

CRITICAL THINKING – HANDOUT 4 – THE STRAWMAN FALLACY

1. THE STRAWMAN FALLACY

Imagine two different fights. In the first fight, you are up against a flesh-and-blood human being who won't let you hit them. You throw a punch, but they move out of the way and sock you in your jaw. In the second fight, you are up against a straw man; he looks a lot like the human being but he's filled with straw. You throw a punch, *bang* it connects, and the strawman falls down for the count. You walk away the victor!

A crucial first step in the intelligent examination of an argument involves getting clear about what the argument is—what its premises and conclusions are and how these premises are used to support the conclusion. Often times, however, this step is blatantly disregarded.

A **strawman fallacy** is a fallacy where an individual distorts an argument by:

- step #1: *identifying* a position that is supported by reasons (either explicitly or implicitly)
- step #2: *distorting* that position either by doing at least one of the following:
 - (i) distorting the reasons given (or typically given) in its support so that the reasons no longer support the conclusion or
 - (ii) distorting the conclusion in a way that makes the position easier to criticize.
- step #3: *criticizing* the distorted version of the argument, and
- step #4: *concluding* that the criticisms which apply to the distorted version apply to the original position.

Simple Example of the Strawman Fallacy

- 1 John: Marijuana should be legalized for adults over the age of 21.
- 2 Liz: John proposes that marijuana should be legalized *for everyone*.
- 3 Liz: Studies show that who smoke large amounts of marijuana as adolescents are more likely to be depressed. Therefore, John's proposal to legalize marijuana is short-sided.

What's happened in the above argument? First, Liz weakened John's argument by making it more extreme. While John asserts that marijuana should be legalized for adults over 21, Liz distorts his position by making it acceptable for *everyone* to use marijuana. Next, Liz criticizes the weakened argument by showing a negative consequence for allowing adolescents to smoke marijuana. Finally, she concludes that John's argument/position is bad.

The strawman fallacy is a fallacious form of reasoning because it purports to show that an argument for position **A** is *deficient* in some way, but what it actually shows is that a different, less convincing position **B** is deficient.

General Pattern of the Strawman Fallacy

- 1 John argues for A, which contains certain key features *x, y, z*.
- 2 Liz substitutes A with B, where B is a distortion of *x, y, z* with features *a, b, c*, which are features similar to *x, y, z*, but which weaken the support for A.
- 3 Liz criticizes B and concludes that A is deficient.

How to Commit Your Own Strawman Fallacy	
1	Find a position, theory, view that you dislike and distort it so that it is less plausible than it really is.
2	Criticize this distorted and less plausible position.
3	Act like your criticisms of the distorted position undermine the undistorted position.

EXERCISE SET #1

A.

1. Write your own example of a strawman fallacy.
2. As long as you have some knowledge of a topic, you turn any position into a straw man, and so can commit the strawman fallacy about any possible issue. To test this, first, ask a friend to state their view on any topic. Next, distort that position in some way by exaggerating that position or by claiming that there is only one reason in support of such a position (and then cite some crazy reason). Once you have done that, criticize that position, i.e. commit the strawman fallacy.

B. In what follows, identify whether any of the following passages commit the strawman fallacy. If a strawman fallacy is committed, explain the distortion involved.

- 1.*The whole assumption that dogs make better pets than cats rests on the assumption that dogs are better Samurai warrior than cats. This would be a very good argument, if only it were true! Have you seen a dog hold a Samurai sword? They always drop it. As this is clear evidence that dogs are not better Samurai warriors than cats, we can accept the conclusion that cats make better pets than dogs.
2. Penn State students believe Joe Paterno was a great man and would never do anything wrong. But why do they think this. Well, they think this solely because (i) he won many games as Penn State's head coach, (ii) his iconic look is plastered all throughout State College, and (iii) the many years he has been at Penn State. Unfortunately for the students at Penn State, Joe Paterno is not as holy as people take him to be as he was involved (even if only partially) in the child abuse scandal.
3. The reason I don't get along with geeks is not because I'm a judgmental person, but because they all insist doing math is the highest form of entertainment. How can I put up with that? People whose favorite activity is math are completely unbearable.
4. While I do believe Tony is a great cook, his claim to being "the best" at Italian cooking has little warrant. I mean, really, did you try his egg roll, hot dog, and taco? Literally all of them had made me puke.
- 5.* The other day Jesse told me that driving while talking on the phone is not a big deal since drivers found talking on the phone while driving compose only of a small percent of car accidents that result in serious injury or fatality. First of all, Jesse is an idiot and if you believe him, then you are an idiot. Secondly, what he says could not be further from the truth. I happened to do some research and found 51% of car accidents involve at least one person using a phone in some way.
6. Crazy liberals advocating for equality in marriage should be ignored. They want to let men marry men; women marry women and even condone bestiality. We can't let them ruin the most sacred of sacraments with their all-accepting hippie attitudes.
7. A number of parents have recently complained that the food available at Noll High contains too much salt and too many preservatives. They have provisionally put forward a plan that would require Noll High to offer a wider and healthier assortment of food. But, I've heard this all before, and I, for one, will not stand aside and watch my child become undernourished because they are only eating vegetables and fruit. Children need a well-balanced diet that includes other necessary proteins found in meat, nuts or breads.

