

# Augusto Del Noce and Eric Voegelin on the *eidōs* of History: A Comparative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

In his critique of Modernity and the modern Gnosis, the prominent Italian Catholic philosopher Augusto Del Noce was particularly influenced by Eric Voegelin's use of the two concepts in his political theory. The aim of this article is to present the various aspects of the idea of history proposed by Voegelin followed by Del Noce's response and interpretation of them in order to show the similarities and differences between their views. More specifically, the comparison between Voegelin and Del Noce centers on the question of the *eidōs* or "form" of history and on the difference, important for Del Noce, between ancient and modern Gnosis.

## KEYWORDS

modernity; history; Augusto Del Noce; Eric Voegelin; metaphysics

## 1. Introduction

The works of the Catholic philosopher Augusto Del Noce (1910–89) had a significant impact on postwar Catholic culture in Italy. Born in Pistoia, he grew up under the Fascist regime (1922–43) during which period he developed his philosophical positions on questions such as freedom and authority, the origins of totalitarianism and the relationship between totalitarianism and modernity, and on secularization and its theological and philosophical implications for the philosophy of history. The same questions and issues were discussed by his contemporary, the German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin (1901–85), whose works Del Noce first encountered in the 1960s and to which from then onwards he continued to refer in his writings—mainly in his major work, *The Problem of Atheism* (2021), in his Introduction to the Italian translation of Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics* (1968), as well as in *L'interpretazione transpolitica della storia contemporanea* [The transpolitical interpretation of contemporary history] (1982). In particular, Del Noce made Voegelin's idea of modern Gnosticism his own, which led him in turn to change his opinion on secularization.

The critique of modernity is one of the themes most often addressed by scholars of Del Noce, and his contribution to the idea of modern Gnosticism, which was first developed by Voegelin, has been widely debated.<sup>1</sup> However, a comparative analysis of the two philosophers—and, in particular, of Del Noce's criticism of Voegelin's idea of Gnosticism—deserves further treatment, with the aim of highlighting not only the similarities but

also the basic differences between their views. These differences, as I will show, emerge in their divergent interpretations of history, behind which appear their deeper opposing interpretations of Gnosis and metaphysics.

For Voegelin, Gnosis and history are closely linked. The modern Gnostic believes that human beings can achieve their own salvation and realize a perfect political society in the course of history. History, the ground on which the Gnostic seeks salvation, assumes therefore a sense, a direction, an understandable structure aimed at fulfillment. This is what Voegelin calls the transposition of Christian eschatology from the level of Revelation to the immanent level of history. Yet according to Voegelin, it is only sacred history that has meaning because profane history has no comprehensible structure and is therefore devoid of *form*. The term Voegelin uses in *The New Science of Politics* is the Greek word *eidos* which means, precisely, "form."<sup>2</sup>

However, Del Noce, who follows the Voegelinian interpretation of modern Gnosticism, arrives at the *opposite* conclusion. He argues that it is precisely modern Gnosticism in its most radical expressions that leads to the negation of the form or *eidos* of history. History, for Del Noce, is *transformation*: it changes but nevertheless maintains its form. My aim in the next seven sections is thus to investigate the theoretical reasons why, from similar premises, Voegelin and Del Noce developed opposite interpretations of history and the deeper theoretical differences between them this divergence reveals.

## 2. Voegelin as Philosopher of History

Voegelin's main influence on Del Noce was in the philosophy of history, and in particular his view that "Gnosis" is a characteristic feature of modernity. There were profound changes in Voegelin's conception of history and also of Gnosis after its first formulation in *The Political Religions* (1938) and later in *The Ecumenic Age* (1974). A faithful mirror of this intricate process can be seen in the various drafts of the *History of Political Ideas*. Voegelin began this work in 1939 with the intention of writing a simple textbook for undergraduates.<sup>3</sup> The work grew and developed over many years as he planned and reworked it and negotiated with one publisher after another, but was never completed. His thesis on Gnosis, which Voegelin still maintained in the 1960s, was progressively abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of the *History of Political Ideas* on Del Noce's thought stems from the central phase of Voegelin's work on the book, which extends from 1952—when he published his most famous book, *The New Science of Politics*—through the years 1956–57, when the first three volumes of *Order and History* appeared, and up until 1958, the year in which Voegelin held his inaugural lecture "Science, Politics and Gnosticism" at the University of Munich, following his return from the United States to Europe. To these works we can add the excerpts from his *History of Political Ideas* that were published during these years, and "Apocalissi e Rivoluzione" [Apocalypse and revolution], a lecture he gave at a conference at the Chamber of Commerce of Milan in 1967, and which was later published.<sup>5</sup>

In pursuing the question of Voegelin's influence on Del Noce, we must first consider what motivated Voegelin's reflections on "modernity." The fundamental experience that spurred his reflections was the advent of National Socialism and, in particular, the *Anschluss*, the German annexation of Austria. In his *Autobiographical Reflections*

Voegelin relates how in 1938 he only managed to escape the Gestapo in Vienna by sheer luck.<sup>6</sup> In the same year, he published the short work, *The Political Religions*, in which he defined National Socialism as a “political religion” and as a “satanical” phenomenon. A political religion, he argues, evokes feelings of a religious type, such as complete commitment and devotion which instead of being directed to God are directed to an “inner-worldly” reality, and in this case to a so-called race. Religion arises from what Voegelin calls—perhaps following Kierkegaard—a “feeling” that emerges from the “condition of creatureliness.”<sup>7</sup> Such a feeling can have as its object a divine transcendent reality and is then a transcendent religion; or, as in the case of National Socialism, it can find its *ens realissimum* “in the world” and thus constitutes an “inner-worldly” religion.

