

The straw man fallacy

Douglas Walton,
University of Winnipeg

Abstract

In this paper, an analysis is given of the straw man fallacy as a misrepresentation of someone's commitments in order to refute that person's argument. With this analysis a distinction can be made between straw man and other closely related fallacies such as *ad hominem*, *secundum quid* and *ad verecundiam*. When alleged cases of the straw man fallacy are evaluated, the speaker's commitment should be conceived normatively in relation to the type of conversation the speaker was supposed to be engaged in.

The straw man fallacy appears to be a modern addition to the list of traditional informal fallacies covered in the logic textbooks. No mention of this fallacy as a distinct type of fallacy in the standard treatment, or as a historical item, is made by Hamblin (1970). The first inclusion of it we can find in a textbook as an informal fallacy is in Chase (1956: 40).

Aristotle did not include the straw man fallacy in his list of sophistic refutations, although he does indicate, in several passages, an awareness of something very close to it. Evans (1977: 81) mentions that in Aristotelian dialectical refutation, where the dialectician refutes another party's views by deducing *adoxas* (implausible propositions, generally held to be false) from them: "Aristotle requires of the serious dialectician ... fidelity [according with the real or expressed views of the other party] in representing the views of others ..." Aristotle indicates in several places (*Topics* 105 b 6; *On Sophistical Refutations* 174 b 21) how this principle of fidelity for genuine refutation could be exploited in sophistic refutation, by only giving the appearance of the real view of the other party as the basis for your refutation.¹ This comes fairly close to a recognition of what would nowadays be called the straw man fallacy.

¹ In *Topics* (105 b 6), Aristotle writes of a useful method for forming propositions to refute an opponent: "choosing not only opinions actually received but also opinions which resemble these ..." In *On Sophistical Refutations* (174 b 21), Aristotle writes of the tactic of looking for contradictions between "the answerer's views and either his own statements or the views of those whose words and actions he admits to be right ..." This tactic sounds more like what we would call a form of the circumstantial *ad hominem* attack (see section 5, below). But it also has elements of awareness of the straw man tactic, as well. Further (174 b 34), Aristotle suggests, "One should also sometimes attack points other than the one mentioned, excluding it if one can make no attack on the position laid down ..." This tactic might nowadays be classified under *ignoratio elenchi* (wrong conclusion), or it could also be a reference to the straw man fallacy.

DeMorgan (1847: 281) also indicated an awareness of the kinds of faulty inferences associated with misrepresenting another party's views in argumentation. But he, like Aristotle, did not use the term 'straw man fallacy,' or some comparable expression, to classify a single category of error of this type.

Hence the historical question of how straw man first entered the logic curriculum, as a distinctive fallacy, remains open. But as shown in this paper below, it is now in (at least a few) leading textbooks, and is definitely a very important fallacy in its own right, in the logic curriculum.

In this paper, the goal is to give a practically useful analysis of the straw man fallacy that can be applied to real cases in everyday argumentation, and a theoretically clear and exact enough analysis that is adequate to distinguishing between straw man and several closely related neighboring fallacies.

1. Initial account of the fallacy

Johnson and Blair (1983: 71) define the straw man fallacy as committed "... when you misrepresent your opponent's position, attribute to that person a point of view with a set-up implausibility that you can easily demolish, then proceed to argue against the set-up version as though it were your opponent's." They cite the following three conditions, for a pair of arguers M and N , and a pair of positions, Q and R : (1) M attributes to N the view or position, Q ; (2) N 's position is not Q , but a different one, R ; and (3) M criticizes Q as though it were the view or position actually held by N . According to their analysis, the straw man fallacy can be defined, in general, by the meeting of these three characteristic conditions (1983: 74). The framework here, as Johnson and Blair put it (1983: 70), is one of an *adversary context* where two participants in dialogue, M and N , are arguing with each other. That is, one is attacking the other (has the aim of refuting or criticizing the other), and each is trying to defend his or her own position from the attacks of the other.

This is a very clear account of the logical structure of the straw man fallacy. But how does one define the variable Q , representing the arguer's position? The way advocated in this paper is to define it as the total commitment set of a participant in a dialogue. This way of defining an arguer's position utilizes the device of a *commitment set* (Hamblin 1970: 264), a set of propositions listed, e.g. on a sheet of paper, or in a computer data base, representing what an arguer in a dialogue has committed herself to, as a result of moves (like asking questions, or making assertions) she has made during the course of that dialogue.

