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Logophobia: Eric Voegelin on Scientism and the Postmodern Corruption of Politics

Observers of the contemporary intellectual climate are all too familiar with the influence of scientism—also referred to as positivism, radical empiricism, scientific reductionism, or scientific naturalism—on conventional attitudes and scholarly opinion. Much debate about scientism stems from arguments over the validity of applying the methods of the mathematizing natural sciences, such as physics, to the social sciences. The application of the scientific method to the traditional humanities has been inspired by the desire to purge such “subjective” influences as myth, revelation, and faith from the study of human nature and human society. The core assumptions of scientism are that reality exists only in the immanent (intramundane) realm in the form of reified external objects and that truth and knowledge of reality can be derived only as outcomes of the scientific (or Newtonian) method.¹ Given these methodological constraints and assumptions, reality is reduced to phenomena—matter in motion—observable through the physical senses.

A corollary to the assumption regarding truth and methodology is that the scientific method is the only acceptable system for

constructing theory. In its extreme form scientism posits that truth can be represented only through quantitative symbols. While objective knowledge can be expressed this way, qualitative distinctions about moral and aesthetic experience are considered subjective and thus outside the boundaries of science. In short, scientific knowledge of metaphysical experience is not possible. Claims about transcendent nonmaterial reality, especially the moral dimension of reality, are said to be mere speculation and are classified disparagingly as values. Eric Voegelin argued that positivism “rests on the assumption that the theological and metaphysical phases of the mind are transitory and not necessary.”² Accepting these doctrines leads to the conclusion that most of the intellectual and artistic work that shaped Western civilization is the product of mere opinion, prejudice, or tradition. Scientism, in short, undermines the pre-Enlightenment intellectual, moral, and cultural foundations of Western civiliza-

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tion. Defenders of traditional Western civilization, especially those who argue for the existence of a universal moral order, have, as a result, seen scientism as a threat to the cultural heritage of the West.³ An impressive group of scholars attempted to refute scientism: Eric Voegelin, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, Irving Babbitt, Leo Strauss, and Robert Nisbet.

To most intellectual conservatives, the approach of scientism to truth and knowledge seems incomplete, fallacious, and misconstrued. Yet its acceptance of truth, however narrowly it may be, is sufficient in today's intellectual and cultural climate to attract some support from the intellectual Right. Scientism is given the illusion of validity in the postmodern context because of the pervasive acceptance of ethical relativism (subjectivism) in both academe and the culture at large. Compared to postmodern relativism, scientism seems to some conservatives preferable or at least a useful intellectual ally.⁴ This attraction is enhanced by the typical encounters with ethical relativism one experiences in higher education. Teachers frequently encounter the subjectivist claim that "what is true for you isn't necessarily true for me." Truth, then, is a purely relative matter of individual or cultural choice, and the concept of a universal reality known to all humans through participation in it has become increasingly alien to students, intellectuals, and the larger culture.

Subjectivist assertions lead to disturbing consequences. Politics—particularly justice—is reduced to a utilitarian calculation of base self-interest that removes the common good (*summum bonum*) from politics. The prevalence of subjectivism marks the ascendancy of the view of justice that was expressed by Thrasymachus in Plato's *Republic*: "might makes right." Justice, in the classical or Christian sense, cannot flourish in a society that perceives it as

a selection of competing utilitarian claims. Utility, choice, and pleasure—the common denominators of contemporary politics—are not the measure of justice. To believe otherwise is to repeat the mistake of Protagoras and claim that "Man is the measure of all things." Moreover, without cultural and ethical impediments to control the will to power, the strong are apt to choose their interests over others. Mere utility, choice, and pleasure are not impediments to the will to power but rather its animating instruments. Justice requires a controlling force as an ethical restraint on will and appetite. This control, as Irving Babbitt has noted, is the very essence of humanity and is "ultimately divine."⁵ This divine element provides a universal ethical standard against which human behavior can be measured.

A desire to preserve the foundations of Western order can lead to frustration that invites the invocation of at least part of the Newtonian tradition. After all, that some truth is better than none undoubtedly provides an epistemological starting point. Yet, one should be cautious before entering an intellectual alliance with the advocates of scientism.