The problem of modernity emerges from the question of what made it possible for a phenomenon such as Nazism to develop in a civilized European society. Voegelin’s idea of modernity grew out of his reflections on this question. What is ‘modernity’? Evidently the theme is complex.<sup>8</sup> To approach it, we must keep in mind Max Weber’s view that modernity is the realization of a process of rationalization and “disenchantment.” For Voegelin modernity revealed an unavoidable grey area: the impoverishment of the idea of humankind and their relationship with the divine. For this reason, he defined modernity as a “spiritual pathology.”

Voegelin’s *History of Political Ideas* thus examines the nature of modernity and how it came into being.<sup>9</sup> The decisive step in its development was the humanist moment in which the human being became the center of the world. With this step, the process of “worldliness” begins. Its paradigmatic figure is Machiavelli (1469–1527),<sup>10</sup> the principal concepts of whose thought are “fama” (fame), “honor of the world,” and “virtue,” as the Florentine State Minister understood it, and “success.” What this means is clearly shown in Voegelin’s interpretation of Machiavelli’s *Vita di Castruccio Castracani* (*The Life of Castruccio Castracani*). Machiavelli, he writes, “has used the well-known facts of Castruccio’s life most cavalierly—selecting some, omitting others, and inventing a good deal.”<sup>11</sup> The reality, in fact, is the result of the use of specific “criteria of selection” that must be assumed in order to single out the seemingly significant aspects. Here is a central point that is further developed in Voegelin’s philosophy: reflection on the philosophical premises of the scientific approach to politics. The analysis of the “criterion of relevance”—the principle that presides over the selection of the facts that are considered significant—reveals that it cannot be an objective criterion. This is so because for the observer there can be no Archimedean point outside of the actual political reality. The criterion of relevance is therefore the result of a choice, not always entirely conscious, that is influenced by multiple factors: cultural, experiential, moral, and ethical. For Machiavelli the “real truth of a matter” is the effectiveness of an action. Truth is completely subordinated to power, and the political order springs from the will of the ruler or Prince. Machiavelli thus inaugurates a philosophical-political tradition of positivist political scientists whose thought follows his example. The political scientists who are indebted to the tradition of positivism, even “respectable scholars” who “have invested an immense erudition into the digestion of historical materials,” have wasted their time, according to Voegelin, “because their principles of selection and interpretation had no proper theoretical foundation but derived from the Zeitgeist, political preferences, or personal idiosyncrasies” (*New Science of Politics*, 95). The result, according to Voegelin, is a reduction of both the idea of the human being and the perception of reality.

The philosophical turn from the relationship between humans and God to their relationship with the reality of the world creates the conditions for the rise of “modern Gnosis.” According to Voegelin, “Gnosis” is characterized by a particular “spiritual structure” that is centered on the idea that humans are capable of saving themselves by eliminating evil. Self-salvation can be thought of in many ways: as scientific progress that solves all problems, as technical progress in the form of possible future societies such as a communist, liberal, or democratic society. These conceptions have one thing in common: in their idea of the future they imply that salvation is something that takes place in time. In other words, that time has a direction and that history is moving toward a final perfection.

The shift of the “ultimate end” from the vertical relationship of human beings to God to the horizontal plane of historical time finds expression in two paradigmatic historical figures, St. Augustine (354–430) and Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202). For Augustine time represents transience, the fragility of the world and temporal things, and the burden of mortality. In this conception, the eternity of God is conceived as an atemporal “now and always,” while time has a lower ontological rank. Joachim of Fiore, the twelfth-century Calabrian theologian, abbot, and writer, breaks with the Augustinian conception and draws the Trinitarian idea (a central theme in Augustine’s works) into time. As Voegelin explains in *The New Science of Politics*, Joachim imagines an Age of the Father, the past age of the Old Testament and Israel; the Age of the Son, the time of the Church, which is the present age; and, finally, the age of the Holy Spirit that will emerge in the future (178). This age will be marked by the rise of universal monasticism and there will no longer be a need for the Church. This notion gave rise to the idea of a *teleological* development, a movement of improvement that unfolds in history. All the concepts of history that are inspired by the idea of progress in the form of a linear unfolding of history towards a final end stem, according to Voegelin, from Joachim’s ideas (179). These ideas preserve the teleological structure of faith but empty it of theological content and replace it with secular content. In other words: all such forms *immanentize* the Christian eschaton. It is for this reason that Voegelin speaks of secularization, drawing on the theses already formulated by Jakob Taubes and Karl Löwith.

