Argumentation as Rational Persuasion

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Abstract I argue that argumentation is not to be identified with (attempted) rational persuasion, because although rational persuasion appears to consist of arguments, some uses of arguments are not attempts at rational persuasion. However, the use of arguments in argumentative communication to try to persuade is one kind of attempt at rational persuasion. What makes it rational is that its informing ideal is to persuade on the basis of adequate grounds, grounds that make it reasonable and rational to accept the claim at issue.

Keywords Argument • Persuasion • Rational persuasion • Advertising • Inquiry • Problem-solving • Decision making

1 Introduction

Anyone approaching the topic of the relationship between persuasion, argumentation and rationality needs do so with an appreciation of the need to provide some measure of precision to these three slippery terms. However, even in advance of doing so there is a temptation to see a close connection between argumentation and persuasion, and because there also seems to be a close connection between argumentation and rationality, there is attraction to the idea that argumentation is rational persuasion (in some senses of these three terms). So in this paper I address two questions. First, is argumentation to be identified with rational persuasion? Second, what is the nature of the rationality of the persuasion that argumentation supplies?

2 Terminology

As noted, each of the terms used in the proposition that argumentation is rational persuasion is used in many different ways. So I need to say how I intend to use them, and thus to explain what I mean by the first question. That said, I don't mean anything unusual or controversial in the way I here use these words.

By *argumentation* I mean the activity of making or giving arguments—and including exchanging arguments—for some purpose, or else a collection of such arguments.

By *an argument* here I mean a set of one or more reasons for doing something, such as—but not limited to—to adopt or maintain an attitude such as a belief but also such as hope, or anger, or expectation; to accept a proposition; or to engage in an activity. I follow Pinto (2010: 230) here in distinguishing between an argument and the presentation of an argument. *Presenting* an argument consists of inviting another or others to adopt the attitude in question on the basis of the reasons offered for it, that is, because they accept the reasons and they judge the reasons to justify adopting the

attitude. Moreover, a distinction is necessary between presenting an argument in the sense of stating it or reporting it, and presenting it in the sense of advocating it or inviting another to accept its conclusion on the basis of its reasons.[1] For instance if one says, "Here is an argument often given for doing [X], namely [R], but [R] is a bad argument for doing [X]," one has presented an argument in the sense of stating it, but one has not presented it in the sense of advocating it. To advocate an argument is to invite someone to accept its reasons and to accept its conclusion because of those reasons.

By *persuasion* I mean the concept that is well analyzed by D.J. O'Keefe (2002, p. 5) as:

> … a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom.

By the way, since "mental state" here is meant broadly to include dispositions to act or decisions no less than propositional attitudes such as beliefs or commitments, I do not make a distinction between *persuading to* (do something) and *convincing that* (something is the case). I here treat 'persuade' and 'convince' as more or less interchangeable, while granting that in English there are nuanced differences between the two that justify retaining both words. To be sure, others have stipulated various distinctions between the two terms, such as that persuasion should apply to actions and conviction to beliefs (for a partial list see, e.g., Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, pp. 26-31). But the dictionaries report that the adoption not only of beliefs but also of decisions, and dispositions to act are spoken of as goals of attempts both to persuade and to convince.[2] It is perfectly good English to speak of persuading *that* (a proposition is true) as well as of persuading *to* (decide or act), and to speak of convincing *to* (do some action) no less than of convincing *that* (some proposition is true). If Reboul (1991, p., 5) is right, the same is true of French (see *persuader que* and *persuader de*), and I would be surprised if the same were not true in other languages too. While Kock (e.g., 2007) might be right that there is an important distinction to be drawn between arguing for actions and arguing for beliefs, I don't think (nor does he argue) that such a distinction can be based on a difference in meaning between 'persuade' and 'convince.'

3 Is argumentation to be identified with rational persuasion?

More precisely, is *presenting* an argument the same thing as an *attempt* at rational persuasion? (It is this more precise form of the question that is at issue in what follows.) Some theorists appear to think so. For instance, for Johnson (2000), the purpose of arguments, which are to be found within argumentation, is rational persuasion. Govier (2001) defines an argument as an attempt to show that some claim is rationally

[1] Pinto (2010: 230) calls advocating an argument, "making" and argument.

