

The Noetic Turn: From Zarathustra to the Wisdom of Salomon

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[EVS: Panel 2 — Religious Experience : Eric Voegelin and Beyond]

Summary: Taking Eric Voegelin's theory of experience as a point of departure, this essay examines more closely the logic of experience (and of religious experience in particular). Voegelin's main thesis is that, since all ideas and concepts are based on experience, there is no „history of ideas“ as an isolated process that is intelligible in itself but ideas must be studied and can only be understood if based on the founding experiences as their intelligible field. In an attempt to go beyond Voegelin's achievements, the paper sets out by analyzing the structure of experience more closely. The results are applied to historic case-studies, starting with the Gathas of Zarathustra; neolithic myth and paleolithic symbolism are studied next; from here the analysis proceeds to Hindu and Daoist traditions, finally to some Old and New Testament sources. In the end, the findings are summarized as a new theory: the structure of experience varies not only regarding compactness and differentiation; but the experiential field itself is changing in terms of horizon, dimensions, and structure. As a consequence, experience and its symbolization are equivalent only if the structure is similar. The difference between „cultures“ does not only regard the varying symbolizations of basically equivalent experiences, they are based on different modes of experience. Therefore we have to go one step beyond Eric Voegelin's achievements and study the history of experience.

1. Star Gazer

One night as a young boy about twelve years of age I sat at home in the kitchen and looked out of the window at the nocturnal sky. While I crouched on a sideboard fixed to the wall right beneath the window I was leaning on the windowsill. It was a clear and pitch-black winter-night with no moon shining, and the stars sparkling brilliantly. As a Christmas gift from my grandfather my father had received new binoculars, which I was now using to get a closer look at all these wonderful stars. I recall myself looking at Orion, Sirius and the Pleiades when out of a sudden I realised that in this wondrous world of night and stars not only the quiet shine of the distant celestial bodies was present, but I myself as well as the one who was looking up there and at the same time *knew* that he was looking. It was the first moment in my life that I realized myself as a conscious and participating *I*. I was so overwhelmed by that new experience that I ran to my mother straight away and told her.

At that age I had absolutely no philosophical ideas, being primarily interested in astronomy, rockets, satellites and space flight. My mother informed me that the appropriate term for this kind of experience was *consciousness* or more precisely *self-consciousness*. The fact that there was a name for it was a great relief for me. At the same time I knew that my world had just changed profoundly. The change, however, was quite strange: something that must have been there all the time, but I had never noticed before, all of a sudden was present to me — and it was myself. I would like to call this event the *switch to self-consciousness*.

2. Ideas and Experience

The story of the star gazer exemplifies a crucial insight: We may have a clear and distinct experience without a corresponding and adequate philosophical concept or idea. Ever since that late childhood experience the *memory* of this moment was present to me, the *theoretical implications* however remained obscure for more than a decade until I first studied Voegelin's theory of consciousness and related works.

Gaining insight into theoretical implications means to take a deeper look into the structure of experience itself and the role of experience in the formation of concepts and ideas. The starting point for this kind of deeper look was Voegelin's emphasis on experience as prior to ideas and concepts:

„Ideas transform symbols, which express experiences, into concepts — which are assumed to refer to a reality other than the reality experienced. And this reality other than the reality experienced does not exist. Hence, ideas are liable to deform the truth of the experience and their symbolization ... I had to give up 'ideas' as objects of history and establish the experience of reality — personal, social, historical, cosmic — as the reality to be explored historically. These experiences, however, one could explore only by exploring their articulation through symbols.“¹

In his *New Science of Politics* Voegelin states that "the substance of history consists in the experiences in which man gains the understanding of his humanity and together with it the understanding of its limits."² Put as a short formula, Voegelin turned from the study of the history of ideas to a meditation of experience.

