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Article abstract

The rhetorical function of whataboutism is to redirect attention from the specific case at hand. Although commonly used as a rhetorical move, whataboutisms can appear in arguments. These tend to be weak arguments and are often instances of the tu quoque fallacy or other fallacies of relevance. In what follows, I show that arguments involving a whataboutist move can take a wide variety of forms, and in some cases, they can occur in good arguments. I end by considering how whataboutist arguing in social justice contexts can be harmful to arguers and to the audiences for their arguments.

Whataboutisms: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Abstract: The rhetorical function of whataboutism is to redirect attention from the specific case at hand. Although commonly used as a rhetorical move, whataboutisms can appear in arguments. These tend to be weak arguments and are often instances of the *tu quoque* fallacy or other fallacies of relevance. In what follows, I show that arguments involving a whataboutist move can take a wide variety of forms, and in some cases, they can occur in good arguments. I end by considering how whataboutist arguing in social justice contexts can be harmful to arguers and to the audiences for their arguments.

Résumé: La fonction rhétorique du qu'en-est-ilisme est de détourner l'attention du cas spécifique en question. Bien qu'ils soient couramment utilisés comme mouvement rhétorique, les qu'en-est-ilismes peuvent apparaître dans les arguments. Ceux-ci ont tendance à être des arguments faibles et sont souvent des exemples de l'erreur tu quoque ou d'autres erreurs de pertinence. Dans ce qui suit, je montre que les arguments impliquant un mouvement qu'en-est-iliste peuvent prendre une grande variété de formes, et dans certains cas, ils peuvent se produire dans de bons arguments. Je termine en considérant comment l'argumentation qu'en-est-iliste dans des contextes de justice sociale peut être préjudiciable à ceux qui avancent des arguments et au public pour leurs arguments.

Keywords: fallacy of relative privation, false dilemma, false equivalence, implicit bias, red herring fallacy, social justice, *tu quoque* fallacy, whataboutism

1. Introduction

Whataboutism functions rhetorically to redirect attention from the specific case in hand, oftentimes to an, arguably, similar case or towards an opponent. For example, in defending their govern-

ment's record of 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?' Although commonly used as a rhetorical move, whataboutisms also take the form of arguments. On the face of it, these arguments tend to be weak and are often instances of, or share similarities with, the *tu quoque* (you too) fallacy or other fallacies of relevance.[1] In what follows, I show that arguments involving a whataboutist move can take a wider variety of forms than has been recognised previously. 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. I end the paper by considering the ways in which whataboutist arguing in social justice contexts can be harmful to arguers and to the audiences for their arguments.

The persuasive power of whataboutisms is frequently leveraged within discussions of contemporary issues and events, particularly within discussions that take place on social media. Often, they are used in complement with other rhetorical devices that serve to mis- and dis-inform, such as gas-lighting and bothsidesism, and I discuss this later in the paper. But while whataboutism might seem to be a specifically contemporary phenomenon associated with the call-out culture that thrives on social media platforms, as Wikipedia tell us, it was first noted in the 1970s as a persuasive device that cropped up in discussions of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. (Wikipedia contributors 2023) hataboutisms 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 the party being defended might not be acting morally, their opponent or enemy is even less moral, and it is thereby used 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. The respondent draws attention to a gap between what is

[1] The *tu quoque* fallacy is committed when someone argues against performing some act A on the grounds that the person arguing in favour of doing A does not follow that instruction or advice themselves.

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, a respondent 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 assertion deflects criticism, redirecting 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. This results in occlusion of the actual target of 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 Aberdein (2010).

2. Some varieties of whataboutism

Identifying whataboutist arguments as a form of *tu quoque* does not provide a full picture of the different guises under which they appear. 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 a dialogue. 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 mess. 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, which is 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 the 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, in the absence of a similar expectation of his brother, is unfair. And it is implied that the unfairness removes the obligation to do as asked despite the fact that 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 per-

ceived unfairness arguably being irrelevant to whether he should tidy his room.