But even if we can define 'position' normatively and abstractly, in general, it is another question to determine what it amounts to in a specific case. According to Govier (1992: 157), the straw man fallacy is committed "when a person misrepresents an argument, theory, or claim, and then, on the basis of that misrepresentation, claims to have refuted the position that he has misinterpreted." Govier brings out some of the main practical difficulties in dealing with the problem posed by the straw man fallacy

in real-life argumentation. The problem is to know, or be able to prove, that an arguer's position has been misrepresented in a given case. How should this be done? It depends on interpreting what someone means to say, on determining what their real position is on an issue. But this can be a hard determination to make, in some cases. So the second thing we need is a way of determining what an arguer's position is, or at least can fairly be interpreted to be, in a particular case where the straw man fallacy has been alleged, or is a danger.

Let us begin with a fairly standard type of case of the kind commonly found in textbook examples, as a first step towards grasping the nature of the problem involved in analyzing the straw man fallacy.

The following case is a brief instance that can be used to illustrate the gist of what is involved in this fallacy.

Case 1: Bob and Arlene are arguing about environmental laws that regulate industrial pollution, and Bob has taken a moderate "green" position. Arlene argues, "People like you want to make the planet into the pristine place it was hundreds of years ago. You preservationists don't want to let anybody do anything to the land that could possibly have ecological consequences. Therefore, what you are committed to is the elimination of all private property and all industrial manufacturing. Imagine the unemployment and social destruction of private homes implied by this."

Arlene attributes to Bob the so-called preservationist position, which is generally taken to represent an extreme version of the green position, allowing for very little to be done on preserved lands. But did Bob in fact advocate any of the viewpoints characteristic of this extreme position? There is no evidence given in the case that this is so, and in fact we are told that Bob's ecological position is a moderate green stance.

In evaluating this case, everything depends on what Bob said before in the argument, and what this discourse may rightly be taken to imply about his commitments on the subject. Let us say that in fact Bob's position was nowhere near the extreme recreation of it portrayed by Arlene's rebuttal. Here Arlene can be said to have committed the straw man fallacy by exaggerating Bob's position to make it appear much more radical than (let's presume) it really was, as Bob presented it.

Of course, to provide a more realistic case study of this fallacy, we would have to provide details of the example that recounted enough of Bob's actual wording of his earlier argumentation to provide enough evidence for us to reconstruct his stated and implied commitments. Then we would have to compare this reconstructed position with Arlene's simulated version of it. And then we would have to arrive at an evaluation of how far the one position is from the other. Textual evidence would have to support all the claims.

But this is enough for our initial account of the straw man fallacy. It has now been defined clearly enough, as an abstract logical structure, and illustrated in a graphic enough way by presenting a typical example, so that we can identify it as a specific fallacy. We now go on to study a number of borderline and more problematic cases that require further clarifications of the fallacy as a distinctive type of argumentation.

2. General positions

The first thing to be emphasized is that the given text of discourse, the exact words of a speaker (quoted in proper context), should be the ultimate evidence and guideline used to determine the arguer's position.

But what happens if we do not have a record of what the arguer actually said in the past discourse, e.g. a transcript, tape recording, etc.? Here the problem of determining a position is more acute, as Govier (1992: 157) notes:

The straw man fallacy is more difficult to detect when the views being criticized are not quoted explicitly. This happens when the positions discussed are general ones, not identified with the stated ideas of any single specific person, such as the environmentalist position on DNA research, feminism, evolutionary theory, the capitalist position on free markets, the belief in free will, and so on. In these contexts, you have to depend on your own background knowledge to determine the real context of the position.

These cases are more difficult, because a representation of an arguer's position may have to be extrapolated by presumption, on a basis of what is generally known or expected about how this position is standardly advocated by others who share roughly the same viewpoint (Walton 1992). Such interpretations, however, if not based on the arguer's exact words, as recorded, may be highly presumptive and conditional in nature, e.g. "Since she said *A* in context *C*, we may presume (by assumption), that she is also committed to *B*." By their nature, however, such inferences are tentative and subject to default (should the speaker be around to rebut them).