¹ Voegelin, Eric, *Autobiographical Reflections*, Coll. Works Vol 34, Columbia, Miss., 2006, pp. 104-105. The emphasis on experience was a focus shared by many of his contemporaries in the early 20th century. Cf. C.G. Jung, *Psychology and Religion*, The Terry Lectures, New Haven 1938 (contained in *Psychology and Religion: West and East* Collected Works Vol. 11)

² Voegelin, Eric, *The New Science of Politics*, An Introduction, Chicago 1987, p. 78

At the same time, Voegelin assumes that the structure of experience and participation in reality is historically invariant while on the other side there exists „a plurality of symbolizations“: „the structure of reality expressed by myth and philosophy is the same“.³ The differences that make up for the plurality of symbolizations arise as a shift from *compact* to *differentiated*:

„Problems were arising that I tried to express through such concepts as ‚compact,‘ or ‚primary experience of the cosmos,‘ and the ‚differentiations‘ that lead to the truth of existence in the Hellenic Classic, the Israelite, and the early Christian sense. (...) The focus of my interest thus moved from ideas to the experiences of reality that engendered a variety of symbols for their articulation.“⁴

In the *The Ecumenic Age*, first volume of *Order and History*, Voegelin enumerates three guiding principles for his analysis of the experience of order: (1) The nature of man is constant; (2) the range of human experience is always present in the fullness of its dimensions; and (3) the structure of the range varies from compactness to differentiation.⁵ Later on in his essay on *The Equivalence of Experience and Symbolization in History* Voegelin developed these ideas in more detail.⁶

To the *Star Gazer*, however, it was not at all evident, that the ‚range of human experience is always present in the fullness of its dimensions‘. On the contrary, based on his personal evidence, it may *not be the case at all times*: The dimension of self-consciousness appeared for the first time at a certain moment. But if one dimension can be missing in the structure of experience the structure of experience is not always the same. Now, what was evident on the personal and biographic level, may likewise be the case on the collective and historic level of mankind. From this suspicion emerged a new question: How can we find out if this is the case or not? If we want to find out if the structure of experience *does* change in the course of time we first have to find out more clearly how experience is structured.

3. The Structure of Experience

³ Voegelin, *Autobiographical Reflections*, p. 105.

⁴ Voegelin, *ibid.*

⁵ Voegelin, Eric, *The Ecumenic Age*, *Order and History* Vol. 1, *Collected Works*, Vol. 14, p. 99.

⁶ Voegelin, *The Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History*, in: *Published Essays, 1966–1985*, *Collected Works*, Vol. 12, ed. with an Introduction by Ellis Sandoz, Baton Rouge 1990, pp. 115–33. Glenn Hughes, ed., *The Politics of the Soul: Eric Voegelin on Religious Experience*, Lanham, Md., 1999.

Experience is a basic principle of science and philosophy, but at the same time it is quite an obscure term. It seems to be one of the most basic concepts, and therefore it defies analysis.⁷ Another major obstacle for an adequate analysis is the modern identification of ‘experience’ with ‘perception’.⁸ Our first goal therefore is to free the idea of ‘experience’ from its restriction to ‘perception’.

This attempt was motivated by the Philosophy of Francis Hutcheson, by Voegelin’s notion of non-representational experience in his *Anamnesis*, and by the philology of Wolfgang Schadewaldt. Against the Lockean empiricist mainstream of his time Hutcheson tried to introduce a plurality of experiential dimensions by way of additional non-representational senses like the *moral sense*, the *sense of beauty*, and the *internal sense*. Schadewaldt demonstrated that the ancient Greek term ‘*nous*’, usually translated as ‘reason’, was derived from the verb *noein* with the indogerman root *snouw*, that means ‘to wheeze, to sniff’, denoting a special mode of experience in Homer as well as in classical Greek philosophy.⁹ The emphasis on the non-representational character of some types of experience indicated that it could not be restricted to sense-perception exclusively. While Schadewaldt’s philologic remark regarding the ‘*nous*’ gave the hint that some well known philosophical terms may not belong to the Kantian realm of the *a priori* and that on top of that, ‘reason’ may not be ‘pure reason’ — and „die reine Vernunft“ in the end may turn out to be simply nonsense. I liked these ideas for two reasons: (1) because I am an empiricist and (2) because I have always disliked Kant. To Voegelin, however, the concept of non-representational types of experience seemed so obvious that he never bothered to analyze their nature more closely.