[2] To persuade (Oxford English Dictionary): "1. To induce (a person) to believe something; to lead to accept a statement, doctrine, fact, etc.; to win to a belief or assurance. 2. To induce or win over (a person) to an act or course of action; to draw the will of another to something, by inclining his judgement or desire to it; to prevail upon, or urge successfully, to do something. … 5. To induce the doing or practice of (an act, course or action, etc.) by argument, entreaty or the like; to urge successfully upon one; to induce or lead to by reasoning, etc."

acceptable, and so would presumable hold that arguments used in argumentation the purpose of which is to persuade, would regard at least some argumentation as rational persuasion. And although they see argumentation's function as the reasonable resolution of a difference of opinion, for van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004) it turns out that such a goal is sought by one or both of the differing parties trying to persuade the other of the acceptability of *his* standpoint in rational ways. I am sure the list could be extended to include many more theorists.

The presentation of arguments and attempts at rational persuasion are identical if, but only if, all cases of such attempts consist of or involve such presentations, and all instances of presented arguments are cases of attempted rational persuasion.

3.1 What is rational persuasion?

In order to examine this question carefully, we need to be clear about what counts as *rational* persuasion. As noted, we are using O'Keefe's analysis of persuasion: "… a successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom. " So what is the difference between such persuasion that is rational and such persuasion that is not rational? I suggest that we can learn something about what constitutes rational persuasion from what it can be contrasted with. There seem to be two ways persuasion can fail to be rational. It can be *irrational*, or else it can be simply *non-rational*.

Consider first persuasion that is not rational because it is irrational. What makes persuasion irrational? It cannot just be the successful use of illogical or otherwise non-cogent arguments or the mistaking of such arguments for logical or cogent ones, for in those cases the mere making of mistakes would qualify as irrational, and not all errors are cases of irrationality. The appeals, or the erroneous acceptance of them, must be egregious—those which no reasonable person would make or adopt. Here we would include such things as appeals to fears, hopes, prejudices or desires that have not only no basis, but every reason to be rejected. Thus racists, Holocaust deniers, predictors of the immanent end of the world and those who believe the earth is flat, to the extent that they attempt to persuade others or that they are persuaded by others, are the perpetrators or the victims of irrational persuasion. The point is not that these attitudes are false, although they happen to be. What makes such persuasion irrational is that they are held blindly and against all evidence.

Thus attempts at persuasion can at one time, i.e., given one state of knowledge, be rational, and at a later time, once more is known, be irrational. For example, tobacco companies' attempts to persuade the public that cigarette smoking posed no health risk were, in the early days of evidence to the contrary, not irrational; but any such attempt today, in the face of today's medical knowledge, would be irrational. Some might say that today's sincere advocates of the view that climate change is a myth or of the view that human activity is not even partly responsible for it (different claims) are irrational, however it might be that we are not yet in possession of enough knowledge to classify them as any more than honestly mistaken. If evidence of climate change and human responsibility for it accumulates further, and if the cases for alternative explanations of the phenomena are all discredited, continued advocacy of its denial becomes increasingly irrational.

Another kind of irrationality is persistent irrelevance of any kind. Persistent pragmatic irrelevance is no less irrational than persistent logical irrelevance. If a person persistently fails to engage supposed persuasion in an appropriate way—responding to a request for reasons with threats of violent retaliation, dire predictions, rambling anecdotes, frantic laughter or inconsolable weeping—their behavior is counted as irrational, no less than if they offer as reasons grounds that have no conceivable connection to the point they are trying to persuade someone of.

Persuasion that is non-rational but not irrational is communication that changes a person's mental state without appealing to reasons of any kind, yet allows for the influenced person to have a measure of freedom in the face of the influencing factor. Examples are the use of auditory and visual effects to influence moods. A vigorous John Phillip Susa march played by a fifty-piece marching band is stirring: it tends to evoke excitement. A gentle Chopin piano étude tends to have a calming, relaxing effect. A room painted in soft pastel colors is relaxing; one painted in bright primary colors is energizing. One can deliberately play music or choose a wall paint color in order to have the desired effect, or can know that the music or color has the effect in question, so there can be a measure of freedom involved in placing oneself in the situation in which one knows the effect will tend to occur. These are not irrational communicative means of influencing people's mental states, for they are not unreasonable at all; but neither are they rational, for there is by hypothesis no attempt to engage the persuadee's intellect, no attempt to influence his or her mental state by offering reasons for the change. To be sure, we might be able to explain precisely how music and colors have these effects. Thus we might be able to know the reasons why we respond as we do to them. However, this is to use "reasons" in a different sense—to refer to the causal explanation of the phenomena. So these persuasive effects are rational in the sense that they have an explanation, they are not magical, even though they are non-rational in the sense that they do not occur as a direct result of engaging someone's reasoned judgment.

