

Whataboutisms

Professor Anderson is having a conversation with his wife, Dr. Marion. He tells her he wants to organize a dinner for John and Mary, a couple of recent graduates. His wife asks him why he wants to do so. He argues that he wants to celebrate their graduation and maybe give them some advice on their future careers that might be of help in navigating the current job market. Dr. Marion thinks that Professor Anderson helping recent graduates with professional advice is a great idea and also agrees with him that celebrating the graduation of one's students is a good reason for organizing a dinner. However, she is not satisfied with Professor Anderson's justification because it is common knowledge between her and her husband that John and Mary are not his only students to have recently graduated; there is a third recent graduate: Ezekiel. "Okay, but what about Ezekiel? He also just recently graduated and could use some advice as well, right?" replies Dr. Marion.

Reactions like Dr. Marion's, commonly known as "whataboutisms" (a term popularized by Edward Lucas¹) because they are commonly expressed as rhetorical questions of the form "what about...?" (like Dr. Marion's "... what about Ezekiel?"). In general, a whataboutism is a kind of response given to arguments that try to justify a particular case by appealing to a general rule but that fail to apply the same general rule to similar and salient cases. In this context, the whataboutism calls attention to these excluded cases and asks *what about* them?² In our example, Professor

¹. Edward Lucas, "Whataboutism" *The Economist* Europe view column of January 31st, 2008. <http://www.economist.com/node/10598774>, and "The Katyn Deniers", *The Economist*, November 2nd 2007, Online extra. <http://www.economist.com/node/10049754>

². To be more rigorous, a whataboutism is a reply to an argument to the effect that since being P is a sufficient condition for being Q , and the R s are P s, then they must also be Q . The argument is

Anderson tries to justify his invitation to a particular pair of students by appealing to a general rule regarding recent graduates, without applying the same rule, and therefore extending the same invitation, to another recent graduate in a similar situation. In consequence, Dr. Marion's question of "what about Ezekiel?" is a clear whataboutism.

I assume my readers have encountered responses of this sort; as a matter of fact, I would be very surprised if many of my readers had not actually given a response like Dr. Marion's. After all, these sorts of responses are very common, both in everyday conversation and in public debate. Yet despite being so common, they remain a puzzling phenomenon. On the face of it, an argument like Professor Anderson's is clearly flawless: it is logically valid and is based on premises accepted by his interlocutor. Yet her reply seems to raise a warranted concern. What is going on here?

My main claim in this paper is that even though whataboutisms might sometimes be fallacious and often serve only as distractors, there are important cases where they are appropriate because they express a justified suspicion that, given relevant contextual information, the argument explicitly put forward by the opponent does not reflect his or her actual position and reasons. In the example, Dr. Marion's response is appropriate because it expresses her puzzlement over Professor Anderson's failure to include Ezekiel and her suspicion that there are unmentioned reasons why he might have wanted to exclude Ezekiel from the invitation—reasons she might not share.

The article is structured as follows: In the first section, I present the two ways arguments of this sort have been previously approached. In the first, logical approach, whataboutisms are fallacies because they are arguments based on irrelevant information. In the second, pragma-dialectical approach, they are seen as appropriate reactions only when they point out an opponent's hypocrisy. I find both accounts to be nearsighted, and in the subsequent two sections I will explain

criticized for not including the *S*'s that are also *P* and therefore must also be *Q*. From now on, I will call the *R*s the included cases and the *S*'s the excluded ones, so in our example, John and Mary are the included cases, and Ezekiel is the excluded one.

why and will develop my own account, incorporating the insights of both approaches, but integrating them into a more complete picture.

I. Previous accounts

It is hard to talk about a “traditional account” of whataboutisms when so little has been written about them. With the exception of a special type known as *tu quoque*—“you too” in Latin—arguments of this sort have received very little attention in the literature. *Tu quoque* arguments are whataboutisms where the excluded cases include at least one of the parties involved in the debate. If, for example, Dr. Marion had been one of the recent graduates excluded from Professor Anderson’s dinner plans, her reply would have been *tu quoque*. *Tu quoque* arguments have special features that make them particularly interesting.³ Nevertheless, most of what has been written about *tu quoque* whataboutisms applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other varieties of whataboutisms. I therefore focus here only on those features of *tu quoque* arguments that are shared with other forms of whataboutisms.

There is no unanimous account of whataboutisms, but they are commonly classified as fallacies of irrelevance; that is, they are “errors in reasoning into which we may fall because of carelessness and inattention to our subject matter”.⁴ The rationale behind this classification is that the excluded cases introduced by the whataboutism are not actually relevant to the actual issue under discussion: precisely because they have been excluded, they have no bearing on the validity or soundness of the argument. In our example, since Professor Anderson says nothing about

³. Stephanie Berlin, “The *Tu Quoque* Defense” *Memorandum for the office of the prosecutor* 3 (Case Western Reserve University School of Law International War Crimes Project, 2002). Sienho Yee, “The *Tu Quoque* Argument as a Defence to International Crimes, Prosecution, or Punishment” *Chinese Journal of International Law* 3 (2004): 87-133.

⁴. I. M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1961): 53.

Ezekiel, information about Ezekiel is completely irrelevant to the issue of whether or not John and Mary should be invited for dinner. Since inviting John and Mary for dinner does not imply not inviting Ezekiel, Dr. Marion's reply is logically irrelevant to Professor Anderson's stated argument.

It has also been argued in public debate, if not in the specialized literature, that replies of this sort commit a fallacy of relative deprivation; that is, they try to make a good proposal look worse by comparing it to a different, better situation.⁵ In other words, whataboutisms mistake what is desirable for what is mandatory. The point is that inviting John and Mary for dinner is still a good idea, even if it might be a better idea to invite Ezekiel as well. It would be *desirable* to invite the three of them for dinner, but it is not *mandatory*—and there is nothing wrong with inviting only John and Mary.