In sum, it is clear that the idea of history is crucial to Voegelin’s philosophy. Firstly because it is the field of *anamnesis*, by means of which one develops the “diagnosis” of the modern as “pneumopathology,” as a spiritual illness that plagues the contemporary world. Secondly because after Joachim, history becomes a symbol through which a society interprets itself and in which political power finds its legitimation. As Voegelin puts it in *The New Science of Politics*: “In his Trinitarian eschatology Joachim created the aggregate of symbols that govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day” (179). That symbols help to create political order demonstrates that their use is linked to the future liberation and salvation posited for example by the Third Reich, Communism, and the ideologies of all other linear conceptions of history that build upon a scientific, positivist, or progressive basis. Since symbols are a part of political reality, history is not an object that can be studied with the methods inspired by the natural sciences and intended for the study of objects in the space-time continuum. Indeed, Voegelin’s Introduction to *The New Science of Politics* is entirely devoted to his criticism of the “scientific” methods based on the natural sciences, since they are inadequate for the study and understanding of political reality. But since a theory of politics must also be

a theory of history, history is a field that needs to be critically founded on principles of interpretation that only philosophy can supply (88).

### 3. Del Noce and History

Augusto Del Noce shares two theses with Voegelin. The first is the idea that history has philosophical depth, and therefore its study cannot be left to historians or “sociologists of history” alone. History, in short, cannot be treated merely as an “object” of science. The pretension of “modern thought” to make history an object of scientific investigation must be rejected because history cannot be removed or separated from the context of a philosophy of history.<sup>12</sup> Instead, one must—in Voegelin’s words—proceed with a work of *anamnesis*: the “recollection” of the philosophical path that leads to modernity and to the alleged “scientific” approach to history itself. The second thesis is related to the first. According to Del Noce, research on the philosophical nature of history reveals the close connection between contemporary philosophy and contemporary politics: “on the one hand contemporary history is philosophical history, on the other hand we cannot speak of contemporary philosophy without including the study of contemporary political reality.”<sup>13</sup> History is a field of interpretation that needs philosophical categories. Thus philosophy is the conceptual understanding of its own time and also the criticism of its own time. Philosophical and conceptual transformations are factors that give rise to political events, as can be seen, for example, in the rise of totalitarianism.<sup>14</sup> History is therefore an integral part of political reality. Del Noce adopts this thesis and regards it as one of Voegelin’s most original contributions to the philosophy of history that sets it apart from previous theories such as Karl Löwith’s.<sup>15</sup>

The importance of this point is palpable in Del Noce’s interpretation of Fascism and the place this ideology occupies in his thought. He argues that Mussolini cannot be understood without considering both Marxism and Giovanni Gentile’s philosophy. Nazi totalitarianism would be misunderstood unless one takes into account the nihilist background that developed in German philosophy up to the time of Nietzsche. Interpretations of Fascism also reveal that, with regard to historical criticism, there is a fundamental interweaving of philosophical categories and history. Starting with the analysis of Fascism presented by Ernst Nolte and Renzo de Felice, Del Noce examines both the liberal and Marxist historiography of Fascism. He points out that although the two historians differ in many ways, they agree in considering Fascism a contingent historical phenomenon that would have inevitably been rejected and defeated in the course of time. In this Del Noce sees the re-emergence of the Enlightenment vision of history characterized by the idea of progress. The same idea is also held by those who interpret Fascism as a “reactionary” phenomenon—even by those who consider themselves reactionary.<sup>16</sup> All of these interpretations are based on “weighty” assumptions that are taken at face value without critical evaluation. They are posited as truths that remain outside the theoretical discussion. The idea of a necessarily progressive historical development is tacitly and universally shared as though it were a “fact.” However, in reality it is a position based on specific theoretical preconditions. The echoes of Voegelin’s theory can be heard here, and indeed his theory plays a decisive role in Del Noce’s interpretation of Fascism and anti-Fascism.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Modernity as a Spiritual Crisis

The anamnesis of Western philosophy and culture sheds light on these kind of assumptions on the contingency of historical phenomena. According to Del Noce, the philosophical analysis of modernity reveals that Fascism and totalitarianism cannot be considered as contingent phenomena that are destined to be overcome automatically in the course of history. Fascism is the final development of a long historical process that has affected European culture and philosophy since 1600. And it is also part of present-day political reality.

This explains why the anamnesis of culture leads to an understanding of the new forms of Fascism that Del Noce identifies in today's affluent consumerist Western society. In this regard, his criticism goes far beyond Voegelin's and takes on Pasolinian tones, for he was particularly responsive to the movements of the 1960s. His many articles on the subject—and on the signs of the new form of Fascism—were published in his 1970 book *The Age of Secularization*, in which his interpretation of the works of Herbert Marcuse, an idol of the young protesters, is particularly significant. According to Del Noce, despite Marcuse's critique of the technological society, he never really grasped the philosophical and cultural origins of the kind of alienation it produced. This is why Marcuse's vision of the liberation from the oppression of technological society remains "a vague utopia about the rehabilitation of instincts and the reconciliation of reason and meaning." What is missing in this vision is a serious analysis of the cultural anamnesis of modernity. For this reason, "liberation," with a certain heterogeneity of ends, leads to forms of "negativism and anarchy." And these, according to Del Noce, characterize the first phase of Fascism: "An indeterminate will, the right to power that is accorded to youth because it represents life, [constitutes] ... negativism and activism, anti-intellectualism" and seeks a return to a bookish culture and the "myth of the new at all costs." The passage to freedom, according to Marcuse, takes place by eliminating the repression of instincts and unleashing the "primeval forces" that abolish the condition of productive repression. However, according to Del Noce, this "liberation" leads to consumerism and the dissolution of the subject through the plastic and protean expression of changing desires, which "is the full realization of the bourgeois (consumerist) subject in the 'affluent society'."<sup>18</sup> In view of current expressions of this kind of freedom, as aptly described by Mario Perniola,<sup>19</sup> neither Pasolini nor Del Noce realized just how penetrating their own analysis was.

