

# *Eric Voegelin on the Authority to Lead*

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THE PHILOSOPHER ERIC VOEGELIN labored for many years in relative obscurity until his death in 1985. Even now his disciples are drawn largely from conservative academe, which is so marginal as to be something of an oxymoron. Part of Voegelin's obscurity, to be sure, is the inaccessibility of his prose. Despite occasional flights of poetry, he struggles for both clarity and thoroughness in some of philosophy's most difficult sectors. There is yet another reason for his obscurity: Voegelin is a theorist, a pilgrim among ideas. He is not known for having written about concrete issues of the day, concretely. And, to be candid, not everyone is willing or able to ascend to the level of abstraction that he made his profession.

Although he would probably never express it this way, Voegelin continually wrote about the subject of leadership. Early in his academic career he openly challenged the leadership of the National Socialists in Germany, attracting the scrutiny of the Gestapo. He set about to discredit such leadership by intellectually cutting it off at the knees. His works repeatedly demarcate the line between legitimate leadership conducive to good

order and corrupt leadership participating in disorder. Thus, in a sense, his work should contribute to leadership studies, so long as we can apply his findings to everyday situations. The specific topic of this essay is Voegelin's consideration of a leader's authority, grounded in a careful balance of force, reason, and revelation, or as I have identified them for the sake of alliteration: might, measure, and meaning.

As a process, leadership is a dynamic without rigidity of structure.<sup>1</sup> Without rigidity of structure, however, most of us experience anxiety. To this, Voegelin replies, "The search for order is the response to anxiety."<sup>2</sup> In a manner of speaking, leadership is a search for order, order in oneself and throughout the organization—none of which is to be confused with the struggle for control. In her popular book *Leadership and the New Science*, Margaret Wheatley plausibly asks: "What if we stopped looking for control and began, in earnest, the search for order?"<sup>3</sup> Voegelin devoted his academic life to this search. To understand the search for order, we might turn to Voegelin's understanding of interpersonal influence.

As the textbook authors Callahan and Fleenor put it, "the one word that seems to pinpoint the major element of leadership is influence."<sup>4</sup> This word has been

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defined as the process by which a person changes the attitude or voluntary behavior of another.<sup>5</sup> At the core of any understanding of influence is the phenomenon of interpersonal communication. Thus at the center of leadership is influence, and at the center of influence is communication. "Communication is an instrument for gaining social power by transforming the listener into a follower of the truth propounded by the speaker."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, Voegelin has written: "The spoken word, it appears, is more than a mere sign signifying something; it is a power in reality that evokes structures in reality by naming them."<sup>7</sup> In other words, you influence me only if I perceive some authority for what you articulate as the desired objective; the listener becomes transformed into a follower upon perceiving a leader's *authority*.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, at the center of a leader's communication is the perception of authority.

Voegelin himself identifies three such authorities: Might, Measure, and Meaning. He then avers that "the balance of the three authorities is the condition of true order in Western civilization."<sup>9</sup> The secret to successful leadership, in other words, is securing that balance. By the same token, an imbalance results in disorder. The leader who relies on such an imbalance puts his or her operation at risk. How, then, are we to understand Voegelin's meaning about these authorities?

**Might.** By "might" Voegelin means force, that is, acts of coercion, ranging from scorn to explicit threats of punishment. He would distinguish this from persuasion, for example, which is an appeal to reason. Not only is might already known to be a base of power in fact, according to studies dating all the way back to Raven and French. Voegelin himself positively endorses the use of might. Without might, order cannot be created or maintained. "[T]he mainte-

nance of an order will have always, human nature being what it is, to rely on the instrument of force."<sup>10</sup> How does he justify this blatant appeal to the threat of institutional violence? Voegelin depicts human nature as both personal and impersonal. The personal side of a man orders his conduct by reason and conscience, but the impersonal "contains a powerful sector of urges, passions, concupiscences...."<sup>11</sup> This impersonal side we all possess to varying degrees, from the saint to the criminal, and society cannot long prevail without its constraint, by means of "social pressures, energetic reminders, and ultimately the threat of force...."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, "the use of force is necessary to break the impersonality of man when it tends to disrupt the order of human existence in society."<sup>13</sup> In other words, the use of might is an attempt to control the impersonal for the sake of the personal. Might does not make right, yet force serves a useful purpose.

