# Historical Judgment and Interpretation

We use the term "history" in a number of interrelated ways, and because they are related to one another, it can be easy for the word to shift without our noticing it. Consider the following different ways we employ the word "history":

1. "Woodrow Wilson was the 28th President of the United States. That is a fact of history."
2. "The uncovered foundations of Hadrian's Wall are historical."
3. "My life's work is that of history."
4. "Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* is my favorite history book."
5. "He teaches over in History."
6. "History teaches us that political power is not easily kept."
7. "Be on the right side of History."

Notice how each use of the term "history" describes differing aspects:

History (1)—the actual past events that happened
History (2)—the surviving evidence—archival, archeological, objects, etcetera.
History (3)—the work of the historian to gather that evidence and to interpret it
History (4)—the resulting texts that seek to order and explain that evidence
History (5)—the academic fields that question and collect (2)-(4)
History (6)—the broad lessons derived from (1)-(4)
History (7)—the philosophy or theology that seeks to assign come sort of covering law or predictable direction to the future based upon the past

One could deny that (6) or (7) is possible and even conclude that (3) or (4) is always tentative, while still affirming that (2) is based on a real and actual (1). What this complexity of definitions shows us is that the nature and meaning of history is greater than just the actual past or the basic evidence that remains from the past into the present. It has as much to do with the interpretation and judgment of the historian.

The following is an attempt to model how historians' work (3) and how the resulting histories (4) happen, and how, while the surviving evidence (2) of the actual past (1) shapes what they determine, so do their experiences of being within academic fields of History (5); their assumptions and conclusions about what broad lessons, if any, can be derived from history (6); and whether there are broad models that help determine the macro-shape of history (7).

## A Basic Model

One could argue that the most basic nucleus of history involves three aspects: that of past events; that of testimonies to those events; and that of their surrounding cultures. These are the basic historical objects (or subjects) that one is seeking to know something about. The goal of the historical

judgment is to investigate the residual evidence in order to reach a specific understanding about the past which results in or accompanies a specific explanation. These three key aspects to history (1) or history (2) can be defined as the following:

1. **Event:** an historical occurrence, something that happened, which by its existence raises questions of its ontological (and phenomenological) status. That is a past event asks us to understand and explain what it was and how it continues to impact the present in some fashion.
2. **Culture: "**an organized way of life which is based on a common tradition and conditioned by a common environment" (Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* Chap III).
3. **Testimony:** written and/or oral sources, as well as other tangible objects, which purport to describe or are judged to reveal the past.

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| Causation | Understanding | Colligation |
| Evidence | **Event**<br>**Testimony**<br>**Culture** | Explanation |
| Confirmation | Investigation<br>(Method) | Coherence |

There are, then, two broad continuums that describe the process of coming to a historical judgment about the past event, testimony, and/or cultures. One continuum you might call *the quest for understanding* (what it is we know), along with the method of investigation by which we come to understand what we know about the past. The second continuum is *the pursuit of explanation* (how it is we know), along with the evidence one gathers in order to reach an explanation. In truth, these two approaches work together, even if we can talk about them separately, and this unity is observable even though various historians and thinkers about history have tended to stress one over the other. These four aspects can be defined, thusly:

1. **Evidence:** anything that can be cited in support of a conclusion about some aspect of the past.
2. **Explanation**: either 1) a realist description of what happened or 2) a conjectural (i.e. deductive) model of what might have happened.
3. **Understanding:** to rationally make sense of what something is, or rather what it was in the past, as well as perhaps the reasons for what historical agents did and said.
4. **Investigation:** methods of discovering, collecting, classifying, criticizing, and interpreting historical pieces of evidence.

There has been considerable disagreement in the modern era of historiography (19$^{th}$-century to the present) as to how sure historical judgments can be or should expect to be. A warranted historical judgment can include predictions (or laws) of causation; the more inductive elements of confirmation;

the looser judgments of colligation; and/or the broad test of evidential and descriptive coherence. Notice that each of these is weaker and/or richer depending upon what you conclude history can actually accomplish:

- **Causation:** 1) determinist judgments of one event, action, or phenomena giving rise to another; 2) evaluative judgments of human motives, agency, and culpability.
- **Confirmation:** judgments that measure the probability of past events or phenomena having occurred and/or that reinforce other such judgments.
- **Colligation:** explanatory patterns that help illuminate the significance of past persons, occurrences, and cultures and thus make ontological and or narratival claims.
- **Coherence:** the manner in which various historical explanations are judged as compatible or fitting in relation to one another.

