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Philosophy of a Specific Discipline

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Talking points: do they solve the issue of hermeneutical lacunae?

Philosophy of argument [FI233VL]

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Introduction

In this essay I will be analysing Katharina Stevens paper on fooling the victim (Stevens, 2021). Stevens argues that victims of the strawman can be fooled just as well as the audience if they have certain gaps in their knowledge (hermeneutical lacuna) that prevents them from being able to properly rationalise their position. I agree with this argument and will be offering an additional situation where victims can be fooled by the strawman by the uncritical acceptance of prevalent talking points or terms in societal discourse. That is when, instead of gaps in knowledge, there is potent talking points or terms that are used predominantly in society that are used without adequate justifications or reasoning, and because of their prominence, are too easily accepted. This phenomena sounds similar to that of Zarefsky, who speaks of strategic manoeuvring through persuasive definitions. My essay will first elucidate Stevens' framework, introduce my proposed extension, explore Zarefsky's related ideas, and delineate how my concept diverges from theirs.

Fooling the victim

Katharina Stevens provides new insights in how the strawman fallacy can, in fact, fool the victim, rather than just the audience (Stevens, 2021). The strawman fallacy is a well known phenomenon where an argument gets misrepresented to appear weaker so that it is easier to oppose. Generally this is understood as to fool the audience of the argument because the victim of the strawman fallacy can hardly be fooled into thinking something they didn't initially mean. Stevens argues that in certain cases, a victim can indeed be fooled in such a way. She presents two scenarios where that is possible. One, where the victim is subject to a hermeneutical lacuna, which is a gap in the person's understanding, for example, a lack of vocabulary or available concepts to adequately rationalise their arguments. This can make someone fall victim and be fooled to the strawman fallacy because they may accept the misrepresentation of their situation or argument because they themselves haven't been able to rationalise it properly. Stevens provides an example of Susan to showcase this. Susan has been getting sexually harassed at work and therefore quit her job. At the time, the sexual harassment terminology wasn't available to her. When she speaks about why she quit her job to her father, she is too embarrassed to go into detail of what the man actually did that constitutes as sexual harassment, and rather, gives a vague description of being bothered at work. The father misreads the situation as her just having annoying coworkers and exclaims that every job has annoying coworkers and that that shouldn't be a reason for quitting her job. The father has unknowingly

committed the fallacy of the strawman and because Susan doesn't have the concept of sexual harassment to help her make her argument clear (for herself or her father), she accepts this misrepresentation of her situation and tries to get her job back because she now does not believe the situation was bad enough to warrant leaving.

In this essay, I want to offer another side of this view where individuals may possess the appropriate vocabulary but lack a deep understanding or the reasoning skills necessary to engage with these concepts critically or adaptively in discussion. For a more direct comparison, I will provide an example where the term sexual harassment has been conflated. Say Emily was out one night dancing with another person. The other person started to feel too comfortable by getting too close and handsy which made Emily uncomfortable. When she walked away the interaction stopped. Because this was the first time she experienced something like that, she wanted to talk to someone about it, a friend. Say this friend cares about Emily a lot, and she raises the concern that this is considered sexual harassment. Emily, well aware of this term, now feels shocked and upset that that had happened. Sexual harassment and the trauma associated is well understood[1], and now Emily has been convinced that this is likely what has happened to her when initially she may have felt at most weird about it. For people who have more experience or knowledge it could be that they would not have accepted that reconstruction of the situation, but for some people using well-accepted terminology to describe a situation which is encapsulated by that term, is convincing. Like Stevens, I would stress that this case of strawman is not malicious or intended to be manipulative. In cases like this, it is an over confidence of the use of the term, where the meaning or reasoning behind what the term is supposed to represent has been lost because it is not often repeated or clarified. Who really draws the boundaries of what sexual harassment is? Is it how threatened someone feels? Is it how persistent it is? Is it defined by specific acts? Answering these questions and defining those boundaries for the term takes endless reasoning and discussions. Therefore these terms are used in a way that is best understood by the individual and often go without a whole philosophical debate about whether its use is accurate.

Abortion debate

There are more examples like this that can be explored. Take for example the well-known abortion debate. One of the main talking points for the pro-life debate is that abortion is murder.