Closer analysis showed that *experience* is a species of participation, distinguished from participation in general by the *consciousness* of the process. Participation in general we can characterize as a reference between two poles. From this perspective the

⁷ Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Wahrheit und Methode, Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* Tübingen 1960, p. 329 (10. ed. 2010, p. 352): „Der Begriff der Erfahrung scheint mir — so paradox das klingt — zu den unaufgeklärtesten Begriffen zu gehören, die wir besitzen.... In der Tat ist es der Mangel der bisherigen Theorie der Erfahrung ..., daß sie ganz auf die Wissenschaft hin orientiert ist und deshalb die innere Geschichtlichkeit der Erfahrung nicht beachtet.“ The same holds true for Husserl, as Gadamer remarks (cf. Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie, Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, Hrsg. von Walter Biemel. Nachdruck der 2. verb. Auflage. 1976 (Husserliana VI), p. 42

⁸ Pomerantz, James R. (2003): "Perception: Overview". In: Lynn Nadel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cognitive Science*, Vol. 3, London: Nature Publishing Group, pp. 527–537

⁹ Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Die Anfänge der Philosophie bei den Griechen*, FaM 1978, p. 71.

entire cosmos is a participatory whole. Experience on the other side we may qualify by the involvement of consciousness. In the end, my first attempt of a ‘dihairesis’ leads to a simple structure consisting of two poles, a participatory reference among them, and the involvement of consciousness. Turning back once again to the Star Gazer this analysis made clear: the analysis itself can be carried out successfully only when the *switch to self-consciousness* has taken place already. As long as our consciousness is not present to itself the nature of experience must remain obscure.

Once the structure of experience is differentiated, its multidimensional nature becomes transparent as well. While one side of the participational structure always remains the same — that is: ourselves as the pole of experience and our consciousness as its particular moment — everything else may change. We may e.g. distinguish two different modes of participation, one that involves our body (that is all sorts of sense perceptions), and another one that does not. When we participate by way of our bodies the pole we experience must be of a bodily nature as well. From this nature the term ‘object’ is derived since the Latin word is *ob-iectum*; ‘iectum’ meaning ‘something thrown’ or ‘put in a place, standing somewhere’; and ‘ob’ meaning ‘against’. That is: one body is thrown or standing against another one. The German word ‘Gegenstand’ (lit.: ‘standing-against’) is a pretty accurate translation. In the case of the Star Gazer objects of this kind were: the sideboard, the windowsill, the binoculars, and the stars; and on the other we find the hands holding the binocular, the elbows on the windowsill, legs on the sideboard, and the eyes looking through the oculars, all of them being parts of *my* body.

In modern usage, the term ‘object’ is profoundly misunderstood, since it is meant to be synonymous with ‘body, entity, fact, item, phenomenon, reality, thing’. If we consider the meaning based on the experience that is articulated by the word, *ob-iectum* refers to the particular *way of participation* amongst all sorts of bodies, which is: a standing against one another, a relationship between bodies in general and the sensible parts of our own bodies in particular. We may call this type *objective participation* accordingly. Modern empiricism identifies all kinds of experience with this mode of participation usually called ‘perception’ or ‘impression’.

Once again: The term ‘object’ refers to a way of participation, not to a particular class of ‘things’. Therefore, if we want to identify other modes of participation we should not look for a different class of ‘things’ but for another kind of participation

instead. (The analysis by different classes of ‘things’ is a faulty method, typical for Ontology.) This kind of participation we may call ‘nonobjective’ (Voegelin uses ‘non-representational’ occasionally). We will look for some instances first. The sudden experience of self-awareness or *self-consciousness* in the case of the Star Gazer is a good example; as is his *memory* of this moment. And whenever we *contemplate* the difference between objective and nonobjective, and among the different kinds of nonobjective participation, we do not refer to ‘things’ at all but to a *mental field* where all the different kinds of participation can be overlooked and compared simultaneously. This comprehensive mode of participation, overlooking everything else, is the kind of experience of the *nous* and in the ancient Greek usage is sometimes called *theoria*. Therefor reason is not *pure reason*, but a specific mode of participation; and all *noëtic* and *theoretical* activities are *empirical* in a very profound sense.

