

**Ted Cohen**

*Thinking of Others: On the Talent for Metaphor.*

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This is a slim book on a focused topic; yet its implications stretch wider than its slight format and narrow scope might lead one to assume. The ‘talent for metaphor’ invoked in the book’s subtitle is the ‘indispensable’ human ability to see one thing as another. Cohen’s thesis is that the construction and comprehension of metaphors requires an ability that is the same as the human capacity for understanding one another. Indeed, without the talent for metaphor, our moral and aesthetic lives would ‘scarcely be possible’ (13).

Cohen assumes a very broad understanding of metaphor and does not intend his work to be a contribution to the literature on metaphor as such. His main concern is with what he calls ‘metaphors of personal identification’. In these, either a general term is predicated of a specific person, or a specific person is identified with a proper name or definite description. ‘Jane is bright, but her brother Jack is dull’ are examples of the first type. Examples of the second include, ‘Juliet is the sun’ and Churchill’s description of Mussolini in a 1941 speech as ‘the merest utensil of his master’s will’ (5). Cohen draws on Arnold Isenberg’s seminal paper, ‘Critical Communication’, to help explain the function of metaphorical language. In using metaphors, a speaker attempts to induce a ‘sameness of vision’ in listeners. To grasp the metaphor of Mussolini as a utensil is to see a new kind of compound and to see Mussolini in a specific relation to others. This sameness of vision may or may not be followed by a community of feeling. In grasping Churchill’s metaphor and seeing Mussolini in this new way we may come to have similar feelings about him as Churchill did.

The creation and comprehension of metaphor thus involves thinking of one thing, say, Juliet, as something that it plainly is not, e.g., a large fiery orb. That same capacity is put to work in our understanding of others. Understanding other people frequently involves thinking of oneself as another. Note that this is not the same as ‘putting oneself in another’s shoes’, to invoke a well-worn metaphor. The issue is not how you would respond in a given situation but how it would feel to be another person in that situation. The challenge is not to imagine, ‘how would I feel if God commanded me to kill my child?’ but rather, ‘how would it feel to be Abraham, and to be commanded by God to kill my child?’ Cohen concedes that mutual human understanding may not be possible. However we may nonetheless have an obligation to try to understand one another, all the while recognizing that it cannot be done with complete success. Related challenges include the difficulty of appreciating how others might see oneself, and of identifying with future versions of oneself.

Cohen uses many well-chosen examples to illustrate and defend his claims, drawing on movies, sports, poetry and novels. His central example is the sto-

ry of Nathan and David from the second book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible. David sleeps with another man's wife, impregnates her, and then effectively has her husband killed by sending him on a dangerous military mission. David is unable to see the wrongness of his actions until the prophet Nathan tells him the story of a heartless rich man who sins against a poor man. When David expresses outrage at the rich man's actions, Nathan tells him, 'You are that man'. The success of Nathan's metaphorical identification of David with the rich man in the story is seen in David's self-disgust. Nathan succeeds in bringing about sameness of vision and a community of feeling between himself and David.

In keeping with much of his earlier work, including *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (University of Chicago Press 1999), Cohen maintains an anti-theoretical stance in this book. Although metaphorical identification with others is said to be incumbent upon some people at some times in some circumstances, Cohen claims that no rules can be given about this. While a reluctance to over-claim for one's position, especially in moral matters, is surely a philosophical virtue, it can also be frustrating. Sometimes I wanted Cohen to say more about the nature of moral thought as he conceives it, and the nature of the responsibilities inherent in our talent for metaphor. What is the nature of the person who fails to metaphorically identify with others, or who fails even to notice that such identification may be required? What kind of failure is the failure to realize the duty of metaphorical identification with others? Cohen also concedes to some earlier critics of his work that metaphorical identification is not risk-free, morally speaking. We may so strongly identify with others that we fail to appreciate their wrong-doing, and this would be a moral failure. While Cohen admits that we must take notice of this possibility, I would have liked him to say more. How do we take notice? Are there conditions under which it might be better not to attempt metaphorical identification? And while Cohen is likely correct in claiming that no formula can be given for grasping a metaphor, some indications of how we might do so would have been welcome.

Cohen might claim that the concerns I have brought up merely indicate that he and I have different temperaments. I admit that my own capacity for metaphorical identification may not allow me to put myself in the place of a 'largely unreconstructed advocate' (36) of ordinary language philosophy, as Cohen calls himself. Yet the frustrations I have indicated with this book do not lessen my high estimation of it. This is really philosophy at its best: clearly written and free from jargon, sophisticated yet unpretentious, and highly engaging.

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