



RESEARCH ARTICLE

BACKGROUND AND FOREGORUND: IS THERE AN ULTIMATE Narrative?

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I develop the concept of background and foreground. This may alternatively be understood as the post structural demarcation of presence and absence. Based on this, I argue initially theoretically and then as applied to apparent grand narratives: mathematics and science; art; philosophy; politics; psychology and briefly religion. arguing that no grand narrative (ultimate paradigm) is forthcoming and what appears to be a foreground may recede into the background depending on the focus. I conclude that perhaps mysticism or some form thereof is the only solution for both arguing for the concept of a grand narrative and for access to such an “entity”, *the cause*.

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INTRODUCTION

Case 1: A major political meeting in a vast Institution in a building of Greco-Roman influence. On the wall, austere painting, portraits of uncanny skill of past presidents. Then the meeting is under way and the talk is about war, security and internal, domestic ills in society.

Case 2: A scientist in the midst of discovering a new material and ready to break the news to the scientific community with the implications of tremendous applications in medicine and technologies of the future. At the same time, this scientist is going through a divorce, his pain masked by this new innovation.

Case 3: A sportsperson is able to defeat his opponent and feels the elation of victory. We are all biologically disposed in the same way, according to a universal template. His victory was short lived. He may grow old; in which case his body will slowly decay, and he will eventually succumb to death.

Now in case 1, depending on what is focused on, either art can be in the foreground, that is, the primary catalyst in history and politics or the background, in which case it is not focused on, and is a mere backdrop to the political discussions and decisions which now assumes the focus and is the foreground. In case 2, the same mechanism occurs: either the scientific breakthrough is the point of focus and its major influence in thought, culture and society, or the psyche of the scientist is

the focus, and his personal life is the foreground, his inventions are a mere epi phenomenon of larger psychological processes. In the last example (and of course there are a tremendous array of possibilities and examples), the focus on that great sporting moment recedes into the background when one focuses of basic human biology and how all people, regardless, are determined by its machinery, while on the other hand, one may focus on this sporting achievement, bringing into focus and the foreground, its influence in sports and culture generally and for a brief moment, nature, biology, medicine is not all encompassing or in the foreground, but blurs as this moment becomes etched into history and human culture. In all such cases, depending on the focus, the foreground and background have a relative truth.

In this sense, one cannot speak of an ultimate narrative, that which is necessarily in the foreground, regardless of the point of focus. In this essay, I shall enumerate major narratives or paradigms, yet in each case show how it may recede into the background, just as in the case of these examples. However, in the last part of the essay, I shall suggest the possibility of an all-encompassing paradigm, though this too is problematized when it becomes fixed as simply a religious framework or paradigm. I do not offer a solution to this quandary. The crucial point is whatever the level of abstraction (i.e. A larger more encompassing set) there is yet the possibility of a further abstraction or indeed one of the elements themselves being the focus, the foreground. To complicate matters elements or an

element may be shared by many sets. So, for example “book” or “books” could be an ultimate narrative, as could “cat” be a conceivable element and one could trace it and link it to innumerable other elements and sets and focus on it is the defining thread that catalyzes and explains a certain narrative. Or it is many elements like the constituents of a sentence. I have chosen certain overarching sets as potentially a foreground, as it were. My notion of background/foreground may be likened to the post structural Derridean concept of presence and absence. In any event, just as one is predicated on the other, so in a sense there is thus neither and knowledge remains a narrative indeed, an imaginative construction, a temporary dwelling.

Another way of explaining the dichotomy between the metaphorical allusion to the background and foreground is through another duality, namely between periphery and center, where a given focus can on the one hand, be construed as central, pivotal, a chief component and catalyst, a fundamental core, whereas, on the other hand, from a different perspective that very same component is but a side show, a periphery, a supporting actor.

Yet another way to conceive the abstract scaffolding is to say that any given element can be key, a set in itself that encompasses every other element, and while a set may seem all-encompassing it can be consumed by yet a further abstraction, rendering what appeared to be a foreground as but a background. Yet, elements and sets are clearly defined and demarcated (in mathematics), so in a sense a narrative defies logic. The idea of such a distinction is also very loose: an artist may paint the background before the foreground, what is at a distant may be more central than what is obvious and perceptible, while on the other hand, what is accessible to the eye may yet be more important and all else appears to recede in the background.

