

Opinion on Marco Crosa's dissertation "Cultural Identity from the Perspective of Complexity Theory"

The key authority figure in Marco Crosa's dissertation is Edgar Morin with whom's work – I must admit – I was not quite familiar up until this moment. That can be easily compensated by reading the first chapter of Crosa's text that serves as an introduction to Morin's concept of the *pensée complexe* (i.e. the complex thought) and his methodological claims which – as far as I managed to gather – aim to oppose structuralism. From the very beginning of my review, I ought to make a disclaimer: I do not think that I am competent in Crosa's research field and thus my notes and remarks could be seen as belonging to "another paradigm".

One general remark about Morin's background that I need to make is the following – he himself does not have a philosophical education nor he has ever defended a PhD and is more influential as a sociologist and an anthropologist rather than as a philosopher. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it imposes a certain kind of restrictions on Crosa's research. Another thing that needs to be mentioned is that – again, as much as I managed to gather – Morin's most influential ideas are the ones that oppose structuralism. However, this topic is scarcely mentioned until Crosa introduces poststructuralist trends in feminist philosophy in subchapter II.2.01.

One thing that stands to impress must be made clear, Marco Crosa's work revolves around his central claim which is stated at the very beginning of his dissertation: "The concept of complexity can provide both the framework and the means for a post-postmodern discourse" (p. 6). And while I fail to agree with the general continental pathos of the text situated around the idea that we live in an era of extreme relativism and I find it generally unfounded, Crosa's inquiry does present us with an interesting attempt to use Morin's complexity as a solution for the supposed problem of the post-postmodern discourse.

My general criticisms are:

Inadequacy regarding the Philosophy of Science: The first section of the dissertation (chapters 1-4) is dedicated to establishing methodological grounds for the analysis of cultural identity. This section contains many claims related to the Philosophy of Science with most of them related to well-established methodological principles such as reductionism and parsimony. Such principles seem to be criticized by Crosa, but on the other hand they are not defined rigorously,

especially in the case of reductionism, which creates doubt in whether the candidate understands the position he criticizes.

Idiosyncrasy: I figured that this is probably deliberate, and it is a searched effect that should come as underlining ‘complexity’, but for me it is very unhelpful and confusing. I understand that my own philosophical background may stand in the way of seeing the positive sides of this approach, but that they do, and I feel obliged to stress it out. The text combines topics as metaphysics of gender with topics like particle momentum, artificial intelligence and entomology and I cannot make heads or tails on how this is productive for the research goals. In cases like this, the expression “less is more” should be taken seriously into account.

Terminological worries: The language of the dissertation and the terminological apparatus are rather vague and unspecified (that reinforces the general feeling that the text is too idiosyncratic). To give just one important example – disjunction is a technical term in philosophy and metaphysical disjunctivism is something quite specific. According to Crosa, there are 1) three types of disjunction (p. 12) and 2) disjunction serves as one of three methodological principles that reject Morin’s complexity (p. 46). As we see, important claims and distinctions are hanging on the meaning of disjunction, which alas has not been made any more luminous by mentioning the word so many times. At times, it looks like ‘disjunction’ aims to communicate something similar to ‘incommensurability’ (p. 22); on other occasions, it seems that there are different ‘levels of disjunction’ and they have something to do with ‘reductionism’ (pp. 55-56). If the first is correct, then I do not see how a reductionist approach is compatible with a disjunctive one (which would presuppose the failure of one unified reductionist approach). If the second reading is the intended one, then incommensurability seems to be rejected by the disjunctive approach. But then it would be very strange to call it ‘disjunctive’ in the first place.

Oversimplification: Despite its significance to the main claims of the dissertation W. Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty is never reconstructed in a robust manner. On p. 15 it is claimed that the principle concerns the “limit of graspability”, but that is a very unconventional reading, and a case must be made for its legitimacy, which requires more than cursory mentions. Otherwise, we are just using complex scientific terms in unclear and unfounded ways without making any valid points.

A similar problem can be stated with N. Bohr's Complementarity Principle. On p. 54, Bohr is quoted, stating that the principle concerns the limits of conceptualization of atomic phenomena. The principle is then alleged to be "transferred" to the domain of political science (p. 55), although the principle itself is never properly reconstructed and clarified, not to mention that such transfer can only take place as a very loose analogy.

Unfortunately, the combination of the problems outlined so far creates, albeit episodically, impressions not dissimilar to those intended by A. Sokal's infamous article "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity".

Regardless of my critical comments, Marco Crosa's dissertation does raise some interesting questions and problems, and it is obvious that the candidate is not merely reconstructing the theories of others but is trying to achieve some research accomplishments of his own. Additionally, the dissertation is well-written and to a large degree satisfies the criteria for academic writing.

In the summary of his dissertation, Crosa enlists four contributions but starts describing them at number II (it is unclear what number I consists in). It should be stated that Morin's complexity theory is neither very "recent" (it was first proposed in 1982), nor it is precise to be called "a paradigm", but otherwise contribution II is completely legitimate. It also should be pointed out that Contribution III is a tad bit undeveloped (the intersection between Morin and SFI is mostly commented upon at the very beginning of the dissertation and the introductory part). I have no comments concerning Contributions IV and V as they go beyond my competency.

In short, a lot can be done to improve the structure and clarity of the dissertation, but it is nevertheless an interesting work. I vote "for" the awarding Marco Crosa with the educational and scientific degree "doctor" in the professional domain 2.3 "Philosophy".

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