Arguments and Metaphors in Philosophy
by Daniel Cohen

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Reviewed by Leo Groarke

Daniel Cohen is a notable contributor to the discussions and debates that have given rise to informal logic and the broader interdisciplinary enterprise of "argumentation theory." In this book, he examines the nature of arguments and metaphors, their relationship to each other, and their significance in philosophy.

Though the title of the book suggests a very focussed discussion of the role that arguments and metaphors play in philosophy, the contents of the book range much more broadly. Its notable components include a theory of argument, a discussion of the scope (and limits) of argument, a theory of metaphor, and a theory of philosophy *as* metaphor. Though some of these topics are handled more successfully than others, Cohen has something to contribute in each case.

Much of the book presents a theory of argument. It emphasizes the possibility of different kinds of argument and proposes an account of argument assessment which is based on a very contemporary amalgam of logic, rhetoric and dialectic. On the basis of this amalgam, Cohen develops a three dimensional system for evaluating arguments which assesses them in each of these three categories. "Fully praiseworthy" arguments are, on this account, logically cogent, dialectically

satisfying arguments which successfully convince their audiences (and are "winning" in this sense). In contrast, the most "abject" argumentative failures are unsuccessful "losing" arguments which are logically problematic and dialectically unsatisfying. In between these two extremes one finds a range of arguments which are (and are not) successful in each of these dimensions.

One might easily expand and refine this approach to argument. Though one could distinguish between different kinds of plausible argument, Cohen instead notes that "Tolstoy's comment about families—that the happy ones all resemble one another, but each unhappy one is unhappy in its own way—can also be said of arguments" (p. 51). In the current state of argumentation theory, which places more and more emphasis on the delineation of different positive forms of argument, this is a contentious claim. That said, it still manifests itself in a useful catalogue of errors in argument. The foundation of this catalogue is a trinity of metaphors for argument: *argument-as-war* (invoked to explain dialectical mistakes in argument), *argument-as-proof* (invoked to explain logical fallacies), and *argument-as-presentation* (invoked to explain rhetorical mistakes). Cohen himself recognizes that there is nothing a priori (or "sacred") about these three metaphors, claiming only that they are relatively successful in explaining common argumentative missteps.

In elaborating his account of argument, Cohen develops a "Principle of Meta-Rationality" which is the basis of meta-arguments for "resisting good arguments" or (less plausibly) "accepting bad arguments," and includes a sustained discussion of different metaphors for argument. The latter often emphasizes Lakoff and Johnson's well known metaphor "argument-is-war." Cohen very clearly enunciates the strengths and weaknesses of this metaphor, though there are times when he seems to make too much of it (as when "argument-2" is treated as equivalent to argument-as-war; when arguments are described as carrying "lots of punch," "a lot of firepower," "a barrage of body-blows;" and so on). Cohen is at his best when he constructs a long list of alternatives to the notion that argument-is-war, suggesting that argument might instead be understood as reciprocal reading, diplomatic negotiation, manifest rationality, the metamorphosis of ideas, a kind of cross-pollination leading to hybridization, brainstorming, or even "barn raising."

In attempting to delineate the scope and limits of argument, Cohen discusses, in a number of imaginative ways, the circumstances in which it is—and is not—appropriate to engage in argument. This is a theme evident when he discusses arguing with god (criticizing Abraham on an occasion when he does *not* argue with God), the role of the filibuster in argument, forensic argument, questions of politeness, the possibility of "just and unjust arguments" (comparable to just and unjust wars); and in the debate between the poet and the philosopher which occupies one chapter. There is a great deal to be learned from these discussions, which isolate an issue in argumentation theory which warrants much more attention than it has previously received.

Cohen's theory of argument is combined with a theory of metaphor which elucidates its relationship and significance to argument. Rejecting the view that metaphors are just elliptical ways of expressing similes, Cohen makes metaphor a

key non-literal component of thought and reasoning. Metaphors are, on this account, more comparable to literature and imagination than science, and function as an essential way to make us see the world differently. As Cohen puts it, metaphors are a way to "focus the *seeing-as* faculty" (134).