It might be thought that there is a third contrast to rational persuasion besides irrational and non-rational persuasion, namely *unreasonable* persuasion. Think here, for example, of the use of a fallacious argument that either the arguer or the persuadee fails to recognize as fallacious—the conclusion drawn a mite hastily, the overlooked opportunity to qualify a conclusion, the failure to raise questions about an alleged authority of dubious reliability, the missed key dis-analogy that uncouples an otherwise plausible inference from similarity, and so on. These are not cases of irrationality, for if they were we would have to be classified as irrational creatures, since we are all prone to these kinds of occasional slips and errors. Being liable to make mistakes from time to time does not make one irrational. But nor are they cases of non-rational persuasion, because by hypothesis reasons are used, and even pretty good ones, although, as it happens, they are not good enough. Just as the amateur, too-often double-faulting, tennis player or the persistently slicing Sunday golfer is still, by virtue of trying and making recognizable tennis or golf moves, playing tennis or golf, so a flawed, fallacy-committing, rational persuader who is trying and making recognizable rational persuasion moves, is still engaged in rational persuasion. A move that is unreasonable is not, on that basis alone, not rational.

What do the irrational and the non-rational have to teach us about rational persuasion? If persuasion is not to be irrational, it must employ an appeal to reasons that

have at least a minimal degree of plausibility, and that have a connection to the attitude change that at the very least can be understood as an attempt at relevance even if found deficient. If the persuasion is not to be non-rational, there must be an attempt to engage the mind or intellect of the persuadee—to bring him or her to a recognition of the purported credibility of the reasons and the alleged way in which they support or justify the change in mental state that is the objective of the exercise, so that the persuadee's change in mental state comes about as a result of his or her judgment that such a change is justified by the reasons presented.

So, for persuasion to be rational, the grounds used must be at least minimally credible and have some measure of pertinence as reasons for the target change in mental state, and the manner in which the grounds are used must engage the intellect of the persuade so as to invoke his or her conscious and deliberate consideration of the grounds and their bearing and force in support of the target change in mental state.

This understanding of what makes persuasion rational implies that the classifications of cases attempted or actual persuasion as rational, irrational or non-rational are in principle contestable. What counts as "minimally credible," "some measure of pertinence" or "engaging the intellect" will in some cases be controversial, for these are properties with vague borderlines and some cases will fall within those penumbras. But this feature is not a flaw: precision about such concepts as rationality (cf., practicality, efficiency) is a false ideal.

3.2 Is all rational persuasion argument?

Having clarified what is entailed in rational persuasion, we are now in a position to consider the questions whether all rational persuasion is argumentation and whether all argumentation is rational persuasion.

To test the first conjunct, can we come up with a counter-example, a case of rational persuasion that is not argumentation, or does not involved the use of arguments?

An initially attractive candidate for such a counter-example is advertising, or some kinds of advertising, because much advertising is attempted persuasion, and a significant subset of such persuasion-oriented advertising does not use arguments. The question, then, is such non-argumentative advertising rational? Is it a case of rational persuasion that is not argumentation?

Advertisements can be roughly classified (in among many other ways) into the following three groups. (1) Reasons are given for preferring the brand over others or over nothing, or for buying the product rather than its competitors or not at all. The reasons can refer to the direct utility of the product or indirect benefits (such as the valued approval of others for having made that purchase). Advertising of this type is a case of rational persuasion, but since it is carried out using persuasion-directed arguments, in whatever manner they are conveyed, it does not constitute a counter-example.