It is a central claim of both of these accounts that the excluded cases are irrelevant to the issue under discussion. By privileging the logical aspect of argumentation, however, these accounts fail to do justice to the widespread intuition that there is something *right* in replies like that of Dr. Marion. For this reason, more recent analyses have tried to go beyond the logical aspect, and to approach these cases within a broader pragmatic and dialectic framework.⁶ From this broader perspective, the question is no longer whether whataboutisms are logically valid or sound, but whether they are appropriate responses to arguments like that of Professor Anderson; that is, whether or not they further the goals of the argumentation in which the participants are engaged.

⁵. Molly McKenna, "An Idiot's Guide To The Fallacy of Relative Privation" *Because Molly Said So* June 11, 2015. <http://becausemollysaidso.com/2015/06/11/an-idiots-guide-to-the-fallacy-of-relative-privation/> and Alison Moore Smith, "A Sad and Tragic Day for Our Nation – A Response to Jo Ashline" *Mormon Momma* November 11, 2012. <http://mormonmomma.com/sad-tragic-day-for-nation-jo-ashline/>

⁶. Trudy Govier, "Worries about *Tu Quoque* as a logical fallacy" *Informal Logic* 3 (1980): 2–4.

Even though we engage in argumentation for a wide variety of reasons and with a complex and constantly changing set of goals,⁷ one of the most common and central goals of argumentation is the rational resolution of a difference of opinion. Consequently, one might question whether whataboutisms contribute to or derail us from the pursuit of this goal. According to pragmatic accounts,⁸ replies like Dr. Marion's strike us as appropriate because they contribute to the rational resolution of the disagreement at issue, not by directly criticizing the logical soundness or validity of Professor Anderson's argument, but Professor Anderson himself for not being consistent with the premises of his own argument. If he actually believed in celebrating and supporting recent graduates, he should be doing that with John, Mary, and Ezekiel. However, he is not, so he is being inconsistent (pragmatically inconsistent, since the inconsistency holds between a statement and an action). Under this interpretation, Dr. Marion's argument is appropriate insofar as, even if the conclusion were true, one should not accept it from the current interlocutor. The point here would seem to be not that Professor Anderson is shown by his actions to have said something false when he said it would be good to have John and Mary for dinner, but rather, the inconsistency between his advocacy of the general principle of having recent graduates for dinner and his failure to include Ezekiel make it hard for us to accept, from him, the particular plan of having John and Mary for dinner. One advantage of this sort of diagnosis is that it explains why some might find Dr. Marion's reply unsatisfactory (because it does not bear on the truth of the conclusion, as those who cast it as a

⁷. Michael A. Gilbert, "Goals in argumentation" *Practical Reasoning* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2005): 223-230. O. Fukushima, Ohbuchi, K.-I., & Kojima, K. "Multiple goals in interpersonal conflict: Effects of concern for personal resource, evaluative observer, and politeness on verbal responses of resolution strategy" *Japanese Journal of Social Psychology* 22 (2006): 103-115.

⁸. Like Scott Aikin, "Tu Quoque Arguments and the Significance of Hypocrisy" *Informal Logic* 28 (2008): 155-169. John Capps and Donald Capps, *You've Got To Be Kidding!: How Jokes Can Help You Think*, (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

fallacy of relevance correctly point out), while others find it appropriate (because it correctly points out a flaw in Professor Anderson's argument).

In the following pages, I will criticize these accounts and offer a new one that better explains why and when whataboutisms are appropriate responses in argumentation and how to respond to them in a productive way. In the next section, I introduce some real-world examples. I hope their heterogeneity bears witness to the pervasiveness of this sort of argument and helps motivate the need to give them a proper theoretical account. Hopefully, too, these examples will serve to guide our intuitions throughout the paper. In the remaining sections, I will explain why I find both the logical and the pragma-dialectical accounts lacking – I think they get important aspects of the phenomenon right, but still leave a lot of it unexplained – and then offer my own account, which incorporates the insights from the aforementioned accounts, while also providing a more complete and unified picture. Finally, I will derive practical morals from the theoretical account, providing some guidelines on how to make sure our own whataboutisms are appropriate, and also how to properly respond to those of others.

II. Some real-world examples

Whataboutisms are actually very common, and a lot of recent public debates have taken this form. For example, many people have reacted to the outpouring of support for France after the attacks of November 13, 2015, with criticisms to the effect that no similar acts of support were given to the also recent attacks in Ankara, Beirut, Kenya, etc. As Lara Marlowe wrote in *The Irish Times*:

Death on an industrial scale seems an integral part of our lives. But we are selective in our compassion. Some 2,200 Palestinians were killed in Israel's 2014 assault on Gaza, nearly 17 times the number of people killed in Paris. If no man is an island, why aren't we grieving for the 19 people massacred in a Bamako Hotel on November 20th? Or the 44 killed in Beirut

on November 12th? Or the 224 Russians whose plane was blown up by Islamic State on October 31st?⁹

A year before these sad events, an outbreak of Ebola took the lives of tens of thousands of people, mostly in West Africa. However,

when Thomas Duncan was diagnosed with Ebola at a local Dallas hospital on September 30th, it ... set in motion a cascade of reports, tweets, and posts that have dwarfed previous levels of attention by orders of magnitude. According to an analysis conducted by *Time*, global mentions of Ebola on Twitter skyrocketed from 100 tweets per minute to more than 6000 tweets per minute after the Thomas Duncan case had become public.¹⁰

The widespread reaction to Duncan's diagnosis elicited criticisms similar to those surrounding the Paris attacks. As Martin Eierman reported, this criticism

... is best expressed in a caricature by the artist André Carrilho. His drawing depicts a hospital ward filled with dying patients. They all appear to be in agony, with red eyes and mouths opened in silent screams. All of the patients are suffering in solitude except one: His bed has attracted several journalists who hover over him in protective gear and attempt to get a quotable statement and a photo. That patient is white; the others are black.