Of course, like many such 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 at all; P2) may simply be false and the argument's unsoundness overdetermined. Perhaps Bobby has agreed to tidy his room when he comes home. Or maybe Bobby was also expected to tidy before he left but stormed out of the house refusing to do so. On the other hand, if there is no such expectation placed on Bobby, it is possible that the whataboutist move here does serve to raise legitimate and relevant questions about unfairness that should give Billy's father pause for thought. Perhaps there is a pattern of Billy being asked to do things that aren't expected of Bobby even though Bobby would be equally capable of undertaking them, or perhaps their father has a tendency to focus attention on what he sees as Billy's shortcomings and less so on Bobby's. Whether or not questions of fairness raised by deploying a whataboutist move are relevant to accepting or acting on an argument's conclusion can, then, come down to details of context. For in a case such as that of Billy and Bobby, it is those details that enable us to determine whether the unfairness overrides the obligation to tidy the room.

Consider, for example, the following case in which a whataboutist move is used to object to an explicit bias: Taylor is asked to work over a weekend on an urgent project. They object asking why their co-worker hasn't been asked—'What about Rowan, why aren't you asking them?' Their manager responds by saying that Rowan has an important sports obligation over the weekend—their hockey team is playing a cup final match—and thus can't be expected to work on this particular weekend. In an attempt to appeal to Taylor's loyalty to the work group, the manager exhorts them to 'take one for the team.' Here, in making the whataboutist move, Taylor draws attention to an instance of unfairness that is relevant to whether or not they accept the request: they are being asked to give up their weekend in order to get a project over the line and contribute to the work group's goals and achievements, while their co-worker has no such demands placed upon them as their weekend plans are considered to

somehow trump any plans that Taylor may have for the weekend. In the situation, as I have constructed it, the whataboutist move draws attention to an instance of unfairness that, on the face of it, is relevant to refusing the request to work—the unfairness seems to override any obligation to take on the weekend work. That said, as with the case of Billy and Bobby, the context of the situation could be filled out in such a way that significant dissimilarities emerge such that the bias in favour of Rowan turns out to be justified. For example, perhaps Rowan worked over a previous weekend and pulled out of a sports obligation to do so.[2]

While many whataboutist arguments are not strictly speaking instances of the *tu quoque* fallacy, drawing attention to alleged hypocrisy remains a principal motivation for whataboutism. Another common variety of whataboutism sees an implied charge of hypocrisy deployed in response to criticism of oneself or of a third party. As a self-defensive move, it is clearly an attempt to deflect attention that may be resorted to when one is under scrutiny or attack. By way of example, here is a university vice chancellor (President) responding via local media to critics of a restructuring 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 (Uni Accused of 'Culture of Micromanagement and Control' 2020).

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 attention more widely including onto the interviewer's own workplace, but the speaker also manages to

[2] My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point and for the suggestion to include this type of example.

signal their apparent humility while at the same time suggesting that their university is really no worse than any other organisation. Consistent with the twentieth century instances cited earlier, the use of whataboutism to make implied accusations of hypocrisy remains common in discussions of geopolitical events and issues. Lately, reactions to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have offered fertile ground for whataboutist-enabled accusations of hypocrisy to flourish. Typically, such exchanges take a recognisable form whereby someone might use a social media platform such as Twitter to express their support for the Ukrainian people, seek to draw attention to an alleged war crime committed by the Russian military, or elicit support for a fund-raising effort to support Ukrainian children, for example. In response, an interlocuter will call them out for not having previously sought to draw attention to, arguably, similar and morally equivalent actions perpetrated against other nations and peoples. This can be seen, for example, in this tweeted response to a shared video clip of a Ukrainian father saying farewell to his children as they are evacuated from the war zone.[3]

> What about poor fathers and children in Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Bosnia, Kashmir, Cuba… (Sher-e-Yazdan 2022).

To which another user, upping the ante, responds,

> Plus the Uyghur genocide in China (Amir, 2022).

Characteristically, this whataboutist move deflects from the issue at hand and implies hypocrisy on the part of the original contributor on the grounds that they don't speak out similarly about other situations that the whataboutist takes to be analogous. In this particular example, the whataboutist also appears to want to signal that they are more virtuous because they care about and are critical of the perpetrators in all these other cases as well. Meanwhile, the

[3] The tweet containing the original video clip can be viewed here: https://twitter.com/GaryLineker/status/1496897892178534402

subsequent interlocutory voice reminds them both of yet another case that they have *both* allegedly neglected to care about.

