ERIC VOEGELIN’S THEORY OF INTENTIONALITY IN CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS PRAGMATIC INFLUENCES

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This dissertation offers an analysis of the impact of the American pragmatist tradition on the philosophical thought of the twentieth century political theorist, Eric Voegelin. It argues that Voegelin’s early-career encounters with the thought of the classical American pragmatists shaped the tendency and organization of his philosophical methodology and that Voegelin’s philosophical vision is significantly clarified when conceived in relation to this intellectual source. To make this case, this project focuses primarily on the influence of William James’ philosophy on Voegelin’s theory of consciousness and the treatment of other persistent themes developed throughout Voegelin’s extensive writings that explicitly engage American pragmatist theory. The problem addressed directly within this examination concerns the ambiguous character of Voegelin’s understanding of intentionality in consciousness, which has been exposed by recent scholarship examining Voegelin’s philosophy.

The issue of intentionality of consciousness for Voegelin, at one level, is quite similar to Husserl’s understanding of the structural fact of consciousness as always involving an awareness of something. Hence Voegelin often refers to intentionality as the way consciousness, at least insofar as it may be known in human experience, both interacts with and is embodied in empirical concrete existence. This connotation of intentionality, for Voegelin, however, is viewed in a subordinate role to his notion of the “luminosity of consciousness”, which refers to consciousness as the “site” or “sensorium” of human participation in its encompassing reality. Here, Voegelin acknowledges the role of intentionality in consciousness as equivocally linked to the notion of “participation of being” in the “metaxic structure of existence.” (These notions will be discussed in the next section.) It is with this problematic ambiguity surrounding Voegelin’s conception of intentionality and, ultimately his understanding of the character of “participation in being” as a fundamental form of intentionality that concerns the following dissertation. Questions regarding the volitional intentionality of consciousness as such emerge throughout Voegelin’s philosophical work. They naturally extend to the coherence of Voegelin’s critique of modernity and his assessment of the nature of change in social and political structures.
I argue that a more adequate account of Voegelin’s conception of consciousness can be formed through a reassessment of the way certain trends of American thought function in the development of his philosophy. To work toward this aim, this dissertation will advance the thesis that not only was Voegelin’s philosophical vision largely structured by his appreciation of the American philosophical tradition, but that Voegelin’s understanding of intentionality in consciousness finds its closest approximation and most explicit elucidation in the ‘common-sense’ realism developed by the classical American pragmatists.

Only within the past three decades have scholars come to appreciate the importance of Eric Voegelin’s writings and to recognize, within their horizon, theoretical advances applicable for multiple academic disciplines. Voegelin formally identified himself as a political scientist, and it is evident throughout Voegelin’s written work that his philosophy takes its point of departure from the political situation. However, Voegelin’s extensive journal writings and five-volume opus, *Order and History* (1956-1987), also attest to his importance as a philosopher of history as well as to the way in which his scholarship extends to a wide range of philosophical and theological concerns. Voegelin’s reflections pertaining to the nature of human consciousness, ancient and modern civilization, and the structures of social order have wide relevance for contemporary thought. The investigation of these features of Voegelin’s thought still remains a major challenge.

The argument set forth in this dissertation endeavors to continue a steady line of critical analysis that has developed from texts fundamentally geared toward making Voegelin’s ideas more accessible to a broader audience. Evident in the scholarship dealing more specifically with the technical components of Voegelin’s thought is a wide variance of interpretation concerned with Voegelin’s understanding of ‘intentionality in consciousness’. John Ranieri’s *Eric Voegelin and the Good Society* (1995), arrives at the unresolved question of whether the vision and/or experience of ‘participation in being’, as Voegelin discusses the issue, is negligible for human action or rather involves a kind of empowerment that elevates intentionality in consciousness to a higher
integration of human subjectivity.¹ Michael Morrissey’s, *Consciousness and Transcendence* (1994), in which Voegelin’s philosophy is highlighted in the broadest sense as a theological enterprise, understands Voegelin’s conception of intentionality in consciousness to involve a definitive experience of conversion that can be either noetic or spiritual in character and can result in a proper grounding in personal, lived reality.²

