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Commentary on Beth Innocenti Manolescu: “Evaluating Fear Appeals”

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“Evaluating Fear Appeals” argues for a conception of argumentation moored to actuality, to the whirling, insistent moment of engagement, to the strategies and (I would add) tactics that speakers “actually use.” Manolescu urges us to embrace what she calls a “normative pragmatic theory of fear appeals” against earlier conceptions (Walton, for example) that rely on logical cogency, on the reconstruction of implied inference, and on logical dialogue for their hermeneutic resonance. Using the speeches of Patrick Henry during debates about the ratification of the US constitution in late eighteenth-century Virginia, Manolescu insists that we abandon generic classification and “dialogue types,” habitual recourse to formal or informal cogency, and “underlying” inferential structures as *explanantia*, all for a theory tuned to contexts, to deliberative moments, to decorum and prudence. Her deft, sophisticated intervention—one which explains the ways in which agents “engage norms of argumentation” in given discursive contexts, which accounts for elements other than *ratio*—is welcome, but the “normative pragmatic theory of fear appeals” Manolescu endorses is antique. In Aristotle and especially in the Roman and neo-Roman conceptions of rhetoric, the pragmatic and the normative turn on conceptions of movement: how might an opponent, an interlocutor, an audience be moved? what constitutes movement? In Manolescu’s context, the appeal to fear is an appeal for movement, and it is always already an appeal to the imagination: as she intimates, fear appeals either demand or attempt to foreclose deliberation or action, and both deliberation and action depend on *phantasmata* or images. To be moved is to be moved emotionally and such movement—the beginnings, as it were, of deliberation and action—depends on *phantasia*.

A brief excursion into Aristotelian ‘psychology’ and the importance of *phantasia* will acquaint us with the workings of fear. Never found without sensation (and thus we share “impressions” [*phantasiais*] with other species), imagination (*phantasia*) is the faculty of “what appears” (427b7ff.). The term itself is complex, and richly designates the faculty that registers, or has the capacity to register, appearances, the “on-going appearance itself,” and “what appears.” It has for its content “what can be perceived” (428b12-13), though it is identical neither to sensation or perception, opinion or thought (427b7ff., 428a5-428b9). Yet *phantasia* is integral to “the *synthesis* and retention of sense-perceptions” and to “applying *thought* to objects of sense-perception” (Frede, p. 279, 282). (The modern term “imagination” is poor in comparison, and we should be wary of identifying “what appears” only or simply with images [Nussbaum, p. 242].) Although thought is separable from the body (408b29-30, 429b5), the soul cannot think without images (431a16-17, 432a13-14), which are “like sensuous contents except that they contain no matter.”

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“captures” sensations, as it were: Aristotle argues that even when a sensible object is no longer present to the senses, the modifications (“movements”) it causes may remain in the perceiving subject’s senses or imagination as after-images or vestiges of the original perception (*De anima*, 425b24, 429a5-8). These after-images—phantasms—are lodged in the common sense and the phantasia, they may represent an object as helpful or harmful, and thus they may carry with them feelings of pleasure or pain. Aristotle’s point here is that both actual objects and phantasms produce similar reactions. Although “when we are under the influence of imagination we are not more affected than if we saw in a picture the objects which inspire terror or confidence” (427b23ff.), the magnitude of influence is nevertheless significant: *phantasmata* “remain in us and resemble the corresponding sensations” (429a3). Hence human beings are stimulated to feel, to deliberate, and to act not only by present objects but by phantasms, which represent an object remembered or anticipated as helpful or harmful (*De anima*, 431b2ff; cf. *Rhetoric*, 1370a28ff.).

Deliberation and action depend on appetite and phantasia, too. A “living creature is capable of moving itself only in so far as it has appetite; but it has no appetite without phantasms or imagination” (433b28-29; cf. 433a20). Human beings cannot deliberate without phantasms (427b11-15, 428b, 431a-b, 434a). The study of action, then, “falls within the province of the functions common to body and soul” (433a9-21, 433b18-20), the subject of the *Parva naturalia*. A stalwart resident of that province is error. While past philosophers and poets have equated sensation with thought, since both produce somatic “motion” and both fluctuate with bodily change, they ought to have considered error, Aristotle writes, “a state which is peculiarly characteristic of animal life and in which the soul continues the greater part of its time” (427b1-2). Sensation cannot be wrong, or at least it is subject to “the minimum of error” (428b19), but the imagination is frequently wayward. Imaginations are “for the most part false” (428a11-12, 433a).