Although Del Noce goes further than Voegelin with regard to the dynamics of the new Fascism (as he defines it), it is in the anamnesis of a "diseased" philosophy and culture that his analysis meets Voegelin's. For both thinkers, modernity is the expression of a loss and thus constitutes a "crisis." In his Introduction to the Italian translation of Voegelin's *New Science of Politics*, Del Noce defines "modernity" as the process of liberation from the supernatural dimension, and he advances this atheistic "hypothesis" in *The Problem of Atheism*.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary history, he argues, is nothing but the "expansion of atheism,"<sup>21</sup> which means, for Del Noce, the loss of transcendence, the reduction of human nature to a purely inner-worldly reality, and the substitution of the Christian eschaton—the supernatural destiny of mankind according to Augustine—with a worldly eschaton. Finally, modernity is characterized by the belief that mankind will realize itself in the course of history. These are, according to Del Noce, the main characteristics of modernity, and this is

exactly what Voegelin defines as “modern Gnosis,” a concept adopted by Del Noce and used in a lecture he gave in the early 1980s.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. The Crisis of Modernity: Marxism and Gentile’s “Actual Idealism”

Del Noce was particularly drawn to the Voegelinian analysis of the crisis of modernity on account of his own personal political-philosophical context. I refer, in particular, to the problem of Fascism and above all to the relationship he identified between Marxism and the notion of ‘actual Idealism’ developed by the most important theorist of Fascism, Giovanni Gentile. His “actual” idealism or “actualism” was an attempt to integrate the consciousness of experience with its contents in the “pure act of thought,” thereby abolishing the distinction between theory and practice. According to Del Noce, it was the debate about Marxism that took place in Italy from 1895 to 1900 that demonstrated the deep relationship between the two ideologies, Marxism and Fascism.

The debate highlighted the irremediable contradiction within Marxism between historical materialism and dialectical materialism: two different and incompatible principles with different theoretical results.<sup>23</sup> Historical materialism results in relativism: for ideas and theories, culture and ideology, are dependent on the changing relations of production. In this there is no criterion for truth. Historical materialism thus leads to the “total relativism” that we see in Western society today and that gives rise to what Del Noce calls “sociologism,” which asserts that the categories of thought are constructed by the existing social and political conditions.<sup>24</sup> What we call *postmodernism* is thus a form of this relativism.

Dialectical materialism, on the other hand, refers to the revolutionary principle. If we separate it from historical materialism, it is devoid of content and the dialectical movement is empty. The term Del Noce proposes for this form of materialism is “relativistic millenarianism,” which refers to the pointless messianic waiting for the cathartic moment of revolution. He describes this empty dialectical principle as “purely negative.” Now, this idea of “pure negativity” is precisely what emerged in the Italian debate from 1895 to 1900 on Marxism. Starting from the interpretation of Marxism as a “philosophy of praxis,” an “activist” line developed, which according to Del Noce led to Gentile’s “actual Idealism.” In *L’interpretazione transpolitica*, he points out that Gentile was one of the protagonists of this controversy. That Gentile wrote *The Philosophy of Marx* in 1899 was certainly not accidental. In many respects his notion of “actual idealism” owes a greater debt to the “philosophy of praxis” as it is particularly linked to Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” Thus the idea of “praxis” becomes an absolute and turns into pure “action.” In Del Noce’s view, this absolutization of action without content is the unavoidable outcome of dialectical materialism and of Marxism in general: Actual idealism, he writes, is “the most radical development of an aspect of Marxist philosophical thought.”<sup>25</sup> And he concludes that a direct line leads from Gentile to Mussolini, whose socialist origins more or less constitute the “natural” premise for subsequent (fascist) developments.<sup>26</sup> Mussolini is to Gentile what Lenin is to Marx.

The interpretation of Fascism as the consequence of Marxism is the key to Del Noce’s explication of the “new Fascism,” since the main feature of Fascism is the revolutionary principle, which is understood as being “purely negative.” Ultimately, it is because the

“negative” principle cannot be overcome that it reappears in ever new versions. The student protest movements of the 1960s was for Del Noce a clear example of the “purely negative,” and was therefore not a liberation movement but merely one authentic realization of Gentile’s actualism: in other words, it was a new form of Fascism. From this point of view, the fault line that divides Italian intellectuals and politicians into fascist and antifascist is only apparent—a superficial cliché that does not grasp the nature of the problem: to see Fascism only in relation to the age of Mussolini prevents us from understanding its true nature. Mussolini’s Fascism cannot return, but new forms of Fascism can.

