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Fooling the Victim: Of Straw Men and Those Who Fall for Them

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Abstract: This paper aims to make a contribution to the debate about the strawman fallacy. It is the received view that strawmen are not employed to fool the arguer whose argument they distort, but instead a third party, an audience. I argue that strawmen which fool their victims exist and are an important **variation** of the strawman fallacy because of their special perniciousness. I show that those who are subject to hermeneutical lacunae, or who have since forgotten parts of justifications they have provided earlier are especially vulnerable to falling for strawmen aimed at their own positions or arguments. Adversarial argumentation provides especially fertile ground for strawmen which fool their own victims, but cooperative argumentation is no fail-safe protection from them either.

Introduction

An arguer (*the delinquent*) commits a strawman fallacy if she a) misrepresents another arguer's (*the victim's*) position or arguments so that they are easier to object to and b) subsequently criticizes the weaker replacement and, once this is successful, acts as though she has defeated the victim's position or argument (Jan Albert Van, 2008; Lewiński, 2011; Lewiński & Oswald, 2013; Schumann, Zufferey, & Oswald, 2019, 2020; Tindale, 2007; Walton, 1996; Mueller, 2020). As several authors have pointed out (Aikin & Casey, 2011; Lewiński, 2011; Tindale, 2007; Walton & Macagno, 2010), the strawman fallacy is a dialectical fallacy. Nothing in what the delinquent offers is by itself **necessarily** fallacious, the problem becomes apparent only once the delinquent's representation of the victim's position or argument is compared to a more accurate understanding

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of what she said, wrote or otherwise contributed. A strawman is successful in its deception if someone (*the fool*) takes the misrepresentation for the victim's actual position or argument and accepts that it has been defeated. The strawman can be committed intentionally or arise from negligent or even innocent misunderstandings (Tindale, 2007). Further, as Lewinski shows, whether a strawman has been committed can depend on the context: The same interpretation may count as a strawman in contexts where arguers are required to extend effort toward charitable interpretation, and not count as one where charity cannot be expected (Lewiński, 2011).

The strawman has recently become a fallacy of interest. The debate has revealed that several authors, among them Saussure, Casey, Aikin and Talisse, are of the opinion that employing a strawman really only makes sense, or has hopes of being successful, if the delinquent's goal is to make a fool not of her victim, but instead of a third party, an onlooking audience.¹ The idea is that the victim of the strawman would herself notice the distortion while the audience might be fooled. For example:

Saussure (2018): “(...) SMFs [Strawman Fallacies] arise virtually only in order to gain the support of a third party (a general audience, in general) (...)” and later: “(...) the SMF fails (of course) to persuade the targeted speaker, since no one can be persuaded that she meant something or that she thinks something.”

¹ I should note, however, that not all recent accounts of the strawman fallacy are committed to this. Linguistic accounts of the strawman can accommodate the strawman that fools its victims. (E.g. Lewinski & Oswald, 2013; Mueller, 2020).

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Aikin and Casey (2011): “Given that strawman argumentation, like ad hominem, is usually addressed to an onlooking audience, instead of deployed directly in the face of an opponent (or used as an argument for internal proof for an opponent), it is addressed to specify the features of an audience the arguer takes to be most amenable to the argument.” (See also Aikin and Talisse (2020))

Casey (2020b): “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.”

I agree with these authors that the paradigmatic case of the strawman fallacy is one in which victim and fool are two different people or groups of people. However, in this paper I will argue that strawmen which turn their victims into fools can be successful and that they are an important variance of the fallacy because of their special potential to be harmful. I will support my case by showing some of the conditions under which it is plausible that a strawman’s victim can also become its fool. Specifically, I will argue that victims who have not been able to work out their own reasons fully and can therefore only offer arguments full of vague formulations because of hermeneutical lacunae, or who have since forgotten parts of the line of reasoning that they originally used to justify their actions or beliefs are vulnerable to becoming their own strawmen’s fools. I will show that adversarial argumentation creates conditions in which this is especially likely to happen, but that cooperative argument is not a fail-safe protection from it either. I will then claim that the effect of strawmen that fool their own victims are especially

