

**THE CONCEPT OF NATURE:
ERIC VOEGELIN ON HUMAN NATURE AND
CHINESE *ECUMENE***

By

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Abstract

The concept of nature, encompassing both the external environment and aspects like human nature, is a significant and well-explored area in intellectual history. However, the relationship between these diverse meanings remains unexamined. I use the term "physical nature" to highlight the interplay between these two levels. Through researching the comprehensive work of Austrian-American historical philosopher Eric Voegelin, I argue that there is a shift in his notion from normative nature, based on his classical philosophical belief in reality and truth, to a plural nature that tends to encompass civilizations geographically isolated regions with the help of the discovery of physical nature.

In the first chapter, I closely read Voegelin's correspondence with conservative theorist Leo Strauss regarding John Locke's natural rights theory. I argue that Voegelin holds a more conservative view of human nature and inclines towards a normative view of nature. However, during his debate with Hannah Arendt about the nature of totalitarianism, he faced the dilemma of the origin of the normality of normative nature.

In the second chapter, I analyze Voegelin's historical philosophy of Order and his linear historical view of normative nature, which was challenged by his reading of China's *T'ien-hsia*—a parallel historical process to the Western *Ecumene*, or the inhabited world. I argue that Voegelin's solution relies on the even and homogeneous spatial nature of the *Ecumene* itself, applying this concept to both China and the West, though he did not elaborate on it. I propose an interpretation based on the spatial perspective and physical nature of the Chinese *Ecumene*, which aligns with Voegelin's renovation of historiography for comparative civilization studies, influenced by Karl Jaspers.

Voegelin's solution offers a promising approach to address the malleability of the concept of nature and the oscillation between different conceptions of nature.

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Introduction

The concept of nature is fundamental in the history of Western political thought and historiography. Countless eminent thinkers continue to challenge this notion and contribute to its evolving meaning. For example, Thomas Hobbes's mechanistic understanding of nature and the notorious state of nature follow from this line of inquiry. However, these studies are often criticized on two fronts. Firstly, they typically focus solely on the conventional meaning of nature, whether analogized with the harmonious external nature created by God or deduced from human nature, while neglecting its physical condition or material base. Secondly, most concepts of nature are essentially Eurocentric and cannot account for experiences outside of Europe.

As a result, two crises emerge from the flaws of the concept of nature, giving rise to two distinct yet complementary streams. The first arises from research into world history, pioneered by figures such as Spengler, Toynbee, and Jaspers. This movement echoes the collapse of historicism¹ in Germany after WWI, prompting historiography and historical philosophy to explore civilizations beyond the declining European sphere, particularly those in the Far East. The second crisis stems from adherents and sympathizers of the New Natural Law School, leading to a resurgence of natural rights among conservatives such as Leo Strauss and Jacques Maritain. Criticizing the Third

¹ Historicism used to refer to the "Historism" methodology in nineteenth-century German historiography, which presupposes that every humanistic or philosophical science reflects a specific theoretical type of thought. In this context, it concerns the dispute about whether universal values can exist under the attack of moral relativism.

Reich and legal positivism, they seek to restore the normality of the concept of nature and natural law.

Eric Voegelin embraces both perspectives and conducts research from his unique standpoint. Born in Germany and educated in Austria, he was deeply influenced by comparative studies pioneered by Max Weber throughout his life. Voegelin extensively studied Arabian, Indian, and Chinese cultures to explore the *Ecumene* in the Far East, using them to develop a historical model for evaluating the process of civilization, drawing on the insights of Toynbee and Jaspers. Additionally, Voegelin focuses on the concept of nature, particularly in the tension between ancient Greek thought and the modern Gnosticism movement. Inspired by his colleagues Alfred Schutz and Leo Strauss, he also embarked on reshaping the concept of nature through phenomenology and Platonic philosophy to contribute to the revival of the classical notion of nature.

Eric Voegelin's extensive research into the history of human ideas and the paradigm he developed for understanding the evolution of human history had a significant impact. His work has inspired later scholars, particularly in the realm of comparative research on the history of ideas and human experiences. Many researchers have expanded the scope of their studies to explore the relationship between the concept of physical nature and comparative *Ecumene* or other worlds, drawing upon Voegelin's foundational insights.

A Short Biography of Eric Voegelin

Eric Voegelin was a German American political philosopher. He was born in Koln in 1901 and moved to Vienna in 1910, graduated from the Political Science department at the University of Vienna under the supervision of Hans Kelsen and Othmar Spann in 1922. He traveled to the U.S. and Paris from 1924 to 1929 and was exposed to a new intellectual environment beyond the popular dispute about Neo-Kantianism stuck in central Europe. He back to Vienna in 1929 and taught political theory and sociology at the University of Vienna.

As a result of the *Anschluss*, Voegelin lost his job due to his writing against national socialism, narrowly avoiding arrest by the Gestapo and immigrating to the U.S. in 1938. Voegelin had a brief period of wandering from the East Coast before joining the Political Science department at Louisiana State University. While teaching a class on the history of political ideas, he found the popular textbooks unsatisfactory and decided to write his own. This series of drafts entitled as *History of Political Ideas* (1939-1954) remained unpublished until his death. While he found it extremely hard to reduce the complex experiences and phenomena into abstract ideas, and that made him face the stagnant time from 1945 to 1950 he also began to learn Chinese to teach Chinese politics. His breakthrough was marked in 1951 when he delivered a speech for Chicago University and later published *The New Science of Politics*, whose main point was that the nature of modernity is the growth of Gnosticism. From 1956 to 1957, he published three volumes about Israeli and Greek experiences which became a series of books, *The*

Order and History.

In 1958, Voegelin accepted the invitation of the University of München, taking over the professorship of political science since Max Weber, and founded the Institute of Political Science. Voegelin continued his serious research of Chinese civilization, significantly revised his theory of the Ecumenic Age, and finished the "Typescript/Tiposkript" (1959-1960), a well-preserved draft of *The Chinese Ecumene*. This work may continue to 1963/4, which constitutes his main writing of Chinese *Ecumene*.² His reconsideration of political philosophy through the philosophy of consciousness represented by his important theoretical book *Anamnesis* (1966). In 1969, he back to the U.S. and worked at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University. In 1974, after the seventeenth-year gap, Voegelin published the fourth volume of *The Order and History*, entitled *The Ecumene Age*, to address the dilemma of universal nature and multiple *Ecumene*. Voegelin died in 1985 in California.

Terminology of Nature

Does "nature" mean "natural"?

This essay defines nature in two ways:

- (1) The collective phenomena of the physical world, including plants, animals, and natural elements, are distinct from human creations;

² Muen Liu, *Eric Voegelin on China and Universal Humanity: A Study of Voegelin's Hermeneutic Empirical Paradigm*, Political Theory for Today (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 107–8.

(2) the essential qualities or characteristics of something, like human nature.

Then we could define its derivative words, natural, in the following two ways:

(1) Existing in or derived from nature, not made or caused by humankind, like the natural environment.

(2) By the nature of, or circumstances surrounding, someone or something, like natural law.

However, a key difference between "nature" and "natural" lies in their involvement in political writings. The adjective "natural" often implies an inherent moral authority, as seen in terms like "natural right," which suggests an unquestionable truth derived from the concept of nature. Often, the authority of the term "natural" is assumed rather than argued. Political theorists like Hugo Grotius use "natural law" to denote

"as a dictate of right reason, showing the moral necessity or the moral baseness of any act according to its agreement or disagreement with rational nature, and indicating that such an act is therefore either commanded or forbidden by the author of nature, God."³

Thus, the ethical authority of natural law involves epistemology—whether humans can perceive natural reason in the right way. John Locke extended this idea, arguing that the law of nature is "a law which each individual can discover by that light alone which is implanted in us by nature", then his task from the authority of nature to the different faculties to perceive the light of nature, or right reason.⁴ This ethical norm is not

³ Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace*, I,1,20-21.

⁴ John Locke, *Questions Concerning the Law of Nature* (Cornell University Press, 2008), 99-101.

directly derived from nature but is an extension or metaphor, like the "light of nature."

The distinction between "nature" and "natural" can be traced back to Aristotle's standing of Naturalism. He proposed a classical clarification of the concept of nature, the *phusis*,

- (1) the coming-to-be of growing things, i.e., growth
- (2) the primary internal component from which the growing thing grows
- (3) more generally, the source of the primary movement which is present in each natural entity intrinsically and not accidentally
- (4) the primary matter of which something consists or out of which it comes to be
- (5) the form or substance which is the end of the process of becoming
- (6) by extension, every substance, because the nature of a thing is a kind of substance.⁵

Aristotle's definition can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of the original senses: a tree grows (*phuetai*) to maturity, and a tree is a growing thing (*phuomenon*). This process refers to biological growth. The second group of senses relates to Aristotle's four causes: moving cause, material cause, formal cause, and final cause. However, neither of these groups directly associates with Aristotle's naturalistic political view in *Politics* I, which can be summarized as three points:

- (1) The Polis exists by nature.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V.4.

(2) A human being is by nature a political animal.

(3) The polis is prior by nature to the individual.

Aristotle did not offer an explicit analysis of his use of the term "*phusis*" or "nature" in *Politics*, making it difficult to pinpoint exactly what he meant by it. For instance, when he argued that the *polis* is the natural extension of the household⁶, it might be interpreted as a direct application of the third sense of nature from his *Metaphysics*. However, he never explicitly states that the *polis* has nature in the sense of an internal cause of self-motion, suggesting that this doctrine should also be understood through the sixth sense of teleology.

Fred Miller concluded that if we assume Aristotle uses the term "nature" in the strict sense found in *Physics* II, his argument contains serious internal difficulties. Thus, Aristotle's political naturalism presupposes his philosophy of nature. Even if he used "nature" in an extended rather than strict sense, the naturalism in Aristotle's politics and ethics still depends on the naturalism of his physics and biology. An organism, for example, has within it an organizing and guiding formal principle: its soul.⁷

Aristotle's case exemplifies the fundamental strategy behind arguments about the concept of nature and the meaning of natural. Nature, whether referring to the external physical world or an essential internal aspect, pertains to a level of reality. This understanding lends the term "natural" a sense of normality derived from the continuity

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, I. 2, 1252b27-34.

⁷ Fred Miller, 'Naturalism', in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought*, ed. Christopher Rowe and Malcolm Schofield, The Cambridge History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 331, 342, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521481366.018>.

of nature, rather than from ethical considerations about the meaning of nature. This phenomenon highlights the difficulty of deriving comprehensive political ethics solely from the concept of nature. Consequently, this has spurred ongoing studies in political theory about the nature of Nature and the assertion of what is or isn't "natural."

Nature as Normative, Physical, and Plural

Faced with the mysterious origins of nature, Eric Voegelin's study of the concept of nature offers a potential solution.

In the third volume of *The History of Political Ideas*, during his study of Nicholas of Cusa, Voegelin introduces a trichotomy of nature: the blind Hellenic nature represented by Plato's metal myth, which makes the lower ranks believe they must submit to the rule of the wise; the medieval instinct with grace, as seen in Nicholas of Cusa; and the psychological nature that emerges later in the natural law speculations of the seventeenth century, such as in Hugo Grotius.⁸ Voegelin continues his exploration of human nature from Richard Hooker in the fifth volume, and this escalates in the seventh and eighth volumes with the emergence of natural law and psychological nature. For example, he diagnoses John Locke's reshaping of human nature as morally corrupt.⁹

In his research on intellectual history, Voegelin develops his stance on nature, although he does not explicitly illustrate it; through his correspondence with Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt, I coined the term "normative nature" to describe Voegelin's notion of

⁸ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas (Volume 3): The Later Middle Ages*, 1. edition (University of Missouri Press, 1998), 262–64.

⁹ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas (Volume 5): Religion and the Rise of Modernity* (University of Missouri Press, 1998), 102, 140–1, 145–8.

nature par excellence normative, which is based on his philosophical project to pursue essence and reality in history, and under this motive, Voegelin further develops a strict notion of nature, asserting that human nature cannot change, for if it did, there would be no nature at all.

However, in *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin's focus shifts from "human nature" to the study of consciousness. The term "human nature" only appears four times in this text.¹⁰ This shift can be attributed to his increasing interest in phenomenology.

"The term 'consciousness' had rarely appeared in the first three volumes [of *Order and History*] ... There had been no previous indication that the central *locus* of our humanity was consciousness. In the earlier volumes, the term most often used to suggest the core of our humanity was 'human nature.' In *The Ecumenic Age*, it is noted, in passing, that human nature is simply 'classical language' for 'the structure of consciousness.'"¹¹

For the deeper theoretical motive, as I will argue in the second chapter, Voegelin faces two dilemmas. The first is that through his correspondence, he already knows that the mere notion of normative nature cannot generate a moral appeal strong enough to counter the disasters that threaten nature. The second is associated with his recent research on multiple civilizations, where his notion of normative (or universal humanity)¹² is significantly challenged by multiple *Ecumene*. He discovered that the Chinese, who experienced similar historical processes such as spiritual breakthroughs, territorial expansion, and advancements in historiography, also have an equivalent symbol of *Ecumene*. This realization spurred him to consider the tension between

¹⁰ "Human nature" only appears four times in this text. (one time in p73, one cite in p94, two times in p147)

¹¹ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, ed. Michael Franz, First Edition (University of Missouri, 2000), 252.

¹² The

multiple civilizations and universal humanity. It should be noted that the term "universal" is different from normative nature. The former, after a long reevaluation and examination, is still preserved in the seventh chapter of *The Ecumenic Age*. While Voegelin had doubts about these symbols during specific periods, they could be listed together as theoretical obstacles he needed to address. After addressing these obstacles, Voegelin still upheld the notion of "universal humanity" as normative. In this sense, it can be seen as the equivalent symbol of "natural," although Voegelin rarely used the latter term to convey ethical duty.

Voegelin's solution can be summarized as follows: the same abstract human being, acting as an agent in different regions, participates in the same stream of divine presence. This view introduces a new concept of human nature, which combines geographical isolation into what I term "plural nature." This concept is distinct from universal or multiple natures in arithmetic terms, as it emphasizes both similarities and variations. It also acknowledges that different agents participate in the same movement of civilization while maintaining their independence as separate subjects.

This transformation is based on the discovery of physical nature, which includes the abstract level of spatial dimensions as a form of order, as illustrated by Kant, and the perceived materials such as territorial expansion and its geographical influence on the agents involved. Physical nature represents the overlap between nature as a collective set or essence and the human beings as the agents involved. Similar to how the term *Ecumene* refers to the inhabited world, it sheds light on both the outside environment

and human activity. For instance, territorial seas are not mere lines in the material world, but their spatial projection imposes a binding force on the material world, shaping the mindset of subjects who function as agents. Carl Schmitt, a remarkable yet controversial German public jurist of the twentieth century, recalled the role of lands and seas within the framework of the mysterious constitution of norms, serving as an example. In his work, *The Nomos of the Earth*, the role of the earth is not only as an object to be ruled or legislated but also as an independent agency forming the overall premise of peace.¹³ Although his definition of "the opposition of the elements of land and sea" changed dramatically to suit his political needs, as noted by Joshua Derman.¹⁴ Schmitt still successfully demonstrated that the physical condition plays an indispensable role in the origin of the normality of laws or norms. This approach moves towards a possible way to discover the "natural." Then we could update the clarification of nature into three,

- (1) physical worlds collectively.
- (2) Physical nature as an agent.
- (3) the essential or features of something.

I further argue that Voegelin's usage of physical nature heavily benefits from his reading of Chinese literature and the concept of nature with Chinese characteristics. As Joseph Needham argued, the nature of China is a kind of organism or naturalism, that avoids

¹³ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of Jus Publicum Europaeum*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Telos Press Publishing, 2006), 37–42.

