



Whataboutisms and Inconsistency

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Abstract

Despite being very common in both public and private argumentation, accusations of selective application of general premises, also known as “whataboutisms”, have been mostly overlooked in argumentation studies, where they are, at most, taken as accusations of inconsistency. Here I will defend an account according to which allegations of this sort can express the suspicion that the argumentation put forward by one party does not reflect his or her actual standpoint and reasons. Distinguishing this kind of argumentative moves is important for evaluating its appropriateness in critical discussions where knowing the honest opinion of arguers is relevant, as in political controversies or interpersonal communication.

Keywords Whataboutism · Fallacies · *Tu quoque* · Hypocrisy · Inconsistency · Suspicion

1 Introduction

It is not unusual for a critic to attack an arguer by pointing out that they have failed to remain consistent about their motives in similar circumstances. For example, there is an inconsistency with someone expressing their sympathy for the survivors of a horrible tragedy in Europe, considering that the previous year, the same person disregarded a similar tragedy happening in Central America or Africa. Or, similarly, someone refusing to spend Christmas with his or her family-in-law, arguing that Christmas is not an important festivity, considering that the previous year the same person requested to spend Christmas with his or her own family. When this happens, the antagonist might accuse the protagonist of being inconsistent because the protagonist seems to be saying or doing something that contradicts what he or she had previously said or done. In this paper, I will argue that, in many cases, this is not what is centrally at stake in this sort of argumentative situations. Regardless of the

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antagonist pointing at an inconsistency, that is not the main point of the argumentative move.

I will defend an account according to which at least some of these maneuvers express the suspicion that the argumentation put forward by the arguer does not reflect his actual position or reasons. In these cases, the inconsistency is not the main problem, but the absence of an honest position on the protagonist's side. If the inconsistency were the main issue, the problem would be solved by the protagonist becoming consistent, but in situations like the previous examples, that would not be enough. Denouncing the inconsistency is just a means to expose the absence of honesty in the protagonist's argumentation. Distinguishing this kind of argumentative maneuvers from mere accusations of inconsistency is important because there are many argumentative situations where knowing the honest opinion of arguers is relevant. Without a clear understanding of this phenomenon, it would not be possible to distinguish the legitimate instances of such argumentative moves from the illegitimate ones.

The structure of the article is as follows. In the first section, I present the phenomenon to be explained. Then, I discuss the possibility that these maneuvers might be subsumed under the general kind of accusations of inconsistency, where one party accuses the other party of an inconsistency between one of her current premises and something he said or did earlier. To test this hypothesis, I present two ways argumentative maneuvers of this sort might be approached from a pragma-dialectical perspective, both of which I find insightful but ultimately lacking. According to the first one, successfully pointing out an inconsistency on the part of an arguer is a legitimate way to reject at least some of her premises. According to the second option, accusations of inconsistency are a legitimate way for one party to show that the other lacks the proper normative standing to make the claims, condemnations, demands, etc. included in her argument. According to my account, even though accusations of selective application of general premises share central features with genuine accusations of inconsistency, they must be distinguished as a completely different kind of maneuver with its own peculiar features. Thus, in the second half of this paper, I develop my own account. First, I characterize these moves as expressing a suspicion that the reasons and claims that have been explicitly put forth by the arguer relevantly and substantially diverge from the arguer's actual ones. From this characterization, it follows that if the suspicion expressed in the accusation is properly justified then the accusation is legitimate; otherwise, it can become a derailing distraction at best and a source of new disagreements and animadversion at worst.

2 Selective Application of a General Premise

When talking about accusations of a selective application of a general premise, I will start from the following characterization: A person P has applied a general premise G selectively if.

P has appealed to or committed to general premise G in arguing for a position C_I .

An analogous argument would allow P to appeal to G in arguing for a different position C_2 .

P has performed an action that is pragmatically inconsistent with C_2 .

