Eric Voegelin's Methodology:

Experience, *Anamnesis,* and the Recovery of Reality

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Introduction

Eric Voegelin was a passionate defender of his unique approach to the study of political theory. Most famously in *The New Science of Politics* he criticized more mainstream approaches to political science and defended his own against the prominent positivist methodologies of his day. Elsewhere in his various essays and lectures, Voegelin presented in greater detail what he held to be a more valid way of approaching the study of political theory—not necessarily dealing with numerical or statistical data within a prescribed 'scientific method,' but focusing in on individuals' "engendering experiences of order." Voegelin went beyond mere assertion and effectively demonstrated his preferred method in practice within his thorough volumes on *Order and History*.[1] In spite of the impressive breadth and detail in Voegelin's chronicles,[2] however, some might understandably wonder whether the 'subjective' experiences of individuals that he relies upon can really be a legitimate basis for an effective study.[3]

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[1] Dante Germino concurs that Voegelin's *Order and History* is an example of his method in practice: "Voegelin teaches—and when I say 'teaches,' I mean much more than mere advocacy, for he offers voluminous documentation for his teaching, drawing on numerous disciplines and his enormous interpretive and linguistic gifts…" See Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework for Political Evaluation," in *The American Political Science Review,* Vol. 72, No. 1 (March 1978), p. 115.

[2] From the sheer volume of his works: "The picture of Voegelin that emerges…is of a thinker whose studies encompassed the magnificent range…He provided broad studies of classical, medieval, and modern European political thought and political culture, of Mongol constitutional theory, of Middle Eastern history and religion, of American political culture, of European racism, of Austrian constitutionalism in the twentieth century, and the list goes on." ("Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of History," Chapter 4 in *Approaches to Political Thought,* Ed. William L. Richter (New Delhi: Rawat), 2011: 38.

[3] Here, we see one "obvious objection to Voegelin…is that not everybody experiences…or recognizes its authority, and that therefore it may be only a private subjective opinión or simply, 'one man's idea about reality,'" (Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework," 113). I will elaborate upon

To be sure, there are some positivist objections to his project as well as some hermeneutic challenges, but Voegelin is prepared to face them. The first part of this paper will go through how Eric Voegelin responds to his critics and reinforces his own method. Once this is settled, the rest will raise the question of whether Voegelin is prepared to respond to one remaining critique concerning his emphasis on experience: If certain constructions of order come about as a result of shared engendering experiences among individuals, then why is it that we see competing configurations of order?[4] If Voegelin's framework holds, and experiences are as deep as he seems to think, then is it the case that the political and methodological disagreements we encounter are irreconcilable? Is "order" not equally accessible to all?

The problem arises in part from remarks like the one found in the beginning of *The Ecumenic Age.* There, Voegelin writes that the "structure of reality is not there to be seen by everybody."[5] The idea that not everyone has access to the all-important "experience of order" is at the very least unsettling. But even further, it seems at odds with Voegelin's insistence that we must put great stock in the "equivalences of

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this problem in the remainder of the essay, and hope to show how Voegelin responds to such an objection.

[4] In an essay analyzing and explicating Voegelin's later works, Dante Germino raises this same issue: "For some time now, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the moral consensus which we thought we could assume to pervade our political discourse has been increasingly challenged by the various movements and groups…" (Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework," 110).

[5] Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 1990, p. 186.

experience" amongst persons and across cultures.[6] So, how is this apparent problem to be resolved?[7]

Granted, this particular criticism is not put to Voegelin directly. Thus, the question lingers because Voegelin did not necessarily have the opportunity to give an explicit rebuttal in his writings, but I argue that he does furnish an answer that can be drawn out of his essays in light of his whole project. In the final section of the present essay, I hope to show that when Voegelin's sense of "experience" is rightly understood and paired with the concept of *anamnesis*, the overall argument advanced by Voegelin, which posits political reality as participation in the human experience of order, becomes more intelligible.

Voegelin's Reproof of Positivist Political Science

To understand why experience must feature so prominently in a proper account of politics, for Voegelin, we must first grasp how he conceived of political

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[6] See, for example, Voegelin's claims in the 1970 essay that "The sameness which justifies the language of 'equivalences' does not lie in the symbols themselves but in the experiences which have engendered them. The language of 'equivalences,' thus, implies the theoretical insight that not the symbols themselves, but the constants of engendering experience are the true subject matter of our studies." (Eric Voegelin. "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History" in *The Eric Voegelin Reader,* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), p. 199).
And also, how "Voegelin's argument concerning equivalences of experience and symbolization "is decisively important," according to Franz. ("Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of History," 113).

