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Boogaart, R., Garssen, B. Jansen, H., Leeuwen, M. van, Pilgram, R. & Reuneker, A. (2024).
Proceedings of the Tenth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation.
Sic Sat: Amsterdam.

What About Whataboutism?

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ABSTRACT: In some recent literature whataboutism is analyzed as a sometimes reasonable argument or claim about inconsistency on an issue of dispute, akin to the ad hominem tu quoque. We argue that this doesn't capture the peculiarly meta-argumentative failure (or success) of "what-about" appeals. Whataboutist moves are appeals to evidence about whether one has assessed the total evidence, and so need not be failures of consistency on the first order.

KEYWORDS: bothsiderism, fallacies, free speech fallacy, meta-argument, tu quoque, whataboutism,

1. INTRODUCTION

On a Facebook thread about road safety on a local internet news group, "Margaret," pleaded with motorists to "watch out for cyclists when pulling out of parking spots" and to "stay out of the bike lane" among many other things. Neighbor "Gary," taking umbrage at Margaret's concerns, replied: "in my experience, bikes have been the more frequent problem" and "many go on the sidewalk." Quick to reply to Gary was "Annie," who asked, "Do you have any more *whataboutism* to add to this conversation, Gary?"

"Whataboutism" is a commonly-encountered term in critical discussions these days, particularly since the 2016 US Presidential election. Several magazine articles and radio spots have discussed it, and now it's attracted the interest of argument scholars (Barceló Aspeitia, 2020; O'Connell, 2020; Aikin & Casey, 2022c; Bowell, 2023). In general, whataboutism consists in a particular kind of critical response, and so it is dialectical in nature. Its purpose seems to be to deflect criticism of one standpoint by raising parallel concerns about another, presumably more worthy target of criticism. The name "whataboutism" comes from a phrase that often (but clearly not always) precedes the criticism—thus, the question "*what about* x?" implicates that there is a y receiving attention that in fact should be set aside, when one sees things from the appropriate position of seeing all the issues. In the literature on the fallacy, the consensus view seems to be that whataboutism is a sometimes reasonable argument scheme akin to the ad hominem tu quoque. In the tu quoque, one alleges that an interlocutor's inconsistency on a topic disqualifies them or their view from serious consideration, or at the very least it reveals something about their view that fails similar standards of scrutiny (Aikin 2008). We agree

that there is something correct about this basic description; *consistency* seems to be a paramount consideration in whataboutist cases. But we also think that this approach fails to capture what is distinctive about whataboutism. For, unlike the tu quoque, the inconsistency on the issue is not always second-personal, that is, it's not directed necessarily at an *interlocutor's* inconsistency on the matter. And further, there are instances of whataboutism that do not depend at all on inconsistency. Rather, we shall argue that whataboutism is a meta-argumentative strategy akin to *bothsiderism* and the *free speech fallacy*, in that one is gathering evidence about whether the discussion has accurately represented all of the considerations on the question. This can be represented sometimes by charges of inconsistency, but they need not be in tu quoque form. Instead, the whataboutist charge is one about whether all the considerations on the issue have been considered, so it is, as we have held, a meta-argumentative case (and fallacy).

Here is how we plan to proceed. We begin by surveying the recent scholarship on whataboutism. We then explain how the argument depends on a form of reasons-contrastivism (which we also briefly explain). This makes sense of some of the cases we discussed. But, as we argue, whataboutism is also a kind of meta-argument. We explain meta-argument briefly, and then explain how whataboutism is similar to other meta-argument cases.

2. WHATABOUTISM IN THE FALLACY LITERATURE

Other than our own brief discussion of meta-argumentative fallacies, with whataboutism featuring as an example, in the closing chapter of our *Straw Man Arguments* (2022c) there are three accounts of whataboutism in the literature. There have also been a smattering of think-pieces, blog posts, and whatnot on the origins and use of the concept. They generally note whataboutism's origins in Soviet propaganda and in discussions of the Irish Troubles, its recent popularity among certain ex-US Presidents, and its enduring place in the Russian disinformation toolkit (Lucas, 2008). They also regularly identify whataboutism with standard tu quoque cases. For instance, National Public Radio's Kurtzleben describes as a counter-charge of hypocrisy: A charges B with something bad, B charges A with something bad (2017). However, a recent piece in *Time* about President Trump's document scandal comes close to getting the meta-argumentative picture right, noting that the point is not to respond to arguments on the first order, but on the second order in that the issue is now about how the arguments have not been fair to the various considerations or consistent in their evaluations (McQuade, 2023).