But it is not only tragedies that bring whataboutisms into public discourse. A couple of weeks after the attacks in Paris, in a very tight electoral race, Argentina elected conservative candidate Mauricio Macri to the presidency. In one of his first public statements after the elections,

⁹. Lara Marlowe, "Grieve for Paris, yes, but without self-pity" *The Irish Times* November 23rd, 2015. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/lara-marlowe-grieve-for-paris-yes-but-without-self-pity-1.2439911>

¹⁰. Martin Eierman, "Ebola Sensationalism and Health Care Hypocrisy" *The European* October 21st, 2014. <http://www.theeuropean-magazine.com/martin-eiermann--3/9139-ebola-sensationalism-and-health-care-hypocrisy>.

he promised to request that Venezuela be ejected from the regional free trade association, *Mercosur*, because of human rights violations. In reaction, the former president of Uruguay, José Mujica, criticized Macri by saying “It's easy to criticize Venezuela, but there are many other places that could also be criticized. [For example] They just killed four mayors in Asuncion, Paraguay, which is right next to him.” [My translation].

Whatever we might think of a case like Marion and Anderson's, we must also be able to apply it to these and other similar cases. Did André Carrilho commit a fallacy of relevance in his cartoon? Are critics of the outpouring of solidarity with France committing a fallacy of relative deprivation since, even if it would be better to show solidarity with all and any similar victims in Beirut, Guerrero, Ankara, etc., it is still good to show solidarity with the victims in Paris? Or are they pointing out hypocrisy on the part of those who do, while also accepting that it is good to do so? Is Mujica's personal attack on Macri appropriate? I do not presume to have definite answers to these and similar questions, but I do hope to provide a robust framework from which to start looking for such answers.

III. A new proposal

My aim is to develop a new account of whataboutisms (probably the first systematic account of them), according to which, whataboutisms must be seen as requests for further information, specifically, for clarifying information about the actual claim and reasoning of our opponent. If this request is properly grounded on a justified suspicion that the reasons and claims that have been explicitly put forth diverge in a relevant and substantial way from our opponent's actual ones, the whataboutism is virtuous; otherwise, it becomes a distraction at best, and a source of new disagreements and animadversion at worst.

I find most of what has been written about these sorts of responses unsatisfying. On the one hand, I am not convinced that whataboutisms are *always* irrelevant and fallacious. On the other hand, I also find previous accounts of whataboutisms as appeals to hypocrisy to be too restrictive,

but on the right track. Thus, I want to develop a unified account that does justice to, but transcends both approaches.

I reject the view that whataboutisms are always fallacious, not just by some intuition that the points they raise are not always irrelevant, but for further pragmatic reasons. A lot more goes on in human communication than just the explicit exchange of information, and argumentative exchanges are not the exception. Thus, in order to understand what is actually taking place in argumentation, one must look beyond what is explicitly put forth by the arguers and also pay attention to what is being presupposed and what is contextually salient; to look beyond what is said into what is left unsaid.

Remember that in the traditional account, whataboutisms are fallacious because they call attention to excluded cases that—precisely because they do occur neither in its premises nor its conclusion—are irrelevant to the argument at issue. From this initial point of view, talk of Ezekiel is irrelevant to the question of whether or not to have John and Mary over for dinner; talk of the Kurdish victims of the Ankara bombings is irrelevant to the question of whether or not to show solidarity with the victims at Bataclán; talk of human rights violations in Paraguay is irrelevant to the issue of whether or not to evict Venezuela from *Mercosur*, etc. However, there is a strong intuition that they are not obviously irrelevant and that their exclusion from the conversation is precisely part of what makes them relevant.

Focusing on our original example, notice that calling attention to the exclusion of Ezekiel would not be irrelevant if, for example, what Professor Anderson claimed was not just that it would be good to have John and Mary over for dinner, but that it would be good to have only John and Mary over for dinner, or anything similar that would entail there is something about John and Mary that makes them especially deserving of the dinner invitation. Such an exclusionary clause is not explicit in the argument's conclusion, but one would be justified in at least suspecting that such a clause was implicit in the assertion that "I would like to invite John and Mary to dinner" or in similar statements in contexts where Ezekiel's being a recent graduate in need of advice on how to

navigate the job market would be relevant or salient to the conversation. For instance, if Dr. Marion and Professor Anderson were just talking about him; or if Ezekiel were a close student of Professor Anderson or Dr. Marion; or if John, Mary, and Ezekiel always worked together; or if it was common knowledge that Ezekiel was in special need of advice, etc. Then, one would be certainly justified in thinking that Professor Anderson wants to invite John and Mary, but not Ezekiel, to dinner, and thus the question raised by Dr. Marion would not be irrelevant. In the case of the Paris attacks, this means that the relevance of our reactions towards the outpouring of solidarity with the people in France can be grounded on the relevance and saliency of the other attacks. If they are relevant and salient enough, then the questions *What about Ankara?* and *What about Sousse?* are relevant.

This does not mean that whataboutisms are never irrelevant. They can be if the excluded cases brought into the argument are not sufficiently similar or are not similar in relevant ways; for example, if Ezekiel was not actually a recent graduate and thus was not in the same situation as John and Mary, Dr. Marion's reply would be inappropriate and distracting. Responses like these are also inappropriate because addressing the exclusion distracts from the original claim. Also, even if the cases are similar, a whataboutism could still be irrelevant if the difference between the included and excluded cases was a distinction without a difference.¹¹ As an illustration, consider the following absurd exchange:

Alberto, holding a couple of cartons of milk in his hands at the supermarket: "We ran out of milk at home, so we should get these."

