

Two Forms of the Straw Man

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ABSTRACT: The authors identify and offer an analysis of a new form of the Straw Man fallacy, and then explore the implications of the prevalence of this fallacy for contemporary political discourse.

KEY WORDS: argumentation, dialectic, fallacies, political discourse, straw man fallacy

I

According to a widely accepted characterization, one commits the straw man fallacy when one misrepresents an opponent's position in a way that imputes to it implausible commitments, and then refutes the misrepresentation instead of the opponent's actual view.¹ This analysis of the fallacy has given rise to a range of theoretical and practical concerns about how one should discern what an arguer's actual (as opposed to her misrepresented) position is and how to correct such misrepresentations. Additionally, there are questions concerning the precise relation of the straw man fallacy to other fallacies; some theorists have wondered whether the straw man fallacy so described is a sub-species of hasty generalization (Chase, 1956, 40), *ad hominem* (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1987, 286), or a failure of internal proof or a *secundum quid* fallacy (Vernon and Nissen, 1968, 160; Walton, 1992, 75–80).

In this paper, our objective is not to challenge the standing theoretical, practical, or classificatory work regarding this fallacy. Instead we will make a case for broadening our conception of the fallacy beyond the form presented in the standard analysis.² Specifically, we will introduce a distinction between two forms of the straw man fallacy: the form of *representation*, and the form of *selection*.

II

On the standard analysis of the fallacy, the straw man occurs in an adversarial argumentative context between two speakers (A and B), where the proponent (A) represents her opponent's (B's) position in an inaccurate way which facilitates or strengthens A's case against B. On this model, the straw man is a fallacy because it marks a pragmatic failure of argumentation. A's straw man argument against B undermines the goals of critical discussion because the resolution of such critical exchange requires that parties argue responsively to one another. That is, A's setting up a straw man of B's view is a failure to actually engage with B.³ Consequently, what makes the straw man a fallacy is that a speaker who erects a straw man advances an argument that misrepresents to her advantage the current dialectical situation. The crucial element of this misrepresentation that distinguishes the straw man from other misrepresentations is that the strength of the opponent's case is not reflected by the arguments the speaker attributes to the opposition.⁴

If opportunistically misrepresenting the current dialectical situation by responding to weaker arguments than those given is the central vice of the straw man, the fallacy admits of forms other than the one presupposed in the standard analysis. Recall that the standard analysis characterizes the fallacy in terms of the following inventory: two speakers (A and B), B's position (p) or argument (a), A's misrepresentation of B's position (p*) or argument (a*), and A's argument that takes advantage of the misrepresentation (m). As we have said, A commits the straw man fallacy when she replaces p (or a) with p* (or a*), thereby erecting m, and then proceeds with m as if she were refuting p (or a). However, incorrectly representing B's position or argument is not the only way for A to misrepresent the current dialectical situation to her advantage. Consider that some proponent A can misrepresent the current dialectical situation not with regard to what her current opponent B says, but with regard to the variety and strength of opposition to her view, of which B may only be a questionably relevant representative. For example, let A, in arguing for her position, survey objections. She takes up with an opponent, B, *correctly* recounts B's objection, and then *legitimately* refutes it. A then concludes that she has successfully defended her view. However, let us imagine that there is some C with an objection to A's position that is the same (or relevantly similar) to B's objection. Let us imagine further that C's objection avoids some of the extravagance and imprecision of B's, and accordingly is a much stronger objection to A's position.

In such a case, A clearly misrepresents the dialectical situation in responding to weaker arguments than given by her opposition. But in this misrepresentation of the opposition, the opposition misrepresented

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is more a generic opposition than the individual speaker (B) she is currently addressing. In taking up with only B's objections, she pragmatically implicates that she is taking up with the best ones (again, on the presumption of proper resolution of the critical exchange). Though A does not straw man B's position or argument in the exchange, A nevertheless straw mans her *opposition* more generally by refuting only her weakest opponents. A has erected a straw man, but she has not *misrepresented* the objection she seeks to refute; instead, she has erected a straw man by *selecting* a relatively weak version of, or inept spokesman for, the opposition to her view. Hence there are two forms of the straw man: the *representation* form, which is captured in the standard analysis of the fallacy, and the *selection* form.

On the description above, the *selection* form of the straw man fallacy bears a strong resemblance to the fallacy of hasty generalization. In hasty generalization, A cherry picks B as an opponent on the basis of B's implausible commitments or B's flimsy arguments, A refutes B, and then takes or presents B's refutation to be indicative of the status of all similar dialectical resistance. However, the similarity with hasty generalization only goes so deep. Avoiding the selection form of the straw man does not require all arguers to overtly respond to every potential challenge. Surely we must recognize that some challenges are too trifling to bother with; after all, life is short and crackpots are a plenty.⁵ The problem with this case of A's straw manning by selection is not that not every objection fits the mold given in A's argument (again, A doesn't have to address every argument), but that A does not address the better arguments in the opposition. That is, the problem is not a *quantitative* problem with the argument (as the hasty generalization analysis would run), but a *qualitative* one. Although A is not obliged to address every form of objection, she is obliged to address the best she can find. In addressing B's arguments only, A implicates that B is the best or most relevant voice of her opposition, because one resolves disagreements most effectively when one attends to and addresses one's opponents' best arguments. If A represents her view defended on the basis of a refutation of B, then it must be reasonable to conclude that the opposition's best and most influential voices do no better than B.⁶