The scholarship on whataboutism stresses different faces of the phenomenon. Further, each instances underscores, as is the state of in fallacy theory these days, that whataboutism admits of non-fallacious cases following (Aikin, 2008 and Tindale, 2007). Additionally, there is the continued tendency in recent fallacy theory in seeking to explain whataboutism in terms of other more basic or well-known fallacy types (like the tu quoque, red herring, or false dilemma). Call this the *reductivist* program in fallacy theory – that of taking purportedly new fallacies and making the case that they are merely special instances of more basic fallacy types. Our plan is to argue that there needs to be a new category of fallacy types, that of the meta-argumentative form. So, in this case, *non-reductivist* fallacy theory. Further, while all the scholars review agree that whataboutism regards consistency

at some level, they differ on the extent to which that characterizes the problem. Critically, they also differ on the description of the paradigmatic argument situation, such as whether whataboutism is something that occurs in dialogues between discussants, and so is second-personal, or whether it is third personal.

Barceló Aspeitia (2020) argues that the non-fallacious use of whataboutism (the term, by the way, he reserves only for the fallacious use) is fundamentally, but not entirely, an inconsistency charge, like the selective application a general premise. His central case is one where a religious fundamentalist is accused by a dialogue partner of cherry-picking religious precepts to be fundamentalist about. The accusation, *what about* x?, is meant to reveal that the target has been *insincere* about their view. This charge, he argues, is to be carefully distinguished from the charge of hypocrisy, as one sees in tu quoque arguments. The whataboutist charge is not then about the normative status of the arguer (440), as in tu quoque cases, but about the sincerity of their views. What about fallacious whataboutism? Barceló Aspietia's answer is that the fallacy lies in the derailment of discussion by charges of insincerity when suspicions of insincerity are unwarranted. Barceló Aspeitia clearly views whataboutism through the lens of the critical discussion, where participants engage in the reasonable resolution of a disagreement, and the key to these discussions is a sincerity requirement. Fallacious whataboutism, then, is a form of inappropriately charging insincerity.

O'Connell (2020) holds that whataboutism (which he calls "whataboutery"), while similar to the tu quoque, merits a more general approach. This is because whataboutism is not always directed at the hypocrisy of one's interlocutor. O'Connell suggests the following the following as a schema:

> A person refers to a situation, A, and says that A is morally repugnant; A ought to be condemned; we should do something about A. In response, another person says, "Well, what about B? B is also morally repugnant. If you are concerned about A then you should be concerned about B." (245).

First, it is clear that, as distinct from Barceló Aspeitia, whataboutism is often targeted at parties *not* present in a critical discussion (244). Second, the whataboutist's "what about" *and* the original case are presumably something that they and the target *agree* to. In the situation as he describes it, both A and B are bad, and agreed to be so. When fallacious, whataboutism consists in "an illicit attempt to change the subject and derail the discussion" (243). Fallacious whataboutism consists in "derailing moral consideration of a particular issue by deflecting attention to another issue" (246). Ultimately, then, fallacious whataboutism is a red herring: a technique for ending a discussion *without* admitting disagreement.

Like Barceló Aspeitia and O'Connell, Tracy Bowell (2023) distinguishes between fallacious and non-fallacious uses of whataboutism. She also agrees with Barceló Aspeitia and O'Connell that whataboutism fundamentally concerns consistency. For Bowell, specifically, it is often a form of tu quoque because the "principal motivation," is to draw "attention to alleged hypocrisy" (96). While the point of this move, at bottom, is deflection (93), whataboutism seems to be a complex strategy, involving many different kinds of fallacious moves, such as the red herring (102), the fallacy of relative privation (101), or false dilemma (104).