Miguel Ángel, picking up a different couple of cartons of milk of the same kind as the ones in Alberto's hand: "Yeah, but what about these two? They also contain milk."

¹¹. Genuine cases of relative deprivation fallacy are cases of replies of just this sort, where the contrast between the cases included in the original argument and the cases mentioned in the reply form a pseudo-dilemma.

It is clear here that even though Miguel Ángel's response is in the same form as Dr. Marion's, his is blatantly irrelevant. The distinction Miguel Ángel makes between the cartons of milk in Alberto's hand and those in his own lacks a difference.

Unfortunately, most cases of irrelevant and distracting whataboutisms are not that obvious. Consider the following example, based on Joel Richardson's criticism of Ron Paul's foreign policies:¹²

Jayla: Radical groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda have radicalised because they have drunk deeply from the trough of an expansionist, racist and murderous ideology; thus, we should try to stop the spreading of these hateful ideas.

Demarco: You fail to mention the American actions abroad that have brought about the natural response of resistance that has contributed also to the development of these radical groups.

Those who find Demarco's response inappropriate and distracting would argue that it presents a pseudo-dilemma between the cause mentioned in Jayla's argument and the one mentioned by Demarco. In other words, since addressing the role of ideology in the radicalization of these groups does not preclude recognizing the role that at least some American policies played in the same radicalization process, Demarco's point is irrelevant to Jayla's argument.

I am not totally convinced that Demarco's response is clearly irrelevant, mostly because relevance is highly contextual, so his reply could be irrelevant in some contexts and not in others. For example, if Jayla and Demarco were debating the causes of radicalization or what to do to stop it, then Demarco's response seems to me relevant and, therefore, appropriate; but if the context was a debate on what role ideology should play in European foreign policy, for example, I am inclined to think that his response was indeed irrelevant.

¹². Joel Richardson, "Ron Paul's Saul Alinsky?" *World Net Daily* September 1st, 2012. <http://www.wnd.com/2012/01/ron-pauls-saul-alinsky/#qpobdcr36cgehrf5.99>

At this point, it is important to stress the fact that relevance and saliency are different phenomena. Something can be relevant to a conversation even if it is not salient to the common ground, that is, even if the participants do not have it present in their minds at the time of the conversation. For example, it might be possible that Professor Anderson had actually forgotten about Ezekiel at the time of his argument for having John and Mary for dinner. This does not make Ezekiel less relevant—it might even make his exclusion more pressing. Fortunately, what is relevant can be made salient by bringing it up in the conversation. As a matter of fact, this is how a reply like Dr. Marion's or the criticisms against the public and media reactions to the attacks in Paris and to Thomas Duncan's diagnosis can be interpreted: as making salient something (that the interlocutor takes to be) relevant. What Dr. Marion is doing is making salient something she thinks must be relevant to the issue of whether to have John and Mary for dinner; what André Carrilho is doing is making salient something that he thinks is relevant when discussing the then-current Ebola outbreak; what many objectors to the public and media reaction to the Paris attacks are doing is making salient other similar attacks that they think are also relevant.

If my diagnosis is right, then it is a mistake to claim, as some traditional accounts do, that whataboutisms are always inappropriate because the arguments they criticize are logically faultless. Even if it is absolutely true that the argument explicitly put forth by the opponent is flawless, there is relevant and salient contextual information—the exclusion of similar cases—that justifies one in at least suspecting that there is important information being left unsaid by the opponent, that is, that what the opponent is proposing is not just what he has explicitly presented and that the actual reasons behind his position are not the ones he has put forth. Even if it is absolutely true that the argument submitted by Professor Anderson is logically irreproachable, the exclusion of Ezekiel, despite his being in a situation similar to that of John and Mary, justifies at least the suspicion that Professor Anderson might be proposing that they have only John and Mary for dinner and not Ezekiel, and that there may be further, unmentioned reasons why Professor Anderson wants to invite just those two students and not the other one. In other words, behind Professor Anderson's

faultless explicit argument for having John and Mary for dinner, there lurks a different, silent argument for the conclusion that *only* John and Mary will be asked for dinner. This is the ultimate target of Dr. Marion’s reply. She wants Professor Anderson to come clean about whether he plans on inviting Ezekiel too, and if not, why? What are his reasons for excluding him?

Whataboutisms do not commit a fallacy of relevance when they call attention to a possible bias that is left implicit. The assumption behind Dr. Marion-like objections is that having a bias in these cases is unwarranted (either rationally or morally).¹³ Thus, the objector is challenging the arguer to warrant making a distinction between John and Mary on the one hand, and Ezekiel on the other; between French concertgoers on the one hand, and Kurdish protesters on the other; between Ebola victims in America on the one hand, and Ebola victims in Africa on the other, etc.

Further evidence that this is what is happening in whataboutisms comes from observing how people react to them. For example, in response to the many of the whataboutisms raised, several recent debates surrounding the appropriateness of showing solidarity with the people of Paris started coming up with reasons to warrant treating these cases differently. In a recent personal conversation for example, Emiliano Boccardi approvingly quoted Larissa Macfarquhar’s recent review of Derek Parfit’s views on impartiality:¹⁴

Without selfish partiality—to people you are deeply attached to, your wife and your children, your friends, to work that you love and that is particularly yours, to beauty, to place—we are nothing. We are creatures of intimacy and kinship and loyalty, not blind servants of the world.¹⁵

¹³. This turn of phrase comes from Emiliano Boccardi, in personal conversation.

¹⁴. Larissa Macfarquhar, “How to be good” *New Yorker* September 5th, 2011.