Notice that as the level of justification lessens, the possibilities increase for the scope of one's conclusions:

1. Causation sets a very high test for why something happened: one has to offer evidence by which one can be assured that (a) caused (b) given a certain set of conditions. This high standard is normally one we associate with natural science.
2. Confirmation is about the percentage of possibility: (a) and (b) and (c) all happened, and (d) was the likely outcome, so it stands to reason they were likely elements in bringing about (d).
3. Colligation, is similar to induction, in that we locate explanations based on common associations and patterns. This is also similar to correlation, which we often associate with the social sciences, in that it does not claim direct causation, only that (a) and (b) and (c) tend to appear together often in a certain order, from which we infer certain reasons. Colligation requires a web of associations or context to effect it.
4. Finally, coherence does not make any claims to need direct causative assurance, high probability, or even strong colligation, though all these may be present to various degrees; all that is needed it a general descriptive picture that suggests that (a), (b), (c), and (d) all fit together and offer a likely enough narrative explanation.

The Two Continuums of Historical Understanding and Explanation

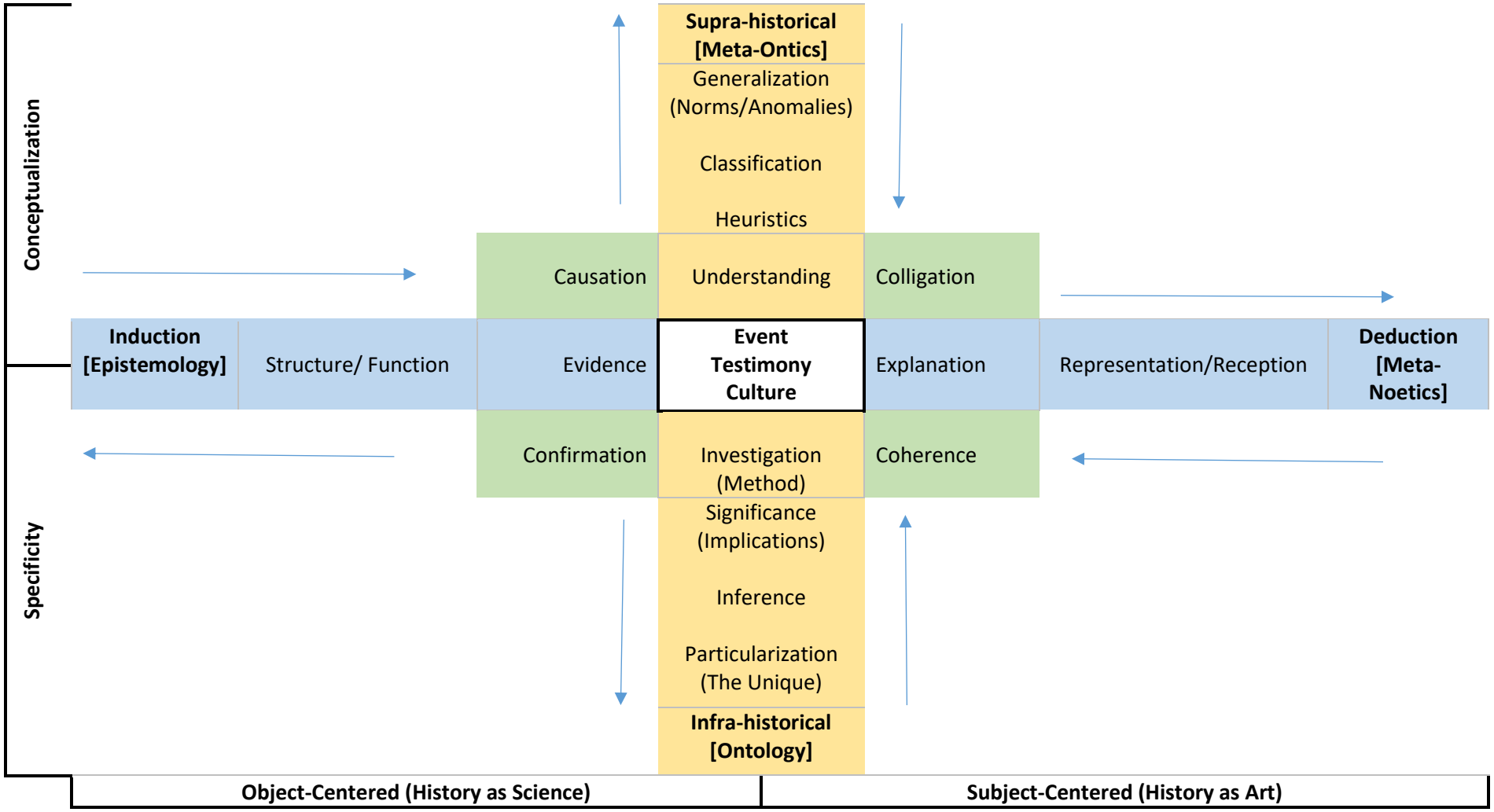
The **continuum of historical understanding and method** can be expanded to trace how it moves from conceptualization (generalization, classification, and heuristic judgments of understanding) increasingly down to more and more specificity (investigational methods, implicative judgments of significance, inferential judgments, and what constitutes a unique particular of the past.)