## 6. The *eidos* of History

Leaving aside the question whether Del Noce’s interpretation of the Marxist controversy is correct or not, its significance lies in the distinction it leads him to make between revolution and transformation. More specifically, the conclusion he reaches is directly opposed to Voegelin’s central claims on the philosophy of history, at least at the stage of Voegelin’s thinking we have been considering. As noted earlier, Del Noce argues in *L’interpretazione transpolitica* that because of its activist nature, Marxism brings forth a concept of revolution that throws “every value that is thought of as absolute and eternal” into crisis. It presents itself as “totally different” and therefore as “purely negative.” To this notion of revolution, Del Noce opposes the idea of transformation which he defines as follows: “when we speak of transformation we do not exclude, indeed we admit, that something remains in the process of changing.” What remains is the “form,” as the word itself—*trans-form* suggests. Del Noce explicitly refers to Aristotle at this point: “in the change of form there is something that does not change, a substance that underlies the previous form and also the next, and newest in which things appear.”<sup>27</sup> Revolution, he concludes, is not *trans-formation* and is therefore formless.

Voegelin views the matter differently. As he writes in *The New Science of Politics*, the problem of the *eidos* of history is a theoretical error that arises from the Joachitic immanentization of the meaning of transcendental history (185). For both Plato and Aristotle history moved in cycles as it did not have a direction or a destination. For Voegelin the concept of historical cycles is the ground on which to further develop his concept of the *eidos* of history. Thus for him the polis has an *eidos*. Indeed, its actualization is governed by the rhythm of growth and decay: the “essence” is embodied and is disembodied rhythmically. But the idea of an *eidos* of history also has other roots. The speculation about the End of History “in the sense of an intelligible sense of perfection” (184) is a Jewish-Christian discovery of a millenarian character. Saint Augustine broke definitively with Jewish messianism. He distinguished between a sacred history that culminated in the appearance of Christ and the establishment of the Church, and a profane history in which empires rise and fall. He does not accord any importance to profane history, for it is only transcendental history that has a direction towards eschatological fulfillment. Thus “there is no *eidos* of history, because the eschatological supernatural is not a nature in the philosophical, immanent sense.” Voegelin explains: “The problem of *eidos* of history, hence, arises only when Christian transcendental fulfillment becomes immanentized,” and a symbol of faith is treated as a proposition relating to an object of experience. Voegelin then concludes: “History has no *eidos* because the course of history extends into an unknown future” (185). The most conspicuous result achieved



by Augustine is precisely the distinction between a sacred history endowed with a supernatural end and a profane history without direction or end. In the separation of the sacred and the worldly sphere, the latter is completely de-divinized.

This difference between Voegelin's and Del Noce's understanding of history is by no means negligible. It points to their deep-seated theoretical differences on nothing less than the question of the relationship of mankind to God and the tension between the creature and the creator—the very relationship that has been overshadowed by the advent of modernity. For Voegelin, Christianity is the religion of uncertainty: “When the world is de-divinized, communication with the world-transcendent God is reduced to the tenuous bond of faith, in the sense of *Hebr.* II:1, as the substance of things hoped for and the proof of things unseen” (187). Uncertainty reflects the experience of “the life of the soul in openness toward God, the waiting, the periods of aridity and dullness, guilt and despondency, contrition and repentance, forsakenness and hope against hope, the silent stirrings of love and grace” (187–88). The symbolic expressions of the divine are not limited to those that flow from this experience in the Gospel (the Bible). Experiences of the divine also include the classical *noesis*, Plato's *periagogé*, the movement of turning around and beginning the ascent to light described in the Myth of the Cave, and events outside Western culture. Genuine spiritual experiences are expressed in symbols, and as crystallizations of experience they should not be dogmatized. They are “signs” left by great men that show us ways in which we can access these experiences that we cannot see—experiences of the relationship to the Ground, experiences of being dragged up by force. One can interpret the symbols only in light of the experiences that generate them: the tension experienced by being violently attracted towards God. The succession of these experiences shapes history by giving it a meaning that nevertheless remains mysterious: a meaning *in* history that can never become a meaning *of* history.

For Del Noce, in contrast, the supernatural is not reducible to experience. It shows a structure that finds expression in the Logos. We can find it in the famous beginning of the Prologue of the Gospel of John but also in the Patristics and Christian theology, and in the writings of the nineteenth-century Italian priest Antonio Rosmini. Del Noce defines the supernatural as the “Order of being, that is, what Augustine calls *'dispositivo plurimum secundum inferius et superius'*. That is, the hierarchy of the better and the best. The primacy of order, the primacy of the immutable, and the primacy of intellectual intuition, form a necessary sequence in classical morality.”<sup>28</sup>

