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To cite this article: Wolfgang Leidhold (2018): Eric Voegelin's New Perspectives on History and Experience: A Paradigm Shift, Perspectives on Political Science

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10457097.2018.1460129>



Published online: 10 May 2018.



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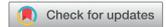
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Eric Voegelin's New Perspectives on History and Experience: A Paradigm Shift

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ABSTRACT

The article outlines Eric Voegelin's paradigm shift in his theory of history and experience to show how it has developed in several stages and through a number of revisions, shedding light on the historical and ideological backdrops of his theoretical endeavors. This also provides an introduction to the basic ideas and the methodological principles of Voegelin's approach.

The study of human reality was the principal theme of Eric Voegelin's continuing quest for truth. He captured his key method of study in a single sentence: "The methodologically first, and perhaps most important, rule of my work is to go back to the experiences that engender symbols."¹ This unpretentious statement marks a paradigm shift in the study of human existence in society and history, as it unfolds from the Paleolithic to the present day. The statement can be unpacked into several claims: The words of a language or the artistic artifacts of a culture are *symbols* that were "created by thinkers for the expression of experiences" (*ibidem*). Accordingly, symbols are not just arbitrary conventions but they are subject to a critical standard, as they originate from an articulation of experience. This process of symbolization establishes the original meaning of a symbol. Thus, a prime task in the study of human reality is to determine the meaning of symbols as they originate from this process of articulation and to identify the experiences that induced such articulation. In studying human existence, we have to start by studying the history of experience, instead of the history of ideas and symbols—the prevailing approach in the humanities that Voegelin's approach challenges. Furthermore, because symbols originate from experience, they can also *lose* contact with their experiential origin. When symbols are uprooted in this way, they become deformed and useless, if we want to get in touch again with their original reality. A good example of this kind of deformation is the word "empirical" as commonly used in contemporary *empirical* social sciences. We will discuss the issue shortly.

However, the methodological principle just quoted is not a random idea but results from the critical study of

some particular subject matter and of the problems involved. The particular problem that Eric Voegelin focused on in his study of human reality was human existence in society and history, and in particular the challenging problem of order and history, a problem that supplied the key terms for his *opus magnum* "Order and History" (EVR 289–390). The challenge of order and history can be unpacked into several problems. The first among them was the tremendous growth of knowledge in the recent past, both in terms of space and time. Closely related was the question of how to cope with such an enormous field of study and how to make sense of these "piles of material" (EVR 14). The comparative study in a historic and intercultural perspective formed the basis for such an endeavor. And finally, trying to restore meaning to the course of history led to the problem of what the driving force of historic and cultural dynamics was. Voegelin condensed his answer into a short thesis, presented in the *New Science of Politics*: "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" (EVR 64). The thesis combined with the aforementioned methodological principle account to what I have called Voegelin's *paradigm shift*. However, the shift did not eventuate in a single breakthrough but developed in a succession over several stages and through a number of revisions.

Thus, the development of the shift deserves more attention, beginning with the challenge of experience. As long as the analysis focused on the history of ideas, the nature of experience remained a secondary issue. Many theorists have treated the matter as if ideas generate more ideas, thus portraying intellectual history as a self-

contained system, a sort of ghost train of ideas. We meet with this kind of approach in Hegel's *History of Philosophy* or in Arthur O. Lovejoy's unit-idea-methodology as proposed in his seminal work on *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea*.² In contrast to that, common sense philosophy—as Voegelin had learned during his two-year stay between 1924 and 1926 in the United States—argued that even the loftiest ideas must originate from some “contact with reality,” that is, from experience (EVR 7–12). When experience moves to the center, accounting for the total panorama of ideas from experiential origins proved to be another major challenge. The key questions were where do ethical standards (or “values”) and religious ideas come from? To arrive at a satisfactory answer, Voegelin had to work his way out of the ideological deformations with regard to “experience.”

