

## FROM OUR DIRECTOR OF FAITH FORMATION

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### Avoiding Straw Men

If you took one Fr. Koterski class at Fordham, you had taken them all. A standard feature of a Fr. Koterski philosophy class was the twenty-page term paper. Fr. Koterski would always give the same advice on writing: establish your position and then respond to a few possible objections to it. "But," he would say, "be careful to avoid straw man arguments. A straw man is one that you prop up just to push over. Always respond to your opponent's strongest case." I knew what he was talking about from my days on the debate team.

Imagine that you're sitting down for a debate over capital punishment. Your opponent stands up to present his case on why capital punishment should be retained. He gives an impressive speech on the nature of justice, why the state alone should have the right to lethal force, and how historical examples bear out his case. "This is more than I want to deal with," you think to yourself. "I could be here all night trying to respond to all this." So, when it comes time for your rebuttal you stand up and say, "My opponent cares more about money than about human life; he doesn't want to pay for long-term imprisonment. That is why he supports capital punishment!"



Your point would be a good one, if it was a central feature of your opponent's case. But your opponent never held that he advocated for capital punishment for purely economic reasons. In fact, he presented several stronger reasons that you simply did not want to deal with. You gained yourself the image of having defeated your opponent's case when in fact, you merely propped up a weak argument of your own design to make yourself look good. That is a straw man.

"What's so bad about that?" you might ask. "You won the round, didn't you?" There are two issues. 1) It can be dishonest. Propping up a straw man that your opponent did not argue for is a false portrayal of his position. 2) Even if your opponent did present the weak argument, there may still be a problem. If he also presented stronger arguments and you refused to address them, you have to wonder if the truth is in fact on your side. If you cannot respond to those objections, are you sure that your position is correct? Do you care more about winning the argument or finding the truth?

I encourage you, respond to the strongest arguments. Ask questions so that you understand your opponent's position well. Your opponent should be able to recognize their own argument in the way you present it.

—Joe Moreshead