Contemporary theories of leadership downplay this fact. Few bestsellers in organizational management explain the techniques of coercion in the workplace. Nonetheless, it is a very real and regrettably necessary base of influence that a leader must be willing to employ, for as Voegelin suggests the very capacity to impose undesirable outcomes is a component of one's authority to lead.

**Measure.** To enable an organization to realize its purpose, a leader will have to resort to reason in order to persuade others to follow. A leader might appeal, for example, to others' self-interest, which is the presumption of all need-based models of motivation. But the rigorous use of reason ultimately involves one in philosophy,<sup>14</sup> and philosophy can be understood in part as *techné metretiké*, the art of measurement.

For reason to lead to action there must be some coordination of means to ends, which is to say that means can be

said to be rational when they adequately serve some intended purpose. This rationality is referred to as a "pragmatic rationality of action."<sup>15</sup> A leader knows the measure of a task, the dimension and scope of his purpose. But then "[t]he full rationality of means depends on the rationality of ends,"<sup>16</sup> which in turn depends on an understanding of a hierarchy of goods. And it is against this hierarchy that an individual's conduct might be measured, such that a man *ought* to do this or that because it is in this manner that he serves his purpose best. After all, under the pressure of the moment we can try one procedure, impose another policy, and generally drift along *ad hoc*, or we can stop and ask, with Voegelin, "Do there exist objective criteria which enable us to define what is 'better'?"<sup>17</sup> Measure is a perspective, a kind of envisioning the big picture and then recognizing the best steps to take toward realizing that vision. In this way, a leader develops a sense of proportion.

Having said this, one could well ask, What does a leader contribute to each individual's private hierarchy of goods? If, indeed, reason is "the constituent of humanity at all times" and "the source of order in the psyche of man,"<sup>18</sup> then why is not everyone already perfectly rational? Is it not often presumed in economics and theories of liberal democracy that man is the best judge of his own actions and the sole curator of his own values?

Voegelin points out that in the past the existence of reason "in human nature had not prevented the order of society from falling into...disorder...."<sup>19</sup> Stated elsewhere, he remarks, "Men capable of an optimum application [of reason] are a minority in every society."<sup>20</sup> Reason shines its light on the tension between order and disorder, a disorder largely attributable to the impersonal, the pull of passions and mere imagination. It follows that the "'quality' of society de-

pends on the degree to which the life of reason, actively carried out by a minority of its members becomes a creative force in that society."<sup>21</sup> But isn't this hierarchical? Of course it is; the very concept of leadership presupposes a state or condition of inequality, no matter how slight. After all, "the structure of society is in fact, for unknown reasons, hierarchical and not equalitarian, and we know of no way of changing this situation."<sup>22</sup> The philosopher-leader is admonished by Voegelin to proceed as follows:

We find in our immediate circle both the opinions and the terminology expressing ideas of right or wrong; our job is to find the path leading from this vocabulary and these customs toward the objective element. This is introduced by the postulate that there is such a thing as human nature, and if we can discover what it consists of we can offer advice as to how society ought to be organized, since the organization of society should aim at the full flowering of human nature.<sup>23</sup>

What, too, about specific institutions within society? He continues.

[T]here is no sense talking about good or bad institutions or making concrete suggestions about this or that social problem unless we first know what purpose or end these institutions are supposed to serve. This we cannot know unless we are familiar with the human nature which is going to develop within this social context.<sup>24</sup>

How do we conduct this analytical research in a fully rational manner? How does one measure the task? On a concrete level, Voegelin mentions several hazards to effective dialogue.<sup>25</sup> He would forbid:

a) communicating by speech or memorandum, rather than by the give-and-take of dialogue;

- b) ignoring arguments for which you detect psychological motives (“The only reason you’re saying that is....”);
- c) classifying or labeling each other;
- d) assuming that the physical sciences offer the only valid methodologies (a risk, for example, when limiting TQM to the methodologies of statistics); and
- e) treating “values” as essentially nonrational, a mere matter of preference.

