Heroic Argumentation:
On Heroes, Heroism, and Glory in Arguments

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Despite objections, the argument-as-war metaphor remains conceptually useful for organizing our thoughts on argumentation into a coherent whole. More significantly, it continues to reveal unattended aspects of argumentation worthy of theorizing. One such aspect is whether it is possible to argue heroically, where difficulty or peril preclude any obligation to argue, but to do so would be meritorious if not indeed glorious.

KEYWORDS: argument-as-war, adversarial argument, disagreement, heroism metaphor, supererogation, virtue argumentation

1. INTRODUCTION

A broad coalition that includes argumentation theorists, feminists, and educators, among others, has waged war on the argument-is-war metaphor, warning us against the negative elements and consequences of the metaphor (e.g., Cohen 1995, Rooney 2010, Hundleby 2013). Nevertheless, it persists. And for good reason: the metaphor organizes what and how we think about arguments, thereby organizing our thoughts into the kind of coherent whole that transforms knowledge into understanding. That understanding, in turn, gives us new ways to look at arguments, which unearth new aspects of argumentation – e.g., by revealing argumentative counterparts to such martial concepts as collateral damage, proportionality, or just war theory. That additional knowledge then becomes fodder for even greater understanding.

We could, in earlier times, sing of the glories of war without irony. That is no longer possible now that humanity's technological

prowess has progressed to the point that our capacity for inhumanity – and our ability to witness and broadcast it – challenge our ability to ignore the horrors. Because those horrors are so manifest, we have added reason to shy away from identifying, even metaphorically, arguments and wars. The metaphor shines too bright a light on the destructive aspects of arguing. An unfortunate side-effect of abandoning the argument-is-war metaphor is that we no longer sing the praises of heroic arguers or the glories of arguing.

We are going to push back against that trend.

2. ON METAPHORS IN GENERAL AND THE ARGUMENT-IS-WAR METAPHOR IN PARTICULAR

There are nine basic points to note about the argument-is-war metaphor that frame the subsequent discussion:

First, the assertion that argument is war is indeed a metaphor. We can choose to argue instead of going to war so the claim is not literal. If a hard literal-metaphorical dichotomy is rejected (as it ought to be) in favor of a spectrum, then this would be closer to the metaphorical end.

Second and third, it is a viable metaphor and it is a natural metaphor. It is viable because there are enough points of similarity to make it work – a very low bar since clever readers can make almost any metaphor work – but it can be termed "natural" because the comparison comes so easily that no explanation would generally be needed.

Fourth and fifth, it is metaphor that works and it is a useful metaphor. It serves as a broad organizing scheme for much of our thinking about arguments, reflecting the broad contours of how we think about arguments; and it provides the material for articulating and extending those thoughts.

Sixth and seventh, it is an entrenched and even dominant metaphor. It is embedded in how we talk – we want impregnable defenses to go along with strategies for attacking using strong or even killer arguments that are right on target – and consequently it informs both how we think about arguing and how we go about arguing. It is a necessary or immutable part of our linguistic practice, but it would take some heavy lifting to uproot it.

Eighth (and now we're getting somewhere), despite its viability, naturalness, utility, and ubiquity, it is also an awful metaphor because it deforms as much as it informs argumentation. It elevates differences into disputes, thereby turning co-inquirers into competitors; instead of working things out, we fight it out and we altercast our fellow interlocutors into enemies (Stevens 2019). Worst of all, the Dominant Adversarial Model – the DAM account – for argumentation conceptually equates learning through argumentation with losing an argument: if you

convince me of something, I'm the one who has made a cognitive advance – usually the only one – and yet I am the one who is described as the loser. Something is wrong with this picture (Cohen 1995).