As an example of the sort of argumentative maneuver I have in mind, consider the following fictional argumentative exchange from a late episode of the American legal drama *The Good Wife*, in which lawyer Diane Lockhart questions wedding planner Ms. Dahl, who has argued that she has the right to refuse to serve as wedding planner for 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? (Schelhass 2015)

In this example, Ms. Dahl has argued that she has the right to refuse service to a gay couple by appealing to a general premise to the effect that her religion demands her to abstain from planning sinner's weddings. In her questioning, Ms. Lockhart censures Ms. Dahl for previously failing to apply this general principle to couples that had previously been married. We can clearly feel the bite of Ms. Lockhart's censure, but it is significantly harder to pinpoint exactly the relevant fault in Ms. Dahl's argument. One might be tempted to characterize Ms. Lockhart's maneuver as accusing Ms. Dahl of a pragmatic inconsistency between what she currently says—that her religion demands her to abstain from planning sinner's weddings—and what she previously did—planning weddings for couples that had previously been married. However, as I will argue, this suggests false predictions. On the one hand, it suggests that an accusation like Ms. Lockhart's would commit a fallacy of irrelevance by bringing up omissions external to the discussion. It would also falsely predict that Ms. Lockhart would be satisfied if Ms. Dahl did something like recognizing that she should not have assisted in planning those other weddings and thus testified to the consistency of her current position. Something else is happening, and the goal of this paper is to show exactly what.

In recent times, it has become increasingly common for such accusations to be called "whataboutisms"—a term popularized by Lucas (2007, 2008)—, because

they are commonly expressed as rhetorical questions of the form “what about...?” (as in “What about second nuptials?”). However, since part of my aim here is to defend such argumentative maneuvers, I reject this derogatory term and instead characterize them as revealing an unjustified *selective application of a general premise* in one’s opponent’s argument. Thus conceived, these accusations call attention to similar cases that have been excluded by the selective application of one of the antagonist’s general premises and ask: *what about them?* In our example above, Ms. Lockhart’s line of questioning criticizes Ms. Dahl for being selective in her zeal for following religious principles by bringing up couples who have been married and asking *what about them?* Accordingly, I will refer to such reactions as accusations of selective application of a general premise, and reserve the derogatory term “whataboutism” for the genuinely fallacious ones.

My aim in this paper is to develop an account of maneuvers like this, according to which they are not mere accusations of inconsistency, but requests for further clarifying information about the arguer’s standpoint. I will claim that although such argumentative moves might often derail the argumentative exchange, there are important cases where they are dialectically legitimate because they express a justified suspicion that—given relevant contextual information—the argument explicitly put forward by one’s opponent does not reflect his or her actual position and reasons. For example, I will argue that Ms. Lockhart’s line of questioning is appropriate because it expresses her suspicion that there are relevant unmentioned reasons which Ms. Dahl might be hiding from her audience.

3 Inconsistency

Accusations of selective application of a general premise share at least some superficial structure with accusations of inconsistency. In our example above, for instance, it seems like Ms. Lockhart is accusing Ms. Dahl of a pragmatic inconsistency between one of her current premises—that her religion demands her to abstain from planning sinner’s weddings—and something she did in a previous occasion—help people who have already been married plan their new weddings. However, this does not automatically mean that what Ms. Lockhart is doing is actually accusing Ms. Dahl of inconsistency. It is still possible that something else is going on. In order to determine this, it is necessary to have a more precise characterization of what is involved in an accusation of inconsistency, which we can use to determine whether or not that is what is happening here; with this goal in mind, let me turn to van Eemeren’s (2010) pragma-dialectic account of accusations of inconsistency.

According to van Eemeren, “pointing out an inconsistency can be a perfectly legitimate strategic maneuver... but it can also derail and result in a fallacy” (van Eemeren 2010: 241). According to his analysis, at least some argumentative maneuvers of this sort correctly strike us as legitimate because they contribute to the rational resolution of the disagreement at issue, not by directly criticizing the logical soundness or validity of arguments like Ms. Dahl’s, but rather Ms. Dahl herself for not acting consistently with the premises of her own argument. This inconsistency, argues van Eemeren, grants us the dialectical right to reject those premises as part of

the discussion's starting points. After all, it makes sense to think that if someone like Ms. Dahl were really concerned about having to partake in actions that contradict her Christian principles, she would have tried to avoid them whenever they arise—by avoiding organizing gay weddings as well as second nuptials. Thus, one who does not avoid organizing second nuptials cannot help herself to the premise that her religion demands her to abstain from planning sinner's weddings. Not because the premise is false, but because she has lost her right to use it in argumentation.