To shed some light on the process of deformation and to appreciate Voegelin's way out, we need to look into the historic backdrop from which it emerged. The history of experience is a particularly obscure story. When Voegelin started his career, Neo-Kantian and positivist “Staatswissenschaft,”³ which focused on institutions and their regulatory framework, dominated continental political science. Both approaches used a value neutral and empirical methodology, equating “experience” with “sensation” or sense perception. This is typical of modern empiricism—but the tradition is much older. Ever since Antiquity, experience was associated with two radically different perspectives: the monist and the pluralist approach. The monists took it for granted that experience is based on sensation. The most famous ancient exponent was Aristotle. For him science (*episteme*) starts with sensation (*aísthesis*).⁴ At the time of Aristotle, this was already a well-established tradition, of which Alkmaion of Kroton, a student of Pythagoras, was thought to be the first advocate. His account of experience (referred to by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*) was as follows: the senses transport the impressions to the human brain, which in turn keeps them as memories and opinions that accumulate to experience or *empireia*.⁵ In the Western tradition this sequence has become an integral part of the empiricist method. In a suggestive paraphrase, Thomas Aquinas popularized Aristotle's account in the Middle Ages: “From the senses comes memory, but from many memories: one experience.”⁶ Leonardo da Vinci upholds this tradition in his diaries in many places: “All our knowledge has its origin in our perception”—as did Locke and the mainstream of modern science, including Kant. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke stated that “all the materials of reason and knowledge” are coming “in one word, from experience,” then equating experience with perception as “the first step and degree towards knowledge, and the inlet

of all the materials of it.”⁷ In their discussion of the Self and its Brain, Karl Raimund Popper and John C. Eccles summarize the mainstream saying: “... in our experience of the world everything comes to us through the senses.”⁸ The present-day situation is even more difficult, because the mainstream of social sciences transformed into a branch of applied mathematics, processing masses of quantitative “data” generated by standardized methods either using electronic technologies for “data mining” or the bureaucratic paperwork approach of filling in questionnaires, considered to be the epitome of “empirical survey.” Evidently, at present, the terms “Empiricism” and “empirical,” as well as the corresponding methods, have lost contact with reality.

Among the ancients, the first witness to the pluralist approach was Democritus. In his work *Microcosm* he asserted that there are more than five senses in irrational animals, in wise men, and in the gods.⁹ Then there were Plato and the Platonists in general. In his famous *allegory of the cave* Plato tells us that sensual perception is but a secondary and imperfect representation of reality.¹⁰ The people in the cave are chained to their seats and watch the shadows on the opposing wall, initially considering these phenomena to be reality. Later on, one of them is dragged upward, out of his seat, turned around to reverse the direction he is looking to and forced to face the true reality, which is the source of the shadows. Here the experiential one-way road of the empiricists is rejected: the intelligible world is accessed in a special mode of experience, called the *noesis* (meaning an activity of the *nous*, i.e., reason). At the same time Plato emphasizes that unlike our sensible powers the noetic dimension in experience needs some special attention to become accessible. For him the full range of experience is not given to men by birth but needs to be developed step by step. The turn to new dimensions of experience is based on deliberate practice. In the metaphorical language of the allegory this development is depicted as a turning around. Plato's Greek term for this was *periagogé*. The Platonists in general adhered to a pluralist concept of experience.¹¹

In the recent past the issue of a plurality of experiential dimensions has reemerged in the context of spiritual experience. In that respect Voegelin benefited from his studies in France, staying in Paris for a year immediately after his two years in America. In Paris he got acquainted with leading neo-Thomist scholars, such as Étienne Gilson and Henry de Lubac, as well as with the writings of Henri Bergson, the Nobel Prize winner of 1927, who all opposed modern reductionism for experience, emphasizing that spiritual knowledge and moral ideas must originate from some other source beyond sensory perception (EVR 12). Later on, Bergson's conception of an open

mind and an open society, elaborated in his study on *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* [*Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*] (1932) in conjunction with Karl Jasper's *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949; English trans. 1953) became major stimuli for Voegelin to turn away from his earlier conception of a history of ideas that he had pursued for more than a decade in writing his many-volume study on the *History of Political Ideas*—a project he suddenly discontinued in the late 1940s, leaving some thousand pages of fully developed texts unpublished throughout his lifetime (now printed as volumes 1926 of the *Collected Works*). Since then, Voegelin substituted the history of ideas by a history of experience, a novel approach in the analysis of the history of mankind, first outlined in his *New Science of Politics* (EVR 36–62, especially 54).