Nevertheless, there is a ninth point to emphasize: this awful metaphor is also a great metaphor because it is conceptually so very fertile. It is a rich mine of meaning whose veins have not yet been depleted. By juxtaposing the concepts of war and argument, the metaphor effectively superimposes the whole constellation of concepts associated with wars on the whole constellation of concepts associated with arguments.[1] In order for the metaphor to work, the major components of war, such as allies and enemies, victory and defeat, and offensive tactics and defensive strategies, need to have more or less obvious counterparts among the major components of argument. And they do. Great metaphors do more. Like all metaphors, they invite comparisons of the conceptual clusters' secondary components, but the best ones successfully reveal new ways of thinking about the target concepts.

The literature on metaphors provides ample resources for elaborating the first five points. The sixth and seventh points have also been addressed at length to the point that they are now routinely part of the discussion. More recently, the negative aspects of the argument-is-war metaphor have come under increasing critical scrutiny from several directions. That has been all to the good, except insofar as it has crowded out the final point: there are still valuable lessons to be learned from thinking of arguments as wars. There is more to be said about how such war-related concepts as reparations, Just War Theory, appeasement, strategic alliances, exit strategies, collateral damage, proportionality, and post-war policies might fruitfully be applied to arguments. Every one of those is a rich topic worthy of further research.

In this paper, however, we will explore a less likely and more challenging set of possible corollaries to the argument-is-war metaphor, namely, whether the ideas that war brings out our heroic best and brings meaning to our lives have counterparts in the conceptual neighborhood of argumentation. This is not a merely academic game of connect the dots, however, because there is something important to be learned about argumentation from the exercise.

3. HEROISM AND ARGUMENTATION?

[1] Black 1954 offers this account in terms of background "associated commonplaces" for each concept that serve to filter, reveal, emphasize, and transform the concepts with which they are juxtaposed.

At first, it would seem to be a rather big stretch to pair arguments and wars by way of heroism and glory.[2] Bravery, danger, and self-sacrifice do not immediately spring to mind when the topic of argumentation comes up, and it is precisely the absence of a common association that gives Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim, "There is no true orator who is not a hero," its punch. However, we can cite precedent for bringing them together: we are reviving a classical association. The juxtaposition of entering the deliberations of the assembly and entering the action on the battlefield is a recurring trope in the Iliad, where fighting well in battle and speaking well in council are the two characteristic virtues of a hero. It starts in Book One when Achilles is described as going "neither to glory-bringing assembly nor to war" (1:490-491), and references to "fighting with words" and "striving with speeches" recur throughout.[3] Cicero, too speaks of the glory of orators. We appreciate and think it is no accident that the greatest hero in the first 100 years of American cinema, as determined by the American Film Institute,[4] was not Indiana Jones, not James Bond, and not even Ellen Ripley, but Atticus Finch, the small-town lawyer in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, whose very name recalls Greek and Roman rhetorical traditions[5] and whose heroic act was not to fight aliens, rescue artifacts and maidens, or save the world from nefarious conspiracies. His heroism was simply to stand up and argue.

What is it that makes a lawyer armed only with arguments such an exemplar of heroism?

Part of the answer, of course, is the context in which he argued which did require great personal bravery. The act of arguing was heroic. But that is only part of the answer because we also want to say that in a deeper and more important sense the content of his argument itself was also heroic.

In the next section, we address the meaning of heroism to answer the first part; the concluding section briefly addresses what makes heroism meaningful to answer the second. The meaning of heroism is not what makes heroism meaningful – and by the same token, the meaning of argumentation is not what makes argumentation meaningful. What makes argumentation meaningful is also what can make it heroic.

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[2]We are using the classical, pre-Christian concept of "glory".

[3]Other passages from the *Iliad* that speak of the glory to be had from council or the assembly include 9:53-54; 9:440-441; and 15:282-284. In addition, there are several phrases that combine war and rhetoric, such as "striving with speeches" and "fighting with words."

[4]https://www.afi.com/100years/handv.aspx

[5]https://1.cdn.edl.io/OOlrFqLm9fdGBP1oNLPtVX13cRQ0CRrgCEGUVhEtAuoWlrlP.pdf

4. HEROISM IN WAR – AND ARGUMENTATION

Can argument be heroic? War is the classical scene of heroism where there is danger, hardship, and sacrifice. Argument has none of those things. But war is also an occasion for great nobility noble because it is a common struggle, perhaps in pursuit of a higher purpose like the defense of the innocent or the liberation of the oppressed. We are at least getting closer to things that arguments can do.