[7] This is an appropriate object of study for a student of Voegelin, since as is noted by his own pupils, Voegelin very much disliked research of a 'topic' and was convicted that true science and scholarship arose out of felt 'problems.' On a broader scale, he believed that political-philosophical investigation was necessitated by problems as well, particularly times of military or constitutional crisis. Pressing on a problem in Voegelin's own texts therefore provides a nice way in. Voegelin replied to a panelist's remark at a 1946 APSA roundtable: "If one ignores the context of scientific problems, research turns into "indulgence in irrelevancies." This is particularly apt to occur when one discusses "research programs" or "research projects" because such items cannot sensibly be found…for a 'topic' is not a 'problem,' and science is concerned with the elaboration or analysis of problems." (Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science," Chapter 3 in *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science,* 84).

reality as such.[8] Politics, after all, assumes that there is such a thing as reality itself, an intelligible world to be explored and acted upon.[9] According to Voegelin, recognizing the basic principle that we can know something about what we are dealing with when we attempt to study the political world is the first step toward a viable political science. We must bring with us a certain confidence in both the order of the universe and our own rational faculties to behold it.

This faith in the inherent rationality of the cosmos is what has increasingly gone missing in the modern era and part of what Professor Voegelin laments in his famous installment of the Walgreen Lectures at the University of Chicago, which have come to be known as his *New Science of Politics*. In the Lecture, Voegelin mounts an attack on positivism, which he blames for the crisis in political science and other fields.[10] Positivism, in the barest terms, insists that what is real is that which can be empirically observed. Voegelin adamantly rejected this premise, and even claimed that it was an affront to reason.

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[8] Dante Germino has written: "If pressed to provide a one-word reply to the question 'What serves as Eric Voegelin's framework for political evaluation?', there could be only one valid answer: 'Reality.'" (Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework," 110). Most of us think we have a handle on what reality is, but Voegelin knows better. In fact, we all know better, but we have forgotten. This is why anamnesis, or memory is so essential, as the end of the essay will make more explicit.

[9] "Once we assume, however, that it makes good sense to raise the question of reality in this form, we imply something essential about the relation of political science to its subject matter…" (Eric Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" in *The Eric Voegelin Reader,* ed. Charles Embry and Glenn Hughes, 342).

[10]"In contrast to the positivistic understanding, for Voegelin and for a Voegelinian understanding of political science, the term science meant the "study of reality" or "a search for truth concerning the nature of the various realms of being," the interrelationship between or among these 'realms' and so on." (Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science," 68).

Voegelin stressed what he believed was a "commonsense observation," that "different objects require different methods."[11] However, proponents of a positivistic mentality believed that their one method fit all. This had the effect of elevating methodology to a new level of importance. It came to pass that method determined not just how things should be studied, but what was able to be studied in the first place. It was no longer the demonstrable truth of one's findings that determined the validity of their approach, but the method they employed.

Therefore, "[Political scientists] share the opinion that method determines the status of a science."[12] Method became the measure of reality for many; if the method could not 'prove' the existence of an entity, then it simply did not exist. Voegelin believed that the fullness of political reality could not be adequately described through a positivistic empirical approach.[13] This meant that a large portion of his subject was left in the dark, since the positivistic method could not illuminate it.

The undue faith in the "scientific" method, therefore, bars man from adequately assessing the truth of his own situation. Voegelin said:

> If the adequacy of a method is not measured by its usefulness
> to the purpose of science, if on the contrary the use of a
> method is made the criterion of science, then the meaning of
> science as a truthful account of the structure of reality, as the

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[11] This is because: "If…one subordinates this principle to the a priori requirements of method, the result is a perversion of the meaning of science." (Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science," 68).

[12] Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science," 69.

[13] "The concept of 'political reality' is employed to refer to the reality generated by the consciousness of actual individuals, whose experiences and symbolic expressions produce a social field…" (Kenneth Keulman, *The Balance of Consciousness: Eric Voegelins Political Theory.* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press), 1990*, p.* 38).

