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Metalinguistic Disagreements, Underdetermination and the Straw Man Fallacy: Toward Meaning Argumentativism

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Abstract: The goal of this paper is to critically analyze some of the dubious assumptions about language and meaning hidden in the dominant accounts of the straw man fallacy. I will argue that against the background of the resurgent conception of language as an underdetermined and in-principle negotiable entity (Dorr & Hawthorne, 2014; Ludlow, 2014; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, 2019), some alleged straw man attacks are better seen as reasonable moves in the metalinguistic disagreements permeating our ordinary argumentative practice.

Keywords: Dialectic, fallacies, meaning underdetermination, metalinguistic disagreements, semantics of arguments, the straw man fallacy, verbal disputes

1. Introduction

The straw man fallacy is typically defined as a misrepresentation of a discussant's arguments, and the resulting misattribution of their commitments, in order to easier attack and rebut them (Aikin & Casey, 2011, 2016; Lewiński, 2011; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Oswald & Lewiński, 2014; de Saussure, 2018; Schumann, Zufferey, & Oswald, 2019; Talisse & Aikin, 2006; Walton, 1996). The basic rationale behind identifying this fallacy—thou shalt not distort thy neighbour's position—has been well-justified in any dialectical approach to argumentation at least since Plato's *Euthyphro*: if the meanings of the terms and sentences used are not well-defined and consistently used by both discussants, any critical, dialectical testing of their opposing positions will turn out to be bogus, futile, or merely verbal at best.

The goal of this paper is to critically analyze some of the assumptions about language hidden in the dominant dialectical view on the straw man fallacy. *Misrepresentation* presupposes there exists *a* (or even *the*) proper representation of what an arguer said, for instance resorting to conventions of usage or speaker intentions. However, given the recently resurging conception of language as an underdetermined and in-principle negotiable entity (Allott & Textor, 2012; Burgess & Plunkett, 2013; Dorr & Hawthorne, 2014; Ludlow, 2014; Plunkett, 2015; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, 2019), the straw man seems to be part and parcel of many of the metalinguistic disagreements we have in our ordinary argumentative practice. The paper will clean up some of the confusions by sketching the possible criteria for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate forms of metalinguistic disagreements.

To start with, is there anything *scholarly* to be said about the straw man? It is a term commonly used in ordinary English, it is about argumentation, it is, arguably, a fallacy, and so argumentation scholars are surely supposed to say something about it. But can they say something *substantive* that goes beyond the ordinary, folk treatment? Perhaps I will spoil the fun now, but my argument, while critical, will end with the conclusion that they can, and even should. Only then will I be able to move to my second point, that of the dialectical background of the straw man, namely, of the extent to which hard dialectical questioning can be seen as strawmanning one's

opponent. Does being a sharp and relentless critic—a dialectical virtue recognized since Socratic *elenchus*—not violate another dialectical virtue of being charitable to one’s opponent (see esp. Aikin & Casey, 2016)? And even if it doesn’t, how can we distinguish between harsh and even uncomfortable, but altogether reasonable, argumentative interrogation from irrelevant nit-picking, quibbling, or “just playing with words,” to use a common expression for dialectical exasperation?

2. Is straw man a straw concept?

My digital *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me under the ‘straw man’ entry that it is “an intentionally misrepresented proposition that is set up because it is easier to defeat than an opponent’s real argument.” A lot can be said about this definition. First, this definition is replete with complicated words, such as “intentionally,” “proposition,” and “because.” Is straw man committed *exclusively* when one advances a fishy “proposition” “because” of one’s “intention” to more easily defeat an opponent’s argument? I don’t think so—see below for details. Second, it is replete with *very* complicated words, such as “real argument” and “misrepresented.” I think we all get the point here. There are some things we say or at least convey in our arguments—and other things we don’t convey, let alone explicitly say. Examples abound, and these are the examples typically given in textbooks on fallacies. Many of them are good, intelligent, even realistic examples. But often things are not so simple. Especially, claiming that there are things such as “real arguments” or “words which mean what they mean”—while possibly useful for introductory pedagogical or encyclopedic purposes—is either oblivious to or iconoclastic of the entire tradition of semantics and pragmatics. It is, then, surely something to be investigated—and, indeed, below I will focus on just that.