The end of the twentieth century affords an opportunity to revisit the debate over scientism in light of recent intellectual trends. Postmodernism, for example, is characterized by its rejection of modern science, classical reason, and Judeo-Christian faith. Any claim of universality, according to the postmodern mind, whether classical, Christian, or modern, has dangerous implications. In fact, such horrific events of the twentieth century as mass murder stem from joining moral universalism and modern science. Hence, some are tempted to embrace the postmodern rejection of rationally and scientifically derived universal moral standards.⁶

Voegelin's thought avoids the extremes of both postmodern relativism and modern scientism and provides a penetrating source for understanding the historical and theoretical development of scientism (which he usually calls positivism). He links it to a range of thinkers: Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte, and Bakunin.⁷ Such historical examples make the dangers of positivism clearer. Voegelin's work is itself a response to the modern desire to be "scientific" and an attempt to restore political science to its classical roots.⁸ His arguments are grounded in human experiences rather than the authority of reified traditions, dogmas, or doctrines. And because he offers a more complete understanding of knowledge and truth than does positivism, he establishes a philosophical foundation for a universal reality that humans experience through participation.⁹ Consequently, he presents a rich and penetrating historical analysis of human experience with transcendent reality that is a powerful antidote to postmodern relativism.

Scientism is an ideology grounded on the assumption that facts can be distinguished from values. Facts, it is claimed, are derived from the scientific method, whereas values are the products of uncritical human constructions (opinions) such as religion, tradition, or prejudice. The fact/value distinction assumes that reality can be known by fragmenting its parts from the universal whole. Once separated from the whole and viewed as objects, facts are classified as empirical knowledge. According to the tenets of scientism, if human reason is liberated from the constraints of values and properly grounded in scientific method, it is capable of discovering empirical truths instrumental not only to material progress, but to political and social advancement. Such progress is therefore predicated on

the belief that the scientific method provides a universal standard for the discovery of truth. Scientifically derived truth, then, provides a body of knowledge that forms the foundation of political and social consensus. All humans are assumed to be rational and equally capable of both employing the scientific method and understanding the knowledge that results from its use.

In this scheme, conflict in human society is caused by mere differences of opinion; a confrontation of values rather than facts. The scientific method eliminates such conflicts because it provides a "scientific" understanding of reality on which rational individuals agree. Once the scientific method is widely utilized, differences of opinion, and the corresponding political and social conflict that is caused by them, wither away. Disagreement and conflict disappear in the same way as they do among mathematicians who present mathematical proofs. Given an accepted body of mathematical principles and methods, the proof either works or fails. In the process of discovering mathematical truth, there is no place for opinion or subjective judgment. The structure of mathematical reality, represented by its principles and laws, is fixed. Erroneous application of principle is possible, but that is not the same as an opinion that causes disagreement. Once the truth or failure of the proof is established, there is no legitimate basis for disagreement. Although this methodological approach may be appropriate for mathematics and the mathematical sciences, its application to the human sciences has been the subject of intense debate.

Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes influenced the early development of positivism in important ways. Bacon advocated the scientific method as the foundation for a new civilization.¹⁰ Proper use of the scientific method would purge the mind of personal unscientific

influences and lead to the acquisition of knowledge. Bacon provided much of the theoretical foundation for the scientific revolution. Its social and political implications, while recognized by Bacon, were more explicitly developed by Hobbes and such later positivists as Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. The common ideological thread of the positivist movement is belief that the scientific method will lead to human domination of nature and that subsequent social, political, and economic transformation is inevitable.¹¹

Yet the historical development of positivism was more complex. As developing positivism fueled industrialization, material progress occurred, but the anticipated social and moral improvement was illusive. A key cause of the lack of moral progress was positivism's undermining of Judeo-Christian moral consciousness. That the rational-scientific approach of the early positivists displaced Christianity in public life is hardly surprising, for the incompatibility of positivism and Christianity is apparent. The metaphysical elements of Christianity that point toward the existence of a transcendent reality cannot be reconciled with the immanentist methods or principles of positivism. And the destructiveness of positivism to the existing social order was heightened through its emergence at a time when the engendering experiences of Christian faith were losing their cultural strength. As a result, Western society became vulnerable to the emerging modern ideologies and in particular could not withstand Newtonian materialism. Voegelin explains, for example, the effect of the publication in 1687 of Newton's *Philosophiæ naturalis principia mathematica*.

To a spiritually feeble and confused generation, this event transformed the universe into a huge machinery of dead matter, running its course by the inexorable laws of Newton's mechanics. The earth was an insignificant corner in this vast

machinery, and the human self was a still more insignificant atom in this corner.¹²

Christian faith in metaphysical reality—the unseen realm of life—lost its vitality under the pressure of Newtonian materialism. Consequently, the development of positivism undermined the philosophical foundations of Christian truth.

