

May 22nd, 9:00 AM - May 25th, 5:00 PM

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Freeman, James B., "Commentary on: Scott Aikin and John Casey's "Don't feed the trolls: Straw men and iron men"" (2013). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 6.

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# Commentary on: Scott Aikin and John Casey's "Don't feed the trolls: Straw men and iron men"

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Aikin and Casey are continuing the development of fallacy theory in two ways frequently encountered in recent developments: They identify schemes not recognized before and they argue that some schemes may have instances which are not fallacious. Thus beside the familiar straw man, they identify the weak man and the hollow man. They regard these two patterns together with the standard view of the straw man appeal, which they call the representational view, as all varieties of a single argumentation scheme. All three, they claim, can have non-fallacious instances. To establish this, they ask us to consider instances. For the traditional straw man, they cite the following:

(1) Music teacher to student: you need to work on your intonation. At the moment it sounds like a tortured cat.

No doubt, the teacher is using exaggeration to make her point, and the traditional straw man may similarly use exaggeration to distort an argument. No doubt the teacher's exaggeration may have positive pedagogical effect. But I am not convinced that her statement is a non-fallacious instance of the traditional straw man. The student has not presented an *argument* through her intonation. By contrast, the traditional straw man attacks a misrepresentation of an *argument*.

I am also not convinced that the example to show there are non-fallacious instances of the weak man appeal makes its point. Brad and Angelina admit that there are various arguments against gay marriage. One is considered:

(2) If homosexuals are allowed to marry, then nothing would prevent the proponent of this argument to marry his box turtle.

Now this argument has to be fleshed out, for in itself we have just a conditional statement. But surely the proponent expects his audience to agree that marrying one's box turtle is absurd and to infer from that statement and the conditional that gay marriage should not be legalized. Now there is nothing fallacious in pointing out that the conditional is unacceptable. Indeed making that judgment is part of argument evaluation. But I do not see that Brad or Angelina have inferred that the ridiculousness of this argument means that all arguments for gay marriage are

ridiculous. Yet for weak man, the refutation of one bad argument is taken to mean that all additional arguments or reasons are bad.

Turning to the hollow man argument, remember that to use this appeal, “one invents an entirely fictitious and decisively silly position, attributes it to a purportedly real but vaguely defined opponent, knocks it down, and therefore suggests the opposition isn’t worthy of rational discussion.” Aikin and Casey point out that introductory logic texts are full of examples of arguments so fallacious as to be silly. But it is not obvious that these examples are put forward to suggest that some opposition is not worthy of serious consideration. Indeed, they are put forward to illustrate a pattern of bad reasoning and to facilitate its recognition. But then how are these textbook examples instances of the hollow man appeal? Aikin and Casey have built discrediting the opposition into the very definition of the pattern for which they are intending to present non-fallacious instances through indicating textbook examples of fallacies.

After discussing three varieties of the straw man appeal, Aikin and Casey turn to iron man arguments, which they regard as a related class. Such arguments involve “a charitable distortion to present an unserious arguer as serious.” Here again, I have trouble seeing how their examples fit this definition. In the first, Leslie Stahl has asked Eric Cantor to explain how Reagan’s raising taxes is compatible with the current Republican view never to raise taxes. Cantor has replied that Reagan never raised taxes and his spokesperson claimed that Stahl did not have her facts right. The blogger Jim Hoft points out that the overall tax rate went down during Reagan’s presidency. How does this show that either Cantor or his spokesperson were unserious and Hoft was trying to portray them as serious? Cantor and his spokesperson may have been factually incorrect, but how does Hoft’s presenting facts which will put Reagan’s tax cuts in a very different light rehabilitate them as *serious*? In the Westboro Baptist Church example, how does Priscilla’s suggestion that these extremists may nonetheless have a legitimate point distort their position or relieve us of not having to discuss their particular arguments or evaluate their egregious behavior? In the case of Philosophy Student I, how does a professor’s suggesting the student’s view makes a suggestion which he may not have intended but which could improve his argument if developed distort the student’s view to make him seem a serious arguer when he was not serious? With Philosophy Student II, no reply by the professor is reported. So how has there been distortion of any off the wall view to make the student seem serious?

If the instructor took Philosophy student II’s view seriously and spent much time with it, the instructor might not be making good use of class time. In that case, “iron manning” would have unwarranted practical consequences. If someone added a point which might improve our view of one participant’s discussion and tend to make us suspicious of another’s position, is that necessarily a bad thing? Does that necessarily mean taking a view over-seriously? If trolls are uninformed and contribute with “unhinged criticism,” it may be wise not to take them seriously, not to feed the trolls. But except possibly with Philosophy student II, where there is no reply, I do not see that these examples of iron manning involve feeding the trolls. One can certainly agree with Aikin and Casey’s final summation that “sometimes feeding the trolls is (a) a waste of time and energy, and (b) it ultimately isn’t

anything but bad for the way we argue,” but I do not see that their examples illustrate feeding trolls. More seriously, how have they shown that iron manning invites argumentation which fails to have acceptable premises or adequate, i.e. relevant and sufficiently strong, connections between premises and the conclusion? But perhaps these are the wrong questions to ask. If iron man arguments involve the mistake of including arguments deserving exclusion, as Aikin and Casey conclude, does not the problem then constitute not a logical but rather a dialectical fallacy? This opens up a whole new question for Aikin and Casey’s investigation: How do the fallacious instances of straw man, weak man, hollow man, and iron man violate dialectical rules, e.g. pragma-dialectical rules, of procedure in argumentative situations? I commend this question to them.