When we generalize as to what something was—its nature and character, we work from certain understandings and these lend themselves to various systems of classification and general heuristic devices we use to make sense of reality. When we specify, we tend more and more to dwell on the unique historical event, person, or context, even as we require our generalizations to reach particular conclusions about what the unique person or event is. What to generalize requires knowledge of particulars and vice-versa; we don't identify particulars without general terms.

In the same way, the **continuum of historical explanation** can track how deductive claims (explanatory representation and its history of interpretative reception) are completed by (or in tension with) the inductive, gathered evidence of function and perhaps ascertained structure.

In general, the more deductive the historical explanation, the more likely it tends to treat history as an art, as something centering around historical subjects, their particular stories, contexts, and so on. While the more inductive the explanation, the more likely the history will turn to evidence-based accounts, to using numeric charts, and to building up its claims based on raw data.

When we reach conclusions that something actually happened, we may begin deductively by drawing together the available evidence, or we may begin with the broad current received models about what happened and why, then work our way back to the specifics in order to understand how they fit the general received model. Again, in actual historical judgment, deduction requires induction, and vice-versa.



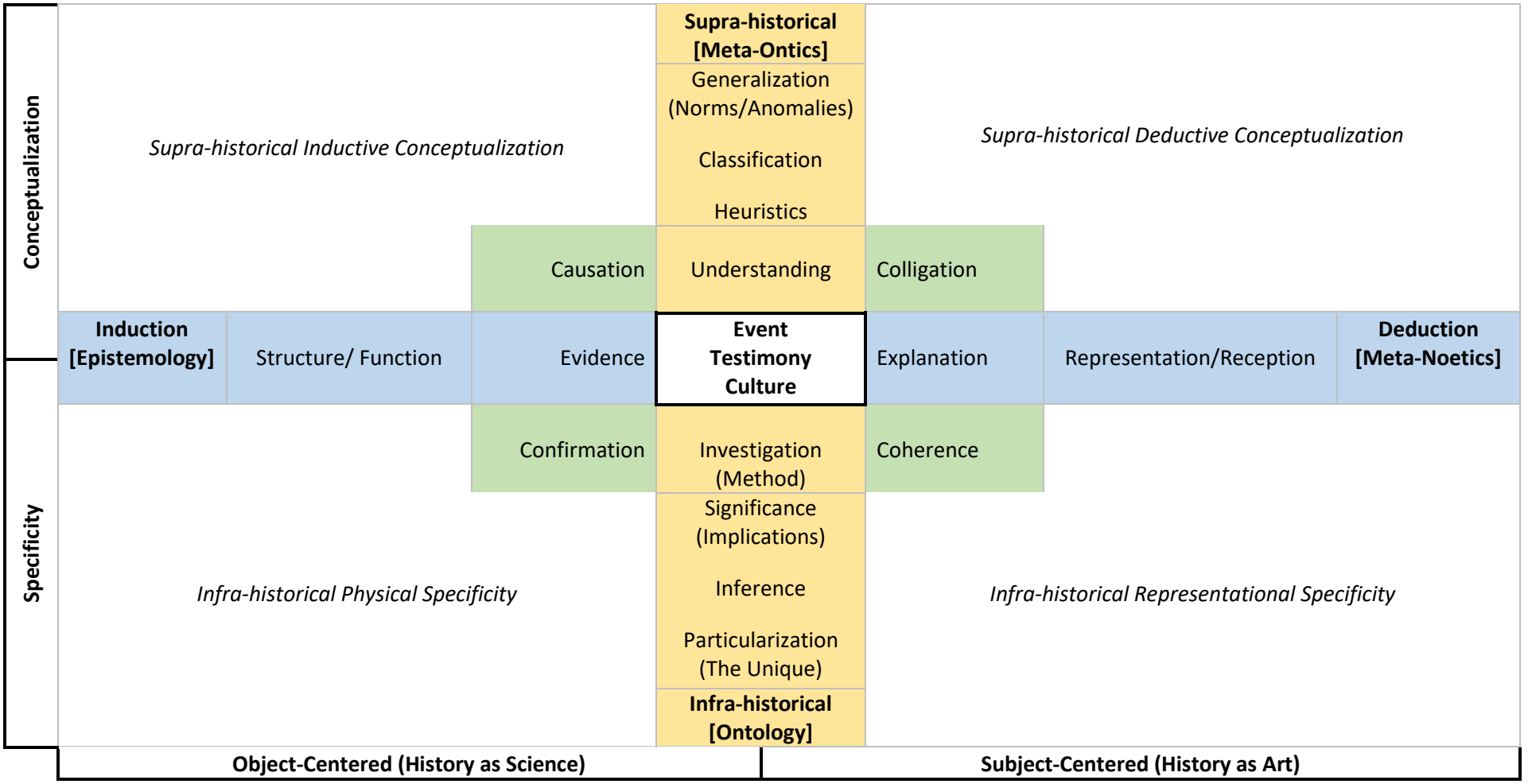
