No Spiritual Investment in the World

Styfhals, Willem

Published by Cornell University Press

Styfhals, Willem.
No Spiritual Investment in the World: Gnosticism and Postwar German Philosophy.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/65141

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2290661
The issue of modern Gnosticism crystallized, in postwar German philosophy, in a very concrete debate between Eric Voegelin and Hans Blumenberg. The relevance of Gnosticism for the understanding of specific modern evolutions and thinkers had been discussed prior to them, as the previous chapters have shown. Yet, the relation between Gnosticism and modernity had never been understood as explicitly and in as all-embracing a manner as in Voegelin’s and Blumenberg’s work. Rather than discussing specific examples of Gnostic revival, they connected it to an entire epoch. They used the concept of Gnosticism to get a grip on something as hazy and general as “the modern age” (Neuzeit) itself. However, their views on the relation between Gnosticism and modernity were radically different from each other. Whereas Voegelin argued that the “modern age . . . would better be named the Gnostic age,”¹ Blumenberg made the opposite claim in Die Legitimität der Neuzeit (The Legitimacy of the Modern Age): “The modern

age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism.” Blumenberg did not define modernity as the return of Gnosticism but as a reaction against its return. To summarize Blumenberg’s complex historical picture, Gnosticism was overcome a first time in Augustine’s refutation of Manichaeism, returned in late medieval nominalism, and was overcome a second time in modern thought. In short, modernity was Gnostic for Voegelin, anti-Gnostic for Blumenberg.

Before Voegelin and Blumenberg developed these interpretations of the modern age, the notion of Gnosticism had already been excised from its immediate historical and theological meaning and used metaphorically to make sense of specific modern phenomena. Precisely because the connection between Gnosticism and its original historical meaning loosened, Voegelin and Blumenberg were able to extend its metaphorical use to define an entire epoch. As a result of this, not only did Gnosticism lose the conceptual connection to its original meaning, but it also became absolutely unclear what Voegelin and Blumenberg meant exactly when they associated Gnosticism with the modern age. For much the same reason, it is unclear how Voegelin’s and Blumenberg’s theories relate to each other or can be opposed to each other. For, in spite of their opposed interpretations of modernity and Gnosticism, a real debate between Voegelin and Blumenberg did not take place. One can only guess what they thought about each other’s interpretation of Gnosticism and modernity. Nonetheless, Blumenberg would have very likely dismissed Voegelin’s position as the umpteenth example of secularization theory, which tries to make sense of secular modernity by showing how it unconsciously remains indebted to theological structures.

This chapter primarily aims to reconstruct Voegelin’s interpretation of philosophical and political modernity by investigating the meaning of his claim that Gnosticism is “the nature of modernity” and exploring how his concept of Gnosticism is related, or not, to its original historical meaning.3 This discussion then allows for a more substantial comparison between Voegelin and Blumenberg that proceeds from a shared structural understanding of Christianity. Blumenberg’s interpretation of the overcoming of Gnosticism will be developed more extensively in the next chapter.

Jacob Taubes and the Voegelin-Blumenberg Debate

Voegelin and Blumenberg never made an effort to discuss their opposed interpretations of modernity, and they neither met nor corresponded. The main reason why they never debated their opposed positions is that the obvious terminological resemblances of their theories did not imply a shared conceptual framework. First, they had a very different historical understanding of the modern epoch itself. Voegelin, on the one hand, had an extremely broad and generalist conception of modernity. The modern age, in which we supposedly still live today, began for Voegelin in the twelfth century with Joachim of Fiore. There is a tendency in Voegelin’s work to call everything modern that deviated in some way from traditional Christian or ancient thought. Accordingly, late medieval heresy, seventeenth-century science or philosophy, nineteenth-century progressivism, and totalitarian politics were all equally modern for Voegelin. Blumenberg, on the other hand, had a more precise and generally accepted understanding of modernity. What he called Neuzzeit is basically a paradigm in intellectual history that largely coincided with modern philosophy and began with Descartes. In addition, Voegelin and Blumenberg had very different conceptions of Gnosticism. Whereas Blumenberg referred to Marcionism and emphasized Gnosticism’s dualistic metaphysics, Voegelin’s

conception of Gnosticism had a clear Valentinian twist and focused on its mystical conception of knowledge (gnosis).

Blumenberg and Voegelin also hardly referred to each other’s work. Voegelin developed his thesis about the Gnostic nature of modernity mainly in his *New Science of Politics* of 1952. As the book was published several years before Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), Voegelin obviously could not have referred to him at the time of writing, but even after 1966 he never made an effort to defend his own position against Blumenberg or even to refer to him in his later writings on Gnosticism. Blumenberg, in turn, never mentioned Voegelin’s name in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. However, when Blumenberg referred to “he who says that the modern age would better be entitled the Gnostic age,” he obviously had Voegelin in mind. Although Blumenberg reversed the latter’s claim, he explicitly considered Voegelin’s thesis as programmatic for his own understanding of modernity: “The thesis I intend to argue here begins by agreeing that there is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism, but interprets it in the reverse sense: the modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism.” Blumenberg did take up Voegelin’s suggestion but was ultimately not concerned with the philosophical complexities of Voegelin’s theory: “I am not particularly interested in determining what the author in fact meant by this phrase.” Accordingly, he neither quoted Voegelin nor entered into further discussion with him. In this regard, it might be conceivable that Blumenberg did not even read *The New Science of Politics*. Voegelin’s provocative thesis was well known in the German intellectual world of the 1960s, and the few sentences that are dedicated to Voegelin in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* did not require more than the general familiarity with his thesis that most German intellectuals must have had.

---

6. Moreover, Blumenberg actually refers to the wrong text in his only footnote on Voegelin. Instead of referring to *The New Science of Politics*, he refers to a short review essay on political philosophy where Voegelin mentions the issue of the
Although Blumenberg and Voegelin did not immediately recognize the potential for an intellectual debate in their opposed definitions of modernity, their common acquaintance and correspondent Jacob Taubes did. Only a few months after the publication of The Legitimacy of the Modern Age, Taubes asked Blumenberg in a letter: “What would you think if I invited you and Voegelin in Berlin, or ask Voegelin to invite us in Munich to discuss your Gnosticism-thesis in his circle?” Voegelin seemed genuinely interested in a discussion, but Blumenberg declined Taubes’s invitation. He did not feel like discussing issues that he felt done with after working on them for so many years. Taubes, however, insisted, and Blumenberg eventually gave in. He agreed to come to Berlin for a conference that Taubes hosted in November 1967, but by that time Voegelin was no longer able to participate.

