PHILOSOPHY 101: Quiz #5 Solutions

April 14, 2011

1 True or False?

For each of the following claims, indicate in the blank provided whether the claim is true (**T**) or false (**F**).

1. The principle of faithfulness (PF) and the principle of charity for implicit premises (PCI) can sometimes conflict with each other. **T**

   Sometimes, in order to make the implicit premises that we add to our reconstruction *reasonable* — in accordance with (PCI) — we end-up with implicit premises that go beyond what the author of the passage seems to have had in mind. In such cases, (PCI) leads us to a reconstruction which is *charitable*, but not perfectly *faithful* to the author's intentions. As a result, (PCI) can sometimes lead us to *violate* (PF).

2. The reason we apply the principle of charity (PC) when reconstructing arguments is to be kind to the authors of argumentative passages. **F**

   It is not a desire to be 'kind' or 'nice' to authors of argumentative passages which motivates our use the principle of charity (PC). We use (PC) because, by being charitable in our reconstructions, we tend to produce arguments which are stronger and more informative. And, this helps us to achieve the main goal of critical thinking, which is to become better informed about the issues surrounding the arguments we analyze.

3. Passages cannot contain both rhetorical and argumentative writing. **F**

   Typically, passages (especially long ones) will contain mixtures of several different kinds of writing, including descriptive, rhetorical and argumentative writing.

4. The very first step of the reconstruction process is to figure-out what the conclusion of the argument is. **F**

   First, one must determine whether there is an argument in the passage.

5. An argumentative passage can never have both implicit premises and an implicit conclusion. **F**

   In class, we discussed an argumentative passage with both implicit premises and an implicit conclusion. This does not happen very often, but it does happen.

2 Three Reconstructions

Charitably reconstruct the following three argumentative passages, using the procedure described in chapter 6. Just report your final reconstructions(s) in the space(s) provided (use scrap paper if necessary).

In my answers to these questions, I have tried to follow not only the chapter 6 rules, but also the chapter 7 rules. So, these reconstructions are "fine-tuned." That is, they are in standard form (whenever possible), and I have given *justifications* for each line of each reconstruction. Specifically, for each line, I have said whether the line is *explicit* (E) or *implicit* (I) , and whether it follows logically from any previous lines of the reconstruction. I have also included brief discussions (really, *evaluations*) concerning my reconstructed arguments and the passages from which they are drawn.

1. Since people can do what they want with their own bodies, a pregnant woman can get an abortion.

   1. All actions which involve only the actor's body are morally permissible actions (for that actor). (E)
   2. All abortions are actions which involve only the actor's body. (I)
   ∴ **3**. All abortions are morally permissible actions. (E), (1), (2)

   Notice that it is the *implicit* general premise (2) that is (by far) more controversial here. This is often the case. People tend only to explicitly say those things (like (1)) that they think are widely acceptable. Usually, people will leave it up to the reader (or the listener) to fill-in the controversial implicit premises upon which the argument ultimately depends.

2. You don't really know anything. Whatever you believe, you could be wrong.

   1. All of your beliefs are *possibly* false. (E)
   2. If there is some statement P that you know to be true, then your belief in P cannot *possibly* be false. (I)
   ∴ **3**. There is no statement P that you know to be true. (E), (1), (2)

   Again, it is the implicit premise (2) that seems more controversial (although, in this case, the *explicit* premise (1) also seems rather unreasonable[1]). Premise (2) constitutes a *very* strong assumption about the nature of knowledge. It says that all knowledge must be *infallible*. Given such a strong assumption about knowledge, it is not too surprising that knowledge turns-out to be very difficult (if not impossible) to obtain. It is for this reason that many (non-skeptical) theories of knowledge deny that (2) is a legitimate requirement for knowledge.

3. Some people say that watching violent TV programs causes people to behave violently themselves. I don't think that they are right. My nephew (call him John) watches lots of violent TV programs, but he never behaves violently. The opponents of these shows probably just don't want to admit that they like them themselves.