Clearly, then, the ontological understanding of what something was on the supra-historical or infra-historical level overlaps much with the deductive, meta-noetic claim as to how we know that something happened and what it represents, even as it also inductively draws together numerous pieces of evidence, which we assign certain functions, and at least arguably may ascertain from the details what their structure would have served in the past. As a result of its two continuums of historical understanding and explanation, *four broad quadrants of historical judgment* can be discussed, and each of these has certain aspects of historical meaning that they favor:

1. **Supra-historical Inductive Conceptualization**: Historical concepts and theories that argue that they derive from material, corporeal facts about the physical and human world, including:
    - covering laws,
    - various meta-historical theories,
    - social (and socio-psychological) theories,
    - and linguistic and anthropological theories.

2. **Supra-historical Deductive Conceptualization**: The universal categories and theories, which have their basis in broad aesthetic, ethical, and logical presuppositions, including:
    - histories of ideas,
    - genres,
    - broad conceptions of periodization, scope, and scale,
    - as well as sacred history.

3. **Infra-historical Physical Specificity**: The categories of investigation and data collection about the past that are used to draw inductive claims about the structure and function of historical events and cultures, including:
    - physical history,
    - archaeology and material culture,
    - specific psychological studies,
    - memory studies,
    - specific linguistic data,
    - and textual archives.

