The Influence of Alfred North Whitehead on Eric Voegelin

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In considering the influence of some ideas developed by the philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead on the thought of Eric Voegelin (the German political philosopher and political scientist migrated to the United States in 1938), I believe that such a relationship represents an interesting subject of analysis from the point of view of the history of ideas. The trajectory of their continuity and the depth plumbed through the speculation of two different thinkers devoted to different topics shows that the value of crucial intuitions cannot be confined to a single discipline; rather, an assessment of their intellectual path manifests its universality in creating and re-creating cultural perspectives able to offer a meaningful interpretation of reality both from a philosophical and from a historical point of view.

In pursuing this task, I am far from pretending to present a full comparison between the two thinkers; rather, my aim consists in pointing out relevant features of Whitehead’s speculation inherited and cultivated within Voegelin’s writings. This article does not attempt to present a historical analysis concerning the evolution of the thought of the two thinkers, which, I believe, considering the wide number of works written by the two authors, would appear too confused in such a limited space. For the moment, therefore, in order to highlight the influence of Whitehead upon Voegelin with enough clarity and in a synthetic way, I will use a specific criterion that consists mainly in following Voegelin’s own declarations concerning Whitehead’s philosophy. I will add my own theoretical
proposals only where it is necessary in order to better explain Voegelin’s interpretation and use of Whitehead’s concepts. This study, then, is intended to provide a basis for a larger research project: the multi-level analysis that this topic requires demonstrates the significance of such a comparison without the pretence of being anything but a preliminary suggestion for further research.

**THE GREAT BREAK**

It was the year 1924 when Voegelin—at that time Assistant in Public Law at the University of Vienna under Hans Kelsen—won a three-year Laura Spelman Rockefeller Fellowship for studying abroad. Voegelin spent the first year at Columbia University, where he attended the courses delivered by the sociologist Franklin Henry Giddings, the well-known philosophers John Dewey and Irwin Edman (both of them supervised Voegelin’s research on the history of English philosophy and its expansions into American thought; Edman moreover contributed to introduce Voegelin to the knowledge of George Santayana), the economist John Wesley, and the public administrator Arthur Whittier Macmahon. During the second year of fellowship Voegelin went to Harvard University for the first semester and to the University of Wisconsin for the second (he spent the third year of his fellowship in Paris). As Voegelin confesses in his *Autobiographical Reflections*, the two years in America caused in his “intellectual development” what he defines as “the great break.” The American intellectual world, in fact, represented a dimension he did not even suspect existed: in particular, the common sense tradition was totally absent from the Germanic world in which Voegelin grew up. Eric Voegelin initially encountered common sense philosophy through John Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), which also introduced him to the work of philosophers such as Thomas Reid and William Hamilton. This encounter with common sense philosophy gave Voegelin the impression that the characteristic philosophical background of American society was “far superior in range and existential substance” than the intellectual atmosphere characterizing the debate

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3 Ibid., 57.
between positivists, neo-Marxists, and neo-Hegelians, which was the predominant debate within Germany at the time of the Weimar Republic (a debate that Voegelin nonetheless maintained was of crucial relevance while he was writing his *Autobiographical Reflections*). Furthermore, the time spent in Wisconsin had a profound effect on Voegelin’s cultural perspective: here, in particular, he became acquainted with John Rogers Commons and he discovered what he defined as “the real, authentic America.” During this period, Voegelin began to distance his thought more and more from the neo-Kantian positivism typical of the “pure theory of law” as proposed by Kelsen: summarizing his experience in the United States, Voegelin states that “the great event was the fact of being thrown into a world for which the great neo-Kantian methodological debates, which I considered the most important things intellectually, were of no importance. . . . The priorities and relations of importance between various theories had been fundamentally changed—and, so far as I can see, changed for the better.” As Voegelin clearly states in his late *Autobiographical Statement* (1983), the years spent doing research in the United States influenced him so as to make him impervious to Heidegger’s philosophy: “he [Heidegger] did not impress me at all with *Sein und Zeit*, because in the meanwhile, with John Dewey at Columbia and with Whitehead at Harvard, I was acquainted with English and American commonsense philosophy.” In fact, between the year spent at Columbia and the semester of studies in Wisconsin, Voegelin spent a semester at Harvard where “the strongest impression . . . was the newly arrived Alfred North Whitehead” who in 1924 moved from London where he was professor of Applied Mathematics at the Imperial College of Science and Technology (an appointment that he received in 1914), having been appointed professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. In February 1925, Whitehead delivered Harvard’s prestigious Lowell Lectures, which formed the basis for his first primarily metaphysical book, *Science and the
Modern World, published in June 1925. Voegelin attended Whitehead’s lectures during the fall term (besides Roscoe Pound’s course in legal philosophy and Allyn A. Young’s seminar in economics theory).\(^{10}\) As he states in his Autobiographical Reflections, “I could understand only a very small portion of what Whitehead said in his lectures, and I had to work myself into the cultural and historical background of his book that came out at the time, The Adventures of Ideas. But it brought to my attention that there was such a background into which I had to work myself more intensely if I wanted to understand Anglo-Saxon civilisation.”\(^{11}\) As Voegelin clearly stated in a letter addressed to Eugene Webb in reply to Webb’s question regarding the thinkers who had most influenced his thought, Voegelin—after having remarked upon the crucial importance of the two years spent in America—declared that the idea of “process” present in his thought “probably comes from Whitehead—whose lectures I heard at Harvard in 1925. I am familiar with most of his work.”\(^{12}\) From Voegelin’s statements, we might infer that the main topics treated in Whitehead’s course were clearly related to the contents of Science and the Modern World (published just few months before Voegelin’s arrival at Harvard) and the main arguments which would later comprise the content of Adventures of Ideas, which, however, would not be published until 1933. From the point of view of Whitehead’s bibliography, the volumes that we should consider in order to analyze the influence of some of his relevant ideas on Voegelin’s thought are the aforementioned Science and the Modern World (1925), Process and Reality (1929, originally the course of Gifford Lectures from 1927 to 1928, in which Whitehead fully develops the metaphysical propositions partially anticipated in Science and the Modern World), and Adventures of Ideas (1933). The three books, as Whitehead himself explained to his readers, “are an endeavour to express a way of understanding the nature of things, and to point out how that way of understanding is illustrated by a survey of the mutations of human experience. Each book can be read separately; but they supplement each other’s omissions or compressions.”\(^{13}\) In addition to these books I will consider also The Function of Reason (1929), where Whitehead clarified his concept of the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