> theoretical orientation of man in his world, and as the great instrument for man's understanding of his own position in the universe is lost.[14]

The issue then, was not just a methodological quibble amongst scientists of different stripes but had much wider ranging consequences. Voegelin showed how the "subordination of theoretical relevance to method" made real political investigation difficult, and perhaps even impossible for some.[15]

In fact, the subordination of truth to method does not just negatively impact the individual person searching for answers, but it poisons future attempts at political philosophy. Serious inquiries are stifled because the new method requires that its practitioners ignore the full scope of reality and what political reality actually is. In short, it precludes one from attending to the 'philosophy' part of political philosophy. This is a problem, for "philosophy, Voegelin teaches us, is not something optional for a political science worthy of the name: it is the *core* of that science."[16]

Political science necessitates philosophical speculation because, as Voegelin notes:

> The tension in political reality, which historically brings forth the phenomenon of noetic interpretation, is not a thing about which objective propositions can be formulated. Rather, the tension must be traced back to its origin in the consciousness of concrete men who desire a true knowledge of order.[17]

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[14] Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969) p. 5.

[15] For a fuller explication, See Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science," pp. 67—119.

[16] Dante Germino, "Eric Voegelin's Framework, 111.

[17] Eric Voegelin, "What is Political Reality?" 345.

In the above passage from his essay, "What Is Political Reality?" Voegelin identifies the proper object of political science as "true knowledge of order," and alludes to the Greek conception of reason as "noetic" knowing, stemming from *nous*.[18] This type of knowing is not as much instrumental as it is existential. *Nous* is sometimes understood as "mind." In Voegelin's usage *nous* is the mode of reasoning that can account for man's capacity to comprehend order in the external world while simultaneously taking account of the interior, or the human 'consciousness.'[19] It assesses the status of one's own soul relative to what is observed in the outside world. In short, it is the human orientation toward 'being,' 'the ground,' or "the tension of existence."[20]

The back and forth between the inward and the outward that Voegelin associates with *nous* is opposed in nearly every way to the positivism of the modern sciences. It must be understood that the 'noetic' orientation he speaks of is neither wholly 'subjective' nor 'objective.' *Nous* does not quite run the risk of relativism in that it is not solely concerned with one's cloistered internal experience or 'self-

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[18] "The core of political science is a noetic interpretation of man, society, and history that confronts the conception of order prevalent in its surrounding society with the criteria of a critical knowledge of order. Thus, in contrast to sciences that examine phenomena of the external world, political sciences as a noetic science of order finds itself in the peculiar situation that its 'object,' political reality, is itself structured by a knowledge that refers to the same 'object.'" Eric Voegelin, "What is Political Reality," 342.

[19] "…[W]e can speak of as man's "integral" nature. This integral nature, comprising both the noetic psyche with its three dimensions of order and man's participation in the hierarchy of being from the Nous down to matter." (Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," in *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness,* ed. Hughes, Glenn and Charles Embry (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), p. 222).

[20] This will require some elaboration in later sections of the paper. Voegelin has written on this point of how: "The unrest in a man's psyche may be luminous enough to understand itself as caused by ignorance concerning the ground and meaning of existence, so that the man will feel an active desire to escape from this state of ignorance (*pheugein ten agnoian*) and to arrive at knowledge. (Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 223).

consciousness.'[21] At the same time, it does not become ideological or dogmatic about what it observes in the world without. This is because one who cultivates *nous* does not make the mistake of assuming that she as the observer of reality stands above and apart from it, as positivism pretends.[22] Instead, unlike the positivist position, she who possesses a noetic understanding of reality notices that she is a participant in that reality; she does not stand apart from it as an outside observer.[23]

The fact of the person being suspended in the reality that she is trying to fathom complicates the matter of philosophy and science as they are typically understood. It precludes the possibility of absolute truth in the sense of a stagnant body of doctrine because there is always more to be discovered. Still, it does not warrant a futurist or progressive attitude either. Noetic reasoning cannot dispense with what has been revealed by the philosophic and scientific discoveries of the past. The task of the philosopher and the scientist is to take seriously all of reality and attempt to understand its order. This recasts the questions scientists and philosophers are repeatedly asking and shows them to be more continuous than one initially expects:

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[21] Voegelin is indeed concerned with "the rise of Reason to articulate self-consciousness." However, he does not attribute the same sort of significance to it that would a Freudian. Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 219.

[22] *Nous* accounts for a dialectic structure of human existence, both oriented to the divine and cognizant of the material world. It is not completely solipsistic. It also is not totally self-forgetful. Voegelin explains: "Thus, the reality expressed by the *Nous* symbols is the structure in the psyche of a man who is attuned to the divine order in the cosmos, not of a man who exists in revolt against it." (Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 227).

