A CONSIDERATION OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHTS OF
ERIC VOEGELIN: THE LIFE OF REASON, THE EQUIVALENT
SYMBOL OF THE DIVINE HUMAN ENCOUNTER

A dissertation by
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Voegelin was deeply concerned about a spiritual crisis of consciousness in the Western world as well as the threat of totalitarianism growing in Europe. The realisation led him to the question of ideologies which he considered as attempts to form a closed society. He argued that philosophy should be as Plato and Aristotle envisaged a science of human nature. The discovery by Plato and Aristotle that philosophy is an openness to transcendence was a turning point in Western philosophy. However since the Enlightenment, philosophy has eliminated the numinous from human experience and has instead given emphasis to the rational intellect. As a consequence, experience is split from knowledge in the human psyche.

Central to understanding this thesis is the notion of transcendence. Human reason is capable of transcending the visible, experiential world. It can know investigate, explore ideas such as goodness, beauty etc. This process is referred to here as noetic reasoning. If noetic knowledge is excluded from scholarly discussions we are then left with a philosophy that is unable adequately to describe the divine, human condition, society and history.

I have argued in this thesis that Voegelin’s thought concerning the life of reason offers a fresh way of analysing and investigating how order is effected in society. *Noesis* or noetic reason is that knowledge which includes all dimensions of human experience including the consciousness of the transcendent. Voegelin argues that an openness to transcendence will foster an open and pluralistic society. I have
demonstrated that Voegelin’s thought concerning the life of reason offers a new way of analysing and investigating how order is effected in societies. Hence, the first part of the thesis examines noetic reason as a hermeneutic tool, closely related to this is homonoia, a symbol Voegelin declared indicates the type of order present in a society.

The first and second chapters consider Voegelin’s life, influences and the development of his thought. The third chapter explores the source of noetic reason in Hellenist thought. Chapter 4 examines the transformation of noetic reason in Christianity. Chapter 5 discusses the area of mysticism as a stratum of experience of human consciousness. Chapter 6 enlarges the study of noetic reason by examining its relation to homonoia, a symbol considered by Voegelin as the substance of society. In Chapter 7 the loss of noetic reason in Western consciousness is examined, a loss that has created current repercussions in international relations. Chapters 8 and 9 investigate noetic reason in a non-western context. The chun tzu (sage) notion of Confucius is explored as an equivalent to Plato’s philosopher-king. Although the chun tzu is important in Chinese thought it never became a principle of order in China. The absence of this principle is evident in the unsettled nature of Chinese society in the 20th century. To explore the problem of silencing the “creative minority”, I have examined the thought of Lu Hsun and his views on the fate of the individual in China. Finally, the thesis examines some possible lines of converging thought between Lu Hsun and Voegelin and the extent to which each thinker was aware of the significance of noetic reason.
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