\(^{10}\) See Jürgen Gebhardt and Barry Cooper, Editors’ Introduction, in Voegelin, On the Form, xxxvi.

\(^{11}\) Voegelin, Autobiographical Reflections, 58.

\(^{12}\) Eric Voegelin, Selected Correspondence: 1950–1984, ed. T. A. Hollweck (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 822. For the concept of process, see the fourth section of this article.

Voegelin refers several times to a characteristically “Whiteheadian” idea known as “climate of opinion.” Whitehead illustrates this concept in his *Science and the Modern World*. According to Whitehead the aim of this volume does not consist in providing the reader with the details of scientific discovery; rather it consists in analyzing “the energising of a state of mind in the modern world, its broad generalizations, and its impact upon other spiritual forces.”

In particular, according to the author, there are two ways of reading history, forwards and backwards: “in the history of thought—he argues—we require both methods. A climate of opinion—to use the happy phrase of a seventeenth century writer—requires for its understanding the consideration of its antecedents and its issues.” From this perspective the series of lectures which constitutes the volume *Science and the Modern World* are aimed to illustrate how the “quiet growth of science has practically recoloured our mentality so that modes of thought which in former times were exceptional are now broadly spread through the educated world.” The mentality influenced by the growth of science—Whitehead explains—has radically affected the metaphysical perspectives of human minds with the consequence of enacting new responses in front of old problems. For instance, the dominant scientific cosmology spread in Europe during the three centuries antecedent to the publication of *Science and the Modern World* presupposed “the ultimate fact of an irreducible brute matter, or material, spread throughout space in a flux of configurations.” Matter as such was considered senseless, valueless, and purposeless, “following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being.” This perspective, according to Whitehead, even if now outdated, was in the past very successful for the progress of science as it was permitted to concentrate on “certain types of facts, abstracted from the complete circumstances in which they occur.” Accordingly, the materialistic scheme typical of modern scientific cosmology, by informing the corresponding “climate of opinion,” has deeply affected the metaphysical view of modernity. This perspective is evident in

15 Ibid., 3.
16 Ibid., 2.
17 See ibid., 2.
18 Ibid., 17.
19 Ibid., 17.
20 Ibid., 17.
the philosophy of Descartes, for whom the existence of substantial res extensa displays the same characteristics of matter presupposed by modern science (that is spatial extension) and, as its counterpart, he described the soul as res cogitans (the essence of soul is identified with its cogitations). Such a view, in turn, has had a prevailing influence upon the anthropological sciences, as the conception itself emerges from the fact that the Cartesian synthesis was the edifice upon which Berkeley, Hume, and Kant developed their systems. This exemplifies the way in which a scientific cosmology has generated a “climate of opinion” shaping the minds of generations of people and affecting their philosophical perspectives. Therefore, as a consequence of scientific cosmology’s impact within the field of philosophy, since the inception of modern philosophy, it has been occupied on one hand with psychology (identified with the study of mental functionings) and, on the other hand with epistemology (interpreted as the gnoseological theory of a common objective world).

Why has Voegelin been so inspired and affected by the notion of “climate of opinion”? Voegelin applies this concept to several subject areas as a useful conceptual key in an effort to discern an awareness of the loss of the depth of reality as well as a barometer of the sense of order’s perversion. In order to understand Voegelin’s arguments, we have to remember that at the core of his thought lies a philosophical anthropology predominantly influenced by Max Scheler (Voegelin’s reading of Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos had been decisive in his education) and by Plato (since the beginning of the forties). According to Voegelin, the human being participates in all dimensions of reality, and his or her primary characteristic consists in their openness towards transcendence (human beings originally participate in a quadrimensional space whose “vectors” of meaning are God, cosmos, society, and the same human being). For Voegelin, the most relevant existential human experiences are the experiences of creaturehood and the search for a “Ground” which starts from human contingency.