¹⁴ Joshua Derman, 'Carl Schmitt on Land and Sea', *Pact with the Devil: The Ethics, Politics and Economics of Anti-Machiavellian Machiavellism* 37, no. 2 (1 June 2011): 181–89, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.histeuroideas.2010.11.010>.

either the "theological vitalist idealism" or the "mechanical materialism" so common to Western thought, and one in which:

"Universal harmony comes about not by the celestial fiat of some King of Kings, but by the spontaneous cooperation of all beings in the universe brought about by their following the internal necessities of their natures... all entities at all levels behave in accordance with their position in the greater patterns (organisms) of which they are parts."¹⁵

Voegelin's analysis of the equivalent symbol of *Ecumene* in China could be an excellent example. The physical condition of *Tianxia* (All Under Heaven) contains the notion of geographical and ethical, like "The law of the Dao is it being natural".¹⁶ I would further continue this path of the interplay with the physical nature and human nature, through a case study of *Tian Ren He Yi* (nature and man joined into one whole). Here, the personalized nature, *tian* (sky, 天) is endowed with an emotional quality; it would not oppose man if man acted in accord with it, as a supernatural will, which introduces the dimension of the interaction between the subject and nature.¹⁷

The highlight of this research lies in the dynamic notions of nature. It aims to delineate the evolution of the concept of nature in Voegelin's writings, illustrating how the depiction of nature's decline aligns with critical research. Firstly, I argued that he held the view of the unchangeable human nature, a kind of normative nature, encountered significant challenges with his colleague and his research of comparative civilizations, that the concept of nature itself cannot generate normality. Secondly, I posted that

¹⁵ Joseph Needham and Ling Wang, *Science and Civilisation in China: Volume 2, History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1956), 562.

¹⁶ "道法自然", *Tao Te Ching*, 25.

¹⁷ Wenhui Hou, 'Reflections on Chinese Traditional Ideas of Nature', *Environmental History* 2, no. 4 (1997): 482–93, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985610>.

Voegelin's discovery of the Chinese notion of nature helped him issue his new solution, that the universal humanity in the isolated Worlds shared the same stream of divine presence, a phrase like Jaspers's spiritual breakthrough, and I coined another term, plural nature, to highlight his change from normative nature to a plural one.

Literature Review

Theoretical Approach of Voegelin Research

The groundbreaking research on Eric Voegelin's work was conducted by Ellis Sandoz and Eugene Webb. Sandoz, drawing from autobiographical materials, argues that Voegelin's philosophy represented a revolutionary departure from the prevalent study of political science and historiography. He emphasized Voegelin's commitment to uncovering truth and maintaining a holistic vision, drawing inspiration from ancient Greek thought.¹⁸ Similarly, Webb's analysis focused on Voegelin's historical philosophy, highlighting its emphasis on the tangible aspects of mortal life, such as symbolization, experiential knowledge, and philosophical anthropology, as opposed to abstract normative ideas.¹⁹ Both Sandoz and Webb underscored Voegelin's empirical foundation in his study of historical philosophy. However, they did not sufficiently address the connection between his historiography and its implications for the study of the concept of nature.

Most researchers usually focus on a specific theme of Voegelin's broad research, and these could be attributed to three categories. The first one focuses on Voegelin's

¹⁸ Ellis Sandoz, *The Voegelinian Revolution: A Biographical Introduction* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University, 1981), p. 199.

¹⁹ Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, Reprint edition (University of Washington Press, 2014).

historical philosophy and centers on his diagnosis of the perceived disorder of modernity and the pandemic of extreme ideology. Michael Franz's careful interpretation of Voegelin's work tends to ascribe a certain programmatic quality to what he understands as Voegelinian therapy to the "spiritual revolt", and ultimately wonders whether Voegelin could have formulated a clear therapeutic program.²⁰ David Walsh points out how a wide range of contemporary writers and thinkers are engaging in the kind of therapy that Voegelin advocates, though they do not explicitly adopt a "Voegelinian" approach, that demands a return to the original experience and symbols of order back to the fundamental experience of order available to every open soul to save the "spiritual vacuum". His combination of literary and philosophical analysis helps the reader to envision more clearly what an anti-ideological treatment would look like.²¹

The second way is to interpret Voegelin's research of consciousness philosophy as the core of his research. Roughly speaking, inspired by the movement of phenomenology, a theory of consciousness would need to make clear what it means to be a perceiving, thinking, and partaking being in the whole of reality, which be utilized as the basement to reconstruct the connection with political policies, even the theology or mythology, to recover from the diseases of modernity. There are at least four extant studies that explore Voegelin's ideas along these lines, including a brief study by Ronald D. Srigley and Michael P. Morrissey, both of which emphasize the theological implications of

²⁰ Michael Franz, *Eric Voegelin and the Politics of Spiritual Revolt: The Roots of Modern Ideology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 13, 51.

²¹ David Walsh, *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom*, First Edition (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ of Amer Pr, 1995), p. 3, 9.

Voegelin's theory of consciousness; Kenneth Keulman, who departs from Voegelin's phenomenology as a means of advancing his political theory; and, finally, Glenn Hughes, who emphasizes the mythological and symbolic aspects of Voegelin's theory.²²

The third group of Voegelin's study focuses on his political writing rather than his theological background, represented by Barry Cooper's research on the foundation of political science. He argued that political philosophy is empirical and an exploration of experiences that permeate the whole field of ordered human existence, which requires a rigorous iterative examination of the concrete phenomena of order and an analysis of consciousness. Thus, the theories of consciousness, history, and symbolization that emerge from Voegelin's explorations are informed by the political situation that he confronts.²³ Cooper's mode of special interpretation of Voegelin's writings thus helps to rearticulate this point with precision and to recall the experience of daily life and transcendence.

These three groups of research offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. For instance, focusing on historical philosophy, the works of Franz and Walsh align with Voegelin's analysis of the rise of Gnosticism and extreme political ideology, providing potential solutions for these issues. However, the solutions proposed in the context of modernity presuppose the existence of the problem and a particular conservative stance. They fail

²² Ronald D. Srigley, *Eric Voegelin's Platonic Theology: Philosophy of Consciousness and Symbolization in a New Perspective* (Lewiston, N.Y., USA: Edwin Mellen Pr, 1991); Michael P. Morrissey, *Consciousness And Transcendence: Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Kenneth Keulman, *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelin's Political Theory*, First Edition (University Park Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1990); Glenn Hughes, *Mystery and Myth in the Philosophy of Eric Voegelin*, First Edition (Columbia: Univ of Missouri Pr, 1993).

²³ Barry Cooper, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, First Edition (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1999).

to address why Voegelin maintained a distance from conservatism and offered a nuanced critique of modernity and Gnosticism in his final research, *The Order and History*.

This thesis aligns with the group focusing on political theory, asserting that Voegelin's philosophical writings are driven by his political concerns. I aim to explore Voegelin's use of the concept of nature from this perspective and trace the emergence of nature's concept from a comparative context, spanning early modern Europe and Ancient China. The Far East holds significant importance in Voegelin's research on comparative *Ecumene*. Given the geographical and cultural boundaries separating Europe from the Near East, the independent intellectual advancements in China prompted Voegelin to contemplate the possibility of multiple *Ecumene*.

Literature on Voegelin's View of Nature and Chinese *Ecumene*

The existing body of literature on Voegelin's concept of nature is predominantly affiliated with the study of Voegelin's interpretation of intellectual history, particularly his conception of ancient Greek ideas. Scholars such as Torres Bernat and Josep Monserrat delve into Voegelin's reading of Aristotle, particularly distinguishing it from scholasticism and offering a revised version of the natural order.²⁴ Similarly, Myron Jackson explores Voegelin's unusual study of modern natural law, tracing the ideas of subjectivity back into the notion of nature.²⁵ While the research fails to pay enough attention to the autonomy and independence of the concept of nature and its relationship

²⁴ Josep Monserrat Torres and Josep Monserrat, *Eric Voegelin's Political Readings: From the Ancient Greeks to Modern Times* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).

²⁵ Myron Moses Jackson, "An Interpretation of the Shift from Classical to Modern Natural Law According to Eric Voegelin's 'History of Political Ideas'" (Order No. 1488973, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 2010).

with derivative terms like natural order and natural right, it also presupposes the continuity of Voegelin's usage of nature, which requires more careful analysis.

Then the second group of literature is a more theoretical approach, which utilizes the concept of nature to comprehend the foundation of Eric Voegelin's political theory through comparisons with his contemporaries. Todd Myer's research places Voegelin and Strauss in the context of classical philosophy, examining their attitudes toward the concept of nature.²⁶ Eno Trimcev's research places Voegelin in reflection with Hannah Arendt regarding their differing notions of the foundations of politics.²⁷ This research introduces the perspective of a greater philosophical tradition Voegelin belonged in, his contemporaries, like Carl Schmitt also tried to reincorporate the physical condition or geographical factors back into political theory.²⁸

While little attention has been paid to the Chinese historiography's influence on Voegelin's writing of *Ecumene*. It is worth noting that after returning to the University of Munchen in 1958 and founding the Institute of Political Science, Voegelin began his serious study of Chinese civilization with the help of translation from his two sinologist assistants Peter Schafer and Peter Opitz, who provided the translation of. Influenced by Voegelin, Peter Schafer continued the study of the *Ecumene* and empire, and Peter-Joachim Opitz studied Lao-tzu and *Tao Te Ching*. And vice versa, the Chinese

²⁶ Todd Eric Myers, "Nature and the Divine: Classical Greek Philosophy and the Political in the Thought of Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin" (Order No. 9735993, Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College, 1997).

²⁷ Eno Trimcev, "Rethinking Political Foundations with Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin" (Order No. U605815, 2013). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global: The Humanities and Social Sciences Collection. (1512387637).

²⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, trans. Simona Draghici (Plutarch Press, 1997; original publication: 1942). Furthermore, David Armitage highlights the interconnectedness of Grotius's ideas and ocean studies within the broader context of global intellectual history. David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

classics they translated like *Zhongyong*, constitute the background for his analysis of the Chinese world.²⁹

After Voegelin's death, Korean scholar Seon-Hee Suh Kwon's doctoral dissertation, *Voegelin and Laozi: The Search for Order*, examines Voegelin's and Laozi's work on order from four perspectives: "openness to transcendence," "human nature," "knowledge," and "political society", establishing a linkage between Tao's nature and Voegelin's.³⁰ The comparative part of Voegelin was gradually been paid more attention, Lee Trepanier's rediscovery of the Comparative Politics with the Voegelin characteristic, with the emphasis on the noetic knowledge, viability, and the clarity of awareness to spread it into the public.³¹ The book edited by him, *Eric Voegelin's Asian Political Thought*, attempts to apply Voegelin's principles to the context of specific Asian topics. It includes analyses of the Chinese *Ecumene* and various other regions.³²

According to Li Qiang, the reception of Voegelin in China could be traced back to the 1980s and many of his main books were translated into Chinese, and some pivotal books like *The New Political Science* and *Autobiographical Reflection* even have different versions.³³ In recent years, Chinese scholars like Muen Liu have refined the paradigm Voegelin used to conduct a parallel comparison of the Chinese *Ecumene* and

²⁹ Peter-Joachim Opitz, *Lao-tzu: Die Ordnungsspekulation im Tao-tê-ching* (List, 1967); Weber-Schaefer, Peter, *Oikumene und Imperium: Studien zur Politische Theologie des Kaiserreichs*, n.d.

³⁰ Seon-Hee Suh Kwon, "Eric Voegelin and Lao Tzu: The Search for Order" (Order No. 9129431, Texas Tech University, 1991)

³¹ Lee Trepanier, 'The Comparative Politics of Eric Voegelin', in *Eric Voegelin Today: Voegelin's Political Thought in the 21st Century* (Lexington Books, 2019), 117–39.

³² Lee Trepanier, *Eric Voegelin's Asian Political Thought*, Illustrated edition (Lexington Books, 2020).

³³ Li Qiang, 'Eric Voegelin's Reception in China', *VoegelinView* (blog), 18 February 2019, <https://voegelinview.com/eric-voegelins-reception-in-china/>.

the Western world, in response to Zhao Tingyang's Tianxia system.³⁴

Based on the framework of Liu, Wenming Tang systematically collected Voegelin's writing about the Chinese, delved into the contradicting position of Chinese civilization, and issued his theory that Chinese civilization has cultivated a new historical philosophy based on balance and reflection(三才之道, The way of three powers), which could be listed along the Greek's philosophy and Israeli's revelation.³⁵ This indicates that there is still much work to be done in understanding the connection of Voegelin's concept of nature to that found in Chinese historiography, as well as the ways different concepts of nature vary and contrast with each other between cultures, Liu and Tang's work could be an excellent start to my work.

Methodology and Achieve

In terms of research approach, I intend to blend the approaches of both the Straussian school, which delves into the issue of natural law (even though I don't fully endorse the paradigm shift from natural law to natural rights) and the contextual approach of the Cambridge school. I perceive a need for a more integrated perspective from both the hermeneutic and the historical approach. The Straussian school, with its meticulous textual analysis, often focuses on specific textual contradictions without contextualizing them within the writing context familiar to the authors of that era. Conversely, the Cambridge school, proficient at constructing historical context, frequently neglects the "why" question – Is there a more fundamental and enduring history of thought behind

³⁴ Liu Muen, *Eric Voegelin on China and Universal Humanity: A Study of Voegelin's Hermeneutic Empirical Paradigm* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023). Tingyang Zhao, *All under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order*, trans. Joseph E. Harroff, Great Transformations (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=6612988>.

³⁵ Wenming Tang (唐文明), *極高明而道中庸(Ji Gaoming er Dao Zhongyong)* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2023).

the complex political discourse, and how do these conversations advance our understanding of these topics?

Regarding the texts, the Eric Voegelin Archive has been established following the model of the Max Weber Archive at the University of Munich, and the Voegelin Library is housed at the University of Erlangen. Additionally, some documents are stored at his alma mater, the University of Vienna. Voegelin's work has been translated into English and published as a complete work in 34 volumes, accompanied by a detailed catalog of all his writings.³⁶ Some of his works are available in more accessible separate editions, such as his *Autobiographical Reflections* and *Anamnesis*.

³⁶ Eric Voegelin: *International bibliography, 1921- 2000* (München, 2000).

Chapter 1 Voegelin's Notion of Normative Nature

Voegelin's normative notion of human nature and natural rights is complex, especially considering its relationship with the tradition of natural law and Leo Strauss, who was famous for his overwhelming passion for the notion of normative nature. Voegelin's early period of the concept of nature could contribute to this lack, which can be exemplified by two texts. Firstly, through comparison and correspondence with Leo Strauss's writings on John Locke, an important figure in the evolution of natural rights, I will argue that Voegelin shares consensus with Strauss's critique. Both Voegelin and Strauss critique John Locke for his notion of natural rights as a form of partial natural law and Protestantism, which ultimately brings about the hedonism of human nature. However, Voegelin holds a more normative view of nature even than the conservative Strauss. Secondly, I would argue that the foundation of normative nature is not the fight against Gnosticism, which destroyed the structure of nature and reality in modern politics, but rather the theory of reality. However, Voegelin understands the impossibility of reviving normative nature in contemporary society, leading to the practical road of the notion of transcendence.

Eric Voegelin on John Locke's Natural Right

Leo Strauss on John Locke's Notion of Nature

After the disasters of the two World Wars, the intellectuals began to reflect on modernity and the lack of normative standards of modern politics, then the concept of nature retained academic attention, which is represented by the reviving of the New

Natural Law movement. Based on the modern philosophical movement of Catholic origin, it advocates a return to Thomas Aquinas's natural law, which consists of very broad and general principles, represented by Heinrich Rommen and Yves Simon who critiqued that the legal and positive rights are the rejection of the rights of nature, and the contemporary rejection of the rights of nature leads to nihilism and lead the way to the Third Reich and World War. Along similar lines with these Catholic thinkers, Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss also attempt to distinguish the ideological predicaments arising from the positivism of worldview and methodology.

