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1. Introduction

Marcin Lewiński wonders here that while we all agree that we should be minimally bound by the principle of accurately representing the standpoints of our interlocutors (van Eemeren & Grootendoorst, 2004: 191), what happens when there are genuine semantic disagreements about what those standpoints are? Are all cases of semantic wrangling instances of straw manning? Indeed, from this point of view, the classical straw man—the one where you distort your interlocutor's conclusion or premises—seems to be anti-dialectical: meanings are fixed, transparent, and perfect; to negotiate these meanings in a dialogue would be to sin against one of the most basic rules of argument. If I've got this right, it strikes me as a compelling and interesting thesis. It echoes other concerns in fallacy theory (Boudry, Paglieri & M. Pigliucci: 2015; Aikin, 2017) that fallacy descriptions, especially the popular ones recommended to students, gluttonously devour everything on the table. There is certainly much to agree with here. However, at the risk of misrepresenting what Lewiński is up to, I want in this brief comment to ask what he means by straw man in the first place and offer two counter-considerations.

2. Two questions

Lewiński is certainly right to explore the dialecticality of the straw man. As Tindale pointed out, it's clearly the case that the straw man cannot be explained by reference to schemes alone (2007, p. 25). They're just arguments, after all, and nothing is wrong with that. Lewiński's exploration of the dialecticality of the straw man has an inward focus: it takes a deeper look at the features of the exchange rather than the broader features of the dialectical situation. There's no denying the dialectical traps of the straw man—legitimate questions over the meanings of crucial terms can quickly derail into allegations of purposeful obtuseness or misrepresentation. Once that happens, discussion is over.

Let's begin by considering the three conditions of being a fallacy: "a fallacy (i) is an argument, (ii) that is invalid, and (iii) appears to be valid" (Hansen, 2020). My interest here is the third of these—call it the deceptiveness feature. It seems, after all, one of our main concerns with fallacies is their treacherousness: i.e., *they might sucker us* and, importantly, *no one wants to be a sucker*. On this score, I'm somewhat skeptical that a dialectical account of the straw man such as the one Lewiński has produced here can be successful, as an account of the straw man, without reference to the other participants in the discussion—namely, the onlooking audience. One reason for this is that misrepresenting someone *to their face* is a very dubious dialectical strategy,

especially when we take the primary problem to be a *representational* one. After all, the common understanding of the representational straw man is a misrepresentation of someone's premises, reasoning, or argument (Aikin & Casey, 2011). I once knew someone who did this, prefacing his reconstruction of others' views with the phrase, "oh, I see what you're saying" and then, unsurprisingly, not seeing what they were saying. What is maddening about this strategy is not really the representational question, even though this certainly involves that, but the aggravation of having to correct it.

The pragmatic limitations of this strategy, however, do point to some other fallacious strategies along the dialectical axis Lewiński is describing here. Assuming, for the sake of argument, a virtue-theoretic posture, we might say there is a kind of fallacy of excessive questioning or clarification seeking. For example, what distinguishes genuine interest in clarification from "sea-lioning," the trollish tactic where one perpetually and disingenuously seeks more information in order to aggravate an interlocutor (Wikipedia, 2020)? Going the other direction, one might make one's position so obscure, complex, or long that clarifying questions are just not possible, or maybe practical. Aristotle describes this scenario in the *Topics*:

> Moreover, formulate your proposition as though you did so not for its own sake, but in order to get at something else: for people are shy of granting what an opponent's case really requires. Speaking generally, a questioner should leave it as far as possible doubtful whether he wishes to secure an admission of his proposition or of its opposite: for if it be uncertain what their opponent's argument requires, people are more ready to say what they themselves think. (156b, p. 2-9)

A variation on this strategy might be called "the self-straw man": purposely offering weak and vague formulations of your own position in order to waste your interlocutors time or, what is more dastardly, to gin up grounds for accusing *them* of straw-manning *you* (for, say, their failure of charity). Sometimes people just call this trolling. In the end, what makes these strategies troublesome is not so much the representational question, which is the core of the straw man, but the economic one. At bottom, dialectical turns in argument come with costs. Taking up a turn correcting a misinterpretation is dialectically costly not only because you've used up time, but also because it uses up argumentative goodwill. In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates is genuinely interested in the meaning of the term piety, but the practical limitations of dialogical exchanges limit the amount of chances he gets not to get it. With this version of the straw man, the target is not likely to be deceived as much as they're going to be aggravated, frustrated, and exasperated. In other words, the cases of two-person dialogical straw manning are not good candidates for the conception of the straw man where the distorted view replaces the original and is a reason to think it unacceptable. To put it more bluntly, it might be the case that the very legitimate worries Lewiński raises do not raise concerns about straw men in the first place.

Since I have been discussing the deceptiveness feature of straw men here, and claiming that the two-person version doesn't account for it, I should say where I think that lies. Let me close out here by doing that. de Saussure (2018), among others (Schumann, Zufferey, & Oswald, 2019; Aikin & Talisse, 2019) point out that straw manning is best understood in terms of its effect on an onlooking audience. This makes it a three-termed relation: the straw manner, the victim (the person whose views are misrepresented), and the receptive audience (who is a kind of second victim). While the first victim of the straw man is unlikely to be swayed or deceived by the distorted version of their view, an onlooking audience might be. This works especially well when the victim is not

around to respond. This, as de Saussure points out, has the added benefit of making the straw manner look especially astute at argument criticism. As a consequence, the straw manned person not only has their view warped, but, more importantly, loses credibility in the eyes of the audience. The point, in other words, of the straw man is to close the discussion with the straw manned. They're not up to argument, as is the straw manner, and so next time they roll around you'll not waste your time with them (Aikin & Talisse, 2019; Aikin & Casey, 2011). In the end, the difference between the two-person and the three-person (for lack of a better descriptor) varieties is that in the second case, the misrepresentation serves as evidence of the straw manned person's incompetence, whereas in the first case it is merely a source of aggravation.

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