Applications (levels of abstraction):

Mathematics and science: When considering the defining cogs in the wheel of nations, indeed of human beings themselves, it would appear that at the foreground stands proudly the achievements and the continued achievements of mathematics and science, ushering in many defining ages: the hunter-gatherer; the farmer; the tribal man; the progression of learning to manipulate nature – earth; iron; bronze; concrete; steel; copper leading to large city development, industry and education etc. As mathematics, physics and chemistry expanded, massive developments in industry, medicine; transport as electrical and chemical processes could be controlled; and the industrial revolution was superseded by the digital age.

These paradigm shifts occurred too despite ongoing revolutions; war; natural cataclysms, irrespective of religious beliefs, ideologies; economic constraints. Empires rose and fell, and the human endeavor to know nature through the modern scientific method remained intact, often used by such Empires to force their will. Is mathematics and science the dominant paradigm, or as an analysis and manipulation of nature, it is actually under nature’s dominion, for the human that studies and uses such science is themselves determined by nature. Thus, mathematics and science are not culture as such,

but nature evolving itself, becoming more conscious. Thus “nature” is in the foreground and “mathematics and science”, the background.

Art: The primitive impulse to express through symbolic notation (visual representation), sound, movement, play and games appear to be a quintessential human impulse, common to all peoples, universal and what later came to be known as culture and civilization. It has a long history: in premodern times art was connected to the ecstatic, the religious impulse, while in modern times, beginning perhaps with the Enlightenment or perhaps further back in history around the late Renaissance, humanized art as a secular discipline and the image become a subset of the institution of art; while in post modern times, the art-object is neither religious, nor about a universal man in secular terms, but rather something to bought and sold in both form (the expression, the “thing”) and content (as an idea) – both pop art and conceptual art initiated this recent development in the arts.

In this long history, the concrete expression of an age and in particular the ruling oligarchy and ideological system of beliefs is augmented and embodied in the artistic practices and forms of the day, whether it’s a deity; a temple; paintings in a temple; a modernist rebellion against traditional forms; a post-modern social commentary. Yet in all such cases, it is not the active initiation that is art, but the prevailing powers that be, that determine the form that the art may take: whether one considers the Ancient Greeks, The Egyptian; the Roman; the rise of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Enlightenment; the postmodern revolt – in all these instances and of course this is a rough simplification and many Empires have risen and fallen – are instrumental and the very foreground, and art, a poor players that plays to the kings amusement.

Philosophy: One would do well to define philosophy as the basic curiosity to ask certain questions about reality or the universe. While in the West, its origins may be attributed to the Ancient Greeks and in the East to the religions of Taoism, Confucianism (if that’s a religion), Buddhism and Hinduism and in Africa to the Egyptians and the tribes of the continent over the ages, in South America to the Aztecs and Incas and later Christian plunder; in North America to the red Indian until he was usurped by the cowboys as the aboriginal natives were conquered by Christian West in Australia. A gross simplification indeed, but enough to tell the story of philosophy as one whose apparent wisdom is under the direct influence of the age; and if not and strong enough as is the case with the rise of any Empire (for its material power is embodied philosophy in action and in reality), it is indeed philosophy that rules the world and in this picture is the foreground. But those were rare moment – like the revelations of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed; Gutama; the rise of kings, queens; of nation states; and of global powers – most of history are failed experiments; the humdrum of eons where no change is registered; the sublimation of the many by the few or the noise of the many, uncultured and unlettered. The form philosophy has assumed today is an analytical one where the sway of argument and reason holds. But it appears rather ineffectual, academic and dry with very little effect on the prevailing powers, in fact ceding power to them in its dull analysis, and the rule of materialism and hedonism, of greed

and power, rules and philosophy is periphery, absent, background.