The complete theoretical argument has been summarized by Raymond Aron.

[F]or there to be any rational or reasonable discussion of [organizational order], there first has to be agreement on the common good. There can be no agreement on the supreme good, however, if one does not have a conception of human nature. This conception implies the immutability of human nature, however, and this is linked to a certain conception of man’s participation in a transcendent reality....<sup>26</sup>

This conception of man’s participation in a transcendent reality shows an interdependence of reason with revelation in the authority to lead, since at some point in the regression we have to involve the spiritual dimension of our enterprise. We have to keep things at work in proportion. Behavior results from choices, which in their turn result from beliefs, and these beliefs come together into a coherent world view only if we practice the art of measurement.

**Meaning.** Early in his academic career, Voegelin was compelled to consider the emergence of Hitler and his policies. In the course of his study, he felt he had to trace the unsettling beliefs of the Nazis back to their spiritual precepts. His argument, as it pertains to the issue of leadership, is to be found in his *Political Religions*.<sup>27</sup>

In any community, as in any organization, there is a plurality of powers. On this proposition we can all agree. Consequently, “the plurality of powers would

necessitate the question of their legitimacy and order....”<sup>28</sup> “One basic form of legitimacy for the rule of man over man is realized in the symbol of radiation from a divine summit, through a hierarchy of rulers and officers, down to the last obedient subject.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, legitimacy can be said to have derived from a divine source. Of this Voegelin offers historical examples, beginning in ancient Egypt and reaching geometric completeness in Bodin.<sup>30</sup> Bodin’s schematic order resembles any contemporary organizational chart, with a central authority and layers of increasingly diffused responsibility and function. Essential to Voegelin’s thesis is the gradual marginalization of the divine while at the same time retaining this hierarchy. In other words, once the leader no longer enjoys the afflatus of the cosmos, so to speak, the whole structure loses legitimacy. If God never ordained your leadership, why should anyone obey you? This leadership without legitimacy is what alarmed him about the Nazis.<sup>31</sup>

One might conclude that, in order to retain the existing hierarchy, *something* had to replace the divine as the fount of all legitimacy, and Voegelin alleges that the unity of the structure was often held up as its own justification. Rather than reinforce revelation or replace it with some sort of myth, authority has been derived from the identity people felt as a group, which could be created and sustained only in differentiation from others.<sup>32</sup> In this sense we perceive ourselves as a group and cohere *because* of the awareness of others, *i.e.* “aliens.”<sup>33</sup> We cooperate in order to repel a common enemy, a rival. We come together to defeat the competition. (In what other sense can we appreciate the obsession with market share?)

But mere opposition is not an identity. The existence of some other group does not tell us who we are or why we in our group should act in concert. This

much is true. To posit a common language or a common culture is to deify tradition or, failing that, to beg the question. Since there really can be no revealed identity, apart from revelation, we readily traffic in myth.<sup>34</sup> Nazis were particularly aggressive about celebrating myth. The result is an irony. The political becomes religious in aspect; there being no gods, we invent one, such as Hobbes's *Leviathan*, or the almighty customer, with the correlate that personality, the rational and religious part of ourselves, can be realized only in community, pursuant to the prevailing myth.<sup>35</sup> After all, why should a firm encourage a myth that runs counter to the firm's objectives? Any religious or philosophical experience separated from the community is at risk for being perceived as apostasy worthy of hemlock or the cross.

In less melodramatic terms, let me make the argument another way. An organizational culture encourages certain beliefs about a common purpose, and these beliefs include the conviction that we depend on each other to realize that purpose. It is axiomatic that organizational culture always promotes loyalty. Of what use, therefore, is someone who is not a team player? Of what use is any self-serving behavior? Private revelations about the meaning of one's life would seem to stand outside the organization and, for this reason alone, constitute a threat, since the tendency is for organizational culture to think of itself as a closed system with a sufficient rationale. There is a point after which the worker cannot challenge the corporation.