Conversely, other scholars have emphasized Voegelin’s reticence in asserting remedial insights distinguishing modes of authentic philosophical and religious intentionality in consciousness so as to resist doxology and/or fanaticism. Michael Franz, for instance, defends Voegelin’s restraint in prescribing remedies for the disorder in civilized life stemming from ideological and religious patterns of disorientation by acknowledging that Voegelin thus allows us at least to envision a parallel history of spiritual order that has the potential to respond to and resist spiritual pathology.³ Ted McAllister asserts that Voegelin explicitly maintained caution to avoid the reification of intentional acts of consciousness into “thing-like” constructs that can potentially lose their ability to articulate the way intentionality in consciousness becomes expressive for its encompassing reality.⁴ And, finally, Kenneth Keulman suggests further that the pessimism apparent in Voegelin’s writings relating to intentionality in consciousness should be read as an open stance that looks beyond the construction of closed systems and disembodied propositions to a sensitive apprehension of the existential tensions and flux that condition life.⁵ Common to these and other interpretations is the recognition that Voegelin’s conception of intentionality in consciousness represents an activity distinct from a basic operational mode of cognitive perception. In essence, such insights refer to way Voegelin’s philosophical writings linked intentionality in

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consciousness to an emergent reflexive understanding of the volitional or participatory character of consciousness as existentially oriented toward its ontological ground.

Further efforts to extract a richer understanding of Voegelin’s position concerning intentionality in consciousness also lie in comparative work assessing the relation of Voegelin’s thought to other seminal figures such as Bernard Lonergan, Alfred Schütz, and Edmund Husserl. And, while scholars like Eugene Webb, Gilbert Weiss, Michael Morrissey and others have made headway in clarifying Voegelin’s thought in relation to these important philosophers, less progress has been made in clarifying Voegelin’s position with respect to them concerning the nature of intentionality in consciousness. Moreover, the majority of secondary works generally devoted to Voegelin’s thought have either neglected to recognize, or have treated piecemeal, the early American philosophical influence on Voegelin’s work concerning this issue and other broader themes. Barry Cooper’s *The Political Theory of Eric Voegelin* (1986) offers a precise account of Voegelin’s early encounter with American philosophy during his 1924 fellowship abroad and indicates the dramatic effect this encounter had on Voegelin’s philosophical priorities. Under the chapter heading aptly entitled “The Crucible,” Cooper accurately notes that the experience in America awakened in Voegelin an awareness of the limitations of the central European intellectual culture that had previously nourished him, but Cooper does not however make explicit the extent of this “awakening” in his broader analysis of Voegelin’s political critique. Ellis Sandoz also stresses the kinship Voegelin had with American philosophers to establish a wider readership of Voegelin in America. Sandoz offers an important analysis of the influence of William James on Voegelin in his book, *The Voegelinian Revolution* (1981), but fails to trace fully the significance of James’s “radical empiricism” for Voegelin’s philosophical method or Voegelin’s theoretical insights concerning psychic disorder. The most constructive treatment of the

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philosophical influence of William James and Charles S. Peirce on Voegelin’s philosophy is found in an essay written by Paul Kuntz entitled, “Voegelin’s Experiences of Disorder Out of Order” (1991). In this essay, Kuntz offers important insights concerning Peirce’s semiotic theory and James’s conception of pluralism as these relate to Voegelin’s postulates concerning existential order yet, Kuntz finally opts to limit his central thematic reflections on Voegelin’s concept of order to a more concise account of the influence of Santayana’s thought on Voegelin’s philosophy.

The general hypothesis orienting this dissertation takes up the broad challenge of tracing Voegelin’s philosophical development with reference to the way American philosophy came to impact the organization of his research, shape his general philosophical interests, and, as Voegelin himself remarked, bring about a “great break” in his intellectual development. However, the more specific project of making explicit the roots of American philosophy in Voegelin’s conception of intentionality in consciousness has the additional import of isolating the perspectives of both Continental and American philosophy with respect to a individual contentious philosophical concern. Voegelin’s writing style and theoretical orientation was mainly recognized as representative of the genre of Continental philosophy, yet his appreciation of the American philosophical tradition over the course of his career relates directly to current divisions and connections evident in the juxtaposition of modern American and Continental philosophy. To discover the ways in which Voegelin came to engage American pragmatism in his career work offers an analogous example of how such a practice remains currently viable.