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21 See ibid., 140–48.
22 See ibid., 146.
23 Max Scheler, Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos (1928; Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1947).
24 See the letter to Leo Strauss, December 9, 1942, in Voegelin, Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949, 338–41.
destiny of human beings—both individually and communally—depends on an attitude of openness or of closure towards human ontological dimension: it is the experience of order (which has to be interpreted as the order of being and, subsequently, as the political and existential order) that urges human beings to resist what, according to Voegelin’s perspective, are the experiences of disorder and the crisis of civilization (again, I am aware of the limits of this synthesis as Voegelin has progressively modified his views concerning the “disease” of modernity, which is typical, for instance, of The Political Religions; however, I have chosen passages from The Political Religions as capable of synthetically describing a perennial concern of Voegelin, that is the human dynamic “openness” towards transcendence). From Voegelin’s standpoint, the problems of his age are considered the result of a long process, as the expression of a spiritual disease of the Western world, which consists in the attitude of retrieving the divine into inner-worldly elements: “when God is invisible behind the world,” he argues, “the contents of the world will become new gods.” By accepting this inner-worldly religiosity, human beings accept their status as instruments within a totalized system: since “the end realm is no longer a transcendent community of the spirit,” it becomes “an earthly condition of perfected humanity.” Humanity is intended as a “collective body,” “terrestrially closed,” and progresses “as a whole” wherein each individual existence must be instrumentally sacrificed towards this collective telos. According to Voegelin, the most extreme consequences of such a “new religiosity” (which, as a matter of fact, is a spiritual disease) are the tragic events that forced him and his wife to migrate to the United States in 1938. However, “the truth of order,” as Voegelin states in the preface to the five-volume

29 See Eric Voegelin, Die politischen Religionen (1938); The New Science of Politics (1952) and the posthumous fifth volume of Order and History, namely In Search of Order (1987). For more details concerning the evolution of Voegelin’s thought, see Opitz, “Alla ricerca dell’ordine.”
31 Ibid., 60.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 61.
work *Order and History*, “has to be gained and regained in the perpetual struggle against the fall from it; and the movement toward truth starts from a man’s awareness of his existence in untruth.” It is precisely within this context that Voegelin finds Whitehead’s idea of “climate” to be fertile ground: in Voegelin’s work, this concept functions as a description of a situation in which a disintegrated mentality forgets the experience of order. For instance, in his essay *On Classical Studies*, Voegelin complains about the state of fragmentation which characterizes classical studies in his time: such a situation, however, is not considered a catastrophe by his contemporaries, as Voegelin complains, because the regnant, two-hundred-year-old opinion established a mentality within classical studies where the study of human nature is broken into disparate, fragmentary disciplines such that its own tenets became unquestioned. However, not all is lost: as Voegelin maintains, climates of opinion do not endure forever precisely because the recalcitrance of human existence is transcendentally orientated and the truth of order will always re-emerge; from this perspective, the main task of philosophical research, according to Voegelin, is precisely that “of establishing islands of order in the disorder of the age.” As Voegelin reminds the reader, the expression “climate of opinion” was coined by the English writer and philosopher Joseph Glanvill (1636–80), but was further elaborated upon by Whitehead since he wrote *Science and the Modern World*. Whitehead, however, not only restored the expression, but developed an independent reflection on this idea, so that, following his initiative, as Voegelin explains: “the changes of this modern climate ever since the seventeenth century have become the subject of Basil Willey’s perceptive and extensive Background studies, beginning in 1934.” Through the initiative of Whitehead (amongst others), we know by now what the problem is, as Whitehead states it poignantly: “‘Modern philosophy has been ruined.’ More explicitly I would say: the life of reason, the ineluctable condition of personal and social order, has been destroyed.” Despite the situation

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characterizing the contemporary age, as hinted above, Voegelin argues that a climate of opinion will never alter human identity: not every person allows the “climate” to deform their nature, as human beings still struggle against the uniformity imposed by the so-called “educators” who pursue cultural and human leveling by labeling it “adjustment.” Hence, Voegelin argues, following the studies developed by Willey, the same “climate” must not be interpreted in a static way, as “through the emotionally determined constellation of opinions of the moment there is always at work the resistance of man’s nature to the climate.” Human history is thus always characterized by the development and by the decay of climates of opinion and by the corresponding acts of resistance against those climates. Placing human consciousness at the center of his philosophical reflection (intended as the reflective self-awareness of human existence in the existential tension between the poles of immanence and transcendence, finitude and infinity, imperfection and perfection), Voegelin maintains that,

as a matter of fact, neither the changes in the climate from indifference to hostility, nor the concomitant waning of institutional support for the life of reason, nor the fanatically accelerated destruction of the universities since the Second World War, could prevent the problem of the climate from being recognized, articulated, and explored in the light of our consciousness of human nature. The reflections in which we are engaged here and now are as much a fact in the contemporary situation as the notorious “climate.” The freedom of thought is coming to life again, when the “climate of opinion” is no longer a massive social reality imposing participation in its partisan struggles, but is forced into the position of a pathological deformation of existence, to be explored by the criteria of reason.

The pathological situation characterizing Western civilization and, at the same time, the capacity of the human spirit to detect the disorder of an age and to search for “truth concerning the order of being” are at the core of a paper Voegelin presented to the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

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40 Ibid.
at Tufts University in 1972 and later published as Notes on “Civilization and Foreign Affairs.” On this occasion, Voegelin recommended a series of topics which should be considered within the program of the same school. Among the relevant topics recommended, Voegelin’s attention was focused on the conflict between the “state of science” and the “climate of opinion” in contemporary Western civilization. Here Voegelin explained that the term “climate of opinion” was introduced by Whitehead to indicate “the publicly dominant mode of opining” that represents—as Voegelin could state more precisely than Whitehead in the 1920s—the tradition of movements such as revolutionary salvationism, millenarianism, utopianism, and immanentist perfection. “At the present juncture of Western civilization,” Voegelin argued, “the science of human affairs is on the point of reemerging from the period of its repression by the ‘climate of opinion.’” Voegelin states that the task of the philosopher in the twentieth century should be that of struggling against the dominant “climate of opinion” in order to retrieve the original order, which specifically gives rise to the charge that he gives to philosophy: Voegelin’s view of this task—as I will consider in the following sections of this article—shares important aspects of Whitehead’s perspective, but it also significantly diverges from the latter.

