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A Commentary on Tracy Bowell's "Whataboutisms, Arguments and Argumentative Harm"

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I wish to thank Tracy for bringing to my attention the significance a common rhetorical move; raising the question "I had not even heard the term "whataboutism" until her paper. I found many of her insights informative and illuminating. As with many so-called fallacies, she points out that the "what about?" question has non-fallacious and fallacious functions depending on the argumentative context.

As she points out, it usually used to insinuate that a speaker is at least inconsistent and more likely hypocritical or biased. Its fallaciousness depends on either the falseness of the claim of inconsistency or the relevance of the apparent inconsistency to the actual claim being made. The notorious *tu quoque* fallacy exemplifies the fact that apparent inconsistency (do what I say, not what I do) is often logically irrelevant though it still maybe rhetorically damaging.

What about question used by interrogator are usually appropriate and a means of identifying bias or inconsistency. The question use by a respondent to a question (Russia's response. Trump's) is usually a fallacy of distraction or irrelevance and frequently *tu quoque* or two wrongs.

I include a table which I hope brings out many of her points in a way that is easily perused. (Italicized are quotes from the paper)

Argument example	Strategy	Assessment
<p><i>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....</i></p>	<p>Distract, Charge of hypocrisy prevent criticism 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</p>	<p>Fallacious Tu quoque</p>
<p><i>P1) I'm expected to tidy my room before I'm allowed to go out.</i> <i>P2) Bobby isn't expected to tidy his room before he's allowed to go out.</i> <i>P3) His room is as untidy as mine [Billy's]</i> <i>P4) If both rooms are equally untidy and only I'm expected to tidy up before I go out, it's unfair.</i> <u><i>P5) If the situation is unfair, I shouldn't be expected to do as I'm asked.</i></u> <i>C) I shouldn't be expected to tidy my room</i></p>	<p>Bias and unfairness unjustified inequality of treatment</p> <p>If the situation is unfair with respect to one of the parties, no party should be expected to act</p>	<p>fallacy of relevance – the perceived unfairness being irrelevant to whether he should tidy his room</p> <p>So the question is when is unfairness grounds for change. Cf. Being caught speeding while others escape vs. Being subject to a sentence out of line with the sentences of others. Conviction is not unfair because others are not convicted but punishment is unfair if unwarrantedly different from others</p>

Argument example	Strategy	Assessment
<p><i>'I agree, we [the University] can improve and we're trying to, but what about other organisations, even your newspaper? We can all improve.'</i> 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.</p>	<p>Distracts, but also minimize criticism because "everyone has the same problem"</p>	<p>Fallacy of relevance Could be <i>Ad populum</i>? Except that the appeal isn't that its OK but that is a common weakness which should affect level of condemnation? Perhaps a new fallacy? <i>Alii quoque</i> (Latin I think for "Others do it")</p>
<p><i>So President Trump wants to ban certain flavours of vape pods. What about guns?</i></p>	<p>Hypocrisy and inconsistency. If you ban X then you should also ban Y. or better I you ban X which is somewhat bad, then you should certainly ban Y which is much worse</p>	<p>Non fallacious argument that consistency requires other actions</p>
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>What about the economy?</p>	<p>Fallacious False dilemma</p>

Argument example	Strategy	Assessment
<p><i>More than <u>3,000 people</u> have succumbed to coronavirus yet, according to the World Health Organization, air pollution alone – just one aspect of our central planetary crisis – kills <u>seven million people</u> 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</i></p>	<p>Inconsistency see above</p>	<p>Non-fallacious Legitimate charge of inconsistency</p>

Argument example	Strategy	Assessment
<p>P1) Urgent action is being taken to prevent a coronavirus pandemic.</p> <p>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</p> <p>P3) The climate crisis represents a graver and deadlier threat to humanity and to the environment</p> <p>P4) Urgent action is not being taken to address that threat.</p> <p>P5) If urgent action can be taken in response to the threat of the pandemic, it should <u>also be taken in response to the threat presented by the climate crisis.</u></p> <p>C) Urgent action should be taken in response to the climate crisis.</p>	<p>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</p>	<p>Non-fallacious</p> <p>Legitimate 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.</p>

Argument example	Strategy	Assessment
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>Distraction, charging interrogator with bias</p>	<p>False charge of bias? False comparison? Two wrongs?</p>
<p><i>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</i></p>	<p>False charge of inconsistency,</p>	<p>Fallacious because not inconsistent given history and context</p>

Argument example	Strategy	Assessment
<p><i>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.</i></p>	<p>Difference between Whatabout? used by interrogator and Whatabout? used by respondent. Former is appropriate if not biased, later is usually distracting and guilty of <i>tu quoque</i> or two wrongs.</p>	

Harm

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 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.

I do not find this use of “harm” to be illuminating. It reminds me of the problem identified by Bernard William’s of using thin as opposed thick moral concepts. Thin ones, like good or bad, don’t tell us much about the reasons for the assessment whereas thick moral concepts like liar, or “courageous,” “free loader,” etc. not only express evaluation but also tell us why. “Misleading, distracting, irrelevant, fallacious, deceptive, deluded, deceived, distracted, unwarranted,” are examples of specific reasons for deploring a bad arguments or the fallacious actions of an arguer and I believe are more useful as a result then saying that the argument was “harmful.”

I also feel that moving to using “harm” to describe the effect of fallacious arguments involves “concept creep” i.e., expanding the ambit (denotation) of term until important distinctions are lost. Cf the difficulties presented to the courts (and public opinion) of the expansion of “sexual assault” to include everything from sexual touching to rape. (<https://www.marshall.edu/wcenter/sexual-assault/types-of-sexual-assault/>)

Responding to the fallacy

Though necessarily her job, I do wish that Tracy had indicated rhetorically useful ways to respond the fallacious use of whatabout?. In our text *Reason in the Balance* (Balin and Battersby) we have a chapter on how to respond to fallacies in ways that do not further side track the conversation. Saying to someone that they have committed the “whatabout” fallacy obviously won’t do. Cf responding to “tu quoque,” one can say “My behavior is not the issue, the issue is...”