Chase (1956) defines the "straw man" tactic as the following kind of argument: "You take a few stray characteristics, build a dummy around them, and then briskly demolish it." (1956: 40). Chase classifies the straw man fallacy as a species of over-generalization. And we can easily see why there is a justification for seeing it this way. The straw man tactic is essentially to take some small part of an arguer's position, and then treat it as if that represented his larger position, even though it is not really representative of that larger position. It is a form of generalizing from one aspect to a larger, broader position, but not in a representative way.

In some cases, we are talking about the position a person has presumably taken on in virtue of belonging to some group. This is more complex, because although you belong to a group, like the Conservative Party, it does not follow that your views will be conservative in every respect. One problem is that you might have different subgroups, more radical and more moderate positions in the same general group identified as a position.

DeMorgan (1847) recognized this complication, and drew attention to the more subtle type of straw man fallacy where you have two different subgroups who take different subpositions within the same general position. For example, in a political debate, among those who take a broadly liberal position, you may have a group that represents the unions (a workers' group), and those who are more middle-of-the-road, and see their interests as more allied to business. The fallacy DeMorgan points out is

a kind of straw man fallacy that draws a conclusion from one premise from each group (1847: 281).

Again, as to subjects in which men go in parties, it is not very uncommon to take one premise from some individuals of a party, another from others, and to fix the logical conclusion of the two upon the whole party: when perhaps the conclusion is denied by all, some of whom deny the first premise by affirming the second, while the rest deny the second by affirming the first.

This is a subtle form of straw man fallacy that involves the notion of a subposition within a broader, or more inclusive position on an issue.

Another problem is that key words used to characterize a position are often used in such a way that they can only be defined in relation to an arguer's point of view who has already adopted a positive or negative group position. For example, if a church group describes an opponent's position as "heretical," all this really means is that the opponent's view is against the position of the church who characterized it as "heretical" in the first place.

3. Ad hominem

This brings us to a consideration of the relationship between the straw man fallacy and the *ad hominem* fallacy. Terms broadly used to define group positions that contain political and ethical implications, like 'communist' and so forth, are commonly used in *ad hominem* attacks. These terms are used (rightly or wrongly) to sum up an arguer's position, and the *ad hominem* argument then draws negative implications out of the attributed position.

The account of the *ad hominem* argument given in Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), quoted in Hamblin (1970: 160), makes it clear how this type of argument against *ex concessis* an opponent is essentially based on the opponent's position, and what is inferred from it. Locke describes the *argumentum ad hominem* as a move "to press a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions." This broad view of the *ad hominem* as an argument from an opponent's position has been extensively analyzed by Johnstone (1959).

Straw man is particularly closely related to the circumstantial type of *ad hominem* argument in many cases. Consider the following example from Walton (1989: 154).

Case 2: George: The notorious problems we have been having with postal strikes means that there is no longer reliable mail service provided by the government. I think we ought to allow private, for-profit mail-delivery companies to compete on an equal footing with the Post Office.

Bob: But George, you are a communist.

This case was used in Walton (1989) as an inconclusive but basically reasonable circumstantial *ad hominem*, on the assumption that George is an avowed communist who, in the past, has been known to base his argumentation on many standard com-

unist principles and positions. If so, Bob has a good point - how can George consistently argue for a for-profit mail system run by private enterprise, if, in the past, it is just this sort of arrangement he has consistently and vehemently argued against?

On the other hand, if one were to adopt different assumptions in describing this case, or filling it out further, it is not hard to see how it could be an instance of the straw man fallacy. Suppose, for example, that George was not really a communist at all. Or suppose that George had advocated some pro-communist views in the past, but had also taken a very mild form of communist position that left a good deal of room for private enterprise in some sectors of the economy.

This close affinity between the straw man and circumstantial *ad hominem* fallacies may be one reason why van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987: 286) categorize as a species of straw man fallacy a type of case they describe as “referring to views of the group to which the opponent belongs,” as illustrated by their example (1987: 286).

Case 3: That may be what he says now, but as a communist he naturally does not mean a word of it.

In the standard textbook treatment of fallacies, this case would normally be treated as a circumstantial type of *ad hominem* argument, perhaps even of the “poisoning the well” variety. The proponent is engaging in a personal attack on the other party’s sincerity in engaging in collaborative dialogue by arguing that, since he is a communist, you can’t really trust him to speak the truth, for he will always just revert to the communist ideology and propaganda as his method of argument.