However, a third notable feature of the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition needs to be noted first: no mention of ‘fallacy’ is included there, although it can perhaps be easily inferred as an offense against the “real argument.” Fallacies are, in an important sense, simply bad arguments which are also characteristically treacherous, in that they hide their own badness (Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Oswald & Lewiński, 2014). As such, their treatment is, perhaps necessarily so, parasitic on the treatment of good arguments and can never stand on its own: “There *is* no such thing as a classification of the ways in which men may arrive at an error: it is much to be doubted whether there ever *can be*” (De Morgan, 1847, p. 237; as cited in Hansen, 2002, p. 147; see also Hamblin, 1970, p. 13). Whether the fallacy theory as an error theory of sorts can be conceived of or not, the link between fallaciousness and argumentative “goodness” (deductive validity, inductive cogency, dialectical appropriateness) cannot be easily undercut. This is clear in Hansen’s definition of a fallacy as “*an argument that appears to be a better argument of its kind than it really is*” (Hansen, 2002, p. 152, italics in original). *OED*’s definition of the straw man as a “misrepresented real argument that is easier to defeat” fits in nicely here. Only that it makes the task of understanding what a “misrepresented real argument” ever more urgent.

Before I take up this task, one final clarification is in place. Is the straw man fallacy an “argument” in the first place? I have discussed this issue earlier (see Lewiński, 2011), and I still think the fair solution is this: Committing the straw man fallacy can be seen as (at least) a two-step process consisting of: (1) “setting up a straw man,” i.e., unjustifiably representing the opponent’s conclusion or premises, and (2) “attacking a straw man,” i.e., attacking the misrepresentation as if it were the actual conclusion or premises of the opponent. (1) does not necessarily involve an argument. It can be a critical question, such as “How many times did you have a sexual intercourse

with Miss Lewinsky?”, to which a proponent can respond, “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky; I only said I had improper physical relationship with her. Please don’t twist my words around!” Under proper contextual circumstances, the first question—“How many times did you...”—can be seen as a straw man that is already “set up,” but is not yet used in some (counter-)argument or other. (2) would likely involve a complete argument (something consisting of a conclusion and premises) in which either the conclusion or one of the premises relied on the misrepresentation set up in (1). In particular, if the conclusion is misrepresented and then refuted as if it were the actual conclusion of the proponent, then we can see the straw man as an important subtype of *ignoratio elenchi*: the classic Aristotelian fallacy of ignoring the proper refutation (*elenchus*). An opponent may even construct a sound (true and valid) argument, just not against the conclusion the proponent defended (see Hamblin, 1970, pp. 31-32, 87-88; Hansen, 2002, pp. 144-145).

In any case, rather than being a strictly “logical” fallacy, the straw man is clearly a dialectical fallacy occurring in argumentative discussions where something is done to the words (meanings? thoughts?) of one’s dialectical opponent (Lewiński, 2011, 2012; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Oswald & Lewiński, 2014; de Saussure, 2018).

3. The semantics of the straw man: In search of “the real argument”

The fact that the *OED*’s definition of the straw man uses the notion of “an opponent’s real argument” in the *explanans* of the term might be explained away as a necessary encyclopedic simplification which resorts to folk terminology in order to be understood by folks. But the argumentation scholars’ habitual use of expressions such as “the real argument” or “the real position” when discussing the straw man (see Walton, 1996; Tindale, 2007, p. 19ff.) deserves some additional critical scrutiny. When working on the issue of the charity of interpretation in argumentative exchanges (Lewiński, 2012), I was urged by one of the two peer reviewers for *Informal Logic* to similarly treat as a basis for any discussion of complex, even suspicious, cases, “the real position” of an arguer, explained as what “the arguer really just means,” or “what the arguer’s argument really is.” I never quite understood these comments, even though I still think one can discern a mis-representation inherent in the straw man fallacy from some re-representation that might just be fine (see also Aikin & Casey, 2011).

Consider the following examples, due to Schumann, Zufferey & Oswald (2019, pp. 10-11). In these cases, Barbara supports a social policy change (*It is crucial to better support young parents*) resorting to a prudential, economic argument (*because having a child means a lot of financial charges*). Four possible reformulations of Barbara’s position put in the mouth of Alexandre have then been analyzed by the authors:

Example 1

- (1) Barbara: *It is crucial to better support young parents because having a child means a lot of financial charges.*
- (1a) Alexandre: *Let’s raise the family allowance since having a child means financial ruin.*
- (1b) Alexandre: *Let’s raise the family allowance since it only is about the money.*
- (1c) Alexandre: *Let’s raise the family allowance since having a child can be a financial weight.*
- (1b) Alexandre: *Let’s raise the family allowance since parents are under economic pressure.*