At first glance, then, the whataboutist response seems to be a way of throwing shade on the initial contributor in the thread—by casting the shadow of hypocrisy over the original claim, it undermines the credibility of the writer. By introducing different, arguably equivalent, genocidal events, it draws attention away from the suffering of Ukrainian families towards the suffering of families elsewhere. If the interlocutor's aim is to excuse or defend the Russian invasion, then deflection could be their means to that end. Such a move is akin to the classic case of cold-war rhetoric used by the Soviet side to deflect attention from its own human rights abuses to the moral and geo-political failings of the USA and its allies. But other, more constructive, interpretations of the exchange and the motivations for such an exchange are available. The whataboutist move can be an attempt to draw attention to these other events and to the consequential suffering of innocent people, not merely as a smokescreen for the issue of human suffering in Ukraine caused by the Russian invasion, but to genuinely draw attention to and implicitly remind an audience that suffering caused by similar actions elsewhere is ongoing and similarly deserves our attention, disapprobation, and action. Such a move may well have an emotive or moral pull for an audience because it appeals to their sense of justice, raising the question, 'why should we care more about these people than about those people?' In this respect, there is a similarity here to the earlier fictional cases of Billy and Bobby and Taylor and Rowan. Billy used a whataboutist? move because of a sense of unfairness—why is he being singled out when his brother's room is also untidy? Similarly, Taylor feels unfairly treated in being expected to work over a weekend when a similar expectation is not imposed upon Rowan. In the case under present consideration, the elicitation of the audience's sense of justice could also serve as motivation for at least some of them to engage with those other cases and speak up and participate more actively in support of those causes.

In a recent essay, Jay Marlowe asks,

> Why have Ukrainians been welcomed [to New Zealand] when others fleeing violence have not? (Marlowe 2022)

He develops an argument in favour of the New Zealand Government responding proportionately to refugees from other conflicts by, at the very least, properly meeting the obligations to refugees and asylum seekers to which it has already signed up. He furthermore suggests that they should extend those obligations by increasing the quota of refugees that will be accepted each year. Marlowe notes the way in which nations of the Global North have been quick to ease the passage of Ukrainians seeking refuge from the Russian invasion of their country, but have been much less willing to take similar actions for, inter alia, those fleeing Afghanistan when the Taliban assumed power in 2021; Rohingya who fled persecution in Myanmar but remain in refugee camps in Bangladesh; Ethiopians escaping civil war in Tigray. He argues that this is motivated by an exclusionary, Eurocentric and racist bias that leads governments and individuals to be welcoming towards those with whom they more easily identify as 'like us' while continuing to keep the 'other' out.[4] And it is clear that much of the visual coverage of Ukrainian refugees evokes that sense of identity in part through its similarities with familiar footage of European refugees during World War 2. Here, then, we see an argument that legitimately deploys a whataboutist move to draw attention to the way in which governments' responses to refugee crises reflect racist biases against the 'other' before going on to argue for a change in approach that would enact moral obligations to protect and offer safety to refugees regardless of their background. The effect of the whataboutist move is to highlight the way in which the differing approaches to Ukrainian refugees, as opposed to those escaping conflict and persecution elsewhere than Europe are borne, at least in part, out of implicit racist biases.[5] It is

[4] Marlowe also notes the way in which people from African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Caribbean nations have reportedly been refused easy passage across the Ukrainian/Polish border.

[5] Such biases could be explicit rather than implicit. It could be that an entirely conscious choice is made to support those who are geographically, ethnically, or

possible, of course, that Marlowe's intent in deploying the whataboutist move is manifold and that he also means to call out what he sees as hypocrisy on the part of governments. Here, however, I want to emphasise the way in which the what about? question can be employed productively as part of cogent argument rather than being restricted, as is commonly assumed, to use as a fallacious or a merely rhetorical move.

In asking 'what about the others?', Marlowe makes a move that Axel Arturo Barceló Aspeitia (2020) as argued is common to whataboutisms: that of calling out implicit bias. 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. Barceló Aspeitia (2020) 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—a bias that might be labelled 'hypocritical' because it results in one child being excluded from an expectation to which the other is held with no clear differentiating circumstances. 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 that particular university rather than any other organisation, such as media organisations themselves. 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. Building on Barceló Aspeitia's (2020) insight, we can also see that where the whataboutist move is used fallaciously, particularly when it is used to make a *tu quoque* move, part of the speaker or writer's mistake consists in erroneously calling out an implicit bias and taking the fact of the bias as sufficient to reject that prescription. The charge of hypocrisy that is made via the *tu quoque* allegation—that one is guilty of not following one's own prescription—is a charge of a

culturally similar to us. Indeed, this is roughly the line that populist politicians and their governments take towards refugee crises.

self-directed exclusionary bias that favours oneself by excusing oneself from the prescription.

