

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

Commentary on Cohen & Rosenwald

Trudy Govier

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



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Govier, Trudy, "Commentary on Cohen & Rosenwald" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 73.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA3/papersandcommentaries/73>

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.

Author: [Trudy Govier](#)

In Response To: Daniel/John Cohen/Rosenwald's [*Once upon an argument: Being the account of a dialogue between a poet and a philosopher, both ancient*](#)

(c)2000 Trudy Govier

In this dialogue between a philosopher and a poet, the authors provide us with a characterization – and to some degree also a caricature – of the philosopher and the poet. Having written on two poems in my life -- and these I suspect were bad ones, and having only a cursory knowledge of poetry based on classes in English literature pursued more than thirty years ago, I feel rather ill-equipped to comment on what a poet is and does. I feel better equipped to comment on the characteristics and role of a philosopher. A philosopher is one of the things I take myself to be. So in my comments, I will concentrate on the portrayal of the Philosopher in this dialogue. I'll discuss the positive, or mostly positive characteristics attributed to the philosopher; the negative characteristics so attributed; and the significance of the story of Socrates.

First, positive or predominantly positive characteristics. A Philosopher is a rational being or at least is trying to be one. He or she values argument and arguing, both as means of conducting disagreements and as an exploratory technique aimed at discovering truth. Whether arguing in the course of a discussion with one or more others or constructing arguments for himself or herself, a Philosopher is trying to pay service to Reason. We are told that the Philosopher is a being who makes himself or herself accountable to Reason, who bows down before Reason, revising arguments and beliefs that turn out to be unreasonable. What that means is not spelled out in the dialogue. I think it would mean that the Philosopher tries to construct arguments that are logical and reasonable. If he or she were to find out that some aspect of the argument was not reasonable, the Philosopher would give up or revise his or her argument and the beliefs dependent upon it.

Sometimes Philosophers argue back and forth with the goal of winning, but it is not necessary that one party in a two-party argument should win. Nor is it necessary to conduct arguments with this purpose in mind: one may construct and evaluate arguments as a tool of inquiry, as part of a broader quest for Truth. The arguments of a Philosopher may be addressed to a specific, historically situated audience, but ultimately the Philosopher is aiming for the Universal Audience of rational minds; he or she is not concentrating solely on a local, concrete dispute. As a Philosopher, one will be sensitive to techniques of argument but not only to that. Substantive knowledge is required as well. A Philosopher may be sensitive to image, rhetorical nuances, and even to emotion and intuition, but his or her main goal will be to employ Reason and argument in the search for Truth.

Now for some of the negative characteristics of the Philosopher. I hear the authors as saying not that all philosophers have these characteristics, but that

some or many do. It would be part of their case, I think, that the ambitions and techniques of the Philosopher make it rather natural and easy to develop these negative traits. But since I do not hear the authors as saying that these negatives are essential or intrinsic to the role, I shall speak here of philosophers, and not of the Philosopher. Philosophers may readily lapse into word games; we may become too pedantic and stuck on minor logical points, losing the core of an issue. We may be unwilling to listen to others and too disputatious and confrontational. We may ignore rhetorical nuances and emotional and intuitive aspects of knowledge or of issues we are pursuing. We may ignore the real needs and sensitivities of particular audiences and may be socially insensitive as to the needs and feelings of those audiences. We may ask too many questions. We may under-estimate emotion and intuition as sources of inspiration, curiosity, and even knowledge – and we may under-estimate the power and significance of images, stories, and rhetoric when we are putting forward our case. We may become so captivated by our sense of Reason, Truth, the capital-P-Philosopher, and the timeless universal Audience as to be naïve about the contested nature and specific practicalities of the situation in which we are functioning.

Such preoccupation recalls the ancient story of Thales, the first Western philosopher, who is said to have fallen into a well as he was walking along looking up at the sky, pondering the mysteries of the world. Note, however, that it is no part of this story that Thales was constructing or evaluating an argument when he took this unfortunate tumble. The story reminds us that philosophers do not argue all the time. Sometimes they think and wonder.