[23] "Cognition of participation, as it is not directed toward an object of the external world, becomes a luminosity in reality itself and consequently, the knower and the known move into the position of tensional poles in a consciousness that we call luminous in so far as it engenders the symbols which express the experience of its own structure…" Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," 204.

'How does this new data corroborate or slightly modify our earlier findings?' translates to: 'How do old experiences accord with the new?' Or, 'How does the past fit in with the present?'[24]

Anyone who believes that they are able to observe reality, 'objectively' and come to a final answer as if they stood outside of their own corporeal existence in time and history is thus somewhat "deformed," and as a result of the deformation is less able to reason correctly about the world and the men who live in it. This deformation often occurs because along the way, the noetic "search for order" at first appears to yield disorder, and many will not continue their journey on the same path but look for a quicker and clearer answer. Voegelin stated that inquisitive men will notice how: "The flux of existence does not have the structure of order or, for that matter, of disorder, but of a tension between truth and deformation of reality."[25] But Voegelin soon after explains that the felt disorder is actually a "tension" or a "pull" toward the "ground of existence." Man stands in the Platonic *metaxy,* or the "in-between" of Diotima's speech.[26] The 'flux of existence' must be felt and confronted before man can begin to see in the in-between world the principles of order.

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[24] There is another important dimension to Voegelin's thought regading his status as a "philosopher of history." Indeed, he did much to integrate a healthy historical consciousness into his writings, and saw it as an important unfolding of reality. It is beyond the scope of the present project to go into much more detail beyond this footnote. A brief mention of his attentio to the past can be found in the final section regarding *anamnesis* and memory.

[25] Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," 203.

[26] See "The Speech of Diotima" at the end of Plato's *Symposium* describing the one who loves as "by nature neither inmortal nor mortal" Plato's *Symposium,* 203e.

Despite the barriers to continuing the noetic journey towards order, Voegelin is confident that it is possible to sojourn on. Reason cannot be lost altogether: "Reason in the noetic sense was discovered as both the force and the criterion of order."[27] As long as we have a desire for order, the tension of existence can still pull us and spur us into philosophizing. We have not moved beyond the "epoch of reason" begun by the Greeks, who established: "the life of Reason in Western culture in continuity to our own time; it does not belong to the past, but it is the epoch in which we still live."[28] Lovers of wisdom can still spring up, and just like the Greek forefathers can become "engaged in an act of resistance against the personal and social disorder of their age."[29]

Although Voegelin leaves us with a hopeful note that deformation is perhaps escapable, still the prevalence of deformed reason perpetuates a rather dire situation. As Voegelin remarks: "[t]he philosopher who has made deformed existence his own, finally, can deform the historical field of experiences and symbols by imposing on it his model of deformation."[30] This means that when one insists on laying a positivistic lens over reality, they create an artificial limitation that hinders subsequent generations from important breakthroughs. This is due in part to how positivism insulates itself and disguises all potential difficulties as mathematical problems. Any failures of

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Furthermore, the idea of *metaxy* is not only found in Ancient Greek philosophy, but also in the Christian tradition, where Scripture tells of how God made men "a little lower than the angels." (Hebrews 2:7).

[27] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience, 219.

[28] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience, 220.

[29] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience, 219.

[30] Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experiences," 201.

interpretation are explained away by citing methodological missteps. Tweaking the

formula fixes everything. At a certain point, however, Voegelin insists that this way of

dismissing political problems proves itself insufficient by the criterion of experience.

To sum up, Voegelin's two main contentions with the rise of positivistic

methods are as follows:

> The first…was the assumption that the successes of the natural
> sciences could be attributed, at least in part, to the mathematical
> or quasi-mathematical methods they employed and therefore,
> the acceptance of such methods as paradigmatic and the
> application of them by practitioners of other sciences would
> result in comparable achievements. The second…maintained
> that…the subject matters examined by such 'non-scientific'
> procedures was…illusionary, which meant either it was simply
> nonexistent, or it was capable of being transformed by scientific
> suspicion and reduction into a form suitable for scientific
> analysis.[31]

Voegelin attributes the first error mentioned here to a Cartesian mentality that, once

taken hold, quickly led to the 'fact-value' distinction in the social sciences, which

amounts to a rejection of the Ancient discovery of *nous*.[32] The second misstep is

perhaps the more severe. The conceit of positivism was that anything it could not

explain was not explainable. This hubristic claim led to a widespread rejection of

transcendence, which has proven disastrous.[33]

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[31] Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science," 67.