2. HOW TO CRITICIZE STRAWMAN FALLACIES & HOW TO KEEP FROM COMMITTING THEM

In debate, if you commit the strawman fallacy, you open yourself up to failing to understand a position.

Person A: I think position P for reasons x, y, and z.

You: Position P-minus is bad for reasons a, b, and c.

Person A: Yes, thank you very much for criticizing a position (P-minus) that no one holds, but I am arguing for P, not P-minus.

In some cases this has negative *practical* consequences. What are these?

To guard against committing the strawman fallacy, many hold the principle that any criticism you level at a position *should only be directed at the strongest available argument that can be given in support of that position*. This principle is known as granting the **principle of charity**.

Why grant the principle of charity?

Reason #1: It can give you an argumentative advantage.

Suppose you are in a debate, and your opponent presents position **A**. You could (i) turn **A** into a straw man and then attack **A** or (ii) direct a criticism at the strongest possible version of **A**.

- Suppose you turn **A** into a straw man, and then attack **A**. Your opponent can simply respond, “Your criticisms show that you don’t understand **A**.”
- Suppose you direct a legitimate criticism at the strongest possible version of **A**. If your opponent plans on addressing your criticism, then they have to *deal with your criticism* since changing their position would commit them to accepting a weaker version of **A**.

Reason #2: It is the Rational Method for Deciding!

Suppose you are *undecided* about an issue. You cannot choose between two positions **A** and **B**. You plan on considering the various reasons given in support of an argument. Here are your options:

	strongest for B	weakest for B
strongest for A	strongest for A & B	strongest for A, weakest for B
weakest for A	weakest for A, strongest for B	weakest for A, weakest for B.

Classroom Activity:

In a small group, take three minutes to discuss why else you might grant the principle of charity. In what contexts, e.g. legal, relationships, with your employer, with your employees, should you instructor grant it when grading your work? Are there any situations where you shouldn’t apply this principle?

3. TYPES OF STRAWMAN FALLACIES

In what follows, four different versions of the straw man fallacy are presented. Keep in mind that these are not mutually exclusive.

3.1 THE EXTREME STRAW MAN

A common way that a straw man is formed is by making the position *more extreme*. One way to do this is to make a position apply more generally than it does. For example, consider the following two propositions:

- (1) All abortions are wrong.
- (2) Some abortions are wrong.

Position (1) is more difficult to defend than position (2) from the standpoint that it does not make any exceptions and makes itself open to more counterexamples. In order to refute (1), all that is needed is a **single example** of an abortion that is *not wrong*. In contrast, in order to refute (2), it is necessary to show that **every example** of an abortion is *wrong*. Thus, one way that a position **A** gets turned into straw man is to change **A** from a position that says *Some P's are Q's* to one that says *All P's are Q's*.

Argument #1: Harder to Attack	Argument #2: Easier to Attack
P1: Even if the fetus is not a person, the practice of sex-selection abortion leads to an increase in violence toward women.	P1: Even if the fetus is not a person, the practice of sex-selection abortion leads to an increase in violence toward women.
P2: Violence toward women is wrong.	P2: Violence toward women is wrong.
C: Therefore, some abortions are wrong.	C: Therefore, all abortions are wrong.

Since Argument #1 is more difficult to criticize, the temptation is to distort it into Argument #2, then criticize that argument but pretend as though that the criticisms apply to Argument #1. Obviously, when the straw man fallacy is committed in everyday life, it isn't this blatant.

John: Even if the fetus is not a person, the practice of sex-selection abortion leads to an increase in violence toward women. I think violence toward women should be prohibited and so I am pro-choice.

Liz: It is not necessarily the case that sex-selection abortion leads to an increase in violence toward women. Of course violence toward women should be prohibited but that does not mean that abortion isn't morally wrong.