Since this is so clearly a classical case of the *ad hominem*, why would van Eemeren and Grootendorst classify it as a case of the straw man fallacy? What is revealed here is the connection between the two fallacies. The case cited, depending on further details of the dialogue, could quite naturally involve elements of both.

The circumstantial *ad hominem* argument basically works by one party utilizing the other party’s position in a dialogue to cite some conflict between that position and what the other party presently advocates, by what she says or how she acts now, for example (Walton 1985). Thus this type of *ad hominem* attack is essentially based on some representation of the other party’s position. And hence, you can easily see that it could, in many cases, also involve the straw man argument. The straw man would be part of the means of carrying out the *ad hominem* attack.

4. Dialogue at cross purposes

Vernon and Nissen (1968) define the straw man fallacy as being committed “when a position being attacked is first stated in a distorted and hence more vulnerable form.” (1968: 160). Their analysis of the fallacy is particularly interesting, because they give a good explanation of what is basically wrong with straw man arguments, in the sense of their being obstructive or counterproductive in argumentation (1968: 160):

This kind of reasoning is not only fallacious and unfair, but may also be very unwise from a purely pragmatic point of view. The latter can be the case where political ideologies, for example, are concerned. If you base your opinion of an opposing ideology on an oversimplified and distorted version of that ideology which can easily be made to look ridiculous, then you are making the serious mistake of underestimating your opponent. Any ideology or program with a large following over a period of years must have *some* merit in order to attract and hold such a following. One cannot hope to argue effectively against such a doctrine unless he understands it well enough to be able to state it in its strongest form, for the real issues will be found only at this level.

The failure to engage with the real position of your opponent in a type of dialogue like a political debate, in a way, defeats the whole purpose of your argument. It is what Aristotle would classify as a failure of real refutation. From this perspective, the outcome is that your opponent's (real) position has not been challenged at all by your argument. It is a kind of failure of an argument to succeed in its real purpose of refuting or critically questioning the opposed point of view.

To see the importance of the straw man fallacy, it is necessary to appreciate that in many instances of argumentation used in everyday conversation, a proponent's premises used in her argument are based on the commitments of the respondent. To be successful and useful in the conversation, these propositions must really represent the position of the respondent.

For example, in a persuasion dialogue (Walton 1989: 5), one of the two main kinds of argument used is the *internal proof*, meaning proof by a proponent of a claim, constructed by inferring that claim from the other participant's concessions in a dialogue. Internal proofs can take a positive form, where the proponent has the aim of proving a claim to the respondent, based on premises that are commitments of the respondent. Or they can take a negative form, where the proponent has the aim of refuting or criticizing the respondent's position by drawing a conclusion from it that is unacceptable or questionable.

For these reasons then, one can see how a straw man argument is obstructive to, and tends to defeat the whole purpose of a persuasion dialogue. The critical discussion is a type of persuasion dialogue where the purpose is to resolve a conflict of opinions by means of reasonable argumentation. However, if arguments used by the one party do not represent the real position of the other, this will interfere with the resolution of the conflict of opinions, or even make it appear that it has been achieved when really it has not.

5. *Secundum quid*

Traditionally, according to (Hamblin 1970: 28), *secundum quid* (meaning "in a certain respect; *para to pe*, in Greek) is the fallacy of neglecting qualifications that should properly be attached to a generalization. It is the fallacy of taking a proposition that has a qualified meaning, and using it as though it were an absolute principle or generalization. In the analysis given in Walton (1992: 75-80) the *secundum quid* fallacy is shown to be a confusion between, or a trading on the confusion between, two

different types of generalizations—the absolute (universal, exceptionless) generalization, and the qualified (defeasible) generalization of a kind that is inherently open to exceptions.

It is easy to see how this fallacy relates to the straw man fallacy. The latter often works by exaggerating and absolutizing an opponent's position in argumentation, making the opponent appear to be a kind of perfectionist who takes an absolutistic view. Such a portrayal makes the opponent's position much easier to criticize or refute. Indeed, van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1987: 286) explicitly define one type of straw man fallacy as a species of distorting someone's point of view by absolutizing it, or omitting qualifications from it.

Distorting someone's standpoint

- oversimplification by omission of his nuances or qualifications
- exaggeration by absolutizations or generalizations of his statements

Certainly what this indicates is that there is a very close connection between the straw man and *secundum quid* fallacies. It indicates that, in many cases, evaluating an instance of a straw man argument depends very much on a judgment of just how absolute or qualified an arguer was, when laying out his position in the prior sequence of argumentation.

