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### Commentary on Cohen

Joseph A. Novak

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**Author:** Joseph A. Novak

**In Response to:** Daniel H. Cohen's *Arguing with God*

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Very often a commentator will spend the first five minutes of a commentary summarizing the theme and argumentation of the speaker to whom he/she may be responding. This is a useful practice, especially if a paper deals with material foreign to the audience or presents the author's ideas in an obscure or disorganized way. Since Cohen's piece deals with a topic not unfamiliar to philosophers and since it is clearly written and thoughtfully constructed, I will forego any unnecessary repetition before offering my criticisms.

I find much that is stimulating and worthwhile in Cohen's paper. However, there are a few points that deserve further investigation, and I would like to offer some ideas that might in fruitful ways, I hope, further his argument.

That the notion of arguing with God can be a puzzling one is probably not a surprise to philosophers. To those who are atheists the puzzle consists in how anyone could consider arguing with a being that does not exist. One occasionally finds people on street corners, especially in large cities, vigorously "arguing" with someone who is not visibly present but such individuals are generally considered not to be in their right mind. To those who are believers, however, the puzzle consists in how, as Cohen has so accurately put it, a Deity who is omniscient -- and one might add, immutable -- is to be argued with, especially if the one arguing is fallible and changeable as the breeze. The whole issue can, of course, be seen as subordinate to the much more general question of communication with God -- how can *that* be possible? This issue can unfold on many levels. There is the ontological level: how can a finite being contact an infinite one (or vice-versa)? how can a spiritual being make contact with a being that is (at least in part) material? how can a being that presumably possesses no natural language communicate with one that does? etc. There is the moral level, e.g., how could a finite being think itself worthy to communicate with an infinite being? Why would an infinite being be interested in speaking with a finite one? There is the epistemological level, e.g., how could a finite being be certain that his/hers ideas are being accurately communicated or that the ideas of the infinite being are being accurately received? Of course, philosophers can recognize that many of the philosophical problems linked to the notion of prayer arise from these and similar questions.

As Cohen remarks, one must be cautious not to confuse the God of faith with the God of the philosophers. While it is indeed true that the God of the Bible should not be equated in every respect with the God of the hellenized Jewish-Christian tradition, there is an adequate base in the Tanach (OT) and the NT to insist that the God of the tradition is no petty deity à la Egypt or Babylon; He must possess those powerful qualities of omniscience, omnipotence, etc. that are generally associated with Him. However, the fundamental aspect of God that is important for the issue at hand, and absolutely undeniable from the biblical perspective, is God's Personhood. If one is going to argue with God, then He must be a person.

Of the three characteristics of arguing noted by Cohen, i.e., the personhood of the interlocutors, their relationship, and the "parity of the disputants," it is, of course, the last that poses the most problem in the case of arguing with God. I should note with respect to the second point, however, that though the relationship of God and man seems obvious from the Covenant, one already finds here that the disparity exists. The Septuagint (and the NT) translate the

Hebrew *berith* by the word *diatheke* rather than by the word *syntheke*. The Latinized word "covenant" gives the impression of both parties equally contributing to the formulation of a mutual agreement. However, the "Covenant" between God and Moses (Hebrews) is really, in many ways, a one way deal; God tells the people what they are to do and what the rewards and punishments will be for their respective obedience and disobedience to His will (Deut. 28). Hence the word "Testament," despite its shortcoming, has functioned for a long time in naming the two great divisions of the Bible. Thus, there really is not that much dissimilarity between the OT and NT regarding this point of the almost "unilateral" agreement between God and his people. The relative absence of argument between God and man in the NT--noted by Cohen--is due, I think, to another factor, namely, that a God who was distant to all but a few has become accessible to multitude.<sup>1</sup>

This notion of distance can, I think, be generalized to make an important point about argumentation in general. Distance between positions (and persons) is often the reason for argument and ignorance is often inextricably linked to this distance either as its cause or effect. Here the question must be raised, "what is it that makes something to be an argument with someone rather than causes it to be a mere question of that person?" In the Abraham account about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18), Abraham repeatedly<sup>2</sup> speaks (*amar*) to God, but always with deference and wondering whether it is even suitable for him to talk to God (v.27). There is no mention of arguing or quarrelling. Similar, in the reaction of Moses to the appointment God is giving him in Exodus 4, the prophet uses (v.10), the particle, *bi* which seems to indicate an attitude of deference, viz., "please/excuse me". Now, of course, the repetition of questioning/statement in each of these incidents makes one think that an argument is underway. However, it does seem that philosophers should have some criteria for distinguishing what is a questioning and what is an argument. Might what seems like a dispute arise from the fact that there is, on the part of one interlocutor, ignorance of the plans of the other? In such a case, the division between query and argument is not always easily drawn. Suppose a spouse, upon returning home, finds that several items of furniture are missing and thereupon, suddenly proffers several questions about the change to the partner who caused those items to be removed.<sup>3</sup> Unknown to the spouse is the fact that a long-needed remodeling and refurnishing is underway. Would such be a query (or series of queries) be an argument? The quotation given from Govier seems to emphasize the propositional side of argument by its talk of "beliefs," "opinions," "values," and "judgments."<sup>4</sup> Does one need to add "directives" and "actions" to cover some of the cases? Cohen seems well aware that the notion of arguing has to be expanded beyond a narrow logico-mathematical sense. However, how far does the expansion go and what