III

The selection form of the straw man fallacy is vicious because it is posited on a misrepresentation of the variety and relative quality of one's opposition. One question is how such arguments succeed in eliciting assent. Generally, straw man arguments depend not only on A's misrepresentation of her opponent's commitments and arguments, but

on her audience's inexperience or ignorance. In the case of the representation form of the straw man fallacy, A's argument against B depends on A's deliberate presentation of p^* (or a^*) as equivalent to B's p (or a). B can correct this misrepresentation only if she keeps track of her own position and arguments for it, and if she can recognize and articulate the difference between them and A's corrupt versions. If B cannot, then A succeeds. Additionally, if A's audience cannot keep track of B's commitments (or has no interest in doing so), then A's representational straw man succeeds. By contrast, in the selection form of the straw man argument, A *correctly* presents B's argument and *legitimately* refutes it, but she fails to countenance stronger objections from other sources.⁷ In so doing, A implicitly presents herself to her audience as having successfully defended her view against the best cases and as having thereby *established* her view. Unless her audience is familiar with the better counter-arguments proposed by A's opposition, then A succeeds in winning their assent.

The two forms of straw manning, then, take advantage of two different failings in their respective audiences. The representation form of the straw man argument depends on the audience not detecting the difference between B's argument (a) or position (p) and A's misrepresentation of them with a^* or p^* . The audience must be inattentive in the sense that any nuance of p or sophistication of a does not register or is deemed inconsequential.⁸ In the selection form of the straw man, however, A's argument depends on the audience being unaware of the variety and relative quality of opposition to A's position. The audience, by contrast, can be very attentive to the details of B's position and have the listening virtues not present in representation forms of the straw man. However, the audience is not knowledgeable about A's opposition, so A sets the terms for argumentative success by default.

Correlatively, the requirements for correction in the case of the selection straw man will be different from those of the representation straw man. First, showing that A has ignored some other versions of the opposition is necessary. This may take the form of either showing that though B gives argument a , others give better versions of a that do not have B's problems, or one may show that though B's argument a is relevant, there are entirely different and more pressing arguments from other sources. Second, an objector must demonstrate that these ignored arguments are superior to the one to which A attends.⁹ The general difficulty is that what must be demonstrated is that A has misrepresented the overall dialectical situation and most importantly the quality of her opposition (*viz.*, the state of the art in a debate), but there may yet be no consensus on what that dialectical situation is. However, even if it is an open question as to what the facts of the matter are as to whether B, C, or D has the best argument, A has

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unjustifiably simplified the situation by taking on B only. The consequence, then, is that correcting the selection form of the straw man fallacy requires more than an analysis of what some speaker says, but an education in the larger discourse A purports to be addressing. That is, in cases of the selection form of the straw man fallacy, A *relies on* the ignorance of her audience; if A is to elicit their assent with the selection form of the straw man fallacy, they must not be familiar with the best arguments made by A's opposition. In this way, the selection form of the straw man draws its success from the ignorance of its intended audience. The only correction is education of the sort advocated most famously by John Stuart Mill in the second chapter of his *On Liberty*. There, Mill argues that our understanding of our own position is directly proportionate to our understanding of those of our opponents.¹⁰

IV

To be sure, we have here offered only the most preliminary characterization of the selection form of the straw man. Much more analytical work needs to be done on this form of the fallacy. However, our aim in drawing attention to the selection form is not simply that of introducing a new dimension to a common, familiar, and thoroughly theorized fallacy. It is our view that the selection form of the straw man is among the most prevalent forms of fallacious argumentation at work in contemporary popular political discourse. In fact, we hold that the prevalence of this form of fallacy helps to explain the curious confluence of two seemingly inconsistent phenomena in contemporary popular politics: (1) high levels of public ignorance about fundamental political matters, and (2) heightened attention to sources of political analysis and commentary.

The social scientific literature documenting public political ignorance is vast and will not be surveyed here.¹¹ Suffice it to say that the following estimation by Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin is widely shared:

If six decades of modern political public opinion research establish anything, it is that the general public's political ignorance is appalling by any standard. (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2004, 5)

That Ackerman and Fishkin are the two advocates for a highly ambitious project of participatory democracy that they call "Deliberation Day" speaks to the force of the public ignorance findings; presumably, participatory democrats would attempt to downplay these findings, if there were an intellectually responsible way to do so. The evidence for the heightened attention to political analysis and commentary consists

simply in the fact that the popular political book publishing business is now a billion-dollar industry. Even a cursory look through the politics section of a local bookstore will confirm the utter proliferation of books offering what professes to be detailed political commentary on the politics of the day, almost in real time. And this is to say nothing about the number of television programs, radio shows, and internet blogs devoted explicitly to current political affairs.