According to Voegelin, Christianity was displaced in two phases: “despiritualization” and “respiritualization.” Once positivism destroyed Judeo-Christian consciousness, individuals were open “to respiritualization from non-Christian sources” that included such radical political ideologies as nationalism, humanitarianism, biologism, and psychologism. If the early positivists removed spiritual matters from science, their intellectual heirs filled the spiritual void with immanentizing political religions.¹³ Saint-Simon and Comte filled the spiritual void with a new intramundane religion of humanity in which they assumed the role of priest, prophet, pope, and god-incarnate. These religious positivists pushed the Western crisis to a new level of spiritual deformation. Voegelin concisely explains the displacement of Christianity by modern political ideologies as language symbols separated from their experiential roots. Rationalism, he wrote:

destroys the transcendental meanings of symbols taken from the world of the senses. In the course of this de-divinization (*Entgötterung*) of the world, sensual symbols have lost their transparency for transcendental reality; they have become opaque and are no longer revelatory of the immersion of the finite world in the transcendent.

Christian symbols became opaque because “the active center of intellectual life” shifted “to the plane of our knowledge of the external world.”¹⁴ Consequently, the symbols of transcendent reality lost their rel-

evance or, judged by utilitarian criteria, were not considered to express truth about reality. Once Christianity lost its authoritative and unifying place in Western civilization, the spiritual void could be filled by the pseudo-religions of modern ideology.¹⁵ Viewed in this historical and philosophical context, scientism is a deformation of real-



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ity and part of a larger historical movement that contributed to the loss of transcendental consciousness. It is a major part of the disorder of the modern age and not a means to restore the West.

Voegelin identifies the eighteenth century, the Age of Enlightenment, as the context in which scientism must be understood. Three attributes of the Enlightenment are particularly important: “a denial of cognitive value to spiritual experiences, the atrophy of Christian transcendental experiences,” and the attempt “to enthrone the Newtonian method of science as the only valid method of arriving at truth.”¹⁶ What makes scientism so dangerous, Voegelin claims, is the fusion of two modern assumptions: that the methodology of the mathematizing sciences is inherently superior to all others and that the success of the natural sciences can be duplicated by other

areas of science if such methodology is employed; and, more dangerously, that the methods of the natural sciences are the standards for theoretical relevance in all areas of science. The combination of these assumptions lead to the belief 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.¹⁷

While scientism is open to truth and the existence of an objective material reality, it is closed to the spiritual reality of the inner life as experienced through participation in transcendence and expressed symbolically through myth, revelation, history, or philosophy. While such positivists as Comte included spiritual matters in their work, this spirituality is not transcendent but secular-immanent—a pseudo-spirituality.¹⁸ As Voegelin explains: “The horizon of man is strictly walled in by the facts and laws of the phenomena.... If gods exist, they certainly are not permitted to participate in history or society.” Comte attempts to eliminate transcendent reality from human consciousness when he “declares as illegitimate all questions that cannot be answered by the sciences of the phenomena.”¹⁹ In this aspect of positivism there is an existential unwillingness to engage in the search for transcendent reality. Voegelin calls this aversion to philosophy “logophobia” (fear and hatred of philosophy). The political and social consequences of positivist logophobia include the de-

struction of human consciousness of the *Agathon* (the Good), which in turn severs any connection between the order of the soul and the order of the political community.²⁰ In short, politics loses its transcendent foundation.

Voegelin recognizes scientism as a primary obstacle to the restoration of Western civilization. In *The New Science of Politics* he analyzes modern positivism to demonstrate its fallacious assumptions and contrasts it to Aristotle's *episteme politike*. Aristotle's political science examines symbols as they occur in reality—a benchmark of the Aristotelian procedure.²¹ All societies create symbols to express their place in the larger order of reality. "Elaborate symbolism" is used to express the meaning of society that includes its place in history and the larger reality (cosmos). Such self-interpretation provides humans with a sense of the abiding and permanent features of life that form the basis for a just social and political order. It is precisely these experiences with self-interpretative symbols that articulate experience with transcendent reality that modern positivism attempts to exclude from scientific discovery.²² Because the symbolism takes the form of rite, myth, and theory and its content is metaphysical experience, it fails to meet the positivist definition of scientific fact. Consequently, what Voegelin considers "an integral part of reality" isn't real at all in the eyes of the positivist. Yet as he explains, "when political science begins, it does not begin with a *tabula rasa* on which it can inscribe its concepts; it will inevitably start from the rich body of self-interpretation of a society and proceed by critical clarification of socially pre-existent symbols."²³ Voegelin's creation of a new science of politics is meant to recover human experience as metaphysical reality, to establish the process of this recovery as scientific, and to restore human

consciousness of metaphysical reality.