In van Eemeren's pragma-dialectical framework, in order to conduct a proper critical discussion, the parties must agree to the propositions that may be used in the discussion from the beginning. At this initial stage of a discussion, the goal of the arguer is to strike the right balance between granting her antagonist as few propositions as possible while achieving sufficient common ground to have an actual critical discussion. If she grants her antagonist too much, she puts herself at a disadvantage regarding the discussion's starting point. If she grants too little, she risks alienating her antagonist, who can now just refuse to engage in discussion with someone who is being unreasonable. If her goal is to bring her antagonist to her side, to have her accept her standpoint, she cannot drive her away from the discussion. In this context, pointing out an actual inconsistency among the propositions proposed by her antagonist as starting points of the discussion is a legitimate strategic maneuver. That way, she can reject the inconsistent proposition—thus achieving her goal of granting her antagonist as few propositions as possible—while showing her commitment to establishing a reasonable common ground for the discussion to take place.

Nevertheless, adds van Eemeren, for this maneuver to be legitimate, it is necessary that the inconsistent propositions and actions belong to the same critical discussion. "From a pragma-dialectical point of view, an inconsistency between something that is presently said or done and something that was said or done on a previous occasion matters only if it involves an inconsistency in one and the same critical discussion" (van Eemeren 2010: 246). If this condition is not satisfied, the accusation is fallacious. This explains why this sort of accusation, when derailing—for example, *tu quoques*—are correctly regarded as fallacies of relevance, for they appeal to propositions or actions that are not part of the antagonist's commitments in the relevant discussion.

If accusations like Ms. Lockhart's were accusations of inconsistency, we should expect them to fit van Eemeren's diagnosis. In particular, one would expect them to be fallacious in those cases that fail to satisfy van Eemeren's condition above. As I have already mentioned, van Eemeren proposes that for an accusation of inconsistency to be legitimate, the inconsistent commitments must occur in the issue under discussion. One might be tempted to argue that since the cases introduced in accusations of selective application of a general premise are not already included in the discussion, they must have no bearing on the argument being criticized. However, Ms. Lockhart's accusation does not satisfy these criteria. Ms. Dahl was not in any critical discussion when she served those second nuptials, much the less in the critical discussion of her right to refuse to help gay couples plan their weddings. From this point of view, whether or not Ms. Dahl previously organized weddings for divorcees is irrelevant to whether she has the right to refuse to plan a gay wedding on religious grounds. Yet, this does not seem to show that Ms. Lockhart's line of questioning

was fallacious. I do not think this is because there is anything wrong with van Eemeren's account of accusations of inconsistency, but instead because what is happening in Ms. Lockhart's questions is not an accusation of inconsistency, but something else.

One can understand why van Eemeren felt the need to include the aforementioned condition. Most likely he wanted to spell out the consequences of what he calls the "Relevance Rule"—that standpoints may not be defended by non-argumentation or argumentation that is not relevant to the standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 190–196)—to accusations of inconsistency. In other words, he probably wanted to make sure that, by bringing up the arguer's previous actions, the critic had not introduced irrelevant information. However, if this was his goal, he was wrong to think that an action or any similar commitment is relevant only if it is already part of the occurring critical discussion. Something can be relevant to a discussion even if it is not already present, that is, even if the participants have not explicitly avowed to their commitment to it, or even if they do not have it present in their minds while the discussion takes place. For example, we can at least consider the possibility that while weighing Ms. Dahl's religious freedoms, the court had not already noticed the similarities and differences between gays and people who had previously been married relevant to the case. However, this does not make such comparison less relevant; it might even make the inclusion of this information more pressing. In other words, it is possible for some facts, actions, or propositions to be relevant to a discussion without it being already part of such discussion.

