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Whataboutisms, Arguments and Argumentative Harm

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Abstract: Whataboutisms have received scant attention in argumentation theory, yet they are common persuasive moves in debates about social and political issues and can occur in the form of arguments. This paper analyses these arguments, showing that while whataboutisms tend to make for bad arguments, there can be instances of good argument employing a whataboutist move. The final section of the paper considers arguments employing whataboutisms as instances of argumentative harm.

Keywords: Argumentative harm, fallacy of relative privation, tu quoque, whataboutism

1. Introduction

Whataboutisms function rhetorically to deflect attention from the specific case in hand, oftentimes to an, arguably, similar case, or onto an opponent. For example, in defending their government's record on action on climate change, a spokesperson might ask, rhetorically, 'What about X-land, its record on carbon emissions is far worse than ours, why are we under so much scrutiny? Whataboutisms also occur in the form of arguments. On the face of it, these arguments tend to be weak and are often instances of the tu quoque fallacy or other fallacies of relevance. In what follows, I analyse these arguments, showing that while whataboutisms tend to make for bad arguments, there can be instances of good argument in which a whataboutist move is made. At the end of the paper, I consider how whataboutist arguing might cause argumentative harms that are perpetrated both by arguers and by the audiences for arguments.

While whataboutism might seem a specifically contemporary phenomenon associated with the call-out culture that thrives on social media platforms, as Wikipedia will tell you, it was first noted in the 1970s as a persuasive device that cropped up in discussions of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whataboutism> Whataboutisms were also a familiar tool of Soviet propagandists when defending their regime's record on human rights abuses and other crimes. Common to these propagandist uses of the ploy is the assertion that while whatever party is being defended might not be acting morally, their opponent or enemy is even less moral, thereby seeking to deflect and diminish criticism or to undermine a claim that some act should be performed. Deployed in these kinds of ways the move is rightly identified as a form of tu quoque argument, usually a fallacious one, that draws attention to a gap between what's advocated and the advocate's own behaviour or beliefs and then points to this gap between their prescription and their action as a reason for not following the prescription or not agreeing with their opinion. So while one party might be inconsistent or hypocritical, the other commits a fallacy when their response invokes that inconsistency or hypocrisy as a (sole) reason to disagree or criticise. For instance,

The West has no right to criticize our record on human rights, look at US actions in Central America, the history of slavery and of lynchings, not to mention apartheid in South Africa....

Familiar examples such as these also demonstrate the way in which the whataboutist deflects criticism, distracting attention away from the actual target and onto a similar, often equally egregious case while failing to provide a good reason for rejecting the criticism. Of course,

there will be contexts in which an arguer's hypocrisy or inconsistency does provide reason not to accept their conclusion, and for the virtue argumentation theorist, of some stripes at least, hypocrisy, inconsistency, or a lack of integrity as an arguer may be sufficient to make the argument a bad one.

2. Varieties of whataboutism: The good, the bad and the ugly

Identifying whataboutist arguments as a form of tu quoque is not the whole story. Whataboutisms occur in a variety of forms and in some instances more than one fallacious move can be seen to be made in the course of an argument event. In others, as I will show later, the whataboutist move is legitimate; there can be good whataboutist arguments. I begin with an exchange familiar to many parents:

Dad: *Billy, when did you last tidy your room? It's an absolute tip. I'd like you to tidy it before you go to football practice please.*

Billy: *That's not fair! What about Bobby? His room is just as bad as mine and you've let him go out to his friend's. You're so unreasonable, it's always one rule for him and another for me. I'm not doing it 😞*

I have reconstructed the argument thus:

- P1) I'm expected to tidy my room before I'm allowed to go out.
- P2) Bobby isn't expected to tidy his room before he's allowed to go out.
- P3) His room is as untidy as mine [Billy's]
- P4) If both rooms are equally untidy and only I'm expected to tidy up before I go out, it's unfair.
- P5) If the situation is unfair, I shouldn't be expected to do as I'm asked.
- C) I shouldn't be expected to tidy my room

The key premise is 4, which is a version of: Whenever two (or more) situations are sufficiently similar and action could be taken to remedy them but only one party is expected to act in remedy, it is unfair. Billy's error in reasoning occurs at 5, a version of: If the situation is unfair with respect to one of the parties, no party should be expected to act.