Two things are noteworthy here. First, none of Alexandre’s response uses precisely the expressions Barbara originally uttered. Yet, one can quickly see that while (1c) and (1d) are more or less acceptable paraphrases of Barbara’s utterance, (1a) and (1b) are some kind of misrepresentations, and thus very strong straw man candidates. More specifically, (1a) involves an *explicit* misrepresentation by means of a lexical exaggeration of the noun phrase (“financial ruin” instead of “financial charges”), while (1b) an *implicit* misrepresentation by virtue of drawing a contextually illicit pragmatic inference from her argument (a possible gloss by Alexandre: “if you exclusively mention financial charges, that implies it’s only about the money”) (see Schumann, Zufferey & Oswald, 2019, p. 10-11). Second, I would say—speaking exclusively for myself, not the authors of the said study—that one can arrive at this judgment without quite knowing what Barbara “really just meant.” Let’s even assume that in some private moment of utter sincerity, she once said off-record that “the way things are now, it’s really just about money, young people are so much afraid of the financial burden that they don’t have kids anymore. We need to raise the family allowance or we’ll be a childless, aging society on its way to extinction.” Given the public context of the debate one could argue that, confronted with Alexandre’s attack on (1b), she would still have the perfect right to object: “Don’t twist my words around! I primarily care about the emotional well-being of our families and the future of our country, but I cannot deny that one problem that can be solved here and now are financial incentives.” What is her “real position” now?

Perhaps I am just strawmanning the concept of a straw man; or rather, the concept of “the real man,” the “actually meant real argument” of one’s opponent. So let me go carefully through the argument, resorting to another example. Consider the following exchange between an external candidate for a head of department at a university (A), and a search committee member (B):

Example 2

A: I think I am the right candidate for the job, I have written a number of books on the topic.

B: Excuse me, sir, but so far as I can see you have only one book published on the topic with you as the single or first author.

A: Well, with all due respect, please don’t twist my words around, I never said all these books were published with me as the sole or first author. I often write with two of my colleagues. Besides, another book is written, submitted, and accepted for publication, but not out yet (it will be early next year). Finally, my last individual monograph is actually written, and about to be submitted for evaluation to a very prestigious university press.

B: Why would you even mention in this context a manuscript that is not even submitted?! We’re evaluating people based on their actual results, not imagined plans...

Again, was A’s “real argument” or “real position” that he should get a job (conclusion) because he has “written a number of books on the topic” (premise), this including books published with him as a second or third author, books “written” but not “published” yet, perhaps even books “written” but waiting quietly on his hard disk for better times? Or maybe he “just meant”

published, real books, including those merely co-authored by him, but excluding edited volumes, books written but not published yet, short eBooks etc. Did A have any “real position” that a reasonable dialectical opponent could and even should “interpret...as carefully and accurately as possible” (rule 10 of pragma-dialectics, see van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, p. 196)? In general, can we “decide what an arguer’s real position actually is” (Tindale, 2007, p. 26), perhaps based on the idea that “words mean what they mean” and, as such, have some kind of an “original meaning,” as some legal scholars would claim (see Ludlow, 2014, 64ff.)?

Well, an irreverent response could be that “here as elsewhere it doesn’t make much sense to divine what the words originally meant—the authors may not have given it any thought” (Ludlow, 2014, p. 59). Do professors writing books have a crystal-clear grasp of what books “really are?” It would seem not. Do institutions employing book writers—such as universities—have a crystal-clear grasp of what books “really are?” It would seem not. Some of them might be favorable to your promotion or tenure if you “have a book” in the sense of a prestigious edited volume. Some not. Some would flatly dismiss an eBook openly accessible via your library’s depository. Some would count it in. Etcetera.

Note, these are not primarily empirical arguments, although to an extent they can be. In particular, the example above is not an empirically observed and transcribed conversation. Instead, it is a made-up case that I invented ripping off Ludlow’s (2014) opening example of how underdetermined the very concept of a ‘book’ is. ‘Book’ is such a basic word in English, and many other languages, but still, as Ludlow observes, “even after a millennium of shared usage the meaning is quite open-ended” (2014, p. 1). Because of this, in the case reported by Ludlow, his position as a writer himself can be that he has “written two or three or six or ten books” (2014, p. 1) without *any* change to the facts on the ground.

This, of course, has serious consequences for how argumentative exchanges—such as the one during a somewhat fraught job interview—develop and, indeed, what they are about. One of the things that happen in argumentative discussions is that both speakers legitimately and quite ordinarily modulate an underdetermined meaning—and they do so in a strategically advantageous manner (Lewiński, 2011, 2012). Think of the book argument advanced by the aspiring department chair. Unsurprisingly, his opponent (the bitchy committee member) would likely endorse the most stringent meaning of a ‘book’ as a substantive text, written exclusively or primarily by a specific author, and published by an esteemed international press. The proponent, the job candidate, could possibly stretch the meaning to the other extreme: Why not include a collection of essays edited by me and a colleague that is still to be sent to the publisher, and will be freely available as an eBook in our university’s digital library? Depending on the purported meaning, the argument of the candidate could be numerically glossed as, “hire me, I have *eight* books on the topic,” while the critique of the committee member as, “I don’t think you’re a strong candidate, just *one* book...” None of them would likely intentionally misrepresent some “real position” grounded in some “real meaning” of the concept of ‘book’—just because, so the underdetermination of meaning argument goes, there is no such real meaning. Dorr & Hawthorne’s concept of “semantic plasticity” conveys this idea very well: “the meaning or content attributed by a particular semantic proposition belongs to a large set of ‘candidate’ meanings or contents, all of which are roughly alike in the respects that seem to matter for the expression relation” (2014, p. 288).