However, there is an important difference between Voegelin and Strauss, as well as other theorists who have written about natural rights and law. Voegelin expresses a certain ambiguity regarding its contemporary revival. Eduardo Passos argued that this ambiguity could be traced back to Voegelin's engagement with various natural law traditions, from Cicero to John Locke, especially his positive evaluation of Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas's interpretations.³⁷ However, this does not explain why Strauss, who also holds a famously uncritical position about classical tradition, is much more aligned with the terms of natural rights and natural law. By reviewing Strauss's position and their interpretations of John Locke, I would argue that it is their different understandings of natural rights that create the gap.

In the first chapter of *Natural Right and History* (1950), Leo Strauss contends that Historicism's dismissal of natural right results in a conventionalist approach where there

³⁷ Eduardo Schmidt Passos, 'Eric Voegelin and the Natural Law Tradition', *Perspectives on Political Science* 48, no. 3 (3 July 2019): 210–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2019.1612506>.

are no inherent rights. Historicism argues that notions of natural rights and justice are merely products of human custom and activity, lacking any universal agreement across diverse backgrounds. Even if such a notion were conceivable, it would be impractical for all to perceive uniformly. Thus, according to Historicism, human activity norms supersede nature.³⁸ Moreover, this stance leads to the assertion of radical historicism: all understanding, regardless of its scope or scientific basis, relies on a frame of reference, a context for integration where knowledge and understanding can evolve. Rational beings must choose among these contexts without any moral guidance other than their own.³⁹

Strauss responds by arguing that the consent of all human beings is not a prerequisite for natural rights, as these rights are rational and not all humans are rational. Additionally, the various notions of justice are not mutually exclusive from natural rights; rather, they serve as presuppositions that prompt the exploration of natural rights. Furthermore, historicism's assumption that the distinction between nature and custom is fundamental, with nature holding the highest moral status while justice is merely customary and contrary to nature, is essentially a repetition of classical philosophy.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Strauss contends that by denying the significance of universal norms, historicism also undermines the only solid foundation for transcending reality—the extreme modern focus on the present moment. Historicism cannot bear this burden because history cannot provide objective norms; in fact, there are no objective norms and realities at all.

³⁸ Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, n.d.), 10–11.

³⁹ Strauss, 28.

⁴⁰ Strauss, 10–11.

Strauss embarked on an intellectual retrospective tracing of the decline of classical natural right and the emergence of modern natural right, with key figures such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke playing pivotal roles. Hobbes shifted the foundation of natural right from divine reason (*ratio divina*) to the desire for self-preservation and fear of death. According to Hobbes, the Leviathan holds the power to enforce laws upon violators with the unquestionable consent of the people. In contrast, Locke's explanation for the source of punitive power is more ambiguous, possibly stemming from conscience, rational calculation, or even self-preservation. However, Strauss asserted that Locke ultimately adhered to Hobbes's teachings, effectively categorizing him as a Hobbesian figure. This interpretation challenges much of the existing scholarship on the relationship between Locke and Hobbes, George Sabine authoritatively asserts that John Locke, through his critique of Robert Filmer, argues against the concept of the state of nature.⁴²

Strauss's main argument can be delineated into three subpoints. Firstly, he contends that Locke's argument for the foundation of natural law is fragile, stemming from its theological underpinnings, which contribute to its partial nature. Locke distinguishes between Christians and non-Christians, asserting that only the former possess the ability to perceive the law of reason. However, since reason cannot demonstrate the existence

⁴¹ Strauss, 17–18.

⁴² George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 2nd Edition (1937; repr., George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1960), 526.

of an afterlife, it is unable to comprehend the law of nature as a binding principle.⁴³ Secondly, Strauss highlights Locke's adherence to a partial law of nature, which is limited to promoting political happiness and the well-being of mankind in this world. This partial conception of natural law represents a significant departure from traditional interpretation, aligning Locke more closely with Hobbes. Both Locke and Hobbes reject the idea that the sanctions of natural law can be enforced through conscience, with Locke dismissing conscience as merely reflecting our own opinions or judgments of moral right and wrong. In essence, Locke, like Hobbes, views private consciences as nothing more than personal opinions.⁴⁴

In conclusion, Strauss's first argument delves into two important Lockean ideas regarding natural rights that may underpin modern notions. Firstly, he explores Locke's conception of desire as foundational to human nature: "Nature . . . has put into man a desire of happiness and an aversion to misery; these, indeed, are innate practical principles."⁴⁵ Strauss interprets this as the pursuit of happiness as an absolute natural right, which originates from nature on the condition that there is no innate natural duty. According to Hobbes, this right of nature is more fundamental than the law of nature and serves as the bedrock for it.⁴⁶

Secondly, Strauss delves into Locke's theory of property and its implications for human nature, particularly in the creation of a division between the poor and the rich. For the

⁴³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 204–5.

⁴⁴ Strauss, 221–22.

⁴⁵ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, 第 Revised 版 (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 67.

⁴⁶ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 231.

wealthy, the absence of a mandate in the law of nature implies that they are permitted to assume that the less fortunate will be cared for by the collective "mother" of society. Conversely, the impoverished contend that each destitute individual is compelled to procure by their labor what they require for self-preservation without regard for others. In essence, the justification for appropriation without consideration for the needs of others is inherent, whether individuals exist in a state of abundance or scarcity. This mindset engenders the consequence that individuals are not content with mere sustenance, leading them to become industrious and rational actors who work diligently, set examples, and compel the lazy and thoughtless to work against their inclinations.⁴⁷

Strauss contends that this mentality, rooted in Protestantism or the spirit of capitalism, marks a shift in the conception of nature. Locke's emphasis on property places the burden on covetousness and lust rather than exemplary charity, thereby establishing the foundation of civil society on the solid yet morally questionable ground of selfishness and private vices. This shift, coupled with Hobbes's revolution, which emphasizes natural rights over duties or obligations, elevates the individual or ego to the center and origin of the moral world. Locke's notion of human nature goes even further than Hobbes's, asserting that creation and non-nature form the basis of value, and self-reliance and creativity become the hallmarks of human nobility. Consequently, humanity is effectively liberated from the constraints of the natural environment, and the rule of convention supplants the rule of nature in shaping the world.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Strauss, 243.

⁴⁸ Strauss, 246–48.

Ultimately, Strauss arrives at his final argument: Locke's notion of natural right and nature itself would lead to a hedonistic worldview, where what is deemed good or bad is reduced to mere pleasure or pain. In this perspective, the absence of the highest good (*summum bonum*) also eliminates the concept of the greatest evil (*summum malum*), and the satisfaction of desires is no longer constrained by the pursuit of a meaningful life but becomes aimless.⁴⁹

"The starting point of human efforts is misery: the state of nature is a state of wretchedness. The way toward happiness is a movement away from the state of nature, a movement away from nature: the negation of nature is the way toward happiness. Just like the primary pain itself, the pain which relieves pain "ceaseth only in death." Since there are therefore no pure pleasures, there is no necessary tension between civil society as the mighty leviathan or coercive society. The painful relief of pain culminates not so much in the greatest pleasures as 'in the having those things which produce the greatest pleasures. 'Life is the joyless quest for joy.'"⁵⁰

It must be noted that Strauss's interpretation has been critically reviewed by contemporary scholars. For example, John Yolton, who also sees a connection between Locke and Hobbes on some epistemological issues,⁵¹ critiques Strauss for not considering the advancements found in the new Locke manuscript about the law of nature, published in 1954.⁵² Yolton argues that Strauss's assumption of esoteric writing in Locke's works is misleading and that Strauss's citations are non-academic.⁵³

In Strauss's reply, he does not directly mention Yolton by name, a common practice in his writings, although he does improve his citation style. Strauss emphasizes that the

⁴⁹ Strauss, 249.

⁵⁰ Strauss, 250.

⁵¹ John W. Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 1956), 153, 158.

⁵² John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature : The Latin Text with a Translation, Introd. and Notes Etc.*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

⁵³ John W. Yolton, 'Locke on the Law of Nature', *Philosophical Review* 67, no. 4 (1958): 477–98.

Leyden translation and editorial team did not fully grasp the philosophical doctrines of John Locke and reiterates his observation about the contradictions in Lockean ideas.⁵⁴ This essay does not aim to determine the "genuine doctrine" of John Locke's political writing and its impact on human nature but rather seeks to elucidate the attitudes and tendencies of Leo Strauss towards natural rights and John Locke, which could, in turn, help us comprehend the position of Eric Voegelin.

Lockean Nature in *The History of Political Ideas*

Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss began their initial substantive correspondence in 1942 January both immigrated to the U.S., in 1964 September, during this period they shared their respective understanding of political thought and covered the notion of natural right. It is interesting that Voegelin also treats Locke and his philosophy as important, while in a very bad way, "when it comes to Locke, my heart runs over. He is for me one of the most repugnant, dirty, morally corrupt appearances in the history of humanity".⁵⁵

Eric Voegelin's main writing of Locke's natural right exists in two main texts. His interest in John Locke and natural right may have risen when he prepared his unpublished project "The History of Ideas" from 1943 to 1945, in which his study of Lockean political theory subordinated to the symbol meaning of natural right and mixed with his study of the rising of modern Gnosticism. In 1953 April 15 and 20, Voegelin wrote two similar letters to Strauss in which he agrees with his analysis of John Locke's

⁵⁴ Leo Strauss, 'Locke's Doctrine of Natural Law', *American Political Science Review* 52, no. 2 (June 1958): 490–501, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1952329>.

⁵⁵ John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature : The Latin Text with a Translation, Introd. and Notes Etc.*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).

natural law, that Locke is in fact Hobbist, he originally wrote the much longer letter first, then gave up sending a much conservative and shorter one. In these writings of John Locke and natural right, Voegelin shared a similar context with Leo Strauss and drew his special answer to this issue.

In the seventh volume of *the History of Political Ideas* entitled as *The New Order and Last Orientation*, Voegelin delved further into his examination of modern Gnosticism and order philosophy. He portrayed the state of political theory at the beginning of the seventeenth century as chaotic, with the collapse of major institutions like the church and the empire, and the nascent emergence of nation-states unable to provide a stable framework for political thought. During this period, humanity experienced a profound disconnection from the universe and God, unlike anything seen before. Individuals found themselves thrust onto the Earth's surface, forced to grapple with their physical existence, their senses, and their mortality. In this existential context, the concept of natural rights emerged as a way for individuals to establish a preliminary order and navigate their existence.⁵⁶ Similar to Leo Strauss's distinction between classical and modern natural law, Voegelin highlighted a key difference between modern natural right (*jus naturale*) and classical natural law (*lex naturalis*). He observed that in modern natural right, the "right" inherent in human existence serves as the starting point for political construction, devoid of any connection to God.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas (Volume 7): The New Order and Last Orientation*, ed. Jurgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollweck (University of Missouri Press, 1999), 47 – 48.

⁵⁷ Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas (Volume 7): The New Order and Last Orientation*, ed. Jurgen Gebhardt and Thomas A. Hollweck (University of Missouri Press, 1999), 48.

Voegelin's original analysis of John Locke can be divided into four main aspects. Firstly, he challenges the traditional study of Lockean political ideas, emphasizing that the focus on Locke's contract theory, limited monarchy, and relationship with Richard Hooker is misplaced. Voegelin argues that Locke's view of contract is inconsistent and superficial, and his preference for monarchy is merely a personal inclination that evolved significantly after the eighteenth-century revolution. Additionally, Voegelin criticizes Locke's citation of Hooker as arbitrary and insufficient to support his arguments.⁵⁸

Secondly, Voegelin highlights Locke's core ideas about human nature and natural right. He views Locke's theory as a new anthropological perspective in the post-medieval era, suggesting that Locke liberated the spiritual personality of man by relegating it to a private sphere. Locke then reinterprets religious elements through this lens, leading to unconventional conclusions such as equating the Lord's Supper with a Dutch lunch.⁵⁹

Voegelin delves into Locke's argument strategy of depriving public status through three distinct steps. Firstly, Locke initially posits that people are prohibited from destroying property as it is considered the creation of God or symbolic representations. However, Locke eventually abandons this religious presupposition and argues that individuals possess property for themselves, becoming equal proprietors and viewing it as a tool for economic purposes. Finally, faced with the realization that divine reason and nature may not offer assistance, individuals are compelled to rely on themselves as their judges and

⁵⁸ Voegelin, 137–40.

⁵⁹ Voegelin, 141–45.

executors.⁶⁰ Throughout these analyses, Voegelin critiques Locke's instrumentalization of human nature, highlighting his belief in a normative conception of nature. He argues that human nature holds inherent value beyond its utility in economic or material pursuits and should not be reduced to artificial or commercial purposes.

In conclusion, Voegelin diagnoses Locke as expelling the spiritual realm from the public domain, reducing it to the material level like property. Voegelin views Locke's ideas as emblematic of bourgeois society, a spiritual disturbance that cannot sustain society in the long term. In his writing, Locke's ideal society is deprived of the normative elements and only resorts to the positive law.⁶¹

Correspondence between Voegelin and Strauss on John Locke

In the letter dated April 15, 1953, Voegelin concurred with Strauss's perspective that Locke's apparent response to Richard Hooker serves as a platform to articulate his views on Thomas Hobbes. Voegelin emphasized that Locke's replacement of the *ratio divina* with opinion veiled under the term "reason" ultimately reduces to desire, rather than a rational foundation. He also suggested a potential revision of Strauss's analysis concerning Locke's use of conscience, highlighting that Locke did not engage with Thomas Aquinas's understanding of *conscientia* as an act of synderesis, a correcting spirit, or a guide of the soul (*actus synderesis*, *spiritus corrector*, or *paedagogus animae*), but rather focused on individual judgment rather than God's judgment.

⁶⁰ Voegelin, 146–50.

⁶¹ Voegelin, 152.

Voegelin further contended that Locke's political philosophy deliberately dismantled spiritual elements by deconstructing the notion of *ratio* and man as *imago Dei*. This deconstruction led to Locke's conception of man as the "proprietor of his person," forming the basis for his theory of ownership through the incorporation of labor into natural matter. Voegelin expressed deep concern over this definition of human essence as self-property, viewing it as one of the most egregious acts. Finally, through the evidence of the Lockean conception of communion and self-property in the "Letter on Toleration", Voegelin concluded that Locke's continuous feature was the systematic dismantling of symbols.⁶²

Voegelin then proceeded to analyze the new meaning of symbols as replaced by John Locke. He argued that Locke's ideal political order, which is founded on equal natural status and the consent of the people, reflects a concrete historical context. This context, according to Voegelin, encompasses the politics of the Stuarts aimed at safeguarding the interests of farmers in New England and slaves in Bermuda against exploitation by landlords and merchants. These efforts were instrumental in inciting revolt among the upper classes against Charles I. Voegelin contended that Locke's defense of this brutal ideological construction served to bolster the position of the English upper class to which he belonged through his social relations.⁶³

Drawing on the interconnectedness of ideas and historical experiences, Voegelin, in

⁶² Emberley and Cooper, *Faith And Political Philosophy*, 95.