Although the meeting between Voegelin and Blumenberg never took place, Taubes’s idea of bringing them together initiated, in and of itself, an influential intellectual debate. Taubes, as it were, construed the debate by emphasizing the opposition between two interpretations of modernity and Gnosticism in which the representatives of both positions were hardly interested. The fact that Blumenberg and Voegelin never engaged in this debate themselves does not mean that it is an irrelevant one. The debate was mainly construed in the reception of their respective works, first and foremost by Taubes himself but also by other postwar German


8. See Eric Voegelin, “Letter to Jacob Taubes of January 23, 1967,” in Selected Correspondence: 1950–1984 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 519–20. In this letter, Voegelin said: “I am very sorry to hear that Mr. Blumenberg apparently finds himself in a state of depression at the moment, because I would really have enjoyed meeting with him in order to have to opportunity for a conversation. Next winter such a conversation will hardly be possible, at least as far as I am concerned, since I will have a sabbatical semester which I will spend in America.”
thinkers. Voegelin’s and Blumenberg’s relevant texts on modern Gnosticism were, for example, taken up and opposed to each other in an anthology of Gnostic texts compiled by leading contemporary philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Moreover, philosophers like Odo Marquard and Jacob Taubes himself or, more recently, Michael Pauen and Richard Faber developed their own Gnostic readings of modernity in explicitly referring to Voegelin’s and Blumenberg’s opposed positions. As such, the “Voegelin-Blumenberg debate” played an absolutely central role in the postwar reflections on Gnosticism and in postwar German philosophy more generally.

Taubes’s role in the debate between Voegelin and Blumenberg he had in mind was clearly not reducible to that of a passive organizer. As pointed out, he had an active role in conceiving a confrontation between two thinkers who did not present their ideas as such. Unlike the more systematic philosophers Blumenberg and Voegelin, Taubes was essentially a polemical thinker. He was the kind of intellectual who always looked for opportunities for confrontation and debate. Throughout his academic career, Taubes had always been concerned with the practical transposition of ideas that were presented in monological or monographic form into the more dialogical academic mediums of debate, commentary, seminar, colloquium, essay collection, and correspondence. Not surprisingly, Blumenberg called Taubes “someone who is made for inter-subjectivity.” Taubes’s intellectual style seemed completely

---


opposed to that of Blumenberg, who was the typical secluded philosopher writing bulky volumes in complete isolation and avoiding direct confrontation and discussion. It is hardly surprising, in this regard, that Blumenberg declined Taubes’s invitation.

In addition to his intellectual inclination to debating, Taubes had more philosophical reasons for being actively involved in this debate. He was indeed genuinely interested in the relation between Gnosticism and modernity himself. In *Occidental Eschatology*, Taubes discussed the role of Gnosticism and Gnostic Apocalypticism in the Western intellectual tradition from antiquity to modernity. Nonetheless, he never treated this topic as systematically and explicitly as Voegelin and Blumenberg did. Thus, Taubes discovered in the Voegelin-Blumenberg debate the systematic framework in which he could express his own ideas on gnosis and modernity. In other words, Taubes wanted not only to organize a debate between the two thinkers but also to actively take a position in this debate himself. Interestingly, Taubes would take up a third position, in between those of Blumenberg and Voegelin. On the one hand, he agreed with Voegelin that modernity is the Gnostic age; on the other hand, he supported Blumenberg’s defense of the legitimacy of modern thought.

Voegelin was very critical of modern culture in general and believed that Gnostic modernity entailed an illegitimate secularization of Christian theology. Modern thought, he argued, *immanentizes* the Christian promise of a transcendent salvation into the controllable pursuit of this-worldly redemption. This heretical and illusory attempt to draw such a religious mystery, which by definition transcends human understanding, into the realm of human action was also characteristic of the ancient Gnostic mind-set. For Voegelin, this process of immanentization was ultimately responsible for the rise of the political religions of communism and Nazism in the

---

13. In a letter to Taubes on *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* he explicitly stated this: “Es gibt Stellen, an denen ich Namen nicht genannt habe, weil ich den Anschein der Polemik fürchtete.” This is one of the reasons why he declined Taubes’s invitation to debate with Voegelin and why he barely mentioned Voegelin’s name in the first place. Hans Blumenberg, “Letter to Jacob Taubes of January 9, 1967,” in Blumenberg and Taubes, *Briefwechsel*, 120.
twentieth century. Blumenberg, on the contrary, wanted to defend the legitimacy of modernity by showing how it did not imply a secularization or continuation of religious and, more specifically, Gnostic contents. Modern thought, for Blumenberg, had its own autonomous logic that was not reducible to religious developments but that arose in dynamic relation to such developments. Taubes ultimately subscribed to Voegelin’s secularization thesis but evaluated the continuity between Gnosticism and modernity much more positively. In contrast to Voegelin, Taubes did not fear Gnosticism’s destructive potential, which he recognized in the modernist avant-garde or in revolutionary politics. He was indeed fascinated by the world-negating potential of Gnosticism and its radical implications for action within the immanent world. Taubes elucidated his middle position between Voegelin and Blumenberg in the letter in which he invited Voegelin to debate his Gnosticism thesis:

Hans Blumenberg’s The Legitimacy of the Modern Age recently appeared. A book that immediately concerns your, I would almost say our (although, where you put minus, I sometimes put plus), main thesis about modernity as the Gnostic age. The New Science of Politics provocatively challenged the legitimacy of modernity. In Blumenberg’s book now arises a defense of modernity. I think we should discuss this among the three of us. What would you think if you and Blumenberg came to a colloquium in Berlin, first to treat the Gnosticism-thesis in the context of the history of religion, and later the problem of the legitimacy of modernity in a hermeneutical context.14

Taubes made clear that there were more fundamental questions at stake in the opposition between Voegelin and Blumenberg than a mere historical discussion about the return of Gnosticism in the modern age. At stake were the very same questions that characterized the German secularization debates: Does the rise of the modern epoch entail cultural decay or intellectual progress? How legitimate is the project of modernity? And is modernity as secular as it thinks it is?