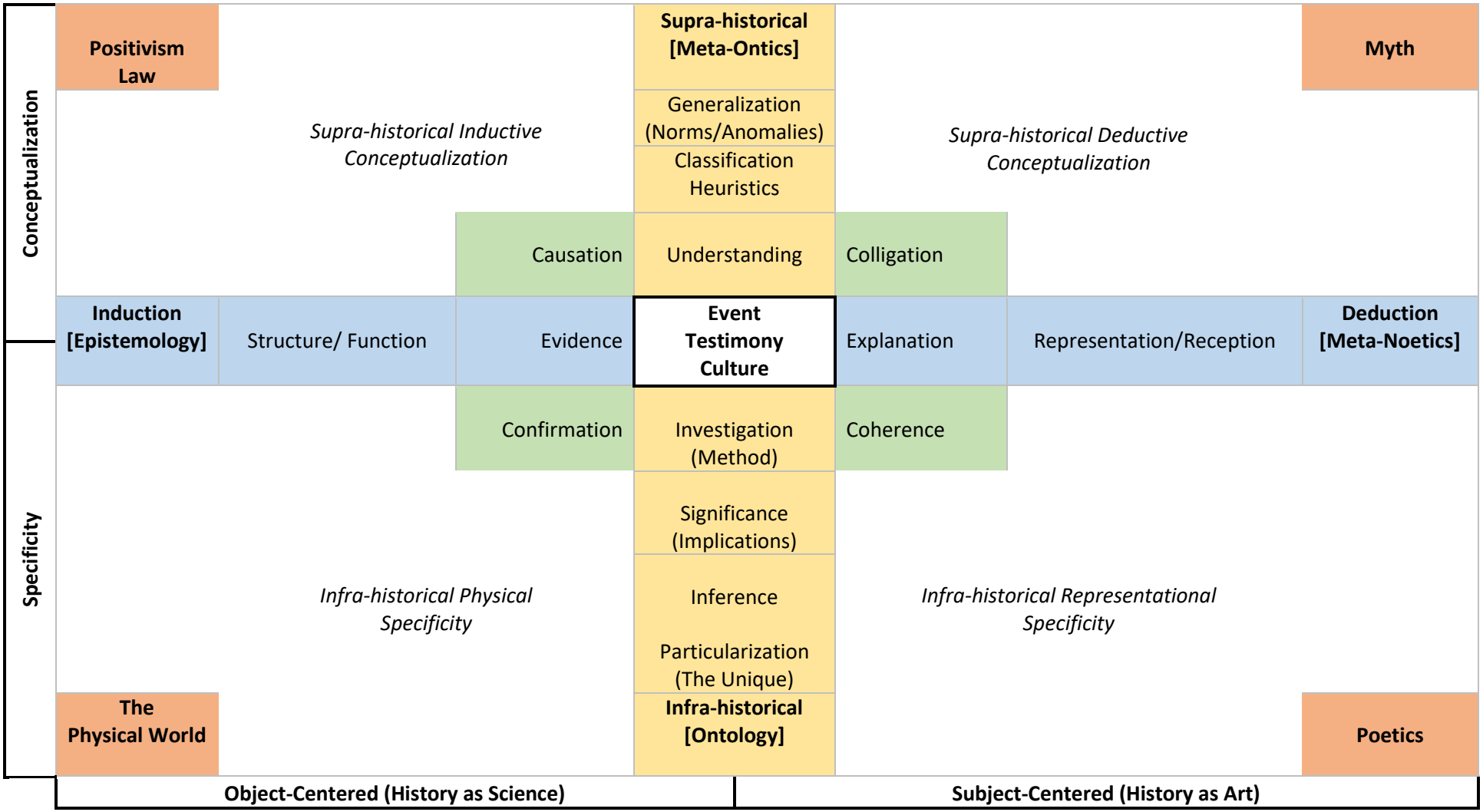
4. **Infra-historical Representational Specificity**: The various means of representing the past in terms of
    - narrative,
    - language,
    - description,
    - attention to agency and context,
    - and histories of reception and of representation.




The Four Formal Tensions of the Physical World, Myth, Law, and Poetics

This variety of emphases in historical understanding and explanation, arguably exist because there are four broad centers of conceptual and practical gravity that act as ideals to which historical judgment aspires:

1. *The Physical World* is the anchor for historical judgments. This includes quantifiable evidence, but also qualitative assessments. Even texts are physical objects, and oral memories have to be shared and recorded in a physical format.
2. *Myth* is the deep structure of our judgments, including sacred history and the broad claims of metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics.
3. *Positivism or Law* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has shaped foundational sets of claims as to history as science.
4. *Poetics* is the way history is recounted as an art. In practice, in previous centuries this had always been the case, but poetics has received renewed attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.



Myth and positivism share an emphasis on supra-historical structures of understanding, while the physical world and poetics tend to focus on the specifics of the physical and human worlds and the specifics of historical narratives respectively. In turn, myth and poetics share a stress on the deductive. They begin with certain received ways of explaining aspects of history, while law and the physical world claim at least to work inductively from the world itself. Of course, neither escapes the other—poetics with its practice interacts with particular examples, and what we notice about the physical world is built upon presuppositions.

One could argue that while broad theories of meta-history tend towards the material, physical, and human world and older theories of universal or global history tend towards large mythic explanations, they share in common the broadest judgments of historical understanding. They each depend in turn upon more specific classifications of various historical periods, on broad judgments as to what characterizes a historical period, how long it lasted, and what all it entailed. This, likewise, means drawing from broad, more inductive judgments about class, economy, gender, and social location, as well as religions, political regions, and general identities.