Disrespect for private revelation (as we are calling it) would be a mistake.<sup>36</sup> Voegelin takes the experience of transcendence quite seriously. He did not treat revelation as a mere utility to subjugate the masses or to prop up the imagination of lesser minds. He states

clearly that the classic experience of reason is neither the same as faith or trust or love, nor a revolt against them. It is instead an orientation and as such a differentiation.<sup>37</sup> As a result, there is a necessary role for genuine revelation, not only in the private lives of individuals, but also in the collective sense of purpose preceding and underlying our everyday efforts. In another passage, Voegelin remarks that the individual "yearns for an explanation of his social existence, of his 'community' in immanentist terms."<sup>38</sup>

Leadership derives its authority in part from its respect for revelation and its convergence with the myths that animate the rest of us. A leader shows that *your* purpose and *my* purpose depend on the organization's success, which is another way of saying that a leader fosters a sense of meaning. In this sense, then, not only is the leader an agent of force and something of a philosopher, as we have just seen, but also he or she must also be a kind of corporate prophet.

We are left by Voegelin to balance three factors in order to establish one's authority to lead: revelation and myth about the spiritual dimension of our enterprise; rigorous analysis to discern the rational means to achieve our common purpose; and, in those instances when the impersonal threatens the operation—which is to say, upon the occurrence of behavior disrespectful of revelation, void of useful myth, or simply irrational in terms of achieving our purpose—resort to force. This article attempts to apply certain lessons from the career and achievement of Eric Voegelin to the more immediate world of day-to-day management. Hopefully his wisdom will find its way into the burgeoning literature on organizational leadership.

1. Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco, 1992), 15. Voegelin uses similar language to define an institution as "not a structure that is established once and for all, but a process in time...." "The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconsideration of the Nazi Era," *Intercollegiate Review*, XXIX (1985), 7-27, reprinted in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Ellis Sandoz, ed., Vol. 12 (Baton Rouge, 1990), 1, at 30. 2. "Anxiety and Reason," in *The Collected Works*, Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella, ed., Vol. 28 (Baton Rouge, 1990), 52, at 71. 3. Wheatley, 23. 4. Robert E. Callahan and C. Patrick Fleenor, *Managing Human Relations: Concepts and Practices* (Columbus, 1988), 97; see also R. Dennis Middlemist and Michael A. Hitt, *Organizational Behavior: Managerial Strategies for Performance* (St. Paul, 1988), 395 ("[M]ost definitions [of leadership] emphasize the concept of influence."). 5. Having attempted a definition, it would be proper for me to quote Voegelin to the effect that, "for methodological reasons definitions come at the end of the analytical process and not at the beginning. And if the analysis has been carefully carried out, definitions are no longer of any great importance, for they can provide no more than a summary of the results of the analysis." Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics & Gnosticism* (Chicago, 1968), 83. 6. Eric Voegelin, "Supplementary Notes for Students in Jurisprudence Course," in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Robert Anthony Pascal, James Lee Babin, and John William Corrington, eds., Vol. 27 (Baton Rouge, 1991), 73, at 75. 7. *Order and History*, Vol. 5 (Baton Rouge, 1987), 19; see also Wheatley, 101-119. 8. Voegelin makes the point this way.

If the story is to evoke authoritatively the order of a social field, the word must be spoken with an authority recognizable as such by the men to whom the appeal is addressed; the appeal will have no authority of truth unless it speaks with an authority commonly present in everybody's consciousness, however inarticulate, deformed, or suppressed the consciousness in the concrete case may be.

