

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 5

May 14th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Cohen

Richard Burke

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>

Burke, Richard, "Commentary on Cohen" (2003). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 17.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA5/papersandcommentaries/17>

This Restricted Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Author: Richard Burke
Commentary on: D. Cohen's "Just and Unjust Wars--and Just and Unjust Arguments"

© 2003 Richard Burke

One of our problems these days, I think, is that the word "war" is getting used too much. The "Cold War" wasn't really a war. Treating it as one for 50 years did great harm to the American system of government, making the President too powerful and the Congress too weak. We had the "war on poverty" under Lyndon Johnson, and the "war on drugs," and now the "war on terrorism," none of which are really wars. By calling his response to Sept. 11, 2001 a "war," rather than stepped-up police work, Bush has made himself the Commander-in-Chief, and anyone who opposes him a traitor, for as long as terrorism is a threat. Likewise, saying that arguments are like war, or that war is a useful metaphor for thinking about arguments, as Lakoff and Johnson did in *Metaphors We Live By* in 1980, is profoundly misleading, I think. (By the way, they said only that it was one way we seem to think about arguments, not the only way or the best way.) So I'm basically unsympathetic to the idea that arguments are like war, unless it's shown to me that they really are.

Also, I think that the "just-war theory," as updated by Michael Walzer in his *Just and Unjust Wars*, is completely inadequate for understanding modern wars, because it assumes that all wars are between nations, thus not covering revolutions, civil wars, and terrorism; and that all existing nations are equally legitimate and entitled to go on existing, by questionable analogy with the right of individuals to self-defense. So I started with a bias against both sides of Mr. Cohen's idea.

Nevertheless, I found his article interesting, and I agreed with a lot of what he said! For our purpose here, we can ignore the problems with the just-war theory, and concentrate on the idea that arguments are like war. Cohen gives an even longer list than Lakoff and Johnson of expressions in English that can apply both to arguments and war: attack, victory, strategy, retreat, etc. My first problem is that all of these expressions also apply to duels, and to combative sports like boxing and wrestling, and to games like chess and go. Aren't these individual and usually non-lethal activities much more like arguing than war is? War is large groups of people trying to destroy each other, using any available means (although just-war theory tries to put some limits on the motives and the means, sometimes with partial success). Hegel did think of wars as arguments between the collective souls of peoples, leaving mankind a little wiser each time; but I think that idea went out with World War I. Meanwhile, argument is sometimes a rather stylized form of combat with words, following certain rules, as in a law court. Instead of saying that argument in general is like war in general, then, we should say that argument is sometimes like dueling, or wrestling, or chess.

But it can be like non-competitive things too, as Cohen pointed out in an earlier article, like building a bridge or a barn. Or it can be like golf, where your "opponent" can be your own previous effort. Cohen goes on in this article to point out that wars, but not arguments, involve prisoners, and armies; while arguments, but not wars, involve premises and conclusions. So they're quite different too. In fact, when he tries to apply just-war theory to arguments, he soon admits that "Argumentation *per se* is not a bad thing. War *per se* is. Argumentation is not

something to be avoided. War is. Arguments... are good things. They clarify our positions, strengthen our convictions, lead us to new beliefs, and, for some of us, even provide a measure of enjoyment. What's to justify?" (p.3) This is a crucial admission, because without the presumption that war is bad there is no point to just-war theory--it is an attempt to **contain war within acceptable** limits-- and there is no corresponding presumption against arguments, only to some ways of arguing: unfairly, inappropriately, too emotionally, etc. It seems farfetched to me, then, to compare "collateral damage" in war with children being upset by overhearing their parents arguing. They can also be upset by overhearing their parents making love; does that make lovemaking like war? Comparing intervening in various ways in an ongoing argument between two people to a nation entering an ongoing war, as in his 6 cases, also seems to me farfetched, given that there is no general reason not to join in an argument.

Cohen understands very well the limits of the "argument is war" metaphor. Indeed, the point of his paper seems to be to bring out those limits by showing that an application of just-war theory to arguments is **not** very enlightening! (Am I right about this?)

But there is a closely related metaphor that is interesting, I think, and that I want to explore briefly in my remaining time. The term "argument" is ambiguous. It can refer to a concrete situation in which two or more people are trying to persuade each other (or impress each other, or impress a third person, etc.). This is what rhetoric takes as arguments, and it seems to be what Cohen (and Lakoff and Johnson) are primarily thinking of. Ever since Aristotle, this sort of argument has been analyzed by considering the "speaker" and the "audience" as well as the "speech." President Bush gave speeches to many different audiences about why we should make war on Iraq, and these can be analyzed to see what devices he used, how effective they were, etc.

Ever since Plato's dialogues, however, philosophers (and scientists) have had a different meaning of "argument," in which we **abstract** from the speaker and the audience on a particular occasion, and even from the manner of expression, and ask "What was the argument for going to war with Iraq? That is, what was the reason (or reasons) for doing it? What was the argument against? And which is stronger?" In Logic courses, we teach students to make this abstraction from the specific arguments made by particular people and to evaluate the abstract form for validity. In the same way, we ask "What is the argument for the existence of a God?" or "What is the argument for black holes?" And these abstract arguments have a certain amount of force to them, ranging from leaving an issue wide open to **compelling** a conclusion. This "force of argument" is a metaphor too, but this one describes something essential about arguments, the element of necessity in them. I realize that asking exactly what an argument (in this sense) **is**, what sort of reality it has, could take us deep into the heart of epistemology, into notorious controversies about the mind and reality. But up to a point, at least, it seems uncontroversial to me that arguments can be evaluated for their normative "force" apart from how persuasive they are to particular people. In this philosophical sense, arguments have no similarity to war.

The first person to understand this difference between rhetoric and philosophy was Plato. So I too will close by referring to Socrates. Toward the end of Plato's great dialogue *Gorgias*, in which Socrates and Callicles are arguing about which is the more valuable art, rhetoric or philosophy, Callicles feels he is "losing" and quits in disgust, threatening Socrates with a fatal lawsuit (a perfect example of "argument as war"!). Socrates' response is to continue the argument by himself, taking both sides in turn abstracting their essence and evaluating them, for about 10 pages. Now there is no human "winner" or "loser," only a testing of both positions for "force," to find out where truth lies. This is argument as the search for knowledge, or rational belief. It has

essentially nothing to do with winning or losing, or with war. So argument can be competitive, like dueling or wrestling, but it doesn't need to be. It can be more like building a bridge, testing its foundation and structure for reliability as we go. Mr. Cohen knows this, but he goes on talking as if he didn't.