(2) Evocations of various unconscious desires of the target consumer groups are created. Standardly, the presence and motivating power of these desires are well-established by prior market research. In some cases, these unconscious motivations have nothing to do with any plausible or relevant reason to prefer or purchase the product. Ads for pet food that make it seem like human food influence pet owners who relate to their animals as virtually human members of the family might make the owners feel they are

caring and responsible, but that is a selfish and irresponsible reason to buy the product. The pet needs food it likes to eat and that is healthy for it, not food that makes the owner feel good to have made the purchase. The Marlboro man, the icon of the strong, independent, self-sufficient cowboy, was used to sell cigarettes to "post adolescent kids who were just beginning to smoke as a way of declaring their independence from their parents" (Barry 1997). Here the unconscious identification of the youth with what the icon represents is the motivating factor, not any reason at all for smoking or for smoking Marlboros. Thus, advertising of these sorts is either irrational (as in the case of the pet food ads described) or else non-rational (as in the case of the Marlboro man ads). While the pet food ads produce arguments, the attempted persuasion is not rational because it is irrational. The appeal to the Marlboro man is non-rational: no argument is offered. So in neither case does this sort of advertising constitute the counter-example we are looking for.

(3) The third type of advertising is a combination of the first two. Both direct or indirect utilitarian reasons are offered, and also unconscious desires such as ego identifications are invoked. The latter can be and often is the more effective element of the advertisement, especially if the consumer is deceived by the utilitarian or lifestyle arguments into thinking he or she is making a choice based on reasons. This third case might seem to be the counter-example we are looking for, since there is an explicit attempt at rational persuasion occurring while what is effective is not argumentation. However, the situation is complicated. Either the argument is the effective persuasive tool, or the evocation of the subconscious motivation is what is effective, or else the two combine. In the first case, the persuasion occurs through the use of arguments, whether the grounds and reasoning offered are rational or, as I would prefer to categorize it in many cases, irrational. But even if it is non-rational persuasion, it does not occur *without* the use of argumentation, so it is not a counterexample. It the second case, no argument plays a persuasive role, but the persuasion is non-rational, so it is not a counterexample. In the third case, to the extent that the persuasion is rational, that is because of the effect of the argument; so neither does the third case count as a counter-example.

Since I am not aware of any other ways advertising functions, I tentatively conclude that advertising does not supply a counter-example to the claim that all rational persuasion employs argumentation.

Although I have not been able to think of any, perhaps counter-examples exist. However, one reason for a difficulty in coming up with counter-examples might be that the conception of rational persuasion I have been using rules out the possibility. The requirement of active consideration of reasons by the intellect, which is a feature of this conception, seems to build in the idea of an advocated argument. Recall that to advocate an argument is to invite someone to accept its reasons and to accept its conclusion because of those reasons. Thus given that (an attempt at) rational persuasion requires that the persuadee actively consider reasons for changing his or her mental state, it looks like an attempt at rational persuasion implies inviting the persuadee to consider accepting the reasons and accepting the change in view on the basis of them—in other words, to consider endorsing an argument. In other words, it is only by virtue of advocating arguments that attempts at persuasion are rational.

3.3 Is all argument rational persuasion?

Can argumentation have other functions besides attempted rational persuasion? Argumentation can be used to inquire into the truth of a proposition or tenability of a prescription, evaluation or injunction and it can be used to arrive at a decision or a solution to a problem. I will argue that neither of these is persuasion, nor can it be reduced to persuasion. Another candidate for the use of argumentation is to establish, prove, or justify a proposition, but it is more controversial to distinguish that from persuasion. If such uses of argument are not cases of persuasion, then they cannot be cases of rational persuasion. Let us consider each of these alleged alternatives to persuasion in turn.

Inquiry. Suppose you are faced with the question of whether to believe some proposition, and it matters to you to decide. One way to decide is to investigate by seeing what arguments can be marshaled in support of the proposition and what arguments stand against it. Since you want to decide on good grounds, you will need to assess these arguments, and that can be done by considering what arguments against *them* can be formulated and then whether *those* objections can be answered. This examination or testing procedure can go through several iterations, but often at some point you find yourself with arguments that you can not find fault with. At this point you have examined as thoroughly as you can the best case you can make for the proposition in question and the best case you can make against it, and on the basis of which of these is the stronger (which might also have to be decided by a similar inquiry) you can decide what cognitive attitude to take towards that proposition. This is, in capsule, the use of argumentation to inquire (see Blair 2004).