De-divinization and Re-divinization

Voegelin’s *New Science of Politics* is ultimately concerned with the question of secularization. What he called the Gnostic age is actually “a secular age,” to use a more contemporary phrase. In line with Jacob Taubes and Karl Löwith, he was interested in the way theological contents were secularized in modern thought. Unlike Taubes and Löwith, Voegelin did not explore the different modern examples of secularization in detail. Rather, he sought to find out how and why the immanentization of Christian theology could have taken place in modernity. Voegelin showed how secularization has its origins in the inner constitution of Christianity itself, and more specifically in its radical de-divinization of the world. Gnosticism’s and modernity’s failure to cope with this withdrawal of the divine from the cosmos forced them to re-divinize the world through the immanentization of Christian eschatology.

Christianity is a religion of de-divinization, argued Voegelin in *The New Science of Politics*. Unlike the polytheistic and mythical religions, the Christian believer no longer considers the divine to be immediately and univocally present within this world. Rather, God is fundamentally withdrawn from it. Accordingly, the cosmos appears as a de-divinized world that is nonetheless created and ordered by this world-transcendent God. Christianity thus portrayed an evolution from the “compact” experience of the divine within nature to a “differentiated” experience of a God outside of the cosmos. This Christian tendency toward de-divinization, however, was from the outset accompanied by the heretical desire for a re-divinization of the world. This re-divinization, which characterized both ancient Gnosticism and modern secularism according

---


to Voegelin, attempted to draw the divine back into the cosmos by immanentizing Christianity’s theological framework. Gnosis, in this regard, was a mystical knowledge that allowed for direct access to the divine from within the immanent world itself.

To the extent that *The New Science of Politics* was mainly concerned with political theory and with the nature of political representation, the implications of Christianity’s de-divinization were for Voegelin first and foremost political. In Christian society, “the sphere of power is radically de-divinized; it has become temporal,” Voegelin said.\(^\text{17}\) In other words, worldly politics no longer represented a higher religious order or truth. The emperor, for example, could no longer be considered the representative or incarnation of God on earth. While losing its religious legitimation, worldly politics also attained autonomy with regard to religion. Politics and religion became separated for the first time in history and henceforth had their own independent logic. For Voegelin, Christianity therefore marked the end of political theology. The religious message of Christianity itself had no political meaning, only a spiritual one.\(^\text{18}\) Christianity offered no guidelines for political action, only the expectation of salvation. The de-divinization of politics had its origins in Christianity’s conception of eschatology. Christianity’s redemptive end of time was not to be conceived in any apocalyptic, millennial, or chiliastic sense as the political realization of a perfect society. Following Augustine’s conception of the end of time, Voegelin did not consider the Christian kingdom of God as the final stage of political history but as a spiritual condition that lies beyond the immanent spheres of politics and history. In other words, Christian eschatology has no political or historical significance whatsoever: it allows for neither a political theology nor a

---

philosophy of history. The eschatological de-divinization of politics thus coincided with a de-divinization of history.

Although the immediate presence of the divine in history and society had become problematical in Christianity, Voegelin would certainly not have argued that Christianity's ahistorical and apolitical message could not be represented here on earth. It should be represented, however, by a spiritual organization that renounces, at least in principle, its claim for political power—that is, by the church. In this regard, the church is the only remnant of a divine presence within Christian society. Because the church, as the representative of an eternal but apolitical truth within history, cannot itself have any political power, there has to be another institution that is responsible for the political organization of society—that is, the state. The latter, however, has to renounce any religious justification of its power. The emperor can no longer rule by divine right, nor can the state be the representative of a higher truth or transcendent order. They are merely responsible for the political organization of society in a purely immanent sense. Thus losing its divine legitimation, the state also acquires its own autonomous sphere of power over which the church has no authority at all. Voegelin considered this separation between church and state to be fundamental for every Christian society. He summarized it as follows:

This left the church as the universal spiritual organization of saints and sinners who professed faith in Christ, as the representative of the civitas Dei in history, as the flash of eternity into time. And correspondingly it left the power organization of society as a temporal representation of man in the specific sense of that part of human nature that will pass away with the transfiguration of time into eternity. The one Christian society was articulated into its spiritual and temporal orders. In its temporal articulation it accepted the conditio humana without chiliastic fancies, while it heightened natural existence by the representation of spiritual destiny through the church.19

The separation between church and state was, in Voegelin’s perspective, characteristic of Christian society during the Middle

Ages. The rise of modernity was then marked by the collapse of this separation through the re-divinization of the political sphere, which was caused, in turn, by a re-divinization of history. This modern re-divinization began, for Voegelin, as early as the twelfth century with Joachim of Fiore’s Trinitarian philosophy of history. Joachim basically applied the theological structure of the Trinity to the course of profane history by dividing it into three successive epochs—respectively, the ages of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In his theory of the three ages, the course of profane history got a divine meaning that it could not have had in orthodox Christianity. Thus, Joachim’s philosophy of history broke radically with the traditional, Augustinian interpretation of world history as a purposeless succession of meaningless events. In the Augustinian view, only the history of salvation, which transcends profane history, has a clear meaning and eschatological direction. According to Voegelin, Joachim confused profane history with transcendent history because he applied the structure of the history of salvation to the history of the world: “The Joachitic speculation was an attempt to endow the immanent course of history with a meaning that was not provided in the Augustinian conception. And for this purpose Joachim used what he had at hand, that is, the meaning of transcendent history.”20 In other words, Joachim re-divinized history by immanentizing or secularizing Christianity’s transcendent eschatology.

Voegelin explained how this process of secularization is radicalized in modern philosophies of history. Modernity’s secular eschatologies transformed the hope for transcendent salvation into a progress toward an immanent state of perfection, often presented in the form of a pursuit of a perfect political society that is attainable within profane history itself. This situation becomes potentially dangerous when a society either believes it has already reached such a condition, or worse, when it claims to know the means to realize it. Virtually every political action, however immoral it may be, can be justified to reach this secular eschaton,

which is posited as the only and absolute goal of society. If a particular political order makes such absolutist claims, society is re-divinized according to Voegelin. Unlike Christian politics, these societies no longer recognize the relativity and temporality of their political legitimacy, but claim to have an absolute justification to the extent that they represent some kind of pseudo-religious truth. In modern thought and especially in the philosophy of Hegel and Marx, the absolute no longer appeared as an abstract ideal beyond this world but had become an identifiable position within history. This philosophical fallacy of confusing the merely immanent and relative with the absolute coincided for Voegelin with a real political danger.

