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# Strawman Fallacy

**Description:** Substituting a person’s actual position or argument with a distorted, exaggerated, or misrepresented version of the position of the argument.

**Logical Form:**

*Person 1 makes claim Y.*  
*Person 2 restates person 1’s claim (in a distorted way).*  
*Person 2 attacks the distorted version of the claim.*  
*Therefore, claim Y is false.*

**Example #1:**

*Ted: Biological evolution is both a theory and a fact.*  
*Edwin: That is ridiculous! How can you possibly be absolutely certain that we evolved from pond scum!*  
*Ted: Actually, that is a gross misrepresentation of my assertion. I never claimed we evolved from pond scum. Unlike math and logic, science is based on empirical evidence and, therefore, a scientific fact is something that is confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional consent. The empirical evidence for the fact that biological evolution does occur falls into this category.*

**Explanation:** Edwin has ignorantly mischaracterized the argument by a) assuming we evolved from pond scum (whatever that is exactly), and b) assuming “fact” means “certainty”.

**Example #2:**

*Zebedee: What is your view on the Christian God?*  
*Mike: I don’t believe in any gods, including the Christian one.*

Spin Doctoring  
Spotlight Fallacy  
Statement of Conversion  
Stereotyping (the fallacy)  
Stolen Concept Fallacy  
Strawman Fallacy  
Style Over Substance  
Subjectivist Fallacy  
Subverted Support  
Sunk-Cost Fallacy  
Suppressed Correlative  
Survivorship Fallacy  
Texas Sharpshooter Fallacy  
Tokenism  
Traitorous Critic Fallacy  
Two Wrongs Make a Right  
Type-Token Fallacy  
Unfalsifiability  
Unwarranted Contrast  
Use-Mention Error  
Weak Analogy  
Willed Ignorance  
Wishful Thinking

*Zebedee: So you think that we are here by accident, and all this design in nature is pure chance, and the universe just created itself?*

*Mike: You got all that from me stating that I just don't believe in any gods?*

**Explanation:** Mike made one claim: that he does not believe in any gods. From that, we can deduce a few things, like he is not a theist, he is not a practicing Christian, Catholic, Jew, or a member of any other religion that requires the belief in a god, but we cannot deduce that he believes we are all here by accident, nature is chance, and the universe created itself. Mike might have no beliefs about these things whatsoever. Perhaps he distinguishes between "accident" and natural selection, perhaps he thinks the concept of design is something we model after the universe, perhaps he has some detailed explanation based on known physics as to how the universe might have first appeared, or perhaps he believes in some other supernatural explanation. Regardless, this was a gross mischaracterization of Mike's argument.

**Exception:** At times, an opponent might not want to expand on the implications of his or her position, so making assumptions might be the only way to get the opponent to point out that your interpretation is not accurate, then they will be forced to clarify.

**References:**

Hurley, P. J. (2011). *A Concise Introduction to Logic*. Cengage Learning.

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Krista Neckles

Hello Sir,

Tuesday, May 22, 2018 - 07:53:50 PM

I read that when this fallacy occurs, this is the opposite of the desired "principle of charity". I have been told that I have committed the strawman fallacy. I do not want to commit this error again. How do I apply the "principle of charity" when dealing with a debate opponent?

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Bo Bennett,  
PhD

Wednesday, May 23, 2018 - 06:33:41 AM

Assume the most *charitable* interpretation of what they had said. Often, claims are ambiguous—they can mean several things. A charitable interpretation is to choose the strongest, most coherent interpretation and assume that is what your opponent meant. Of course, it's best to get clarification when possible rather than assume anything.

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