One would expect that greater attention to political analysts and commentators – even highly partisan analysts and commentators – would result in a *decrease* of political ignorance. But the trend does not work this way. In fact, a recent study has found that increased attention to the media forms that tend to feature more by way of real time argumentation – namely, television and radio, as opposed to print sources – is *positively* correlated with political ignorance.¹² But this positive correlation between exposure to sources of purported political analysis and political ignorance is precisely what should be expected from a mode of public discourse in which the selection form of the straw man fallacy is prevalent. For it is the essence of this fallacy to cast the *entirety* of one's opposition in the terms adopted by one's *weakest* opponent. When the selection straw man prevails, one's audience is convinced that *there is no intelligent opposition* to one's view, and thus *no forthcoming rejoinder from the opposition that could be worth attending to*. That is, though the straw man fallacy itself is not a form of hasty generalization, it does yield such an inference in its audience – those who hear straw man arguments take themselves to have inductive evidence for the stupidity of their opponents. Only a narrow and distorted view of contemporary political disputes can result.

Evidence that popular political commentary is governed in large measure by the selection form of the straw man fallacy is garnered, again, by an even cursory survey of the popular political literature that can be found in any bookstore. In fact, one needs only to look at the *titles* of the bestselling books to get a sense of the extent to which the fallacy prevails. To cite only a few examples, conservative commentators claim that liberals suffer from a “mental disorder” (Savage, 2005) and should be spoken with only “if you must” (Coulter, 2004), while liberal commentators cast their opponents as “lying liars” (Franken, 2003) who trade in “idiocy” (Black, 2004). On both sides, the argumentative strategy is the same: The audience is expected to rely upon the author to present the opponent's view, the author presents what is in fact a more-or-less accurate depiction of what some of the weakest opponents have said, the author easily refutes the opponents, and then explicitly takes himself or herself to have shown that *all* extant articulations of the opposing view are as easily dismantled.

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As we noted above, the selection form of the straw man fallacy depends upon the ignorance of one's audience; in order to succeed, one's audience must not have first-hand knowledge of how strong opponents respond to one's position. However, we now see that the selection form of the straw man fallacy serves to *perpetuate* if not positively *encourage* such ignorance. When it succeeds, it convinces one's audience not only of the correctness of one's view, but also of the absence of reasoned and intelligent opposition to it. The result is a popular public discourse of heightened passion and outrage that grows increasingly ignorant of what is actually in dispute. Under such conditions, a premium is placed on holding one's ground without regard to the reasons and arguments of those who disagree; that is, the result is a total undermining of argumentation.

On any view about the ultimate purposes and nature of public political discourse in a democratic society, the prevalence of a fallacy that undermines argumentation and encourages irrational tenacity must be seen as a threat to a properly functioning system of self-government. In this paper, we have identified a heretofore relatively unnoticed form of the familiar straw man fallacy. We have also claimed that this form prevails in popular political discourse, with deleterious effects. Having a new term (i.e., the "selection" form of the straw man) with which to identify and theorize this form of failed reasoning will certainly not by itself eliminate its use or diminish its effectiveness; but it is a necessary step in a larger effort to rehabilitate public discourse.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Chase (1956), Johnson and Blair (1983), van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987), Govier (1992), Hurley (1994), Walton (1996), and Moore and Parker (2004).
- 2 Though the standard analysis is found in most every source addressing the straw man fallacy, there are a few places where this broadened conception has been touched on, but it has not received any systematic treatment; see for example van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1992, 131) and Teays (2006, 171).
- 3 See Walton (1996, 125) for this analysis.
- 4 This feature of misrepresenting the opposition's quality of case is distinct from other dialectical misrepresentations – for example, denying that one previously agreed to some claim, allowing evidence from a source but then rejecting it later, and that of feigning doubt in order to increase the opposition's burden of proof.
- 5 Of course, the speaker should be able to respond effectively to even the trifling objections if prompted, but this is not a requirement in place at all times.
- 6 It should be noted that there must be an additional social factor for the selection straw man fallacy – there must not only be better cases (C's perhaps) than B's for A to address, but C's case must be one that if A is at all a responsible researcher of her general opposition's views and arguments, she would have come upon C's case and recognized it as such.

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- 7 Of course, A can still misrepresent her *selected* straw man. This will transform a selectional version of the fallacy into a representational form.
- 8 For this reason, Walton argues that the straw man fallacy is a special form of *secundum quid* (1996, 122).
- 9 The conditions for this are clearly slippery, but at least showing that A's argument does not touch arguments posed by C and D is a start. Additionally, showing that these neglected arguments are from superior sources is an option – for example, the more recent, those in better journals or more reputable media sources, from widely recognized authorities as opposed to less recognized.
- 10 Mill writes, “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that” (1992, 42). It should be noted that the intuitive force of this Millian principle partially explains the success and prevalence of the selection form of the straw man fallacy: in order to convince, one must give one's audience the impression that they have understood adequately the opposition.
- 11 See Ackerman and Fishkin (2004, 5ff.) for a quick survey of the relevant findings in the recent literature. The classic book-length study of public ignorance is Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). See also Converse (1964) and Somin (1998).
- 12 See the study by the PIPA organization, “Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War,” http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/Media_10_02_03_Report.pdf

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