The political implications of secularization, already present in nuce in the nineteenth-century philosophy of history, culminated in twentieth-century totalitarianism. In communism and Nazism, Voegelin argued, the immanent eschaton became a very real political goal, in the form of the classless society and the *Dritte Reich*, respectively. Only in such a context, where politics had set itself an absolute goal, could a concept like the “final solution” become politically conceivable. For Voegelin, political actions and solutions could never be never “final” or absolutely justified, unless they were guided by an absolute ideal lying beyond the domain of immanent politics. Political action, in its modern and totalitarian form, was no longer confined to its immanent function of ruling and representing a society but recovered its lost religious function by claiming to represent or even realize a pseudo-divine truth here on earth. Voegelin indeed characterized the totalitarian movements as political religions.21 As totalitarianism completed the modern re-divinization of society, it is hardly surprising that it made use of (pseudo-)religious symbolism. It is often argued, in this regard, that the *Führer* had an almost divine status in Nazi Germany or that the totalitarian mass meetings resembled pagan rituals. Voegelin himself focused on the very specific example of the continuity of

---

Joachim's symbols in totalitarianism: “In his Trinitarian eschatology Joachim created the aggregate of symbols which govern the self-interpretation of modern political society to this day.” He elaborated, for example, on the return of the Trinitarian structure of Joachim’s historical speculation in the political and historical self-understanding of the Nazi empire as the Dritte Reich, or, much earlier, of Moscow as the third Rome.

Voegelin now connected the modern re-divinization to the return of Gnosticism: “These Gnostic experiences, in the amplitude of their variety, are the core of the re-divinization of society.” This claim is surprising, to say the least. Voegelin’s interpretation of Gnosticism as a religion of re-divinization and immanentization completely disregarded and even contradicted Hans Jonas’s generally accepted understanding of Gnosticism as radically world-negating. The Gnostics paradigmatically emphasized the absolute transcendence of the divine and its fundamental absence from this world. Rather than a re-divinization, Gnosticism seemed to entail the most radical de-divinization of world, history, and society. As one commentator of Voegelin correctly noted, “His picture of Gnosticism is, of course, simply inaccurate. . . . The Gnostic god—at least the higher or father god—far from being a world-immanent god, was more radically world-transcendent than anything Christianity had ever envisioned.” Curiously, Voegelin never took this obvious interpretation of Gnosticism into account in The New Science of Politics (he did do so in his later writings, as will be shown).

Nonetheless, the connection between Gnosticism and modern immanentization is not completely out of place if one takes another central feature of the Gnostic religiosity into account. In spite of the absolute transcendence of the Gnostic God, a select company of believers—the Gnostic sectarians—claimed to have privileged

---

23. Voegelin, 124.
access to God’s mind through the mystical knowledge of gnosis. Gnosis allowed for direct contact with the divine from within the world, in spite of God’s absence from this world. Although communication between human beings and God was certainly not obliterated in orthodox Christianity’s de-divinized world, it always remained mysterious and uncertain. Communication with a transcendent God was only possible through faith, and the only knowledge one could have about him was based on the tenuous relation of faith and trust. Gnosis (Greek for “knowledge”) functioned as a heretical alternative to this uncertain Christian cognitio fidei (cognition through faith) because it allowed for a direct and certain knowledge of transcendence. In Voegelin’s perspective, this meant that Gnosticism took the Christian de-divinization absolutely seriously and even radicalized it, but at the same time tried to regain an immediate access to the divine for which the Christian perspective did not allow. Thus, Gnosticism did not entail a merely divinized worldview; rather, it re-divinized immanent existence after its initial de-divinization through Christian orthodoxy: “The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt of bringing our knowledge of transcendence in to a firmer grip than the cognitio fidei, the cognition of faith will afford; and the Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip insofar as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.”


unity guarantees was fundamental to Voegelin’s interpretation of Gnosticism and its return in modern culture.

In Christianity, this certain and absolute knowledge about the divine was fundamentally impossible for Voegelin. As he provocatively put it, “Uncertainty is the very essence of Christianity.”27 He argued that the Christian believer is always in doubt about the transcendent purpose of existence, about the meaning of world, history, and society, and about the possibility of salvation. Gnosis pursued an existential certainty that Christianity could not guarantee. This very pursuit of certainty was ultimately also the driving force of modern secularization. Modern thought, said Voegelin, could not cope with these uncertainties about the most fundamental questions. In order to overcome them it reverted to a forgotten heretical potential that lay hidden within the Christian tradition itself. In this regard, secularization is no mere negation or corruption of religion but finds its origin in a tension within Christianity itself. The uncertainties that destabilized orthodox Christianity from within tended toward resolution and stabilization in Gnostic heresy. As long as Christianity exists, said Voegelin, there will be people “who do not have the spiritual stamina for the heroic adventure of the soul that is Christianity.”28 The possibility of Gnosticism can therefore never be rooted out completely. Gnosticism, in Voegelin’s perspective, is the eternal, structural counterpart of orthodox Christianity. In order to overcome the Christian uncertainties, gnosis and modernity made the divine univocally present in the immanent world. The modern immanentization of Christian eschatology was therefore an attempt to capture and control the meaning of existence, and by extension also the meaning of history and the possibility of salvation. In modernity, the meaning of reality is no longer to be found in an unattainable salvation or in a world beyond, but can be discovered within the evolution of profane history itself. Modernity radicalizes the ancient Gnostic immanentization by ultimately denying transcendence itself. While the ancient Gnostic experience merely made the divine accessible for the immanent perspective by mystically drawing it

28. Voegelin, 123.
into the soul of the Gnostic believer, modernity is the complete immanentization of the divine to the point where transcendence itself is lost.

**Gnosticism and the Inner-Christian Tension**

In Voegelin’s reflections on secularization, uncertainty appeared as the destabilizing factor in Christian orthodoxy that tended toward stabilization in Gnostic heresy and modern secularism. As such, uncertainty was not something to be avoided for Voegelin. On the contrary, it should be embraced, in religion as well as in philosophy, as the only sincere human relation to the beyond. Modern philosophy, argued Voegelin, could not cope with this uncertainty and opted for the illusory certainty of gnosis rather than the uncertain truth of Christianity. Voegelin considered the philosophical and Gnostic attempts to overcome this uncertainty illusory because the finite human perspective did not allow for an absolute knowledge in his view: “The leap over the bounds of the finite into the perfection of actual knowledge is impossible. If a thinker attempts it, he is not advancing philosophy, but abandoning it to become a Gnostic.”