As our analysis above has already indicated, the straw man fallacy brings to the fore the applied nature of informal logic. Whether the fallacy has been committed in a given case depends on how a text of discourse in that case is interpreted, in the conversational context it was supposed to be a contribution to. This is very much a contextual question of how an argument was used in a given case.

The straw man fallacy is made even more tricky to pin down in many cases by another factor. In these cases, an arguer's unstated presumptions or nonexplicit premises or conclusions may be the only indications we have of one or more of his commitments. This brings us to the question of enthymemes, or unstated premises. When attributing enthymemes, especially to an opponent, it can be very tempting to exaggerate the opponent's position by filling in a missing premise of the form 'Generally things that have property *F* also have property *G*, subject to exceptions' with an absolute, or strict generalization, of the form 'All things that have property *F* also have property *G*, without exception.' This kind of move is a form of the *secundum quid* fallacy, meaning that qualifications have been ignored. But the same move may also be a case of the straw man fallacy, the tactic of misrepresenting an opponent's position by making it seem stronger, or stricter than it really is, in order to more easily refute it.

The same kind of tactic is involved when an argument is wrongly taken to be a different type of argument than it was meant to be, the way the speaker put it forward.

Again, the tactic is to take the argument as being of a stronger kind than the speaker really meant.

For example, suppose a proponent puts forward an argument based on an appeal to an analogy, and is correctly interpreted as claiming that two situations tend to be similar in certain respects. Suppose the analogy is imperfect, and subject to default, but nevertheless qua argument from analogy, it is a fairly reasonable argument, and not without merit. Seen as an argument based on an analogy then, this argument is rightly interpreted as inherently presumptive and defeasible, open to exceptions and qualifications. But what if a critic portrays the speaker's way of putting forward the argument, unjustifiably, as one that was meant to be deductively valid. If we accept the assumption that the missing premise in question has to make her argument deductively valid, then we will not find that missing premise in the given text of discourse, and that could seem like a decisive criticism. In the case of an argument from analogy, we would take the argument as claiming that the two situations in question must be exactly equal, in every respect, for the argument to be any good. But this attribution is based on a misinterpretation, and commits a variant of the straw man fallacy by taking the argument in a much stricter way than a charitable interpretation of how it was used in the discourse would support.

6. Limits of the straw man fallacy

We have seen that the straw man fallacy is closely related to several other important fallacies. But it is a distinctive type of fallacy in its own right, and can be distinguished from these other fallacies.

It is different from *ignoratio elenchi* because in this fallacy, it is specifically the thesis of the other (and not her whole position, or set of commitments as a whole) that is misrepresented or gotten wrong. It is different from the circumstantial *ad hominem* because this type of argument cites a conflict between an arguer's position and his specific argument of the moment, and uses this supposed conflict to attack the arguer. This tactic can often involve a straw man fallacy, but that is only part of the argument, and is not essential to the circumstantial *ad hominem* as a fallacy. See Walton (1985) for an extensive analysis of the circumstantial *ad hominem* as a distinctive type of fallacy in its own right.

Straw man is also closely related to the *secundum quid* fallacy, because in the straw man argument, as van Eemeren and Grootendorst pointed out, the attacked party's point of view is often absolutized, making it appear more extreme and simplistic than it really is. But clearly this *secundum quid* element is only one aspect of the straw man fallacy. An arguer's position in the straw man fallacy can also be misrepresented and distorted in other ways.

Wrenching from context is another one of those means used to distort an arguer's position in the straw man fallacy. In this kind of case, the superfallacy is straw man

and the subfallacy (the means of carrying out the other tactic) is the fallacy of wrenching from context.

In other cases, however, we can have instances of the fallacy of wrenching from context that do not involve the straw man fallacy. For example, if I cite the quoted opinion of some third party whose opinion is used to support some part of my point of view, but wrench it out of context in a misleading way, then I have committed the fallacy of wrenching from context. But it is not a case of the straw man fallacy, unless I have used that quoted opinion to attack or criticize your (my opponent's) position in the argument.

Of course, generally, any argument I put forward will be opposed to one of yours (if we have a conflict of opinions as the basis of the dispute). But unless the wrenching or misquotation is directly used as a misrepresentation of *your* position, the fallacy should not be classified as an instance of straw man.