[32] "[This fact/value distinction] meant ignoring, forgetting or otherwise eclipsing ontology as a science. In the process, ethics and politics ceased to be what they were…namely, rational accounts, sciences, of the order within which human beings actualize themselves. Instead, ethics and politics became indistinguishable from preferences, idiosyncrasies, and subjective, uncritical opinion..." (Barry Cooper, "Positivism and the Destruction of Science, 70).

[33] The symbols of the transcendent and the worldly cannot be separated. Voegelin wrote: "If we split these pairs of symbols… we destroy the reality of existence as it has been experienced…we lose consciousness and intellect; we deform our humanity and reduce ourselves to a state of quiet

Voegelin believed that orientation toward transcendent reality was actually an integral part of man's existence, and this made it important to political life as well.[34] He hearkened back to the Ancient mode of understanding, stressing the works of Plato and Aristotle as exemplars.[35] Thus: "[Voegelin] was a strong advocate of returning to much earlier historical methods of political thought, renewing the ultimate 'why' question—inquiring into the very nature of mankind's existence and political purpose."[36]

Voegelin's suggestion is that those sincerely interested in the science of politics return to older ways of viewing political problems. He does not intend to institute an altogether "new" science of politics. [37] Sometimes the title of his lecture series suggests otherwise, but the intent of Voegelin's *New Science* is not to present his own substantive work, but instead to critique and to diagnose.[38] He aims to replace the

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despair or activist conformity to the "age" of drug addiction of television watching, of hedonistic stupor or murderous possession of truth, of suffering from the absurdity of existence or indulgence in any divertissement…that promises to substitute..." but can never adequately °replace the rightful Transcendent realm. (Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience", 203).

[34] "Voegelin's work makes it clear that there can, in fact, be not merely a new science of politics, but a comprehensive science of man, a noetic science." ("Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of History," 109).

[35] "Voegelin gives us a leading example of a mid-twentieth century critic of modernity whose critique of modernity is inspired not by Heidegger, but by Plato." (Ronald Beiner, "Eric Voegelin: Modernity's Vortex" Chapter 6 in *Political Philosophy What It Is and Why It Matters*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 92.

[36] "Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of History," 97.

[37] Thus it can be said of Voegelin: "His revolutionary qualities appear both in his recovery and further development of an ancient mode of inquiry and in his critique of the contemporary situation based on the inquiry that he develops." ("Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of History," 110).

[38] Voegelin does indeed mean to be diagnostic, which some have regarded as rather odd for a political scientist: "…A diagnosis of modernity as a spiritual disorder may give a vague sense of being more theological in tone than of being a properly defined topic of political science. We should

"new science of politics" by borrowing from the old. This meant turning away from strict positivistic empiricism and taking instead what he considered the more valuable empirical data of human experience in history—experiences of the world, of the divine, and of order in both of these spheres.

Eric Voegelin's Emphasis on Experience

Appropriately, Voegelin's turn away from the scientific method to an emphasis on experience in his political investigations was in large part based on his own personal experiences as a scholar. It was while studying *Staatslehre* in Germany as a young student that Voegelin first became wary of the oppressiveness of certain methods. He was trained under the prominent neo-Kantian legal philosopher, Hans Kelsen, and it has been recorded that after leaving the tutelage of Kelsen, Voegelin: "from then on…would only accept concrete experience as binding evidence on his judgments, experience based not on perception, but the entire spectrum of consciousness."[39] But before Voegelin settled on this as his signature method, his approach would go through some stages of refinement.

Following the epiphany that led him away from positivism, Voegelin first prioritized political ideas and their consequences.[40] Over time, Voegelin noticed that rather than focusing on ideas, he would have to ground his insights in something more

therefore be reminded…that [Voegelin] was originally trained as a political scientist and that he retained this professional appellation throughout his life." ("Eric Voegelin, Philosopher of History," 121).

[39] Kenneth Keulman*, The Balance of Consciousness, 30*

[40] This focus is evident in his early work such as in *Political Religions,* and his book on the American mind.

concrete. In the midst of a commissioned project on *The History of Political Ideas,*

Voegelin found himself unable to complete it, because through his investigation of the

sources, he saw that the project as a whole rested on a flawed premise.[41] The premise

that *ideas* were most fundamental to political theory no longer held. Instead, he needed

to revise his approach: "He would have to criticize ideas by penetrating to the

experiences from which they originated, if in fact there were any, and then attempt to

understand how these experiences related to one another."[42] Experience came to

replace ideas in his frame of thinking.