¹⁵. The phenomenon of preferential treatment of the next of kin has been widely known, as can be witnessed in Henry Sidgwick’s *Methods of Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1874), cited in G. Patzig “Verhaltensforschung und Ethik” *Neue deutsche Hefte* 31 (1984): 680 and Christian Vogel, “The

However, even if this might explain why it is natural to mourn the death of our sister or brother much more intensely than the death of a neighbor (and indeed why we would find it morally reprehensible to act otherwise), it is not clear how it would justify why we showed solidarity or, in general, paid more attention to the deaths in Paris than to the deaths in Ankara. After all, the outpouring of support for France after the attacks came from all over the world, not only from places with close ties to Paris.¹⁶

Lacking a good strategy to justify our bias in favor of some innocent deaths over others, some have turned their defense strategies to arguing that the relevant difference is not at the level of the actual value of innocent lives, but is at the *symbolic* level, and that this difference has little to do with the victims of the attacks, but has to do with the place where they happened. In other words, Paris has a special symbolic meaning, as the birthplace of secular, modern democracy, that Ankara and Damascus lack. Thus, the Paris attacks can be naturally interpreted as attacks on modern western values in a way that those other attacks cannot.

True Egoist is Cooperative: Ethical Problems Seen Against a Background of Evolutionary Biology, Behavioural Research, and Sociobiology” in Ulrich J. Frey, Charlotte Störmer and Kai P. Willführ (eds): *Homo Novus - A Human without Illusions* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2010): 61.

¹⁶ As I wrote in a personal exchange with Peruvian journalist Leila Macor (AFP) and Manuel A. García Ordoñez, Lima is practically as far from Paris as it is from Ankara, and thus there is no straightforward natural way to argue that Peruvian citizens are *closer* to Parisian citizens than to Ankarans. One could say that we are closer to Parisians because we *feel* closer to them, but this is patently circular. We are looking for a sense of closeness that explains why Paris elicits such a strong emotional response, so we cannot appeal to this emotional response to define the relevant sense of closeness.

Others have tossed around terms like “compassion fatigue”¹⁷ and “massacre fatigue”—the phenomenon of getting diminishing returns of outrage from recurring evils—a term coined in 2000 to make sense of a similar situation: why the Chittisinghpora massacre in Kashmir had provoked so little coverage, outrage, and sympathy.¹⁸ For example, Farah Stockman at *The Boston Globe* wrote:

Charles Figley, an expert in trauma at Tulane University who studies “compassion fatigue” among doctors, says it’s normal for the brain to tune out pain, especially when investing emotionally hasn’t made a difference in the past. That suggests that we “max out” on places that suffer tragedy too often.¹⁹

The idea is that the Paris attacks were surprising in a way that the Beirut attacks, for example, were not. This might explain not only why the Paris attacks were more newsworthy but also why they elicited larger emotional reactions. However, it cannot explain why the Ankara bombings did not elicit a similar response, given that terrorist attacks in the Turkish capital are not a usual affair.

Notice that the challenge is pretty high: it is not enough to explain why we are biased, since what is being requested is a justification, not an explanation. Also, it is not enough to give a response about why exclusions are either necessary or justified; what is necessary is a justification of why *these particular* cases were included and *those other* cases were excluded. Thus, the challenge for Professor Anderson, for example, is to justify—not explain—why he included only John and Mary in his argument and not Ezekiel; that is, he must justify not only why he did not include all three of them, but if he was going to exclude someone, why it was Ezekiel, and not John

¹⁷. Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁸. Lara Marlowe, “Grieve for Paris, yes, but without self-pity”.

¹⁹. Farah Stockman “Why we care more about Paris” *The Boston Globe* November 18, 2015.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/11/18/why-care-more-about-paris/kzjWdI6lw4SVtmBM0GgtxN/story.html>

or Mary. In other words, if he thought of having only two recent graduates over for dinner, why not invite John and Ezekiel or Mary and Ezekiel instead of John and Mary.

Finally, another way people have reacted to whataboutisms has been to reframe the problem as a case of conflicting values, that is, to argue that their original conclusion was right under the value embodied in the original argument but wrong under the value of fairness.²⁰ Thus, one can try to defend one's original conclusion by arguing for the importance of the value embodied in one's original argument over that of fairness. This is how whataboutisms are usually dismissed in the trials of international crimes against humanity, for instance.²¹ In the *Kupreskic* case, for example, when presented with a whataboutism, the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) argued that the good resulting from prosecuting those responsible for the mass murders of Bosnian Muslims in central Bosnia on April 16 by far outweighed the bad of not being able to prosecute all similar crimes. In other words, they argued that it is better to be unfair and prosecute *some* crimes against humanity, than to be fair and prosecute *none*. This kind of reply is especially appropriate if the whataboutism at issue commits the relative deprivation fallacy. Notice that what the ICTY did was to argue that even though it would be better to prosecute *all* war criminals, it would still be good enough to prosecute *these* war criminals. Similar arguments were espoused in the Paris bombings case when people argued that, given that it was impossible to show concern for every victim of violence in the world, it was better to show solidarity with some than to do nothing in the face of such senseless violence.

It is important to stress that the appropriateness of replies of this kind depends on the appropriateness of the original criticism. We find replies like the ICTY's appropriate precisely because we recognize the point of Dr. Marion-like criticisms: They challenge us to provide warrant

²⁰. Ben Jones, "Authenticity in Political Discourse" *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19 (2016): 489-504.

²¹. Stephanie Berlin, "The *Tu Quoque* Defense".

for an exclusionary bias. This is something we could not account for if we took the criticism to be a fallacy of relevance. Thus, the fact that, when faced with whataboutisms, people often search for reasons to justify the exclusion that their opponent has brought to their attention instead of dismissing it as irrelevant gives us further reason to believe that the function of whataboutisms is precisely to demand such a justification.