*Order and History*, Vol. 5, 26. 9. "The Nature of Law," *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, 68. 10. Eric Voegelin, "Right and Might," *The Review of Politics*, III (1941), 122-23, reprinted in *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, 84, at 86; see Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, John H. Hallowell, ed. (Durham, 1975), 26, citing Voltaire. 11. "The Nature of the Law," 63. 12. *Ibid.*, 64. 13. *Ibid.*, 64. 14. See "Remarks re: Renaissance of Philosophy," in *World Technology and Human Destiny*, Raymond Aron, ed. (Ann Arbor, 1963), 225. 15. "Industrial Society in Search of Reason," in *World Technology and Human Destiny*, 31. Pragmatic reason he later defines as "all rational action in the

sciences of the external world, the development of technology, and the coordination of means and ends as they apply to the external world...." *Ibid.*, 43. The alternative kind of reason directed toward the sciences of man, society, and history he terms "noetic." 16. "Supplementary Notes for Students in Jurisprudence Course," 73. 17. See "Remarks re: Renaissance of Philosophy," 222. 18. Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," *Southern Review* X (1974), 237-64, reprinted in *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, 265. 19. *Ibid.*, 266. 20. "Industrial Society in Search of Reason," 34. 21. *Ibid.*, 38. 23. "Remarks re: Renaissance of Philosophy," 223f. This "full flowering of human nature" is significant to offset the belief that subordinates are no more than useful, for Voegelin did not endorse an elitism in which some persons are to be treated as means to the organizational ends. He does not say that a leader must use people. For one thing, people who come to view themselves as merely useful drift toward collectives that will compensate for their residual anxieties, collectives such as labor unions or ideological political parties, which respond to challenges by exerting counterforce and otherwise frustrate the private exercise of reason. 24. *Ibid.*, 224. 25. See *ibid.*, 227f. 26. *Ibid.*, 229. 27. *Political Religions*, T.J. DiNapoli and E.S. Easterly, III, trans. (Lewiston, N.Y., 1986). 28. *Political Religions*, 7, citing Dante. 29. *Political Religions*, 29. 30. *Political Religions*, 31; see *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 30. 31. *Political Religions*, 32 and 42; see especially *Science, Politics, & Gnosticism*, 53-73. Stephen Holmes, in his polemic against what he calls "antiliberalism," makes an equivalent assessment on behalf of Joseph de Maistre. "The antiliberal style of reasoning...originally depended on theological premises that later dropped from sight. When no longer based on the idea of a divine injunction, however, the claim that man's sociality is morally binding became unintelligible, even though it may remain psychologically attractive...." Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 17. 32. *Political Religions*, 53; see also *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 20. Ironically, religion became the unifying symbol of evil, the nemesis. See e.g. Holmes, 35. 33. Georg Simmel, *Conflict*, Kurt H. Wolff, trans. (New York, 1955), see esp. 96-107. Holmes represents Maistre as saying that "realistically, violent confrontation between rival groups is the most intense expression of mankind's inherent sociality." Holmes, 28. See also Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, George Schwab, trans. (New Brunswick, 1976). 34. *Political Religions*, 62f; "Anxiety and Reason," 82 ("[W]hen [man] is prevented from responding to anxiety by a true search of the ground, he will find relief in the creation of fictitious grounds."). For clarity on the meanings of myth, cf. *ibid.*, 75-79. Holmes ascribes a similar belief to Maistre: "[Liberals] overestimate the sufficiency of reason and force in the creation and maintenance of social order [citations omitted]. What they do not

see is that man also needs myth." Holmes, 24. **35.** *Political Religions*, 67. **36.** *Science, Politics, & Gnosticism*, 43; see also *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, 27f. ("Behind the phrase that a man who is not socially useful ... does not count looms the virtuous *terreur* of Robespierre and the massacres by the later humanitarians whose hearts are filled with compassion to the point that they are willing to slaughter one half of mankind in order to make the other half happy."). **37.** "Reason: The Classic Expe-

rience," 273; cf. "Anxiety and Reason," 79 ("If a perversion of immanence goes to the extreme of losing the transcendent God, this means the radical loss of any ground to which existence could be related. And if reasoning means relating existence to its ground, the loss of God entails the loss of reason."). **38.** See "Remarks re: The Decline of Messianism," in *World Technology and Human Destiny*, 172.