With respect to the way this inquiry works toward advancement in religious studies, it must initially be noted that Voegelin’s work is evidently theological in character. Voegelin’s philosophy addresses a variety of cross-cultural religious issues, most of which are explicitly related to his theory of consciousness. The central

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feature of Voegelin’s thought that fundamentally correlates with religious experience is his notion, arising out of his philosophical exegesis of Plato and Aristotle, of human participation in the *metaxy* (the “in-between”). Voegelin describes this structure of reality as a realm constituted by the polar tension of time and eternity in which the mutual participation (*metalepsis*) of humanity in divinity and divinity in humanity transpires. Accordingly, for Voegelin, divine transcendence is signified in the eternal pole of the tensional structure of the *metaxy*, and participation in (human) consciousness is construed as existence both embodied in time and positioned between the indexical poles of time and eternity. Hence, Voegelin in essence delineates the structure of metaxy as the way consciousness exists in tension toward the divine ground of being (*Nous*).

In the broader scope of his work, Voegelin considers the transformation of social consciousness historically by locating forms of social consciousness in symbols of political and social order and demonstrating how certain modalities of order specifically express the character of human participation in the metaxic structure of existence. Within such reflection, Voegelin explicitly speculates on the dynamism involved in the tensional interplay of the poles constituting metaxic existence (i.e., eternity and time) and indicates that a transfiguring movement can be discerned in the analysis of the differing historical constructs of symbolic order formed to express the nature and structure of existence. Voegelin comes to recognize this movement of transfiguration as the “flow of divine presence” and argues that the vision of transfiguration implicit in this movement becomes illuminated for consciousness in the spiritual outbursts of diverse social orders common to both the Eastern and Western world. Voegelin’s later work is increasingly dedicated to the analysis of the nature of these spiritual occurrences and the social order they represent. To address the core of Voegelin’s thought concerning intentionality in consciousness as it is expressive of a participatory relation to divine reality is then to treat philosophically fundamental and efficacious aspects of religious life. To consider further the influence of

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American philosophy on Voegelin’s thought with respect to such matters presents an alternative way to envision with greater clarity the aims of religious life.

**III. Method of Investigation**

To determine the scope of Voegelin’s interpretation of the American pragmatists and the relevance of their thought in his later work, this project develops and employs paradigms for comparison appropriate to the unique American influence that is explicit in Voegelin’s philosophy. The comparative examination concerning the nature of consciousness as such, represented by Voegelin and the classical pragmatists, has the purpose of eliciting a fresh conceptual basis from which to assess and clarify further the ambiguity evident in Voegelin’s treatment of intentionality in consciousness. Core distinctions and correlations are made explicit in the process of presenting and defending the thesis of this project and the project as a whole builds upon contemporary literature relevant to the problem addressed in this study.

**Chapter One**

This dissertation, at the most basic level of analysis, is concerned with the development of Eric Voegelin’s theory of consciousness and the orientation his philosophical career had as a result of encountering American pragmatist thought early in his career. In 1924, Voegelin was awarded a Laura Spellman Rockefeller Fellowship to study in the United States for two years at Columbia, Harvard, and Wisconsin. During this time, Voegelin worked for one year under the guidance of John Dewey, who introduced him to the philosophy of Peirce, James, and the Scottish “common-sense” school. Leaving New York for Boston the following year, Voegelin encountered the thought of Whitehead at Harvard. In 1928, Voegelin’s first published monograph appeared, *Über die Form des amerikanischen Geistes*, reflecting his studies during his stay in America. The first chapter of this dissertation provides a concise historical account of Voegelin’s studies in America between 1926 and 1928, and brings into focus Voegelin’s early career development. Additionally, this chapter introduces an assessment of clear shifts in Voegelin’s philosophical interests and attitudes as were occasioned by his experience in America, providing the
transitional material necessary to move toward a detailed account of Voegelin’s first monograph and later philosophical works. Pivotal to this analysis is the introduction of themes treated by Voegelin in his work discussing the “American mind” and his initial engagement with the thought of Peirce, James and Dewey. Significantly, the early transformations in Voegelin’s thought concerning dialectical reasoning and the nature of philosophical monism as a result of his encounter with American philosophy are established in this chapter. Further consideration of the broader scope of Voegelin’s first major work provides the necessary background to proceed into the later chapters that address the technical concepts of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness and Voegelin’s mature philosophy concerning the transformations of historical consciousness.

Chapter Two

Voegelin’s concern to reorient the theoretical principles operative for the field of political science shortly after the Second World War led him to develop his “theory of consciousness” as the foundational centerpiece for his own political theory. Voegelin’s *The New Science of Politics* is the first work to outline what other scholars have often referred to as Voegelin’s “1952 breakthrough,” for this work initially frames the general trajectory Voegelin’s later systematic writings would take in comprehending the role of consciousness in the construction and maintenance of political order. This chapter will trace these advances in Voegelin’s work with regard to his concern to establish a theoretical foundation for his political theory and philosophy of history. Voegelin’s reflections on history as a field of analyzable phenomena for consciousness can then at this point be introduced; these reflections are required fully to delineate Voegelin’s conception of the intentionality and luminosity of consciousness.