This demand is especially pressing in circumstances where there are salient differences between the excluded and the included cases. For example, even if there is no mention of left and right political positions, the distinction is salient in Mujica's singling out of Paraguay—a country with a rightwing government—in his whataboutism regarding Macri—another rightwing president. It is no accident either that in Eierman's description of Carrilho's cartoon, he includes the information that the patient holding all of the attention "is white; the others are black." Similar comments usually accompany criticisms of the reactions to the Paris attacks as well, stressing the fact that the other attacks occurred in poorer, non-western countries and the victims were non-whites. (So it is also no accident that I named my third recent graduate "Ezekiel" instead of, say, "Paul"). In the absence of a satisfying explanation for the original bias in favor of the victims of the attacks in Paris over the victims in Ankara, Sharm el-Sheikh, or Beirut, one cannot blame critics for assuming that it was motivated by racial and class concerns. This puts extra pressure on the arguer to meet the challenge of warranting (or denouncing) her bias in favor of the Parisian victims.

Consider the following fictional argumentative exchange from a recent episode of the legal drama "The Good Wife," where lawyer Diane Lockhart questions wedding-planner Ms. Dahl, who argues that she has the right to refuse serving as wedding planner to a gay couple because it conflicts with her own religious views:

Lockhart: Ms. Dahl... how many times did, um, Jesus condemn homosexuality?

Dahl: Um, Jesus never condemned homosexuality.

Lockhart: And how many times did Jesus condemn divorce?

Dahl: Three times. Four times, if you count Matthew and Mark's account of the same incident.

Lockhart: Thank you. Uh, so you've never planned a wedding... for a couple that had previously been married?

Dahl: Um... I haven't asked. I... I guess I have.

Lockhart: Well, in fact, you have planned two weddings in the last year alone where one or both of the couple had previously been married.

Dahl: That sounds right.

Lockhart: So your religious objection is selective, at best. Wouldn't you say?

In this fictional exchange, the whataboutism is filled in more explicit detail than in most common occurrences in real life, so it is easier to see its actual target. It is not so much that Ms. Dahl is a hypocrite in defending her refusal to assist with weddings that conflict with her religious beliefs (weddings of gay people) while actually assisting with weddings that conflict with her religious beliefs (weddings of divorced people), but that she is being dishonest, or at least inaccurate, about her actual motivations for rejecting service to gay couples. By reducing Ms. Dahls' religious freedom argument, Ms. Lockhart is accusing Ms. Dahl of trying to hide her actual homophobic motivation behind a false invocation of religious rights. She does this without even mentioning homophobia, because homosexuality is already salient.

Whataboutisms are appropriate when it is rational to be suspicious that the arguer has shown a prima facie unjustified bias in favor of some members of a general kind over others: innocent victims of terrorist attacks, Ebola victims, countries with human rights violations, etc. Notice that the epistemic standard for such a suspicion to be justified is relatively low. One need not know or even be justified in believing that the arguer was moved by such a bias. All that is necessary is to have a rational suspicion, and that is why whataboutisms commonly take the form of questions.

In previous accounts, whataboutisms have been diagnosed as criticizing the arguer for being inconsistent, and thus hypocritical. I think it is more accurate to say that the arguer is expressing a

suspicion that there is an implicit bias in her opponent's argument. Indeed, one reason why such bias might be implicit is hypocrisy, but that is not the only one; self-ignorance or inattention can also make us unaware of our own biases. Thus, what the whataboutism uncovers might be surprising to the arguer as well. A hypocrite might not be forthcoming about his or her real motivations, but that is not the only reason why she might demonstrate what Gilbert has called "dark-side commitments":

Dark-side commitments include both positional components known to the arguer and not revealed (for either strategic or practical reasons) as well as components unknown to the arguer as concomitants of the avowed position.²²

In the Macri-Mujica debate, for example, the former president is not denying the importance of human rights or that human rights are violated in Venezuela, but is expressing his suspicion that Macri is not being honest about his real motivations for wanting Venezuela out of Mercosur. As I have already mentioned, the current government in Venezuela is socialist, and so was Mujica's government in Uruguay, while Macri is a staunch pro-business conservative and Paraguay also has a conservative president. This sharp difference is remarkably salient in the context of both Mujica's and Macri's statements. Thus, Mujica is suggesting that Macri might be hiding his ideological reasons behind the façade of a concern for human rights. According to Mujica's argument, if Macri actually cared for human rights, he would be requesting the exclusion of other members of Mercosur that are also responsible for human rights violations, like Paraguay, but he isn't. Therefore, Macri concludes, he does not actually care about human rights.²³

If Macri is actually being duplicitous regarding his motivations, we can call this a matter of hypocrisy. As Jones has recently explained, hypocrisy takes place when a person violates one of

²². Michael A. Gilbert, *Coalescent argumentation* (London: Routledge, 2013): 105-106.

²³. Unfortunately, Mujica's argument does not seem sound because the death of mayors is not in itself a human rights violation unless it is carried out by the State.

two conditions: “(1) consistently upholding the values and commitments that define one’s identity for reasons that one deems legitimate, and (2) a second-order commitment to accurately represent these values and commitments”.²⁴ In other words, authenticity involves both a first-order commitment to consistency and a second-order commitment to accuracy. Consequently, one can be a hypocrite by being either inconsistent or duplicitous. Traditional accounts of whataboutisms focus on inconsistency and, thus, on the first-level commitment to authenticity, but this paints an incomplete picture of the phenomenon. In contrast, my account focuses on the second-level commitment to authenticity: the commitment to accuracy in presenting one’s viewpoint. If my diagnosis so far has been on the right track, a whataboutism calls into question, not the validity or the soundness of the argument presented by an opponent, but its accuracy as a presentation of an opponent’s position. Thus, what is at issue is the arguer’s violation of the commitment to accuracy.