The concept of “climate,” even if Voegelin does not refer to it explicitly, can be detected in his early writings, in particular in his two books Race and State and The History of the Race Idea: From Ray to Carus, dedicated to the concept of race published in 1933 (which Voegelin began during his stay in New York in 1924–25). In these books Voegelin states that contemporary race theories (from the second half of the nineteenth century) consist in a system based on superstition, and in particular on two dogmas: the first consists in believing that the only valid scientific method is the one provided by natural sciences; the second, that science progresses steadily: what follows is a widespread acceptance of a “system of dogmas.”

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45 Ibid., 347.
46 Ibid.
47 See Voegelin, Autobiographical Reflections, 148.
on the basis of a “superstition” that comes to constitute a commonly-
accepted uncritical and prejudicial way of thinking.49 This example illus-
trates how Whitehead’s treatment of the concept of “climate” has deeply
influenced Voegelin’s philosophical perspective since its beginnings, even
where it is not specifically mentioned thematically (other examples might
be quoted, but our synthetic analysis does not permit us to focus on them).

In order to analyze Whitehead’s influence on Voegelin’s thought and to
compare their respective views, in addition to the concept of “climate” we
have now to consider a second relevant and related idea developed by
Whitehead, namely, the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness.”

THE FALLACY OF MISPLACED CONCRETENESS

As in the case of the “climate of opinion,” this concept has also been pre-
sent in Whitehead’s Science and the Modern World (even if it had been
especially introduced in some of Whitehead’s previous writings, such as
An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge, published in
1919):50 that is, while describing the scheme of scientific thought shaped by
the mathematicians of the seventeenth century, Whitehead underlines the
success, within the scientific world, of promoting a reality abstracted into,
on the one hand, a division into matter with its simple location and, on the
other hand, into mind as “perceiving, suffering, reasoning, but not inter-
fering.”51 According to Whitehead, there is a patent advantage in using
abstractions in the field of science, such as the possibility to “confine your
thoughts to clear-cut definite things, with clear-cut definite relations,”
which is the typical logical method.52 However, when this abstraction is
used outside its frame of reference (which is the world of mathematics with
its consequent implications within the world of science) and pretends to
describe reality as such, we succumb to the “error of mistaking the abstract
for the concrete”: even if “it is not necessary for the intellect to fall into the
trap,” maintains Whitehead, “... there has been a very general tendency
to do so.”53 According to Whitehead, such a mistake has ruined modern

49 See Voegelin, Race and State, 9.
50 See Victor Lowe, “The Development of Whitehead’s Philosophy,” in The Philosophy
of Alfred North Whitehead, ed. P. A. Schilpp (New York: Tudor Publishing Company,
1951), 15–124 (esp. 64).
51 Whitehead, Science, 55.
52 Ibid., 58.
53 Ibid., 51.
philosophy which, in fact, has unsuccessfully tried to overcome the dualism between matter and mind by introducing two kinds of monistic views atop this system: “those who put mind inside matter, and those who put matter inside mind.”54 However, the disadvantage of bestowing an “exclusive attention to a group of abstractions, however well-founded, is that, by the nature of the case, you have abstracted from the remainder of things. In so far as the excluded things are important in your experience, your modes of thought are not fitted to deal with them.”55 For this reason, the activity of a permanent critical revision of the modes of abstraction is crucial. This task, according to Whitehead, belongs to philosophy, which is interpreted as “the critic of abstractions”: “a civilization which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress.”56 This perspective is expressive of Whitehead’s philosophy, as it emerges not only from Science and the Modern World but also from the essay The Function of Reason57 where he argues that “science has always suffered from the vice of overstatement. In this way conclusions true within strict limitations have been generalized dogmatically into a fallacious universality.”58 Furthermore, Whitehead develops his first insights concerning the concept of “fallacy” in the volume that is considered his metaphysical masterpiece, Process and Reality: in this context the author refers to the concept of “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” for describing the chief error which can be made in philosophy, namely, overstatement. The “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” is here identified as the first form of overstatement, whereas the second form “consists in a false estimate of logical procedure in respect to certainty, and in respect to premises.”59 In this volume the “fallacy” is described as the mistake that “consists in neglecting the degree of abstraction involved when an actual entity is considered merely so far as it exemplifies certain categories of thought. There are aspects of actualities which are simply ignored so long as we restrict thought to these categories.”60 Once again, according to Whitehead, “the success of a philosophy is to be measured by its comparative avoidance of this fallacy, when thought is restricted within its categories.”61 A similar argument is developed in The Function of Reason where Whitehead explains that the task of

54 Ibid., 55.
55 Ibid., 59.
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid., 22.
59 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 8.
60 Ibid., 7–8; see also 93–94.
61 Ibid., 8.
speculative reason is that of transcending abstract theories by discerning their proper use, because “if the scheme be pressed beyond its proper scope, definite error results.”