The awareness of a divine presence in human consciousness, differentiated by Plato and Aristotle as *nous*, is akin to right reason or the ability to understand truth. *Nous*, therefore, aids in this effort to express truths about nonmaterial reality. Human understanding of truth requires the participation of the divine in the process of knowing. *Nous* is not a tangible object in the external world and, therefore, the ideology of scientism declares that it is not part of reality. For Voegelin, however, it is real because it is experienced. Symbols such as "*nous*" are articulations of experience with transcendence that can be rediscovered. Acceptance of Voegelin's argument about science and the scientific validity of such symbols as *nous* depends on a certain openness to the transcendent reality he discusses. Scientism is incompatible with Voegelin's philosophical approach because the former begins with closure to transcendent reality; scientism refuses to engage in the philosophical search for higher truth. Consequently, open discussion is impossible with positivist ideologues because they cannot transcend their ideological dogmas; they are unwilling to put aside the obstacle to open discussion, i.e., the propositions of scientism. Rational debate is impossible among true ideologues because the ideological dogmas prevent open discussion.²⁴

Voegelin's new science of politics enables him to rediscover human experience with a transcendence that has become opaque in the modern world because of such gnostic political ideologies as scientism, Marxism, and National Socialism. Restoration requires that gnostic ideologies be seen for what they are and that souls closed as a result of their influences be opened by the renewal of experiences with and insights about transcendence.²⁵ This cannot occur unless a consciousness of transcendent principles exists. Yet restoration is necessary,

Voegelin points out, because of the destruction of science by positivism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Positivism has contributed to the Western crisis because it determines theoretical relevance based on method rather than choosing methods based on the search for truth. Voegelin considers this a perversion of the meaning of science. Properly understood, "science is a search for truth concerning the nature of the various realms of being . . . Facts are relevant in so far as their knowledge contributes to the study of essence, while methods are adequate in so far as they can be effectively used as a means for this end. Different objects require different methods." When method is elevated to become the ultimate standard for truth, the search for truth is subordinated to the particular methods used in the discovery of reality. Voegelin argues that if "the use of a method is made the criterion of science, then the meaning of science as a truthful account of the structure of reality, as the theoretical orientation of man in his world, and as the great instrument for man's understanding of his own position in the universe is lost."²⁶ Because scientism is responsible for the loss of transcendental consciousness and the destruction of science as the search for truth, it cannot be a source for the restoration of science or the recovery of the Western social and political order.

Returning to the problem of scientism and postmodernism: it makes no sense to use scientism as an intellectual counterweight to postmodernism.²⁷ In their common manifestations they are two variations of the modern secular mind; they both define themselves by rejecting transcendent reality.²⁸ In fact, acceptance of the principles of scientism does not preclude subjectivism in matters regarding transcendent reality. In rejecting the existence of transcendent truth, scientism and

postmodernism occupy the same ideological ground. Even if scientism is accepted as true by postmodern subjectivists, what has been accomplished? The ideological presuppositions and dogmas of scientism are based on a misunderstanding of reality and truth. Acceptance of these dogmas perverts science and destroys transcendental consciousness. That reality can be only material or quantifiable or that only the scientific method can discover truth is simply contrary to historical experience and philosophical insight. In sum, positivism is an impediment to the philosophical search for the truth of metaphysical reality.

The restoration of truth and acceptance of transcendent reality cannot be accomplished by engaging in ideological warfare. Dogmatic battles between ideologues who assert propositions as evidence of the truth of their ideology will not reestablish consciousness of transcendence. More philosophically-minded individuals will recognize that the preconditions for rational debate include the acceptance of human experience and transcendence. As Voegelin explains, "Questions of social order can be discussed rationally only if the whole concept of the order of human existence, of which the social order forms a part, is viewed in its entirety and right back to its transcendental origin."²⁹ The failure to accept this condition is precisely the logophobia that Voegelin understood to have corrupted the modern world.

