

MENACE
GAME
COUNTERMEASURE
SYNDROME
DISAPPOINTMENT

WHAT ABOUT ME ISM

Insights from Game Theory, Behavioral
Economics and Moral Philosophy

VINCENT F. HENDRICKS

CONSUMER
OUTCOME
INSTALLMENT
PREDICAMENT
SOME
ZERO-SUM GAME
SENTIMENT
MALADJUSTMENT
COMMERCIALISM
DOWNTIME
PERMEABLE
BLAMEWORTHINESS
SYMMETRY
PREMEDITATION



Springer

WHAT ABOUT ME ISM

Vincent F. Hendricks

WHAT ABOUT ME ISM

Insights from Game Theory,
Behavioral Economics and Moral
Philosophy



Springer

Vincent F. Hendricks
Department of Communication
University of Copenhagen
København S, Denmark

ISBN 978-3-031-84639-7 ISBN 978-3-031-84640-3 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-84640-3>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2025

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

If disposing of this product, please recycle the paper.



Photo | Ulrik Jantzen | © 2025

About the Author

Vincent F. Hendricks is Professor of Formal Philosophy at The University of Copenhagen. He was the founder and director of the Center for Information and Bubble Studies (CIBS) funded by the Carlsberg Foundation. A prolific writer he has been awarded several prizes for his research among them *The Elite Research Prize by the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, The Roskilde Festival Elite Research Prize, Choice Magazine Outstanding Academic Title Award and The Rosenkjær Prize*. He was Editor-in-Chief of *Synthese: An International Journal for Epistemology, Methodology and Philosophy of Science* between 2005-2015.

Hendricks has over the years appeared in a wide variety of media outlets including The Washington Post, The Huffington Post, The Guardian, BBC, Le Monde, DIE ZEIT, Welt, TEDx, The Open Mind:Channel Thirteen, Wired, The Conversation, VICE, Quartz, New Statesman, Frankfurter Allgemeine, Danish Broadcasting Company, News POLSAT Poland, Tom Hartman Show, Pete Dominick Show, The David Packman Show, The Forbidden Speech podcast, SiriusXM, Ideasphere – National Public Radio, Sputnik-News Radio UK, SRF Tagesschau CH, Neue Zürcher Zeitung CH, CNBC AFRICA, New Business Ethiopia, CPH:DOX, TRT World Turkey, ARD Radio Germany, TV2 News Denmark.

Table of Contents

Prologue

1. Life and zero-sum scenarios | 1
2. The whataboutme game | 15
3. Enough about me, what about you, what do you think of me? | 37
4. Moral depravity | 53
5. Seeing it coming a mile away | 71
6. Separate spreadsheets | 87
7. Coward or crook? | 101
8. Work the problem, work together | 117
9. What about you? It's about us! | 133

Acknowledgements

Notes

This **o**ne is for you Daddy,
you taught me *some* lesson here ...

Prologue

What-about-me-ism. Another word, yet a new *-ism*, perhaps a neoteric trend – or better still, one more burstable bubble for the academy, online-coaching or self-help literature to take on.

Reasonable sentiment if that's your initial reaction. Whataboutism – or whataboutery – are already established idioms so is this just another spin-off in the same general direction? Whereas whataboutism or whataboutery in the pejorative sense denotes a rhetorical ploy designed to distract attention from a well-placed critical question by retorting to another critical counter-question entailing some counter-accusation against your opponent, whataboutmeism is veritably a very different item. The word has a “*me*” in it. That indeed makes for a different beast altogether.

Whatabout-*me*-ism announces a morbid self-absorption. A view of the world as one mammoth mirror in which one's reflection is not only the object of one's own constant attention and admiration. The whataboutmeist likewise expects everyone else to take pause and admire the mirror image of the protagonist. While at it, with such a main character syndrome, things, events and other people are but props and actors in

supporting roles in a movie for which the whataboutmeist is both script writer, director and main character. As a whataboutmeist you are all the above in a production of your own making. Potential failure to realize expectations is not on you, but on the surroundings and the people to whom you have assigned supporting roles whether friends, foes, colleagues, lovers or spouses.

With whataboutmeism as the overarching premise, no matter what goods, advantages or opportunities you have, I am also entitled to. Whatever you gain is indeed something that has passed me by, because why should I not have the same as you? Life is viewed as a zero-sum game. Mere existence accordingly becomes a competition to get what you want. If you don't get it, your loss, either in whole or in part, while the other person's gain: If you get something, it's only because I've been similarly deprived – and net goes to zero.

In the eyes of the whataboutmeist, it is morally unjust: I should be able to achieve the same as you if I have done the same as you – by extension, according to me of course. Therefore, it is now up to you, whether you are the lover, the friend, the surroundings or the world at large, to make sure that I get the same conditions, opportunities, degrees of freedom or rewards as you. And I am morally exempt from responsibility, because on the authority of me, I have done what I could while

author of the script, thus factored in is also what is best for us. Now it is up to you, or the world, to fulfill my expectations of, what I think I am entitled to.