At the same time, there is a tension between meta-historical theories (be they old cyclical ones, Whig claims of cross-civilization Progress, or the dialectical materialist claims of various Marxisms, world systems theories, and so on), as well as various social theories of class, economics, gender, and urban or rural life, and the broad narratives one can tell about universal history or various periods (What actually was the Renaissance, for example?). All such theories tend towards grand claims of historical necessity, but ones that deny the metaphysical and ones that assume it have different centers of gravity. Each approach believes it can explain the other—material models reducing myth to example of their theories, and various mythic and theological models seeing the material ones as truncated or ghostly versions of themselves.

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| Meta-history<br>Cyclical History<br>Progress<br>Marxism | **Supra-historical**<br>**[Meta-Ontics]** | Universal/ Global<br>History |
| | Generalization<br>(Norms/Anomalies) | Periodization<br>Scale<br>Scope |
| Social Theory<br>Class<br>Economy<br>Gender<br>Urban/Rural | Classification<br><br>Heuristics | <br>Religions<br>Politics/Regions<br>Identities |

Similar things can be said about our most fundamental assumptions about the nature of what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful. They depend upon specific ideas, traditions, ideologies and so forth. (There are broad number of ways to track and understand these, and they make up the stuff of intellectual history.) The way we organize our historical narratives depend upon certain patterns (types, plots, themes, and settings), and these in turn can often be traced to our deepest mythic assumptions about things.

A case can be made for the historical narrative choices of magnitude, sequence, emplotment, and symbolism being shaped in the West by the broad sacred histories of eschatology, typology, and especially teleology. The order and direction of our histories (as well as the typical genres) often have deep sacred patterns within them. Especially how we organize our beginnings and our endings shape, not only the forms of narrative by which we

organize our historical understanding, but also the broader purposes we assign to them. And even once one begins to pay more-and-more specific attention to the particulars of how we experience the phenomena of the world, we cannot escape that these experiences arrive invested with our own ideas, genres, myths, and philosophical views.

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| Ideas<br>Conceptuals<br>Mentalities<br>Logics<br>Traditions<br>Paradigms<br>Webs<br>Ideologies | Metaphysics<br>Ethics<br>Aesthetics | **Myth** |
| | Genre<br>Types<br>Plots<br>Settings<br>Themes | Sacred History<br>Providence<br>Eschatology<br>Typology<br><br>Teleology |
| Intellectual History | Phenomenology<br>(Experience/ Life Worlds) | |

On the positivist side of things, or at least as to the law-like aspects of the physical world, our most basic assumptions about the nature of time shape our sense of temporality and chronology; our physical sense of the *totum simul*, the everything at once (i.e. eternity); and our senses of contingency and change. These profoundly shape what we know and experience as history. Basic assumptions about what makes something necessary as opposed to contingent gives rise to counterfactuals, arguments that if this-or-that aspect of history had changed things would have been different. Not all historians are convinced that counter-factual arguments are truly historical—after all, the counter-factual *didn't* happen, yet they are rather hard to avoid, at least by implication. Linguistics, as a field of study, is subject to considerable theorization, yet its attention to semiotics, our sign systems; to syntactics, our formal linguistic relations between our signs; and to semantics, the ways we logically, formally, and verbally organize meaning, suggest the potential law-like analysis that can be made about our language about time and history.

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| **Positivism**<br>**Law** | Necessity<br>Counterfactuals |
| Time<br><br>Chronology<br>Temporality<br>*Totum Simul*<br>Contingency<br>Change | Linguistics<br>Semiotics<br>Syntactics<br>Semantics |
| | Anthropology |

Anthropology is another science that purports to examine the laws of human culture—we should remind ourselves of the close relationship between anthropology, sociology, and social theory here. Its claims and findings can be drawn from for historiography, especially as categories that help organize and judge the specifics of cultural history, and there are a number of arguable relations between the structures of linguistics and anthropology.