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pernicious because the victim-fool of the strawman is not only misled into believing that an argument or position has been defeated when it has not. **The distorted or even completely different version of their argument also replaces their own (however vague and jumbled) account of their reasons in their mind, making it less likely that they will become able to correctly recall or formulate it later.**

1 Two ways to fool the victim

I will argue that victims of the strawman fallacy are vulnerable to becoming its fool if they have to support their position argumentatively when they are not yet, or not anymore, capable of easily thinking through and **precisely** formulating their own reasons into **clear** arguments they can offer intersubjectively.² Here, I offer two kinds of contexts in which it is plausible that arguers may be in this position: If they are subject to a hermeneutical lacuna or if they had clear access to the line of reasoning justifying their position in the past, but have since forgotten some of the relevant inferences due to cognitive parsimony. I do not want to commit to the idea that these two are the only kinds of circumstances in which the victims of strawmen may be fooled. I am leaning

² I am aware that there is extensive debate about the relationship between knowledge, justification, reasons and the ability to offer or formulate those reasons, but I do not think that a short paper on strawmen is the right place to enter this debate. I agree that sometimes, or even often, people who cannot formulate their reasons may simply not have any. But I hope that the two examples of hermeneutical lacunae and the effects of cognitive parsimony I give below do the job of showing that one can, in *some* sense of “have”, have a reason (or have had a reason) that one cannot formulate precisely yet or anymore into a clear argument.

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to the view that the victims of strawmen may sometimes also be fooled when they have not yet had the opportunity to carefully and fully formulate their argument, at the beginning of the argument-construction process. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper put it, “[i]t takes time and thought to formulate a position (...), coming under critical scrutiny before one is ready has a distorting effect on the quality of one's reasoning powers and so one's likely reasons.” For example, the argument presented in this paper was first offered in an email and back then only had roughly 350 words. Given that I was just starting to formulate my position, I assume that the colleague to whom the email was addressed, John Casey, could have influenced my thinking in a way that would have muddled the idea and made me lose the original reasoning instead of being as helpful and charitable as he in fact was. However, I believe that in cases like these, it might be unclear whether a strawman was committed or whether instead an opportunity for developing a good argument was lost. I suspect that much may depend on the details, both of how far the alleged victim was in her argument construction and what the alleged delinquent did. By contrast, I think that cases like the ones I discuss below are more obviously cases of strawmanning and therefore serve my goal of showing that fooling the victim is a real variation of the strawman better.

1.1 If the victim is subject to a hermeneutical lacuna

Fricke (2007) describes a hermeneutical lacuna as a gap in a subject's hermeneutical resources, resulting in a cognitive handicap.³ This handicap stops her from clearly understanding, much less

³ Importantly, not all such gaps are handicaps. They are handicaps only if they have a detrimental effect on those afflicted by them, or on others because they lead to an inability of their owners to understand an experience or issue that would, for some reason, be important to understand. I would

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articulating some experience or issue that is relevant to her because she lacks the concept(s) necessary to do so.⁴ Hermeneutical lacunae can be source of epistemic injustices. One of Fricker's central examples of this is the lack of understanding of the phenomenon of *sexual harassment*, including the lack of a term, until the early 1970s. Fricker cites Brownmiller (2000) who recalls the story of a woman affected by sexual harassment and the hermeneutical lacuna obscuring it:

As Wood told the story, the eminent man would jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or he'd deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers. One night as the lab workers were leaving their annual Christmas party, he cornered her in the elevator and planted some unwanted kisses on her mouth. After the Christmas party incident, Carmita Wood went out of her way to use the stairs in the lab

also like to acknowledge that in addition to gaps in hermeneutical resources, such handicaps can also be the result of having (only) the wrong hermeneutical resources to work with – e.g. having only the terms of “awkward flirting”, “annoying behavior” etc. which replace or crowd-out more useful terms like, e.g. “sexual harassment”, which is at the center of the example Fricker uses. Unfortunately engaging with the relevant literature on conceptual ethics and conceptual engineering would lead too far afield here (see, e.g. Burgess, Cappelen, Plunkett).