In sum, as opposed to whataboutism as a logical fallacy, whataboutmeism captures an ubiquitous attitude towards life and a moral outlook in which:

- Human **deliberation, decision** and **action** is
- designed as a **what-about-me game** based on largely your **expectations** towards other people;
- with **no moral responsibility** on your part right or wrong, that's on everybody else, and;
- entails a sense of **entitlement**; if others can have it whether a gift, benefit or reward materially, socially or otherwise, I shall too if for no other reason because ... **what about me?**

Some 40 years ago I was given a remote-controlled car by my father and grandmother for my 12th birthday. I adored that Lamborghini-Countach-Cannonball-Run-looking-car. When my friends came over for the birthday party a few days later, some of them wanted to try it out. Time was limited and the cake was about to be cut, so I was not to try it in the same run as some of my buddies. When this became clear to me, I was as puzzled as eventually disappointed and so I asked my daddy: "But what about me?" My father courtly yet crisply explained:



What about you?! This is not about you! It's about them! You get to play with it all the time. Even if you are not to race it whenever you fancy, cherish the fun your friends are having trying out the RC-car. Oh, and do yourself a favor: Cherish their fun without thinking that you somehow missed out on something along the way just because your friends tried *your* car!

As a kid it took me some time to digest this broadside. Eventually it settled with me, and I have been trying to live my life perpendicular to whataboutmeism ever since – admittedly with varying degrees of success over the ensuing years. Nevertheless, my father's fusillade back then, seems as pertinent as ever today. Designing life as a zero-sum game, whataboutmeism is everywhere to be found offline as well as online where life is now lived as vividly as ever. It's permeating through relationships and love affairs, among colleagues, business partners, family members, relatives, strangers, users on social platforms, friends, foes and freaks.

If practicing whataboutmeism made us more empowered, independent and mature, perhaps such an approach to life could be defended if not condoned. However, it does not, on the contrary. Whataboutmeism must be dismantled, avoided and replaced with

something better, which indeed makes us more autonomous and mature. To determine what that is, the epistemological structure and behavioral dynamics of whataboutmeism must be unveiled first. There is a toolbox for doing so including game theory, behavioral economics and moral philosophy.

I recall to this day the sting I felt after my father's barrage relating to the RC car, buddies and the birthday party. There was a certain measure of personal insult, my ego injured, and my expectations were not cashed in neither pertaining to what I felt entitled to, nor what I expected others should immediately realize was to come my way. And amid all my personal presumptions, grievances and self-righteous reasoning, I couldn't help feeling but ashamed of what appeared to be my own initial reaction, inclination and attitude towards the entire spectacle. I felt unfairly overlooked and simultaneously puny.

As powerful, seductive and satisfying whataboutmeism may seem personally, there is also something pompous, predictable and pathetic about life viewed as a zero-sum game hinged on your expectations towards other people. A main character syndrome and a moral trajectory that continuously exonerates you of any wrongdoing since you know best. That's pompous. Squarely placing the blame of mischief on the world and its inhabitants either unwilling or unable to meet with

your projected expectations. That's pathetic. And if what-about-me is the way you look at the world, I can see you coming a mile away. You become blatantly predictable.

Suppose everyone decided to live in accordance with whataboutmeism. A world ruled accordingly would be a dire scenario for personal autonomy and collective democracy alike. Autonomy and integrity are not to be confused with perverted egoism as little as democracy is about what society can do for us as we habitually ask: Enough about me, what about you, what do you think of ... me? Autonomy is not to be confused with perverted egoism as little as groupthink is tantamount to democracy.

Although having a much tougher time admitting it, whataboutmeism still rears its ugly head from time to time in certain situations, settings and contexts where I take the lead in asking what about me? At least tacitly I may be mumbling these very words to myself when feeling neglected, unappreciated, supercilious or presumably entitled in some way that doesn't come to pass. Why shouldn't I also have a bonus now that my colleague was just awarded one? Why can't I have the same success as an influencer as my neighbor? Why does my good friend spend time with another acquaintance instead of me? Why does my girlfriend

choose to spend her night off at the steak house with her friends... what about me?

We can probably most of us relate to just as much. But I'm dead set to fight whataboutmeism all the way because, by the end of the day, it makes me pompous, predictable and pathetic in the eyes of those around me – and by reflection, in the eyes of the beholder. If untamed, whataboutmeism may create a chain reaction among social animals, making us less trusting, less incentivized to coordinate and cooperate. You simply do not put stock in the judgment of others, show neither trust nor desire to cooperate for the good of everyone – yourself included. Taken to the limit, lack of trust, coordination and cooperation is the day of doom for individual autonomy and collective democracy.

To win the personal battle not losing the collective war, it's indispensable for a victorious outcome to understand what whataboutmeism all is about; definition; epistemology, exemplars, behavioral characteristics, structure and dynamics, philosophical underpinnings and moral fabric.

The final analysis is to include tips and tricks of the trade to avoid walking through life, or good portions of it, pompous, predictable and pathetic. "Who would ever want to do that?" is rhetorical enough and not about self-help, coaching, pseudo-psychology or the invention

of yet another -ism to the amusement of philosophy and the academy. It's about being good people on a daily basis.

Vincent F. Hendricks

Copenhagen 10 | 01 | 2025