The Christian uncertainty appeared as the existential or epistemological implication of a deeper philosophical tension within the human condition itself. This tension was first revealed in the process of de-divinization, which Voegelin connected not only to Christianity, but in his later works to the entire range of intellectual and spiritual breakthroughs that are commonly associated with the “axial age.” Voegelin, however, preferred the notion of “hierophanic events,” which he borrowed from Mircea Eliade, to Karl Jasper’s concept of axiality: “By letting man become conscious of his humanity as existence in tension toward divine reality, the hierophanic events engender the knowledge of men’s existence in the

---

divine-human In-between, in Plato’s Metaxy.”30 Human existence is characterized by this middle position between this world and the beyond. Although human beings are directed toward the beyond, they can never have an absolute grip on it. This subtle balance between this world and the beyond that marks human nature is lost in Gnosticism and modernity, according to Voegelin.

This anthropological tension also has metaphysical implications that become particularly obvious in Christianity, and more specifically in its hesitation between this world and the beyond. In Christianity’s de-divinized worldview, Voegelin maintained, the meaning of the divine for immanent being is highly ambiguous and indeed uncertain. *The New Science of Politics* mainly emphasized the political implications of this ambiguity: political society is completely de-divinized, but that does not mean there are no spiritual reasons for forming a community, for example, in a church. In his later works, Voegelin described this ambiguity more philosophically as a tension between immanence and transcendence: although God is absent from this world, immanent being is certainly not void of divine meaning in Christianity. De-divinization rendered the immediate mythical presence of the divine in the cosmos problematic, but it certainly did not abolish the meaning of the cosmos. Reality no longer coincides with the divine that now transcends it, but the divine did create and govern reality, Voegelin emphasized: “The new truth can affect the experience of divine reality as the most adequate symbolization of cosmic-divine reality, but it cannot affect the experience of divine reality as the creative and ordering force in the cosmos.”31 The experience of the divine is now “differentiated” between immanence and transcendence—between the Beginning and the Beyond, to use Voegelin’s concepts from *The Ecumenic Age*: “Although divine reality is one, its presence is experienced in the two modes of the Beyond and the Beginning. The Beyond is present in the immediate experience of movements in the psyche, while the presence of the divine Beginning is mediated through the

---

experience of the existence and intelligible structure of things in the cosmos. The two modes require two different types of language for their adequate expression.”32 The unity of these two divine aspects is a religious mystery that is rationally unfathomable. One can speak independently of a divine presence within this world and of God’s radical absence from this world, but they cannot be brought together in one coherent discourse.

For Voegelin, the resolution of this ambiguity was possible only by abandoning the differentiated experience of the divine and reverting to more simplistic and “compact” experiences of the divine that characterized Gnostic heresy. Gnosticism accepted the de-divinized worldview and its conception of a transcendent God but struggled with the religious mystery that the divine is both absent from this world and present within it as a creative force. If one should direct spiritual attention toward a divine beyond, why would the meaning of this world still matter, the Gnostic asks. Or formulated more theologically, why has God created a world at the beginning of time from which he has to save us at the end of time? Voegelin conceived the issue as follows: “The intensely experienced presence of the Beyond brings the problem of the Beginning to intense attention. When the formerly unknown god of the Beyond reveals himself as the goal of the eschatological movement in the soul, the existence of the cosmos becomes an ever more disturbing mystery. . . . A Cosmos that moves from its divine beginning toward a divine beyond of itself is mysterious indeed; and there is nothing wrong with the question as such.”33 The real problem with Gnosticism, Voegelin argued, was that it wanted a definitive answer to this question. The attempt to systematically grasp the relation of the Beginning and the Beyond denied the religious mystery: “The fallacy at the core of the Gnostic answers to the question is the expansion of consciousness from the Beginning to the Beyond.”34 Ancient Gnosticism brought these two aspects together in a single theological narrative that unambiguously dissociated the

32. Voegelin, 4:63.
33. Voegelin, 4:64.
34. Voegelin, 4:65.
evil god of creation (Beginning) from the good God of redemption (Beyond). Accordingly, it univocally opted for the beyond and completely discarded the meaning of the cosmos. The Christian balance between both was lost.

Voegelin’s interpretation of Gnosticism in his later works dovetailed better with the traditional dualistic interpretation than his earlier views in *The New Science of Politics*. Voegelin, moreover, linked Gnosticism to the same Christian ambiguities Hans Blumenberg also emphasized in his reflections on the early Gnostic thinker Marcion in *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*: “The fundamental thought that underlies Marcion’s Gnostic dogmatics is, I think, this: A theology that declares its God to be the omnipotent creator of the world and bases its trust in this God on the omnipotence thus exhibited cannot at the same time make the destruction of this world and the salvation of men from the world into the central activity of this God.” On this point, Voegelin’s and Blumenberg’s positions were surprisingly similar. For both, Gnosticism was the attempt to overcome an inner-Christian tension between the immanence of creation and the transcendence of salvation by univocally choosing the latter option. Their respective evaluations of this tension itself, however, were radically different. For Voegelin, on the one hand, this Christian tension was a subtle balance that reflected the human condition as being between the divine and the worldly. Blumenberg, on the other hand, had a philosophically more neutral interpretation. He maintained that orthodox Christian theology was marked by a structural instability, a paradox even, that historically tended toward stabilization. Ancient Gnosticism was one of these stabilizations; late medieval nominalism, he argued, was another.

Not unlike Voegelin, Blumenberg showed that Gnosticism resurfaced at the end of the Middle Ages after its seeming disappearance in the early centuries of medieval Christianity. Blumenberg did not refer to Joachim of Fiore as the main representative of this Gnostic return but to another Franciscan—namely, William of Ockham.

---

36. For the Franciscan legacy in the German secularization debates, see Guido Vanheeswijck, “De dubbele Franciscaanse Erfenis: Een ontbrekende Schakel in het
Moreover, Blumenberg did not recognize the return of Gnosticism in the alleged re-divinization of history but rather in the radical emphasis on divine transcendence that was implied in Ockham’s nominalism. Nominalism is a philosophical theory that denies the existence of ontological entities (universals) that correspond to abstract notions. Although universal concepts like “human being” have meaning to us, there is nothing that corresponds to them in reality. These concepts are nothing but the names (nomines) we give to a collection of individuals. Blumenberg pertinently noted that the motivation behind Ockham’s nominalism was theological, and more specifically the theological emphasis on God’s absolute and inscrutable omnipotence. If universals exist, even if God himself created them, God’s creative power is limited. Rather than creating ex nihilo, God would create the world by repeating the structure of the universal in the individual existence of worldly beings. Blumenberg summarized: “The concept of the potentia absoluta, however, implies that there is no limit to what is possible, and this renders meaningless the interpretation of the individual as the repetition of the universal.”