⁴ Here I use a very simple concept of “concept”: I mean that she has not (yet) recognized a distinct category of experiences/objects/events etc., associated with a term or turn of phrase, into which her experience or issue falls and which she can use to distinguish it clearly from other experiences or issues such that she can reason about it or analyze it for its descriptive and/or normative properties.

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building in order to avoid a repeat encounter, but the stress of the furtive molestations and her efforts to keep the scientist at a distance while maintaining cordial relations with his wife, whom she liked, brought on a host of physical symptoms. Wood developed chronic back and neck pains. Her right thumb tingled and grew numb. She requested a transfer to another department, and when it didn't come through, she quit. She walked out the door and went to Florida for some rest and recuperation. Upon her return she applied for unemployment insurance. When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under prodding—the blank on the form needed to be filled in—she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment benefits was denied.

Fricke is mainly interested in society-wide hermeneutical lacunae, cases in which the *collective* hermeneutical resources have a gap. Of course, **however**, individuals can also suffer from their own private hermeneutical lacunae; they might simply not have learned a concept and the associated term which they would need to cognitively handle certain relevant experiences or phenomena. One example might be a conversation that I had with my mother in which she told me that she was upset with my aunt for only ever talking about lighthearted topics with my grandmother, while my mother talked to her about her worries and fears. Only when I introduced the term “emotional labor” was my mother able to, in her words (translated by me from German) “understand what I am upset about”.⁵

⁵ My mother consented to my use of this example.

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Unfortunately, that a person does not have the hermeneutical resources she needs to fully understand and formulate her own reasons does not preclude her being in the position of having to defend her actions or beliefs in argument. Wood, for example, had to justify her decision to leave her job when she wanted to apply for employment benefits. She decided not to even attempt giving her reasons and instead wrote that she had left for “personal” reasons. That she was aware that this was not true, that her reasons were really others, is apparent because she was later able to tell the story above *and* to recognize her experience in the new concept of “sexual harassment” once it became available to her. Further, it is all too easy to construct a plausible scene in which such an attempt is made – **in which a person formulates arguments meant to justify her actions but is unable to do so clearly or unambiguously because of a hermeneutical lacuna.**

Imagine Susan, having quit her job because of a case of what will later be recognized as sexual harassment, being challenged by her elderly father who relies on her income. **To justify herself, she produces a jumbled, narrative account of what happened, similar to Fricker’s description of Wood’s experiences, together with a reference to the stress she felt, as premises meant to justify the conclusion that her quitting was acceptable. The result could be described, by an argumentation theorist, as a vague or ambiguous, maybe sloppily formulated, narrative argument.** Her father answers: “There are annoying people at every job. This is not a reason to quit and deprive your family of support.” Maybe he elaborates, suggesting he understands her feelings but begs her to consider whether dealing with “unpleasant colleagues” is really too much to ask. Maybe he suggests that some “flirting” is normal and nothing to worry about. Unable to offer a precise alternative interpretation of her own story, Susan accepts her father’s interpretation and

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consequently that her father is correct when he evaluates her justification as insufficient. The next day she goes and begs for her job back.

Note that I did not, as is common in discussions about fallacies, produce a dialogue so that Susan and her father's exact utterances can be analyzed. This is because I do not think that the way in which Susan's position was distorted can be pinned down by identifying those of her utterances that were misinterpreted or terms that were unfaithfully replaced in her father's reconstruction. In this, the case is importantly different from this example Lewinski (2020) gives of a clear case of strawman:

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?

Nor is the meaning of Susan's utterances under negotiation. Susan and her father do not have clear but differing understandings of what it is that she is referring to. Contrast this to another of Lewinski's extended examples in which an academic **job candidate** claims to have a number of books and is challenged by an interviewer who claims that she has only one book, with the meaning of "book" being contentious (e.g. do edited collections count?). The job candidate presumably knows what she meant by "book" – she could give some account of what it means for an object to fall into the category of being a book - and could easily discover that she disagrees with the interviewer about this. By contrast, the hermeneutical lacuna prevents Susan from even attempting a precise formulation of her reasons because she does not have the resources to fully understand them. All she can do is give a vague, jumbled account in an attempt to formulate what it is that made her consider her action justified. So she might have made her attempt at justification such that there is no specific utterance or term we can point to that her father clearly misinterpreted or

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distorted. Nonetheless, I think, it is clear that her father's representation of the justification she is attempting to communicate is a *misrepresentation*, one **that also erroneously presents her as not having good reasons**, and that his objections defeated only this misrepresentation: Sexual harassment *can* justify temporarily depriving Susan's father of financial support much better than merely annoying or even flirty colleagues. And Susan was struggling to make her father understand that she had been subject to what we now know is sexual harassment, not to make him understand that she had annoying colleagues.