Voegelin did not wish to turn away from the realm of ideas altogether. (Indeed,

this would be opposed to his model of noetic knowledge). He simply wished to

understand better the proper place of ideas and how they operated in the social

sphere. In particular, he wanted to be sure that ideas were grounded in reality. Ideas

that did not have their basis in actual human life were less legitimate than those that

did stem from verified experience. He found that successful ideas did in fact arise

from a shared experience that was then expressed through symbolization in a

community.[43] Symbols are attempts at articulating ideas that are built up from the

material of individual and collective experiences.

Symbols are necessary because experiences are not communicable in their own

right. This is the particular difficulty of defining "experience" in the Voegelinian

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[41] Eric Voegelin wrote in his *Autobiographical Reflections* about halting his project when he realized ideas were not as important as experience to the investigation of poltical order.

[42] Kenneth Keulman*, The Balance of Consciousness,* 30

[43] Voegelin recognized that: "Ideas are not entities in history; the substantive realities are societies, which express their existence in history though a complex constellation of symbols."

vocabulary. Experiences as such are inefable, and cannot be directly transmitted from person to person, but symbols must carry the ideas that were inspired by a particular experience. Thus, a symbol such as "philosophy," becomes a shorthand for the almost religious experience of encountering the transcendent and subsequently realizing one's own ignorance regarding the realest things followed by a reordering of one's life.[44]

Voegelin considered it his task as a political philosopher to scrutinize the symbols found in societies and trace them back to the point where he might unearth the "engendering experiences" behind them like those entailed by the description of 'philosophy'. He insisted: "[t]he methodologically first, and perhaps most important rule of my work is to go back to the experiences that engender symbols." [45] But especially when it came to citizens in bygone political orders, how would Voegelin be able to observe their experiences? Of course, Voegelin was not one to insist that the experiences he sought must be empirically verifiable in the positivistic sense. Rather, he argued that the evidence of the experiences in question would appear to the careful reader in the texts these historical figures left to us. Thus, the method he developed entailed serious textual analysis.

He began his investigation into the experiences behind the symbols with the ancient Greek philosophical texts. He saw in the works of the philosophers of Athens

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[44] "I found that I had to explore the meaning of *philosophy* as a symbol created by the Classic philosohers, its meaning to be determined on the basis of the text. Such changes of meaning as this symbol has suffered in the course of time then have to be determined with care by relating them to the original meaning…" Eric Voegelin,. "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!" in *The Eric Voegelin Reader: Politics, History, Consciousness,* ed. Hughes, Glenn and Charles Embry. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017), p. 28).

[45] Eric Voegelin, "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!", 28.

the "engendering experiences" of order. It was clear that both had experienced

"theophanic events" that alerted them to the "tension of existence." This meant, for

instance, that Plato came to recognize the transcendent realm of the Forms as the

ground of earthly reality. Plato then theorized the *metaxy* because he had experienced

the pull of both poles of existence, and truly felt himself as in-between. Because of

this, it was in the Ancient Greek world that the discovery of *nous* was most

impressively articulated. As a result, the Greek philosophers were able to lay the

groundwork for a philosophical anthropology that has withstood the test of time.[46]

Voegelin wrote that the modern tendency to omit philosophical anthropology:

> …was a grave omission" because "unless we have an idea of
> man, we have no frame of reference for the designation of
> human phenomena as relevant or irrelevant. Man is engaged in
> the creation of social order physically, biologically,
> psychologically, intellectually, and spiritually.[47]

Since the Greeks attended to questions of philosophical anthropology and asked,

'What is man?' they were able to make more valuable contributions to political science

as well. An excellent illustration of the Greeks' integration of philosophical

anthropology and politics is Plato's motif of the interconnection between the

beautifully ordered city and the well-ordered tripartite soul in *The Republic*.

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[46] "In general one may say that philosophical anthropology integrates several modes of human experience rather than splits them apart into familiar dichotomies of culture and nature, mind and matter, heredity and environment, and so on. Such dichotomies express the 'dual nature' or the human being…The symbol 'dual nature'…may be said to have a genuine ontological status and…can be the subject matter of a realistic theory." Barry Cooper, "Philosophical Anthropology," Chapter 5 in *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science,* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), p. 170.

[47] Barry Cooper, "Philosophical Anthropology," 161.