But would not all this take down the *real* dialectic, where arguers discuss substantive issues, the facts on the ground, off its pedestal and into the realm of semantic quibbles and merely verbal disputes (see Chalmers, 2011; Krabbe & van Laar, 2019)? Isn’t there simply a real book, on whose meaning the arguers should settle before getting down to the real business of discussing

serious issues at hand such as tenures and promotions, rather than mere words, words, words? A real and ideal book in the Platonic sense, perhaps?

I agree that Plato is elucidating a number of important concepts and they are getting more and more precise, but I don't agree that this is because we are getting closer to the concepts themselves as they rest in Plato's heaven. I would argue that we are merely coming up with better and better modulations—or if you prefer, we are constructing better and better concepts. What makes them better is not that they are closer to some perfect target, but rather that...we are coming up with progressively more serviceable modulations via a normatively constrained process of argumentation. (Ludlow, 2014, p. 111)

This, admittedly, is an argument well-known since Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of meaning and his critique of "the myth of the museum":

Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels. ...Seen according to the museum myth, the words and sentences of a language have their determinate meanings. To discover the meanings of the native's words we may have to observe his behavior, but still the meanings of the words are supposed to be determinate in the native's mind, his mental museum, even in cases where behavioral criteria are powerless to discover them for us. When on the other hand we recognize with Dewey that "meaning ... is primarily a property of behavior," we recognize that there are no meanings, nor likenesses nor distinctions of meaning, beyond what are implicit in people's dispositions to overt behavior. (Quine 1968, pp. 186-187)

What emerges from Quine's critique of the "uncritical semantics" where words and sentences are attached to *fixed* and *determined* meanings is, then, semantics which instead acknowledges an intrinsic relationship between the way we use our words and our concepts. Our conversational interactions—and argumentative interactions in particular—are where our *dynamic* and *underdetermined* meanings are put to the critical test and, hopefully, become somewhat sharper. Some kind of a conceptual clarification and resulting mutual understanding of what the other means are thus likely the results of—not the prerequisites for—reasonable, "normatively constrained" argumentative discussions.

Of course, critics of the strong indeterminacy thesis (Quine: there is no fact of the matter regarding real meanings) and the weaker underdetermination thesis (Davidson, Ludlow: meanings can be sharpened and mutually agreed on) point to the fact that communication typically *is* successful, that speakers often impart their mental contents to others without great effort (Pagin, 2008). This, of course, has not escaped the attention of Quine (1960, 1968) and those after him. The crucial point here is that our theories of meaning need to be sensitive to the possibility of entirely legitimate processes of argumentation over meaning, recently described in some detail under the terms of *meaning negotiations*, *meaning litigation*, *metalinguistic disputes*, or *conceptual engineering* (Cappelen, 2018; Ludlow, 2014; Plunkett, 2015; Plunkett & Sundell 2013, 2019). Once this weaker argument is recognized, not everything that looks, walks, and talks like a straw man turns out to be a straw man.

All the same, argumentation theorists dedicated to the study of fallacies are often bound to the Aristotelian tradition of analyzing abuses of argumentation (see Hamblin, 1970; Hansen, 2002; Hansen & Pinto, 1995). This is not surprising, given Aristotle's foundational contributions to the

study of argumentation and his historical prominence. One enduring idea is to divide fallacies into those dependent on language (*in dictione*) and those outside of language (*extra dictionem*) (Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*; Hamblin 1970, Chs. 2-3). Aristotle indeed provided a very powerful catalogue of what can go wrong with the use of language in argumentative discourse, this including the problems of ambiguity, equivocation, and vagueness, the cornerstone of the theories of semantic underdetermination. Some even claim this is all there is to fallacies. Powers (1995) proposes his “One Fallacy Theory” departing from precisely this assumption:

[One Fallacy Theory] insists that there is no fallacy unless there is a clearly specifiable appearance of validity (or goodness of whatever kind). Since I believe there is no clear way to make an argument appear to have a goodness it really lacks except by playing with ambiguities, every real fallacy will turn out to be a fallacy of equivocation. (Powers, 1995, p. 290)