There is much in this discussion that is relevant to contemporary attempts to expand our notions of argument so they better account for emotional, figurative, and non-literal argument components. That said, Cohen might be criticized for taking his view to implausible extents. While it is plausible to say that interpreting a story is an argumentative act (in which we reason to the conclusion that this or that interpretation is plausible or implausible), it doesn't seem to follow that a story is an argument. While there is something to the claim that metaphors are in some ways comparable to literature, it doesn't seem to follow that "metaphors are really just very short stories" (136). And while it is true that metaphors and arguments can make us see the world differently, this does not permit the radical conclusion that metaphors are arguments and arguments are metaphors.

In cases such as these, Cohen might take refuge in the notion that his claims are metaphorical (and aren't meant to be taken as literal truths). But he then needs to better clarify what these claims imply and how they illuminate our attempt to understand argument and metaphor. Whatever needs to be said in this regard, Cohen's theory of argument and metaphor has much to offer informal logic, both directly and as a provocative stimulant for discussion and debate.

A more problematic feature of the book is its account of philosophy. Though this is an aspect of the book which is emphasized in its title, and the titles of three of its four parts, the connection to philosophy is sometimes strained. Though Part 2 is entitled "Arguments in Philosophy," it culminates not in a discussion of philosophy, but in a discussion of the filibuster, which is presented as "the Senate's most infamous contribution to the history of arguments." Even when the book directly addresses philosophy, it does not rely on detailed accounts of particular philosophies, but on debatable casual claims and maxims like "philosophers have a great predilection for saying things that are either true, but trivial, or interesting, but quite false" (1).

This should not be taken as implying that Cohen has nothing of interest to say about philosophy. In the course of his discussion, he scrutinizes the common view that argument is central to philosophy and offers the radically alternative view that philosophy "at its best, when it is most successful, is all about the production of metaphors of a special sort: 'Grand Metaphors'" (142). This is a view which finds its inspiration in the way that both philosophy and metaphors can radically change and reconceptualize the way we see the world.

Cohen recognizes that this is not what philosophers—who generally eschew the metaphorical in favour of literal and scientific modes of expression—think they are doing when they forward their philosophies. "In the end, the fact that these grand metaphors are only metaphors is, by the discourse's own 'official' standards, philosophy's great failure" (142). "There is an element of tragedy here for those grand metaphors. These theories aimed at being Transcendental Truths, not merely

metaphors, grand or otherwise." (148) Looked at from another point of view, "the fact that they are *successful* metaphors is ... the source of philosophy's great triumphs." (142) According to Cohen, this explains why the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and other great philosophers are still relevant today, persisting in a manner that scientific theories fail to.

This view of philosophy is a challenging one which is worthy of discussion, but it needs to be made plausible in the context of a more thorough analysis of philosophy and individual philosophers. Instead, the remarks about philosophers are cursory, undeveloped and contentious.

Consider the suggestion, on p. 115, that Socrates always demonstrated that losing arguments establish useful justified beliefs. Putting aside the question whether this is a plausible claim in the context of dialogues like the *Euthydemus* and *Parmenides*, such a view seems at variance with Socrates' account of his own method, which suggests that it is—in keeping with the Delphic Oracle—a method of showing that his interlocutors do *not* have justified beliefs.

If one answers that Socrates showed that his dialectical partners were justified in believing that they don't know what they thought they knew, this only raises further questions. Socrates' commitment to this view was debated in ancient times and if not Socrates, then at least the later sceptical schools used his methods to demonstrate that one can use argument to undermine any belief at all. It is hard to think of philosophical developments that more poignantly raise the question whether argument can be taken too far, and whether arguments provide or undermine justified beliefs.

Instead of trying to fit a necessarily truncated discussion of such thinkers into a book that addresses as many issues as this book does, Cohen might do better to address specific philosophers and their arguments and metaphors elsewhere.

One cannot read a book about metaphor without searching for a metaphor to describe it. Though Cohen convincingly demonstrates that metaphors are open-ended and open to interpretation, I will risk the comment that the book contains (to the extent that one can contain) a volley of ideas which will be of interest to scholars working in informal logic. This is an attractive metaphor because it captures both the strength and weakness of the book—its strength being the many innovative and provocative ideas it advances; its weakness being its failure to fuse them into a unified and fully convincing whole. On balance, the former strength outweighs the latter weakness, which is also mitigated by the open-ended view of philosophy, metaphor, and inquiry which is one of the cornerstones of Cohen's views.

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