

May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Souder

Daniel H. Cohen

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



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Cohen, Daniel H., "Commentary on Souder" (1997). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 103.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA2/papersandcommentaries/103>

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

**WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I DID A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT
ALONE IN THE WOODS AND NO ONE WAS THERE TO RESPOND?
(COMMENTARY ON LAWRENCE SOUDER'S "A WAY TO DESCRIBE AND
EVALUATE
THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS, OR TRYING TO GET A GRIP ON VIRTUAL
REALITY")**

**Daniel H. Cohen
Department of Philosophy
Colby College
©1998, Daniel H. Cohen**

Here I am, JSPS¹ who came to this conference two years ago and spoke about metaphors and arguments, and now I'm asked to comment on thought experiments. What do I know about thought experiments? So I said to myself, "Self, why do you suppose Hans gave you this opportunity?" And myself said back to me, "Gee, Dan, I dunno. That's a tough one." No help at all. Really, sometimes I don't even know why I bother talking to myself because it's hardly ever of any help. So I am left, as usual, to my own devices. Well, Hans is a good egg, so is Chris, and they put on a pretty damn good conference, so they probably have their reasons. I began to wonder what I would do in their shoes, and an answer came to me: They were stuck for commentators and were scraping the bottom of the barrel by cashing in on the good will they earned from the last OSSA Conference. Well, actually there was a second answer that came to mind, too: perhaps they thought there might be an interesting connection between thought experiments, on the one hand, and metaphors, on the other.

So I had two hypotheses. As it turned out, there was a way for me to decide between them. Jill Gordon, a colleague of mine at Colby, is also on the program here but she *wasn't* asked to be a commentator. Why not? Not because she isn't knowledgeable about the subjects—she is actually far more knowledgeable than I—but *she was not at the last OSSA conference*. And so I have my answer, which, being an uncomfortable realization, I will now proceed to ignore completely by talking about connections between thought experiments and metaphors. Metaphors, after all, sometimes seem to function as miniature thought experiments: *think* of love as blind; *imagine* all the world a stage; *suppose* the nation were a ship adrift in a storm-tossed seas—what sort of a thing should the captain do?

There is actually a point to my narrative (besides the cheap and transparent attempt at winning good will). Several points, in fact: First, there was a thought experiment involved—asking what I would do in their shoes; second, it appears *not* to be part of any dialogical context—my dialogue with myself ended when I dismissed that hypostatized Self and started the solo flight of wondering; so third, if that sort of thing is indeed possible, then the pragma-dialectical aspects of thought experiments apparently do not have to be present since it is impossible (or at least problematic) to identify and isolate a *pragmatic* element in this kind of solitary speculation; fourth, even though the thought experiment was explicitly of the see-it-from-my-shoes sort, that was not its goal. Its goal was one of *discovery*—to find out why me—not one of argumentation, persuasion, explanation, or, in short, any other sort of *communication*. Fifth, there is the fact that when in the end I discovered *two* hypotheses, I returned to the thought experiment for a second look—and thereby put it to a second *use*—to decide among those hypotheses. And finally, when the thought experiment decided in favour of the personally unacceptable hypothesis, its findings were (validity be damned) summarily overruled. Even compelling thought experiments are

resistible.

Points of comparison between metaphors and thought experiments are not hard to find. In neither case, for example, is truth, falsity, or argument validity the real issue. With all due respect to Shakespeare and Galileo, all the world is not in fact a stage, and we can not in fact take a perfectly smooth ball and set it rolling on a perfectly level and perfectly friction-free surface. Similarly, just as a sentence that conveys a metaphor may also have literal uses—*He is in the grip of a vice* could describe either an unwilling drug addict or an incompetent handyman, and Prince Rainier can introduce his daughter Stephanie as "my little princess" either literally or metaphorically—so too, some thought experiments may indeed be actualized—Bishop Berkeley's speculations about the view from outer space and A.J. Ayer's hypothesizing about the experiences that we would have were we ever to go to the far side of the moon come to mind, and abstract speculations about Prisoner's Dilemmas have given way to both actual and computer-simulated tournaments.

Of more immediate moment are the parallels between their roles in reasoning. Neither metaphors nor thought experiments present themselves as deductively valid arguments. On the other hand, there is often something even harder to resist about them. Perhaps it is a sign of our shortcomings as rational agents, but—as any teacher can confirm—there are times when we do not find valid deductive arguments compelling but a well constructed metaphor does succeed at capturing the imagination. And yet, back to the first hand, there are strategies for rejecting the claims implicit in metaphors and thought experiments. As Mr. Souder notes, these strategies differ from those we employ to counter other sorts of arguments: we can change the story in a thought experiment but "tweaking" an argument is not really an option.