But how can a man be expected to grasp what Plato means when he makes the city-soul connection? It seems from all that we have laid out that Voegelin would have him undergo the same experiences that underlie the ideas written about. Voegelin argues that this is more or less what occurs. We can comprehend what the dialogues communicate because we have a natural commonality with the author. We have what Voegelin calls "equivalent experiences." And if we have not personally gone through the experiences ourselves, we at least have been cut from the same cloth, and can participate via our powers of imagination and by appeal to similar events in our own interior lives. In an essay on the topic of the importance of equivalences to the social sciences, Eric Voegelin stated, "We know that the sameness which justifies the language of 'equivalences' does not lie in the symbols themselves but in the experiences which have engendered them."[48]

Despite the attunement of the Athenian philosophers and their vast influence, Voegelin mourned that their insights did not quite have the desired effect. Plato and Aristotle taught that philosophy was a way of life, but what the symbol "philosophy" was meant to stand for was evacuated of its meaning, as people instrumentalized the reason that Plato and Aristotle had made available to them. From Voegelin:

> Plato and Aristotle were so successful in elaborating the exegesis of their experiences that the postclassic development of philosophy could attach itself to the upper stratum of noetic "results" while [the experience of] "philosophy" was relegated to a limbo of semi-oblivion.[49]

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[48] Eric Voegelin, "Equivalences of Experience," 199.

[49] Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 224.

Ironically, it was because they were so successful in presenting their experiences to others in the transmission of their ideas that people did not personally need to wrestle much with the experiences so deeply felt by Plato and Aristotle. Readers are increasingly unable to grasp the ideas communicated by the Greeks' symbols. The full meaning of the symbolism in Plato and Aristotle is incomprehensible to those who do not follow it all the way back to the motivating experience of the true philosopher: being struck by a sort of revelation and consequently overcome by *eros,* or the love wisdom.

Only those who experience an erotic pull to the truth can become philosophers, Voegelin seems to say. Regrettably, many people of the present 'postclassic' age do not respond to this pull or appear to experience it at all. Does this imply that only certain blessed ones can gain the secret knowledge necessary to benefit from the classic philosophical works? Is philosophy an enterprise for the elect, in Eric Voegelin's mind? Must we leave the construction of political order up to them? If we leave things where they are, it is tempting to think that Voegelin is making exactly this point—and therefore falling victim to the Gnosticism he has so famously decried elsewhere. However, there is one more element of his thought to be considered that successfully removes the temptation to believe that Voegelin would close off participation in philosophy to the masses. The addition of *anamnesis* opens the path to all.

***Anamnesis* as "Recapturing Reality"**

The concept of *anamnesis* is especially important to shore up one's understanding of the prescriptions in the Voegelinian corpus.[50] *Anamnesis* usually means something akin to "memory" in the Greek, but the word can also evoke something broader in Voegelin's case. The term may also encompass "imagination," and varying types of "consciousness."[51] Voegelin argued that *anamnesis* was an important ritual to keep on both an individual and communal level.

Voegelin himself practiced *anamnesis* and actually took the time to write down many of his earliest memories in an attempt to assess how they impacted his later impressions of the world. He wished to "recall those archetypal episodes where the world made an impression on the psyche…reminiscences…as creative acts that lead to experiences, which inaugurate[d] a search for understanding." This type of remembering ultimately brought about "philosophical reflection [through the] elucidation of one's own generative experiences, during which time questions about the nature of existence arose."[52] Voegelin advocates that people in today's world reflect on their individual experiences, but also sift through the important "generative experiences" undergone by figures of the past. He is sure that with the proper

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[50] "The essays in *Anamnesis*…may prove to be Voegelin's most significant achievement." (Kenneth Keulman, The *Balance of Consciousness,* 43).

[51] On one level, *anamnesis* is related to a plane of consciousness. We must remember, however, that for Voegelin: "Consciousness is not a self-contained process that apprehends itself and is able, by analyzing its insights, to arrive at a comprehension of its own nature. Conversely, consciousness is a material process that understands itself to exist in a body and in a world. It consequently understands itself to be a part of a wider reality which comprises it." Thus, anamnesis partakes of *nous*. (Kenneth Keulman*, The Balance of Consciousness*, 56).

[52] Kenneth Keulman, The *Balance of Consciousness,* 57.

disposition, a man will find through a philosophical reminiscence a common thread connecting him to the rest of humanity. Indeed, in Chapter Twenty-Two of his *Autobiographical Reflections,* where Voegelin recorded his own reminiscences, he explained that he recommended the philosophical and reflective process of *anamnesis* in order to "recapture reality."[53]

Reality stands in need of recapturing because of the widespread "deformation" of reason, which has permeated the social sciences and civilization as a whole. In part of *Autobiographical Reflections,* Voegelin pointed to this predicament:

> Anybody with an informed and reflective mind who lives in the twentieth century since the end of the First World War, as I did, finds himself hemmed in, if not oppressed, from all sides by a flood of ideological language—meaning thereby language symbols that pretend to be concepts [or ideas] but in fact are unanalyzed…[54]

According to Voegelin, important symbols of order are no longer intelligible to members of this age because they are largely "unanalyzed"—or unverified by one's own experiences, and this hinders communication and genuine political advancement.