Furthermore, whatever is relevant can become part of the discussion just by being brought up; in other words, arguers can dialectically contribute to a debate by introducing new, relevant information, and they do it all the time. As a matter of fact, this is what I hold happens in maneuvers like Ms. Lockhart's: the arguer introduces into the discussion something that she takes to be relevant but absent. From this perspective, what Ms. Lockhart did was to bring up new information she thought was relevant to the discussion. The fact that this information was absent from her antagonist's explicit arguments does not make it irrelevant; on the contrary, it is part of what makes it worth bringing up. Thus, even if there is actual "legitimate assumption of the discourse that the response is supposed to be relevant to the proposition being debated" (Blair 2004: 147), van Eemeren's requirement that the relevant premise, action, or omission must *already* belong to the same critical discussion is too demanding.

There are further reasons to reject the hypothesis that we are dealing here with an accusation of inconsistency, at least as characterized by van Eemeren (2010). There, he considers two possible replies to an accusation of inconsistency. Either the arguer "admits that he acted inconsistently" (van Eemeren 2010: 161) and retracts one of his contradictory commitments, or tries to argue "that no inconsistency was committed" (van Eemeren 2010: 161) by challenging the critic's account of either his current standpoint or his previous actions or by challenging that they are actually inconsistent. These two options correspond exactly to van Laar's first two defensive strategies in (2007: 329) and to Mohammed's available responses in (2009). In our example, this means that Ms. Dahl could have either admitted her inconsistency or tried to challenge Ms. Lockhart's account of her current position or previous actions. In the first case, writes van Eemeren,

If the [arguer] admits that he acted inconsistently, he thereby retracts any doubt he might have against the standpoint of the [critic], which is, of course, the response favored by the [critic], who can then maintain his standpoint without any further defense. (van Eemeren 2010: 160)

Notice, however, that this is not what happens in our example. If Ms. Dahl admitted her inconsistency, for example, if she admitted she was wrong in helping those couples, replying with something like “I did not know that the people I married were divorcees. I will ask from now on,” this by no means would be the end of the discussion, and would not decide the argument in Ms. Lockhart’s favor. What Ms. Lockhart wants to know is not why Ms. Dahl helped plan those second nuptials, but why she does not want to help plan this gay wedding. This gives us further reasons to think that the point of her argument is not to accuse Ms. Dahl of inconsistency. In the following, I will argue that this is because recognizing the inconsistency would not have lifted the suspicion that Ms. Dahl was not being honest about her true reasons for wanting to refuse services to a gay couple. But first I must also show that what Ms. Lockhart is doing is not trying to defeat or diminish Ms. Dahl’s standing as an arguer by exhibiting her inconsistency either. That will be the goal of the following section.

4 Normative Standing

One might argue that when a critic points out that the arguer is being selective in the application of one of her general premises, she is still making an accusation of inconsistency and that my remarks above rely too much on van Eemeren’s account in (2010). In response to this possible rebuke, in this section, I will try to show that a couple of other accounts of accusations of inconsistency also give an unsatisfactory analysis as to what is happening in the Lockhart/Dahl case above and, therefore, that we should definitely reject the hypothesis that we are dealing with a mere accusation of inconsistency.

Indeed, there are other accounts (van Laar 2007; Aikin 2008; Capps and Capps 2011, etc.), who agree with van Eemeren in that at least some argumentative maneuvers of this sort correctly 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 arguments like Ms. Dahl’s, as described above, but rather Ms. Dahl as an arguer. However, they do not think that the point of the criticism is to allow the critic to reject premises at the opening phase of the discussion. Instead, they claim that their force is squarely directed at the arguer and her ability to partake in a rational discussion. According to van Laar (2007), for example, in order for an arguer to preserve her image of being sincere, credible, and capable of engaging in productive argumentation, she must strive to appear consistent. Therefore, revealing an inconsistency in one’s opponent may successfully discredit her as an arguer. Under this interpretation, Ms. Dahl’s pragmatic inconsistency does not give us good reasons to disbelieve the *proposition* behind their proposal—i.e. that she has the right to refuse to serve a gay couple on religious grounds—but rather that it justifies

our resistance to accepting such a claim *from her*. In other words, Ms. Dahl might have the religious right she demands but *lacks standing* to demand it (Cohen 2006; Wallace 2010; Fritz and Miller 2018; Tognazzini and Coates 2018).