War is not the only place to find heroes, of course. The sports pages of any newspaper routinely laud the heroes of last night's games, but those are heroes without heroism. For heroism outside of war, we can point to firefighters who rush into burning buildings to save people or doctors who work in quarantined epidemic areas, and no one will object. What about arguers?

As a starting point, we will follow J. O. Urmson (1958) in thinking that heroic acts, like saintly ones, are supererogatory – no one has to be a hero – and we will follow Joel Feinberg in characterizing a supererogatory act as "a meritorious, abnormally risky non-duty" (1962, p. 281) If these criteria are taken as individually necessary and jointly sufficient, it is possible to generate legalistic counterexamples. Great excellence in one area apparently can compensate for slight deficiencies in another, but the characterization generally accords with our pre-analytic sense of heroism. You don't get to be a hero for simply doing your job, unless, like firefighters, the job is both dangerous and worthy. Similarly, going far above and beyond what is called for in highly praiseworthy but relatively safe activities can also be thought of as heroic, like the quiet heroism of dedicated kindergarten teachers.

The controversial criterion is that heroic acts be meritorious for noble ends. No matter how risky and difficult rock-climbing may be, it is not heroic. But what are we to say of brave, self-sacrificing actions on behalf of ignoble causes? There is something about them that people find honorable. The American South is replete with statues to "heroes of the lost cause" – the euphemism of choice for defenders of slavery. Could their acts be heroic while they themselves are not heroes, or the other way around? We will return to this question later.[6]

Can argument be heroic by these criteria – (a) dangerous and risky, (b) noble or meritorious, and (c) above and beyond the call of duty?

4.1 Risky and dangerous arguments

[6]We will sidestep entirely the question of whether the concept of the supererogatory is incoherent and ought to be abandoned. See Pybus 1982 for a skeptical view.

It is easy to find cases of very difficult, challenging, or even scary arguments, but risk is something else. Let us distinguish two categories of risk here, those that come from the act of arguing and those that concern the content of the argument.

The most obvious examples are in the first category. Because arguing is a social activity, challenges come from the social context, especially the other participants – arguing with difficult, dangerous, or ignorant people in difficult, dangerous, or trying circumstances. A hero will be unafraid to take on difficult opponents, whether they are uninformed and irrational, hostile and uncivil, or dogmatic to the point of being pig-headed. The danger can be very real because it is hard for such vicious arguers to stay within the space of reasons. As with war, there is a fine line between brave and foolhardy, the rash and the heroic, so arguers need to weigh the pros and cons. It is with good reason that the first principle of on-line argumentation is, "Do not feed the trolls." There may be something romantically heroic about tilting at windmills, but there is no glory in taking a troll's bait.[7]

Atticus Finch did indeed risk his family, friends, career, and even physical safety. Something similar might be said about the mathematician Andrew Wiles for his work on "Fermat's Last Theorem". He has been explicitly described as a "hero" and hailed for his "glory" because of his decision to take on the Theorem, devoting years in secret, solitary efforts, risking his career, professional standing, and if not his physical safety, then perhaps his mental well-being (Leon 2016). There is an important difference between these cases. The kinds of dangers facing Atticus Finch may be less imminent and dire but they are still comparable to the dangers found in war. However, they are not specifically argumentative dangers. Wiles' risks are not comparable to a soldier's risks; they were cognitive. His risk was failure: a failure to reach the conclusion, i.e., to prove the theorem, but also the risk of a subsequent failure to persuade other mathematicians. The second risk concerns other arguers; the first one concerned the argument itself.