Familiarly, a response such as this has the psychological effect characteristic of the whataboutist move, for it will often serve to distract from one's aim of getting a room back in shape. But unlike many familiar whataboutist moves, this isn't a tu quoque argument as such. Billy's objection isn't that he's expected to do something that, as far as we can tell, his father doesn't do, rather his objection is that, as far as he can tell, he's not being treated in the same way as his brother. His reason, then, for not tidying his room is that the expectation that he should do so, is, in the absence of a similar expectation of his brother, unfair. And it is implied that the unfairness removes the obligation to do as asked despite the fact that's what's being asked of him – that he tidy his room – might be reasonable and justified. While it's not, strictly speaking, a tu quoque, then, Billy's whataboutist argument is a fallacy of relevance – the perceived unfairness being irrelevant to whether he should tidy his room. Of course, like many domestic disagreements, with a little more context filled in, misunderstandings may come to light and it may well be that there is no unfairness here anyway. P2) simply being false and the argument's unsoundness overdetermined. Perhaps Bobby has agreed to tidy his room when he comes home. Or Bobby was also expected to tidy before he left, but slammed out of the house refusing to do so.

While many whataboutist arguments are not strictly speaking instances of the tu quoque fallacy, hypocrisy is a principal underlying concern for the whataboutist. Another whataboutist variation sees an implied charge of hypocrisy deployed against one's critics, a move to which a CEO or other senior manager often resorts when under scrutiny or attack. By way of example, here is a university vice chancellor (President) responding via the local media to critics of a restructure proposal:

On the whole, our culture here is good, and of course there's always room for improvement. Most staff, through the culture project, made it clear to us that they wanted less complaining, gossip and negativity and they wanted more respect, collaboration, kindness and support. This is where we are heading, and we are hoping to take as many people with us as possible. I would challenge all workplaces, including the Otago Daily Times, to take a brave look at their own culture and seek to improve. (Otago Daily Times, 9/03/20)

Here whataboutism is used as a way of saying, "I agree, we [the University] can improve and we're trying to, but what about other organisations, even your newspaper? We can all improve." The rhetorical effect is to deflect, but the speaker also manages to signal their humility while at the same time suggesting that their university is really no worse than any other organisation.

Another variety of whataboutism commits a different fallacy of relevance – the fallacy of relative privation. Take this example of a response (heard on New Zealand's National Radio¹)

So President Trump wants to ban certain flavours of vape pods. What about guns?

Rather than deflection, this whataboutist move serves to draw attention to an, allegedly, more serious problem, which, it is implied, is being neglected. In so doing the speaker questions the importance of the problem that is being tackled. In this particular case, with just the one line to work with, it is difficult to say whether the commentator was implying that the ban on vape pods shouldn't be pursued – perhaps they thought it wasted time and energy that could be better used pursuing gun control, or they didn't agree that vaping is a problem that needs addressing through legislation – or whether they were simply raising that topic as a means of pointing out the President's lack of action on gun control relative to action on the less serious matter of vaping. If they were arguing that vaping should not be tackled through legislative action because gun control is not being legislated, then a false dilemma fallacy could be in play. There is surely no reason to believe that there are insufficient resources to tackle both. For that reason, though, this is likely a rather uncharitable interpretation of the argument they were implying through their comparison of action on vaping with action on gun control.

Media and other discourses about the COVID-19 pandemic offer plenty of examples of whataboutery in action. A common element of these is that the whataboutist seeks to downplay the severity or importance of the pandemic, to question the attention paid to it, or to question responses to it by comparison with some other life-threatening event or phenomenon. These arguments don't lend themselves to interpretation as fallacies of relative privation. The coronavirus pandemic is at the very least *one of the worst things that's happening to humanity right now*. But arguments are starting to emerge claiming that measures taken to prevent the spread or growth of infection should be rolled back because of the serious consequences to the economy – the so-called *lives vs livelihoods* dilemma. Proponents of such arguments, ask, 'but what about the economy?' Where the whataboutist move pits economic devastation against

¹ A text version Radio New Zealand's coverage of the story can be found here <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/world/406631/trump-administration-restricts-e-cigarette-flavours>

loss of lives, we see clear instances of a false dilemma. What's implied is that we can either limit economic damage or we can limit loss of life, but we can't do both and it is better, or least worse, to limit damage to the economy than it is to continue hardline measures that aim to limit loss of life. While the coronavirus pandemic presents deep challenges about how to minimise loss of life while at the same time minimising damage to livelihoods, our dilemma doesn't present us with a dichotomous decision between one or the other. To argue, using whataboutist rhetoric, that it does, is to argue fallaciously.