Hence, if Ms. Lockhart's argument were to succeed in its goal of demonstrating a pragmatic inconsistency in Ms. Dahl's words and deeds, one would be justified in rejecting her conclusion, even if her argument was sound. That is why the accusation can be legitimate even if the targeted argument is perfectly sound. As O. J. Herstein has argued, whether someone has standing or not to make a demand "... turns on *ad hominem* facts about the intervening party and not on the independent validity or rightness of her [demand]." (Herstein 2017: 3109) According to Herstein, what happens in these sorts of accusations is not that the critic gives reasons to refute or defeat reasons given by the arguer but that she deflects the normative force of the accompanying directive. According to Herstein, when one offers reasons for condemnation, a demand, an urging, etc. one is not only giving reasons to accept a proposition as true or expressing an emotional attitude towards such proposition, but is also issuing a directive to act. It is this last directive that is the target of this sort of accusation. From this perspective, what Ms. Lockhart's line of questioning aims to do is not to show that what Ms. Dahls holds to be true actually isn't, but that she lacks the normative standing to demand such truth to be recognized.

This analysis explains why some might find Ms. Lockhart's reply unsatisfactory (because it does not bear on the truth of Ms. Dahl's claim), while others find it appropriate (because it correctly points out a character flaw in Ms. Dahl herself). I think there is much to commend applying Herstein's model of accusations of inconsistency to accusations of selective application of general premises like Ms. Lockhart's above. Nevertheless, I still think there are reasons to resist subsuming this sort of maneuver under Herstein's or Van Laar's general model. In other words, I think the point of accusations like Ms. Lockhart's is not to show that Ms. Dahl lacks the normative standing to back her demand. This is because, as Herstein himself recognizes, accusations of lack of standing can be preempted. For example, someone who wants to advise someone else to stop doing something she herself does may say, "I'm sorry, I know I'm the last person who can tell you this since it is something I do myself, but..." and thus deflect at least some of the burden of her own inconsistency. However, this is not something that seems possible in a case like Ms. Dahl's. If Ms. Dahl had said something like "I'm sorry, I know I'm the last person who can ask this of you since I have myself helped second nuptials, but..." it would still have made sense for Ms. Lockhart to comment on how Ms. Dahl's religious zeal seems selective. Thus, it seems like the point of Ms. Lockhart criticism was not directed at Ms. Dahl's standing to demand her religious rights. This, in conjunction with our previous discussion of van Emeeren's account, gives us enough reason to reject the hypothesis that what is at stake in accusations of this sort is the normative standing of the arguer. It is still true that there is a problem of sincerity, but not the one van Laar or Herstein identify, as I will try to show in the final section.

Summarizing the paper so far, I have tried to show that accusations of selective application of general premises must be distinguished from accusations of inconsistency as modeled by van Emeeren (2010), van Laar (2007), and Herstein (2017). Even though they share some superficial features with accusations of inconsistency,

the differences are salient and significant. Unlike accusations of inconsistency, accusations of selective application cannot be resolved by restating consistency or pre-empted by a previous recognition by the arguer. This means that we are talking about a bona fide different phenomenon that needs to be accounted on its own. That is what I will try to do now.

5 A New Proposal

My proposal is that in accusations of selective application of a general premise, the arguer is expressing the suspicion that there are hidden reasons behind her opponent's position not disclosed in her explicit argument. In the Dahl–Lockhart interrogation, for example, the fictional lawyer does not directly challenge the Christian condemnation of homosexuality, nor whether Ms. Dahl has the right to refuse service to gay couples, but rather expresses her suspicion that Ms. Dahl is not being honest about her real motivations for refusing service to gay couples. By bringing up Ms. Dahl's treatment of divorcees, Lockhart suggests that Dahl might be hiding her true ideological reasons behind a façade of Christian dogma. According to Lockhart's argument, if Dahl really cared about observing Christian principles, she would refuse service to anyone who engages in behavior condemned by her religion—like divorcees—but she doesn't. Therefore, Lockhart concludes, she does not actually care about Christian condemnation and so there must be another motivation behind her refusal to organize gay weddings. Ms. Lockhart does not even have to mention homophobia in order to suggest that this is what lies behind Dahl's behavior.