Thomas Aquinas, swimming in deep waters, raised a related problem that magnifies the difference: the possibility, after much time and effort, of failing to comprehend the truth (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I 4.4). Is that enough of a risk to make the enterprise heroic? That's stretching things, but it serves to isolate specifically cognitive dangers. It takes a special kind of courage to follow an argument to an unexpected,

[7]Although we appreciate the reasons for characterizing Socrates as perhaps philosophy's greatest argument troll, we are using the term "troll" in its more common pejorative sense. See Cohen 2017.

unwelcome, and even unbearable conclusion. The risks may include all of the above, as well as one's epistemic well-being and mental health.

4.2 Noble and meritorious arguments

In addition to their intellectual bravery, Aquinas, Finch, and Wiles directed their respective efforts in metaphysics, social justice, mathematics to things of great value – indeed, Aristotle's transcendentals Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Arguments on behalf of noble causes and the arguers who make them are common enough, but while this may be a necessary condition for heroic arguing, it might be observed more in the breach: we do not honor arguers who have argued on behalf of false or ignoble causes, no matter how heroic their arguing may otherwise be – unless we are determined to honor them. In that case, we can surely come up with something worthy. The State of Alabama annually celebrates a holiday honoring Jefferson Davis, but they make sure that everyone knows they are honoring the slave-owning President of the Confederacy for his bravery and dedication to a people's autonomy in the form of states' rights, not for being a champion of white supremacy. Conversely, Alabama resisted the federal holiday for Martin Luther King, Jr., insisting it was because of his anti-war efforts, not his civil rights work, before finally acceding – albeit by combining it with a holiday for the Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Hypocrisy, as de la Rochefoucauld said, is the homage vice to pays virtue.

Although most of the risks associated with arguing are contextual and external, there are some that are internal and specific to argumentation.

4.3 Arguing above and beyond the call of duty

Supererogation also involves going beyond one's duties. In order for that to be possible in argument there would have to be basic duties for arguers to fulfill and then to exceed. Argumentation theory would appear to have this covered since so much of the discipline is explicitly devoted to the normative dimensions of arguing. This is true no matter whether the approach is primarily logical – use all the available and relevant evidence, warrant all your premises, and reason well;[8] or dialectical – listen to your opponents, be open-minded, etc.; or rhetorical – consider ethos, pathos, and logos, take into account the audience, and so on.

[8]This, roughly, paraphrases Govier's A-R-G criteria for good arguments. Govier 2010.

However, a closer look reveals two gaps in our theorizing about arguing. First, a large part of the normative principles that have been articulated for argumentation are prohibitions and permissions rather than mandates and duties. Fallacy theory, for example, is explicitly concerned with what not to do in arguments. Critical thinking does a little better, but even there, the positive principles tend to be in the form of fairly general and vague strategies rather than specific obligations. The pragma-dialectical approach fares pretty well on this score: the original list of ten rules for critical discussions does include one positive duty: the second half of rule 10 is that participants must interpret others carefully and accurately. There are also three conditional obligations regarding retractions and replies to objections and (2, 3, and 9). The rest of the decalogue are prohibitions regarding what we must not do (1, first half of 10), what we may not do (5, 6, 7,) or what we may do only in certain circumstances (4, 8) (van Eemeren and Grootendoorst 1992).

Attention to the relative lack of mandates reveals the second gap: the striking absence of principles of when – and when not – to argue at all. That is, while we have normative principles for conduct within an argument, we have no real guidelines for arguing in the first place, i.e., for moving from the confrontation stage in a discussion to the opening and argumentation stages of a critical discussion. More generally, when should a difference be the occasion for an argument?

What makes this so relevant for the question of heroic argumentation is that one way to argue heroically is simply to argue at all. We can argue whether Atticus Finch argued beyond the call, but that is because we recognize that as an attorney, he did have some initial professional duty to argue. Is there a duty to argue for non-professional arguers? Except for philosophers, that is almost everybody else.