Another refrain familiar in present discourses about the pandemic involves the juxtaposition of responses to the pandemic with responses to climate change and the environmental, social and economic damage it is causing and will continue to cause. Among these arguments, we can find examples of justified uses of the what about? move. Writing relatively early in the piece about responses to the pandemic, when 3000+ people had died worldwide, Guardian journalist Owen Jones posed the question, 'Why don't we treat the climate crisis with the same urgency as coronavirus?' He begins his call to arms with an appeal to relative privation, thus:

More than [3,000 people](#)² have succumbed to coronavirus yet, according to the World Health Organization, air pollution alone – just one aspect of our central planetary crisis – kills [seven million people](#)³ every year. There have been no Cobra meetings for the climate crisis, no sombre prime ministerial statements detailing the emergency action being taken to reassure the public. In time, we'll overcome any coronavirus pandemic. With the climate crisis, we are already out of time, and are now left mitigating the inevitably disastrous consequences hurtling towards us. (Jones, 2020)

He goes on to take account of some of the psychological effects that explain the difference in response – the effects of the climate crisis seem more distant spatially and temporally. While we have a clear understanding of how illness affects us individually, it is harder to come to terms with how the climate crisis will play out for each of us, and for future generations. But, rather than leveraging the appeal to relative privation to argue that the response to the pandemic is disproportionate compared to responses to the climate crisis, the central argument of the article draws on comparison to the coronavirus response to make the case for similarly urgent action on climate change:

Coronavirus poses many challenges and threats, but few opportunities. A judicious response to global heating would provide affordable transport, well-insulated homes, skilled green jobs and clean air. Urgent action to prevent a pandemic is of course necessary and pressing. But the climate crisis represents a far graver and deadlier existential threat, and yet the same sense of urgency is absent. Coronavirus shows it can be done – but it needs determination and willpower, which, when it comes to the future of our planet, are desperately lacking. (Jones)

The following reconstruction makes explicit the way in which the argument draws on relevant similarities rather than on the relative importance and urgency of the climate crisis as compared to the coronavirus pandemic:

P1) Urgent action is being taken to prevent a coronavirus pandemic.

² See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/04/coronavirus-latest-at-a-glance>

³ See https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

- P2) If action of a certain quantum and seriousness can be taken to address one threat, action of at least the equivalent quantum and seriousness should be taken in response to any other threat of a more serious nature
- P3) The climate crisis represents a graver and deadlier threat to humanity and to the environment
- P4) Urgent action is not being taken to address that threat.
- P5) If urgent action can be taken in response to the threat of the pandemic, it should also be taken in response to the threat presented by the climate crisis.
- C) Urgent action should be taken in response to the climate crisis.

Here the whataboutist move serves to introduce a comparison between the way in which governments, particularly the British government, and the public have acted and reacted in response to the coronavirus pandemic and the way in which governments and the public have failed to act and react with the same urgency in response to climate change. But rather than making a fallacious whataboutist move, focussing on inconsistency or hypocrisy, or juxtaposing the crises as a faux dilemma according to which only one problem can be tackled at the expense of the other, or arguing that climate change presents a more serious crisis upon which we should focus attention rather than the pandemic, Jones argues that these two wicked problems are connected and that the correct longer term response to the economic, political and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic – a green economic recovery - is one that that will also tackle the threats posed by the climate crisis. Here, then, we see a positive use of the whataboutist move. In this particular context, asking ‘what about climate change?’ is appropriate because it a) aims to remind us that an ongoing wicked problem should not be occluded by the immediate trauma and challenges of the pandemic and b) prompts us to attend to some parallels between the pandemic crisis and responses to it and climate crisis and responses to that.

We can see a similar pattern of whataboutist argument in responses to the news that the Duke and Duchess of Sussex were standing down from their duties as members of the British royal family. A second royalty-related story being covered by news media around the same time was the friendship of the Duke’s uncle, Prince Andrew, the Duke of York, with sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and his attendance at Epstein’s parties and other events. In response to the, arguably excessive, attention given to *Megxit*, commentators in both mainstream and social media asked “what about Andrew?” as a way to draw attention to both the excessive and overly moralistic reaction to the decision of the Duke and Duchess and the, by comparison, disproportionately light touch reaction to the Duke of York’s involvement with a convicted sex offender. Similar to the coronavirus/climate change case, the whataboutist move serves as an effective way of drawing attention to an inconsistency in the way that relevantly similar cases are treated, though in this example the whataboutist’s point is that a much more serious series of transgressions is receiving far less scrutiny than it should.