Even in cases where the argument explicitly put forth by the opponent is logically valid and based on premises shared by the arguers, there might still be relevant and salient contextual information—like the exclusion of similar cases—that justifies the suspicion that the proponent's actual position or her reasons behind it may not be the ones she has explicitly put forth. For example, even if the arguments explicitly submitted by Ms. Dahl were intrinsically irrefragable, the exclusion of other, similar sins from her demand justifies the suspicion that she has not been completely forthcoming about her true reasons. There may be further, unmentioned reasons why she might want to refuse to help plan gay weddings, but not second nuptials. This is the ultimate target of the accusations of selective application of a general premises: to demand that the arguer comes clean about his or her true reasons.

In this account, accusations of this sort are accusations of hypocrisy, but this term is misleading. On the one hand, duplicity about one's motivations is the mark of the hypocrite (Ryle 1949; McKinnon 1991, etc.). However, as Jones (2016) has shown, hypocrisy occurs when someone violates at least one of 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" (Jones 2016: 490). Thus, avoiding hypocrisy 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. Accounts like van Eemeren, van Leer and Herstein above have focused on inconsistency and, thus, on the first-level commitment to authenticity,

but I have tried to argue that this paints an incomplete picture of the phenomenon. In contrast, my account focuses on the second-level commitment to authenticity: the commitment to accuracy when presenting one's viewpoint. If my diagnosis so far has been on the right track, accusing someone of applying a selective application of a general premise calls into question, neither her normative standing as an arguer, nor the validity or soundness of the argument she has put forth, but rather how accurately it presents her reasons for holding her standpoint. Thus, what is at issue is whether one's opponent has honored her commitment to accuracy in presenting her premises and standpoint.

In general, accusations of this sort bring up the possibility of a biased distinction that has been left implicit during the process of argumentation. The assumption behind these accusations is that making such a distinction is either rationally or morally unwarranted. So, for example, Ms. Lockhart's questions challenge Ms. Dahl to justify making a distinction between homosexuality on the one hand, and divorce on the other. However, such biases cannot be adequately assessed unless they are recognized as such, and this is what accusations of selective application of general rules aim to achieve.

Further evidence that this is what happens in this sort of accusation comes from observing how people react to them. When faced with accusations like these, people often seek reasons to justify why some cases must be treated differently than others. This gives us further reason to believe that the function of accusations of this sort is precisely to demand such a justification. This demand is especially pressing in circumstances where there are salient differences between the cases to which the general premise is applied and those to which it is not. As I had already mentioned, even if there is no explicit mention of homophobia in Ms. Lockhart's line of questioning, it is clearly salient in Dahl's differential treatment of gays and divorcees. Thus, even if Ms. Lockhart hints at no alternative explanation of Ms. Dahl's motivation, in the absence of an obvious justification for the unequal treatment of one sort of sin over others, one cannot blame critics for assuming that Ms. Dahl's standpoint was motivated by homophobia. This puts extra pressure on the arguer to meet the critic's challenge to come clean about her true motivations and either justify or renounce her distinct treatment of what seem otherwise to be similar cases. In our example, it is not so much that Ms. Dahl is being inconsistent in defending her refusal to organize *some* events that conflict with her religious beliefs (weddings of gay people) while having no similar qualms about organizing *other* events that also conflict with her religious beliefs (weddings of divorced people), but that she is being insincere, or at least inaccurate, about her actual motivations for refusing to serve gay couples. By dismantling Ms. Dahl's religious freedom argument, Ms. Lockhart accuses Ms. Dahl of trying to hide her actual homophobic motivation behind a façade of religious rights. Lockhart does this without even mentioning homophobia because homosexuality is already contextually salient.

One reason why such a reason might be hidden is deceit, insofar as the opponent might be deliberately trying "to appear activated by a motive other than one's real motive" (Ryle 1949: 173). However, no deliberate deception need be involved. Self-ignorance or inattention can also make us unaware of our own reasons. Thus, what an accusation of this sort uncovers might be surprising to the

arguer as well. All that is required is the possibility that the opponent is moved by what Gilbert has called “dark-side commitments,” i.e. commitments that can be either “known to the arguer and not revealed (for either strategic or practical reasons) [or] unknown to the arguer as concomitants of the avowed position,” (Gilbert 2013: 105–106).