The work of thinkers such as Voegelin has helped to restore interest in the transcendent ground of politics and science. Such renewed interest is an indication that scientism may be losing its vitality. At the very least, its core assumptions are being seriously questioned. While scientism continues to manifest itself in ways that endanger the dignity of human life, there is hope Voegelin's work will give pause to those

who are inclined to let modern science progress in an ethically unfettered manner. Moreover, his work serves as a cautionary note to those who are tempted to invoke the tradition of scientism as a remedy for postmodern subjectivism.

Notes

1. The scientific method includes systematic experimentation to verify a hypothesis. Hypotheses are used to discover causal and/or mathematical relationships between observable phenomena. When a hypothesis is supported by the evidence, the result is scientific proof. 2. Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 139. 3. See, for example, Michael D. Aeschliman, *The Restitution of Man: C.S. Lewis and the Case against Scientism* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998; reissue of 1983 edition). 4. See, for example, A. Owen Aldridge, "Jonathan Swift's Message for Moderns," *Modern Age*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1995). Aldridge argues for a "new positivism" drawing on the work of Irving Babbitt and connecting it to the positivism of Auguste Comte. His argument is a reaction to postmodern approaches to literary criticism, and thus he attempts to use positivism to combat postmodern abstractionism and politicization. Aldridge expands his case for neo-positivism in "Babbitt, Literary Positivism, and Neo-Positivism," *Humanitas*, Vol. IX, No. 1 (1996): 65-78. 5. Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1979), 28. 6. Postmodernism is, in this respect, a reactionary movement. Like most reactionary movements it tends to overreact and in so doing lose the essence of things. By replacing the pseudo-universalism of scientism with a pseudo-subjectivism, postmodernism has misconstrued both the element of universality and the element of change in life. Like scientism, it has identified a part of reality and taken it as the whole. 7. See especially *From Enlightenment to Revolution*. This book has been republished with an Introduction by David Walsh as part of Voegelin's *History of Political Ideas*. See *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VIII, *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999). 8. See especially, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952). 9. By a "more complete understanding of knowledge" is meant that Voegelin recognizes both a universal and a relative element in reality. The universal is discovered in the particular historical experiences of various civilizations. While truth exists, it is never known completely. Human understanding of truth varies from compactness to differentiation. 10. See, for example, Bacon's

New Atlantis (1627). 11. Voegelin refers to this revolutionary aspect of positivism as an "apostatic revolt." Positivists sense the emergence of a new order that will replace the existing one. In the historical context in which positivism develops, the apostatic revolt means the displacement of Christianity by modern ideologies. 12. Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, vol. VI, *Revolution and the New Science* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 164. 13. In this context Voegelin explains: "Comte belongs, with Marx, Lenin, and Hitler, to the series of men who would save mankind and themselves by divinizing their particular existence and imposing its law as the new order of society. The satanic Apocalypse of Man begins with Comte and has become the signature of the Western crisis." Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 159. 14. *Ibid.*, 21-25. 15. *Ibid.*, 3. 16. *Ibid.*, 3. 17. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 4. 18. Note, as an example, Comte's transformation of Christian love into altruism. See Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 155; and Voegelin, *Science, Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1968), 85. 19. Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 165-66. 20. Comte refuses to participate in the search for the ground of existence. In Voegelin's framework, he rejects aetiology. 21. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 34. 22. In the case of Comte and later positivists, transcendent symbols are replaced or given a new immanentized meaning. See note 18. 23. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 27-28. 24. For Voegelin's discussion of ideology and rational debate, see, "On Readiness to Rational Discussion," in *Freedom and Serfdom*, ed. Albert Hunold (Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1961), 269-84. 25. Voegelin's five-volume work, *Order and History*, is a recovery of experiences with transcendence. Each volume describes and provides specific examples from history of human participation in transcendent reality. 26. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 4-5. 27. Voegelin does believe that rational debate is possible with ideologies, but only in a limited area of natural science and logic. "Debate with ideologists is quite possible in the areas of the natural sciences and of logic. The possibility of debate in these areas, however, must not be taken as presaging the possibility in the future that areas central to the person (Max Scheler's distinction of *personperiphäre* and *personzentrale* area) will also move into the zone of debate." See Voegelin, "On Debate and Existence," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 12, *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, 36-37. 28. This conclusion suggests that certain aspects of postmodernism, namely its moral relativism, are not "post" modern at all but further manifestations of modernity. 29. Voegelin, "On Readiness to Rational Discussion," in *Freedom and Serfdom*, 278.