Most of all, thought experiments are like metaphors at least this much: they can be put to many uses, and those uses arguably do not constitute a single natural kind. As Mr. Souder has insightfully observed, the pragma-dialectical model highlights something too often neglected by philosophers' discussions of thought experiments: in general, their natural habitat is *dialogue*. But if the narrow focus on truth-values and validity has implicated a *monological* context, blinding us to the possibility of other *contexts*, we should be careful not to let the *pragma-dialectical* turn focus too narrowly on the use of thought experiments in argument to the exclusion of other *uses*.

The *pragmatic* dimension is indeed crucial to understanding both metaphors and thought experiments: it can be quite helpful to see them through a *Gricean* template to highlight their implicative powers by noting ways in which they flout sundry conversational maxims or discourse conventions, thereby contributing effectively to arguments. And it can be equally helpful to look at them through an *Austinian* lens, as performing distinctive illocutionary and perlocutionary acts in the course of arguments. So Mr. Souder is right to emphasize that aspect of thought experiments, but perhaps my thought experiment can be used to *argue* that not all thought experiments are used to *argue*!

I think at least these three related, but separately identifiable, families of uses for metaphors and thought experiments can be distinguished: they can be used *rhetorically*, in arguments; *interpretively*, in explanations; and *heuristically*, in the process of discovery. In none of these categories is the measure of the success of metaphors or thought experiments their truth and falsity or the logical validity of their context arguments. Rather, they succeed insofar as (in reverse order):

- (i) They *reveal* something important, insightful, or even just true; or
- (ii) They *communicate* something ineffable, profound, or even just difficult to articulate; or
- (iii) they *persuade* the hearer of something controversial, counter-intuitive, or even just at issue.

Mr. Souder has done an able job of focusing attention on the last stage. Many of his comments also apply to the second stage. I would like to *extend* his discussion—or at least *augment* it—by turning attention to the first one: thought experiments as vehicles for discovery.

Before I do, however, two other uses of thought experiments should be noted here because they have bearing on these first three. First, one use that is conspicuously missing from this list is their strictly *logical* use in demonstrative argumentation. I am inclined to say that thought experiments in formal, deductively valid demonstrations, like assumed premisses in Fitch-style natural deduction systems, are better understood as *calculations* rather than *experiments*, i.e., as part of what differentiates the methodology of pure mathematics from experimental physics. It may be that in the end there are good reasons to regard all of mathematics as just so many thought experiments—a hypothesis that might well be worth pursuing—but that will have to be put on the shelf for another time. Suffice it to say that this sort of information processing has roles in both argument and discovery.

The other very important role for thought experiments missing from this list is perhaps less conspicuous in its absence. Thought experiments, like metaphors, have a *formative* or *constitutive* role in human thinking. Our beliefs are not just an unorganized assembly of discreet propositions. Rather, there are local networks and clusters of beliefs whose meanings are interconnected with and determined by their neighbours. To the extent that thought experiments can themselves be the organizing schemes for clusters of beliefs, they are partial determinants of the *cognitive content* of those beliefs. This is something that metaphors also do, but while great attention has been paid to that aspect of metaphors, I think the corresponding role of thought experiments in thought formation has been less appreciated. The Chinese Room argument, for example, can both be a *reason* why someone believes what he or she does about, say, consciousness as well as constitutive of the *content* of those beliefs. That is, it could be offered in answer to the question *why* do you believe what you do. But it can also be offered as part of an answer to *what* do you believe [I believe the mind is (or is not) like a room full of boxes labelled with Chinese characters but no one around who really understands them, just mechanical processes of sorting and responding]. The processes of justification, explanation, and discovery all converge here to give substance to our thoughts.

It might seem that the heuristic and constitutive functions of thought experiments that I have identified would serve as counterexamples to the pragma-dialectical approach, and yet I said that I hoped to extend Souder's comments, not refute them. The pragma-dialectical approach focuses on communication, but neither thought discovery nor thought formation would seem to be *communications* phenomena. However, as Souder notes, quoting van Eemeren, *et al.*, "The model can provide a framework for interpreting and reconstructing the argumentative features of actual discourse, whether dialogic or monologic." So the question comes down to whether these uses for thought experiments qualify as parts of "actual discourse." Is solitary speculation a case of *communication*?

One source of support for an affirmative answer comes from the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky whose research into the phenomenon of "egocentric speech" in children—talking aloud to themselves—led him to the conclusion that it "is a phenomenon of the transition from interpsychic to intrapsychic functioning." That is, it is really more a part of thought acquisition than language acquisition. To put it another way, Vygotsky was rejecting Piaget's understanding of speech as externalized thought in favour of understanding thinking as internalized dialogue. And while this is not the occasion for going into it, the preponderance of evidence seems to favour Vygotsky—and that in turn favours van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, and Jacobs, and, of course, Souder.

Note

1. Just some poor schmuck. 

[View Paper by L. Souder](#)

[View Index of Papers and Commentaries](#)

[Return to Main Menu](#)