In these, and all the other cases I have discussed here, the whataboutist move serves to issue a challenge to an arguer, or to those involved in a particular discourse more generally, to justify an exclusionary bias. Axel Arturo Barceló Aspeitia recognises this in his paper ‘Whataboutism Defended? ...’ (unpublished, p. 9ff) He goes on to point out that in using the whataboutist move, the challenger also seeks to reveal an implicit bias. In the case (above) of Billy, Bobby and their dad, Billy is alleging a bias on his dad’s part in favour of Bobby. In the case (above) of the university vice chancellor defending restructuring proposals, the allegation of bias is directed at the local newspaper in singling out their university rather than any other organisation, such as media organisations themselves. In the case of a President Trump’s decision to ban certain types of vape pods, his critic seeks to remind us of his bias towards the gun lobby and consequent lack of action on gun control. In the coronavirus/climate change case

(above), that bias inclines towards tackling the immediate and more easily comprehensible threat of the pandemic towards human lives versus tackling the, arguably, less tangible threat to human lives from irreversible climate change. In the *Megxit/Duke of York* case, the bias inclines towards avoiding or ignoring discussion of his transgressions in favour of directing attention, and aspersions, on, less morally relevant, judgement of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. In each case, we see a charge – of inconsistency, unfairness, or hypocrisy – coupled with a challenge to justify the exclusion and to show what’s saliently different about this particular case that justifies it not receiving the same treatment. If there is no justification, the implied charge goes, the exclusion is a matter of unjustified bias.

3. Whataboutisms, social justice and argumentative harm

This type of calling out allegedly unjustified bias is at the heart of whataboutist responses that oppose arguments and movements for social justice. President Trump’s response to questions from journalists about violence by alt-right activists at a 2017 white supremacist, *Unite the Right*, rally in Charlottesville, VA in which he asked ‘what about the alt-left?’ is a classic example of calling out alleged unjustified bias. The alleged bias is on the part of the media and in favour of the left. In this final section of the paper, I discuss the way in which deploying the whataboutist move as a blocking or deflection tactic in response to movements for social justice and change not only makes for bad arguments, but can perpetrate argumentative harm.

Whataboutisms can contribute to good argumentation when they invoke an apparently excluded case that is at least sufficiently similar to, or better/worse than the case upon which attention is focussed. So Owen Jones’ pandemic/climate crisis argument works because the case of climate change is at least as bad as and sufficiently similar to the coronavirus pandemic to justify an expectation that they be treated in with the same degree of urgency and seriousness appropriate to the specifics of each case. Similarly, If it were the case that Bobby is not subject to the same expectations that he clean his room in a timely fashion as Billy is, then Billy’s claim of unfair treatment has grounds, although his subsequent claim that this is reason for him not to clean his room, does not. On the face of it, their dad has a bias in favour of Bobby when it comes to the fair allocation of room-tidying duties. When whataboutisms are deployed to attack arguments for social justice, the equivalences they draw upon tend to be false ones. The cases they invoke as being unnecessarily excluded are seldom morally equivalent to the cases that social justice arguments or initiatives aim to address. In addition, allegations of implicit bias are somewhat disingenuous given that social justice movements and initiatives are, of necessity, biased in favour of groups who are systemically disadvantaged and the subject of harmful prejudices and stigmas as a result of race, gender, class, sexuality, gender identity, religious beliefs or disability.

Rhetorically, the question “what about white people/men/straight people....?” posed in response to actions or arguments for action to redress inequalities function as a smokescreen, deflecting or distracting attention from the case under consideration, and/or diminishing the significance of that case for social justice and equality. The whataboutist move stops the argument in its tracks diverting the audience into a siding where they become absorbed in questions of alleged inconsistency and hypocrisy instead in of the issue at hand. They become distracted by the scenery, drawing to a halt on their journey to knowing more or getting closer to the truth. For example, an argument for a targeted scholarship aimed at increasing the representation of a particular disadvantaged group at college, might be countered by a response along the lines of, ‘What about white males, where are the special scholarships for them?’ Rather than engaging in the merits of the scholarship itself and, perhaps, the reasons why such a scholarship might be necessary, the whataboutist takes up the attention and energy of their interlocutor(s) in dealing with the spurious suggestion that an unjustified exclusion is taking

place. Indeed, by its nature such a scholarship would be based on a bias in favour of the particular, disadvantaged group in question.