Voegelin’s theory of consciousness was not made entirely explicit until his 1966 book entitled *Anamnesis*. In this work, Voegelin’s distinctions between “noetic” and “pneumatic” forms of consciousness were maturely developed, as was his most detailed explication of his interpretation of the Platonic conception of the *metaxy*. Concise depictions of these issues essential to understanding Voegelin’s theory of consciousness are outlined in
this chapter in order to bring into focus Voegelin’s appropriation of James’s theory of consciousness. Centrally important to this discussion is establishing the way Voegelin utilized James’s concept of “pure experience” to build his own interpretation of consciousness and how this concept, formally developed by James, came to impact Voegelin’s philosophical understanding of existence in this monograph and throughout his opus, *Order and History*.

**Chapter Three**

In order fully to engage Voegelin’s mature philosophy and to consider the importance of the American pragmatist tradition in orienting Voegelin’s philosophical career, this chapter investigates the way Voegelin’s methodology and philosophical vision was influenced by James’s concept of ‘radical empiricism’ and the pragmatist understanding of pluralism. In his autobiographical reflections, Voegelin explicitly acknowledged how James and the American philosophical tradition offered him an alternative approach to European dialectical thinking for both interpreting philosophical problems and understanding historical development. This assertion is explored here in relation to the primary motifs of Voegelin’s analytic work concerning the transformations of historical consciousness and the contextual structure of order in existence, as this theory was set forth in his five-volume work, *Order and History*.

The examination of key conceptions in Voegelin’s mature thought, such as the differentiation of consciousness, the deformation of consciousness, and the movement of transfiguration in history, is necessary to proceed toward a more nearly complete comprehension of Voegelin’s theory of consciousness. This examination also reveals how Voegelin’s interpretation of the structures of existence and history evidently are non-dialectical and pluralist in character. Further, other themes in Voegelin’s thought concerning differentiated forms of consciousness are also to be linked in this chapter to paradigms found in James’s psychological analyses. Of note in this consideration were Voegelin’s concerns regarding deformation in consciousness and the way his analysis of pneumapathology in the unfolding of historical consciousness finds its closest equivalence in Jamesian
concepts like “healthy-mindedness” and the “sick soul”. The discussion of all these matters forms the background to begin to consider with detailed clarity, in chapters four through six, the core issues of intentionality and luminosity in Voegelin’s theory of consciousness and how Voegelin’s background in classical American pragmatism figured into his understanding of intentionality in consciousness.

Chapter Four

The central focus of this chapter is a comparative examination demonstrating differences and positions shared in common between Voegelin and the American pragmatists regarding the nature and role of consciousness. The first analysis in this investigation outlines the way James and Peirce understand the mediation of the subjective and objective poles of consciousness and how their treatment of this matter compares to Voegelin’s philosophy. This discussion focuses on the similarities and differences these considerations have in relation to Voegelin’s central thesis of consciousness conditioned by its metaxic existence, and begins to identify the way in which the Voegelin and these early American thinkers understood this paradoxical structure of consciousness to characterize its agency. The root issue of intentionality in consciousness, as conceived by both the early American thinkers and Voegelin, is then formally introduced and technically examined, bringing forth a subsequent analysis of Voegelin’s reconstructive theory of the Platonic concept of ‘anamnesis’. Ultimately the nature and agency of anamnesis as interpreted by Voegelin dominates the concern of this project in connection with the manner by which the pragmatist theory of ‘common-sense’ realism relates to the encompassing mode of intentionality in consciousness. The chapter concludes with a comparison of the inherent principles defining the process of anamnesis and the common-sense philosophy of the American pragmatists, including such related matters as the association of ideas, memory, and apperception. The summation of this analysis begins moreover to examine the significance of these modes of consciousness for private and public life.
Chapter Five

The emphasis placed on Voegelin’s conception of intentionality as fundamentally situated in the project of anamnesis, as defined against the backdrop of the common-sense philosophy of the American pragmatists, naturally tends to uncover the way in which Voegelin appropriated the Jamesian concept of the “open self” to characterize active ‘participation in being’. Thus, it is important to re-visit Voegelin’s considerations regarding the doctrine of ‘participation in being’ to assess whether this newly framed theory of intentionality can better clarify Voegelin’s thought. Further, this examination will reconsider the manner by which Voegelin links the agency of intentionality in consciousness directly with ‘participation in being’ as a measure of continuity and order in existence in open relation with the divine Ground. Analysis in this direction is significant in relation to the way Voegelin re-works James’s hypotheses concerning the nonexistence of consciousness-soul by disclosing it as a dimension of non-existent reality.