Indeed, attention to the linguistic treacherousness of fallacies, and especially the clearly language-based fallacies such as the straw man, is a *sine qua non* condition in any comprehensive treatment of fallacies (see our arguments in Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Oswald & Lewiński 2014). As repeatedly noted, however (Tindale, 2007; Walton, 1996), the straw man—its Ancient Greek structural or functional equivalent, that is—has not been among the fallacies recognized by Aristotle. Moreover, as already mentioned, the nearest possible classical counterpart would be *ignoratio elenchi*, curiously, a fallacy *not* based in language. As a result, Powers, who avowedly follows Aristotle in his treatment of fallacies dependent on language, has nothing to say about the straw man. Instead, he propounds his theory based on the following semantics of ambiguity:

All the fallacies involve playing with ambiguities. So we divide the different types of ambiguity. A sentence is built out of words or word-parts or phrases to which meanings are conventionally assigned. The meanings of the ultimate meaningful parts are said to be *lexically* assigned. Thus in “rented” a meaning is assigned to “rent” and one to the part “ed.” The phrase “fell off the wagon” may be understood literally in terms of its parts “fell,” “off,” “the,” and “wagon,” or lexically as a whole receive the meaning “went back to drinking.” The lexically meaningful parts are then put together grammatically to make up the sentence.

If a lexical part has more than one meaning, we have a *lexical* ambiguity. (Sometimes “equivocation” is used in a narrower sense than mine to cover only lexical equivocations.) If the lexical parts are unambiguous, but it is ambiguous how the parts are grammatically put together, we have a grammatical ambiguity, also called an *amphiboly*. (Powers, 1995, p. 291)

What is the “conventionally assigned” meaning of a ‘book’? If there isn’t one, perhaps we are constantly committing the fallacy of equivocation whenever mentioning a “book”? We can even make this point more precise: while the notion of ‘book’ is perhaps not *ambiguous*, whereby two or more determinate meanings are “conventionally assigned” to the same word (like in “bank” or “runs”), it is nonetheless *vague*, in the sense that we don’t have a determinate concept in the first place, as discussed above. Even in this case, however, it would fall under the “One Fallacy Theory” (Powers, 1995, pp. 297-298). If we follow the arguments of the semantic underdeterminists, we would then have a systemic implosion of the fallacy of equivocation in any use of language—and

the corresponding shrinking of the straw man fallacy to only most blatant abuses (for then the “error” would lie in the vague expression in the first place, not in the attacker’s misrepresentation).

How can this *reductio ad absurdum* be averted? One famous response is to abandon natural language as inherently vague and turn instead to formal logic as a proper area of inquiry into inference and argument (see Grice, 1989, for a well-known exposition and criticism of this argument). Another, noted in passing by Powers, is to resort to semantic conventionalism (for a recent account, see Lepore & Stone, 2015): there are socially recognized conventions that might quite precisely determine the meaning of a given term in a specific context of use. There might even be some kind of institutional ontology around a concept such as a ‘book’ (see Searle, 2010), an ontology that would define what *counts as* a book in a given context (e.g., “a (co-)authored, peer-reviewed scientific text of 50.000 words or more, published as an individual volume at one of the commercial or university presses officially indexed in the Web of Science”). Conventionalism, however, cannot account for many phenomena of rational linguistic communication, as argued by intentionalists (e.g., Strawson, 1964; Grice, 1989; Sperber & Wilson, 1995): much of what is communicated is grounded in what speakers intend to convey, over and above the literal, explicit meanings, via the process of pragmatic inference, notably implicatures. Finally, one might want to resort to semantic minimalism and claim that at bottom there *is* a minimal, fixed meaning, grounded in the literal meaning of non-indexical expressions, or to semantic contextualism that would instead insist that the meaning of propositions is always contextually-variant, open to contextually-relevant pragmatic enrichment, especially in the case of indexicals (see Cappelen & Lepore, 2005, for a discussion).

Now, I am mentioning these obvious facts only in an encyclopedically simplified form. But even in this form they allow me to sketch two conclusions, both of which are almost grim for argumentation theory. First, the discipline, in its attempts to define what rational argumentative interaction is, is bound by the principle requiring arguers to have clear and distinct definitions of concepts ready prior to any meaningful dispute. If the speakers do not mutually agree on the meanings and definitions of terms, they are in effect talking past each other, sinking ever deeper in their futile misunderstandings rather than resolving worthwhile disagreements. In many practical contexts this is, of course, a reasonable requirement: colloquially speaking, “we need to know what we’re talking about,” so as to avoid a *merely* verbal dispute and instead produce some fruitful dialectic.