From the standpoint of Whitehead’s reflection on the mistakes which may occur when the process of abstraction is not continuously informed and revised by a philosophical analysis, we can observe some analogies between his view of the task of philosophy and that of Voegelin’s. In our analysis, we have to notice that, whereas Whitehead is more focused on the topic of science and on its reciprocal relationships with human mentality, in Voegelin’s case, we observe a more extended application of the concept of “fallacy” within the field of political philosophy, anthropology, and, more generally, socio-political studies, even if Voegelin recognizes the value of this idea within its original field, that is, scientific investigation. In particular, Voegelin owes a great debt to Whitehead for having forged a useful conceptual tool for detecting the mistakes that characterize the theory of knowledge as it applies to the field of natural science: for instance, in a letter addressed to Aaron Gurwitsch, in addition to praising the arguments proposed by Husserl in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1954) concerning an incorrectly understood geometrization, Voegelin states that “the only other person who has done a creditable job on this is Whitehead. His concept of the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ (in *Science and the Modern World*) appears to me to decisively express the problem in a short phrase.” Here, however, we must note that Voegelin is very critical about an identification of the notion of science with that of natural science: as he maintains in *The New Science of Politics*, nowadays a study of reality tends to be considered scientific as far as it reflects the method used in natural sciences; the consequence of this attitude is the belief that “realms of being that are not accessible to exploration by the model methods were irrelevant.” Voegelin, therefore, develops a critique of the regnant subordination of theoretical relevance to that of methodology: on the contrary, “science is a search for truth concerning the nature of the various realms of being. Relevant in science is whatever contributes to the success of this search . . . . Different objects require different methods.” In particular, according to Voegelin, “science starts from the prescientific existence of man, from his participation in the world with

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63 Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, 618.
his body, soul, intellect, and spirit, from his primary grip on all the realms of being.”65 Compared to Whitehead’s use of the concept of science we can note that the latter, even if he sees in “the groundwork of common experience”66 the common and final test of both science and philosophy, describes science as “special science,” whose field “is confined to one genus of fact,”67 whereas philosophy is intended to be “a voyage towards larger generalities.”68

Before considering Voegelin’s explicit references to Whitehead’s influence on him concerning the concept of fallacy (which is the criterion adopted in this article), we might remember (as we have noticed for the concept of “climate”) that this notion informs Voegelin’s work since his early writings: for instance, in his books on race he states that body ideas (to which race ideas belong) have been used in order to create a community from a multitude of individual members and that without this fiction, according to Voegelin, the creation of “the intellectual reality of the community” would have been impossible: “the idea of the community as a body is always a ‘mythic’ idea, and it always (not only in the case of the Christian community) establishes a corpus mysticum.”69 The specific case of race ideas is a clear example of the dynamic characterizing Voegelin’s use of Whitehead’s notion of fallacy: a concept derived by abstraction from the concrete reality (such as that of a constancy in physical traits) has been crystallized and therefore not submitted to the “test of reality”; the ideology springs up exactly when this concept is used in order to represent a real entity or unit whose existence is presupposed due to the pervasive power of that concept.

A relevant example of Voegelin’s explicit use of Whitehead’s concept of “fallacy” within the field of scientific thought is his reflection on Newton’s theory of absolute space.70 Newtonian theory led science to make reductive ontological assumptions through the claim of describing not only a phenomenon through the use of abstraction, but also reality as such.71

65 Ibid., 91.
66 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 329.
67 Ibid., 9.
68 Ibid., 10.
71 For Whitehead’s consideration of Newton’s theory, see also Process and Reality, 70–72, 92–96.
According to Voegelin, this fallacy has contributed to the ascendancy of materialism because it is based on a view of the world for which “all realms of being are reduced to the one and true reality of matter.” The new science, in fact, cannot be confined to a specific discipline, as it engenders a new order of existence up to the point that scientific materialism influenced—with all its ramifications—several philosophical perspectives such as, to name a few: the Encyclopedist movement, utilitarianism, positivism, and the sociology of Comte and Mill up to Marxism. “The belief that science is the key to the understanding of nature in an ontological sense,” Voegelin argues, “has entered as a decisive ingredient into every one of our political mass movements—liberalism, progressivism, Darwinism, Communism, and National Socialism. The historical root of this belief is the Newtonian theory of space.” In a typical example of Voegelin’s “telescopic” approach to the history of ideas, we can provide evidence of the relevance of the concept of “fallacy” in having forged an aspect of mentality which, according to Voegelin, remains a permanent feature within the modern and contemporary age: the intellectuals who were influenced by Newton, in fact, did not accept the existence of a divine substance that, according to Voegelin, in Newton’s thought was still the counterpart of the theory of absolute space. More specifically for Voegelin, this system “showed the world as consisting of nothing but matter obeying a uniform law. The theory of absolute space sealed this system ontologically against God, and by virtue of this character, the Newtonian system became socially effective.” The resulting view, according to Voegelin (upon whom, once again, the specific influences of Whitehead are more than evident), is a dualism between a nature regulated by the laws of mechanics and a metaphysical perspective accepted as valid as far as it is compatible with that first “unquestionable” truth. The fact that Voegelin refers quite often to Whitehead’s concept of “fallacy” in the History of Political Ideas is due to the fact that in this work, and especially in the section dedicated to “Revolution and the New Science,” he focuses his attention on the emergence of