By attending to the way Voegelin interpreted these fundamental phenomenological concerns, and, again by relating the clear American philosophical influence Voegelin exhibits in reckoning with his understanding of the primary structures of existence, connections can be drawn to concerns of religious life. In particular, Voegelin’s meditations on immortality and theoretical discussions of the eschatological orientation of reality and human participation in this transfiguring process must be considered in clarifying further the nature of participation as luminosity in consciousness. Strong parallels as well as certain stark differences emerge between Voegelin and the pragmatists concerning the topic of immortality, and these are identified explicitly in the closing sections of this chapter.

Chapter Six

Having worked through Voegelin’s theory of consciousness in detail with special concern directed toward clarifying Voegelin’s conception of intentionality, and further establishing evidence for linking Voegelin’s interpretation of this key mode of consciousness to his engagement with American pragmatist thought, this final
chapter inquires whether Voegelin intended his theory of intentionality to function as a normative ethic. The investigation hinges upon the possibility of the deepening of consciousness in relation to its ground and whether an increased awareness of the area and/or experience of participation can be secured in order to intend the act of ‘openness’ that Voegelin endeavored to articulate throughout his career writings. Moreover, it must be possible to attempt to elicit a reflexive understanding of the activity of intentionality as a fundamental modality in noetic participation, and additionally, to envision determinately and comprehensively, the structural process in which participation in being occurs so as to respond appropriately to its appeal.

The design of this project generally addresses these questions in its effort to further distinguish and characterize the concept of intentionality through an investigation of the American pragmatist influence in Voegelin’s theoretical treatment of this dimension of consciousness. Against this backdrop, and by again turning to Voegelin’s work to identify the way he developed his theory of consciousness as a measure against which he could assess political reality and gain philosophical understanding, an argument will be made concerning the ethical character of the anamnetic process as conceived in Voegelin’s philosophy. In light of the way Voegelin evidently engaged classical pragmatist insight in his own philosophical quest, this argument will include consideration the way in which intentionality as luminosity in consciousness and active ‘participation in being’ emerges as an achievement of value and a fundament of order, regardless of its specific moral content. Further, this examination also will focus on the role Voegelin outlines for intentionality in contrast to his understanding of the deformation of consciousness, and identify the way in which pragmatic norms having to do with relatedness, deference, the achievement of balance and continuity emerged for Voegelin as means to right action and basic virtues of existence.
The following working bibliography is organized to feature first the primary texts authored by the figures to be studied in this investigation. These texts are listed in chronological order. The sections following those listing the primary texts present the secondary literature linked, respectively, to the work of Eric Voegelin, William James and Charles S. Peirce. The latter sections provide texts related to the contextual background of topics to be addressed in this dissertation, and are listed under categorical headings.

I. PRIMARY TEXTS OF ERIC VOEGELIN

____."Die Zeit in der Wirtschaft." Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozial-politik, LIII (1924): 186-211.


### II. SECONDARY LITERATURE ON ERIC VOEGELIN


III. PRIMARY TEXTS OF WILLIAM JAMES

_____. The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897.


V. PRIMARY TEXTS OF CHARLES S. PEIRCE


VI. SECONDARY LITERATURE ON CHARLES S. PEIRCE


Corrington, Robert S.; Carl Hausman; Thomas M. Seebohm; Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology; Pennsylvania State University; and Dept.of Philosophy, eds. *Pragmatism Considers Phenomenology*. Current Continental Research. Pittsburgh, Pa.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology, 1987.


**VII. LITERATURE ON AMERICAN PRAGMATISM**


**VIII. LITERATURE ON INTENTIONALITY AND PARTICIPATION**


IX. LITERATURE ON THE NATURE AND RELATION OF TIME AND ETERNITY


X. OTHER CONSULTED WORKS


Descartes, René. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by Donald A. Cross. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980. The original publication date for *Discourse on Method* was 1637, and *Meditations on First Philosophy* was originally published in 1641.


Toynbee, Arnold. *An Historian’s Approach to Religion; Based on Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Edinburgh in the Years 1952 and 1953.* London: Oxford University Press, 1956.