Politics: Is this the most obvious candidate for being a grand narrative? The ultimate, perennial foreground? When paganism, religious rule, Empires, monarchy seemed to give way to nation states and humanism (secularism), then politics assumes central stage as the cause of the state of nations, individuals and the global state of affairs. Thought-systems such as democracy, oligarchy, liberalism, communism, socialism and fascism mobilize peoples in the way the major religions used to or the reign of kings and queens, Caesars, Kalifs; Shoguns used to only now in the guise of presidents, reminiscent of Ancient Greece, supported by liberal and capitalist agendas or perhaps this is a ruse: Dictatorships and tyranny is always the order of the day. Or perhaps such an analysis is logically unsound. Certainly, there have been and are nation states that constrain the freedom of its citizens and are war-mongering and violent, while there are other nations far less so, where individuals do have some level of freedom; their politicians do not actively seek war and the institutions are thrive both in the business sector and education. It is difficult to find any perfect embodiment of the latter, but it is clear when a country and nation is bent of immoral design, that such an assessment is not mere rhetoric, but factual, and hence often more civilized nations are called to defend basic morality against those who plunder and set the world to chaos and run. Indeed politics does appear pivotal, that determined the power that will be wielded in a given society, only the stars burn bright for thousands of years longer than any Caesar,

Psychology: Or perhaps psychology is the true grand narrative with tremendous explanatory power so far as understanding the psyche, the human condition and behaviors? Various psychological theories, initially spearheaded by Freud, would appear to be grand theories that have tremendous explanatory power so far as the mechanism of the human psyche is concerned. If indeed one such theory may be true, or partial aspects of one theory or perhaps a combination of such theories deliver the truth more accurately or perhaps the theories themselves are flawed, their progenitors succumbing to the very notions it purports such as Thanatos, the pleasure principle and the irrational subconscious, and thus no truer than a duck proclaiming it can fly. To claim some one system is a grand narrative implies that all sub-narratives can be subsumed (devoured and eaten) by this one grand theory. Yet the fact that one grand theory itself splinters (into various theories) means that it itself is not a grand theory, for its theoretical strength lies in various competing theories, the possibility of innovation, the possibility of error, the unsolvable; contradictory claims and so on.

Therefore, a grand narrative is not a grand narrative. If one retorts and claims, but what of say claiming religion or rather a particular religion is a grand narrative, this does not works as a counter claim might be that religions or rather a particular religion can neatly be subsumed, explained, caused by such psychological mechanisms in the first place, while philosophy might be simply explained as an incidental game where the philosopher is but the pawn in the larger game of his psychological state of mind and narrative, with no more claim to truth that a monkey might make in counting bananas. A grand narrative *is* the foreground! Yet by its very definition it is self-defeatist for the theories arise out of the very psychic mechanism it claims as true, and therefore it may not be true, just as I cannot say that $2 = 2 = 4$ is true, only that it is true relative to the system called mathematics. Reality itself is unknown, mysterious and knowledge is a chimera. But the illusion holds, and it must, for indeed $2 = 2 = 4$ is a useful illusion.

An ultimate narrative?: It would appear we have reached an impasse. Any level of abstraction (set/system/paradigm) may be seen as either a foreground or background, present or absent, center or periphery depending on the focus and the play of other abstractions (set/system/paradigm). Therefore, there is no level of abstraction and hence set or any particular element that can be explained as *the cause* of all. If one simplifies it and claims, well, what I seek is God, that which is the ultimate narrative one is invariably led to religion and that set/system/paradigm will simply suffer the fate of the “applications” above as will any such item of knowledge and human expression. Thus, there appears to be no solution in sight.

CONCLUSION

The all encompassing, the ultimate abstraction is the ultimate narrative. And the ultimate abstraction is precisely beyond a set/system/paradigm both an absolute absent and an absolute present, containing all and yet unrelated to anything. Therefore, the ultimate abstraction cannot be defined. One can only know it must exist as the ultimate cause without knowing what such “an entity” is. Though the fact of the abundance of nature and the depths of the universe is one effect of which we are aware, we must perforce say that such an “entity” has certain attributes – will, intelligence, emotional dispositions – is without any body as it were, and clothes itself somewhat as light is contained in the vessel in all the multifarious creations of this world, and such creatures evolving from the inanimate to higher life forms and eventually human beings, have access to such an “entity”, though here one might then digress back to religion (or a particular religion) with the pitfalls mentioned hitherto as applied to other “applications”. Perhaps the closest we can get is a form of mysticism. It is at this point that there is neither foreground nor background, nor object or space.