Moreover, the existence of universals would imply that human beings ultimately share God’s rationality. If human concepts reflect the universals that God used to create the world, the human and the divine mind are fundamentally alike. Nominalism could not accept this, and emphasized the transcendent omnipotence of God at the expense of the immanent rationality of creation. To rephrase this idea in Voegelin’s words, the Beginning becomes a problem in view of an intense experience of the Beyond.

The inner-Christian tension between this world and the beyond that Marcion already discovered in early Christianity returned in medieval Christianity as a paradox between the immanent rationality of the world and the transcendent omnipotence of God’s will. Blumenberg put it like this: “Here was the common ground of all the paradoxes of Scholasticism: It could not remove from the


world anything that was essential to the functioning of the system of proofs of God’s existence, but neither could it commit divinity to this world as the epitome of its creative capacity.”38 In other words, medieval Scholasticism wanted to unite two mutually exclusive concepts of the divine: on the one hand, it understood the divine as present in this world in order to retain the rationality of the cosmos; on the other hand, it had a concept of divine absence that excluded the possibility that God coincided with this rational cosmos in order to retain his omnipotence. Not unlike ancient Gnosticism, Ockham’s nominalism tipped this unstable balance to the latter side of a divine absence. In line with Gnostic cosmology, this emphasis on transcendence also devalued the meaning of immanence. In the nominalist worldview, the structure and existence of the world were deprived of their rational necessity and uniqueness. The world could have been created in an entirely different way; or worse still, it could not have existed at all. Moreover, one cannot know how God created the world: he might have created a good and rational cosmos, but he could have created just as well the evil and irrational world-prison of Gnosticism. In view of God’s absolutely free will, the world becomes absolutely contingent.

Interestingly, the resolution of this inner-Christian tension in favor of a univocal emphasis on transcendent omnipotence ultimately triggered the genesis of modern thought, for Blumenberg. In this regard, it is not just an insignificant theological possibility that is manifested in rather marginal phenomena like ancient Gnosticism or late medieval nominalism, but an absolutely critical shift in the intellectual history of the West. Modernity should be understood as a reaction against late medieval divine absolutism and its implied return of Gnosticism—hence, Blumenberg’s claim that “the modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism.”39 The radical emphasis on transcendence left the world and human existence void of meaning. Just as the reliability of reality was no longer guaranteed by the rationality of its creator, the possibility of salvation from this world was contingent upon an inscrutable

divine will. The only possibility that remained for modern human beings in such a threatening existential situation was the immanent assertion and development of their own finite lives here on earth. Modernity did not stabilize the inner-Christian tension by tipping the balance toward either a Gnostic transcendence or the opposite side of a pure immanence. Rather, it dialectically resolved the tension by presenting a third option. The modern reaction to theological absolutism entailed a return to immanence without, however, reverting to the Greek or Scholastic ideal of a rational and reliable cosmos. The immanent world as such remained utterly meaningless, but now human self-assertion constituted meaning in relation to this world.

Voegelin’s understanding of secularization followed a similar logic, albeit a far less complex one. Whereas Blumenberg understood modernity as a dialectical reaction to the Gnostic resolution of an inner-Christian tension, Voegelin considered modernity to be identical with it. For Blumenberg there was an alternative to the Gnostic stabilization of Christianity; for Voegelin there was not. The loss of balance between the Beginning and the Beyond was for Voegelin by definition Gnostic. In whatever historical configuration the Christian balance was lost, Gnosticism resurfaced. Only in this regard were phenomena as diverse as ancient heresy, late medieval theology, and modern thought equally conceivable as Gnostic. Modern secularization therefore was nothing more than the Gnostic resolution of the Christian tension between immanence and transcendence—this time not in the direction of radical transcendence but of radical immanence. The way the balance was tilted was of secondary importance for Voegelin. For even if it tilted toward transcendence, it still entailed a re-divinization and immanentization.

As an ostensible radicalization of de-divinization, Gnosticism’s exclusive emphasis on transcendence inadvertently re-divinized the world, according to Voegelin. As indicated above, the axial de-divinization formed the historical background of the Gnostic speculations, but gnosis recovered the divinized worldview of the preaxial religions by reestablishing a (mystical) unity between the
human and the divine. The Gnostic claim that God is absolutely absent from this world paradoxically made him more accessible to human understanding. God was no longer ambiguously mixed up with this world, as a being that is mysteriously both immanent and transcendent. In the Gnostic worldview, it was very clear where God is and even more so where he is not. In this regard, certain knowledge of the divine was possible, even if it was initially merely negative—the divine should be understood as the complete opposite of the world. This negative theology then made an immediate and unambiguous relation with the divine possible through the experience of gnosis. To the extent that God is completely accessible from within this world, the divine is drawn into the immanent existence of human beings.

**Evil and Gnostic Self-Salvation**

If Gnosticism’s radical de-divinization ultimately entailed a re-divinization of the world, Voegelin’s concept of Gnostic immanentization did not contradict the radically world-negating dynamics of Gnostic heresy. Paradoxically, world-negation actually caused the re-divinization of politics and history. Voegelin believed that Gnosticism’s negative theology brought God closer to immanent politics because a very concrete course of negative political action derives from divine absence. Because the world of Gnosticism is godless, evil, and corrupted, politics gains a divine justification to the extent that it rejects and destroys the present world order. In antiquity, the antinomian or libertine rejections of all moral, religious, and political standards were characteristic of Gnostic politics; in modernity, they took the shape of political revolution, which can be liberal as well as Marxist or totalitarian. Both in ancient Gnosticism and in modernity, politics was re-divinized because political action was no longer indifferent to the transcendent truths of religion but explicitly wanted to realize salvation. In the Gnostic worldview, destructive action prepared the establishment of a redemptive future, Voegelin claimed: “However the phases of
salvation are represented in the different sects and systems, the aim is always destruction of the old world and passage to the new.”

As indicated above, the Gnostic re-divinization of politics coincided with a re-divinization of history, for Voegelin. Re-divinization did not entail the immediate divine justification of the present. On the contrary, the divinization of history meant that the divine was manifested in the historical evolution from an evil present to a perfect future. Gnosticism indeed considered the present to be radically meaningless and even evil. Because it could not accept the world as it currently is, Gnosticism projected salvation into the future, Voegelin argued: “From this follows the belief that the order of being will have to be changed in a historical process. From a wretched world a good one must evolve historically.” In antiquity, this Gnostic re-divinization of history took shape in an apocalyptic eschatology that conceived salvation as a revolutionary and destructive change at the end of profane history. In modernity, Voegelin argued, this Gnostic eschatology was secularized in the philosophy of history, where historical change can bring about an immanent absolute.