Here again, we need to take a brief look into the historic backdrop from which the new approach in the study of history has emerged. Well into the eighteenth century, human history looked like a straightforward affair, progressing on a single, well-organized trajectory. The historian Flavius Josephus provided the blueprint for world chronology based on the Bible in his *Antiquities of the Jews* written in the first century AD.¹² Since then, mediated by authors, such as Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea, Otto of Freising and Joachim of Fiore,¹³ the scheme became the standard version of Western history: Human history started with creation, revolved around the birth of Jesus Christ, as the vanishing point of history, and developed as an irreversible process that was, in analogy to the Trinity, subdivided into three ages, labeled the age of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as its *eschaton* or “final destination,” comprising the *Last Judgment*, resurrection of the dead, and restoration of the Kingdom of Heaven. In the second century AD, based on Josephus's account, Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, made the first attempt to calculate the beginning of the world, setting the date to 5,695 years before the death of Marcus Aurelius.¹⁴ James Ussher established the most popular modern version published in his *Annals of the Old Testament from the Beginning of the World* (1658), setting the date of creation to October 23, in the year 4004 BC.

Yet just a century after Ussher, a new picture emerged: an evolutionary universe rising from the depth of times. The finite cosmos with its geocentric design made room for an infinite universe. Since the eighteenth century, an enormous temporal and material expansion complemented this gain in space, as James Hutton (1726–1797) established modern geology, Georges Cuvier (1769–1832) founded paleontology, Charles Darwin (1809–1882) published his theory of evolution, and Karl Alfred Zittel (1839–1904) initiated the modern approach to astronomical research. The

time horizon for the existence of our universe in general and for mankind in particular expanded into unprecedented magnitudes, now comprising many million years. Simultaneously, our knowledge about cultures and their respective histories multiplied as well. Numerous new and non-European languages were explored, and with that, previously unknown literatures and cultures became available. In the seventeenth century Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) introduced Chinese literature to a Western audience when he translated some Confucian classics into Latin. At the close of the eighteenth century Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) added the knowledge of Sanskrit and Old-Avestan, and in 1822 Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832) supplemented Egyptian. A little later, Grotefend (1775–1853) and Rawlinson (1810–1895) deciphered Old Persian, followed by the Akkadian and Sumerian, which Oppert (1825–1905) added in 1869. Starting with Columbus's voyages, new geographic and cultural horizons opened up in the Americas, in Africa and the Pacific, Australia and the islands of the South Seas. To this day, the original handful of pioneers has grown into a huge army of scientific experts, who have enlarged the scope of our knowledge beyond all previous limits. The expansion into deep history, combined with the increase of knowledge, unraveled a cultural panorama that would not fit into the pattern of a unilinear worldview. The challenge resulting from this change was nothing less than designing a new paradigm of world history including a new concept about the driving forces of cultural dynamics.

Hegel, Comte, and Marx were among the last to model a secular history analogous to the unilinear scheme of sacred history. All of them eliminated the divine foundation, substituting the interaction of a transcendent God with mankind by some immanent force now driving the course of history. With Hegel, this force became his triadic dialectics, which is an immanentized Trinity proceeding from “thesis” (the Father), via “antithesis” (the Son), to “synthesis” (the Spirit). Comte conceived the progress of human knowledge from myth to positive science as the moving force of history. Marx opted for a “materialistic” design, identifying the conflicts kindled by class struggle for control over the means of production as the driving force of progress. Nevertheless, with the knowledge about a plurality of human civilizations expanding rapidly, even such a secular idea of a single universal history of mankind lost plausibility by the end of the nineteenth century, because none of these approaches would cope with the plurality of cultures and histories.