⁶³ Emberley and Cooper, 96. Although Voegelin's interpretation from the perspective of experience is seemingly radical, it aligns with recent research studies based on the social structure of post-colonialism critique. For example, David Armitage explored the relationship between his role as an agent for investors in the slave trade and as the lawgiver of the Carolina Constitution. David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95–120.

alignment with Strauss's notion that philosophers should be prudent in their wisdom and expression to protect their philosophizing from disturbance by the unqualified, concluded that Locke, as an ideological constructor who ruthlessly dismantles philosophical problems to justify the political status quo, is not a philosopher but rather a nihilistic destroyer. Voegelin characterized this facade of a philosopher as "the bad conscience of modern man, who doesn't quite dare to declare the knavery that he actually intends." ⁶⁴ Locke's idealized portrayal of political order is, in Voegelin's view, nothing more than a depiction of bourgeois society, which Marx believes to require extensive research and unmasking. As Scott Robison continues to argue, Voegelin suggested that Locke's work should be seen as a significant case of spiritual pathology. Voegelin implies that "Locke is engaged in the activity of subtly constructing ideological arguments which derive their validity from the object of ideological aspiration instead of from robust contemplation of philosophical matters." ⁶⁵

However, this aggressive letter was not sent but was replaced by a much shorter one five days later, on April 20, 1953. In this revised letter, Voegelin concurred with the main argument of Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, asserting that Locke esoterically inherited the modern reformation mission of Hobbes rather than advocating for limited government against Leviathan. The notable change in tone reflects Voegelin's attempt to accommodate the context of Leo Strauss's work and the neutral tone, including the removal of the aggressive criticism of Locke, and instead framing the discussion within

⁶⁴ Emberley and Cooper, *Faith and Political Philosophy*, 96.

⁶⁵ Scott Robinson, *John Locke and the Uncivilized Society: Individualism and Resistance in America Today* (Lexington Books, 2021), 37.

the context of the conflict between the ancients and the modern:

	History of Political Ideas	First Letter (April 15th, 1953)	Second Letter (April 20th, 1953)
The challenge towards past research	Contract theory. Limited monarchy Inherence from Richard Hooker	Hobbes- Locke	Contract theory Hobbes- Locke
Lockean Human nature	Protestant-Bourgeois	Protestant-Bourgeois	Modern people
Locke's argument of Human nature	Man as the being created. Man as the equal commercial proprietor. Man as the executor	(A brief repeat for the previous one.)	Psychology based on desire
Critique for Locke's view	Spiritual disturbance	Non-philosophical	Non-philosophical ideologue

Table 1 Comparison of Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss's Analysis of John Locke

From this analysis, we can conclude that Voegelin's reading and analysis of Locke remain roughly the same, addressing Locke's views on limited government, his references to Hooker, and the arguments regarding the revision of human nature. However, there is a significant change in Voegelin's interpretation of Locke: he pays less attention to Locke's argumentative strategy regarding the new human nature,

instead situating Locke within a more dynamic movement that pursues reality as the mission of philosophy. Although Locke plays a reactive role and cannot be considered a philosopher in Voegelin's full sense, Voegelin's revised interpretation places greater emphasis on this philosophical pursuit. One possible explanation for Voegelin's revision is his theoretical strategy. He attempted to align with Leo Strauss in arguing that the concepts of "natural" and human nature were undermined by John Locke while setting aside their different understandings of "natural rights."

Voegelin maintained a more normative notion of nature than Strauss, leading to ultimately different interpretations. For Strauss, the term "natural right" in the modernity project can be summarized as playing a negative role, emphasizing the subjectivity of individual good rather than the objective values advocated by natural law. In contrast, Voegelin does not focus on the dichotomy between natural law and natural right. Instead, he is concerned with how ideas reshape and reform themselves throughout history. Therefore, for Voegelin, the term "natural rights" is somewhat neutral, allowing him to explore whether Locke is a philosopher who uses the language of natural rights.⁶⁶

Leo Strauss may recognize the distinction between his views and those of Voegelin. In his response letter dated April 29, 1953, Strauss acknowledged that they shared a similar, unusual understanding of the relationship between Locke and Hobbes. However, he then began to make a distinction between modern natural rights and classical natural rights.⁶⁷ This strategy largely aligns with Voegelin's point that natural rights could serve as a

⁶⁶ Emberley and Cooper, 95–96.

⁶⁷ Emberley and Cooper, 97–98.

basis for philosophical debate while maintaining his stance on the untenable and narrow nature of modern natural rights.

The differing understandings of modern natural right between Eric Voegelin and Leo Strauss cannot solely be attributed to their differing emphasis on this complex conception or their respective interpretations of Locke's political theory. Instead, it can be traced back to their distinct interpretations of Plato and Greek philosophy, which significantly influenced their attitudes toward modernity. This foundational difference in their philosophical outlooks may have ultimately led to their eventual parting of ways, initiated by Strauss, who held a greater affinity towards the classical notion of nature rather than natural right.

Gnosticism, Reality, and Normative Nature

Gnosticism and its Destruction of Human Nature

Voegelin continued his analysis of human nature and modernity as launched by John Locke, a theme he explored in his 1951 Charles Walgreen lectures at the University of Chicago, published as *The New Science of Politics*. In this narrative, Voegelin portrayed modernity as characterized by the resurgence of Gnosticism. Gnosticism, traditionally thought to have emerged in the late 1st century AD among Jewish and early Christian sects, arose as a response to the collapse of the universal empire. The sense of rejection from the world and the desire for personal spiritual knowledge (gnosis) prompted adherents to unite and seek to reshape the perceived guilty world, which could echo the contemporary discourse of the US Cold War, the future of an artificial apocalypse of

nuclear bombs appear as the latest and most dramatic expression of an outlook on the human condition which refuses to accept limits in the imposition of human designs on the world.

The themes of anxiety about the fallen world and a fervent desire for salvation were effectively echoed in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, a collection of early Christian and Gnostic texts discovered near the Upper Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi, although Voegelin may have no access to it until the 70s.⁶⁸ These texts resonated with expressions of alienation from mainstream society, a longing to transcend mortal life, and a quest for a lifestyle distinct from societal norms. For example, "The Apocryphon of John", a revelation purportedly imparted by the resurrected Christ to John, son of Zebedee, grapples with questions about the origins of sin and how to escape the confines of the world.⁶⁹ Similarly, in "On the Origin of the World", the narrative describes the initial state of the world as chaotic and void, with wisdom and light emanating from the natural order. However, the shadows grew jealous of these powerful elements, leading to a struggle for dominance.⁷⁰

Voegelin posited a parallel between this passion for the destruction of reality and historical philosophical developments, expanding on the narrative of modernity and Gnosticism. He argued that this mentality of destruction affected human nature in various ways. The anxiety it engendered drove individuals to seek to overcome or

⁶⁸ Matthias Riedl, 'Modernity as the Immanentization of the Eschaton - A Critical Re-Evaluation of Eric Voegelin's Gnosis', in *Revolutions: Finished and Unfinished, From Primal to Final*, ed. Paul Caringella, Wayne Cristaudo, and Glenn Hughes (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

⁶⁹ James M. Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English: Revised Edition*, Reprint edition (Harper One, 1990), 111.

⁷⁰ Robinson, 194–95.

conquer reality, leading to a sense of hubris and an overestimation of human capabilities. Ultimately, this path led to disastrous outcomes, epitomized by the self-destruction witnessed in figures like Adolf Hitler.

Firstly, Voegelin's analysis delves into the nature of human beings and their quest for certainty in faith. The collapse of Christianity's influence brings about a sense of uncertainty in modernity, prompting a shift towards self-divinization and the radicalization of Gnosticism. This transformation is reflected in the transition from the notion of the Paraclete to that of the Superman, and its impact on civilization ranges from monasticism to scientism. Voegelin sees modernity as the unfolding of Gnosticism, leading to a belief in individual and civilizational salvation through action and the empowerment to construct civilization. However, this development comes at the cost of spiritual death and the murder of God, culminating in the emergence of totalitarianism as the ultimate form of progressive civilization.⁷¹

Voegelin's ideas about human nature and anxiety can be traced back to his early work, "The Political Religions," written in April 1938 just after the Anschluss Österreichs and escaping to the U.S., shocked by the National Socialism Terror and the appeasement of British and French politicians. In this text, Voegelin explores the theological foundation of state supremacy and delves into its sources. He critiques Hegel's notion that the state embodies the prevailing *Weltgeist*, arguing that this perspective fails to account for the tendency of the state to become the sole reality and to deprive individuals of their reality.

⁷¹ Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction*, Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 130–33.

Voegelin highlights the cosmic aspect of human nature and the mystical dimension of religion, asserting that these elements cannot be controlled by political activity. Then Voegelin further employs the concept of nature to convey a sense of hidden emotions and existential anxiety: The existence of human being is natural(kreatürlich) and untenable, and the innermost soul is linked to the cosmos and keeps tugging at him. Then the agitation of naturalness finds fulfillment and provides deliverance through the Beyond surrounding us, from the inanimate nature to God.⁷² This spiritual dimension of nature provides the condition of the Gnosticism undermined.

The second danger posed by the Gnostic revolution is the destruction of public order. Historical events such as the Fronde in France and the Thirty Years War in Germany underscored the importance of maintaining political order in society, because different religious groups claimed to represent spiritual truth, and they used this claim to seek political power. Hobbes's representative theory suggests that people can adhere to the dictates of reason, seek peace, and abide by natural law, but it necessitates the oversight of a sovereign to establish a political society. According to Hobbes's contract theory, the representative of existence merges with the existing society, negating the essential tension between the truth of society and the soul, as seen in the case of the Thirty Years War. Consequently, Hobbes's idea of an everlasting constitution is a manifestation of Gnosticism that undermines nature.⁷³ More importantly, in the later passage, Voegelin argued Hobbes' solution different from Protestant Gnosticism tried to address truth with

⁷² Manfred Henningsen and Eric Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions, the New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (University of Missouri Press, 1999), 30–32. It is notable

⁷³ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 154–61.

society otherwise destroy it, namely, the immanentize of eschatology. Immanent, as the opposite of transcendent, means dwelling in the present within a limited, mundane reality. In turn, Hobbes argued that any order could represent the truth if it ensured that society existed. Thus, he made a new conception of man, who seeks consummation in himself, not in transcendence like the supreme good (*summum bonum*) from Aristotle.⁷⁴

The clue of the Gnosticism and public order was further illustrated in his November 1958 speech titled "Science, Politics, and Gnosticism," which was Voegelin's Munich inaugural lecture following his return to Germany, he responded to the increasing Marxist tendency in students. Voegelin identified socialism in the Soviet Union as a representative of political beings, contrasting it with normative nature, through analyzing the characteristic nature of modern politics, which prohibits questioning. Figures like Auguste Comte and Karl Marx rudely refused to engage with specific critiques in their writings and speeches. Marx, in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, described existence as a process of nature's self-perfection, with man and nature portrayed as opposites. However, he failed to substantiate this claim and instead dismissed questions about it. Similarly, Comte dismissed such inquiries as tedious in his *Course of Empirical Philosophy*.⁷⁵

Both Marx and Comte sought to abolish the transcendental origin of existence through their doctrines of communism and positivism. Voegelin argued Marx is a speculative Gnostic, through the construing the paradox of nature, that "Man is directly a being of

⁷⁴ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 179-82.

⁷⁵ Henningsen and Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint*, 257-60.

nature" and its development of nature has developed upon man, also stands over against nature and assists it in its development by human labor, and in its highest form is technology and industry into "Nature as it develops in human history... as it develops through industry". Considering Marx's usage of nature also focuses on the *essentia*, this process of creating nature achieved climax with Marx's sentence "A being that does not have its nature outside of itself is not a natural being."⁷⁶ Voegelin associated these Gnostic ideas of creating or shaping nature with popular movements and ersatz religion, which stemmed from dissatisfaction with reality and a belief in the world's inherent flaws. This ideology posits that the order of existence can be transformed through human action, a burden carried by the Spiritualists.⁷⁷

The third danger posed by Gnosticism is self-destruction. Gnostics disregard principles of existence and create a dream world, attacking the dianoetic virtues and promoting moral insanity. Take Hobbes, for example his invention of civil theology signifies the radical immanence of existence, portraying a life of the spirit as *libido dominandi*. Classical philosophy's teleology, as advocated by Aristotle, centers on the *summum bonum*, whereas Hobbes abolishes this concept and replaces it with an order founded by a group of isolated individuals.⁷⁸

This phenomenon is also evident in Voegelin's series of lectures in Munich in 1964 on *Hitler and the Germans*, which was given upon request of the Munich student body. As the pioneer of the German university professor to lecture on the Nazi period, Voegelin

⁷⁶ Henningsen and Voegelin, 283–85.

⁷⁷ Henningsen and Voegelin, 295.

⁷⁸ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 180–82.

piqued the class's interest by recognizing the obvious continuity between the Nazis and West Germany, delving into the motives that propelled the Nazis to power and the judiciary's inaction, which cannot solely be attributed to Hitler. Voegelin argued that Hitler cannot be analyzed in isolation as a separate personality but must be viewed alongside the attitude of the German people. A society is considered to exist when it can elect representatives to assume responsibility. Hitler, as a representative, suffered from pneumopathology, the obscuring of the spiritual essence of human nature, and the loss of the spiritual dimension of normality. This necessitates a restoration of consciousness to the transcendent dimension in reality and the presence of God.⁷⁹

Gnosticism or Reality of Politics?

However, the concept of Gnosticism fails to explain modern political history, such as the notion that World War II was caused by "Gnosticism politicians," which is incoherent. Firstly, Gnosticism, as a long intellectual tradition, has been used to describe the complex and lengthy history since the Hellenistic period. When applied to analyze the rise of modernity and World War II, the concept is stretched beyond its original scope. Voegelin's thesis on natural reality, or the normative nature and its destruction, such as Gnostic Socialism, does not address the question of what the original ideas of nature untouched by Gnosticism are. It is nearly impossible to discern a pure idea based on classical notions and declare its legitimacy, given the tension between different accounts of nature, such as Platonism and Aristotelianism. Even if conclusions could be

⁷⁹ Eric Voegelin, *Hitler and the Germans*, trans. Brendan Purcell and Detlev Clemens, First Edition (University of Missouri, 1999), 51–55.

drawn from ancient texts, it is necessary to engage with modern situations to move beyond pure intellectual history and enter the realm of political theory.

Secondly, Voegelin does not distinguish the primary cause of Gnosticism which may lead to the trap of circular argument. In Voegelin's analysis of modernity and Gnosticism, these two elements are intertwined, making it difficult to distinguish which is the primary cause. While he claims that Modern Gnosticism originated with Joachim da Fiore in the twelfth century and later fueled modernity without restraint, it is reasonable to argue that modernity also created conditions for the flourishing of Gnosticism. Gnostic actions are attributed to Gnosticism itself, leading to a conflation of modernity and Gnosticism in the framework and an overstretching of the concept. If modernity is embedded in Gnosticism, how can a better possible world based on normative nature be demonstrated without Gnosticism?

Lastly, there is an inherent defect in the research of Gnosticism from the perspective of modernity critique, which easily falls into the trap of reductionism. Simply uncovering clues and sources of spiritualism in a figure's comprehensive work is insufficient to attribute some kind of essence, as it fails to account for further elements of knowledge.

⁸⁰ Voegelin's assertion that Hitler was driven by Gnosticism, as an uneducated man full of vulgar ethos, reflects a pedantic viewpoint. This is not unique to Voegelin; Ernst Topitsch's research on Marxism and Gnosticism similarly argues that Marx, shaped by Romantic and Hegelian philosophy, did not shed the notion of counter-Enlightenment,

⁸⁰ Voegelin, 178.

but still manifested old Neo-Platonism and Gnostic knowledge, eschatology, and apocalyptic literature, especially regarding his notions of externalization and alienation.⁸¹ Hans Blumenberg's classical *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* argues for the opposite, against Topitsch and Voegelin, saying that modernity means the overcoming of Gnosticism, thus bringing the remedy of the reductionism tendency of Gnosticism.

I would argue that Voegelin's main focus was not on Gnosticism, but rather on his theory of reality, as covered by the discourse of truth and representation within the framework of historical philosophy. This interpretation of reality provides a more reasonable explanation for several reasons.