This brief literature review shows that a key question is whether whataboutism is primarily *second* or *third* personal. To begin, whataboutism is *second personal* when it involves an inconsistency or hypocrisy charge in the context of a dialogue by one interlocutor of another (who may only be imagined to be present). The primary aim of whataboutism on this form is the character (their consistency, hypocrisy, or sincerity) of the interlocutor target. To cite one of Bowell's cases, when asked to clean his room, Bobby asked of his *father what about Billy*? It also seems that popular use (exemplified in recent think pieces). The basic form of second-personal whataboutism is that YOU have left off some consideration or a crucial piece of evidence. While Barceló Aspeitia takes this approach exclusively, Bowell and O'Connell leave the door open for a *third-personal* form of whataboutism. This differs from the second-personal form in that the question is not levied by one party against another in the dialogue for an evident inconsistency, but rather to a third party being criticized or wider considerations (O'Connell, 2020, p. 244). Return to the Troubles case. As O'Connell notes, what is crucial is that there are *three* parties involved: Some who criticizes the IRA, someone who replies on their behalf by pointing to *someone else* (the British) who are not party to the dialogue. And in the case of asking 'what about x?' the arguer is reminding an audience of all the considerations on the issue that may have been forgotten. This is no longer an inconsistency charge, but a question of whether we have surveyed all the relevant reasons bearing on the question. For this reason, we agree with O'Connell that the tu quoque approach comes up short in describing all cases of whataboutism. Rather than seek a more generalized account, however, we would propose that there are at least two versions of whataboutism: a second-personal, tu quoque (style) version and a third-personal version.

3. CONTRASTIVISM

Contrastivism about reasons is the view that evaluating reasons requires evaluating those reasons against a set of alternatives (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008). This means that reasons evaluation is triadic, between (i) the reason, (ii) what the reason is a reason for, and (iii) the alternatives, or the contrast class. To speak generally, a reason for p, in order for it to be a reason for p, it must also be a reason for p *rather than* q. In light of this, it's easy to see that the contrast class is the source of the whatabout question. Consider the following case of moral reasoning from (Snedegar, 2015):

> Suppose you run into the burning building, scoop up Tiny Tim, and carry him out to safety. Is this what you ought to have done? Maybe so. But what if an alternative, one that you could have just as easily performed, was to run in, scoop up both Tiny Tim and Tiny Tom – who was right next to Tiny Tim – and carry both of them to safety? (p. 379).

Indeed, *what about Tiny Tom*? It seems natural to us to understand whataboutism as an argument form that regards contrasts such as this. The whatabout form, then, means to pick out the relevant contrasts that have been neglected.

The challenge of any account of a fallacy is to explain both what makes a fallacy attractive and what accounts for its fallaciousness. In the case of whataboutism, the

attraction is that reasons work on contrasts. This is what gives the whataboutist the feeling that they're doing something right (and what makes many of us fall for it), because a contrasting case can undercut the reasons if they have not borne on it (as we see with the question *what about Tiny Tom?*). But whataboutism is fallacious when those are not the right contrasts, given the scope of the conversation. Let's put this thought together with our first example. That Margaret made an argument about irresponsible motorists is understood by Gary against the contrast set of other topics she could have discussed. Gary doesn't argue that Margaret is *wrong* about the motorists, it's that there are other, more worthy targets of criticism such as cyclists on sidewalks. Understood against the purportedly proper contrasts, Gary alleges, Margaret has failed. But Margaret hasn't failed, because she is addressing driver attentiveness to cyclists who have a right to be on the road. When Gary asks about irresponsible cyclists, Annie is right to point out Gary's confusion of the proper contrast class.

4. META-ARGUMENT

Whataboutism is a meta-argumentative fallacy. Let us now briefly introduce the concept of meta-argument. The prefix "meta" comes to us from ancient Greek, where it means, roughly, "about." Thus, in a simple sense, one does meta-argument when they, argue, well, *about* arguments (Finocchiaro, 2005, 2007, 2013). It's the *content* of arguments that makes them meta-arguments in the first instance. But the term "meta" also means "after," "beyond," or "above." We can understand meta-argument on further layers of their function. In one way, it's a relation between arguments: not only is one argument about another, but it evaluates, explains, or clarifies it. Call this the relational sense. In another sense, meta-argument might refer to something internal to argument, call this the internal sense. So, arguments are token reflexives in that their 'therefores' invoke the norms of appropriate inference as the inference is made. All arguments are internally meta-argumentative, or so it seems to us (see the case for this in our Aikin & Casey, Forthcoming.

The norm-constituted nature of argumentation is especially evident when evaluating arguments. Critical dialogue, then, is not only argumentative, but also meta-argumentative – if you're exchanging and weighing reasons, you're arguing about arguments. For to criticize something as an argument means to allege that it's failed to meet some kind of standard. Sometimes failing to meet a standard is a matter internal to the type of operation one is trying to achieve. One generalizes hastily if one uses too few cases as a basis for the inductive step.