However, this colloquial idea does not easily pass muster of critical scrutiny. Geach, in his analysis of Plato’s early Socratic dialogue, *Euthyphro*, calls it a *Socratic fallacy* and insists on the following:

Let us be clear that this *is* a fallacy, and nothing better. It has stimulated philosophical enquiry, but still it is a fallacy. We know heaps of things without being able to define the terms in which we express our knowledge. Formal definitions are only one way of elucidating terms; a set of examples may in a given case be more useful than a formal definition. (Geach, 1966, p. 371)

This criticism has not lost its currency today. Quite the contrary, as already discussed above, it fuels recent discussions of meaning underdetermination and the value of metalinguistic disputes. Among others, Plunkett & Sundell argue that “the assumption that sameness of meaning is necessary for the expression of genuine disagreement is what leads so many theorists to ascribe meanings to speakers that systematically diverge from those speakers’ usage and first-order

intuitions” (2019, p. 18). That is to say, in its allegiance to the Ancient Greek principles, such as the priority of definitions and determination of meanings, the discipline might be committing a fallacy itself.

This brings me to the second grim point: even assuming that these principles *are* defensible—in many ordinary contexts they perhaps even are—argumentation theory has not produced its clear position on how the allegedly fixed and definable meanings can actually be fixed: by linguistic conventions alone, by speakers’ intentions, by contextual features, by the circumstances of evaluation, etcetera, etcetera. As a result, when discussing the straw man and other fallacies of language, the discipline resorts to textbook quality explanations and folk concepts such as “what the arguer really just means.” In this way—involuntarily, one would hope—it produces its baby semantics for absolute beginners. This raises the suspicion that argumentation theory is a *biblia pauperum* of sorts, a largely pedagogical discipline meant to translate the complexities of logic and the philosophy of language to “dummies” interested in everyday argumentation.

Now, in all fairness, when it comes to the straw man fallacy argumentation scholars are aware of the fact that concepts such as “the real argument,” “the real position,” or “the standpoint actually advanced” are idealizations that might not necessarily work well in actual discussions.ⁱ However, for ease of exposition (that’s my best guess), they still discuss the puzzles involved parenthetically—and, in any case, treat them as *practical* problems of implementation rather than *theoretical* issues in semantics that need to be, one way or another, addressed.

One final remark before getting out of the dark: here, I focus exclusively on the *semantics* of the straw man fallacy, while, together with Steve Oswald, I treated its *pragmatics* in other work (esp. Lewiński, 2011; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Oswald & Lewiński, 2014). Thanks in part to the pragmatic theories of argumentation, such as pragma-dialectics (see esp. van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs, 1993), the pragmatic phenomena of argumentative exchanges have received closer attention. This attention has recently turned into a serious empirical program of investigating the linguistic and pragmatic details of various forms of possible straw man (see de Saussure, 2018; Schumann, Zufferey & Oswald, 2019; Müller, 2020).

4. The dialectic of the straw man

The discussion in the previous section lets me also formulate the guiding principle for this section, namely: playing on the meaning of words or phrases is *not* necessarily a straw man. It might instead be a necessary, indeed valuable, contribution to a collective conceptual refinement of vague, ambiguous, unclear, or otherwise underdetermined terms.

Above, I already suggested what the possible relation between the concept of open-ended, underdetermined meanings and an argumentative discussion can be. Part and parcel of an argumentative exchange in natural language would not only be an argumentative contest over the “facts on the ground” but also a dispute over the meaning of the words used. These two aspects—traditionally dichotomized into, respectively, substantive and verbal disputes—have intricate relations that are yet to be fully appreciated (see Balcerak Jackson, 2014; Chalmers, 2011; Plunkett, 2015; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, 2019; Rott, 2015; Vermeulen, 2018, for some of the recent contributions to the debate). The meaning is, of course, consequential for how a given position can be defended and objected to—it would be utterly surprising, then, if arguers were not attentive to this element in their discussions. How can this process be grasped in terms of argumentation?

To start with, I will assume an adversarial view on argumentative discussions, not unlike the classic Socratic elenchus referred to above, or its contemporary rendering in pragma-dialectics (see Lewiński, 2011, 2012, 2017, for a detailed defense). Arguers are out to defend their position on an issue and have it accepted by their critics. To this end, they go through an agonistic process of advancing arguments, asking critical questions, providing counterarguments, etc. This process, while agonistic and thus likely strategic, is also inherently cooperative: for the whole process to be reasonable and simply meaningful, arguers need to follow some basic rules, such as those defining relevant types of speech acts, acceptable inferences (formal and informal), possible responses to an opponent’s contributions, and commitments that arguers are bound to undertake or retract, as needed (see Hamblin, 1970). It is, shortly, both a normative and a strategic endeavor (see van Eemeren, 2010).