The closer and closer we get to the specific objects and materials of the physical world, the more we have to account for studies of archaeology, material culture, technology, and folklore (though these obviously impact anthropology, as well). While the quantification studies that involve demographics, surveys, and so forth are not limited to these, these are often key aspects. Others include birth and death rates, deeds and titles, predominance of certain folktales, coins, metals, economic production sites, and lithography. And once we reach these large numeric studies, then laws of probability, such as Bayes theorem, can be invoked by historians.

Likewise, paleontology and genetics can also be invoked as ways of uncovering the history that was not written down or as further confirmation of the conclusions drawn from archeological findings. They can also be used to confirm or deny certain claims made in documents.

Perhaps even more fundamental, are the ways in which geography, environment, and climate shape cultures. In similar fashion, the shape of physical history (evolution, agriculture, climate and geology) has a broad scientific relationship to the nature of time and change, including the temporal and contingent. Certainly, broad analysis of agriculture and food webs tell us important things about cultural history, economics, trade, and so on.

And all these share certain theoretical assumptions with evolutionary theory, not just paleontology, but also geological history, and so on.

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| Geography<br>Environment<br>Climate | Archaeology<br>Folklore |
| Geological History | Material Culture<br>Technology |
| Agriculture/<br>Food Webs<br><br>Evolution | <u>Quantification</u><br>Demographics<br>Surveys<br>Probability (Bayes) |
| **The<br>Physical World** | Paleontology<br>Genetics |

Personal agency is one of the basic assumptions of history, and not only group behaviors. The fields of memory studies, especially personal memories, and particular psychological studies, obviously overlap much with attention to agency and biography. One can also have studies of

collective or shared memories, and of group psychological experiences, and these, too, overlap with an emphasis on contextualism and the shared practices, beliefs, and problems of agency.

There is some tension between these, however. Traditional biography depends upon traditional models of agency, descriptions of persons' habits, practices, and behaviors, while memory studies and psychological studies gravitate more to law (or law-like) claims about human behavior—their explanatory systems are different, and thus, they see the historical evidence differently, as well.

Memory studies can gather both personal and collective memories of past events, while biography and autobiography must engage various aspects of historical contexts, so they can in turn offer clues to larger contexts, and these can be examined for more evidence about a particular past.

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| Memory Studies<br>Personal<br>Collective | Significance<br>(Implications) | (Auto)biography<br>Contextualism |
| Psychological Studies<br>Dispositions<br>Emotions<br>Motives<br>Irrationality | Inference<br><br>Particularization<br>(The Unique) | Agency<br>Habits<br>Practices<br>Behavior<br>Beliefs<br>Problems |
| **Infra-historical**<br>**[Ontology]** | | |

Almost all of these kinds of studies are dependent upon oral and written records. The physical institutionalization of archives, their organization, their availability, their professional, governmental, and organizational associations, all influence how history is collected, examined, and written. The science of textual criticism becomes an important set of tools for historical study, especially when there are multiple copies (and or printings) of accounts.

The same can be said for the critical approaches taken to uncovering various sources when they have been combined together by later redactors or editors, and the suppositions that can be made from or about the cultures and contexts that surrounded these sources and their editors. Taken together these shape the histories we tell about peoples and their ideas and claims. The authenticity and dating of documents becomes an essential aspect of what we believed happened and to whom.

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| Archiving<br>Textual Criticism | **Infra-historical**<br>**[Ontology]** | Source, Form, and<br>Redaction Criticism |

Oral and written accounts of what happened in the past, also remind us that histories themselves are narratives, even those that are quantifiable studies and archeological and paleontological suppositions. What humans do is what history (or almost all history) is about. Thus, the poetics of history forms the fourth pole of concern.

There are obvious potential connections between the way we use language, visualize our findings, and the descriptions and narratives and the ways in which we employ the broad plot lines of our myths and sacred histories, the linguistic and anthropological structures that shape stories, folklore, memories, and so forth.

Linguistics is the structural theorization of language; anthropology serves a similar relationship with agency and anthropological thick description; chronology and chronography; and genres often shape memories.

At the same time, these approaches in history tend towards the art, rather than the science of it, and as such, they stress the pragmatics of what makes a good, true, or beautiful account. In some versions, the law-like claims of science are simply ignored as irrelevant, but as often, they are included, but only in so far as they serve the artful telling of the historical account.