When Eric Voegelin decided to tackle the problem, three models of secular history, associated with the names of Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and Karl Jasper, dominated the discussion. The result of his critical encounter with these conceptions of history was his five-

volume series of *Order and History*. In the introduction to the second volume, entitled *The World of the Polis*, he dealt at length with the three authors (EVR 316–326). In his book *The Decline of the West*, published in 1918 and 1922, Spengler was the first to abandon the unilinear approach, designing a new picture, based on a plurality of cultures that coexist as individual units. He substituted the single and universal trajectory of human history by a comparative study of the varieties of cultures and their dynamics through the vitalistic lens of growth and decay. Because Toynbee was dissatisfied with Spengler's biologist paradigm, he designed his twelve-volume *Study of History* (1934–61) to solve the problem, substituting the botanical metaphors with an evolutionary open-ended concept. The two key terms of challenge and response characterize his approach. For Toynbee, the challenges usually were environmental problems, such as the need for irrigation in Egypt or in China. If the challenge met with a creative response by a capable elite, a new civilization would eventually, prospering as long as the creative impulse remained alive. Although both Spengler and Toynbee had aimed at a new picture of human history, they always studied individual cultures or civilizations in isolation. In contrast to that, Karl Jaspers tried to regain a universal perspective. In his study on the *Origin and Goal of History* Jaspers described human history as culminating around what he called the *axis age*, a pivotal period between 800 BC and 200 BC when a spiritual outburst simultaneously changed the ways of thought in China and India, in Persia, the Middle East, and in Ancient Greece. However, Jaspers's approach was still conceived as a history of ideas, and the respective belief that ideas were the driving forces of history.

The interval between Jaspers's *Origin and Goal of History* of 1948 and Voegelin's Walgreen lectures, held during the winter term of 1951 at the University of Chicago, and published as the *New Science of Politics* in 1952, marks the watershed in the evolution of his paradigm shift. At that time the challenge of experience and the challenge of the order of history combined into the new concept of an experiential history of mankind. Voegelin outlined the concept in the preface to the first volume of *Order and History*, entitled *Israel and Revelation*, which starts with the key maxim: "The order of history emerges from the history of order." The principal types of order are articulated in different symbolic forms, which in turn emerge from various basic varieties of experience, resulting in a scheme of five succeeding historic constellations that Voegelin sketched in the preface this way:

- (1) The imperial organizations of the ancient Near East, and their existence in the form of the cosmological myth;
- (2) the Chosen People, and its existence in historical form;
- (3) the polis and its myth, and the development of philosophy as the symbolic form of order;
- (4) the multicivilizational empires since Alexander, and the development of Christianity;
- (5) the modern national states, and the development of Gnosis as the symbolic form of order" (EVR 291).

However, the experiences that drive the human encounter with order and reality are not those of self-contained spectators located at a vantage point outside of existence and reality from where the drama can be comfortably studied and "a course of action can be charted according to a plan." The encounter with reality is not analogous to watching a movie. Instead, "God and man, world and society form a primordial community of being." Yet this structure is part of human experience only "insofar as it is known to man by virtue of his participation in the mystery of its being"; it is "not given in the manner of an object of the external world" (EVR 295). The five stages in the history of experience outlined in the preface, reflect a continuing process, a "progression from compact to differentiated experiences and symbols" (EVR 300). This is the order of history that emerges from the history of experience.¹⁵