Firstly, the discussion of Gnosticism is only a small part of Voegelin's text compared to the broader discussion of positivism and the new science of politics. In the introduction, Voegelin begins with the assertion that "The existence of man in political society is historical existence; and a theory of politics, if it penetrates to principles, must at the same time be a theory of history".⁸² He traces historical moments of crisis and the subsequent rebuilding of a new science of politics, citing examples such as Plato and Aristotle's responses to the crisis in Greece, St. Augustine's response to the crisis in Rome and Christianity, and Hegel's response to the crisis in the Western world. During times of crisis, societal order falters, bringing fundamental political problems into focus and prompting a return to the consciousness of principles.

⁸¹ Ernst Topitsch, 'Marxismus Und Gnosis', in *Sozial- Philosophie Zwischen Ideologie Und Wissenschaft* (Neuwied, 1966).

⁸² Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 1–2.

Secondly, if the discussion of Gnosticism were omitted, Voegelin's main argument would remain intact. In the first chapter, Voegelin distinguishes between representation in elemental aspects such as electoral behavior, and representation in an existential sense, which is inherent in the societal form and action in history.⁸³ He concludes that contemporary theories of representation often exhibit provincialism and an uncritical preference for elemental aspects, neglecting the structure of existence.

The dimension of representation and truth opens the door for a discussion of truth and reality. Voegelin then explores these perspectives in the second chapter, arguing that society represents the cosmic order and defines truth and falsehood. Taking classical times as an example, Plato's anthropological principle emphasizes the relationship between the polis and the individual, suggesting that political society is an ordered cosmion and provides a way to interpret society. Aristotle's theory of the mature man similarly emphasizes experiential basis and the authority of theoretical truth.⁸⁴ These transcendental notions derive from tragic experiences such as the Athenian struggle against the Persian Empire, exemplified in Aeschylus's *Suppliants*, which demonstrate the importance of action, governance through persuasion, and decisions for justice (Dike).

Based on the line of reality, Voegelin's discourse on political phenomena such as truth or representation points to the dimension of reality. Through his study of representation in existential meaning and the experiential foundation of Plato's and Aristotle's

⁸³ Voegelin, 36–38.

⁸⁴ Voegelin, 66–68.

philosophies, Voegelin moves away from positivism and metaphysics, detaching the conception of reality or transcendental truth. He turns to the typology of truth in the third chapter, concluding that there are three kinds of truth: cosmological truth, anthropological truth, and soteriological truth.⁸⁵

In essence, in this text, Voegelin succeeds in two tasks. Firstly, he establishes the direction of normality and the appearance of reality, rather than the converse. Secondly, he elaborates on the foundation of normality based on reality, rather than on the counterpoint of Gnosticism and modernity. In the next section, I will further contextualize the connection between the normality of nature and reality through Voegelin's text of political philosophy.

Eric Voegelin and Hannah Arendt on the Concept of Nature

When Eric Voegelin wrote *The History of Political Ideas* before he dives into the complex symbols of natural rights, he explained the philosophical meaning of Nature:

"Nature does not mean the nature of physics or chemistry, but in modern English may probably be best interpreted as the "essence of man." The meaning is, therefore, rather elastic, for it depends, in the case of Grotius as well as of later naturalists, on the opinion of the philosopher as to what constitutes the "essence of man." As a rule we may state that political thinkers are inclined to call "essence of man" the view that they hold of their personality. The ultimate source of natural law in practice, therefore, is the personality of the philosopher, with its physiological, characterological, social, and historical determinants. If we wish to come to the core of the systems, therefore, we must in each case pierce the shell of legal, geometrical, or physical terminology to get at the self-interpretation of the thinker."⁸⁶

This clue could be connected to his pivotal work published in 1966, *Anamnesis*,

⁸⁵ Voegelin, 77.

⁸⁶ Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas*, 55.

Voegelin revisited the notion of nature and traced it back to the experiences of the Greeks. In Chapter 6, entitled "Right by Nature," he argued that right by nature is a symbol of classical philosophy. Classical philosophers interpreted the intellectual experience of justified human action, which gradually lost its experiential roots to become a philosophical thesis, a collection of norms of eternal and immutable validity in law, a theme that remains divorced from experience even as we have revived it today. Voegelin examined Aristotle's natural right (*Physei dikaion*) in *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is ambiguous because the concepts therein often break through his theoretical framework, and because *physis* tends to have several meanings.⁸⁷ To specify the dimensions of nature that Aristotle involved, Voegelin introduced a different classification of Nature into three meanings: the physical, the divine, and the human. When Aristotle speaks of natural justification, it is a natural justification between the tension of eternal divinity and human existence.

In the next chapter, "What is Nature?" (1965), Voegelin reexamines how Aristotle's "nature" refers to constant structures in motion, and how a return to the lexicon's "form-quality" (nature as the form of things) in *Metaphysics* does little to help this problem.⁸⁸ Voegelin unsatisfied with the broad existential experience of nature in the history of Greek thought became a merely metaphysical conception of nature.⁸⁹ In the last chapter of *Anamnesis*, Voegelin noted the lack the dimension of reality would bring the disaster of the human condition: The loss of actuality results in a situation where the

⁸⁷ Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak and Gerhart Niemeyer (University of Missouri Press, 2002), 140–41.

⁸⁸ Voegelin, 157–58.

⁸⁹ Voegelin, 162.

individual suffers from the chaos of spiritual disease, which manifests itself in intransigent revolutionary activity, noisy propaganda, bloody executions, but can arrive at a turning point by becoming aware of the suffering that comes with dark life.⁹⁰

Voegelin's strong defense of the normative nature of reality can be better exemplified through his correspondence with Hannah Arendt about human nature. In 1952, Voegelin published his review of Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) in *The Review of Politics*. After a long critical analysis of totalitarianism as an immanentist creed movement, Voegelin began to explore the relationship between totalitarianism and human nature. According to Arendt,

"What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself."⁹¹

"Human nature as such is at stake, and even though it seems that these experiments succeed not in changing man but only in destroying him ... one should bear in mind the necessary limitations to an experiment which requires global control to show conclusive results."⁹²

Voegelin cannot accept Arendt's usage of the concept of nature,

"When I read this sentence, I could hardly believe my eyes. 'Nature' is a philosophical concept; it denotes that which identifies a thing as a thing of this kind and not of another one. A 'nature' cannot be changed or transformed; a 'change of nature' is a contradiction of terms; tampering with the 'nature' of a thing means destroying the thing. To conceive the idea of 'changing the nature' of man (or of anything) is a symptom of the intellectual breakdown of Western civilization. The author adopts the immanentist ideology."⁹³

The adjective "immanent" takes its meaning in opposition to "transcendent."

Accordingly, the phrase "immanentist ideology" refers to an act of ignoring, reducing,

⁹⁰ Voegelin, 434.

⁹¹ Hannah Arendt, '[The Origins of Totalitarianism]: A Reply', *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 1 (1953): 432.

⁹² Arendt, 433.

⁹³ Eric Voegelin, 'The Origins of Totalitarianism', *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 1 (1953): 74–5.

transfiguring, or perhaps explaining away the existence of experiences of world-transcendent reality, a reality conventionally described as "divine." However, as Barry Cooper has pointed out, Voegelin did analyze why Arendt would adopt this perspective. In response to Voegelin's poignant critique, Arendt claimed her terminological usage was the same as Voegelin's in *The New Science of Politics*. When discussing the Platonic-Aristotelian theory of the soul, Voegelin states: "One might almost say that before the discovery of psyche man had no soul," and with the discoveries of totalitarian domination and its experiments, we have reason to fear that man may lose his soul.⁹⁴ More importantly, Arendt hinted that the inflexibility of the concept of nature would not bring genuine normality or a solution for totalitarianism.

"Under these conditions, it will be hardly consoling to cling to an unchangeable nature of man and conclude that either man himself is being destroyed or that freedom does not belong to man's essential capabilities. Historically we know of man's nature only insofar as it has existence, and no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities."

In the much shorter concluding remark, Voegelin interestingly skipped the debate on the notion of nature. This can be explained from two aspects. Firstly, Voegelin realized that he did not have a substantial disagreement with Arendt after the clarification, and Arendt may have shared this view. Before the published dialogue, Voegelin wrote a letter to Arendt anticipating aspects of his review, where he delivered his view of normative nature for the first time with a much more conciliatory tone: "A thing is its identifying essence...talk of a change of human nature implies the antireligious revolt against the *imago Dei*. And the attempt to change this nature ends (as you quite rightly

⁹⁴ Arendt, '[The Origins of Totalitarianism]', 83.

state) with its destruction".⁹⁵ In Arendt's two versions of her reply, she did not address the critique of nature, and the missing passage of Voegelin's reading might explain why Voegelin misunderstood and made more aggressive comments.⁹⁶ As Peter Baehr said, the authors were "bound more by common dislikes than by shared enthusiasms".⁹⁷

However, this first explanation cannot fully account for Voegelin's understanding of normative nature compared to Arendt and his earlier exchanges with Leo Strauss. Voegelin's view of normative nature can be attributed to realism, contrasting with Arendt's more nominalist approach, which allows for greater mutability. This perspective reflects Voegelin's perception of the tension between normative nature and modernity, exemplified in his analysis of Jean Bodin. Bodin attempted to re-establish political order based on the idea of natural order amidst the spiritual disorder and partisanship brought by the Protestant Reformation. He aimed to continue the Greek concept of a closed universe with a typical understanding of man and politics but ultimately failed.⁹⁸

Through a retrospective examination of the intellectual history of nature, including figures like Plato, John Locke, and Leo Strauss, Voegelin ultimately distilled the notion of normative nature, arguing that the core of human nature is its essential qualities. However, the failure of Jean Bodin led to a re-evaluation of the possibility of reviving the classical notion of nature, including normative nature. This posed a more

⁹⁵ Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells, 'Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters Between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin', *History and Theory* 51, no. 3 (2012): 374.

⁹⁶ Baehr and Wells, 375–80.

⁹⁷ Baehr and Wells, 375.

⁹⁸ Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas (Volume 5): Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, 137–38.

challenging question for Voegelin: how to refine the concept of nature, delve into its changeability, and illustrate it acceptably, rather than relying on Bodin's astronomical metaphor of the collapse of the stars. This re-evaluation echoes Arendt's response to Voegelin's understanding of nature. Arendt referenced Montesquieu, who observed that Western civilization was no longer guaranteed by laws and that governance by customs was insufficient to resist despotism.

"Man, this flexible being, who submits himself in society to the thoughts and impressions of his fellow-men, is equally capable of knowing his nature when it is shown to him as it is and of losing it to the point where he has no realization that he is robbed of it."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Arendt, '[The Origins of Totalitarianism]', 84. The Preface to *L'Esprit des Lois* "L'homme, cet être des autres, est également capable de connaître sa propre nature flexible, se pliant dans la société aux pensées et aux impressions lorsqu'on la lui montre, et d'en perdre jusqu'au sentiment lorsqu'on la lui dérobe."

Chapter 2 Plural Nature and Multiple *Ecumene*

Voegelin's research on Chinese civilizations challenged his earlier framework of order philosophy, which was based on a linear historical view and a normative understanding of human nature. Confronted with the tension between universal human nature and multiple *Ecumene*, Voegelin sought to unify the stream of divine presence in separate geographical regions through his theory. Similarly, Wenming Tang's notable work proposed constructing a typology of Chinese civilization to compare with Greek and Israeli civilizations. Both solutions presuppose an even spatial nature of the Chinese *Ecumene* but do not elaborate on it. I propose an interpretation based on the spatial perspective of the *Ecumene*, considering the condition of human nature across multiple *Ecumene*. I argue that this is grounded in Voegelin's renovation of historiography for comparative civilization studies, particularly influenced by Karl Jaspers. I will construct the Chinese *Ecumene* as characterized by hierarchy, where the even spatial nature shifts the Chinese emphasis from imperial expansion to spiritual development.

Towards Plural Human Nature

Order Philosophy and Ecumenic Age

Guided by the view of normative nature, Voegelin experienced a significant methodological shift. This change is chronologically linked with his discovery of symbols as a form of order philosophy. In February 1939, Voegelin planned to write a 200-page college textbook on the history of political thought, which became the draft of the *History of Political Ideas*. This work aimed to challenge popular textbooks like

George Sabine's *The History of Political Theory* and William Dunning's *History of Political Theories*. Voegelin argued that these political theorists shared the common assumption that political phenomena should be studied based on ideas. However, this approach contradicts the process of science, where ideas are transformations of symbols expressing experience into concepts.¹⁰⁰

Voegelin believed that studying political phenomena through the lens of ideas could not explain certain phenomena, such as the continuity of Greek philosophy and the prophets of Israel. He found that the symbols of these mythological revelations could not be reduced to mere concepts. Instead, Voegelin discovered that the relationship between symbols and experiences was more fundamental than the ideas derived from them. Voegelin further argued that ideas, being transformations of symbols expressing experiences into concepts, stand at a secondary level of development and often distort the original positive experiences. For instance, an Egyptian coronation ritual or the recitation of the *Enuma Elish* during Sumerian New Year festivals could not be fully understood by merely labeling them as "ideas." Voegelin acknowledged his initial struggle to grasp the origins and meanings of these concepts. As a result, Voegelin's research shifted from focusing on abstract concepts to examining positive experiences and their direct expressions. He proposed that the reality of experience is self-interpretive, emphasizing that experiences and their symbolic expressions are inherently designed to convey their principles. This shift marked a significant turning point in Voegelin's methodological approach, moving away from the study of ideas to a

¹⁰⁰ Monika Puhl, *Eric Voegelin in Baton Rouge* (München: Fink Wilhelm GmbH + Co.KG, 2005); Eric Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections, Revised Edition with Glossary* (University of Missouri Press, 2011), 104–5.

deeper understanding of the relationship between symbols and lived experiences.¹⁰¹

Voegelin ultimately discovered that experiences are expressed through symbols, which are linguistic representations of experience and consciousness. These symbols link the divine and human encounters, allowing participation in both divine and human reality. This insight was influenced by his correspondence with his friend, Alfred Schütz, and their discussions about Edmund Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Voegelin acknowledged that while Husserl had made significant contributions to modern philosophy, there was a mix of arrogance in his work, similar to that of Hegel and the National Socialist Party. After a thorough critique of Husserl's conception of consciousness, Voegelin argued that it was absurd to claim that nothing outside of the consciousness of the external world, led him to explore what constitutes human experience. In his later research, particularly in *Anamnesis*, Voegelin posited that experience itself is neither subject nor object, but interstitial, which is essential for understanding the presence of divinity.¹⁰²

Recognizing that the symbolic relationship is more fundamental than the conceptual, Voegelin devoted his energy to his new series of writings in *Order and History*, thus dedicating the rest of his life to Order Philosophy. For Voegelin, the order is an experienced structure of reality, closely linked to how people perceive the highest mystery, or Being.

"God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being. The community with its quaternarian structure is, and is not, a datum of human experience. It is a datum of experience insofar as it is known to man by his participation in the

¹⁰¹ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections, Revised Edition with Glossary*, 90.

¹⁰² Voegelin, 96–97.

mystery of its being. It is not a datum of experience insofar as it is not given in the manner of an object of the external world but is knowable only from the perspective of participation in it." ¹⁰³

The second aspect of Voegelin's order philosophy concerns the varying experiences and symbols representing the reality of the world and its mysteries, which can be chronologically categorized into myths, history, and philosophy. Voegelin divides the phases of order into two groups: cosmological order and the order experienced through the leap of being.

In terms of cosmological order, early empires in the Near and Far East saw themselves as representatives of a transcendent cosmic order and truth. This can be traced back to ancient texts like the Chinese *Shangshu* (尚書) and inscriptions from Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and Persia. These empires viewed themselves as analogs of the cosmos, small worlds that reflected the order of the larger world. Their goal was to ensure that social order was in harmony with cosmic order. The boundaries of the empire symbolized the world and its four quarters; the great rituals mirrored the rhythms of the cosmos; festivals and sacrifices were cosmic liturgies, symbolizing participation in the universe's cosmion—a smaller representation of the universe at the individual level. Through representing the transcendent power, the governor maintained cosmic order on earth.