Cohen (2001), Breakey (2021), and Aikin and Casey (2022c, 2022a, 2022b, 2023a, 2023b) describe a different sense of meta-argument. These are arguments that come *after* or *in the wake of* arguments. In a sense, we have an argument and then we argumentatively reflect upon it with another argument. Consider the case of a really impressive argument for some outrageous conclusion about which one might reason in the form of what Cohen calls a meta-argument for rejecting good arguments (MARGA): "this argument seems really good, but the conclusion is really bad, and therefore there must be some mistake, though I can't identify it." (78-79). The meta-argument here is about the first, but it is in critical relation to it. Thus, we call this the *relational* form of meta-argument – it is a second argument, reflecting upon and in the wake of the prior. The meta-argument that comes in

its wake isn't about the argument in a simple sense. Rather, with this following argument, we ask whether this *prima facie* good argument reflects all of the considerations bearing on the issue or whether the premises *really* support the conclusion. The relational meta-argument opens a new reflective space where we ask about the target argument as an item for evaluation as an argument. This feature of meta-argument, we hold, is evident in whataboutist arguments.

5. WHATABOUTISM AS A META-ARGUMENTATIVE FALLACY

Our argument is that Whataboutism is an instance of meta-argument. When fallacious, then, it's a special case of meta-argumentative fallacy. First, let's get clear on what makes something a meta-argumentative fallacy. Recall above where we described meta-argument in two ways: internal and relational, and the fallacious explicit cases are relational cases. Relational meta-arguments are responses to arguments, but they are not responses on the first-order merits of the argument. Rather, they are meta-arguments because they take *the fact of there being an argument at all* as the significant input – that there is evidence about the breadth of evidence on an issue. Whataboutism is among several cases of reasoning along similar lines, that one, in assessing the argument and other factors bearing on it, have meta-evidential considerations that must be aired. Other forms of this reasoning are the free speech fallacy and bothsiderism. We will survey their meta-argumentative features to then highlight those of whataboutism.

A standard version of the free speech fallacy runs that since some viewpoints have not been given full voice in debates, the result of the debate is undercut. The fallacy works from the appropriate default attitude of open inquiry norms, including wide viewpoints for consideration, but it becomes fallacious when those representing refuted views insist on being considered seriously, even after repeated refutation (Aikin & Casey, 2023a). They infer that since they are excluded from the debate, the results of the debate are either unjustified or obviously false, because important rebutting evidence has been quashed. What matters in this case, clearly, is not the quality of the original objections, but rather the fact that they were made at all. This is not a reply that can be characterized by standard dialectical rules, such as those described by Walton (1998) or van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004), as the respondent does not attend to merits of the opponent's case at all. Rather, they ignore the case entirely and turn to the fact that the case has been prevented from being made. However fallacious all of this sounds, it's not a standard case of irrelevance (or something else). For certainly the offering of arguments has a *kind meta- relevance* (or *meta- irrelevance*).

Another meta-argumentative fallacy along these same lines is bothsiderism (Aikin & Casey, 2022a). In bothsiderism, one concludes that a disagreement on an issue is sufficient evidence to conclude that the issue is undecidable in a way that means it is rational to split the difference between the sides or withhold belief. Here again, bothsiderism does not interrogate the quality of the arguments that have been advanced; rather, it takes a second order fact (the fact of arguments being made and disagreement continuing) as sufficient to draw conclusions about the matter at the first order.

Let's return to whataboutism. The first similarity with the above cases is that the whataboutist charge does not challenge the salience, truth, or validity of the target's claim.

This is because the whataboutist will build the charge on the agreement about the original case and on the contrast case. The whataboutist, in other words, does not challenge *what someone said*, rather, they build their meta-argument on it given agreement on the overlooked contrast.

To put the theory into motion, consider two instances of whataboutism, one in the second person form, and one in the third. Consider an exchange between two people running as follows:

> Analisa: I think it's terrible that Russia doesn't respect human rights – look at how the LGBTQ community is treated there.
> Barron: Yes, that's bad, but what about the fact that the United States engages in state-sanctioned killing of leaders around the world?