It is not always the case that you commit the strawman fallacy by considering one and only one position. For example, a strawman fallacy is an effective way to make your position *sound* like the best alternative among a sea of bad options that no one really holds. Here is an example:

We see that, above all, in the recent debate — how the recent debate has obscured the truth and sends people into opposite and absolutist ends. On the one side of the spectrum, there are those who make little allowance for the unique challenges posed by terrorism, and would almost never put national security over transparency. And on the other end of the spectrum, there are those who embrace a view that can be summarized in two words: “Anything goes.” Their arguments suggest that the ends of fighting terrorism can be used to justify any means, and that the President should have blanket authority to do whatever he wants — provided it is a President with whom they agree. Both sides may be sincere in their views, but neither side is right. The American people are not absolutist, and they don't elect us to impose a rigid ideology on our problems.

– Barack Obama “Remarks by the President on National Security”, May, 21, 2009

It is also important to note that a single argument can contain multiple strawman fallacies. You can weaken your opponents reasons while simultaneously making their conclusion more extreme. How many instances of the strawman fallacy can you find in the following passage:

Nowhere else in the world are so many weapons in circulation as in the US. In no other country are citizens as well armed. The U.S. Constitution guarantees every American the right to move about in public as though he or she is John Wayne in person. One can see it as a national tradition. But this martial approach to liberty is also a relic of the past and one that is out of step with the times. Every 20 minutes, a U.S. citizen is murdered by a firearm. American schoolchildren are killed by bullets 10 times more often than in comparable industrialized countries. Such numbers speak for themselves.

- From Germany's *Stuttgarter Zeitung*

3.2 THE FALSE REPRESENTATIVE STRAW MAN

Another way that straw man is formed is to take a person **P** who holds an implausible version **E** of a position **A** and then treat **E** as being representative of position **A**.

Example of the False Representative Strawman Fallacy

JOHN: I am Pro-Life and against *all* abortions under *any* circumstance whatsoever.

Why? Well, my reason is simply this: *it is wrong!*

LIZ: People who are Pro-Life are against abortions. For example, John says that he is against all abortions under any circumstance whatsoever.

LIZ: Pro-Life is a faulty position since it does not consider extreme scenarios where abortions may be acceptable, e.g. when a mother's life is at risk or the case of twins where aborting one child would save the life of the other.

What is being distorted here is not John's position. John actually holds an extreme view. Instead, John is taken Liz treats John as *the* representative of the Pro-Life position, but John's stance on abortion is an extreme version of that position.

Example of the False Representative Strawman Fallacy

John: I'm not sure who I should vote for this year. Any thoughts?

LIZ: Yes, don't vote for any republican. Why? well, consider republican party candidate Eleanor O'Donnell. She opposes abortion in cases of rape and incest. That is typical of republicans, they are inflexible and behind the times.

3.3 THE EARLY-BIRD STRAW MAN

Another way that straw man is formed is to take an early version **E** of a position that has undergone development **A** and then treat **E** as though it **A**.

Example of the Early-Bird Strawman Fallacy

1 John: Evolution is true.

2 Liz: If you believe in evolution, then you must accept the work of Charles Darwin. Ahem, that is you accept "Darwinian evolution."

3 Liz: But, Darwin thought that parents passed hereditary traits to their offspring by transmitting particles called "gemmules" but since no real scientist believes in this anymore evolution is clearly false.

In the above example, Liz treats Darwin's work as representative of modern proponents of evolution. But this is a straw man as Darwin's theory of evolution is an early version of a theory that has undergone significant development since Darwin first proposed the theory.

This type of straw man can be effective when you don't know a lot about the development of a theory but you are able to identify some famous or early representative of it.

People tend to know who Darwin is but not know how the theory of evolution developed or know any other evolutionary biologists.

3.4 OUT-OF-CONTEXT STRAWMAN FALLACY

Context makes a difference in how we interpret what someone is *literally saying* and what they *mean* when they say something. Here are some examples:

Example #1:

Jon: *Honey, did you leave the backdoor open?* (shouted in an angry tone with a furrowed brow and clenched fists)

Jon: *Honey, did you leave the backdoor open?* (said in a worried tone with eyes wide open and visibly sweating in fear)

Example #2:

Jon: There is the door (said in the midst of a heated argument)

Jon: There is the door (said in the midst of a fire)

Jon: There is the door (said at a hardware store in search of the perfect door).