Another qualification should be noted, as well. The straw man fallacy is not simply the misrepresentation of someone's position, but the use of that misrepresentation to refute or criticize that person's argument in a context of disputation. The same qualification should be made for the fallacy of wrenching from context, which should only be judged a fallacy when done to misrepresent their view as part of an argument.

Care is needed here, because there is a tendency on the part of students to identify any cases of misquotation, misrepresentation of a position, or wrenching from context, as instances of the straw man fallacy (or some related fallacy), without carefully examining the case to see how the misrepresentation has been used. To correct this tendency, it is worthwhile to remember the three-part analysis of the straw man fallacy given by Johnson and Blair in section 1, above.

Straw man is also related to another fallacy, the *argumentum ad verecundiam*. When an appeal is made to the claimed opinion of an expert as an authority to back up an argument, there is a danger that the authority may be misquoted or misinterpreted. An example of a failure to meet this requirement for a reasonable appeal to authority is given by Salmon (1963: 64).

Case 4: The authority of Einstein is sometimes summoned to support the theory that there is no such thing as right or wrong except insofar as it is relative to a particular culture. It is claimed that Einstein proved everything is relative. As a matter of fact, Einstein expounded an important physical theory of relativity, but his theory says nothing whatever about cultures or moral standards. This use of Einstein as an authority is a clear case of misinterpretation of the statements of an authority.

This type of failure is pretty close to the straw man fallacy, and could perhaps, even be thought to be a species of it. The difference is that in the straw man argument, a proponent distorts or misrepresents the position of the respondent (the opponent in the dispute). But in the variant that relates to the *ad verecundiam*, as exemplified in case 4 above, the proponent misrepresents the position of the authority whose alleged opinion is being used to back up the proponent's own argument.

In both cases, the basic underlying fault is the misrepresentation of somebody's position in relation to an argument between opposed points of view. Both are cases of misquotation or misrepresentation of the position of another participant in argumentation. But there the similarity ends. In the straw man argument, by definition, the misrepresented position of an arguer is used to attack, to criticize or refute the point of view of that arguer. In these other cases, the misquotation or misrepresentation is used for different purposes in argumentation.

Hence it is important to recognize that misquotation and other forms of misrepresenting someone's position in an argument are not always fallacies of the straw man type. Although there are similarities in the method of argument used, these failures of argumentation should be classified under the headings of fallacies or errors other than that of straw man.

7. Analysis of the fallacy

The fallaciousness of the straw man argument needs to be seen as a pragmatic failure—the problem is that such an argument goes at cross purposes to the goal of a conversational exchange. Because the deception or error may not be seen, the destruction of the argumentation in a dialogue can deeply effect a conversational exchange. But the fallacy also has a logical structure as a characteristic sequence of reasoning from premises to a conclusion.

There are three parts to the straw man fallacy. First, the structure of reasoning in the fallacy is displayed in the three-part account of the straw man fallacy given by Johnson and Blair (1983: Section 1). Second, the explanation of why the straw man type of argument interferes with the basic goal of a critical discussion, and is therefore normatively at cross purposes with this type of dialogue, is that the resolution of a critical discussion requires the use of argumentation by one party that is based on premises that represent the real position of the other party.

The precise reason why the straw man is normatively counterproductive in a critical discussion is that for the critical discussion to succeed in resolving a conflict of opinions by reasonable argumentation, it is necessary that each party argues against the other party's side by using premises that represent the commitments (position) of that other party. Otherwise the dialogue is at "cross purposes." This requirement applies to other types of dialogue, like negotiations, as well as to the critical discussion.

But there is also a third aspect needed to explain why the straw man argument is a distinctive species of fallacy in its own right. Because of the various kinds of problems and trickiness in determining what an arguer's position really is in a given case, it can be easy to get this wrong, and to mistake an arguer's real position for something else that is not her real position, but only appears to be. This is the essence of the deception or error inherent in the straw man fallacy as a distinctive type of sophisticated tactic.

The key here is the realization that attacking an opponent in argumentation, by drawing negative implications from her position on the issue of the dispute, is inherently reasonable as a type of argument.² But it can go wrong in a number of ways, resulting in a sophistical refutation or fallacy. One of these ways is to get the premise wrong, by distorting or misrepresenting that arguer's position, even though the negative conclusion drawn may be by a valid inference. It is this deceptive shift that is the essence of the straw man fallacy.