The connection between Gnosticism, Apocalypticism, and modernity strongly aligned Voegelin with Jacob Taubes’s *Occidental Eschatology*. Although Voegelin completely subscribed to Taubes’s analysis of modern culture as a return of Gnosticism and

41. Voegelin, 297.
its apocalyptic eschatology, their respective evaluations of this process were opposed. While Voegelin criticized Gnosticism, Taubes embraced it. Upon meeting Taubes, Voegelin reputedly remarked with a sense of dread: “Today I met a Gnostic in the flesh!” What Voegelin feared most about the Gnostic return in modernity, was for Taubes its main attraction: its radical world-negation and its appetite for destruction. In other words, Voegelin’s main reproach to Gnostic modernity and to Taubes, for that matter, was their lack of *spiritual investment in the world as it is*.

Voegelin’s diagnosis of modern culture was of course pertinent. Since the rise of modern science and philosophy, the intrinsic meaning of the world has been denied ever more radically. Being no longer has a primal sense of goodness but is considered neutral and indifferent. In a world void of meaning, human beings can no longer have any spiritual relation to the reality that surrounds them. In view of this lack of spiritual investment, the world itself ultimately becomes disposable. If this world without intrinsic meaning does not fit our human aspirations any longer, nothing keeps us from changing or even destroying it and creating it anew. For reasons discussed above, the consequences of this Gnostic line of thought can be very dangerous, especially when applied in modern politics. For Voegelin, the dangerous political attempt to abolish the existing situation rather than compromise with it ultimately negated the nature of political action. On a more fundamental level, it even relied on an illusory and too simplistic ontology. On the one hand, the modern Gnostic ontology overestimated the scope of human political action; on the other hand, it underestimated the substantiality of the world: “The world, however, remains as it is given to us, and it is not within man’s power to change it. In order—not, to be sure, to make the undertaking possible—but to make it *appear* possible, every Gnostic intellectual who drafts a program to change the world must first construct a world picture from which those

---

essential features of the constitution of being that would make the program appear as hopeless and foolish have been eliminated.”44 For Voegelin, the Gnostic construction of such a world picture first presented reality as fundamentally evil and subsequently conceived human beings as capable of saving themselves from this evil world. Gnosticism thereby negated the finite condition of human existence as well as the constitution of being as meaningful in itself.

Against the Gnostic-modern degradation of the world, Voegelin wanted to safeguard the dignity of the cosmos. For Voegelin, the world was meaningful in and of itself. The meaning of immanent being had surely become problematic after Greek philosophy and Christian revelation discovered a truth beyond this reality, but it could not disappear altogether. The Greek concept of cosmos as well as the Christian notion of creation indeed accounted for the mysterious divine meaning of being. In this respect, Voegelin claimed that the Gnostic interpretation of the world as meaningless or evil artificially negated being’s primal sense of goodness. Failing to cope with the ambiguous and mysterious presence of the divine in this world, the Gnostic rather discarded the value of immanent reality altogether. The illusion of a complete absence of meaning allowed the Gnostic to find meaning univocally and exclusively beyond this world. It allowed human beings, moreover, to blame the existence of evil in this world on a cosmological corruption rather than on their own failures.

In this regard, Voegelin lamented that the belief in salvation could no longer be understood in the Christian sense as an uncertain hope for individual forgiveness of our own human sins. Rather, salvation appeared as a straightforward escape from immanence that human beings could realize themselves through destructive and revolutionary action. Against the passivity of Christian faith, gnosis is an active concept that allows human beings to have control of salvation. Unlike Christian grace, modern and ancient Gnostic salvation is considered by Voegelin to be within the reach of our human capacities. The redemptive knowledge of gnosis is

44. Voegelin, “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism,” 305.
not just something modern human beings hope for; it is something they pursue. Paradigmatically, knowledge is what we attain ourselves; it is not something we just passively receive. Since Voegelin emphasized that modern human beings did not want to depend on the uncertain and uncontrollable transcendent redemption of Christianity, the Gnostic alternative fitted the modern mind perfectly. Gnosticism allowed the moderns to gain control of their own salvation through the intervention, improvement, and recreation of reality. Gnosis is the knowledge that is needed to change the structure of reality. For Voegelin this structural change took many different forms in modernity: he considered it characteristic of scientific knowledge, which allowed for intervention in nature as well as for totalitarianism that wanted to revolutionize political reality. In all its different forms, modern thought was conditioned by the dynamics of self-salvation. The modern Gnostic, argued Voegelin, believed “that a change in the order of being lies in the realm of human action, that this salvational act is possible through man’s own effort.” This Gnostic self-salvation is by definition immanent salvation. If salvation does not come from beyond this world, it can be realized within profane history itself. In Voegelin’s picture, modernity secularized or immanentized Christian eschatology. Modernity’s immanent salvation was necessarily also a historical salvation. If the present is unredeemed and if salvation cannot come from beyond according to the modern, salvation has to take place in the future. Because human beings determine the process of profane history through action, it is believed that humanity can realize its salvation in the historical change from an evil to a perfect world.

Because modern human beings thus believed themselves to be their own savior, Voegelin ultimately argued that they took over God’s position. Modernity reached its apogee when “[man] becomes conscious that he himself is God, when as a consequence man is transfigured into superman.” If man becomes an earthly, secular God, the position of the Christian deity itself is secularized.

45. Voegelin, 298.
46. Voegelin, New Science of Politics, 125.
Voegelin typically recognized this divinization of man in Nietzsche’s Übermensch or in Hobbes’s earthly God, the Leviathan, but this divinization was ultimately a Gnostic motif for him: “The Gnostic experiences . . . are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.” Gnosis, in Voegelin’s view, installed an immediate connection between the human and the divine that ultimately enabled the modern divinization of man. Only by becoming God can modern human beings attain an absolute certainty and control of salvation.