In order to better see the importance of this second-level commitment to virtuous argumentation, adopting a pragma-dialectical perspective might be helpful. Remember that from such a perspective, one must avoid actions that derail critical discussion in argumentation, for example, by showing a lack of commitment to collaboratively resolving a difference of opinion purely on merits. Consequently, criticizing our opponent is appropriate only if it targets her incapacity or unwillingness to collaborate on the resolution of our difference of opinion on proper merits. I take it that appropriate whataboutisms achieve this by showing that the opponent is not being accurate in presenting her actual reasons for holding her actual opinion, for “the overall goal of the discussion—resolving the difference of opinion on the merits—can only be reached if the difference of opinion has been clearly brought to light”.²⁵ Thus, one who is (deliberately or not) inaccurate in presenting her viewpoint is not collaborating to reach this goal.²⁶

²⁴. Ben Jones, “Authenticity in Political Discourse” 490.

²⁵. Frans H. van Eemeren, Bert Grassen & Bert Meuffels, “The disguised abusive ad hominem empirically investigated: Strategic manoeuvring with direct personal attacks” *Thinking and*

One might doubt that accuracy is a genuine virtue in argumentation. After all, there is a lot of debate surrounding the question of whether hypocrisy is an actual vice in political discourse.²⁷ Some might think that reasons for doing or believing something are not important as long as the action is right and the belief is otherwise justifiable. As Saul D. Alinsky put it, “with very rare exceptions, the right things are done for the wrong reasons. It is futile to demand that men do the right thing for the right reason—this is a fight with a windmill.”²⁸ This means that if we care for human rights, we should not criticize Macri because even if he is motivated by ideological reasons, he is still doing something good: holding Venezuela accountable for human rights violations. Hypocritical good deeds are still good deeds. Hypocritical good reasons are still good reasons.

Reasoning 18 (2012): 350. One need not share van Eemeren’s conviction that the overall goal of the discussion is to resolve the difference of opinion on the merits to see the importance of making a committing to accuracy in representing one’s claim and reasons. Talk of *the overall* goal of argumentation is always controversial. One might think of the goal of argumentation in *impersonal* terms—for example, to reach truth, or rational belief, etc.—or in *personal* terms—for example, to reach an agreement, etc. If we understand the goal of argumentation in this latter way, as affecting the people actually involved in the argument, it will be natural to expect that reaching this goal, in general, would require an accurate presentation of each of the arguer’s actual claims and reasons.

²⁶ In van Eemeren’s terms, non-fallacious *tu quoque* arguments criticize their opponents for making a fallacious move in the confrontation stage of the discussion.

²⁷ For example, Ben Jones, “Authenticity in Political Discourse”. David Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, from Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2008). Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2002).

²⁸ Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House 1971): 76.

Accuracy in argumentation might seem unimportant because if one cares only for the quality of the reasons behind a position, and if good reasons have been presented for an opinion, it does not matter whether or not those reasons are actually motivating the person presenting them. However, I think this is wrong. Accuracy is important in argumentation because we cannot debate with someone who is not forthcoming about his actual standpoints. Consequently, whataboutisms may be helpful if they actually help to elicit the necessary honesty from the arguers. If I am right, this means that expressing one's justified suspicion that the actual position of one's opponent has not been accurately presented is an appropriate move in argumentation because an accurate presentation of each of the arguer's positions is a central requirement for argumentation to reach its overall goal. According to my account, this is precisely what a whataboutism aims to achieve in argumentation, and this is also what previous accounts of whataboutisms have failed to notice. They have been blind to the importance of accuracy in argumentation. Logical accounts that count them as fallacies of relevance are wrong because they fail to notice that expressing one's suspicion of inaccuracy on the part of the opponent can be very relevant to the goals of argumentation. What is at stake is not whether the arguer is being consistent but whether she is being accurate in presenting her position, deliberately or not.

So far I have been arguing that, contrary to traditional accounts, whataboutisms are seldom fallacious. However, this stands in stark contrast to the fact that they are seldom successful in advancing an argumentation and usually end up producing animadversion among those involved. I hope to have shown that since relevance is difficult to judge, and whether or not a reply like this is fallacious depends on issues of relevance, it is hard to determine whether or not a whataboutism is fallacious. Also, perhaps the main reason why whataboutisms are common yet unwelcome moves in argumentation is because they are very successful as distractors. Even when a whataboutism claim is fallacious, it distracts attention from the original conclusion and/or argument because now the original arguer must take some time off from arguing for her claim in order to argue about why her opponent's claim is irrelevant and/or not sufficiently similar.

Yet, I do not think that is the whole story about why replies like these are so controversial. I think that whataboutisms, even when appropriate in content, do not produce positive results because they violate a general and common rhetorical rule: “Start with the positive.” After all, whataboutisms do not challenge the original argument as stated; in most cases, they actually agree with them—people were not against showing solidarity with the victims in Paris, as long as such solidarity was extended to often overlooked places like Tunisia and Syria, for example. This means that there is something both arguers agree on, even if there is also something on which they disagree. In cases of this sort, it is generally a good idea to present the challenge starting with the positive. Thus, for example, Dr. Marion could have framed her criticism in a more constructive way by saying something like “Yes, having John and Mary for dinner would be great, they deserve the celebration and could use the advice, but I think we should not forget about Ezekiel. He also just recently graduated and could use some advice as well, right?” Demarco could also have made his point better by saying something like “You are right, Jayla, the recent spread of expansionist, racist, and murderous ideology in the region has probably contributed to the radicalization of these groups, as have the American actions abroad that have brought about the natural response of resistance.”