Since all nonobjective modes of participation are part of this mental field we may call it *mental participation* (in German: geistige Teilhabe) as well. In the end we can distinguish three dimensions of mental participation: imagination, self-consciousness, and contemplation as the specific experience of the *nous*.¹⁰

4. Searching for Divine Presence

In early discussions of these results, however, a problem emerged that I had overlooked so far: What about religious experience? How does this fit into the logic of experience? The question was originally asked by students in a lecture, at Cologne University; and it recalled the memory of another situation that took place about two years after the Star-Gazer-Experience. It was during the last year of my confirmation classes of pastor Storck that one evening I was laying on the sofa in the living room searching for the presence of God. One moment I was looking at the light bulbs of the ceiling lamp — the next moment all devine presence was blanked out by these electric lights. It was a very strange experience: in the cold electric light it became completely clear to me: there was no God.

A little later, however, I thought, may be I have been looking for the wrong kind of God? And I tried my luck with the Greek Gods instead. The experiment failed

¹⁰ The clarification lead me beyond Voegelin’s earlier achievements: in general, all so called metaphysical principles can be developed from and founded on the logic (the dynamic structure) of experience itself, e.g. identity and difference, the ideas of order and existence, and so on.

entirely, all Greek Gods were completely dead. A year later when I was about 16 years of age I started my search again, this time guided by Buddhist methods of meditation. Nevertheless, it took many more years and quite some patience until the search came to a result; and still many more years until I could articulate and express the particular nature of religious experience in a more or less satisfying way. The final motiv for trying to do so were the above mentioned questions of my students. So, what was the result?

5. Religious Experience

In all other cases of participation the other pole besides the participating person usually is something which we become aware of. Something becomes present. In the case of religious experience the other pole remains absent while at the same time the participating person nevertheless is aware of a reference. The reference is

- (a) non-representational (that is: it is not a perception, since all perceptions include another pole that refers to one of our senses);
- (b) but it is neither imagination (all imaginations include some „image“ as the other pole);
- (c) nor is it a self-reference of the consciousness (because there can be no doubt of the self-reference of consciousness) or
- (d) a contemplative experience (the noëtic transparency of the *nous*).

The spiritual or religious experience is the awareness of an absent presence: the other pole beyond myself remains absent while the reference that originates from some sort of an absent pole nevertheless is present. The term „absent presence“ is not a logical paradox like a „contradictio in terminis“. Religious experience then is a specific mode of participation where nothing but some reaching out to me is present — but the source of this reaching-out remains beyond my horizon, there is an absent pole but in the mental field there still is a particular participation.

Quite appropriately, the absent pole can be called numinous since it is a particularly powerful source and it is beyond the ordinary confines of all our other dimensions of experience — including the unconscious. All personal and collective forms of the unconscious *can* be made present albeit it may take some time and a lot of psychological efforts.

It is a particularly powerful source since it can reach out to us but we cannot touch it at will. And in all ordinary cases where something is „beyond“ our empirical horizons this transcendent something may become present sooner or later, by approaching it, by research, or simply by waiting for it.

6. The Noëtic Turn and Other Changes in the Structure of Experience

In a third step, I have put these results to a test. As a testing area I choose the historic field of religious ideas as expressed in written sources.

If my analysis of religious experience was appropriate then it should be possible to find equivalent formulations of the very same structure of experience in classical religious texts as well. (For reasons of simplicity I confined my research to texts, excluding visual arts and the like; for reasons of clarity excluded mystic literature because of its excessive enthusiasm.) I start with a document where, as far as I can see, for the first time ever a person presents himself as partner and responsible interpreter of a religious experience. As a sign for this turn is the fact that the is written as a personal testimony in which the person writing appears as an ‘I’ and as the speaker or narrator of the text. This moment I call the *noëtic turn*, a moment when the self-consciousness is not only experienced but articulated, expressed and has become a decisive form of representation.