The problem is that most of argumentation theory is concerned with the thou-shalt-nots of argumentation rather than the thou-shalts. Either way, there has been little systematic work regarding what should be the First Commandment of Argument. Is it *Thou shalt argue* or *Thou shalt not argue*? If the default is to argue whenever there is a difference, we would need "defeaters" or "excusers" to prevent us from going down the someone-is-wrong-on-the-internet rabbit hole. If, in contrast, the general prohibition comes first, we would need "over-rides", reasons to argue, to avoid a world of disengaged monads without any of the benefits of arguing. There are strong intuitions on behalf of each: Job was heroic in trying to take on God in an argument over the injustices done to him, but he was not obligated to do so. For contrast, consider the case of Jackie Robinson, the first African-American to play Major

League Baseball after the so-called color line was drawn.[9] Part of his greatness – his heroism – was that he did not argue against the malicious way he was treated by opposing players, who we might suppose felt no special obligation to treat him fairly, and by umpires, who most definitely were obligated to treat him fairly. When the umpires violated their own code, Robinson clearly had a justifiable argument to make. His heroism, however, was restraining himself precisely because the weight of so many others was on his shoulders and the prospects for success in the long-term required extraordinary stoicism.

The decision to argue or not may provide the clearest examples of supererogatory arguers – Job and Jackie Robinson, respectively – but supererogation can occur within an argument, too. By way of an example, we will offer the parallel cases of the Noble Chess Master and the Noble Philosopher in debate who lose their respective endeavors because, beyond any duty, they offered strategic help to their opponents out of great love and respect for the game of chess and the institution of argumentation (Cohen 2105). Perhaps they are really tragic heroes.

Argumentation can be dangerous, it can serve a noble cause, and it can involve going above and beyond what duty calls for, so tragic or not, there is indeed room for argumentation so admirable to qualify as heroic by the three-part measure.

5. ARGUERS CAN BE HEROIC: SO WHAT?

It would be fair to ask if there is anything philosophically significant here, because the conclusion that the concepts of heroes and heroism have applications in the field of argumentation could be nothing more than an odd, hopefully interesting, observation. But are there lessons to be learned from pushing the argument-is-war metaphor in this direction? For example, could it alter our argumentative practice – as might result from greater attention to the phenomenon of collateral damage or the need for exit-strategies? Does it enhance our understanding of argumentation – the way that considering the effects of argumentation in the pre-, post-, and inter-argument periods does? (Cohen 2018). Does it open up new areas for research – as retro-jecting Just War Theory back on to argumentation does? Or is it mostly just academic doodling?

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[9]Robinson was not the *first* African-American in the major leagues. That distinction belongs to Moses "Fleetwood" Walker, a name nearly lost to history. Walker played in the mid-to-late19th century *before* the prohibition on black ballplayers was put in place.

Yes, to all of the above. We could leave it as an academic exercise in connecting the dots, but that would squander the value it holds for understanding arguments, for future theorizing about argumentation, and for the practice and pedagogy of arguing. The connection to follow is the idea that war is source of meaning – not semantic meaning but the meaningfulness that defines a life: "War is a force that gives us meaning," a thought echoed by Wittgenstein who claimed that only be facing death on the front lines in the Great War of 1914-1918 was he able to give life its meaning.[10]

We are not claiming that argumentation by itself can make a life meaningful and worthy of living, but we are suggesting that argumentation is a source of meaning. The reasons we offer for a standpoint define that standpoint: a position apart from its supporting argumentation is incomplete; a conclusion for which we have not argued is at best a work-in-progress. Argumentation provides the necessary background context against which a conclusion can have a well-defined meaning, but it is also the medium out of which meaning emerges. That is the glory of argumentation. It is also a topic for its own paper. Still, "There's glory for you!"[11]

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Commented [JvdL1]: I wonder whether this was intentional, or a left-over placeholder

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[10]See Hedges (2003), *War is a force that gives us meaning*, where he argues that an underappreciated attraction of war is that it gives life purpose and, paradoxically, builds community.

[11]The quotation, meaning, "There's a nice knock down argument for you" is used by both Donald Davidson and Keith Donnellan, following Humpty Dumpty's lead. See Carroll 1872 (ch. 6), Donnellan 1996, and Davidson 2005.

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