Of course, that the scene is set in the early 1970s makes it very likely that her father suffers from the same lacuna as Susan. His strawman is therefore likely unintentional. But, as e.g. Tindale points out, this does not mean that it is not a strawman (Tindale, 2007). And presumably, Susan's distress while telling her story and her obvious grasping for words are signal enough that interpretive charity is required (but not extended), even if it is difficult **and might require her father to ask insightful questions about her experiences until he can assist her in formulating her reasons better**.⁶ In addition, we could imagine a scenario in which a hermeneutical lacuna is not shared,

⁶ Elsewhere I make arguments to the effect that Susan's father, in forcing his daughter to argue against him in a proponent-opponent structure which places the burden of defending herself squarely on her shoulders is doing a moral wrong: Her inability to formulate her reasons require him to argue in a more cooperative way (Stevens, forthcoming). This is so because adversarial argument can stifle the development of arguments if it happens too early in the argument-construction process. However, I should also point out that asking (even insightful) questions might not always be enough. More on this below.

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but the delinquent arguer intentionally neglects to offer the necessary concept and term to her victim. In my conversation with my mother, for example, I might have recognized her anger as one about the uneven distribution of emotional labor. However, because I like my peace and quiet and want the fight between my mother and aunt to end, I might have told my mother that she is likely jealous of my grandmother and aunt's joyful conversations and her anger is therefore unjustified. It is not implausible that she might have been fooled by my strawman, given her inability to fully grasp her own reasons with the hermeneutical resources she has available.

1.2 If the victim is unable to recall the complete line of reasoning

In their paper "Enthymematic Parsimony", Paglieri and Woods (2011) point out that one of the reasons why an arguer may give an enthymematic argument may be that she is no longer able to easily recall the chain of inferences that originally justified her actions or beliefs. They argue that it can nonetheless be rational to believe these actions were justified or to continue holding these beliefs, as well as to present enthymematic arguments for them. They explain that it is normal that our inferential chains become condensed and truncated over time, a process that is motivated by cognitive parsimony: Having once spent the resources to think through the matter, it is more parsimonious to trust that we reasoned carefully in the past than to keep the entire line of reasoning saved in our memory. When it comes to arguing, however, cognitive parsimony can become costly:

Of course, employing these compressed inferences in enthymematic argumentation puts the arguer in a suboptimal position, insofar as he would be hard pressed to provide a detailed reconstruction of his own reasoning. (...) either he must express his convictions as they are, possibly exposing them to vigorous questioning, or remain silent and not argue at all. (Paglieri & Woods, 2011)

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Again, that part of a person's original line of reasoning is not (easily) accessible anymore does not mean that she will be spared from having to argumentatively defend her actions or beliefs. And, as before, this makes her vulnerable to be fooled by the strawman she is a victim of.

Imagine, for example, two parents disagreeing on whether to send their child to private or to public school. Finn argues in favor of private school because he wants their child to get the best education possible. James disagrees on the basis that he does not want to support a broken system of schooling that structurally advantages the wealthy. Finn constructs a complex rebuttal to James worries, but James believes Finn's objections to be rationalizations in order to deal with the cognitive dissonance that Finn's secret snobbery causes him. In the end, they send their child to private school. A year later, a quarrel of the kind that opens up old issues erupts. James, still unhappy about the choice the couple made back then, claims that Finn brushed the structural social issues surrounding private schooling aside as unsubstantiated worries of a "bleeding heart". Finn cannot remember the details of his own argument anymore, only that in the end he was convinced that James' worries should not be the deciding factor. When James accuses Finn of rationalizing his own snobbery, Finn becomes convinced that, if he is honest with himself, that is what he did. Finn admits that maybe sending their child to private school was a mistake motivated by his vanity. Note that, like before, it is possible to complete this scenario either by saying that James, too, has forgotten about Finn's original line of reasoning, or that James remembers it well but never took