Furthermore, in cases such as these the whataboutist fails to take account of material differences that are highly relevant to the cases in question. As we have seen, the whataboutist move implies a similarity between the recognised case and the allegedly neglected case sufficient to ground a meaningful comparison. But in these cases, the move misunderstands, or intentionally ignores the power imbalances and history of prejudice and marginalisation that have resulted in present and past inequalities. There is no hypocrisy or inconsistency in setting up initiatives, such as scholarships, that seek to address and move past those inequalities, for the cases of the marginalised and the dominant are not sufficiently similar to justify a reasonable expectation that, if marginalisation is to be addressed and overcome, the dominant should not be excluded from targeted initiatives aimed at doing so.

Taking Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice (2007) as a starting point, Patrick Bondy (2010) has developed a concept of argumentative injustice. According to Bondy, injustice occurs in the context of argumentation when an arguer is denied credibility qua arguer on the basis of an identity prejudice on the part of their audience. Such prejudice is likely to be based in negative stereotypes and biases that favour the dominant and privileged over the marginalised. On Fricker's account, testimonial injustice occurs only as a result of a credibility deficit. Bondy points out, however, that in the case of argumentative injustice, affording someone an excess of credibility can also result in argumentative injustice when the audience or respondent for an argument affords an arguer more credibility than is due.⁴ An effect of this is that someone might accept the arguer's conclusion when they have not been given warrant to do so.

In whataboutist scenarios, both credibility deficit and credibility excess can play a role in perpetuating argumentative harm to both an arguer and their audience. When the whataboutist plays their card in response to someone's argument, the arguer's credibility is undermined in the minds of their audience, because they are believed to be inconsistent or a hypocrite through their exclusion of other cases that are implied to be relevantly similar. The audience is then inclined towards unjustified *ad hominem* dismissal of the case in question on the basis of what they now perceive as a credibility deficit on the part of the arguer. As a result, they fail to engage with the original argument. In scenarios such as this, both arguer and audience are harmed: the arguer because their credibility is undermined and they are not properly acknowledged as a reason giver; the audience because there is something they have reason(s) to believe, but they are being misled or distracted and not adopting that belief. This refusal to be a reason taker can be understood as a form of self-harm because in so refusing, one is denying oneself an opportunity to get closer to the truth of some matter or other or to discover how one should act.

President Trump's response to criticism of the alt-right marchers in Charlottesville (above) offers an example of this move in action: asked by a journalist about violence on the part of the marchers, he evades the question asking, "What about the alt-left?" At least some of the audience for the exchange; that is, the public, are distracted from the original question and become sceptical about the intentions of the journalist and their question. The question casts doubt on the credibility of the journalist asking the question by suggesting that they are being biased and partisan. They are harmed in the context of the exchange by having their credibility undermined – a credibility deficit is in play. At the same time a credibility excess could be in play. At least some of the public are likely taken by the President's turn of

⁴ Although Fricker's account limits the source of testimonial injustice to credibility deficits, as Medina (2011) argues, the affordance of an excess of credibility also plays a role in bringing about epistemic (testimonial) injustice, typically where the socially privileged are afforded more authority on a matter than is warranted.

questioning simply because they afford credibility to him by dint of his holding the office of US President and of his being a white man, and a successful and powerful one to boot. Harm is not only afforded to the journalist as an arguer, but also to any audience member who is now disengaged from the original question. In an act of self-harm they have denied themselves the opportunity to get closer to the truth of the matter in hand.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered varieties of whataboutism, good and bad, in argumentation. I began by acknowledging that the typical rhetorical effect of a whataboutist move is to deflect or distract from the issue at hand. I considered the standard interpretation of whataboutisms as tu quoque fallacies before going on to discuss and analyse a variety of argumentative forms that can be manifested by whataboutisms. I have shown that while some of these were bad arguments, whataboutist moves can also occur in good argumentation. Following Barceló Aspeitia, I noted that whataboutisms seek to draw attention to an allegedly unjustified exclusion caused by some alleged implicit bias. In the last section of the paper, I considered this in the context of whataboutist attacks on arguments for social justice causes arguing that in many such cases, the calling out of bias is inappropriate and disingenuous, as bias in favour of various marginalised groups is often justified in the context of attempts to overcome social injustices. Finally, I discussed the ways in which whataboutist moves constituted instances of argumentative harm.

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