The straw man fallacy is committed where the proponent in a critical discussion misrepresents the position of the respondent with a simulated position, in order to appear to refute the respondent by carrying out a refutation of the simulated position. This tactic typically works by attributing to the respondent a simulated position that is implausible and easy to refute, and then, the simulated position is shown to have some absurd or unacceptable consequence that is a sufficient basis for repudiating it. The pretense or deception is to argue against the simulated position as though it really were the respondent's position that he has maintained or supported judging by his discourse in the previous sequence of dialogue. What is suggested then is that the arguer's real position implies the absurd consequence. Thus it appears that the real position has been refuted by *modus tollens*, the consequence being false. Thus the fallacy involves a misrepresentation of an arguer's real position or point of view, and the use of that misrepresentation to give the false appearance that the arguer has been refuted by valid reasoning.

If the respondent is actually present when the charge of fallacy is to be evaluated, then the case is quite different from the situation where he is not available for comment. If he is present, then he is in a privileged position to pronounce on what his present position is on the issue. However, even if he is present, he is still bound by what he said before, when we determine what his commitments were, as expressed at that point in the dialogue.

In a case where the respondent is present, it may not be too difficult for him to reply to the charge of fallacy by insisting that his position is not what the proponent has pictured it as. If the proponent continues to press the charge, the two can resolve the problem by going back over the record what the respondent actually said in the previous dialogue (to the extent that this was recorded, or can be recalled), and discuss exactly what his commitments on the issue should be taken to be, given what is now known of his remarks at the time.

It is important to realize that the job of determining what an arguer's commitments really are, or may fairly be taken to be, in a real case, is by no means trivial. Indeed, in some cases, this judgment itself can be a subject of intense argument between two parties. We are all familiar with cases of familiar disputes where one party claims, "You remember when you said that!" and the other party replies, "No, I never said

² Probably the most familiar kind of case in modern logic would be the kind of argument called *reductio ad absurdum*.

that!" If the conversation was never witnessed or recorded, or if there is no other record of it, independent of the sayso of the two primary disputants, the issue may not even be possible to resolve.

In a normative (ideal) model of dialogue, commitments are recorded or retained in a commitment store (Hamblin 1970: 264). In the real world of everyday argumentation however, disputes can arise because this is in fact not the case, or because memory, or even a written transcript, is subject to dispute.

If the respondent is not present, as is typically the case with the kinds of cases cited as examples of the fallacy in the logic textbooks, and evaluated in a logic class, or case study, then the evaluators should be required to go very strictly by the existing discourse, using the principle of charity in fairly interpreting that text of discourse. Here, the respondent must be given the benefit of the doubt, where competing interpretations may be more or less plausible.

Analyzing and evaluating an allegation of straw man fallacy in a particular instance comes down to a question of determining fairly, by the evidence, what the commitments of a respondent can fairly be taken to amount to as explicit propositions. This judgment is arrived at by examining what was said, and how it was said, in the given context of dialogue. It depends on what type of conversation the speaker was supposed to be engaged in, when he put his original argument forward. If it was a critical discussion, then the first thing that needs to be determined is what thesis the speaker was supposed to be arguing for. Another thing of importance may be how the speaker has qualified his support for that thesis. A third factor in determining a speaker's commitments is the detailed, more localized record of what the speaker actually said as he developed his point of view, and argued against the other party's opposed point of view in the dialogue.

Commitment, as a critical and normative concept appropriate for use in evaluating cases of alleged fallacies, is not a psychological notion. It should be conceived normatively in relation to the requirements of the type of dialogue a speaker is supposed to be engaging in. There are various types of dialogue with distinctive goals and other features that define them as familiar contexts of conversation. See Hamblin (1970), van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), and Walton (1992). The concept of commitment is precisely defined for several different types of dialogue in which argumentation takes place by Walton and Krabbe (1994).

The key to evaluating particular cases where the straw man fallacy is alleged to have been committed is to be sought in the evidence furnished by the text of discourse and the context of dialogue, as known in that case. Of course, in some cases, there is not enough evidence to determine what an arguer's position really is, or may fairly be taken to be. In these cases, the best evaluation should be a conditional one, and the charge of fallacy judged relative to the given evidence.

However, as we have shown, the normative tools for aiding us to evaluate evidence of this kind in judging cases of the straw man fallacy have now been well enough developed to yield a clear and useful analysis of this fallacy.

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