(1) The earliest texts in which the participating person identifies himself in a situation of immediate religious experience and speaks as ‘I, Zarathustra’ are the Gathas of Zarathustra, a figure that lived somewhen in the 13th or 12th century BC.¹¹ The *Gathas* (i.e. Nrs. 28-34 and 43 to 51 of the 72 poems of the *Yasna*) are dialogues between the ‘prophet’ and his divine partners. Here, in the Ushatvaiti-Gatha 43, 7-10 we read:

7. I realise that Thou art prosperous, O Wise Ahura, / when one attends me with good thought, / and asks me: ‚Who are you? Whose art thou? / Why wouldst thou get a date for consultation, O zealous one, / regarding thy herds and thyself?’
8. Then I say to him: ‚First, I am Zarathustra, / Secondly, Since I, a true person, would seek (as allies for myself), enemies of the deceitful on / I could be a strong support for the truthful one / if I might gain the adornments of one who exercises power at his will, / according to how much I praise and extol Thee, O Wise One.’

¹¹ Cf. M. Boyce: A History of Zoroastrianism, 3 Bde., Leiden, New York, Köln 1982ff (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Bd. VIII.1.2A, Bd. VIII.1.2.2, Bd. XIII.1.2).

9. I realise that Thou art ropserous, O Wise Ahura, / when one attends me with good thought, / (asking): ‚For whose sake dost thou wish to know details (about) its (good thoughts) consultation? / (then I answered:) ‚For thy fire I will consider the bestowal of reverence for thruth as much as may be in my command’
10. Show me the truth for which I am calling / - in agreement with right-mindedness I have come for it – and aks us which (are) the questions (to be asked) by us of Thee / For a question (asked) by Thee is like that of impetuous persons / if one who exercises power might have made Thee vigorous (and) impetuous.¹²

Zarathustra here is an active partner in the dialogue. He is seeking answers. He knows at the same time, that he is taking sides for truth instead of deceit, since he made a decision, which side he wanted to be on. This decision between truth and lye, for the right answer to important question, is crucial for the person’s life. Everything depends on a mental balance, external acts are subordinate to the truthful state of mind.

On yet another level of contemplation, the dialogue becomes a cardinal event, dividing the life of the prophet in a period before and a period after it. And when the personal moment becomes part of a social field, the entire field is transformed by this divide: the time before, and the time after the establishment or truth. Only now time can become history. With the establishment of truth and the decision to take sides with truth the order of society alltogether may become a matter of the right choice.

(2) From Zarathustra we turn to the experiential field of the neolithic cities and empires. Here the theoretical situation and the mental structures look entirely different. The person responsible for experience and its representation is completely missing. The problem of truth is absent, the word does not appear. Instead, we the central topic is order, the mainenance, the support, the repitition, the festival of order.

The most ancient texts we can read so far are the texts of the cosmogonic myth (late neolithic) the oldest of which are in Sumerian (3.500-1.700 BC). While persons play a dramatic role as heroes (like Gilgamesh) or as real people (like in the sumerian

¹² Yasna 43, 7 ff, in H. Humbach: *The Gathas of Zarathustra and the Other Old Avestan Texts*, 2 Bde., Heidelberg 1991; see also St. Insler: *The Gathas of Zarathustra*, Leiden 1975 (*Acta Iranica* 8, *Textes et Mémoires* vol. 1); older translations see: H. Lommel: *Die Gathas des Zarathustra*, Basel, Stuttgart 1971, K.F. Geldner: *Avesta, the Sacred Books of the Parsis*, Stuttgart 1896; L.H. Mills: *The Zend-Avesta*, Oxford 1887 (*Sacred Books of the East*, Bd. 31); Chr. Bartholomae: *Die Gatha’s des Awesta, Zarathustra’s Verspredigten*, Straßburg 1905; F. Wolff: *Avesta, Die heiligen Bücher der Parsen*, Strassburg 1910.

text „A Man and his God“¹³) the situation in which religious experience takes place and its structure are never addressed.