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it at face value and sees no gain in reminding Finn of it. Either way, James has misrepresented Finn's position, and Finn has accepted the misrepresentation as accurate.⁷

2 Fooling the victim in adversarial and in cooperative arguments

The reader may have noticed that the foregoing examples have something in common: They all depict arguers engaged in argumentation structured according to the proponent-opponent structure of the *Dominant Adversarial Model* (DAM)⁸. The DAM requires each arguer to shoulder the burden of developing the case for their position by themselves, defending it against the

⁷ I think it might also be worth pointing out that this is a strawman that fooled its victim even if Finn's argument was flawed. I am inclined to imagine it was because of my own position on public vs private schools.

⁸ The name was given to it by Cohen (2015) and has since gained widespread use. I would like to make a caveat here: When I am talking about argumentation in the DAM-model here, I am imagining the core case in which arguers engage in DAM-style argumentation in order to rationally persuade their opponent of a conclusion they hold. Not all DAM-style arguments fall into this category. For example, arguers may play each other's devil's advocates and take the role of an opponent only to help their interlocutor improve their ability to defend their conclusion (or determine whether their conclusion is defensible) (compare Stevens & Cohen, 2020). In contexts such as this one, arguers may engage in "distorting" interpretation of each other's arguments to draw attention to ways in which these arguments might be misunderstood by later, uncharitable audiences. I thank my reviewer to drawing my attention to the importance of acknowledging this.

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objections of a dedicated opponent. It can be contrasted with more cooperative models which require arguers to aid each other in the development of their arguments.

In this section, I argue that it is no coincidence that constructing examples of strawmen that fool their victims was much easier when using the DAM-structure. The structure creates favorable conditions for both intentional and negligent strawmen and increases the vulnerability of those victims of strawmen who are already vulnerable to being fooled. Nonetheless, I show that arguing cooperatively does not offer reliable protection from strawmen that fool their victims either.

2.1 In adversarial arguments

I believe that engaging people in DAM-structured argument when they are not yet or not anymore able to easily access and formulate the reasons that justify their actions or claims means risking unintentional, negligent strawmen as well as that their victims will be fooled by them. In this I expand on an argument by Moulton (2003/1983) in her famous article against what she called the adversarial paradigm in philosophy. Moulton argued that the adversarial method is epistemically harmful because it does not focus arguers on understanding new arguments or ideas fully, but instead on how they can be defeated (and defended from defeat). As a result, arguments and ideas may never get fully developed and instead shot down prematurely. I think the reason for this lies in the way the DAM influences arguers. The DAM is meant to facilitate the rigorous testing of arguments and ideas by setting up a kind of battle of reasons that is supposed to leave the truth as the lone survivor (compare Stevens, 2016). It expressly relies on mutual, vigorous attacks, requiring arguers to seek out weaknesses in their opponent's contributions in order to win the argument. By organizing the argument around winning and losing, the DAM makes it likely that arguers will personally identify with the acceptability of their conclusion such that they, e.g.,

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fear a loss of face should they have to admit that their opponent is correct (compare Govier, 2020). This creates ideal conditions for heightened influence by the my-side- or confirmation bias, a cognitive bias which influences the way reasoners interpret evidence by making them seek out interpretations that let the evidence appear favorable for their prior beliefs even where it is not (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). In other words: The DAM creates favorable conditions for unintentional, negligent strawmanning because it guides the arguer's attention to seek out ways in which their opponent's contributions can be understood as lacking. Where this attention is directed at the position or arguments of an opponent who is struggling to formulate their reasons because of a hermeneutical lacuna or the effects of cognitive parsimony, strawmen become all the more likely. And because the DAM does not encourage arguers to give each other space to develop arguments carefully, nor require special effort towards charitable interpretation (compare Lewinski, 2012), the strawman victim's vulnerability to being fooled is enhanced under the conditions of the DAM.