This perspective supports the argument from the previous chapter: the normality of nature relies on the theory of natural entities rather than the critique of Gnosticism. Voegelin increasingly focused on this theme, sometimes unconsciously. His intellectual

¹⁰³ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 1): Israel and Revelation*, ed. Maurice P. Hogan (University of Missouri, 2001), 39.

history begins with the cosmological symbols of the Near Eastern empires. The revelatory breakthrough of Israel caused an explosion of intellectual thought among Greek philosophers, leading to a leap of being. This leap extends from individual consciousness to a group of people, fostering the formation of a civilization that can impact all of humanity. Voegelin initially planned to extend his analysis to the modern era, including the development of empires and Gnosticism. However, realizing the complexity of aligning empirical types with historical meaning in any time sequence, he began with thematic studies starting with early Christianity and moving on to the history of the Gnostics. This approach allowed him to incorporate the latest historiographical findings, including those related to the Chinese Empire and Gnosticism.¹⁰⁴ These types of order and symbolic form are the following.¹⁰⁵

Initial Plan for <i>Order and History</i>	Content
I. Israel and Revelation	The imperial organizations of the ancient Near East, and their existence in the form of the cosmological myth;
II. The World of the Polis	The Chosen People, and its existence in historical form;
III. Plato and Aristotle	The polis and its myth, and the development of philosophy as the symbolic form of order;
IV. Empire and Christianity	The multicivilizational empires since Alexander,

¹⁰⁴ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections, Revised Edition with Glossary*, 107–8.

¹⁰⁵ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 1): Israel and Revelation*, 20.

	and the development of Christianity;
V. The Protestant Centuries VI. The Crisis of Western Civilization	The modern national states, and the development of Gnosis as the symbolic form of order.

Table 2 Voegelin's Initial Plan for *Order and History*

However, Voegelin encountered significant difficulty reconciling the Western concept of nature with the Far Eastern concept of *T'ien-hsia*, which reshaped his notion of normative nature. The publication of the fourth volume of *Order and History*, *The Ecumenic Age* (1974), came seventeen years after the first three volumes. In the introduction, Voegelin acknowledged that this book diverged from his initial plan. He conceived history as a process of increasingly differentiated insights into the order of being, in which humans participate through their experiences. However, the structures emerging from historical orders and their symbolization proved more complicated than anticipated. His original five types of order were regrettably limited, and more importantly, he could not align empirical types with historical meaning in any time sequence.¹⁰⁶

Voegelin's turning point can be better understood concerning Karl Jaspers's concept of the Axial Age. In *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers argued that between the 8th and 3rd centuries BC, several different civilizations experienced a spiritual breakthrough, explaining the birth of universal human beings and their transcendental foundations.¹⁰⁷ Jaspers attempted to portray a universal history in which the universal

¹⁰⁶ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, 45–46.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 1st edition (Routledge, 2021), 14–16.

human being is the main subject, using transcendental breakthroughs as the spiritual impetus. He presupposed the equal spatial structure of axial civilizations like China, India, and Greece.

Jaspers suggested that these breakthroughs brought tension between the transcendental and mundane orders. A small nucleus of intellectual elites became aware of the necessity to actively construct the world according to a transcendental intellectual breakthrough. These attempts at re-ordering the world developed in various spheres of human existence and activity, including philosophy, religion, and science.¹⁰⁸ This process of institutionalization helped classify knowledge into second-order worlds, leading to societal restructuring and the emergence of new elites.

Voegelin criticized Jaspers's efforts as oversimplifications, overwhelmed by the richness and diversity of spirit, attempting to reduce all breakthroughs to some common element of cause. This brings us to the question: can a pluralistic spirituality that is unconscious of itself be interpreted as a meaningful structure in human history? Who is the subject hidden behind the symbolic expression "human"? Who is *humanitas abscondita*?

Voegelin proposed that humanity is not a concrete society and that epiphanies make humans realize their tension towards divine reality, giving rise to the in-betweenness or *metaxy* of the divine and the human. Replacing Jaspers's spiritual breakthrough, Voegelin introduced the concept of a leap in being based on his theory of consciousness. For Voegelin, humans have always experienced a sense of divinity. There has been a

¹⁰⁸ S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State Univ of New York Pr, 1986), 4–5.

process of differentiation in that experience and its symbolization from primal societies to more "advanced" cosmological societies to societies predicated on Judeo-Christian and Greek thought.¹⁰⁹ The leap in being is clearly articulated in Judeo-Christian and Greek symbolic representations, with the fullest differentiation achieved in its Pauline form.

Facing the Axial Age emphatically forward-looking of spiritual breakthrough, Voegelin constructed his theory of the Ecumenic Age, that under the pressures of imperial conquest, the compact society of cosmological empires differentiated into a society ordered by pragmatic and spiritual domains, which brings the fundamental division that emerged between the temporal and spiritual poles of existence. According to Michael P. Morrissey, the notion of the Ecumenic Age is depicted in the following developments:

(1) the rise and fall of successive empires transformed the political landscape of the ethnic societies they overran into a sea of 'senseless misery' due to the absence of a coherent cultural base.

(2) Out of this turmoil emerged a new realm where order was experienced independently from society, pursued in personal existence.

(3) This contraction provided fertile soil for spiritual outbursts and the growth of religions.

(4) As ecumenic self-understanding developed, there emerged a missionary impulse among philosophers and religious leaders who saw themselves as representatives of a truth valid for all humankind.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Hoffman, 'Eric Voegelin's Leap in Being', *VoegelinView* (blog), 7 April 2017, <https://voegelinview.com/eric-voegelins-leap-part/>.

¹¹⁰ Michael P. Morrissey, *Consciousness and Transcendence: The Theology of Eric Voegelin* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 97-99.

The Predicament between Normative Nature and Multiple *Ecumene*

One of the most significant challenges Voegelin faced, which impeded his progress, was understanding the role of the Chinese *Ecumene*. As an essential part of the multiple worlds alongside Israel and Greece, China challenged his original notion of universal nature. Voegelin's interest in China can be traced back to his early writings on Max Weber (1925), where he mentioned China numerous times as an example. This interest continued with his references to *Tong Jian Gang Mu* (通鑑綱目) in *Race and State*. His engagement deepened in the 1940s when he taught Chinese courses at LSU:

"The horizon grew even larger during the war, because China had become fashionable and the department decided that I, with my linguistic facility, would be elected to teach Chinese government. That threw me into the study of Chinese history; and because it was a bit difficult to talk about contemporary Chinese ideas without understanding their classical background, I started learning Chinese and learned enough to understand the symbols of the Classics, especially of Confucius and Lao-tse. This knowledge helped considerably in understanding Chinese thought."¹¹¹

According to Muen Liu, Voegelin's in-depth research on China between the 1950s and 1960s can be divided into three phases:

1. **1953:** Voegelin positioned China within the framework of comparative civilizations, comparing it to Egypt and ancient Greece in the fragments of *Israel and Revelation*. He viewed China's cosmological symbolism as simpler than Mesopotamia's, with the older pattern remaining unbroken.
2. **1958-1964:** Voegelin placed China alongside Egypt and Babylon as cosmological empires within the scheme of ecumenic empires. He replaced the

¹¹¹ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections, Revised Edition with Glossary*, 91.

spiritual movement with the triadic Ecumenic Age. During this period, he completed the "Typescript/ Tiposkript" (1959-1960), a well-preserved draft of *The Chinese Ecumene*. This work analyzed Chinese historiography and the *Shiji*, discussed Chinese self-understanding, the pattern and characteristics of Chinese order, and compared the symbols of *Tianxia* and *Guo*.

3. **1963/4:** Voegelin developed the historiography and the framework of the Ecumenic Age, encountering significant difficulties with the Chinese part. Much of this work was done from 1953 to 1963/4. He even deleted this part in the 1969 version, adding it back in the early 1970s. During this time, he abandoned his earlier argument that the Chinese self-understanding of humans was anthropomorphic, instead using the term "ecumenic humankind" rather than "universal humankind."¹¹²

Between the first and second phases, Voegelin significantly shifted from his earlier perspective that Far Eastern civilizations could not reach higher civilization levels. In the second volume of *Order and History*, he argued that human order is based on free will, which transcends mortal existence, and that there is an attunement between human order and society. Fighting for this order is the essence of history, with each society making progress toward the truth.¹¹³ He noticed that this argument shared a similar logic with Augustine's construction of historical order and its critiques after the 18th century, such as those by Jaspers and Toynbee. They constructed a history drawn from

¹¹² Liu, 92-3, 106.

¹¹³ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 2): The World of the Polis*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis (Baton Rouge: University of Missouri, 2000), 67.

Israel, Greece, and the Orient. Their studies could not ignore that the philosophy of history must be Western, either in the sense that Western forms of history are destroyed and retreat into a new order, or in the sense that societies where the leap of existence does not break the cosmological order are assimilated into historical forms.¹¹⁴

In the fourth volume of *Order and History*, *The Ecumenic Age*, Voegelin faced a theoretical challenge: integrating Chinese civilization into his framework, which traditionally emphasized Western symbols and philosophy. Initially, Voegelin saw Chinese civilization as a reference point, but he eventually recognized it as a key figure in explaining diverse civilizations and parallel phenomena within the framework of historical philosophy based on universal human nature. On one hand, his notion of normative nature and linear historical view led him to categorize Chinese civilization as cosmological or transcendent. On the other hand, he acknowledged that the Chinese *Ecumene* and the Western *Ecumene* are parallel historical phenomena, which conflicted with his previous analysis of universal human nature. Thus, Voegelin grappled with reconciling the concept of universal human nature with the existence of multiple *Ecumene*.

This tension is evident in his *Typescript/ Tiposkript* (1959-1960), where the prototype remained largely unchanged in narrative structure, research sources, and the absence of the Weber-Schafer translation. He did not update his theoretical breakthroughs on the theory of order between the 1960s and 1970s. However, a significant update in the

¹¹⁴ Voegelin, 82–89.

three-page preamble to *The Ecumenic Age* provided a clue for resolving this issue.¹¹⁵

Voegelin set the equivalent symbols of the *Ecumene* and the Chinese *Tianxia*, indicating that various societies symbolize the fundamental structure of reality in equivalent terms. He emphasized the spatial experience of the Ecumenic Age, noting that the compact cosmological experience of the *Ecumene* was disrupted by the impulse of empire expansion.¹¹⁶

Voegelin shared his revisions and final solution in the last chapter of *The Ecumenic Age*. His initial philosophical view posited that historical events are rooted in the biological nature of humanity and become historical through participation in the movement of divine presence, referred to as the Ecumenic age. The emergence of the Chinese world posed the challenging question of whether multiple human societies had experienced a disintegration of cosmological consciousness, becoming independent from one another. Voegelin resolved this by arguing that the stream of divine-human presence is not a given, and universal humanity is not a concrete society but a sign: the movement of human beings in their mundane existence, participating in a mysterious reality and aiming at its metamorphosis.¹¹⁷ In sum, the dispersed and scattered societies participate in the same stream of divine presence, thereby becoming a single humanity with a unified history.

Voegelin's reflections on time further illustrate his evolving thoughts. He dismantled

¹¹⁵ Liu, *Eric Voegelin on China and Universal Humanity*, 107–8. As for this phenomenon, Opitz answered from the perspective of practical choice and academic interest, he did not have enough time to rewrite the Chinese part in 1970s and seems lost his academic interest in Chinese materials by the middle of 1960s, and remained the judgement that the leap in being is too short in China and the cosmological form remained intact. Liu, 148.

¹¹⁶ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, 340–41.

¹¹⁷ Voegelin, 396.

both the cyclical and linear views of time, rejecting any closed, unilinear view of history. This critical analysis of historical retrospectivism was a significant aspect of his intellectual shift during the seventeen years between the publication of the first three volumes of *Order and History* and the fourth volume. Voegelin's diagnosis of the Ecumenic Age did not meet the expectations of many critics, particularly those who believed in the centrality of Western civilization and Christian Universalism. These critics were disappointed that Voegelin had abandoned his original theory centered on Western civilization and acknowledged the existence of multiple worlds in the development and transformation of human history.

However, Voegelin did not fully illustrate the spatial relationships between and within different civilizations, except within the framework of *the Ecumenic Age*, driven by the expansion of disenchantment territory. Additionally, he did not conduct a specific case study of human nature in China and its relationship with the characteristic understanding of space. This gap in his work left certain aspects of his theory underdeveloped, particularly regarding the spatial dynamics between different civilizations.

A Revised Chinese *Ecumene* from Chinese Scholars

Before issuing the spatial perspective of the *Ecumene*, it is useful to introduce the representative study of the Chinese *Ecumene* by Professor Wenming Tang, who focused on the nature of Chinese civilization. Tang's argument centers on two related questions: "Did Chinese civilization transition from a cosmological civilization to an anthropological one?" and "How does it compare to Israeli and Greek civilizations?"

Tang argued that Voegelin made a seemingly contradictory assertion by ranking Chinese civilization as a cosmological order while recognizing its leap in being in the first three volumes of *Order and History*. In the first chapter of *Israel and Revelation*, Voegelin illustrated the birth of the concept of the navel point, the physical point of connection between Greece and Israel.¹¹⁸ To emphasize the typical manifestation of the navel point in various cosmological civilizations, Voegelin introduced the symbol "China" (Chung Kuo), representing the central territory and the seat of the king. During the early Zhou dynasty, "China" referred exclusively to the royal domains. In the Qin and Han dynasties, its meaning shifted to the unified empire, around which the rest of mankind was surrounded as a barbaric outer region.¹¹⁹ Voegelin further discussed and analyzed Chinese civilization as a cosmological order after the great changes of the Zhou and Qin dynasties until 1912, in terms of geographic symbols, political symbols, and indoctrination symbols.

Tang concluded that Voegelin's view of Chinese civilization underwent a substantial change, but he is cautious due to the lack of literature that limited further argument. Voegelin maintained that the spiritual breakthrough in China was incomplete. Voegelin's view in the first three volumes of *Order and History* suggests that Chinese civilization underwent a leap in being early in its history, advancing to the ranks of the axial civilizations in Jaspers' sense. However, it later regressed to a cosmological order for unclear reasons and remained in this state until modern times, never advancing to a historical existence like that of the West. According to Voegelin, the truth of the order

¹¹⁸ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 1): Israel and Revelation*, 66–67.

¹¹⁹ Voegelin, 68–69.

of being provides a criterion for the stage of civilizations.

Tang argued that these criteria lead to the recognition of multiple human natures and anthropological truths. He suggested that the core of Greek civilization was the metaphysics of perfecting, while the core of Chinese civilization was the metaphysics of returning. The historical consciousness of Judeo-Christian civilization was characterized by the flight from nature, Greek civilization by the perfecting of nature, and Chinese civilization by the return to nature, based on a firm belief in the perfect order of the universe. Consequently, Chinese civilization does not have a theory of universal human beings as eschatology, but a unique theory of beginning and teleological order expressed in a cosmological style. This constitutes a unique civilizational trio with Judeo-Christian and Greek civilizations, representing God, Man, and the Universe.¹²⁰

The Chinese civilization, like Israel's and Greece's, also underwent refinement through a spiritual breakthrough. In Israel's civilization, prophets communicated between God and the public, while in Greek civilization, philosophers searched for truth through contemplation. These corresponded to the awakening of transcendence and the awakening of the individual mind, respectively.¹²¹ In China, the holy king (圣人) did not engage in dialogue with philosophers but rather created rituals and music according to the time and place to indoctrinate the people. The awakening of transcendence and the individual mind were important dimensions in China, albeit presented differently from Israel and Greece. Tang summed it up by stating that Israel was a religious

¹²⁰ Wenming Tang, *Ji Gaoming Er Dao Zhongyong*(*极高明而道中庸*) (Sanlian Shudian, 2023), 348, <https://book.douban.com/subject/36464113/>.

