

Informal Logic: A Pragmatic Approach by Douglas Walton Quotes

The straw man fallacy can involve exaggeration or misquotation, as well as other forms of distortion of an opponent's position. Consider the following dialogue (Freeman 1988, p. 88) in which one party attacks the prior argument of another.

Example 1.9

C: It would be a good idea to ban advertising beer and wine on radio and television. These ads encourage teenagers to drink, often with disastrous consequences.

A: You cannot get people to give up drinking; they've been doing it for thousands of years.

Assuming that the concerned citizen did not maintain that people should give up drinking, the alcohol industry representative has committed the straw man fallacy by arguing against this position that he attributes to her. To analyze the fallacy more deeply, Freeman (1988, p. 88) contrasts the following pair of propositions, asking which is the easier to refute.

A: It would be a good idea to ban advertising beer and wine on radio and television (the concerned citizen's original conclusion).

B: It would be a good idea to get people to stop drinking (the alcohol industry representative's portrayal of that conclusion).

B is much easier to refute than A. Thus the alcohol industry representative improperly represented the concerned citizen's position in a way easy to refute, and then proceeded to attack it.¹

Normally in reasonable dialogue one is obliged to try to give a direct answer to a question, if one knows the answer, and if the question is reasonable and appropriate. If one does not know the direct answer, or for some reason cannot give it, then one is obliged to be as informative as possible. The reason behind this normal expectation is that our usual and reasonable presumption in many contexts is that a question is a sincere request for information where the questioner expects, or at least hopes, that the answerer may have this information and be able to give it. Therefore, if the answerer does not give a direct answer, his reply may be perceived as unhelpful or evasive... However, this normal and reasonable expectation is not true of all questions. Some questions are not sincere requests for information. They are aggressively posed

¹ 22-23.

questions with harmful presuppositions that may discredit an answerer if he attempts to give a direct answer. For this reason, some tricky questions are deliberately mischievous, and where an answerer fails to give a direct answer, his reply should not necessarily be open to criticism as evasive or irrelevant. For to give a direct answer in such a case would be to fall into the questioner's trap. Therefore, some questions ought to reasonably be answered by posing another question in reply.²

If an answerer truly does not know whether the proposition queried is true or false, he should have the option, in reasonable dialogue, of replying 'I don't know' or 'No commitment one way or the other.' In other words, the ignorant answerer should be able to admit his ignorance. For, as Socrates reminded us, the beginning of wisdom is to admit your ignorance if you really don't know the answer to a question.³

However, some decisions to act on an emotional reaction, like fear, can turn out to be sound and justified conclusions which have survival value. Moreover, many arguments on controversial issues, for example, in politics and religion, may quite rightly be based on passionate conviction. Especially where morals and values are involved, ignoring our "decent instincts" may be to overlook some of the best reasons for adopting a certain position. And it is a given of democratic politics in free countries that political loyalty based on instincts or appeal to deep emotional wellsprings of conviction may be a legitimate and important part of election speeches and political dialogue. Lincoln's speeches were deeply emotional, but that should not lead us to conclude that they must be inherently fallacious or illogical. Far from it! Because they do appeal to our deep instincts on what is right, their arguments are judged more compelling and important. Hence it is not always easy to sort out when emotional appeals in argument should be properly subject to criticism on logical grounds.⁴

Buy the book: <https://www.amazon.com.au/Informal-Douglas-University-Windsor-Ontario/dp/0521713803>

² 39.

³ 56.

⁴ 107.