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Commentary on Maurizio Manzin’s “‘Identity-based’ and ‘diversity-based’ evidence between linear and fractal rationality”

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Manzin’s brief and interesting paper addresses the necessity of persuasion, proposing to understand that necessity as a function of the available kinds of evidence. According to Manzin, “[p]ersuasion becomes necessary when such means [as] analytical demonstrations, experimental tests, dialectical – ‘critical’ – discussions [sic] cannot work,’ which will be the case if “no stipulative conditions are available or when agreement on premises [is] lack[ing] for various reasons” (p. 2). If so, then “the floor is open to the ‘likely’ (*eikos*)—in Aristotle’s words, ‘what can be otherwise than it is’—and the appeal to effective (i.e., persuasive) grounds for evidence is strictly required.” It is the absence of such means, then, that speakers and audiences *must* find themselves in the “rhetorical situation,” a situation where the need to persuade—and to be persuaded—arises naturally, because the kind of evidence that could suspend the need for persuasion is simply absent.

Referring to Tindale (2019), Manzin suggests that a so-called “nonlinear rationality fits with situations in which stipulations and expert knowledge are not on hand, whereas linear rationality works only with abstract objects in abstract contexts” (p. 3). These contexts are “abstract in the sense that the object of proof has to be ‘extracted’ from the living situation of here-and-now, characterized by ‘a variety of forms of life that overlap and crisscross in a variety of ways’” (as quoted in Tindale 2019, p. 13) (p. 7). In this context, Manzin introduces the term ‘fractal rationality’ to characterize forms of “intellectual activity capable of [capturing] the roughness of [Wittgensteinian] *Lebensformen* with all their possible diversities and disagreements.” The distinction he thus puts into place is that between two species of rationality: linear and fractal. Crucially, an “exclusive preference for linear rationality (*episteme*) and the subsidiary contempt for reasoning based on trust (*pistis*),” he submits, are “deeply rooted in the history of Western thought” (p. 4). Here omitting historical details that Manzin outlines, linear and fractal rationality are said to be discernable today as broad intellectual outcomes corresponding to Snow’s (2012;) two cultures: the (linear) Sciences and the (fractal) humanities.

Manzin observes that both Plato and Aristotle contributed to a tradition that recognizes “two different accounts of rationality—the linear and the fractal—as products of a longue philosophical reflection based, in the case of linearity, upon mere identity ($A=A$) and, in the case of fractality, upon the coessentiality of identity and difference ($A=A$ and $A\neq\neg A$)” (p. 7), an idea he simply denotes as ‘diversity.’ Seen from today’s vantage point, the linear conception of rationality would appear to have “carried the day,” whereas the fractal conception of rationality has “survived only in a literary guise,” but otherwise appears comparatively marginalized today. Western thought would thus bear out a divided rationality. Accordingly, Manzin can speak of “identity-based” and “diversity-based” evidence. The former, which he views as being based on mere formal consistency, would make persuasion unnecessary. On a linear conception of rationality, after all, any disagreement between contending parties becomes *pathological* because linear evidence would uniquely identify what one should be persuaded of. Insofar as the persuasive effect on audiences would thus

originate exclusively from linear evidence, there is no wiggle room, hence no room for disagreement, hence no need for persuasive acts that seek to treat, reduce, or even settle a disagreement.

By contrast, “the pioneers of the fractal account deepened the role of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* in building arguments, providing a set of intuitive, perceptive, symbolic, poetic and moral tools” (p. 9). This not only leaves room for disagreement, but also recognizes that disagreement can be inevitable. According to Manzin, the “guiding idea was that reasoning consists of a continuous adaptation to concrete situations and that nothing is more reasonable than the inevitable clashes among different opinions, especially when deciding about what to do.” The pioneers of fractal rationality maintained:

that if reasoning needs to ascertain what counts as evident under the contextual aspect, it is not in order to ‘neutrally’ establish how things go on, but to move from a certain state of affairs to another. This means that, according to the fractal diversity-based account, knowing and making... mutually implicate [one another], and that an agreement on something as evident—provided by persuasion—is usually oriented by some need to act.” (p. 9)

Crucially, on the fractal view it follows that: “No disagreement means no search for truth, no reasonable interactions between individuals or groups of individuals, no need for persuasion, [and] in the end no *polis*” (p. 9).

Manzin thus effectively proposes to trace the present day status of rhetoric—understood as the art of persuasion regarding issues that one can decide in this or another way—back to the human need to act, one on hand, as well as man’s limited epistemic capacities, on the other. Again, this need *must* arise in a social setting whenever linear evidence cannot be appealed to at all, or cannot be appealed to exclusively. In this sense, Manzin’s distinction serves to understand the need for persuasion better than would be the case were this distinction not in place. As for Manzin’s main distinction being tenable—the term ‘fractal’, of course, takes some getting used to—this commentator is already on-board (see Zenker, 2013 a; b). That said, this commentator also hopes that, preferably in application to specific cases, a future analysis would tease these two forms of evidence more clearly apart.

References

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