I don't think such argumentation is plausibly thought of or modeled as having persuasion as its objective. By hypothesis there is no one else involved in the inquiry so you are not trying to persuade someone else. Furthermore, you are not trying to persuade yourself. For when attempted persuasion by argumentation occurs, one party is attempting to persuade another of some position. The persuader is thus the proponent of that position, whether or nor he really believes or accepts it himself. But in the case of inquiry, you are not the proponent of some position. By hypothesis, you are in a state of uncertainty about the position in question: you don't know whether to affirm it or not. It might be legitimate to describe you as arguing with yourself in the sense that you formulate arguments both pro and con the position and arguments both pro and con those arguments. But that does not mean you are trying to persuade yourself of some standpoint.[3] In fact, only once your inquiry has been completed are you in a position to try in good faith to persuade another of what stand to take on the question, for only then have you satisfied yourself (at least) about the strength of the grounds for its correctness.

Decision-making and *problem solving*. Decision-making has to take place when there is a choice to be made among a range of possible actions. Problem solving has to take place when a choice must be made among alternative means to achieve some given end. The two are related, and might be assimilated, but for present purposes what matters is that each entails making a choice from among alternatives. Both decisions and problem

[3] After having conducted the inquiry you might say, "I am now persuaded by these considerations that…." But that is a *façon de parler*: it does not follow that you were trying to persuade yourself of the proposition you ended up endorsing as a result of the inquiry.

solutions can be investigated using argumentation in much the same way argumentation can be used to inquire into the truth of a proposition. The arguments for a given set of alternatives, and the arguments in favor of and against each of them, can be canvassed, and those arguments can be tested by trying to find the best arguments against them and then seeing how well those objections can be answered by further arguments. Granted that in real-world situations different interested parties have already made up their minds and they try to persuade others to adopt their choices, so that collective or institutional decision making and problem solving entails persuasion to a considerable or even a predominant extent. But I am focusing on the situation each party is in prior to the lobbying stage, when it has to decide which alternative it prefers and will lobby for. At that point the option is available to use arguments to try to figure out what choice to try to have prevail. One weighs the pros and cons of the various alternatives, and then decides which is preferable (again, often on the basis of further argumentative consideration).

I am not claiming that argumentation alone clearly settles the issue. The all-things-considered final judgment might not be one that can be decided completely by further argumentation. However, the process of investigating alternatives by considering the best arguments for and against them is usually illuminating. And as with inquiry, such argumentation is not plausibly modeled as persuasion. The open-minded decision maker or problem solver is not using argumentation to try to persuade others what to choose, since he is using argumentation to make up his mind in the first place. And he isn't trying to persuade himself, since by hypothesis he doesn't yet have a choice to advocate.

So the use of argumentation to inquire, and to help solve problems and make decisions, is not a use of argumentation as a means of attempted rational persuasion because it is not a use of argumentation as a means of attempted persuasion at all. If that is right, then not all argumentation is the attempt at rational persuasion, so argumentation cannot be identified with attempted rational persuasion.

If we turn to the question whether the use of argumentation to establish, prove, or justify a proposition is different from rational persuasion we run into the controversy between the advocates of the dialectical (and perhaps also the rhetorical) conception of argumentation and the advocates of the epistemic conception of argumentation. The former (e.g., van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, 2004) hold that "objective" justification is a misconceived goal, and that any attempt to prove or establish or justify a proposition using argumentation amounts to an attempt to rationally persuade interlocutors to accept it, and nothing more. The latter (e.g., Lumer 2005, and Biro and Siegel 2006) hold that it is possible in principle in some cases rationally to use argumentation to produce an "objective" justification for a proposition even if is not accepted by one's interlocutors, or even if there is no interlocutor. Perelman (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969, pp. 31-35), it seems to me, in effect tries to bridge this chasm by suggesting that the goal of reasonable argumentation might be regarded as justification, but in the sense that this goal is to persuade all possible reasonable and well-informed interlocutors to adhere to the proposition in question. I don't need to get into the middle of that controversy, because I have already made a case that at least in some cases argumentation can be used for other purposes than attempted rational persuasion.