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard the Ps. 22 cry of Jesus, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" needs to be seen as merely the initiation of the recitation of the entire psalm -- one which ends quite triumphantly.

<sup>2</sup> Verses 23, 27 (ana), 29 (with some embellishment), 30, 31.

<sup>3</sup> For instance: "Why did you have the sofa removed? It was given to me by my parents. Besides, it always look nice in that corner...."

<sup>4</sup> See section I of the paper.

criteria are to be invoked so that the sense of "argument" does not become so expansive as to lose all meaning?<sup>5</sup>

One further point can be raised in connection with the second characteristic given above. If one maintains that the purported cases of arguing with God are genuine arguments and not mere questions, one must ask whether the arguing is unilateral or bilateral. "Questioning God" seems to imply an answer would be forthcoming, although it hardly implies that the activity of questioning be reciprocal. "Arguing with God" (rather than, say, "an argument against God") seems to mean that He would argue back. Does an argument exist as a symmetrical relationship or might it exist on the part of one of the interlocutors alone? In the case of the relationship between God and man, is it possible that there be an argument from the human side but not from the divine side? This would be analogous to the idea proposed by some medieval theologians, i.e., that man could be related to God by a real relation, but God could not so be related to man.

Cohen raises some interesting examples from the Bible (Tanach) and he maintains that we find cases of arguments with God not quite going through. Now, Cohen seems to hold that Moses argued and lost and thus should provide an example of arguing with God, although he also seems to classify the Moses' dialogue as one of the "failed examples of arguing with God." Abraham seemingly fails to win his "argument" with God for the saving of Sodom. But is it really an argument with God or a petitioning of Him? In a different way two other famous arguments do not "quite go through". One is the case of the Abraham-Isaac story (the *Akedah*). Here Abraham does not engage God in argument; it is a case of failing to argue rather than a failure in argument. The other is the case of Job. As Cohen astutely notes, the legal overtones of argumentative encounter fill the book of Job. Still, God will not quarrel with Job even though Job seems to be quarreling with God; God simply will not engage Job in argument. So, in these two cases one has to wonder about whether there is, or in what sense there is, argumentation. However, let me refer to one (two?) case(s) that, *prima facie*, appear to be cases where God does change his mind as a result of what someone says.

In Exodus 32 God is ready to annihilate the whole nation for their idolatry and build a new nation on Moses alone. Moses intercedes for them. He offers three reasons: 1.) You brought them out of Egypt; 2.) The Egyptians will gloat over your destroying your own; 3.) You promised the Patriarchs a heritage. Here we have, it seems, an argument. God relents. Yet, strangely, God offers no counter-argument to what was presumably an effective argument. There is no argumentative dialogue. The other case pertains to King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38) who is ill and who is told, prophetically, that he will die. After a brief prayer in which he recalls (offers as reason?) his faithfulness to God, God tells Isaiah to inform the king that he will not die. Here the line between request and argument is hard to draw. Again, there is no counter-argument.

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<sup>5</sup> Cohen notes that Laytner speaks of God "being taken to task" over "values and actions, not facts." Yet, one might claim that what is at issue in any given case is always some general principle – if not mathematical, then perhaps moral. If this is true, how is the structure of the dialogical interplay to be elaborated?

Perhaps the whole discussion can be broadened, as Cohen suggests, to the role of argument on the purely human level, by looking to some generally important factors beside winning and losing an argument. In addition to the many useful insights that Cohen offers, I would suggest that an improved understanding of one's own position and an improved self-understanding can be the result of bringing an argument. Even if there is no response from the interlocutor, the arguer will find that his/her own position and reasons will be clarified in the process of putting forth an argument. If the arguer is confronted with an intelligent interlocutor, the position argued will be strengthened or its fatal weakness(es) uncovered. The more intelligent the interlocutor, the more benefit from the process of arguing. However, benefit accrues to the arguer, even if he/she just argues with him/her-self. Plato maintained that thinking was the soul's discourse with itself. In the case of arguing with God, one should find the most challenging opponent as well as the deepest self-illumination. Even an atheist will have to concede that envisioning such an opponent in argument should provide maximal dialogical profit.