Now, whenever some term—such as “book”—is underdetermined it will characteristically have various plausible interpretations (“modulations,” in Ludlow’s, 2014, parlance), some of them benefitting one arguer, and others her opponent. Let’s return to our job interview and the book argument. As already described, the job candidate would most likely stretch the concept of ‘book’ to its widest possible extension, including edited books, eBooks, and written manuscripts, even those still under review. By contrast, the uncharitable committee member would likely say something like, “Let’s be professional about it, this is a professional context, right? For me a ‘book’ is, I quote, ‘a (co-)authored, peer-reviewed scientific text of 50.000 words or more, published as an individual volume at one of the commercial or university presses officially indexed in the Web of Science.’ You have merely *one* of those, and I hope I’ll die in a ditch before we have a department chair like that.” The job candidate can then respond, “That’s just like, your opinion, man... I quote from the APA’s recent rulebook where a book means ‘a substantive text written or edited by a scholar, and published through traditional or digital channels, or considered for such publication.’ I have *eight* of those, you won’t get a better hire!” Importantly, throughout this process, neither of them is misrepresenting the (real?) concept of ‘book,’ but rather modulating it to his or her own dialectical advantage. And, as long as their arguments are reasonable—those above probably are—they are not only *not* committing a straw man (nor any other fallacy of language described by Powers, 1995), but rather engaging in a strategically understandable and, potentially, conceptually fruitful *elenchus* over the meaning in question.ⁱⁱ

Yet, one cannot deny that straw men do happen: Aikin & Casey (2011, 2016) are surely right about that. My argument so far has been limited to *underdetermined* terms—but many would argue this pertains to virtually all our vocabulary (“What exactly does ‘3 o’clock’ mean?” see Ludlow, 2014), or at least to the most important part of it (“Is waterboarding ‘torture’?” see Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, 2019), or least to the most esteemed and famous part of the most important part (“Is our will ‘free’?” see Chalmers, 2011). Still, let’s bar meaning underdetermination for a second as philosophers’ gibberish. Here’s a semantic straw man:

Example 3

A: I won’t go there again. The food was pretty bland, and expensive for that.

B: Well, no, I myself didn’t find it inedible. And the company paid, so what’s the problem?

‘Bland’ and ‘inedible’ cannot easily be modulated so as to be one and the same concept—all the troubles regarding the predicates of personal taste notwithstanding (see Stojanovic, 2007). So we clearly have a straw man here. But real examples—I again invented this one—are hardly ever so

simple. Meticulous analyses of actual cases (see Lewiński, 2011; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Oswald & Lewiński, 2014) reveal that much of the difficulty rests in the pragmatic aspect of natural language: strawmanners may astutely manipulate various types of pragmatic inference in order to cover up and get away with the abuse. Here, as already mentioned, I limit myself to the semantic issues—all the troubles regarding the semantics-pragmatics distinction notwithstanding, again (see Plunkett & Sundell, 2019, for a discussion in the context of metalinguistic negotiations).

In any case, the dialectical discussion over meanings should be governed by “a normatively constrained process of argumentation” (Ludlow, 2014, p. 111). For Ludlow, this process is primarily grounded in analogical argumentation: one would argue analogically from undisputed, canonical cases, thus tracking the important properties of the term as applied in the new context of the current dispute. Importantly, much has to do with the contextual conditions of the debate: the question of whether a ‘fetus’ is a ‘person’ can lead to a very different answer in the strictly legal, strictly medical, or strictly religious context. That is, different arguments from analogy would be deemed reasonable in various context of an argumentative discussion over meanings.

Table 1
Contextual precision and charity of interpretation

	Precise interpretation	Loose interpretation
Highly critical (uncharitable)	Criminal trial, blind academic review, job interview?	Political debates
Constructive (charitable)	Doctor-patient consultation, classroom discussion, conference presentation?	Small friendly talk, family dinner table

In my earlier work (see Lewiński, 2011, 2012; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013), I have advocated similar contextual conditions for what I have called an *intersubjective interpretation procedure*. When in dispute over the meaning of their expressions—which can be triggered by the straw man attempts or straw man accusations—arguers need to abide by two crisscrossing criteria of interpretation: the precision required by the context at hand and the charity of interpretation. The resulting simple matrix of four options is presented in Table 1.

In the first place, various forms of institutionalized activities offer precise rules of interpretation of discourse. Legal discourse is a paradigmatic example here—but so is any specialized context, including perhaps a job interview at a university, where a ‘book’ can mean a specific type of scholarly publication, rather than just any longer written text. Other contexts in the private or public sphere may allow for more laxity in meaning, thereby making a meaning dispute ever more likely and the straw man ever more unlikely. In the second place, one can distinguish between charitable (constructive) and uncharitable (critical) argumentative contexts. A certain expectation of constructive or critical engagement affects the contextually appropriate level of meaning nit-pickiness. Compare an argument over an experiment in a high-school chemistry class with cross-examination in a criminal trial: while similar levels of precision might be required in both contexts, the classroom discussion calls for the interpretive benefit of the doubt, when necessary, at least on the part of the teacher. As a result, in the classroom context attacks on interpretations which are plausible, but less than charitable, can be seen as attacks on straw men, whereas they would be seen as tough but overall reasonable criticisms in the legal context. As for our job interview: there doesn’t seem to exist any firm convention regarding the levels of necessary