The potential mendacity of the imagination, its trade in “what appears,” is not only a problem for philosophers but for rhetoricians as well. To Quintilian, eloquence is “mainly a psychological matter: it is the mind which must be emotionally stirred and must conceive images, and adapt itself to suit the nature of the subject which is theme of the speech” (1.2.30.53): the mind is moved by emotion and that movement is dependent on images; only when we are moved and conceive images of things do we adapt ourselves to, and understand, a speech, a situation, a conversation, an event. The resonance of images, their immediacy, speaks to their power:

There are certain experiences which the Greeks call *phantasiai*, and the Romans *visions*, whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes. ... From such impressions arises that *enargeia* which Cicero calls *illumination* and *actuality* (*illustratio et evidentia*) which makes us seem not so much to narrate as to exhibit the actual scene (6.2.29, 32)

Such “vivid conceptions ... which ... are called *phantasiai*” must be kept before the eyes and “admitted to our hears,” Quintilian writes elsewhere, for “it is feeling and the force of mind (*vis mentis*) that make us eloquent” (10.7.15). Feeling and *vis mentis* are transacted through *phantasmata*; here, perhaps, is one of the anxieties that dogged rhetoricians since the Sophists: their trade, and their medium, is the imaginative. In part, the worry is ethical for, according to Aristotle, emotional experience is dependent on images (1382a21-23, 1371a9, 1371a19, 1384a23). As Aristotle suggests, “all men aim at the apparent good, but [some] have no control over how things appear ... but the end appears to each man in a form answering to his character.

“We reply,” he continues, “that if each man is somehow responsible for the state he is in, he will also be himself somehow responsible for how things appear” (1114a31-1114b3). If states of character arise out of activities and habits (*NE*, 1103b17ff.), clearly managing images (“how things appear”) is crucial.

Like honour, love, or shame, fear turns on images. Fear, Aristotle writes, “may be defined as a pain or disturbance due to imagining some destructive or painful evil in the future.” To experience fear, the danger must have a particular magnitude (for example, we do not fear stupidity) and must “appear not remote but not so near as to be imminent” (1382a22-25). Fear involves either prolepsis (“something ... likely to happen” at the hands of particular persons, in a particular form, at a particular time” [1382b33-35]) or a rather vague sense of anticipation. Aristotle explains:

when it is advisable that the audience should be frightened, the orator must make them feel that they really are in danger of something, pointing out that it has happened to others who were stronger than they are, and is happening, or has happened, to people like themselves, at the hands of unexpected people, in an unexpected form, and at an unexpected time. (1383a8-12)

In Manolescu’s examples, Henry appeals to the latter, amorphous fear, which depends on making one’s audience “feel” that they are in danger using the stalwart tools of an orator: imagination and exemplarity. According to Manolescu, in his declamations Henry “engages a norm that we ought to deliberate in perilous situations,” in a sense, as she implies, inverting the usual reaction to certain magnitudes and forms of fear; but it is precisely this second sense of fear, which is underwritten by *phantasia* and exemplarity, that Henry conjures.

This intervention should not suggest that everything new is old again. Rather, if I were involved in the field of argumentation theory, I might suggest, as a spurring prolegomenon, a return to the history, or histories, of rhetoric. I might, for example, suggest that Manolescu’s argument rehearses material and concepts from the history of rhetoric in the Aristotelian, and indeed in the Grassian, tradition. I might suggest a return to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* for contemporary answers about appeals to fear, for the *Rhetoric* is the first manual for everyday life, an engaging treatise on politics and persuasion, listening and the passions; it is a delicate, nuanced inquiry into human experience. And however one thinks of experience—as amorphous or foundational, fragile or lost—the relationships between structures, process, and agency, between experience and meaning, are sifted and accessed rhetorically. Rhetoric is a flexible, responsive mode of inquiry: it encompasses multiple discursive practices while laying bare motives, issues, strategies, and tactics with respect to speaking and listening, ideation and affect, the passions and persuasion. Aristotle’s project in the *Rhetoric*, especially in books one and two, is connecting habits of thought with action and belief. If the *Rhetoric* is read together with the *De anima*, as it should be, his lissome programme provides ways into and out of the skein of individual thoughts, desires, imaginations, and their social capacities and effects. Its area of inquiry is the complex matrix of individual experience—including fear—in its discursive and social contexts. Rhetoric in the Aristotelian tradition embodies a set of flexible, investigative criteria, one that stipulates at the very least areas of inquiry: we do not deliberate about that which cannot be otherwise. Deliberation about that which *might* be otherwise is complex, not least since guidelines for every situation and comprehensive rules of propriety that govern all discursive and behavioural occasions do not, cannot, exist. In ethical and political contexts, in psychological inquiry, the investigative canons are rhetorical.

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In one sense, then, the opposition between cognitive and “normative pragmatic” theories is straw: in the history of rhetoric (or, say, in the history of argumentation), the two are precisely separated in theory, but rarely immured from one another in practice. In the history of rhetoric from antiquity to early modernity, there is an increasing emphasis on emotional appeal; by the sixteenth century, rhetoricians almost wholly neglect the syllogism, for example, which slowly became a province of logic, and their resources are redirected to exploring the means of securing agreement, and of avoiding dissensus, with pathos and ethos rather than logos (see Skinner, pp. 120-127, although he does not make his argument explicit). That division is certainly evident in contemporary appeals to fear.

[link to paper](#)

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