¹²¹ Tang, 386.

civilization, Greece was philosophical, and China was artistic.¹²²

Tang's argument primarily focuses on the spiritual stage of Chinese civilization, attempting to demonstrate that Chinese civilization holds a unique position in Voegelin's order philosophy and is more advanced than the cosmological stage. I partly agree with this point: Chinese civilization indeed plays an important role in Voegelin's comparative analysis of civilizations and helps him overcome a Western-centric view. However, Tang falls into the pitfall of a rigid hierarchy of civilizations. In Voegelin's order philosophy, once a civilization makes a breakthrough, it breaks from the cosmological stage and enters the domain of history. Voegelin emphasizes the different natures of civilizations rather than a hierarchical ranking.

Secondly, Tang uses the Chinese transcendental concept of "Heaven" to compare with the Western "God." This comparison is problematic due to the heterogeneous nature of Chinese philosophy, particularly the differences between Confucianism and Daoism.

For example:

"Ji Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, 'While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?' Ji Lu added, 'I venture to ask about death?' He was answered, 'While you do not know life, how can you know about death?'"¹²³

"Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is."¹²⁴

Tang's simplification of the Chinese concept of "Heaven" can be associated with his

¹²² Tang, 388-91.

¹²³ *The Analects*, Xianjin, 12.

¹²⁴ *Dao De Jing*, 25.

emphasis on spiritual breakthroughs among civilizations. However, as I will argue in the next chapter, this approach overlooks the tension between the spiritual and physical levels, which constitutes the gap between Jaspers and Voegelin. Tang's sympathetic view of Jaspers can be traced back to the unique reception of Jaspers in China and may also explain his insistence on the typology of Chinese, Israeli, and Greek civilizations, which largely echoes Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age.

In summary, Tang's interpretation highlights the spiritual and artistic dimensions of the Chinese *Ecumene* and offers a promising strategy to locate the relationship between China and the world. While this interpretation is valuable, it must be refined to avoid hierarchical pitfalls. From a spatial perspective, I argue that Voegelin's spatial structure of "the world" can explain China not only in its beginnings (emerging from the sea) and its formation (expansion of the empire) but also in the final stage of comparative civilization types, where the basic structure is preserved and gives birth to separate human natures in diverse spaces. This strategy maintains the character of Chinese civilization and the *Ecumene* while reinterpreting its foundation and teleological narrative.

Multiple *Ecumene* and Physical Nature

Physical Nature and Ecumenic Age

Spatial factors play a robust and persistent role in Voegelin's interpretation of the *Ecumene* and human nature. This section delves into the reasons for Voegelin's focus on spatial factors, beginning with his writing about peripheral spaces in *The History of*

Political Ideas, and examines how these factors serve his comparative civilization studies.

The spatial dimension is a recurring theme in Voegelin's early period, represented by his study of the Renaissance image of Timur. He argued that the Timurids' invasions and victories in the fifteenth century had a tremendous impact because they transcended the experience of Western politics and brought about an inexplicable rise in power that affected Western civilization. This experience entered Machiavelli's *The Prince* as the image of a man who seized power through his virtue. This research explores the relationship between power and geography, suggesting that ideas can originate from diverse environments far from their source. The military glory of Timur, who traveled great distances, is reflected in the writings of intellectuals from different backgrounds and has been solidified and symbolized into a robust image of Western virtue.

Additionally, Voegelin touched on this topic in his analysis of Montesquieu's style, highlighting Montesquieu's ability to understand the expansion of geographical horizons and human biodiversity through the fragmentation of historical relativity. By recognizing that the West might no longer be the center of civilization and the standard of human obligation, Voegelin acknowledged the importance of spatial factors in understanding historical configurations.

Geography and spatial considerations significantly contributed to Voegelin's study of historical configurations and his revision of past comparative civilization theories from Hegel, Oswald Spengler, and Karl Jaspers. Voegelin argued that these theories, derived

from Augustine's linear historical philosophy and its secular myth, could not accommodate the plurality of civilizations found in non-Western regions, particularly considering the geographical expansion of the nineteenth century. Spengler's theory of the cycle of civilization takes a very radical and desperate approach to accommodate the parallel phenomena of civilization in the Western region, diverging significantly from sacred history. Hegel, on the other hand, builds upon sacred history, especially in his presentation of Jesus as the new epoch in human history. However, his inversion of Spiritualism based on Protestant principles implies an even more serious retrogression, leading to the decline of historical forms and the "annihilation" of universal humanity and human history.¹²⁵

Both Hegel and Spengler failed to expand their horizons beyond the Western context. Voegelin placed more emphasis on Jaspers, whose paradigm, although not thoroughly challenging Augustinian historical construction, still provided a criterion to methodically incorporate and place the phenomenon of multiple civilizations from non-Western regions into a renewed framework of world history, including figures like China's Confucius and India's Buddha.

However, the Axial Age paradigm faced technical problems, such as integrating significant events before and after the Axial Age, like the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus. Jaspers could not affirm their significance within the axial-age framework. This issue traces back to Jaspers' incomplete breakthrough from Augustine and Hegel's

¹²⁵ Eric Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 2): The World of the Polis*, ed. Athanasios Moulakis (Baton Rouge: University of Missouri, 2000), 82–85.

Christian history. Jaspers attempted to incorporate the phenomena of multiple civilizations into one universal humanity without entirely abandoning the claim of universality for inclusiveness, unlike Spengler. Voegelin pinpointed that the Axial Age theory remains an uncompromisingly unilinear historical construction.

The most vital flaw of the Axial Age theory is that it considers spiritual breakthroughs as the sole factor in historical development, thereby ignoring much of the historical codification and consequences of such breakthroughs. By attempting to incorporate the parallel phenomena of multiple civilizations into a single history, it oversimplifies the reality of Western civilization into a homogeneous Christian era.

Facing the fundamental challenge posed by Jaspers, Voegelin's theory of the *Ecumene* emphasizes the expansion of geographical horizons in comparative civilizations rather than focusing solely on intellectual factors. He introduces a historiogenesis theory comprising a triad of spiritual breakthrough, universal imperial expansion, and historical codification, which encompasses the three dimensions of the individual, the social, and the historical. To create a universal history that includes the parallel phenomena of multiple civilizations while avoiding a linear historical construction, it is necessary to deeply penetrate the structure of experiential consciousness in a comparative context to understand these spiritual breakthroughs. In this way, Voegelin effectively deconstructs the Axial Age theory.

Voegelin's emphasis on geographical factors aligns with Toynbee's efforts to revise Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age by expanding its geographical scope to encompass the

disintegration of Indian, Syriac, Chinese, and Greek civilizations. Toynbee mediates the decisive moment of world history in the first 500 years of the Christian era within the Axial Age theory. Toynbee's *A Study of History* highlights the pluralism in historiography, tracing it back to his definition of civilizations. He defines civilization as a state of society where some of the population is free from productive work for food and crafts, allowing professions such as soldiering, administration, and priesthood to emerge.¹²⁶ This philosophical notion of spatial factors within civilization needs further development in Toynbee's theory of comparative civilizations.

By incorporating the geographical and spatial dimensions, Voegelin offers a more nuanced understanding of historical development. This approach challenges the unilinear historical construction and emphasizes the importance of diverse experiences and perspectives in shaping civilizations. This broader perspective enables a more comprehensive analysis of the parallel phenomena of multiple civilizations, highlighting their unique contributions and interactions within the framework of universal history.

Physical Nature and *Tianxia* System

Voegelin's theory of *Ecumene* carries two important missions. Firstly, the concept should be based on the genuine experience of primary geographical ideas. *Ecumene* means the inhabited place or earth, originally established in opposition to the ocean, expressing humanity's experience of the earth as it stands out from the water. In Homer's

¹²⁶More importantly, this concept need to concerns the spatial structure behind the physical conditions, and let it be Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, ed. Jane Caplan (New York: Gramercy, 1989), chapter 3.

poetry, this mystery is termed oikumene.¹²⁷ The Chinese version of *Ecumene*, *t'ien-hsia* (天下), literally means "below heaven." Voegelin pointed out that translations centering on collective notions like "all below heaven" or "the world" are not exact enough due to their linkages with the cosmological meaning, such as *t'ien-ti* (天地), "heaven and earth"; while the *t'ien-hsia* is neither the cosmos nor the earth as a territorial expanse under heaven, but the earth as the carrier of human society, therefore, it serves as the exact equivalent of the Greek *oikoumene* in the cultural sense.¹²⁸

More importantly, this concept needs to consider the spatial structure behind the physical conditions, extending into different geographical areas. Thus, the term *Ecumene* refers not only to the genuine experience of the Greek people and potentially universal human experience but also to the spatial structure they encountered, escaping from one place to another to establish order. It combines the gap between physical and spiritual experience behind geographical expansion. Apart from the exodus from the sea, the *Ecumene* age refers to the collapse of the cosmological meaning of the world, with consciousness differentiated along human experience levels through imperial conquests and the growth of geographic knowledge, and then equivalently reconstructed into the teleological meaning of the world at the spiritual level.

Once the spatial dimension of the *Ecumene* is established, a new perspective emerges between Voegelin and Jaspers' axial age. I propose that a significant challenge to Voegelin's research can be offered from the spatial perspective, particularly considering

¹²⁷ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, 340.

¹²⁸ Voegelin, 351.

the unique geographical nature within the Chinese cosmological view and the distinctiveness of the geographical location of the Chinese *Ecumene*.

"The Chinese situation is an entirely different one. At the time of An-yang, which, according to the presumed chronology, was contemporary with the Amarna Age, China was neither surrounded by a field of societies of comparable civilizational rank nor were there any traceable contacts with India or the Near East. China was never one society among others; from its beginnings, the history of Chinese society was for its members, to the best of their knowledge, the history of mankind. The structure of Chinese consciousness of order differs profoundly, therefore, from the Near Eastern, inasmuch as the experiential ferment provided by the manifold of societies is missing."¹²⁹

This observation aligns with the authoritative research of Youlan Feng, who noted that the Chinese term for "world" can be translated as "all beneath the sky" or "all within the four seas." This reflects a perspective shaped by thinkers who lacked the experience of venturing out upon the high seas. The factors of the seas played a very limited role in their worldview; for instance, Confucius mentions the sea only once in the *Analects*, which contrasts with the maritime culture of ancient Greece. However, both Voegelin and Feng only acknowledged this geographical aspect towards the end of their analyses of Chinese historiography, failing to delve deeper into its significance.

The concept of *Tianxia* (all under heaven) illustrates how physical nature plays an important role in the origin of normality. Tingyang Zhao's *Tianxia* system is an excellent example. In the face of an international society that remains in Hobbesian chaos or experiences "the clash of civilizations," Zhao argues that the failure to unify the world is due to the lack of a global political philosophy, which he refers to as a "failed world." The Chinese concept of *Tianxia* offers a form of world philosophy that

¹²⁹ Voegelin, 353.

speaks on behalf of the world.¹³⁰ Critics of Zhao have pointed out the nationalist intentions of him and his followers. However, the intellectual level of *worldness* and the normality it refers to remains an important theoretical problem that goes beyond regional concerns. As Muen Liu argues, Zhao shares the premise and implications of an ideal system with Voegelin, which should not be restricted to existing sociopolitical structures based on the secular nation-state. Instead, it should extend beyond modern mainstream political theories.¹³¹

Zhao argued the dense term of Tianxia could have three meanings: (1) the Earth or all lands under the sky; (2) a common choice made by all peoples in the world; (3) a political system for the world with a global institution to ensure universal order. Compared to the term “world” which is more likely a scientific term, Tianxia carries more moral duty and the necessity to transform from *chaos* to *kosmos*, which combines the physical world, the psychological world, and the institutional world. In his initial theory of Tianxia, the rule of physical nature is only hinted at in the role of the principle of “Nothing and nobody excluded”, that nothing could be considered as being “foreign” or “pagan”.¹³²

In Zhao's detailed reversion of the *Tianxia* system, he highlights the linkage between the first and second levels of *Tianxia* before delving into the principle of “No Outside”

¹³⁰ Zhao Tingyang, 'A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-Xia)', *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (1 February 2009): 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192109102149>.

¹³¹ Muen Liu, 'The “Ecumene” as a Paradigmatic Political Symbol: Comparison between Voegelin's “The Chinese Ecumene” and Zhao's “Tianxia System” (Draft Version)' (APSA Preprints, 8 September 2020), <https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2020-zptz3>.

¹³² Tingyang, 'A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-Xia)', 9–10. Zhao's original draft could be traced back to his paper in 2003, and the monograph in 2004.

(*wuwai*, 無外), which means nothing and nobody is excluded. He adds two key points: correlating with Heaven (*peitian*, 配天) and the institutional layout. Regarding the former, the wholeness and harmoniousness of order that *Tianxia* depends upon is the order of Heaven (*tian*). Zhao interprets this as the ideal political theology derived from naturalistic metaphysics like the Dao, representing the best of all possible ways to be.¹³³

Zhao's writings on the institutional layout of *Tianxia* in the Zhou Dynasty highlight the entangled relationship between the external environment and human artifice. The Zhou dynasty's *Tianxia* system of territorial division aimed to transform the way of heaven into a great undertaking of the human way. This system constructed a web-like world conceived as an earth web of connectivity, structured with various nested hierarchies. Zhao deduced several networking characteristics from this system: it has unlimited openness, it is a voluntary, cooperative scheme, and each state is potentially qualified to develop and replace the existing center as a new center, thus acknowledging the possibility of revolution.¹³⁴

In Francesco Sisci's review of Zhao's *Tianxia* system, his emphasis on the influence of geographical characteristics on Chinese culture suggests that physical nature could play a more dominant role.¹³⁵ From this perspective, Zhao's revision from Daoist principles to Zhou's enfeoffment system provides insight into the source of *Tianxia's* moral appeal. His solution suggests that the concept of nature serves not only on a metaphysical level, spurring everything into existence, but also as a mediator between the external world

¹³³ Zhao, *All under Heaven*, 52.

¹³⁴ Zhao, 57–59.

¹³⁵ Francesco Sisci, 'Under the Same Sky: A New World-View from China', *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (1 February 2009): 74–82, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192109102157>.

and human beings. This view of physical nature echoes the ancient Chinese perspective, as Joseph Needham argued, which sees nature not only as a metaphysical object but also as the environment in which humans live.