Typical is the Egyptian Goddess Ma'at, often and misleadingly translated as „Justice, Truth, Order of the World“ which in the Old Egyptian usage are essentially the same, the etymology leading back to the verb „m3“ meaning „to direct“, „to judge“ and „to give a direction to things“ and on the other side „to offer“ and „to sacrifice“.¹⁴

In the older Vedic texts as well as in the early parts of the Old Testament, the order of things and its creation are an eternal manifestation, and the texts that tell this story are an eternal manifestation from a divine source where the person who recites it does not play any relevant or responsible role except insofar as the text must be preserved like all other parts of the divine order. The Sanskrit term Shruti, literally meaning „something heard of“, denotes the vedic texts and the old upanishads, received from the goddesses directly by the rishis, the wise. All later texts are called smriti, that is: something remembered. The memory refers to the person, that is responsible for the text, i.e. he who wrote it.¹⁵

This is an essential characteristic of all mythological texts: Their content is a manifestation of eternal order. The person, who recites texts, is just a singer, a voice. Submission to the manifest order is the right thing to do. The ritual is important, mental attitude is not. If submission and ritual are incorrect, order will collapse more or less completely. Neolithic myth is a manifest obsession with order. The conscious person is not part of a mental field – and ideal while the language Zarathustra reflects the structure of the mental field and differentiates various capacities of a multidimensional soul, the psyche of neolithic texts is but a particular form of breathing, a spirit in the material sense.

(3) If we go further back in time to the paleolithic we now can see a major difference to what we have observed so far. First, there is neither text nor linear structure of any kind. Order seems to be very loosely knit, usually an arrangement in form of a sphere with single elements often painted and scratched one over the other.

¹³ See transl. of S. N. Kramer, in: J. B. Pritchard (ed.): ANET2–3, 1969, pp. 589ff; or excerpts in: S. N. Kramer: The Sumerians, 5. ed., 1972, pp. 127ff)

¹⁴ Jan Assmann: Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Ägypten, München 1995, (2nd ed.), p. 15.

¹⁵ Clooney, Francis X. Why the Veda Has No Author: Language as Ritual in Early Mimamsa and Post-Modern Theology, Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Vol. 55, No. 4 (Winter, 1987).

The representations in most cases depict large animals, often interspersed with signs, sometimes the silhouettes of hands appearing, some rather abstract human forms show up very rarely. In some instances the movement of a group of living creatures can be detected. The rigid representation of order is gone completely. If we compare any two caves with their paintings each of them is a very individual work. The only thing that we see repeatedly are some of the elements: a certain selection of animals is prevalent, landscape and floral life, the weather and all sorts of natural events are entirely missing. The single item seems to be much more important than the overall composition, if there is any. Sometimes the act of painting or scartching seems to be more important than the faithfullness or the context of representation. However, the experience evoked by paleolithic ,art' is not that of chaos, but something powerful. And that is, I guess, what it is: the representation of things powerfull. All things represented are living and powerful, sometimes they may be wounded; death, however, seems to be absent (if we not speculate and assume that an occasional bird is a symbol of death). In summary, the paleolithic artist articulates the power of life, and the encounter with powerful life, I guess.

(4) When we reverse the direction of research and look briefly into more recent times, we witness still some more profound changes in the structure of experience. For brevity, I limit myself to

In Greek antiquity the structure of the mental field becomes more transparent; the parts of the soul are identified; reason (*nous*) and theory (*theoria*) as particular forms of contemplative participation in reality are detected; and the structure of thought becomes clear in itself, and will be called *logic* from now on.

In the Wisdom of Salomon we see many of these changes imported into Jewish wisdom, as was earlier, during the ,Babylonian Exile', the case with Zarathustrian ingredients. In the Gospel and the Pauline letters we find another new dimension: that the basic form participation is *love*.

During the last centuries the most profound contribution regarded the dimension of the unconscious, on one side. On the other side, we had to learn, that the changes in the structure of experience are no prograssively accumulated achievements that automatically resist deformation. Quite the opposite is the case. The *eclipse of reason* is a very real event. I have to stop here, ending with a short outlook.

7. Towards a History of Experience

The systematic analysis of the logic of experience shows that its structure changes over time. For example: The paleolithic, the neolithic and the antique ways of experience are not similar. Therefore, the respective forms of symbolization cannot be equivalent. Myth is not equivalent to *logos*.

Only if we discover similar structures of experience, we will find similar topics of experience. That is why I have set myself the task of writing a history of experience entitled *Cosmos and Conscience*.