approach than in Voegelin's. Voegelin also admitted that irony factored into these passages, but he conceived of irony differently than Strauss did.

possibility. Therefore, Voegelin's approach to the dialogues better accounts for the *variety* of ways that Plato might be speaking by considering not only Platonic irony, but also Plato's efforts to clarify the ineffable (which required paradoxical formulations), the significance of the dialogic context, and relevant historical issues. These are only two general examples to show how Voegelin's approach can help readers gain a better understanding of both the answers and the questions surrounding Platonic interpretation. My chapters on each of the dialogues pointed to many other specific areas that deserve further examination as a result of Voegelin's work.

The second reason to consider seriously Voegelin's approach to reading Plato is the breadth of its empirical foundation. Voegelin's willingness (or insistence, rather) to consider the slew of historical influences to which an author might have been responding lends more credibility to his conclusions, invites a broader audience to evaluate them and, consequently, opens them up to more criticism. Voegelin justified his conclusions by citing many observable historical facts (such as nuances in language, practical social and political events, and ideas that were circulating as evidenced by other texts) in ways that can be challenged from various perspectives. For example, Voegelin argued that Plato was the first person to use the term "theology," and that his activity of developing the new word provided a clue to his concerns. If an historian, who had not read Plato's entire corpus and did not have any particular expertise in interpreting a dialogue, identified a previous usage of that term, Voegelin's conclusions would need to be reconsidered; but if no such evidence emerges, Voegelin's conclusions seem sounder. By allowing materials

"beyond the text" to inform his conclusions in a way that Strauss did not, Voegelin took a more pragmatic or commonsense approach.[15]

Voegelin's willingness to consult historical materials is attractive because those materials *inform* rather than *determine* his reading. A real strength of Voegelin's approach was that, in opposition to many of his contemporaries, he thought Platonic philosophy emerged from a perspective that transcended Plato's unique socio-historical circumstances. So while his approach offers an account of the impact of Plato's milieu, it also includes a theoretical argument for the limits of that impact. Plato's meaning, Voegelin argued, must be sought in the dialogues—the words Plato wrote are the ultimate key for penetrating the mystery of his motivations and insights. Voegelin made an attractive, if not compelling, case for his determination that Plato was exploring his experiences of the transcendent ground of reality by examining the text of each individual dialogue and the corpus as a whole.

The third reason to consider Voegelin's treatment of Plato is the clarity it can bring to contemporary scientific and political affairs. Voegelin concluded that Plato was a knower and, perhaps more importantly, he was an educator: Plato's dialogues sought to teach others about the content of reality and about the process of knowing. Voegelin's reading shows how paying attention to particular teachings in Plato's work leads to a better grasp of modern phenomena. I have noted several interesting examples throughout the course of this study, including Plato's examination of the reasons for supporting a theory despite contradictory evidence, the process through which language becomes

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[15] Strauss did consider historical or contextual information, as I discussed in my examination of *The City and Man*. He was less clear than Voegelin about the precise way in which that information should be folded into the interpretive activity.

deformed, and the issue of existential representation. In addition to this, Voegelin's reading illuminates Plato's insights into the process of discovering the proper standards for scientific evaluation. Thus, Voegelin revealed an alternative to modern methodology for understanding phenomena that Plato, for one reason or another, did not directly treat in his work. Here again, the comparison with Strauss is instructive. For Strauss, Platonic philosophy was primarily about contemplation and in a secondary way about navigating the messy world of practice and politics. Moreover, Strauss thought that the effort to apply classical teachings to modern problems "distorted" those teachings.[16] Voegelin, by contrast, presented us with a Plato who speaks directly to specific practical and political issues and models for us the good life, which consists in trying to help all human beings obtain a better understanding of the world in which they find themselves.

At the end of this study, it seems appropriate to mention a few words concerning methodological pluralism. I have tried to bring into focus the distinguishing features of Voegelin's approach to reading Plato and thereby to show that his method and conclusions deserve at least a hearing by those who are drawn to the study of the ancient author. Although I have developed my argument around a comparison between Strauss and Voegelin and have suggested that Voegelin's reading has certain advantages over Strauss's, I do not wish to imply that giving Voegelin his due requires us to do less than that for Strauss. Rather, the effort to understand Plato as well as to understand his philosophically significant interpreters is advanced by consulting both interpretations on their own terms and in light of each other. In this way, the grand themes and most subtle details of each thinker's work are cast in brighter hues.

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[16] Leo Strauss, "On a New Interpretation of Plato's Political Philosophy," 333.

I also do not want to overstate the differences between Voegelin and Strauss. Although they disagreed on many crucial and fundamental issues (such as the precise nature of Plato's philosophic experience and its relation to transcendence), Voegelin and Strauss shared several important commitments. Both wished to understand Plato as he understood himself and both sought to learn from Plato before evaluating him. They also hoped to find in Plato a guide who could help them undertake efforts to reinvigorate the academy, politics, and Western Tradition as a whole. And they thought that seriously engaging Platonic philosophy would illuminate a pathway out of modernity's dogmatic and ideological tendencies. Our own efforts to learn from Voegelin and Strauss will be all the more successful if we not only try to understand what they wrote and thought, but also endeavor to appropriate their concerns. Therefore, if we admit that Voegelin and Strauss have something important to contribute to an understanding of Plato and of modernity, it seems only reasonable that, in evaluating their distinctive approaches to Plato, we should adopt the same spirit of charity and openness that they gave to Plato and ought to avoid the dogmatism and ideological fervor that both opposed.

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