Based on the study of Zhao and Voegelin, I would argue that this spatial recognition of the Chinese *Ecumene* serves as the core of the *t'ien-hsia* concept. Firstly, the dominant characteristic of *t'ien-hsia* is its hierarchical structure of different civilizations, both externally and internally. The self-designation of Chinese society in a civilizational sense positions itself at the center, known as *chung-kuo* (中國). Contrasted with the surrounding barbarian tribes, this term acquired geopolitical and civilizational connotations alongside its cosmological meaning. The notion of the "lordships of the center," representing the organization of mankind at the world's center about surrounding barbarians or lordships that recently entered the orbit of Chinese civilization, further exemplifies this hierarchy. Another aspect of this Chinese worldview is the notion of superiority, originally called "the land of Hsia" in the *Book of Songs*. Later, it equated with the term *shang*, denoting superiority, using terms like *hsia* for civilized and *hua* for flower or flowering.¹³⁶

The distinction between *chung-kuo* and barbarians introduces the Hua–Yi distinction (華夷之辯). Notably, the spatial structure doesn't indicate racial or geographic restrictions but rather a distinction based on civilization. Several Confucian classics touch upon the fundamental difference between Hua and Yi, represented by sayings like, "The rude tribes of the east and north have their princes and are not like the States of our

¹³⁶ Youlan Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Simon and Schuster, 1948), 16–17.

great land which are without them." ¹³⁷ Similarly, in the *Chunqiu Zhengyi*, it states, "Xia, also big. China has a ceremonial greatness, the so-called summer; it has the beauty of the chapter, called China. Hua, Xia are one." ¹³⁸ Han Yu, a famous Confucian scholar in the Tang Dynasty, articulated a famous thesis regarding the physical meaning of t'ien-hsia: "If the barbarians advance into China, then China will be China, and if China retreats into the barbarians, then the barbarians will be barbarians." ¹³⁹

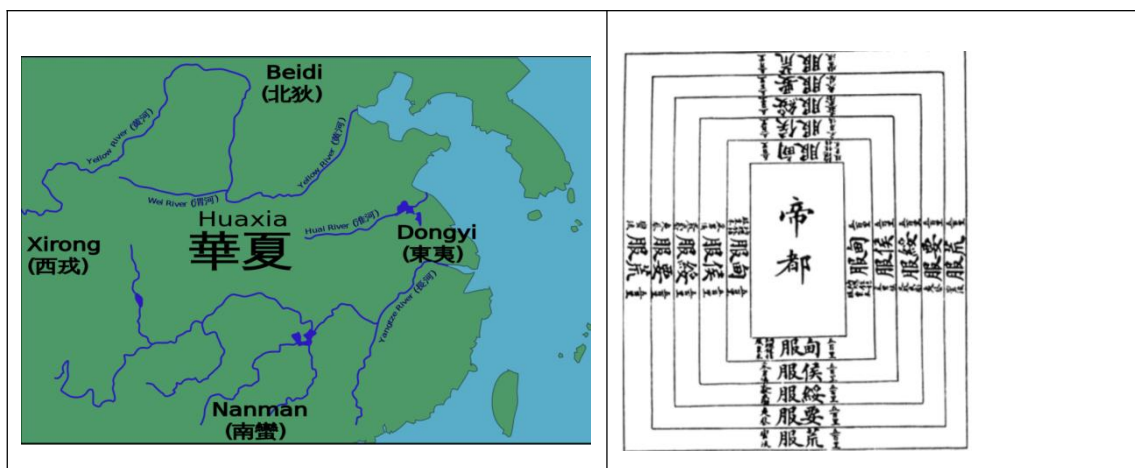


Table 3 The Spatial Structure of Chinese *Ecumene*

This hierarchical structure is also evident in *Po-hu-t'ung*, the official report of discussions on the classics held under imperial auspices in A.D. 79, which contains illuminating reflections on the meaning of pre-imperial kingship. There is a fundamental distinction between the Son of Heaven, t'ien-tzu, and kingship. Voegelin concluded that early China comprised small territorial states under chieftains—though the exogamous clans themselves were ritual units and never occupied definite territories. This structure was subordinated to the hierarchy of civilization, drawing into the orbit of civilization

¹³⁷"夷狄之有君不如諸夏之亡", 《論語·八佾》。

¹³⁸"夏, 大也。中國有禮儀之大, 故稱夏; 有服章之美, 謂之華。華、夏一也。" 《春秋左傳正義·定公十年》

¹³⁹"孔子之作春秋也諸侯用夷禮則夷之孫曰僖二十三左氏杞子卒用夷禮故曰子夷而進于中國則中國之", 《五百家注昌黎文集·卷十一》。

like the conquest of the Shang kingdom by the Chou.¹⁴⁰

Voegelin's Text	Context	Original Text
The king is the Son of Heaven, t'ien-tzu, because Heaven is his father and Earth is his mother; he in his turn is father and mother of the people; and in that capacity he rules over "all under Heaven." ¹⁴¹	T'ien-tzu 'Son of Heaven' is the designation of a rank. Why is this rank called Son of Heaven? The King has Heaven as his father, and Earth as his mother; he is the Son of Heaven.... The <i>Shang shu</i> says: "The Son of Heaven acts as father and mother of the people, and in [that capacity] rules as King over all under Heaven'	天子者，爵稱也。爵所以稱天子者何？王者父天母地，為天之子也...《尚書》曰：「天子作民父母，以為天下王。」
The Feudal Lords, as rulers of the Hundred Clans, are each designated by the name of one state. The Son of Heaven, as the most exalted, now assumes an appellation (expressing) the possession of all under Heaven and the union of the ten thousand states. ¹⁴²		諸侯各構一圃之髓而有百姓矣天子至尊即備育天下之號而兼萬圃矣
Hence, a new Son of Heaven "must create a beautiful appellation (expressing his		春秋傳曰王者受命而主必擇天下之冀號以白號也

¹⁴⁰ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, 360.

¹⁴¹ Ban, Gu, *Bai Hu Tong*(白虎通, *Po Hu T'ung*) (Beijing: Guojia Tushuguan Press, 2019)., 1a,b.

¹⁴² *Po Hu T'ung*, 15m.

possession) of all under Heaven, in order thereby to express his achievements and make himself illustrious." ¹⁴³		
The Three August Ones [san huang] walked leisurely, the Five Emperors [wu ti] walked hurriedly, the Three Kings [san wang] ran, the Five Hegemons [wu pa] galloped. ¹⁴⁴		三皇步，五帝趨，三王馳，五伯驚。
the te of the king harmoniously combines goodness (jen) and righteousness. ¹⁴⁵	What do [the words] ti and wang signify? They are appellations hao. An appellation is the outward sign of an [achieved] merit. Therewith the [achievement of the] merit is expressed and the [possession off spiritual power is manifested, in order to command the [multitude of] subjects.	帝王者何？號也。號者，功之表也，所以表功明德，號令臣下者也。德合天地者稱帝，仁義合者稱王，別優劣也。

Table 4 Voegelin's Citation of Chinese *Ecumene*

Secondly, the hierarchy and dominant structure of the Chinese *Ecumene* bring about its even spatial nature and a different understanding of conquest. According to the philosophy of order, geographic knowledge is reconstructed into the teleological meaning of the world at the spiritual level. The dissolution of the cosmological order results in experiencing the world as a space to be conquered, represented by Polybius's

¹⁴³ *Po Hu T'ung*, 15i.¹⁴⁴ *Po Hu T'ung*, 12e.¹⁴⁵ *Po Hu T'ung*, 12b.

feelings and descriptions of the expansion of the Roman Empire, where the Romans brought almost the whole of the inhabited territory under their rule in as short a time as half a century. Thus, the spatial structure of this period is dominated by an even and homogeneous nature, with all remaining land seen as undifferentiated places to be conquered.

The even stratum of Chinese *t'ien-hsia* is supported by the feudalism of the Chou Dynasty, an organization traceable to the alliance of Western clans under the leadership of the Duke of Chou. Following the conquest, Chou society displayed three levels of political and social hierarchy: the king, the ruling society, and the common people. The king's proverbial character relationship with the people is embedded in *Shih-ching*¹⁴⁶:

Voegelin's Version	詩經・北山	James Legge's Version
<p>All below Heaven</p> <p>None but the king's land;</p> <p>the Chinese <i>Ecumene</i></p> <p>All on the land,</p> <p>None but the king's men.</p>	<p>溥天之下、</p> <p>莫非王土。</p> <p>率土之濱、</p> <p>莫非王臣。</p>	<p>Under the wide heaven,</p> <p>All is the king's land.</p> <p>Within the sea-boundaries of the land,</p> <p>All are the king's servants.¹⁴⁷</p>

Table 5 Different Translations of Chinese *Ecumene* Texts

This hierarchical civilization structure expands into horizontal territorial conquest. The

¹⁴⁶ Voegelin, 358.

¹⁴⁷ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics : The She King, or The Book of Poetry* 詩經 (Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 360.

t'ien-hsia corresponds with the level of civilization, and its incorporation of peripheral worlds is guided by civilization itself, akin to gravity. This experience is delivered in Mencius's ideal picture of the early Shang Dynasty's conquest, serving as the counterpoint to the rise of the *po*. Voegelin noted that in the early Chou period, *po* was the title of the senior lord of the king's clan; in the later Chou period, when the king's power declined, the *po* was a lord invested by the king with the charge of establishing order within the realm and defending it against barbarians. The *po* operated through *li* (ritual), rather than through *tê* (the prestige of culture). In the aggregate, there have developed two sets of symbols: To the series *t'ien-hsia*, *wen*, *tê*, *wang*, there corresponds the series *kuo*, *wu*, *li*, *po*.¹⁴⁸

"When he turned his face toward the East to subjugate it, the barbarians of the West were dissatisfied; when he turned his face toward the South to subjugate it, the barbarians of the North were dissatisfied, saying: 'why should we be the last?' The people yearned for him, as in a great drought men yearn for clouds and a rainbow. . . . In the Shu-ching it says: 'We wait for our lord; when our lord comes, we shall live again.'"¹⁴⁹

As Voegelin reevaluated the *Ecumene* age as consisting of historical configuration, imperial expansion, and spiritual breakthrough, he began to focus more on early Chinese historiography, especially Sima Qian's *Shiji*. Based on his discovery of historiogenesis, Voegelin pointed out that Sima Qian was not writing for specific political intentions or merely reproducing real life but was concerned with the origin of social order.¹⁵⁰ He summarized three principles of historiographical configuration, with the third being the

¹⁴⁸ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, 362.

¹⁴⁹ Mencius, 1 B 11. 南面而征，北狄怨。曰，奚為後我？』民望之，若大旱之望雲霓也。歸市者不止，耕者不變。誅其君而弔其民，若時雨降，民大悅。《書》曰：『徯我后，后來其蘇。』

¹⁵⁰ Voegelin, *Order and History (Volume 4): The Ecumenic Age*, 373.

most significant:

"The third principle is the construction of history in terms of the *tê*, usually translated as virtue or power. The *tê* is the sacral substance of order that can be accumulated in a family through the merits of distinguished ancestors. When the charge has reached a certain intensity, the family is fit to exert the functions of a ruler over society. The *tê* of a ruling family will be exhausted in the end, though in the course of a dynasty recoveries through virtuous rulers are possible before the final relapse. Hence, the great incisions of history are marked by the exhaustion of a family's *tê*, culminating in the replacement of the ruling house by a family whose *tê* at the time has achieved a charge of sufficient strength. This is the pattern followed in the construction of the history of the Three Dynasties."¹⁵¹

What should human nature be under multiple civilizations, apart from the universal nature? The spatial factor could provide an ancillary explanation for it, with the seminal Chinese text that Voegelin neglected—the *Yi Jing* (I Ching, 易經)—completing his analysis of multiple *Ecumene* and universal nature.

The Chinese *Ecumene*, through the doctrine of the mean (中庸), can be understood from a spatial perspective. The Way of the Three Talents (三才之道), namely Heaven, Earth, and Man (People), is based on the spatial structure of the sky and ground, situating human beings within this framework:

"There are in it the way of heaven, the way of man, and the way of earth. It then takes (the lines representing) those three Powers, and doubles them till they amount to six. What these six lines show is simply this, - the way of the three Powers. This way is marked by changes and movements, and hence we have the imitative lines. Those lines are of different grades (in the trigrams), and hence we designate them from their component elements. These are mixed together, and elegant forms arise. When such forms are not in their appropriate places, the ideas of good fortune and bad are thus produced."¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Voegelin, 346.

¹⁵² 易之為書也，廣大悉備，有天道焉，有人道焉，有地道焉。兼三材而兩之，故六六者，非它也，三材之道也，道有變動，故曰爻，爻有等，故曰物，物相雜，故曰文，文不當，故吉凶生焉。(周易，繫辭下，10.1)

This similar structure of the metaxy and the median position has a moral meaning:

"Anciently, when the sages made the Yi, it was with the design that (its figures) should be in conformity with the principles underlying the natures (of men and things), and the ordinances (for them) appointed (by Heaven). With this view they exhibited (in them) the way of heaven, calling (the lines) yin and yang; the way of earth, calling (them) the weak (or soft) and the strong (or hard); and the way of men, under the names of benevolence and righteousness. Each (trigram) embraced (those) three Powers; and, being repeated, its full form consisted of six lines. A distinction was made of (the places assigned) to the yin and yang lines, which were variously occupied, now by the strong and now by the weak forms, and thus the figure (of each hexagram) was completed."¹⁵³

The human being's unique position in the heavens and the earth illustrates the interconnectedness of man's existence, an interstitialist philosophy. Firstly, it brings the transcendental consciousness as man's experience of God, beginning with man's experience of the cosmos, and man's self-consciousness as participation in this experience. This is then guided by the sage's virtue of in-betweenness, driven by inner moral innovation cultivated through moral education. This embodies the balance of indoctrination and the demand for balance in the virtuous gentleman, which is a uniquely strong cosmological concern of Chinese civilization:

Therefore, the superior man honors his virtuous nature, and maintains constant inquiry and study, seeking to carry it out to its breadth and greatness, so as to omit none of the more exquisite and minute points which it embraces, and to raise it to its greatest height and brilliancy, so as to pursue the course of the Mean. He cherishes his old knowledge and is continually acquiring new. He exerts an honest, generous earnestness, in the esteem and practice of all propriety. Thus, when occupying a high situation he is not proud, and in a low situation he is not insubordinate. When the kingdom is well governed, he is sure by his words to rise; and when it is ill governed, he is sure by his silence to command forbearance to himself.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ 昔者聖人之作《易》也，將以順性命之理，是以立天之道曰陰與陽，立地之道曰柔與剛，立人之道曰仁與義。兼三才而兩之，故《易》六畫而成卦。分陰分陽，迭用柔剛，故《易》六位而成章。(周易，說卦，2)

¹⁵⁴ 故君子尊德性而道問學，致廣大而盡精微，極高明而中庸。溫故而知新，敦厚以崇禮。是故居上不驕，為下不倍；國有道，其言足以興，國無道，其默足以容。(中庸，28)

Conclusion

Nature, encompassing both physical nature and the essence of human nature, is an enduring topic in intellectual history. Eric Voegelin's view of normative nature aligns with the tradition of Western thought, positing that there is an untouchable and unchangeable core reality within human beings. He believes that the modernity project, from John Locke to the Third Reich, challenges this core reality. Voegelin's experiences of the *Anschluss* and escape from Austria likely solidified his belief in the normative and unalterable nature of human essence. This belief underpins his critique of John Locke's deterioration of human nature, a view he shares with Leo Strauss, and extends to his debate with Hannah Arendt's "nominalism" regarding human nature.

However, this philosophical standpoint has been challenged by the eschatological atmosphere in Europe and the significant power shift from Europe to the Third World, prompting Western thinkers to reconsider the localism and colonialism inherent in this notion. Voegelin's engagement with ancient Chinese philosophy led him to substantially revise his theory of historical philosophy. In his revised Ecumenic Age theory, Voegelin offers a framework that integrates physical nature with human nature, rather than isolating them as driven by positivism.

This integration poses a significant challenge, especially considering the spatial pressures that had not been previously addressed. When Voegelin began reexamining his notion of China and completed the transcript of the "Typescript/ Tiposkript" (1959-1960), Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958) was already reflecting on

the implications of the launch of the first satellite, Sputnik-1, into outer space. The development of human nature now heavily relies on the discovery and understanding of other physical natures or spaces. This thesis aims to connect these two conceptions from intellectual history and comparative civilization studies. This connection reminds me of the themes explored in Polish science fiction writer Stanisław Lem's *Solaris*.

"We take off into the cosmos, ready for anything: for solitude, for hardship, for exhaustion, death. Modesty forbids us to say so, but there are times when we think pretty well of ourselves. And yet, if we examine it more closely, our enthusiasm turns out to be all sham. We don't want to conquer the cosmos, we simply want to extend the boundaries of Earth to the frontiers of the cosmos..... We are only seeking Man. We have no need of other worlds. We need mirrors."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Stanisław Lem, *Solaris*, 1970, 72, <http://archive.org/details/B-001-001-236>.

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