As we have seen in considering the fictional cases above, in certain contexts, the whataboutist challenger may not be drawing attention to an implicit bias but to an explicit one, such as when Taylor's manager appears explicitly to favour Rowan over Taylor in their expectations about who should work over a weekend to complete a project. Where this is the case, the whataboutist move can still be understood as being deployed to question whether the bias in question is justified.

A further variety of whataboutism can commit a different fallacy of relevance—the fallacy of relative privation. The fallacy of relative privation is committed when an argument is rejected by making appeal to some other, more serious, problem. It is sometimes called the 'not as bad as fallacy.'[6] Take this example of a listener's text message response to a radio broadcast:

> So President Trump wants to ban certain flavours of vape pods. What about guns?[7]

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 relative importance of the problem that is being tackled. In this particular case, with just 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 to be addressed through legislation—or they were simply raising that topic as a means of pointing out the former 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 legis-

[6] Responding to someone's complaint, problem, or argument by claiming it to be a 'first world problem' can be an example of committing this fallacy.

[7] A text version coverage of the story can be found here https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/world/406631/trump-administration-restricts-e-cigarette-flavours

lative action because gun control is not being legislated, then a false dilemma fallacy could be in play.[8] There are surely no reasons 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 by means of their comparison of action on vaping with action on gun control. In addition, although the whataboutist move here draws on what the speaker sees as relative privation, the move also serves to draw attention to an alleged bias in favour of the gun lobby and consequent lack of action on gun control.

Given the way in which the psychological effect of a whataboutist move is often to deflect attention from the real target of a discussion, it is unsurprising that when it is used in an argument, one of the variety of fallacies that can be committed is the red herring fallacy.[9] For, as the notion of a rather odorous fish connotes, the red herring fallacy has the effect of throwing an interlocutor off the scent of the topic at hand by deliberately introducing an irrelevant argument on a different (though possibly related) topic that will distract their attention away from the genuine argument. Indeed, the arguments that are referred to in the course of what is taken to be the first use of the concept of whataboutism are open to interpretation as instances of the red herring fallacy. In a letter to the editor of the Irish Times, Sean O'Conaill is critical of the way in which defenders of the Provisional I.R.A.'s violent and murderous tactics tended to invoke the allegedly equally evil actions of their unionist and British enemies. He writes thus,

> I would not suggest such a thing were it not for the Whatabouts. These are the people who answer every condemnation of the Pro-

[8] The false dilemma fallacy occurs when someone argues that there are only two, entirely incompatible positions that can be taken on an issue or that there are only two, entirely incompatible actions that could be taken in some given situation.

[9] Eoin O'Connell (2020) argues that when whataboutery (their preferred term) is fallacious, it is a red herring (p. 254). As I show here, when used in bad argumentation, the whataboutist move *can* take the form of red herring arguing, but it can also take the form of any one of a variety of fallacious forms of argumentation.

> visional I.R.A. with an argument to prove the greater immorality of the "enemy", and therefore the justice of the Provisionals' cause: "What about Bloody Sunday, internment, torture, force-feeding, army intimidation?". Every call to stop is answered in the same way: "What about the Treaty of Limerick; the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921; Lenadoon?". Neither is the Church immune: "The Catholic Church has never supported the national cause. What about Papal sanction for the Norman invasion; condemnation of the Fenians by Moriarty; Parnell?" (O'Conaill 1974)

The arguments that are the targets of O'Conaill's criticism are open to interpretation as instances of the red herring fallacy. When the I.R.A was condemned for violent attacks, defenders of those tactics attempted to shift the discourse away from a focus on the I.R.A. and onto violent treatment of I.R.A. members in prison or to events such as Bloody Sunday during which fourteen civil rights marchers were shot dead by the British army. A red herring occurs here, then, in so far as the what about? question reorients the focus of the discourse away from the I.R.A's own tactics and towards the actions of those to whom they are opposed The subject is then changed in a subtle way to one that is adjacent and related to the original one but, nonetheless, a diversion from the original course of the argument. This is not to say that the what about? question ushers in material that is wholly irrelevant to the matter at hand. The actions of those who were opponents of the I.R.A. and of those whom the I.R.A. considered to be enemies are, indeed, relevant to the wider context of the discussion of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. But the case to which O'Conaill's letter refers has the characteristics of red herring arguing due to the way in which attention is drawn away from the original target—the violence perpetrated by the Provisional I.R.A. itself—and towards violence perpetrated by other organisations and individuals also responsible for the Troubles.