I have no quarrel with the claims that many philosophers display such characteristics as confrontationality, pedantry, insensitivity, arrogance, and metaphysical and practical naivete and that these characteristics are negative. Indeed, I take such claims to be uncontroversial and will not pursue them further here. I wish only to emphasize again that I am interpreting the authors as saying *not* that such negative features are endemic or intrinsic to the practice and pursuit of philosophy, but only that they are relatively common among *philosophers*.

The positive case, I tend to read as more essentialist, and it is for this reason that I am more skeptical about it. The very act of constructing a dialogue between a philosopher and a poet has led the authors to represent The Philosopher as One Side in a discussion about method and attitudes to the world. The Philosopher is for most of the dialogue contrasted with the Poet, who represents the Other Side. Unlike the Philosopher, the Poet does not value Reason and does not search for Truth. Rather, the Poet seeks to interest or entertain, takes so little interest in arguments as to be almost incapable of following them, values stories over Truth, and puts his or her stake in intuition, feeling, image, art, and story, aiming to entertain or please a particular audience. Until the reconciliatory moves towards the end of the dialogue, the Philosopher and the Poet are cast in a dichotomy of Two Sides. Each is what the other is not. And this necessarily over-simplifies matters – both for poets

and for philosophers, I suspect.

Again, I will concentrate on philosophers. There are philosophers, including contemporary feminists such as Andrea Nye and Sarah Ruddick, who strongly value feeling, intuition, listening, and inter-personal skills. There are philosophers such as Nietzsche and Derrida who question Reason and Truth. There are philosophers such as the later Wittgenstein who question universalistic interpretations and insist on importance of context and the details of particular cases. There are historicist philosophers who would laugh loudly at any idea of the Universal Audience. The demands of the dialogic art and the brevity required by this occasion have made the Philosopher an over-simplified and artificially singular figure. The same may be said for Argument, Reason, and Truth. We do hear a little about different conceptions of Argument, but Reason and Truth have been reified as clear essences that the Philosopher is guided by and is aiming toward. There is no acknowledgement here that Reason and Truth have been many things to many philosophers.

So now for the story of Socrates. For most philosophers, Socrates stands out as a hero of autonomous, rational inquiry, a questioner *par excellence*. According to the philosophers' story, Socrates was a man who bravely embodied the truth that the unexamined life is not worth living, a gadfly of a society, pricking with questions that showed the unclarity and inadequacy of their assumptions about life. This brave hero of ancient Athens was put to death because of antagonism to his questions. He died for his principles and, indeed, for the spirit of free and autonomous thinking and inquiry. He defended the right to raise questions, even embarrassing ones, and to put those questions to the powerful and important. This story of Socrates was told by Plato, who had been his pupil and who loved and admired him enormously. And in philosophy this story amounts to orthodoxy. The Poet in our dialogue questions philosophical orthodoxy about Socrates, claiming that he was arrogant and socially insensitive, and that he lost his life because he did not understand the ways of the world or the particularities of the audiences whom he was addressing.

The dispute about this story is of course a real one. One place it surfaces – not in a poem – is in I.F. Stone's *The Trial of Socrates*. Stone argues that Socrates was anti-democratic and elitist and that it was these aspects of his thought and life that got him into trouble in Athens. He also suggests that for various reasons including the fact that, at seventy, he was ready to die, Socrates did not launch the kind of defense that would have served him well. Socrates, Stone suggests, did not appeal to principles of free speech because there was a fundamental sense in which he did not fully believe in them. Socrates did not think that all opinions were of equal merit and equally deserved to be heard: he did not believe that everything is worth saying. The status as a philosophical hero, or secular saint, that Socrates enjoys in the Western philosophical tradition is on this account unwarranted. I.F. Stone strongly resists Plato's telling, and Western tradition's classic re-telling, of the story of Socrates. People can tell stories in different ways, for different

audiences, and to different ends. This case is well-suited to illustrate the authors' final reconciliatory moves in the direction of allowing that stories can be told in different ways and can be relevant to audiences and arguments in different ways. A story can give rise to arguments, can be the basis of, or an important part of, an argument, and give rise to critical discussions just the way an argument can. These facts will be important for a fuller understanding of the broader topic suggested by this dialogue – the role of narrative in argument, and argument in narrative.
