6. The European Metahistorical Narrative and Its Changing “Metaparadigms” in the Modern Age (Part I)

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1. INTRODUCTION

The historian Ortega y Gasset called for a “metahistory,” a field of study that analogically would be as physiology for medical science. “Metahistory” would enable us to discern in the panorama of history the invariant categories of judgment that led to differing historical understandings of human experience. “Metahistory” would include such categories as change, duration, development as well as those categories which focused upon historical cause. Theories of history depended upon the metahistorical categories as medical science upon physiology in that “history” might have many theoretical approaches in its conceptualization, but its range of concepts were determined by how the mind functioned as it judged temporality. The concept in my title of “changing metaparadigms” is temporal in the idea of change, but also in the idea of a “metaparadigm.” Ortega y Gasset explains how in each generation the movement of life and thought is guided by generally shared assumptions. Nothing is ever still: existence is temporal and thus changing. I will discuss the concept of “metaparadigm” as a set of general assumptions spanning several generations that govern the conduct of inquiry in all the arts and sciences of a time, as well as the manner of life in popular culture. A “metahistorical” understanding enables me to look at the diverse events of scientific, artistic, humanistic, and popular culture in a given period of time and elicit from this welter of differing activities a coherent sense of the basic temporal-spatial assumptions that were opaque to most persons, but nonetheless guided their activities. I will in this discussion show how Thomas Kuhn’s notion of the

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“paradigm” included this overarching sense of generalized assumptions that subtly guided one or more generations of scientific activity before a change in these overarching assumptions. Kuhn will not be the major focus of my essay, but his thought will help a contemporary audience grasp my line of argument which draws more from late nineteenth century and early twentieth century thinkers, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Scheler, Edmund Husserl, Ernst Mach, and Ortega y Gasset, than it does from Kuhn.

Ortega y Gasset, whose theory of a metahistorical knowledge is vital in much of my work, could be considered a philosophical phenomenologist and his historiographical work phenomenological history in the spirit of Max Scheler, who was his intellectual mentor. Time was a cognitive product for this post-Kantian philosophical school whose most renowned twentieth century philosopher was Edmund Husserl.

The Kantian/Husserlian/Schelerian consideration of historical time in its cognitive genesis is central to my historical theory and method. As a cultural historian, I will present certain basic assumptions in Western culture that can be described as metahistorical assumptions held by thinkers in the arts and the sciences, assumptions held to be true for all time as they entered the historical judgment of these individuals, yet were actually points of view that were quite relative to the time in which they occurred, generated by generational preferences in the categorical lexicon of human time-consciousness. Among the metahistorical categories I will elucidate that created major changes in the arts and the sciences from generation to generation are:

1. historical time as either a gradual (incremental or evolutionary) or a radically discontinuous, changing process;
2. the agency of historical cause being either a group or centered in individuals;
3. historical effects as either highly determined for all events within the compass of their cause or highly accidental, never predictable; and
4. the content of historical cause and its most significant effects to be found in the materiality of persons, places, and things in their mutual interaction or, in contradistinction, to be found in the mutual reciprocity of ideas and intentions of persons as they are directly communicated or through their artifacts in systems of technology or institutional practice.

Ortega y Gasset recognized several of the metahistorical categories in their generational changes I will track in Western culture. He saw the pendulum shift from a collective to an individualistic perspective over generations, as well as the sense of enduring time associated with the collective in contrast to quantum changes with spontaneous suddenness associated with the individualistic perspective (Gesammelte Werke, 1950, 1:533–537; 2:112115, 455–460, 462466).