

The Power of the Rhetorical Perspective: A Reply to Fontaine

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While generally sympathetic to my approach, Phillippe Fontaine argues that the “rhetorical perspective and its associated treatment of the successive disappearances and appearances of the entrepreneur nonetheless suffer from . . . weaknesses” (Fontaine 1998, 278). I respond that, when properly understood, his comments actually illustrate the power of the rhetorical perspective and the way it can be fruitfully extended to address new questions.

Whereas the historians of economic thought have typically focused on the “disappearance” of the entrepreneur and tried to explain this phenomenon by referring to the inadequacies of the neoclassical theory of the firm, emphasis on equilibrium, and mathematical language, I argued instead that the entrepreneur’s place would be better understood by carefully examining the metaphors and stories of schools of thought in economics (Coşgel 1996). Fontaine finds two weaknesses in my approach. First, noting the current lack of an agreed definition or a unified theory of the entrepreneur, he argues that the entrepreneur could be present but go unnoticed. Second, he argues that my approach “fails to explain how the different modes of narrative actually infiltrate economic discourse” (ibid., 278).

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Let me address Fontaine's concerns by first distinguishing between the levels of discourse about the entrepreneur. The controversy surrounding the role of the entrepreneur in economics involves discourse at three levels: the entrepreneurs themselves, the economists, and the historians of economic thought, each level with its own distinct rhetorical framework (though, of course, the same person can engage in discourse at more than one level). In my 1996 article, I primarily addressed the discourse at the second level about the first level. Fontaine's first comment raises the possibility of extending inquiry into the third level, regarding the way the discourse among historians of economic thought has affected their conceptions of the entrepreneur. That is, he suggests that it is possible that economists could have written about the "entrepreneur" without referring to him as such and attributing to him functions other than those in the historian's own conceptual framework. If true, however, this says more about the differences between the economist's and the historian's metaphors and stories about the entrepreneur than the usefulness of the rhetorical perspective. Indeed, as he also suggests, "an interesting task would be to identify the different guises taken by the entrepreneur in economics" (Fontaine 1998, 279). This task of identification calls for extending the rhetorical approach to studying not only the economists but also their historians to whom the entrepreneur seems to have appeared in disguise.

Moreover, while I agree with Fontaine's general concern, I disagree that the primary problem has to do with the lack of an agreed definition or a unified theory of the entrepreneur. Each level does have an inter-subjectively shared understanding, if not an agreed formal definition, of the entrepreneur, though the understanding might differ across levels (or schools) and it might change over time. Although it would be interesting to find out why the understanding differs across levels, the primary problem has more to do with imposing the definitions and general interpretive framework of one level or one time period onto another than the differences themselves.

Fontaine's second comment suggests studying the interaction between the first two levels with a historical dimension. Although I did not directly address the origins of modes of narrative, doing so would be entirely consistent with the rhetorical perspective that I proposed. It would mean to carefully examine the way schools of thought have adopted metaphors and stories and the way these choices have evolved over time and affected the conceptions of the entrepreneur (in a similar

manner to that suggested by Fontaine, pp. 281–82). Once again, this would point toward a useful extension of the rhetorical perspective. One could even go further and study the interaction among all three levels.

On a similar note, Fontaine criticizes me for highlighting the characteristics of the entrepreneur at the expense of his functions. Although I highlighted the role of the character in narratives, the primary emphasis was on the role of the mode of narrative (differences in casting being a way to differentiate among modes), and the intention was not a priori exclusion of other aspects of a narrative: actions, happenings, and setting. One could alternately examine the usefulness of emphasizing the roles of other aspects of a narrative—for example, the actions, which would differentiate schools of thought on the basis of the types of actions that their narratives allow—and then highlight the changing conceptions of the entrepreneur among schools of thought. This would be a different approach to the problem but consistent with the present one.

Fontaine's comments suggest fruitful new avenues of research and interesting new possibilities for revising the conventional story about the entrepreneur in economics. For example, one could ask whether the entrepreneur's alleged disappearance could simply be appearances under different functions or attributes that have been less perceptible by historians of economic thought. If yes, what caused this divergence between the economist's and the historian's conceptions of the entrepreneur? Why and how have different groups in economics adopted different modes of narrative, and why and how have these modes changed over time? How have these changes affected the conceptions of the entrepreneur? I submit that the rhetorical perspective provides a fruitful framework to pursue these and similar questions.

References

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