On the basis of the considerations adduced so far, we can answer the first question this paper is addressing: Is argumentation identical with rational persuasion? First, we can say that at best argumentation is to be identified as an *attempt* at rational persuasion.

Second, it seems that all attempts at rational persuasion entail the advocacy of arguments. It is difficulty to find a case of attempted rational persuasion that is not the advocacy of an argument, and it may be that is so simply because what we *mean* by "persuade rationally" is "convince by using arguments." Third, however, we must admit that there are uses of arguments that do not involve attempts at persuasion, and *ipso facto* are not cases of attempts at rational persuasion. It is this third consideration that prevents us from *identifying* the use of arguments with attempted rational persuasion.

4 The rationality or reasonableness of argumentative persuasion

Although argumentation cannot be identified with attempted rational persuasion, it is one means of attempting to persuade rationally. The persuasion attempt is rational in the sense that it entails the giving of reasons as the means of trying to influence another's mental state. In this section, I suggest the nature of the rationality that is entailed in the giving of reasons to try to persuade.

Clearly, persuasion-attempting argumentation can fail to meet criteria of adequacy. The reasons offered can be irrelevant to the claim in question, or if relevant they can be weak in the sense that they are not worthy of acceptance as the basis or grounds for the claim at issue, or if they are acceptable they are not sufficient to justify acceptance of the claim at issue. There may be known or readily imagined objections to the claim at issue or to the reasons offered in the first instance that the argumentation fails to address or fails to address adequately. These inadequacies can be inadvertent, or the arguer can be aware of them and even try to disguise them; so they can sometimes be deliberate. In either case, however, the rationality or reasonableness of the persuasion-attempting argumentation does not depend on its satisfying the criteria of adequacy. A weak argument is not an irrational argument, nor even necessarily an unreasonable one.

The rationality that argumentation brings to argumentative persuasion lies not in success in meeting the criteria of adequacy, but in the fact that the activity is constituted by the attempt to satisfy these norms, or the guise of trying to satisfy them. It is rational to be persuaded of a claim by considerations that have probative relevance to it, merit acceptance and survive challenges or doubts. It is rational to invite the acceptance by others of a claim on the basis of such considerations. This ideal or telos is necessary to the viability of argumentative persuasion. Just as a world of liars would make truth telling pragmatically impossible, so a world in which the norms of argumentative cogency are not presumed would make argumentative persuasion pragmatically impossible. The deliberate commission of fallacies is parasitic upon the general expectation of well-intentioned attempts to argue adequately, just as the liar must rely on a general presumption of honesty.

This ideal is not at all necessarily the only aim or norm of argumentation, but it is its defining norm. Other objectives, such as to build consensus or show respect for the interlocutor, can occur through argumentation because it is informed by this guiding norm. Norms such as clarity, courtesy and respect, or economy also might be applicable to attempted argumentative persuasion but they are not essential to it, whereas the norm of attempting probative adequacy is.

I have stated the norm in a very general a way, because its specific formulation should vary with the situation and the circumstances. We rightly do not expect the arguments of physics journals to satisfy these adequacy conditions in just the way arguments of historians should; legal arguments are expected to meet standards of relevance, acceptability and sufficiency that differ from those of moral arguments; and so on. But in general, argumentation aimed at persuasion requires that there be an effort, or the pretense of an effort, to meet the appropriate probative adequacy criteria in some way, to some degree, because persuasion-attempting argumentation entails the use of arguments, which are the provision of grounds that are supposed to provide a rational and reasonable justification for the persuadee to accept the claim in question.

3 Summary

I have argued that argumentation is not to be identified with rational persuasion, or with attempted rational persuasion, on the grounds that the former can occur independently of the latter. There are other uses of argument besides rational persuasion. But the use of arguments in argumentative communication to try to persuade is the attempt at rational persuasion. And what makes it rational is that its informing ideal is to persuade on the basis of adequate grounds, grounds that make it reasonable and rational to accept the claim at issue.[4]

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[4] This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference, *Persuasion et argumentation: Colloque international organisé par le CRAL à l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, Paris. 7-9 septembre 2010. I am grateful to Rongdon Jin and Ralph Johnson for helpful critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and to two anonymous referees for invaluable criticisms and suggestions.

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