2.2 In cooperative arguments

Elsewhere, I have argued that for these reasons, the DAM structure is a good choice only if arguers are clear about the reasons they have for their positions, and how to represent them in argument (Stevens, 2016). Where this is not the case, a more cooperative structure is required, one that asks arguers to help each other in developing positions and arguments and that often requires

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charitable interpretation.⁹ However, it would be a mistake to think that cooperative argumentation keeps arguers safe from becoming the victim of strawmen, or from being fooled by strawmen they are the victim of.¹⁰ This is so because of the pitfalls of what I call *toxic* charity, as Govier describes it (Govier, 1987a, 1987b). Govier criticizes the strong version of the principle of charity, which asks arguers to interpret arguments so that they appear as strong as possible, even if this requires changing the argument as it was presented, e.g. by adding “missing” premises.¹¹ She points out that this encourages interpreters to revise arguments so that they become convincing from the interpreter’s point of view. But the more *other* the interlocutor or her viewpoint is from the interpreter, the greater becomes the risk that the interpreter’s efforts at turning her interlocutor’s argument into one she finds convincing will have a distorting effect. The danger is that the interpreter’s “charitable” interpretation will change the interlocutor’s argument so that it represents what the interpreter, but not necessarily the interlocutor considers a convincing reason, or a reason

⁹ Or uncharitable interpretation expressly used to draw attention to the fact that the arguer who is being helped has not yet managed to find a way to express herself that does her position justice (see, e.g. van Laar’s work on when strawmanning can be used constructively.)

¹⁰ I thank John Casey for suggesting that cooperative argumentation does not prevent strawmanning.

¹¹ Against this, she sets her own, moderate principle of charity which requires arguers to interpret arguments under the assumption that their interlocutor has made a good faith attempt at giving what they believe to be good reasons for true claims.

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at all.¹² The result is a kind of argumentative imperialism (Govier calls it a kind of cultural imperialism) that replaces the reasons that the interlocutor was trying to present with ones that fit the interpreter's worldview. Govier argues against adopting a strong principle of charity (and for her own, more moderate principle) because it amounts to an encouragement of toxic charity by requiring interpreters to attempt *bettering* the arguments of others. Of course, the effects of toxic charity need not be motivated by a conscious effort to change another's argument to its best possible version. A well-meaning arguer, trying to understand the on-their-face confusing contributions of her interlocutor as representing reasons, will find it easier to attempt fitting what her interlocutor says into her own worldview than to try and understand a whole different way to see the world first and only *then* make sense of the argument.

Importantly, such toxic charity can actually lead to a reconstructed argument that represents a reason considerably weaker than the one that the interlocutor was grappling to understand and formulate, even if the interpreting arguer made an honest attempt at interpreting the argument so that she considers it strong. The best reason an interpreting arguer can construct an argument to represent *from their view of how the world is* may still be much worse than the reason an interlocutor tried to represent in the context of how the world is from the interlocutor's point of

¹² A related concept is that of constructing an ironman. See Aikin and Casey (2016). Even if ironmanning actually results in a better argument, it may nonetheless have a harmful distorting effect of the dialogue because it may influence the ethos of the interpreted arguer in a distorting way (I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.)

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view.¹³ The result is step one of a strawman: The argument is misrepresented as weaker than it is. This is especially likely to happen where interlocutor and interpreting arguer are subject to a shared hermeneutical lacuna during cooperative argument, so that one is trying to formulate reasons she possesses but has no concept for while the other is trying to understand reasons she does not possess nor has a concept for.