Public discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic offers plenty of examples of whataboutism 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 public health responses to it by comparison with those associated with some other life-threatening event or phenomenon,

such as annual deaths from influenza or road deaths. 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 has happened to humanity recently. But during the pandemic, arguments have emerged claiming that measures taken to prevent the spread or growth of infection should be rolled back because of the serious consequences to the economy that they affect—the so-called *lives vs livelihoods* dilemma. Proponents of such arguments ask, 'but what about the economy?' Where the whataboutist move pits serious economic damage against loss of lives, we see clear instances of a false dilemma. It is implied that we can either limit economic damage or we can limit loss of life, but we can't do both, and of the options, it is better, or least bad, to limit damage to the economy than to continue strict measures that aim to limit loss of life. While the coronavirus pandemic has presented deep challenges regarding how to minimise loss of life while at the same time minimising damage to livelihoods, those challenges have not presented us with a dichotomous decision between one or the other. Employing a whataboutist move when arguing that it does is arguing badly.[10] Further, when the whataboutist move is used in a way that generates a false dilemma, it often serves to polarize debate about an issue, thereby clouding complex details and important nuances.

Another refrain familiar in recent discourse 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. In a piece about responses to the pandemic that was written relatively early on when more than three thousand people had died worldwide, journalist Owen Jones posed the

[10] While I would argue that the decisions required of governments are not rightly understood as dichotomous ones, that is not true of the dilemmas faced by many individuals during the pandemic. Many workers with little or no sick leave entitlements and/or in precarious employment have faced genuine dilemmas as to whether to go to work and risk their and their families' health or to risk their livelihood and ability to pay for food, housing, and other essentials of living in order to protect their health.

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:

> More than 3,000 people 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 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 aspects 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.[11] 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 a comparison to responses to the COVID-19 pandemic 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 2020)

[11] I note that there is a similarity here to the empathetic responses those in the Global North may have towards Ukrainian refugees in contrast to those we may have towards refugees and asylum seekers who seem less familiar to us.

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 COVID-19 pandemic:

> P1) Urgent action is being taken to prevent a coronavirus pandemic.
> P2) If action of a certain magnitude 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 than the coronavirus pandemic.
> 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 COVID-19 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 and attention should be focussed there rather than on the pandemic, Jones argues that these two complex problems are connected and that the correct longer term response to the economic, political, and social consequences of the COVID-19 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 a serious ongoing 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-induced crisis and responses to it and the climate crisis and responses to that.

3. Whataboutisms, social justice, and argumentative harm

In this final section of the paper, I discuss the way in which deploying the whataboutist move as a deliberate blocking or deflection tactic in response to movements for social justice and change not only makes for bad arguments, but can perpetrate argumentative harm.

While the use of whataboutism to draw attention to unjustified bias can be a positive dialogical move bringing to light biases that underlie false assumptions, it can also be used negatively to deflect attention from a genuine problem. This type of calling out *allegedly* unjustified bias is at the heart of whataboutist responses that form part of opposition to arguments and movements for social justice. Former 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 an example of calling out alleged unjustified bias. The alleged bias is on the part of the media and in favour of the left. The whataboutist move also implies a demand for false objectivity in coverage, often referred to as 'bothsiderism'—the misplaced expectation that both, or all, sides of a conflict or debate should be granted equal representation and exposure via media and other channels even when it is patently clear that one side is largely or wholly in the wrong.

Further, former President Trump's introduction of a non-existent 'alt-left' as a movement equivalent to alt-right supremacists, the purpose of which is to eradicate or separate all white people from all people of colour, is a false and dishonest analogy with ontological and epistemological implications. First, it implies that an 'alt-left' actually exists, whereas, in reality, the 'alt-left' is an invention by the alt-right and by ultra conservatives that is intended to be conceived of in an audience's imagination as a

movement directly in opposition to their own and thus as something to be feared and hated.[12] Second, by invoking the 'alt-left' as though it is a genuine political movement, former President Trump's whataboutist move can serve, for his audience and for the audience of any subsequent media coverage of his response to journalists' questions, as the source of false beliefs about the existence of an 'alt-left' movement and about that imaginary movement's activities and beliefs.