IV. Appropriate and Inappropriate Responses to Whataboutisms

So far, I have argued against traditional accounts that frame all arguments of this sort as fallacious, and also against the diagnosis according to which the point of the reply is to criticize the arguer for being inconsistent and hypocritical. However, in accounting for whataboutisms, determining whether and when they are appropriate is just half of the work; one needs also to specify the proper and improper ways of responding to them.²⁹ Once we have recognized that Dr. Marion’s reply is

²⁹. I have little to say about how to reply to a fallacious whataboutism, since I find little difference in how to reply to different fallacies. On how to respond to fallacies, in general, see F. H. van Eemeren and P. Houtlosser, “Countering fallacious moves” *Argumentation* 21 (2007): 243-252.

not fallacious, for example, the ball is in Professor Anderson's camp. Yet there are appropriate and inappropriate ways for him to respond to Dr. Marion. Remember that what Dr. Marion has done is challenge Professor Anderson to explain why he did not take Ezekiel into account in his original argument, that is, why treat John and Mary differently than Ezekiel. Professor Anderson can either concede and withdraw his original argument and/or conclusion, or rise to the challenge and try to justify excluding Ezekiel from his first argument and/or conclusion. This warrants the following appropriate responses:

1. **Concession.** One can concede the opponent's point by withdrawing one's argument and/or conclusion. For example, if there were no practical problems with including Ezekiel, Professor Anderson could have replied with something like "You are right, I should have included Ezekiel. Let's have him for dinner as well." If there were practical problems with including Ezekiel, Professor Anderson could have withdrawn the original proposal and replied with something like "You are right, we have no reason to do this only for John and Mary, but we cannot have all recent graduates for dinner, so we should find another way to celebrate and help them all." Or he could reassess the priorities between the included and excluded cases by saying, for example: "You are right, we have no reason to do this only for John and Mary, but we cannot have all recent graduates for dinner, so maybe we should have only Mary and Ezekiel. I think they could better use the advice." Finally, one could also ask one's interlocutor for a solution, being careful not to make the request sound like a rhetorical question that would communicate not actually conceding the point. Thus, "You are right, I should have included Ezekiel, what do you propose?" is acceptable, while "What do you want me to do, have all recent graduates for dinner?!" is not.
2. **Try to meet the challenge.** One can recognize the value of the challenge raised by the whataboutism and submit whatever extra information is required to properly ground the distinction made between the included and excluded cases. For example, Professor Anderson could have replied: "You are right, but Professor Sánchez is organizing something similar for

Ezekiel, so it is not necessary to have him over as well.” This way, Professor Anderson recognizes the relevance of Dr. Marion’s reply and responds accordingly, giving a good reason to invite John and Mary but not Ezekiel to dinner. Another way to meet the challenge is to reframe the problem as a case of conflicting values, and to try to argue that even though one’s position is indeed unfair, it is nevertheless justified because the good resulting from it might nevertheless outweigh the bad resulting from the unfairness. For example, Professor Anderson could have argued that, given that they cannot have all recent graduates for dinner, it is better to be unfair and help two students, now that they have the opportunity, than to be fair and help none.

In contrast, the following responses would definitely be inappropriate:

1. **Insisting on the validity of the original argument.** As I hope to have shown, there is no fallacy of relevance in Marion’s response; that is, Dr. Marion has not expressed any doubts that Professor Anderson’s original argument is less than valid. Thus, it would completely miss the point of her challenge to reply with something like “But John and Mary could very well use this advice,” or “I still think that celebrating the graduation of students is a good idea,” or “I just wanted to celebrate their recent graduation and give them some advice and I do not see anything wrong with that.” For similar reasons, it would not be good to insist that the validity of the original argument makes the criticism irrelevant by saying, for example, “I was just trying to celebrate and help some students! I should not be vilified for that!”
2. **Explaining why one failed to include a particular case in a way that does not justify excluding it.** Professor Anderson could appeal to the cognitive nature of his bias against Ezekiel, for example. If he replied with “Well, I was just thinking about John and Mary because I just saw them this morning at the bus stop” or “The bias for thinking only of those more similar to one is natural, you know? There have been tons of studies supporting this,” his responses might explain his biases, but would not justify his consciously acting on these biases.
3. **Justifying excluding some cases without justifying the exclusion of these particular cases.**

It would be no good for Professor Anderson to tell Dr. Marion “Well, you know we do not have enough room at the table for more than two guests,” because even though this reply might be enough to justify having only two recent graduates for dinner, it would not justify having John and Mary and not, say, Mary and Ezekiel or John and Ezekiel.

V. Summarizing: Guidelines for dealing with whataboutisms

We can summarize the results from this analysis in the form of advice on how to deal with whataboutisms: If you are tempted to present a whataboutist response to an argument, make sure that the excluded case you want to make salient is both sufficiently similar to the cases included in the argument and is relevant to the issue at hand. Avoid distinctions without a difference, that is, avoid false dilemmas that would give rise to a fallacy of relative deprivation. Also, present your case in a constructive way by first recognizing your agreement with your interlocutor’s argument and/or conclusion. If you can, also make a positive proposal about how to reconcile both of your perspectives.

If you are faced with a whataboutist response to one of your arguments, avoid restating your original claim, argument, or its premises, and do not use them to disregard your opponent’s argument. Instead, try to determine whether or not the whataboutism is justified (i.e., whether the excluded case your interlocutor is bringing up is both sufficiently similar to the cases included in the argument, and relevant to the issue at hand), and respond accordingly. If you find that the reply is irrelevant, explicitly address the reasons why; that is, present the reasons you find that the excluded case is not actually similar or is otherwise irrelevant. If you do find the reply appropriate, either concede the point or rise to the challenge of justifying your bias in favor of the included cases over the excluded ones. Finally, avoid trying to excuse your bias by explaining it in a way that does not justify it. Remember that despite their bad reputation, whataboutisms can help us become aware of our biases and oversights.