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[1] I use the term understood here to mean there is a very general accepted definition that most people are aware of and not that people could exactly say what constitutes and sexual harassment and what not.

This is a potent talking point as it frames the debate in stark moral terms, suggesting that abortion is equivalent to taking a human life. By using the term "murder," the argument appeals to emotional and ethical considerations, aiming to establish a moral high ground. It is effective because it is difficult to argue against because the opposing side (pro-choice) seem to have to take the stance that murder is OK. This key phrase is repeated by almost all pro-life advocates but how many have actually reasoned this phrase through? What exactly constitutes a murder? At what point exactly is the foetus considered a human life? At what point is it independent from the mother with independent human rights? These are all difficult questions and are overshadowed by the potent talking point of "abortion is murder". Now if we narrow the scope and imagine a woman who needed an abortion because she was sexually assaulted and imagine that her peers are now calling her a murderer. With the weight of the established talking point she may be convinced she really is one if she had not yet developed her beliefs strongly. She accepts the reconstruction of her situation and falls victim to the strawman.

Zarefsky's strategic manoeuvring

This concept may seem very similar to David Zarefsky's concept of strategic manoeuvring through persuasive definitions (Zarefsky, 2006). Zarefsky highlights the interplay between dialectic and rhetoric in argumentation. Dialectic is concerned with the procedures of critical questioning to resolve disagreements, while rhetoric examines the relationship between claims and audiences, focusing on persuasiveness and how audiences validate arguments. Strategic manoeuvring is introduced as a concept that integrates rhetorical considerations into a dialectical framework, acknowledging that people engaged in arguments aim not only to resolve disagreements but to do so in their favour. Zarefsky explains that in argumentation, terms are strategically chosen to elicit specific connotations and influence the audience's perception. The pro-life movement's characterisation of abortion as "murder" is definitely an example of a persuasive definition. The chosen term of murder is laden with moral condemnation and criminal implicatures, without clear justification. Zarefsky's position, however, is mainly concerned with how an audience may be persuaded by persuasive definitions. The focus of this essay is similar to that of Katharina Stevens, which is the idea that the arguer themselves (not an audience) can be fooled into believing something they didn't initially believe by falling victim to the strawman.

The purpose of this essay is to offer a contrasting view to Stevens who states that falling victim to strawmen is due to hermeneutical lacuna. I argue that even without hermeneutical lacuna, victims can still be fooled due to prevalent terms in societal discourse. One can argue that this perspective is actually another way of framing hermeneutical lacuna because the reason why the victim falls for the strawman is because they don't have the knowledge to argue against the prevalent talking points. This is a fair point to be considered. I would still argue that it is different because it is not the lack of words or concepts, but rather a lack of reasoning. In Stevens' case, there is reasoning and personal understanding of the situation, but there is no language to express it. Here, the verbal tools are available, but the reasoning falls short. If Emily in my example had more time to reason through her situation and the term sexual harassment, she could have come to the conclusion that this wasn't a case of sexual harassment after all. There is no hermeneutical lacuna in that sense where she isn't able to express herself at all.

Conclusion

This essay expands upon Katharina Stevens' insightful examination of the strawman fallacy, offering a nuanced perspective that even when individuals have access to the necessary linguistic tools, they may still fall victim to this fallacy due to a lack of deep reasoning or understanding. Through the exploration of scenarios like the misunderstanding of sexual harassment and the charged rhetoric of the abortion debate, it becomes evident that the employment of powerful, emotionally laden terminology can profoundly influence individuals' perceptions and self-understandings, even when they are the subjects of the discourse. This discussion shows similarities with Davis Zarefsky's concept of strategic manoeuvring, which highlights how language can be used specifically to persuade audiences in argumentation. The perspective proposed in this essay differs from that view because there are cases where persuasive language (such as potent talking points prevalent in society) can fool the arguer themselves rather than only the audience. That is akin to the arguer falling for the strawman, as a lack of understanding of a situation and the mislabelling that they are very familiar with can make them accept the reconstruction.

References

Stevens, K. (2021). Fooling the Victim: Of Straw Men and Those Who Fall for Them. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 109-127.

Zarefsky, D. (2006). Strategic Maneuvering through Persuasive Definitions: Implications for Dialectic and Rhetoric. *Argumentation*, 399-416.