## 7. Ancient and Modern Gnosticism

Keeping these differences in mind, we can understand why Del Noce does not agree with Voegelin's concept of Gnosis. While sharing with him the interpretation of modernity as a “modern Gnosticism” centered on the idea that humans can redeem themselves and thereby attribute to themselves a creative power, Del Noce raises doubts about the link between ancient and modern Gnosticism, as we read in his Introduction to the Italian translation of *The New Science of Politics*. He emphasizes that ancient Gnosis has a pessimistic philosophical attitude and searches for the rules that can free the soul from the world. On the one hand, the ancient Gnosis believes that the world is in itself irrecoverably evil, yet on the other hand it expresses an elitist bias.<sup>29</sup> Modern Gnosticism is rather optimistic and not elitist. It entrusts history with the task of expelling evil from the

world, and it appeals to the masses. Thus according to Del Noce, Voegelin failed to take into account the fundamental difference between ancient and modern Gnosis: namely, that ancient Gnosis aimed to be an “expression of truth,” while modern Gnosis arose in response to a “practical need.”<sup>30</sup> This important difference precludes any talk of the development of one form of Gnosis into another. Undoubtedly, Del Noce identified a crucial lacuna in *The New Science of Politics* where the theme of “ancient Gnosticism” is not developed at all. Voegelin does not quote any text of ancient Gnosticism nor does he engage in any critical work of his own on ancient Gnosis. Indeed, it is only in his later works that he develops the idea that the main trait of Gnosticism was its pessimism and need to escape from the world.<sup>31</sup> Still, we can find some anticipations of this view in his earlier thought. In reality Voegelin’s intention was not to compare ancient and modern Gnosis but to provide an interpretative key to modernity with the concept of Gnosis: He took the term from Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*—a work written about ten years before the Nag Hammadi’s codices (i.e., “Gnostic Gospels”) were found in 1945.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of Del Noce’s critique is that it highlights the specificity of his analysis of modernity based on an Italian philosophical perspective which he articulated with the help of Voegelin’s theory. Yet although Voegelin’s theory of the relationship between ancient and modern Gnosis provides the key for the interpretation of the activist character of the spirit of modernity, modern Gnosis nevertheless stands in contrast to the passive pessimism of ancient Gnosis.

For Del Noce, however, the path that leads from Marxism to the new Fascism—the protest without content—is an epiphenomenon of a new actual idealism and is the result of “modern Gnosis.” The examination of ancient Gnosis not only helps to point out the “practical” activist character of modern Gnosis, but more importantly, the discussion of the relationship between ancient and modern Gnosis points to the relationship between faith and reason.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, the problem of the difference between ancient and modern Gnosis is crucial, for the lack of any distinction between them leads to the rejection of Gnosis as an anti-Christian philosophy. Del Noce, with a rather conspicuous digression in his short Introduction, analyzes two examples of this reduction: the position of Claude Tresmontant, a follower of Teilhard de Chardin, and that of Roger Garaudy, a representative of “dialogical Marxism.” Both of these thinkers try to make Christianity compatible with their own philosophical conception, that is, with evolutionism and Marxism. According to Del Noce, both conceptions are completely incompatible with Christianity. For, in trying to make evolutionism and Marxism compatible with Christianity, they have to reject Christian Gnosticism, which Del Noce defines not in terms of contempt for the world but as a “constant metaphysical structure.”<sup>34</sup> He argues that there is a fundamental Christian truth in ancient Gnosis. If we forget it we will fall into the error of Modernism. The metaphysical structure, the “*dispositivo plurimum secundum inferius et superius*,” is the bridge between reason and faith. Here we find the most significant difference between Voegelin and Del Noce: for Del Noce faith is *not* an experience. We cannot describe it in terms of an existential relationship between two poles, such as immanence and transcendence, finitude and infinity, imperfection and perfection, the human being and the “divine ground,” as Voegelin does. For Del Noce faith is not only an existential relationship between a human being and God, which could also be a relationship of dependence in which one has an arbitrary will (God) and the other an

obedient will (human being); for him faith embraces the metaphysical structure of the supernatural. This metaphysical structure makes it possible to take up the legacy of Greek thought as the Fathers of the Church did.

It is thus by taking into account the interweaving of faith and reason that we can understand what Del Noce means when he writes that history has a form: He means a metaphysical structure that nurtures history because it reveals itself in time, the time of conversion, of searching, of intellectual intuition, discovery and vision. This metaphysical structure, however, does not develop in time, because history itself is not revelatory.

## 8. Transcendence and Experience

The difference between the Voegelinian notion of experience and Del Noce's idea of metaphysical order gives rise to two different concepts of the *eidōs* of history and reflects a different interpretation of metaphysics. According to Del Noce, metaphysics expresses the priority of being over becoming, the stability of being on which the unity of classical philosophy and the Catholic faith are based, as well as the unity of faith and reason.<sup>35</sup> According to Voegelin, in contrast, metaphysics is the expression of a dogmatic fixity, a conceptual crystallization that deforms and hides the original experience from which it originates and to which it must be led back.