This Gnostic divinization of the human was for Voegelin radically suspect. If human beings think they are able to take over God’s place, modernity fundamentally disregards the human condition. Voegelin maintained that doubt and uncertainty are simply essential features of human existence. Human beings are finite creatures that oscillate between immanence and transcendence without ever being able to appropriate the truth of transcendence definitively. In order to attain certainty about salvation, modernity has to change this human condition. The dangerous consequences of this illusory attempt to change human nature were, for Voegelin, most obvious in totalitarian politics. In The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt also elaborated on this topic, discussing the totalitarian experiments with changing human nature in the concentration camps. In his review of Arendt’s book, Voegelin connected these ideas to his own reflections on modern eschatology: “Totalitarian movements do not intend to remedy social evils by industrial changes, but want to create a millennium in the eschatological sense through transformation of human nature.” In a very different way than Arendt, he emphasized the danger of messing around with human nature: “A ‘nature’ of a thing 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.” The illusory attempt to change human nature and realize

---

47. Voegelin, 124.
salvation paradoxically destroyed human nature. Voegelin took this destruction in a very literal sense. In the case of Nazism, it referred to mass murder and genocide. In his essay “Science, Politics, and Gnosticism,” Voegelin returned to this idea, which he had introduced in the review of Arendt: “The nature of a thing cannot be changed; whoever tries to alter its nature destroys the thing. Man cannot transform himself into a superman; the attempt to create a superman is an attempt to murder man. Historically, the murder of god is not followed by the superman, but the murder of man: the deicide of the Gnostic theoreticians is followed by the homicide of the revolutionary practitioners.”

Secularization and Human Nature

Voegelin’s pessimism about the modern age aligned his project in some significant ways with Karl Löwith’s theory of secularization. Voegelin’s argument that modernity secularized or immanentized Christianity’s transcendent eschatology is taken almost entirely from Löwith’s Meaning in History. Löwith was deeply critical of this process of secularization and of modern culture in general, albeit less explicitly so than Voegelin. Both agreed that the modern attempt to overcome human finitude and open up a redemptive infinity within immanence grievously wronged human nature. Both argued that human beings are essentially related to an infinite otherness that cannot be recuperated, controlled, or secularized. In antiquity, this otherness took the shape of a harmonious and eternal cosmos; in Christianity, it was the divine truth of transcendence. In modernity, this relationship was lost because human beings identified themselves with this infinite, immanent absolute, thus shutting the door to the constitutive experience of a meaningful heterogeneity. Compared to Christian and classical thought, modernity

was therefore a historically illegitimate paradigm of thought for Löwith: “It sees with one eye of faith and one of reason. Hence its vision is necessarily dim in comparison with either Greek or biblical thinking.”\textsuperscript{52}

This relation between Voegelin and Löwith can offer insight into the relation between Voegelin and Blumenberg, and their opposing interpretations of Gnosticism’s role in the modern age. In \textit{The Legitimacy of the Modern Age}, Löwith was the main target of Blumenberg’s criticism of secularization.\textsuperscript{53} Löwith’s theory, for Blumenberg, was exemplary of the secularization theorem in general, which delegitimized specific modern ideas by showing their substantial continuity with theological contents—modern idea X is actually \textit{secularized} theological content Y. Since Blumenberg’s elaborate criticism of Löwith was actually directed at this entire secularization narrative, and since Voegelin relied specifically on Löwith and on this very narrative, Blumenberg’s criticism of Löwith immediately applied to Voegelin as well. Although Blumenberg did not discuss Voegelin directly, his famous debate with Löwith made it piercingly clear that he would have immediately dismissed Voegelin’s understanding of modernity as well. Indeed, he would not only have criticized Voegelin to the extent that he relied on Löwith’s theory of secularized eschatology, but rejected his interpretation of the epochal relation between Gnosticism and modernity as well, characterizing modernity instead as the “overcoming of Gnosticism.” Unlike Löwith and Voegelin, Blumenberg did not recognize a substantial continuity between specific religious contents and modern thought. Accordingly, he accepted neither the continuity between eschatology and the modern philosophy of history nor the unmediated relation between the ancient Gnostic

\textsuperscript{52} Löwith, \textit{Meaning in History}, 207.

religion and the modern age. The modern epoch had its own original and legitimate contents that were not reducible to religious developments but arose in a more complex, dialectical relation to them. Indeed, the modern age is not characterized by the return of Gnosticism but by an overcoming of this return.

This different historical picture also implied a different and less pessimistic anthropology of modern humanity, for Blumenberg. In contrast to Voegelin, Blumenberg did not interpret the modern tendency to control and change the world as an eschatological or Gnostic attempt to save human beings from an ontological evil. For Blumenberg, the modern intervention in nature was merely an attempt to make life possible and bearable in a world that is indifferent to human aspirations. Consequently, modern human beings did not take up God’s position in Blumenberg’s view. When human beings no longer need to save themselves they do not need the illicit perspective of an earthly god either. On the contrary, Blumenberg’s anthropology of modern humanity was based on human finitude rather than on a supposedly accessible infinity. Unlike Voegelin, who argued that the modern Gnostic pretended to have access to a divine truth, Blumenberg had indeed emphasized that the relation between the human and the divine had become fundamentally unbridgeable at the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modernity. Thus, human beings were utterly powerless in view of a remote and unintelligible transcendence, realizing that the ultimate truth about their existence and salvation was inaccessible. The only possibility that remained in such an awkward existential situation was the immanent assertion of finite human existence here on earth—and, as the next chapter shows, a modest embrace of the world. Not surprisingly, the project of human self-assertion is the cornerstone of Blumenberg’s interpretation of the modern worldview. From this follows that the immanent world does not just serve as means for the survival of human beings, but that it becomes the material in which human existence realizes itself: “Self-assertion,” said Blumenberg, is “an existential program according to which man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself how he is going to deal with the reality
surrounding him and what use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him.” Instead of negating human nature, as Voegelin argued, modernity rather accounted for it, in Blumenberg’s view. Perfectly in the spirit of Blumenberg’s criticism of Löwith’s and Voegelin’s positions, and also defending the legitimacy of (political) modernity against implied religious continuities, the French philosopher Marcel Gauchet denied the modern divinization of man: “The death of God does not mean that man becomes God by reappropriating the conscious absolute self-disposition once attributed to God; on the contrary, it means that man is categorically obliged to renounce the dream of his own divinity. Only when the gods have disappeared does it become obvious that men are not gods.” Blumenberg similarly believed that when God disappeared in secular modernity, human beings did not occupy the empty infinity. Rather, human beings could now become conscious of their radical finitude for the first time. Modernity, for Blumenberg, was the fundamental assertion of this finitude and the exploration of its worldly potential.