THINKING TOOLS: THE STRAW MAN

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Thinking Tools is a regular feature that introduces pointers on thinking clearly and rigorously.

The straw man fallacy involves attacking a position that is not actually that of your opponent. You set up a 'straw man', defeat him, and then claim to have defeated your opponent. But of course you haven't. You have succeeding only in conquering a straw man.

The straw man's position is typically a distorted or exaggerated version of your opponent's true position, similar enough to it that some will be fooled into thinking you have refuted your opponent's view.

Here are a few examples:

I think we should give a little money to charity.

But why would you want to bleed us dry like that?

I think you should get a bit more exercise. You're hardly out of that chair.

But if I spend every minute of every day down the gym, I'll never get anything done!

So you believe in God? Then you believe in angels, hell, bleeding statues and all that other hocus pocus. You're a gullible fool!

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