One might doubt whether requiring this sort of accuracy is a legitimate demand in argumentation. After all, there is currently a vast debate about whether an inaccurate presentation of one’s standpoint, premises or starting points, is genuinely a vice in political discourse (see, e.g. Jones 2016; McDonough 2009; Runciman 2008; Williams 2002; McKinnon 1991). Some have argued that one’s 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,” (Alinsky 1971: 76). Applying these concerns to argumentation, it might seem that a commitment to accuracy in argumentation is unimportant, because if one cares only about the quality of the reasons behind a position, and if good reasons have been presented for an opinion, then it does not matter whether or not those reasons actually motivate the person presenting them. However, this is wrong: accuracy is important in argumentation because we cannot engage in critical discussion with someone who is not forthcoming about his or her reasons and standpoint. In order to better see the importance of accuracy to virtuous argumentation, the pragma-dialectical perspective is once again very helpful. From such a perspective, one must avoid actions that derail critical discussion, for example, by showing a lack of commitment to collaboratively resolving a difference of opinion purely on merits. Consequently, criticizing one’s opponent is appropriate only if it targets her incapacity or unwillingness to collaborate in resolving our difference of opinion on merits. One way of doing this is by showing that she has not obeyed the relevant discussion rules that regulate the tasks that make up the discussion. Among these tasks, at the confrontational stage, the shared goal is to formulate the difference of opinion in a way that furthers its resolution. This requires, among other things, that the parties “formulate their contributions as clearly and univocally as possible” (van Laar 2007: 320). I take it that appropriate accusations of selective application of a general premise achieve this by suggesting that one’s opponent might not be accurately presenting her actual reasons for holding her actual standpoint, 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” (van Eemeren et al. 2012: 350). Thus, one who (deliberately or not) inaccurately presents her viewpoint does not collaborate in reaching this goal. The pragma-dialectical code of conduct for critical discussion (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 190–196) includes amongst its rules an *Unexpressed Premise Rule* according to which discussants may not disown responsibility for their own unexpressed premises (543). Being obscure or inaccurate about one’s premises or standpoint is a clear violation of such rule. If the goal of the discussion is not to reach a rational resolution of a difference of opinion purely on merits—as in debate tournaments, at least some political discussions, legal argumentation, etc.—accuracy is clearly a requirement. In these cases, pointing out that someone is

selective in her application of a general premise may be very helpful in eliciting the required accuracy from her.

Furthermore, accusations of selective application of a general premise might also further the rhetorical goal of the critic by forcing the arguer to reveal reasons that, most likely, are more difficult to defend than the ones she has duplicitously put forth. As van Laar has stated:

The central rhetorical aim of a party is to shape the difference [of opinion] in a way that is helpful for winning over the other party in the later stages. Consider, for example, the critic in a situation where the arguer has already advanced a standpoint. For her, the rhetorical objective amounts to get the arguer to change his standpoint in a manner that is advantageous for her, for instance by being clearer on those parts of his position that are difficult to defend, (van Laar 2007: 323).

In my account, this is exactly what is happening in a maneuver like Ms. Lockhart's. She wants to shape Ms. Dahl's position in a way that is helpful to her goals in the discussion. Given that at the stage of the discussion where her line of questioning took place Ms. Dahl had already advanced her standpoint, the goal of Ms. Lockhart was to get Ms. Dahl to change her standpoint in a way that was advantageous for Ms. Lockhart by having her reveal the indefensible homophobia behind it. Expressing one's justified suspicion that one's opponent's actual standpoint or premises have not been accurately presented can be a legitimate maneuver in argumentation, and this is precisely what an accusation of a selective application of a general premise aims to achieve. Nevertheless, this is something that we could not account for if we took them to be mere accusations of inconsistency. Subsuming them under this broader category blinds us to the importance of accuracy in argumentation. It shows that what is at stake is not whether the arguer is being inconsistent or not, but instead whether she presents her position accurately or not. Consequently, this sort of accusation must be sharply distinguished from accusations of inconsistency.