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72 Voegelin, History of Political Ideas, 6:183.
73 See ibid., 6:184.
74 Ibid.
75 See, for instance, Voegelin’s analysis of Toland’s Christianity Not Mysterious (Voegelin, History of Political Ideas, 6:182).
76 Ibid., 6:194.
77 See Whitehead, Science, 55.
79 Now this section corresponds to the volume Revolution and the New Science, the sixth volume of the History of Political Ideas.
modern science and on the *forma mentis* that its epistemological model has shaped. However, this fact should not lead us to forget that his concept of political ideas (the relevance of which was discerned by Voegelin since 1922 when he was planning a book concerning the principles of government that was able to overcome the limits of both Georg Jellinek and Hans Kelsen’s *Staatslehre*80) was abandoned at the end of the forties because it was considered scientifically obsolete (in particular, the historicist model characterized by a diachronic reconstruction of the history of ideas was in crisis). Instead of ideas, Voegelin decided to focus on experiences, symbols, and symbolic forms which express them as the reality that has to be studied from an historical point of view. As Voegelin explains in his *Autobiographical Reflections*: “I had to give up ‘ideas’ as objects of a history and establish the experience of reality—personal, social, historical, cosmic—as the reality to be explored historically.”81 His aim transitioned into shaping a theory concerning the course of history that was able to point out the full dynamism of meaning.82

Alongside the appraisal for the application of the notion of “fallacy” within its original conceptual ambit—namely that of science—we can observe that the influence of Whitehead’s speculation emerges also in Voegelin’s attitude to avoid conventional terminology (sometimes with the consequence of engendering an original and not immediate philosophical language). This is especially evident in Voegelin’s later works: the reason for this probably lies in the abandonment of the (still conventional) project related to ideas as the object of history and the emergence of the concept of experience that required the creation of a new vocabulary. As Voegelin states, the avoidance of a conventional terminology should be made in order “to protect the analysis from the danger of the fallacies of misplaced concreteness which . . . lurk behind every unanalyzed concept.”83 In particular, in the essay *Immortality: Experience and Symbol*, Voegelin warns against the danger of adopting doctrinal arguments in which “symbols are erected into entities”: when human beings participate in them, in fact, they commit the mistake that Whitehead has defined as “the fallacy of misplaced

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80 See Voegelin, *Selected Correspondence, 1924–1949*, 80; and *Autobiographical Reflections*, 66.
concreteness.”

This is also the case in the psychological explanation of religious ideas, analyzed by Voegelin in *The Drama of Humanity* (a work resulting from the transcription of the Walter Turner Candler Lectures that Voegelin presented in 1967 at Emory University). What happens in the modern age is a loss of balance between the three universals (universal humanity, universal divinity, universal world), that, in turn, are the results of the differentiation of the primary experience of the cosmos. More specifically, the universal idea of the world has become an absolute, “as if the world existed in itself,”

so that, for instance, we talk about “the world of physics” as if it were a “thing,” the reality. As a consequence, according to Voegelin, “you must do something about the rest of reality that you no longer credit with being reality; you have to construe it as dependent,”

namely as a function of “the” reality. According to this perspective, “man becomes a function of the world, and God becomes a function of man,”

echoing Feuerbach’s idea of the psychology of projection. In this case, as Voegelin states, “the psychological explanation of religious ideas is the vehicle by which God and the religious ideas are transformed into functions of the human psyche” up to the point that,

you have the first spectrum of constructions that are used when the world is erected into an absolute entity. That is, the idea of the world is made into an entity, what Whitehead has called “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.” If you attribute to an idea [the] concreteness [of] an entity . . . if you have such a conception of the world as if “the world” were real, you can let these other constructions follow. Man is a function of this world, and God is a function of man; and on that depends a whole wealth of further problems.

What emerges from this analysis is an application of the concept of “fallacy” within specific philosophical and metaphysical inquiries: Whitehead’s concept of “fallacy” has been such a deep source of inspiration for Voegelin that it is clearly impossible to provide a comprehensive list of influential

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86 Ibid., 221.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 223–24.
passages and arguments. For now, we have offered a few relevant examples, without forgetting that the concept of “fallacy” will also act as an implicit thread that continues to run through Voegelin’s thought. This will be case, for instance, with Voegelin’s treatment of process and symbol, which will be the subject of the next section.

PROCESS AND SYMBOL

Far from pretending to summarize the core of Whitehead’s and Voegelin’s reflections concerning such crucial metaphysical topics, in this last section I will refer to several arguments presented by Voegelin in which he recognizes his intellectual debt to Whitehead. Focusing on Voegelin’s work, we notice that the concepts of process and symbol belong to the period in which the project of a history of ideas was completely abandoned. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that Voegelin refers to Whitehead’s notion of process only in his late work. I will take into consideration some passages of his essay Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History as synthetically paradigmatic of Voegelin’s perspective on what follows, as well as the chapter “The Process of History” in The Ecumenic Age, the fourth volume of his five-volume work Order and History.89 In Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History, Voegelin summarizes crucial aspects of the concept of “symbol” relating it to that of process. Symbols are engendered by human experiences which, in turn, emerge from man’s search for his humanity and its order:90 “the study of symbols is a reflective inquiry concerning the search for the truth of existential order; it will become, if fully developed, what is conventionally called a philosophy of history.”91 The latter, however, cannot be compared to a linear search for truth, as it is interrupted by periods of “deformed existence,” which sometimes become so influential in the life of human beings as to make them presume that this deformation corresponds to their true existence (Whitehead’s notion of “climate of opinion” is here again apparent). The task of philosophers, in Voegelin’s view, is that of avoiding one’s succumbing to this climate by turning to the light instead of going down into the cave, as we have noted before (even if Voegelin focused more on the gnoseological aspect). In a similar way, Whitehead charges philosophy with the task of recovering “the totality obscured by the selection,” as “philosophy is the self-correction by