Likewise, macro-histories, studies of regions over millennia, have obvious relations to broad meta-historical theories and universal (or global) histories, as it does with judgments about scope and scale, geography, and so on. Micro-histories, in turn, have close relations with agency, anthropology, and psychological studies and folklore. Yet again they represent narrative shapes we traditionally learn and depend upon, and their forms often still draw from the mythic structures and sacred histories that make up our basic expectations about what makes a narrative what it is.

The choices we make about a history's language can be shaped by what makes a moving and/or accurate translation; what kinds of language will move readers, draw them in, keep them interested, and so on. The same kinds of skills can be employed in our historical descriptions and narratives. The ways that we organize our descriptions are important: how much historical information do we include? Do we employ comparison and contrast? What graduations or ruptures do we include in the way something is explained?

Historical narratives plot themselves not just around grand narratives and myths or broad theories about language and identity, but also by the use of historical characterizations and the quasi-characterizations of cultures and periods. They choose to tell the historical account at various speeds and while using various symbols at varying levels of rhetorical magnitude. Some histories are grander or more mundane, and with good reasons.

Of course, one could add post-modernist incredulity within the poetics form, but one could argue that it really belongs in the skeptical fringe beyond historical judgment, since it basically relegates all history to another fiction.

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| Visualization<br>Mapping<br>Chronography<br>Media | Language<br>Translation<br>Illocution<br>Perlocution<br>Rhetoric | Narratives<br>Magnitude<br>Sequences<br>Characters<br>Actions<br>Emplotment<br>Speed<br>Symbolism |
| Macro-History<br><br>Micro-History<br>Thick Descriptions | Descriptions<br>Summaries<br>Comparisons<br>Ruptures<br>Graduations<br>Conditions | |
| | | **Poetics** |


As a whole, then, the process of historical judgment and historiography is a complex one, invoking many intellectual skills and disciplines. As a process, it is also deeply contested. The pull between science and art, induction and deduction is a real one, and historians differ in their work and results based upon what they emphasize and trust. The same is true for how much or little trust they place in their models of understanding, especially as to whether they accord any respect to mythic and/or positivist models, and as to whether they recognize their influence upon the history they are uncovering and the shape in which they present their conclusions.

The Full Model Visualized

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| Conceptualization | **Positivism Law** | Necessity Counterfactuals | Meta-history Cyclical History Progress Marxism | **Supra-historical [Meta-Ontics]** | Universal/ Global History | Ideas Conceptuals Mentalities Logics Traditions Paradigms Webs Ideologies | Metaphysics Ethics Aesthetics | **Myth** |
| | Time<br>Chronology Temporality<br>*Totum Simul*<br>Contingency Change | Linguistics Semiotics Syntactics Semantics | Social Theory Class Economy Gender Urban/Rural | Generalization (Norms/Anomalies)<br>Classification<br>Heuristics | Periodization Scale Scope<br>Religions Politics/Regions Identities | | Genre Types Plots Settings Themes | Sacred History Providence Eschatology Typology<br>Teleology |
| | | Anthropology | Causation | Understanding | Colligation | Intellectual History | Phenomenology (Experience/ Life Worlds) | |
| Specificity | **Induction [Epistemology]** | Structure/ Function | Evidence | **Event Testimony Culture** | Explanation | Representation/Reception | | **Deduction [Meta-Noetics]** |
| | Geography Environment Climate<br>Geological History<br>Agriculture/ Food Webs<br>Evolution | Archaeology Folklore | Confirmation | Investigation (Method) | Coherence | Visualization Mapping Chronography Media | Language Translation Illocution Perlocution Rhetoric | Narratives Magnitude Sequences Characters Actions Emplotment Speed Symbolism |
| | | Material Culture<br>Technology | Memory Studies Personal Collective | Significance (Implications) | (Auto)biography Contextualism | | | |
| | | Quantification Demographics Surveys Probability (Bayes) | Psychological Studies Dispositions Emotions Motives Irrationality | Inference<br>Particularization (The Unique) | Agency Habits Practices Behavior Beliefs Problems | Macro-History<br>Micro-History Thick Descriptions | Descriptions Summaries Comparisons Ruptures Graduations Conditions | |
| | **The Physical World** | Paleontology Genetics | Archiving Textual Criticism | **Infra-historical [Ontology]** | Source, Form, and Redaction Criticism | | | **Poetics** |
| | **Object-Centered (History as Science)** | | | | **Subject-Centered (History as Art)** | | | |