charity, but an interrogative, even bitchy, critical attitude of the committee members seem to be one recognizable option for a job interview. Similarly for the precision of rules of interpretation: there might be institutional regulations defining what counts as a ‘book’, or ‘an academic publication’ at large, and in this case arguers should in principle be bound by them. Only “in principle,” however, because *descriptive* metalinguistic disputes, with arguments resorting to how a term actually *is* used by some authority, institution, or by custom, do not preclude *normative* metalinguistic disputes, where arguments turn on how a term *ought to* be used, even despite the currently accepted, prevalent, or even mandated meaning (Plunkett, 2015; Plunkett & Sundell, 2013, 2019).

To sum up, arguers should conduct their argumentative discussions with these general rules in mind. Depending on the contextual conditions, meaning disputes will be more or less open to arguers’ modulating the meaning of the words, and, respectively, less or more rigid when it comes to the straw man identification.

5. Conclusion: Toward meaning argumentativism

Before reaching an optimistic conclusion, let me first summarize the argument of the entire paper in three sentences. In order to identify the straw man fallacy, we need to have some idea of how to adjudicate between the meaning of the original arguments and the meanings attributed in the alleged straw man attack. There are various ways of solving this semantic predicament: we can rely on the intention of the original arguer (“No, no, don’t twist my words around, I meant...”), on some governing convention (“At our university “x” means ‘x’”), on mutual agreement between speakers (“For the current purposes, let us define “x” as ‘x’”), etc. And while none of these solutions is fully satisfactory—by virtue of each of them being unreflectively tied to spurious assumptions regarding the determination of meaning—one possible idea is to resort to the contextual criteria of precision and constructiveness of linguistic usage and vary our fallacy judgements accordingly.

The optimistic conclusion is that whereas argumentation theory has not been capable of producing or even resorting to some defensible theory of meaning, it can find a solution in its own midst. The varied contextual criteria proposed above allow us to undermine the dubious assumptions about meaning and come up with a less-than-grim solution. I will call this solution *meaning argumentativism*. In a sense, it has been argued for all along this chapter through my critical arguments and the analyses of examples; yet, I surely haven’t been able to express it in so few a word Donald Davidson did when he spoke about “the cooperative reworking of verbal usage that occurs in dialectical exchange” (1994, p. 435). Analyzing Plato’s *Euthyphro*—the exact same dialogue that led Geach to identify the *Socratic fallacy*—Davidson declares the he sees “the Socratic elenchus as a crucible in which some of our most important words, and the concepts they express, are tested, melted down, reshaped, and given a new edge” (1994, p. 435):

As they try to understand each other, people in open discussion use the same words, but whether they mean the same things by those words, or mean anything clear at all, only the process of question and answer can reveal. ...If it attains its purpose, an elenctic discussion is an event in which the meanings of words, the concepts entertained by the speakers, evolve and are clarified. In this respect it is a model of every successful attempt at communication. (Davidson, 1994, p. 432)

This is more than little praise for the role of argumentation in our communication. But it's also an indictment and a challenge to abandon the baby semantics of "the real argument" and engage in serious reconsideration of the functions of argumentative discussions. Instead of being a *sine qua non* condition for meaningful argumentative discussions, semantic clarification and refinement is their result, and often a precious one. As I have argued, the analysis of one single fallacy, the straw man, can be a good point of entry into such reconsideration. Yes, it will likely make the straw man a concept more obscure than our students need, but it can also lead us to a better understanding of what argumentation, and argumentation theory, is about.

ⁱ To give but two, but prominent and quite representative, examples:

"In practice, the differences between the attacked standpoint and the original standpoint will often be quite subtle. By design, the opponent's words are so twisted that it becomes at the same time easy for the distorter to tackle and difficult for an outsider to tell whether justice is being done to the original standpoint." (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, pp. 127–128).

"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 sophistical tactic. [...] 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" (Walton, 1996, pp. 125–126).

ⁱⁱ However, there is a difference between attributing to the protagonist a meaning that patently misrepresents the meaning he intended, and signaled as intended, and advancing a reasonable metalinguistic argument. Compare the committee member's retort, "Well, if any written text is a 'book' to you, I have written about 237 of them!", with, "I see what you're trying to say, but at our university 'books' are only *published* books, period." While in both cases the protagonist (the job candidate) can claim to "own" the meaning or at least have some meaning precedence, only in the former case could he justifiably issue a straw man accusation ("Don't twist my words around!"). As a consequence, assuming both retorts of the committee member are *metalinguistic* arguments, meaning disputes can still include moves which commit a straw man fallacy. (Thank you to Steve Oswald for pointing this out!)

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