89 Voegelin, Order and History, ed. Franz, 4:229–73.
91 Ibid., 116.
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consciousness of its own initial excess of subjectivity.” In recovering the
search for humanity and for order (which through experience is expressed
by symbols), Voegelin warns us, it would be wrong to hypostatize a sup-
posed right order or a catalogue of permanent values as constants within
the history of mankind (that attitude, in fact, would engender the “fallacy
of permanent values”). According to Voegelin’s view, in fact, “ultimate
doctrines, systems, and values are phantasmata engendered by deformed
existence” because such perspectives forget the dynamic tension of exis-
tence characterized by the fundamental experience of creaturehood, which
“has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic metaxy,” and
from which the search for the Ground finds its beginning. Also, the latter
experience, however, cannot be hypostatized, as that would engender,
accordingly, “subtler fallacies of existential tension and experiences of par-
ticipation.” What remains constant in history, then, is the same structure
of existence that, as Voegelin maintains, can only be described by a series
of propositions. The fundamental proposition is that “man participates in
the process of reality” and its implications are the following: 1) the fact
that man is conscious of his place in reality as that of a process; 2) that man
“is able to engender symbols which express his experience of reality”; and
3) that “man knows the symbols engendered to be part of the reality they
symbolize.” Among his corollaries, Voegelin refers to the fact that reality
cannot be observed from an external standpoint and, consequently, the
experience of reality always has the character of perspective (here again we
can notice some analogies with Whitehead’s philosophy for which every
description is already an interpretation). This view leads to the fact that
“the knowledge of reality conveyed by the symbols can never become a
final possession of truth, for the luminous perspectives that we call experi-
ences, as well as the symbols engendered by them, are part of reality in
process.” For this reason, as Voegelin maintains in The Ecumenic Age,
the “truth of the process” cannot “be hypostatized as an ‘absolute’
truth”: that reading, in the first place, would entail that the process

92 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 15.
93 Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 123.
94 Ibid., 120.
95 Ibid., 119.
96 Ibid., 123.
97 Ibid., 120.
99 Voegelin, “Equivalences,” 121. See Voegelin’s view of “symbolic being” as developed
in On the Form of the American Mind, 23–24.
100 Voegelin, Order and History, 4:235.
would be a “succession of ‘things’” whereas, according to Voegelin, the process “is structured in time by the progress of noetic consciousness” (which is characterized by an articulated awareness of its structure). Secondly, the search of human consciousness is not oriented towards an hypothetized “truth” which lies beyond this process: the truth of philosophers does not correspond to a property, rather, as Voegelin maintains, it has to be identified with “the truth of the search (zetesis) in erotic tension toward the mysterious ground of existence,”101 to which the fragmentary character of human experience constantly tends. In this context Voegelin praises the work of Whitehead (in opposition to the differentiations characterizing the philosophy of Enlightenment and, in particular “Kant’s epistemological skepticism”) for his “consciousness of the contextual wholeness” that “vibrates with the historical tension of truth when he lets his ‘process of reality’ gain its weight of meaning from its oscillation between the process of physical reality and the wholeness of the cosmic process.”102 In addition to The Ecumenic Age, his intellectual debt to Whitehead is explicitly recognized in Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History, where Voegelin states, to wit, that his view of “the process of reality is the equivalent of Whitehead’s conception of the experience.”103 In this context, it is impossible fully to synthesize the perspective of Whitehead concerning the topic of process; however, by recalling some of Whitehead’s arguments regarding this issue, we want to point out that an extended analysis of this topic deserves a properly developed account.

Whitehead articulates a philosophy of organism which he interprets as a cosmology whose aim consists in replacing modern scientific materialism, due to the intrinsic limits already considered. In his work, Whitehead strongly criticizes substantialism, for it is based on the fallacious thought that reality is split into the duality of subject-predicate/substance-quality; whereas for Whitehead, however, he argues that the world is fundamentally composed at the metaphysical level not of substance, but of process. Every single actual entity (to be intended as the final real thing “of which the world is made up”)104 is then not describable in terms of the morphology of a “stuff”;105 rather, it is a process which “involves the other actual entities among its components. In this way the obvious solidarity of the world receives its explanation.”106 Every actual entity, in fact, creates itself in the

101 Ibid., 4:236.
102 Ibid., 4:234.
104 Whitehead, Process and Reality, 18.
105 Ibid., 41.
106 Ibid., 7.

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process of its experience and for its constitution needs other actual entities, which are its “components”: the result is a new and specific synthesis in which the being of an actual entity “is constituted by its ‘becoming’. The way in which one actual entity is qualified by other actual entities is the ‘experience’ of the actual world enjoyed by that actual entity, as subject.”