Once the strawman is constructed, the fact that the argument is cooperative may actually contribute to the ease with which the victim of the resulting strawman is fooled. Cooperative argumentation encourages arguers to trust each other because it sets up argument as a joint attempt at formulating the best reasons for conclusions in any direction. An arguer suffering, e.g., from a hermeneutical lacuna and trusting that her interlocutor is trying to understand her contributions as reasonable may be more willing to accept the toxically charitable strawmen that she is a victim of. From there, knocking the strawman down might even become a joint effort: Strawman-delinquent

¹³ Imagine, for example, that you and me are looking at the famous duck-rabbit head (the reader may google it if they do not know it). I have only ever seen the duck and you have only ever seen the rabbit, neither of us knows that it is an ambiguous image. We are discussing whether the depicted animal is a good pet. You think it is. I say: "I just think that they need a pond, and that is so hard to maintain." You may make an honest attempt at charity for what to you sounds like a horrible argument, but even if you manage to see that maybe rabbits are happier if they have a pond to play at, even the best argument you can construct from what I said is not going to be as good an argument about rabbits as it is about ducks (For more on problems like these, see Wohlrapp, 2014 on frame-problems in argumentation.).

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and strawman-victim together recognize that the victim's apparent "reasons" are actually not good enough to hold water. The victim joins in her own victimization.¹⁴

Think back to Susan and her attempts at justifying that she quit her job. Imagine that instead of trying to justify herself to her father, the first person she talks to is her sympathetic friend Sally. Sally went from high-school to being a home-maker. So far, she has been lucky enough never to become the victim of sexual harassment. She does not share the kind of experiences with Susan that would make it easier for her to understand Susan's point of view. Susan gives her jumbled, narrative argument and Sally does her best to see why Susan might be justified in quitting based on what she tells her. She thinks about how stressful she found high-school because she had to deal with annoying schoolmates day after day, and how bad she felt about turning down the advances of a young man she simply was not attracted to. She would never choose this situation over her peaceful life at home. She believes that Susan had good reasons to quit her job if she deeply disliked her colleagues and felt bad for them and their romantic feelings towards her. She tells Susan as much. Susan, feeling that her friend is sympathetic and wishes to understand her, accepts Sally's reconstruction. When Sally asks her how bad it really is, Susan herself weighs the stress of "the awkward social situation" against the strain she would put her elderly father under. Trying to be helpful by adding relevant considerations, Sally points out that the obligations children have towards their elderly parents weigh quite heavily. On the basis of this reason and Sally's distorting interpretation of Susan's argument, the two friends become convinced that

¹⁴ I thank John Casey for this formulation.

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though Susan is indeed facing difficulty, her quitting her job was unjustified all things considered.

Susan decides to beg for her job back the next day.

3 Why should we care when victims are fooled?

At the beginning of this paper, I said that I agree that the paradigmatic case of the strawman is the one in which the victim and the fool of the strawman are two different parties and the delinquent who commits the strawman aims not to persuade its victim, but an audience. I hope that the reader is now convinced that there is a variation of the strawman that fools its victim. However, the reader might not yet be convinced that she should care especially much. Strawmen that fool their victims are presumably less common than other kinds. It might seem a waste of time to invest all the effort of writing and reading this paper just to point out that a fallacy that is already thoroughly theorized is sometimes used in yet another way. In this section, I will argue that this would be a misperception.

As Aikin and Casey (2016) put it, the paradigmatic strawman is unlike many other fallacies in that it is not fallacious because it is internally invalid. Rather, it distorts the dialectical situation; it misrepresents what the state of the argument is and thereby leads its fool to accept a conclusion that is not actually well supported. This is also what the strawman that fools its victim does. However, that is not *all* that the strawman that fools its victim does. The paradigmatic strawman leaves the actual argument or position intact at least in the victim's mind (and sometimes also in the minds of some who heard the victim's original contribution or as a recording in written or spoken form). It is therefore vulnerable to being dismantled through the comparison between the victim's original contribution and the delinquent's misrepresentation. By contrast, the strawman that fools its victim does not only distort the dialectical situation, but instead works to remove the

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argument or position it misrepresented altogether. It obscures the original position or reason in its victim's mind also.¹⁵ This, so I argue, is a more serious *moral* wrong than that of the paradigmatic strawman.