However, this difference should not be overestimated. The clearest proof of this is the way both thinkers describe the relationship between mankind and transcendence. According to Del Noce, the metaphysical structure of being is not revealed abstractly. In his comments on the outdatedness of the metaphysics of being in "L'inattualità della metafisica dell'essere" (1948), he criticizes the basic presentation of St. Thomas's philosophy, according to which "problems" are placed before thinkers as objects of reflection, and the personal, subjective aspect is reduced to a merely psychological factor. Del Noce calls this "eternalism": "The eternal," he writes, "cannot be confused with that pseudo-eternal which is the abstract." It is necessary, instead, to take into consideration the novelty of each individual, because "the eternal reveals itself in an always new, original, unpredictable way just as new, original, and unpredictable is the person of the questioner." When the metaphysics of being replaces the concrete self with the category 'man', it replaces being with the idea of being.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, philosophy is the exclusive result of individual research, attention and intuition, and each philosopher marks an absolute beginning in human history.

On the other hand, according to Voegelin metaphysics must be linked to the experience from which it flows, yet this neither means that experience is a generic fusion or confusion between human and divine, between transcendence and immanence, nor that experience is something psychological or subjective. The transcendent experience has a precise structure that classical philosophy has revealed. Plato was the first to show it, Aristotle provided a detailed analysis of it in his *Metaphysics*, and the same structure was later articulated by Marsilio Ficino, Jean Bodin and many others.<sup>37</sup> It is found, renewed and perfected as spiritual experience in the Gospel. The objective structure of the relationship between mankind and transcendence is as follows: on one side there is a human being who has an existential tense attraction towards God; on the other, there is a God who attracts the human being who thus participates in divine reality without it ever becoming an absolute possession. The balance between these two poles shall be maintained;

human beings participate in divine reality without appropriating or eliminating it. However, the existence of an objective structure does not mean that the two poles can be analyzed as objects of scientific investigation. Voegelin describes the experience as a movement of the soul culminating in an act of transcendence in which God and the human being are constituted as persons facing each other.<sup>38</sup> The soul is “the site of the meeting” and God is experienced by the soul as the presence of a Beyond. Thus experience is not subjective in the sense that a “subject” has experienced something that has to be considered as its “object.” The experience is an ontic event, perfectly described by Paul (Heb. II:1) as an adventure of the spirit in the realm of existential uncertainty.<sup>39</sup> It is an event which reveals the truth of order with obligatory force to every human being.<sup>40</sup> When the memory of this experience is lost, the symbols expressing it degenerate and transform into concepts of dogmatic metaphysics.

The strong relationship between metaphysics and the concrete self is explored in greater depth in *Notes on Western Irreligion* (1963), where Del Noce defines transcendence in a manner very similar to that of Voegelin. He writes: “In the act of bringing his hands together, the religious subject demonstrates by his gesture that there is nothing to be done, nothing to change, but simply that he is coming to make an offer of himself, and this is truly the sentiment of the sacred in which respect, fear and love come together. If the word ‘transcendent’ means anything, it is precisely this: it denotes exactly that sort of absolute and impassable gap that opens up between the soul and being because the latter escapes the grasp of the former.”<sup>41</sup>

When faced with this boundary, however, it is Voegelin who stops short, not Del Noce. For him the experience of tension with the transcendent and its articulation are not the main discoveries of classical philosophy as argued by Voegelin in his interpretation of the noetic experience. In Del Noce’s view, one of the greatest discoveries of classical philosophy was the principle of evidence, “understood not as a force that constrains but as light that illuminates. It is necessary and does rule out its opposite, but without forcing the intellect.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus for Del Noce what classical philosophy discovered was not the noetic experience that eternally springs from the relationship of humans with transcendence. Rather, the relationship between the concrete self and order is based on an ontology of necessity,<sup>43</sup> whose metaphysical character is the evidence, while the principle of non-contradiction has an ontological value. Del Noce writes: “The metahistorical and super human nature of the truth implies that its fixity includes the aspect of being ulterior to every possible way of expressing it.”<sup>44</sup>

The idea of the fixity of truth and the logical structure of metaphysics marks an important difference between Del Noce’s and Voegelin’s idea of transcendence. However, in Del Noce’s opinion, evidence and metaphysical order need a very personal and concrete experience to be discovered and understood.

## 9. Conclusion

As noted earlier, Voegelin’s thought was a constant reference point for Augusto Del Noce. He shared Voegelin’s view that the study of history requires a philosophical, not a scientific, approach. The philosophical approach to history led both thinkers to a critical view of modernity especially regarding its loss of a religious horizon. For

Voegelin this was the loss of transcendence and a “reduction” of reality to the sole reality of the world; for Del Noce it was the rise of atheism. Del Noce also adopted Voegelin’s idea of modern Gnosticism according to which humans can realize their self-redemption by imagining salvation in immanence and projecting it into a historical future.