Within Whitehead’s processual view of reality, the permanent elements are represented by the “eternal objects,” which—despite having been compared to the Platonic ideas—are “pure potentials for the specific determination of fact”; the mediator between the actual entities and the ideality of forms is God, to be intended as the primordial, non-temporal accident of creativity, as the “primordial actual entity,” and the “unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality.”

What Voegelin inherits from Whitehead’s idea of process is the refusal of a static metaphysical view enjoined to an empty and hypostatized concept of substance, which would ultimately be nominalistic; on the contrary, human life is characterized by an existential tension in which process “will reveal its meaning only where men are open toward the mystery in which they participate by their existence and allow the reality of the process to become luminous in their consciousness. After the crippling of the truth through existential closure, it becomes the philosopher’s task to heal and restore it by opening his existence to the divine ground of reality.” It is evident that Voegelin’s use of the concept of “process” does not reflect the specific “technical” metaphysical meaning placed upon it by Whitehead, but it serves rather as a fruitful source of inspiration inserted within his own philosophical perspective, animated by the centrality of human consciousness as it is oriented toward the “mysterious ground of existence.”

Such a perspective, Voegelin complains, is exactly what is lacking in Whitehead’s metaphysics and what differentiates the reciprocal tasks of their respective philosophies. As Voegelin argues in a letter addressed to Ivor Leclerc:

> when reading Whitehead . . . I had the feeling that, in spite of his splendid Platonism, he neglected one important point that for Plato is central: there is only one area in which we have an immediate experience of lower being entering into a compound, and that

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107 Ibid., 166.
108 Ibid., 22.
109 See ibid., 7.
110 Ibid., 87.
111 Ibid., 343.
112 Voegelin, Order and History, 4:243.
is the participation of man in the divine in the growth of his soul toward its divine roots. Plato’s methexis, and Aristotle’s metalepsis, the later participatio signifies the structure of consciousness that, on the [one] hand, is human, and, on the other hand, participates in the divine.¹¹³

As illustrated in this passage, despite Voegelin’s explicit indebtedness to Whitehead, there are equally important differences between their philosophical views: for instance, Whitehead’s actual entities (or “actual occasions”) considered as “drops of experience, complex and interdependent”¹¹⁴ lead him to consider (against the view of actuality as a “static self”) “each actual thing . . . in terms of its becoming and perishing.”¹¹⁵ Whitehead’s difficulty is then that of explaining (for instance through the concept of “nexus”) how larger units are formed: on the contrary, in a way partially reminiscent of Henri Bergson’s philosophy,¹¹⁶ Voegelin considers reality as a unity that cannot be “atomized” into discrete occasions. Moreover, according to Voegelin, “what is experienced and symbolized as reality, in an advancing process of differentiation”¹¹⁷ is the substance of history, which is seen at the same time as a unity and as an open process; more specifically, history is “a mystery in process of revelation.”¹¹⁸ This differing perspective, in addition, makes Whitehead’s view of God unacceptable to Voegelin: Whitehead’s God, however benign, tends in fact to absorb everything as his “consequent nature” is “the realization of the actual world in the unity of his nature, and through the transformation of his wisdom.”¹¹⁹ This is a view far removed from Voegelin’s perspective, which never neglects a transcendent pole of the tension of existence; and furthermore, in the first volume of Order and History, Voegelin sees the experience of Israel as the overcoming of the cosmological form of existence through a Revelation intended as “a divine intrusion from beyond the cosmos” which has brought about a “leap in being,” a “differentiation” in human self-consciousness and understanding.¹²⁰

What emerges from these preceding observations concerning the

¹¹³ Voegelin, Selected Correspondence: 1950–1984, 557.
¹¹⁴ Whitehead, Process and Reality, 18.
¹¹⁵ Whitehead, Adventures, 274.
¹¹⁶ See Voegelin, Autobiographical Reflections, 63.
¹¹⁷ Ibid., 106.
¹¹⁸ Voegelin, Order and History, 4:15.
¹¹⁹ Whitehead, Process and Reality, 345.
¹²⁰ Maurice P. Hogan, Editor’s Introduction, in Voegelin, Order and History, 1:4–5.
notion of process, therefore, is that Voegelin’s intellectual debt to Whitehead primarily concerns the concepts of “climate of opinion” and of “fallacy of misplaced concreteness,” which reflect the contents of his lectures delivered at Harvard; instead, regarding the concept of “process” and Whitehead’s metaphysical reflection, we note that Voegelin distances himself from his professor by placing his thought in a completely different framework.

The overall view of this analysis is that there exists a rich intellectual relationship between Voegelin and Whitehead in which some relevant intuitions of Whitehead have been absorbed and sometimes reframed into Voegelin’s expansive speculation. The task of retrieving specific influences within the thought of an eclectic thinker such as Voegelin might be difficult and sometimes even misleading (the richness and the variety of “influences” present in Voegelin’s work make it impossible to trace any feature of his thought to a single thinker or philosophical tradition). This is because such an endeavor would lead us to an improper use of abstraction, as stigmatized by the aforementioned idea of “fallacy.” However, the fruitfulness of Whitehead’s intellectual heritage arising within Voegelin’s work has provided us with enough hints for pointing out an intellectual continuity between the two thinkers, which, while not obscuring the differences already considered, shows that the history of ideas is not constituted by a mere sequence of isolated thinkers and intuitions, but that such an intellectual trajectory is always developed relationally and thus interdependently.

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