As context shapes how we interpret language, and we use language to put forward different positions, another way the strawman fallacy gets deployed is when a person **P** who is a representative of a position **A** is quoted as saying “A” out of context so that the presentation of **A** is weaker, and so it can be quickly attacked.

Context #1: Interview

Liz the Reporter: Senator Santellano, do you support increased gun-control legislation?

Senator Santellano: Let me say that I believe in the Constitution and the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution says that we have the right to bear arms. Now, I’ve fought to protect these rights. I’ve killed and would kill to protect these rights. You know, I fought in Iraq to protect a country that I love. But, I think it is important to understand that these rights have to be balanced against another right I think we have, the right to feel safe, the right to security, the right to send your kids to school and not have to worry if they are going to be killed by someone with an assault rifle. So, yes, I do support increased gun-control legislation.

Context #2: Nightly News

Liz: When I sat down with Senator Santellano this morning, I asked him a simple question and I was horrified when I heard his answer. *Play the clip!*

Video Clip:

Liz the Reporter: Senator Santellano, do you support increased gun-control legislation?

Senator Santellano: I believe in the Constitution and the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution says that we have the right to bear arms. Now, I’ve fought to protect these rights. **I’ve killed and would kill to protect these rights.**

Context #3: Political Ad

A vote for Senator Perez is a vote for peace and prosperity. He will work hard with opposing politicians to enact change for the better. His opponent, Sen. Santellano, however, *cut to audio clip* “I’ve killed and would kill.”

Exercise Set #2:

- 1.* I respect all religions, but as a Christian, how can you condone the slavery and misogyny that is found in the Old Testament? Do you have no morals? I should mention again I’m a tolerant atheist.
- 2.* If Jimmy argues he's the smartest guy in Astronomy 001, then I'm the King of England. How dare he, with the knowledge that there are over seven billion people in the world. There are people such as Hawkings, who discovered some... astronomy stuff... Anyways, you get my point. So I may not have scored higher than him on the Astronomy midterm, but it’s clear that I’m smarter, since he makes such idiotic claims.

Exercise Set #3

1. On 26 February 2012 George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon Martin. The police arrived at the scene after the shooting, took Zimmerman into custody, questioned for approximately five hours, and treated him head wounds. Zimmerman was released from custody when it was decided that there was no evidence that Zimmerman had *not* acted in self-defense. News of Zimmerman’s release sparked public outcry. The Martin family believed that Zimmerman did not act in self-defense and that Martin had been a victim of racial profiling.¹

One contentious issue involved media coverage of the Martin case. Before the shooting, Zimmerman had called the police. Consider the following two excerpts from NBC news and then a transcript of the Zimmerman’s call to the police dispatcher. Once you have completed this, state whether you think NBC News has committed the out-of-context strawman fallacy.

<p>Excerpt #1: NBC News (19 March 2012): Zimmerman: There is a real suspicious guy. Ah, this guy looks like he is up to no good or he is on drugs or something. He looks black. Dispatcher: Are you following him? Zimmerman: Yeah. Dispatcher: Ok, we don’t need you to do that. Zimmerman: Okay.</p> <p>Excerpt #2: NBC News (19 March 2012): Zimmerman: This guy looks like he’s up to no good or on drugs or something. He’s got his hand in his waistband. And he’s a black male.</p> <p>Excerpt #2: NBC News (22 March 2012): Luciano: Law students from across Florida</p>	<p>Excerpt of Transcript of 911 Call. Zimmerman to Police Dispatcher</p> <p>Dispatcher: Sanford Police Department. ... Zimmerman: Hey we've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy, uh, [near] Retreat View Circle, um, the best address I can give you is 111 Retreat View Circle. This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about. Dispatcher: OK, and this guy is he white, black, or Hispanic? Zimmerman: He looks black. Dispatcher: Did you see what he was wearing? Zimmerman: Yeah. A dark hoodie, like a grey hoodie, and either jeans or sweatpants and white</p>
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¹ Two Neighbors Testify in George Zimmerman Trial; Interview with Trayvon's Stepmother (28 June 2012). <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1306/28/acd.01.html>

demanded justice outside the prosecutor's office.
Unidentified Woman: We want an arrest now. We won't wait.

Luciano: They want George Zimmerman arrested for the deadly shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, as the teen walked through this gated community near Orlando three weeks ago. Zimmerman, a Neighborhood Watch volunteer, called 911 reporting, quote, "a suspicious-looking guy."

