

Bothsiderism
John Casey
Philosophy Program

In recent years, the phrase “both sides” has become a social media meme, parodizing the journalistic trope of prioritizing neutrality at all costs. Here’s one egregious example, in a tweet directing to an article on “civility” the *New York Times* remarked, “Mr. Trump rails against illegal immigrants as ‘murders and thieves’ who want to ‘infest the country.’ Some of his opponents respond with rage.” The implication is that there’s a balance between overtly racist speech and angry responses to that speech. Or, there’s an epistemological or moral requirement that any partisan utterance be framed as a part of a two-party debate. In the same vein, Trump himself, in the wake of a violent confrontation between racist white nationalists and protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, remarked that there are good people “on both sides” of that issue. Perhaps the apotheosis of “both sides” might be the Texas high school teacher who asked students to list the positives and negatives of American chattel slavery, in order to give a “balanced view.” Parody aside, in one sense, to allude to the good ideas of *both sides* or the failings of *both sides* is a kind of rhetorical ploy to suggest fair-mindedness. In another sense, the very idea of “*both sides*” reflects a deeper tendency to view disagreements dichotomously; it presupposes an account of the options—one side, or the other.

To a casual student of argumentation, however, the invocation of “both sides” seems like a virtuous one. After all, awareness of differing or opposed opinions is one hallmark of a person who is authentically critically engaged on an issue—one who knows both the norm of balance and the actually balancing things. Beyond that, we’re often urged to wait to hear *both sides* of the story and to walk in someone else’s shoes. We’re on our guard against journalism that is *one sided* and for people who are *biased*. We’re praised for being *even-handed* or *balanced* in adjudicating facts. We might call this *the norm of balance*. The norm of balance is a meta-norm; it has to do with regulating our attitudes toward the existence of multiple arguments, rather than our attitudes *within* arguments, such that we apply critical norms in a balanced, judicious, or fair way.

While there is clearly a virtue to be found in balance, some scholars have recently alleged that there is corresponding *vice* of balance, a fallacy of middle ground as it were. No one, however, has given a robust account of either the fallaciousness or the variations of the fallacy. This is what I intend to do in this paper.