Furthermore, this characterization also has normative consequences as to when this sort of move is legitimate and when fallacious—i.e., a whataboutism. I will get to this in the closing part of this section. However, an important caveat is in order: Although we engage in argumentation for a wide variety of reasons and with a complex and continually changing set of purposes (Blair 2004; Gilbert 2005; Fukushima et al. 2006), one of the central goals we pursue in argumentation is the rational resolution of a difference of opinion. In what follows I will consider only cases where this is the predominant goal of the argumentation. This does not preclude the possibility that whataboutisms might further the protagonist's rhetorical goals without furthering her dialectical goal (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2003). In other words, whataboutisms and other accusations of selective application of a general premise might still "be an effective debating tactic, and so deserve praise on that account" (Blair 2004: 147). With this caveat in mind, one might enquire when accusations of selective application of general rules contribute to or derail us from pursuing the rational resolution of a difference of opinion.

Accusations of selective application of general rules are demands for clarification about the real reasons and claims that constitute the proponent's actual position.

Consequently, accusations of this sort are appropriate when it is rational to suspect that the arguer has shown a *prima facie* unjustified bias in favor of some members of a general kind over others, and they are whataboutisms when no such suspicion is warranted.

Notice that the relevant mental attitude behind these accusations is one of suspicion, not full belief. Suspicion is a positive inclination towards a claim that falls short of full belief but is still epistemically evaluable. This means that, just like beliefs, our suspicions can be justified or not; however, the epistemic standards of evidence or warrant required for having a justified suspicion are less than those needed for a justified belief. It does not take as much evidence to suspect that someone is homophobic as it takes to believe that she is, for instance. Nevertheless, justified suspicions are not mere hunches either. Rather, they are articulated mental states with specific contents (but see Lerner 2005 for a dissenting view). Furthermore, the difference between suspicion and belief is not just a matter of degree, but also of kind. Suspicion is not just a weak sort of belief, but an altogether different kind of epistemic state. Fundamentally, suspicions aim to challenge one's belief in a proposition without thoroughly defeating it (Javind 2017). Thus, suspicion entails doubt and motivates inquiry (Hurtado 2005). Unlike normal assertions, when someone conveys her suspicion that a proposition is true, her aim is not for her hearers to reject such a proposition, but rather to instill doubt and motivate inquiry as to whether the proposition is true or not. Thus, for example, one does not need to be fully convinced that Ms. Dahl was motivated by unmentioned homophobic reasons in order to notice something dubious in her different treatment between gay and divorced couples and thus be motivated into inquiring whether there was actually something else behind her seeming to be so selective in her religious zeal.

6 Conclusions

In this article, I have argued for the claim that accusing someone of applying a selective application of a general premise expresses one's suspicion that, given relevant contextual information, the argument explicitly put forward by one's opponent might not accurately reflect his or her actual position and reasons, and that there is a possibility worth pursuing that his or her hidden reasons might involve a biased distinction that is either rationally or morally unwarranted. Consequently, this move is dialectically legitimate only in cases where the expressed suspicion is justified, i.e. cases where although we might not have sufficient reason to conclusively hold that our opponent is not being forthright about her position and reasons, we still have sufficient reason to inquire whether this is so. Otherwise, such an accusation might be a so-called "whataboutism" and derail the argumentation process. In other words, if the suspicion is not adequately grounded, inquiring whether one's opponent actually holds what she has explicitly presented as her claim and reasons might result in a distraction at best, and a source of new disagreements and acrimony at worst.

Accordingly, accusations of selective application of a general premise are better modeled as requesting one's opponent to clarify her reasons and her position, and that is why they commonly take the form of a question. It is not so much that the

opponent is being inconsistent, but rather that she is being either obscure or inaccurate about her own position and reasons. Given that an accurate presentation of each of the arguers' positions is a central requirement for argumentation to reach its goal of resolving a difference of opinion purely on merits, making sure that arguers abide by this requirement, when there is justified suspicion that they do not, would qualify as a legitimate argumentative maneuver.

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