   1. John watches lots of violent TV programs, but he never behaves violently. (E)
   2. If (1), then there is some person who watches lots of violent TV programs, but never behaves violently. (I)
   3. There is some person who watches lots of violent TV programs, but never behaves violently. (I), (1), (2)
   4. If (3), then watching violent TV programs does not cause people to behave violently. (I)
   ∴ **5**. Watching violent TV programs does not cause people to behave violently. (E), (3), (4)

   I have made this reconstruction *extra* precise, to illustrate several aspects of "fine-tuning" reconstructions. First, notice how premise (3) follows logically (in this case, *deductively*) from premises (1) and (2). I have indicated this by adding "(1), (2)" to the *justification* of premise (3). I have done the same thing for the conclusion, which follows deductively from premises (3) and (4). Second, notice how it is very clear that my reconstruction is *valid*. By deriving the *intermediate conclusion*, (3), we make it crystal clear that the antecedent of premise (4) is also being assumed as a premise. If we were to write-down only (1) and "If there is some person who watches lots of violent TV programs, but never behaves violently, then watching violent TV programs does not cause people to behave violently" as premises, then the validity of the resulting argument would not be as obvious. The moral of this story is: *you should always make the logical role of each premise in your reconstruction as clear as possible (by writing justifications for each premise).*

   As we discussed in class, it is the implicit premise (4) that is controversial. A single case in which X obtains but Y does not obtain is *not* sufficient to establish that X does not cause Y. When people say that "X causes Y" (*e.g.*, "watching violent TV programs causes people to behave violently" or "smoking causes cancer" *etc.*) they do not (typically) mean that whenever X occurs Y also occurs. Usually, they mean that X *raises the probability of* Y (or, something to that effect). This is perfectly consistent with there being cases (even *many* cases) in which X occurs but Y does not occur.

   Notice how I did *not* include (*i*) "Some people say that watching violent TV programs causes people to behave violently themselves" or (*ii*) "The opponents of these shows probably just don't want to admit that they like them themselves" as premises in my reconstruction. I did not include (*i*), because it does not support the conclusion of the argument. If anything, (*i*) is a kind of *testimonial evidence* which seems to weigh *against* (5).[2] For similar reasons, I did not include (*ii*) as a premise in my reconstruction either. (*ii*) seems to be offered by the author as some sort of *explanation* of *why* (*i*) is true.[3] In any event, the important thing for our purposes is that (*i*) and (*ii*) are *not* part of the argument. They are in the passage only to anticipate (and, to try to *explain away*) possible *objections* to the argument.

   Ultimately, it seems that the author of this passage has either uncharitably attributed an overly strong conception of "cause" to their opponent, or they have misevaluated the anecdotal evidence provided by a single case, or both.[4]

[1] Consider the statement P = "Either $1 = 1$ or $1 \neq 1$." I believe P, and I find I quite difficult to see how P could even *possibly* be false. Moreover, consider the statement Q = "There is no statement P that Branden knows to be true." If the author of this passage is correct, then doesn't their (deductively sound!) argument *guarantee* that Q is true? So, why can't I *know* Q *itself* to be true?

[2] Of course, by themselves, (*i*) and (*ii*) are *not* logically relevant to the conclusion, (5). The point is that the premises we would need to add to make (*i*) and (*ii*) relevant to (5) would be *highly* unreasonable. What would we need to add to make (*i*) and (*ii*) logically relevant to (5)?

[3] It seems to me that a better explanation of (*i*) is that the people who claim that watching violent TV programs causes people to behave violently do not have as strict a definition of "cause" in mind as the author of this passage seems to be (uncharitably) attributing to them.

[4] There seems to be no escaping the conclusion that the author has made *some kind* of mistake here. If (as was suggested by a student in the class) we reconstruct the argument so that the conclusion says "not everyone who watches violent TV programs becomes violent themselves," then our resulting reconstruction would surely be considerably stronger. But, this would also have the effect of making the author's belief that they are *genuinely* disagreeing with people who say that violence on TV causes violent behavior *false*. Either way, *some* mistake is being made here.