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 succeeds 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 with the same degree of urgency and seriousness. 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 is, all things being equal, warranted although his subsequent claim that this is a reason for him to not clean his room, is not. On the face of it, their father has a bias in favour of Bobby when it comes to the fair allocation of room-tidying duties. By contrast, 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 exclusionary bias are misplaced and disingenuous given that social justice movements and initiatives are, of necessity, biased in favour of groups who are systemically disadvantaged and subject to 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/cis people….?' posed in response to actions or arguments for action to redress inequalities functions as a red

[12] Rogers (2019) offers a detailed and systematic analysis of the use of the term 'alt left' on social media platforms, concluding that it is a construct of right-wing voices and groups.

herring, 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's attention towards questions of alleged inconsistency and hypocrisy instead of towards the issue at hand and towards knowing more or getting closer to the truth. For example, an argument for offering a targeted scholarship aimed at increasing the participation of a particular underserved group in higher education might be countered by a response along the lines of, 'What about white males, where are the special scholarships for them?' Rather than engaging with the merits of the scholarship itself and, perhaps, the reasons why such a scholarship might be necessary, the whataboutist requires the interlocutor(s) to expend their attention and energy dealing with the suggestion that an unjustified exclusion is taking place. Indeed, by its nature, such a scholarship would be based on an explicit bias in favour of the particular, underserved group at which it is aimed. The whataboutist move can also have the effect of gaslighting a disadvantaged group or individual. By implying that the experiences of the privileged may necessitate similar bias in their favour, the move can serve to diminish the experiences of the marginalised, implying that their experiences are no worse than those of the privileged and centred.

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; however, Bondy points out 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.[13] An effect of this is that someone might accept the arguer's conclusion when they are not warranted 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 a whataboutist move is made in response to someone's argument, that arguer's credibility is undermined in the minds of their audience because they are considered to be inconsistent or hypocritical given 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 is harmed because their credibility is undermined and they are not properly acknowledged as a reason giver—as someone via whom the audience or respondent could come to know something or move closer to learning the truth. The audience is harmed because there is something they have reason(s)to believe, but they are being misled or distracted and thus are not adopting that belief. This refusal to be a

[13] 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.

reason taker can be understood as a form of self-harm because in so refusing, we are denying ourselves an opportunity to get closer to the truth of some matter or to work out how we should act.

Former President Trump's response to criticism of the alt-right marchers in Charlottesville (discussed above) offers an example of how deploying a what about? question can undermine credibility: asked by a journalist about violence on the part of the marchers, Mr. Trump evades the question by asking, 'What about the alt-left?' At least some of the audience for the exchange, that is, the public, are likely to be 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. The implied accusation of bias on the part of the journalist also connotes a bothsiderist expectation that good journalism always consists in giving equal attention and emphasis to all sides of an issue. The journalist, then, is harmed in the context of the exchange by having their credibility undermined by the implicit accusation that they are biased in favour of the left. A credibility deficit is thus in play. A credibility excess could also be in play in this exchange if at least some of the public are inclined to believe the accusation made by the former President's turn of questioning simply because they afford credibility to him by dint of him holding office as US President and being a white man and one who is seen as successful and powerful to boot. Harm is not only done 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 at hand. [14]

[14] It is also worth noting that where someone makes a whataboutist move with the intention of distracting from the real issue and does so knowing that the apparent equivalence upon which they are drawing is not a genuine, their disingenuity manifests a lack of integrity in their arguing that results in non-virtuous argumentation.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have considered varieties of whataboutism: the good, the bad, and the ugly. 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 a standard understanding of whataboutisms as *tu quoque* fallacies before going on to consider 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. Building on Barceló Aspeitia's (2020) insight, I noted that whataboutisms seek to draw attention to an allegedly unjustified exclusion caused by an alleged bias that can be implicit or explicit. In the last section of the paper, I considered this in the context of whataboutist responses to arguments for social justice-related causes, arguing that in many such cases, the calling out of bias is inappropriate and disingenuous as biases in favour of various marginalised groups are often justified in the context of attempts to overcome social injustices. Finally, I discussed the ways in which whataboutist moves might constitute instances of argumentative harm.

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