(Clip from 911 call)

ZIMMERMAN: This guys looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something. He's got his hands in his waistband and he's a black male.
Unidentified 911 Operator #1: Are you following him?
ZIMMERMAN: Yeah.
Operator #1: OK, we don't need you to do that.

(End of clip)

Excerpt #2: NBC News (27 March 2012):

ALLEN: One by one, civil rights activists warned Sanford, the entire world is watching.
AL SHARPTON (MSNBC Host): For one man, would you risk the reputation of a whole city? Zimmerman is not worth the history of this city. You need to arrest him and redeem this city right now.

(Clip from 911 call)

Mr. GEORGE ZIMMERMAN: This guy looks like he's up to no good. He looks black.
Unidentified 911 Operator: Did you see what he was wearing?
Mr. ZIMMERMAN: Yeah. A dark hoodie.

(End of clip)

ALLEN: This case drew national attention after 911 tapes were released from the night Zimmerman, a Neighborhood Watch volunteer, shot and killed Martin, an unarmed teenager.

tennis shoes. He's [unintelligible], he was just staring...

Dispatcher: OK, he's just walking around the area...

Zimmerman: ...looking at all the houses.

Dispatcher: OK...

Zimmerman: Now he's just staring at me.

Dispatcher: OK—you said it's 1111 Retreat View? Or 111?

Zimmerman: That's the clubhouse...

Dispatcher: That's the clubhouse, do you know what the—he's near the clubhouse right now?

Zimmerman: Yeah, now he's coming towards me.

Dispatcher: OK.

Zimmerman: He's got his hand in his waistband. And he's a black male.

Dispatcher: How old would you say he looks?

Zimmerman: He's got button on his shirt, late teens.

Dispatcher: Late teens ok.

Zimmerman: Somethings wrong with him. Yup, he's coming to check me out, he's got something in his hands, I don't know what his deal is.

Dispatcher: Just let me know if he does anything ok

Zimmerman: How long until you get an officer over here?

Dispatcher: Yeah we've got someone on the way, just let me know if this guy does anything else.

Zimmerman: Okay. These assholes they always get away. When you come to the clubhouse you come straight in and make a left. Actually you would go past the clubhouse.

Dispatcher: So it's on the lefthand side from the clubhouse?

Zimmerman: No you go in straight through the entrance and then you make a left...uh you go straight in, don't turn, and make a left. Shit he's running.

Dispatcher: He's running? Which way is he running?

Zimmerman: Down towards the other entrance to the neighborhood.

Dispatcher: Which entrance is that that he's heading towards?

Zimmerman: The back entrance...fucking [unintelligible]

Dispatcher: Are you following him?

Zimmerman: Yeah

Dispatcher: Ok, we don't need you to do that.

2. Upon being found not guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter. George Zimmerman filed suit against NBC Universal Media, LLC, et al. for defamation of character. Zimmerman claims that NBC News edited his call with the police dispatcher so as to depict him as a racial profiler. Zimmerman claims that the defendants knew “when they created, broadcast, and rebroadcast the manipulated audio and the false statements about the recordings’ contents that the entire basis of their reporting was manifestly improper, a violation of journalistic ethics, and was certain to cause not just severe emotional distress to Zimmerman and damage to his reputation, but also threats to his life and calls for criminal prosecution” (Zimmerman v. NBC, p.5). Zimmerman claims that these death threats and bounties put on his life have (i) forced him to live in hiding wearing a bullet proof vest, (ii) have caused him severe and permanent emotional injuries, and (iii) have destroyed his prospects for a reasonable social life.

In response, NBC has claimed that this manipulated audio was not done with intent to hurt Zimmerman, but was a “mistake” and “not deliberate.” They have since fired Luciano and Burnside for manipulation of the audio.

Consider the charge for defamation of character:

Defamation of Character

- (i) the defendant published a false statement;
- (ii) the false statement is about the plaintiff;
- (iii) the false statement was to a third party;
- (iv) the falsity of the statement caused injury to the plaintiff; and,
- (v) the false statement was published with negligence² by the defendant.

First, does NBC’s intentions factor into whether they are guilty of defamation? Second, is NBC guilty? Third, how does the Zimmerman-NBC show that there are practical consequences associated with not committing the strawman fallacy?

² In order to show negligence, the plaintiff must show that the defendant published the false statement without a reasonable level of caution. That is, did the defendant take all of the steps necessary to determine that the statement was true. Factors relevant for determining whether a reasonable degree of caution was taken involve: the amount of time spent researching, the trustworthiness of the sources used, whether there was any attempt made to verify questionable statements, whether the defendant appropriate journalistic practices.