Voegelin implemented the concept of a sequential history of experience in the first three volumes of his *opus magnum*, only to stop again for another revision: the materials available and in need of incorporation into the text had grown considerably, and the analysis proved that the initial restriction to five types of order and symbolization was too limited. For instance, he realized that the Paleolithic was not to be dismissed as being part of "pre-history" but must be studied seriously as well. However, what "ultimately broke the project ... was the impossibility of aligning the empirical types in any time sequence at all that would permit the structures actually found to emerge from a history conceived as a 'course'" (EVR 329). Putting it simply, Voegelin realized that he was still following the traditional conception of unilinear history, albeit on the level of "mankind." Yet "mankind" is not an acting subject of universal history, nor is it a concrete society that participates in the concrete process of history. Instead, the idea of a history of mankind is an "enigmatic symbolism" to express an experience—the experience that the process of experiential history is valid for all men, although this "history" is but a plurality of histories that do not follow a single course. Thus, he restarted the final volumes of *Order and History* with another revision, summarized in *The Ecumenic Age* by a new insight: "History is not a stream of human beings and their actions in time, but the process of man's

participation in a flux of divine presence that has eschatological direction” (EVR 333).

Analogous to the history of experience, Eric Voegelin’s theorizing never came to a standstill, continuously moving through a series of breakthroughs and new revisions. To him, truthfulness was more important than the vindication of a coherent system, which he regarded to be the insouciant game of intellectuals and dogmatists with imaginary realities in an imaginary realm of thought. Accordingly, the most appropriate way of continuing Eric Voegelin’s lifelong quest for truth is to learn from him as much as you can—but then to move ahead.

Notes

1. Eric Voegelin, *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness*, edited by Charles R. Embry and Glenn Hughes (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2017), 28. Hereinafter EVR.
2. *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).
3. The term literally translates into “state science,” which is an equivalent to political science, yet with a strong bias toward institutions, economics, and jurisprudence.
4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I (Alpha). In ancient Greek, *aisthesis* always designates sensation or sensory perception.
5. Plato, *Phaedo*, 96a–b; quoted from: *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 1 (translated by Harold North Fowler; Introduction by W. R. M. Lamb) (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1966). In contrast to *aisthesis*, *empireia* usually denotes accumulated memories and opinions of repeated encounters with reality.
6. My translation: “Ex sensu fit memoria, ex multis autem memoriis unum experimentum” (Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, q. 16, a. 7, arg. 12. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *The De Malo of Thomas Aquinas*, translated by Richard Regan, edited by Brian Davies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 900f.
7. John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), II. 1. §2, and II. 9. § 15.
8. Leonardo Da Vinci, *The Literary Works of Leonardo Da Vinci*, translated by Jean Paul Richter, Volume 2 (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1883), 288 (Ch. XIX, Philosophical Maxims, No. 1147); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690): Book II Of Ideas, Ch. I. Of Ideas in General, and Their Original; Ch. IX. Of Perception; Ch. X. Of Retention; Ch. XI. Of Discerning, and Other Operations of the Mind [esp.: II, 1, § 2; II, 9, § 8 and 15]; Karl Raimund Popper, John C. Eccles, *The Self and Its Brain, An Argument for Interactionism* (New York: Springer, 1977), 425.
9. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 449.
10. Plato, *Republic*, Book VII, 514a–520a.
11. Cf. Plotinus in the Fourth of his *Enneads*, see: *Plotinus, Greek Text With English*, translated by A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1968–88, see especially vol. IV.
12. Cf. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, translated by H. St. J. Thackeray, R. Marcus, and L. H. Feldman, 9 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930–1965), vol. 4, Book I, 8.2.
13. Cf. Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*, Books I–VII, translated by Mary Francis McDonald (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press), 1964; Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 2 volumes, edited and translated by Kirsopp Lake, J. E. L. Oulton, and Hugh Jackson Lawlor (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library), 1926; Otto of Freising, *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus [The Chronicle or History of the Two Cities]*, edited by A. Hofmeister, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, vol. 45 (Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1912); Joachim of Fiore, *Liber Concordiae Novi ac Veteris Testamenti, Liber de concordia noui ac Veteris Testamenti*, edited by E. R. Daniel (Philadelphia, PA: Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, 1983), vol. 73, part 8.
14. Theophilus, To Autolytus in, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 2., *Fathers of the Second Century, Hermes, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), III, § 28, p. 120.
15. See Wolfgang Leidhold, *The History of Human Experience* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2018).