If people do not share experiences, they are unable to agree on the interpretation of symbols, which in turn means that they cannot come together and agree upon political principles and construct lasting structures of social order. Competing experiences would seem to render impossible political consensus. Thus, the disconnect between experience and the available "symbols of order" appears to present a sort of challenge to Voegelin's political thought: Extrapolating from the

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[53] Eric Voegelin, "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!" pp. 24—32.

[54] Eric Voegelin, "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!", 24.

framework of experience-idea-symbol that Voegelin has given us, it would seem to imply that at the most basic level, when we see social disagreement, what we are really observing is a war of competing experiences. Voegelin can attribute this to "deformation," but is he able to offer us hope that there is a way to regenerate?

Voegelin has given us hope that the "deformation" might be overcome, and that political order is attainable after all. We can understand why he remains so optimistic by attending to *anamnesis* and its function in Voegelin's thought. In short, *anamnesis* can reverse deformation by re-opening the soul that was closed.[55] It can make one who would otherwise be disinclined to philosophize into a philosopher. For instance, if she reflects on her experiences with an eye to those that could constitute theophany, she can afterwards relate to the symbols that attempt to communicate similar experiences in a new way, whether they originate in Ancient Greece or the twenty-first century. Thus, memory in the case of *anamnesis* does not just apply to an individual's lifespan, but to all of history.[56]

This means that *anamnesis* can alert us to our "equivalent experiences" by helping us remember. Alienation is illusory.[57] It is not really the case that persons undergo

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[55] Voegelin was very taken with Henri Bergson's importance of the *l'ame ouverte* or the "open soul," and he borrowed from it in many of his essays. (See Eric Voegelin, "Reason: The Classic Experience," 227).

[56] There was not sufficient room to elaborate on Voegelin's view of history and its importance, but he is rightly considered a philosopher of history in his own right. In the "Why Philosophize?" essay in *Autobiographical Reflections,* Voegelin acknowledge his debt to history: "My work…culminates in a philosophy of history." (Eric Voeglein, "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!", 24).

[57] Voegelin treats "the problem of alienation" as "the state of existence that experesses itself in the definition of symbols into doctrines" that compete with one another. (Eric Voegelin, "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!", 31).

wildly different incommensurable "experiences" in the course of human life. Voegelin believes that every person at one time or another has experienced some kind of "tension" that is constitutive of human restlessness. This can be quite enough to link us to the Ancients and our neighbors.

And finally, this makes it very clear that Voegelin does not believe that only some have the engendering experiences of order, which are simply not available to others. At a certain level, everyone's individual experience is unique. But the most important of these happen, in a sense, collectively; they become shared in the form of symbols that everyone has the resources to comprehend, if only they would engage their memory.

Therefore, I argue that Voegelin's appeal to *anamnesis* solves the problems he would seem to have with the multiplicity of experiences in the modern age, meaning that the absence of *anamnesis* (and, consequently, the great need for it) accounts for why people have such devastating disagreements in the first place.[58] Most importantly, Voegelin's appeal to memory offers a way to resolve such conflict, by inspiring the gradual return to a view of reality that can be shared by all.

He opens up the possibility of recapturing political reality from the positivists, albeit not one that is easy. Voegelin leaves us with the warning that: "Recapturing reality in opposition to its contemporary deformation requires a considerable amount

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[58] "Throughout a great part of the history of Western civilization, differences of opinion with regard to these central questions have not been significant. More recent times have witnessed a change. By the middle of the twentieth century, speaking of human nature demanded audacity. Empiricist either maintained that not enough was known to speak of it or were convicted that no such reality existed. Normative theorists, on the other hand, tended to deny it because of what were thought to be conservative implications." Kenneth Keulman *, The Balance of Consciousness,* 10.

of work. One has to reconstruct the fundamental categories of existence, experience,

consciousness, and reality."[59] Hopefully, we are up to the task of 'recapturing reality.'

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[59] Eric Voegelin, "Why Philosophize?—To Recapture Reality!", 27.

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