Del Noce commended Voegelin for highlighting the political implications of thought, which is not only a reflection on but also an integral part of political reality itself. His use of this idea led Del Noce to address the issue of Fascism (and new Fascism) from an original philosophical perspective. He interpreted Fascism in light of the Italian debate on Marxism at the turn of the twentieth century, which revealed the contradiction between the two principles of Marxism, historical materialism and dialectical materialism. The former leads to relativism, while the latter to empty activism. The “activist” interpretation of modern Gnosis led Del Noce to positions that contrast with those of Voegelin regarding the philosophy of history and, more deeply, to their differences on metaphysics. Their opposing interpretations of the *eidos* of history and Del Noce’s criticism of Voegelin’s failure to distinguish between ancient and modern Gnosis reveal their different ideas of transcendence. While for Voegelin it is an experience marked by uncertainty, for Del Noce it discloses a certain metaphysical order. And yet, the metaphysics theorized by Del Noce on the one hand, and the objective structure of the existential tension towards transcendence proposed by Voegelin on the other, contribute to a substantial decrease in the distance between these two original critics of Modernity.

## Notes

1. See Duso and Chignola, “Die Rezeption Voegelins in Italien”; Thomassen and Forlenza, “Voegelin’s Impact on the Italian Response”; Lagi and Rosboch, *Quale modernità*.
2. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 186. Hereafter page references to this work are cited in the text.
3. Opitz, “Zur genesis und Gestalt,” 258.
4. Opitz, “Die Gnosis-These,” 7ff.
5. Voegelin, *Machiavelli’s Prince*; Voegelin, “Apocalissi e Rivoluzione.”
6. Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, 71.
7. Voegelin, *The Political Religions*, 31.
8. Hollweck, *Wie legitim ist die Moderne*, 5ff.
9. The reconstruction of political thought in Voegelin’s *History of Political Ideas* is centered precisely on the spiritual crisis from which the “modern” springs. Peter Opitz writes: “They deal (the three volumes on the modern world of History) with the relationship between religion and politics and the emergence of an inner-worldly religiosity within the framework of Western civilization. Of particular value is the very extensive and decisive part of the *History*, produced between 1944 and 1948, which in the *Collected Works* was published under the title *Crisis and the Apocalypse of Man*. Its theme is the spiritual crisis of the Western world, which Voegelin first dealt with in his 1938 essay “Political Religions.” Opitz, *Vorwort des Herausgebers* in Voegelin, *Die Krise*, 16 (my translation).
10. The analysis of Machiavelli’s thought in Voegelin’s *History of Political Ideas* was revised and published in 1951 under the title, *Machiavelli’s Prince: Background and Formation*.
11. Voegelin, “Order of Power: Machiavelli,” 57.
12. Del Noce, *Notes on Western Irreligion*, 271.
13. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 169.
14. Del Noce, “Eric Voegelin and the Critique,” 287.

15. Ibid., 293: "The influence of Joachimite thought is very well known. On this topic, Löwith's book about the theological origins of the philosophy of history has been one of the most widely read books in history of philosophy of the last few years. However, Voegelin's viewpoint is completely different and leads, or at least opens the way, to completely different results. Indeed, his research is not primarily about philosophy of history but about modern political societies."
16. Ibid., 289, 288.
17. The interpretation of anti-Fascism as a covert form of Fascism is one of the most important issues for Del Noce. See Del Noce, *Antifascismo*, 295.
18. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 28, 29, 16.
19. See Perniola, *Berlusconi o il 68 realizzato*.
20. Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism*, 321.
21. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 238.
22. Del Noce, *L'interpretazione transpolitica*, 20.
23. Del Noce's in-depth analysis of these two principles, complemented by the juxtaposition of Marx and Engels, appears in "Marx's 'Non-Philosophy' and Communism as a Political Reality" (1946), in *The Problem of Atheism*, 169.
24. Del Noce writes in *The Age of Secularization*, 169: "Mere historical materialism would lead to a doctrine of complete relativism, to a reduction of all world views to expressions as instruments of the power of social groups, without making an exception for the Marxist conception itself, which instead claims to be true and cannot act as a revolutionary force without being perceived as true. Now, these two aspects tend to break apart from each other when they reach their most radical form. The first must turn into sociology. As for the most complete extension of the dialectical aspect of Marxism, separated from materialism, I believe it already happened, and it manifested itself in philosophical form in Actualism."
25. Del Noce, *L'interpretazione transpolitica*, 30.
26. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 101ff.
27. Del Noce, *L'interpretazione transpolitica*, 21, 19.
28. Del Noce, *The Age of Secularization*, 156.
29. Del Noce, "Eric Voegelin and the Critique," 295.
30. Ibid., 297.
31. Voegelin, "Apocalissi e Rivoluzione," 124.
32. Parotto, *Zum Einfluss*, 25ff.
33. Del Noce, *Revolution, Risorgimento, Tradition*, 58.
34. Del Noce, "Eric Voegelin and the Critique," 298.
35. Del Noce, *Revolution, Risorgimento, Tradition*, 58.
36. Del Noce, "L'inattualità della metafisica dell'essere," 367, 368.
37. Voegelin, *Anamnesis*, 393ff.
38. Voegelin, *What Is History*, 21.
39. Ibid., 69.
40. Ibid., "This additional factor that makes the experience historically relevant is the truth of order that it reveals with obligatory force for every man," 48.
41. Del Noce, *Notes on Western Irreligion*, 253.
42. Del Noce, "Authority versus Power," 195.
43. Del Noce, "L'inattualità della metafisica dell'essere," 367.
44. Del Noce, "Eric Voegelin and the Critique," 196.

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## Notes on contributor

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