The intentional or culpably negligent use of fallacies is a moral wrong because it amounts to a deception (Blair, 2011). Specifically, it is a *violating* deception: As Casey (2020a) points out, all argument is in some sense a forceful interference with another's mind, simply because arguments present reasons and reasons, once understood, change minds independently of whether the one inhabiting the mind *wants* it to be changed. I might *want* to believe that there is nothing wrong with eating an entire 150g bar of chocolate every day, but if I am presented with and understand arguments that combine my wish to maintain a healthy weight with the calorie-content of chocolate, my mind will change and I will cease to believe it. With some exceptions (see, e.g. Tsai, 2014), we do not think that it is a morally unacceptable violation of the integrity of another's mind to present reasons through argument. We assume a continuing tacit consent to hear such arguments on the basis that at least generally speaking, being aware of more reasons leads to epistemic improvement. When we give reasons through argument, we act on the generally legitimate assumption that while our interlocutor cannot voluntarily steer the changing of their minds in response to our arguments, they *want* their mind changed by good reasons: The changing

¹⁵ This may not always be successful. For example, a third party might have witnessed the entire exchange and notice the strawman by comparing her understanding of what the victim contributed with the distortion provided by the delinquent. I do not think, however, that this erases the special effect that the strawman that fools its victim has.

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happens independent of their will, but not against their will (Casey, 2020a). However, where we use fallacies, the force of argument turns into a *violating* force. Those fooled by a fallacy also have their mind changed forcefully because independent of their will, but now we may presume that this also happens *against* their will. This is why presenting a fallacy is an attempt at an immoral violation while presenting an argument in good faith is not.

Both the paradigmatic strawman and the strawman that fools its victim are violating in this way. They both interfere with their fool's mind such that they create false beliefs about the state of the dialectical field and the effectiveness of objections, thereby strengthening or bringing about assent to a conclusion that the fool might otherwise not have accepted. Thereby, they make the strawman's fool epistemically worse off in a morally relevant way (and potentially they make her worse off in other ways too, depending on the consequences of her new beliefs). Those who employ each kind of strawman intentionally or culpably negligently engage in a violating deception. But the strawman that fools its victim does more because it interferes with its fool's mind in an additional way: By obstructing reasons that might otherwise have been or become accessible. The strawman that fools its victim does not only add something, it also takes something away, it is doubly coercive and doubly violating.

It is also, additionally, especially hard to identify and the damage it does is especially hard to repair. This is so because unlike the paradigmatic strawman, it covers its own tracks by enlisting its victim in its service. The consequences of this can be very serious, especially in cases due to hermeneutical lacunae, and especially where these lacunae exist in the conceptual resources available to a society and constitute a hermeneutical injustice as in the sexual harassment case

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Fricker cites. Here, strawmen that fool their victim contribute to the perpetuation of the injustice by erecting obstacles between the victims of the hermeneutical injustice and their own reasons.

Finally, the strawman that fools its own victim can illegitimately damage its victim's confidence in her own faculties. Susan, because of the reaction of her father, is now convinced that she did not have any good reasons for her quitting and could not have produced any, and this will feature in her future self-assessment when it comes to her ability to make good decisions. As several authors have argued (Saussure, 2018; Aikin & Talisse, 2020; Aikin & Casey 2011), paradigmatic strawmen do not only effect their fool's perception of the dialectic field, but also their perception of the strawman's victim: They diminish their *ethos* in the fools' mind, making them think lesser of the victim with respect to their intelligence, ability to argue or even their integrity. Where victim and fool are the same person, this diminished respect is turned inward. Depending on the kind of argument that is being strawmanned, the result can be something similar to gaslighting, especially if this kind of strawmanning occurs repeatedly, in that the strawman's victim is lead to not take herself and her ability to reason seriously anymore (Abramson, 2014). This is a serious harm because, as Fricker (2007) explains, our self-image as competent epistemic agents is deeply connected to our psychological and emotional well-being.¹⁶

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that strawmen that fool their own victims do not only exist, but should also be taken seriously. Adversarial arguments provide especially fertile soil for these kinds of strawmen (and strawmen in general), but they can also occur in cooperative arguments. Strawmen

¹⁶ Once more, I thank John Casey for suggesting the impact that strawmen which fool their victims have on self-confidence.

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that fool their victims are especially pernicious because they are *doubly* coercive: They do not just coercively change their fool's mind by persuading them with objections that appear more effective than they are, but they change her mind by *replacing* her reasons with weaker ones and *then* overwhelming them with objections, obscuring her access to her own reasons in the process.

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