In this case, Barron has proposed a whataboutist charge to Analisa, with the objective of contrasting the bad of human rights abuses with the injustice of assassinations. It's worth acknowledging that the parallel with tu quoque arguments is deep in this case, as Barron's charge is that moral consistency is not being met. Further, the inconsistency is presented as tacitly in the second-person, as Barron's implication is that Analisa's criticism of Russia's human rights record would be worth mentioning only if she did not attend to the United States's record of attacking state leaders. This is why we'd termed this form the second person to begin with, keeping the TU in the tu quoque. And, finally, Barron's argument is made even with a concession that Analisa is right that there is a bad. His case is that there is plenty of blame to go around, and the question is who deserves the most. What makes this argument meta-argumentative is that it is made primarily as a criticism of some reasons on the basis of there being reason to think they are undercut by an overall survey of the relevant reasons. The error, however, is that not all moral evaluation is a matter of rank- ordering the various bads. In fact, one would not be able to have a rank-ordering of the bads unless one were to look at each on their own. And this is precisely what Analisa is doing – she is looking at a particular bad thing and recognizing the injustice and unique alienation inherent in human rights abuses.

Consider now whataboutism in the third person. Importantly, these instances emerge in cases where the considerations on an issue are expanded in ways that favor the arguer's conclusion. So, again, in the Troubles case, the argument that there should be peace is undercut by the question of whether those arguing for peace had forgotten yet another atrocity. So, "What about Bloody Sunday?" In this case, to be clear, the issue is not a charge of inconsistency of the application of some rule of evaluation, but that one has not fully surveyed the range of atrocities demanding reprisal. Consider, now, two people in the following conversation:

> Tamir: We should buy a new dishwasher. It would make our evenings so much easier after making and cleaning up after dinner.
> Ronda: Yes, that would be nice to have one. But what about how much it would cost, and what about how hot it would make the apartment, and what about how hard they are to install?

The importance of these cases is that Ronda is bringing up concerns about the overall good of having a dish washer – making the kitchen hotter and being expensive are relevant considerations. And so, again, given the contrasts, the reasons for the dishwasher must also be reasons for also putting up with a warmer kitchen in the evenings and accepting the costs of buying and installing the appliance. These are all appropriate things to consider, but the trouble can be that one can pose whatabouts indefinitely.

> Ronda: What about the noise? What about the water used? What about the electricity bill? What about how we are going to miss out on drying the dishes together? What about the fact that dish washers regularly leave residue on glasses? What about the fact that they break down?

You can see how this can go, and once we get to Ronda's ramped-up round of whataboutism, we can see that it's a tactic of swamping Tamir's proposal with a deluge of critical questions. At some point, even if they are all small, his overall case begins to look weaker. In this regard, the fact that there are so many (even if inconsequential) critical questions begins to appear to be evidence that Tamir's case is not so good. It is the argumentative equivalent to a death of a thousand cuts. In this regard, the whataboutist case is similar to that of the bothsiderist – the persistence of a disagreement is taken as meta- evidence that there is not a winning side to the issue. One way to see whataboutist cases in the third person as fallacious is simply that they rely on the multiplicity and variety of the contrasts to be considered. In Tamir and Ronda on the dishwasher, Ronda's case is made by the sheer quantity and variety of her critical questions. But quantity is not necessarily a good guide to quality.

Whataboutism requires a meta-argumentative survey of contrasting cases that have not been considered in the initial argument. Whataboutism is a charge of not having a representative set of considerations on an issue, and this can take the form of charging hypocrisy, as we see in second-person whataboutery, and it can take the form of a long list of hanging critical questions, as we see in third-person whataboutery. Whataboutism is a meta-argumentative move, and what makes it fallacious or not is whether the contrasting cases are relevant to the critical conversation and whether they improve it by expanding it.

6. CONCLUSION

Our analysis has shown that whataboutism comes in two main forms. In the one, what we've called the second-personal form, it's assimilable to the tu quoque fallacy, where one accuses a dialogue partner of inconsistency. In this regard, we think there is a reductivist line to take with the fallacy, taking whataboutism to be a special version of standing fallacy forms. In the other version, what we've called the third-personal form, one doesn't charge their partner with inconsistency, but rather raises a contrasting consideration whose existence alters the original claim. We think this means the third person version of whataboutism is best understood in terms of reasons contrastivism, where one's reasons for p are incomplete until they include a contrast set. This means that to raise contrasting considerations is legitimate in some cases. It is not legitimate, however, in too many cases, thus the fallacy of whataboutism. However, both forms of whataboutism belong in the class

of meta-argumentative fallacies, like bothsiderism, and the free speech fallacy, among others, because both forms of the fallacy are cases that one has evidence of whether all the evidence on the matter has been considered. These are meta-argumentative because one does not reason on the first order but rather on the second order.

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