

# PHILOSOPHY 101: Quiz #2 Solutions

March 1, 2011

## 1 Fill-in the Blanks

Fill in the blanks in the following sentences, using the appropriate vocabulary from chapter 3.

1. The principle of rational belief (RB) implies that if a person's total evidence supports p, then the rational epistemic attitude (for that person) toward p is belief.
2. The idea that a belief can be rational — even if it is actually false — is called fallibilism.
3. Unlike truth, rationality is relative, in that what's rational for one person need not be rational for another person. However, rationality, like truth, is objective, in that our thoughts and/or feelings about a statement do not determine whether it is rational to believe the statement.

## 2 True or False?

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

1. It is possible for different people to have different rational epistemic attitudes toward the same statement. T  
One person's total evidence may *support* p, while another's *goes against* p.
2. If a person considers a statement, then the person must either believe the statement or disbelieve the statement. F  
A person may also *suspend judgment*.
3. If you have some evidence against a statement, then it is always rational to disbelieve the statement. F  
Even if *some* of your (total) evidence goes against p, the rest of your (total) evidence may support p.
4. If a statement is true, then it is always rational for you to believe the statement. F  
Your total evidence may go against p — even if p is true.
5. Since Smith and Jones disagree about whether God exists, one of them must have an irrational belief about God's existence. F  
They may have different evidence, and each may be following their evidence.
6. Since Smith and Jones agree about whether God exists, it can't be that one of them has a rational belief and the other an irrational belief about God's existence. F  
One may have good evidence for the belief and the other not have good evidence.

## 3 Short Answer #1

Discuss the following objection to (BP):

I *know* that I like peach pie, I don't merely believe that I like it. Thus, the statement "I like peach pie" is one that I neither believe nor disbelieve nor suspend judgment about. So, it is an exception to (BP).

If I *know* that I like peach pie, then I *do* believe that I like peach pie. The reason it seems odd to say "I believe that I like peach pie" is that we do not usually say that we believe something when we believe it very strongly. Instead, we usually say "I feel sure..." or "I know..." But it is still true that we believe the statement in these cases of strong or firm belief.

## 4 Short Answer #2

Discuss the following objection to the evidentialist principle, (RB):

A person who is shipwrecked on a deserted island has a better chance of surviving if he believes that he will be rescued than if he doesn't believe that. The belief will give him the strength and motivation to do what he must to stay alive, and this will give him a better chance of living until help arrives (if it does). As a result, it surely is rational for him to believe that he will survive, even if he doesn't have any evidence supporting this belief. So, (RB) is wrong.

On the surface, this objection conflates what is *beneficial* to believe with what is *rational* to believe. It is surely in the shipwrecked person's *pragmatic* interest — all things considered — to believe that he'll be rescued. But, given his evidence, this is not a reasonable (*i.e.*, *epistemically* rational or justified) belief. A neutral observer with the same evidence would be irrational to believe that the shipwrecked person will be rescued.

Delving a bit deeper, however, this “short answer” of Feldman's glosses over some important subtleties in the example. The first thing we need to do is clarify the example, by answering a few questions. I will call the shipwrecked person “Gilligan.” Does Gilligan's total evidence include the statement that Gilligan *already* believes that he will be rescued, or is he currently only *considering* the statement “Gilligan will be rescued”? Why doesn't Gilligan have access to the information (*i.e.*, the apparently relevant *evidence*) that if he believes he will be rescued, then this will increase the probability that he will — in fact — be rescued? *How much* would Gilligan's believing he will be rescued raise the probability of his rescue? When we answer these questions carefully, we see that there are two possible cases to be considered. Let  $p$  be the statement that Gilligan will be rescued, and consider the following two possibilities:

- (i) Assume that Gilligan does *not* already believe  $p$  (*i.e.*, that he is currently *considering* whether or not to believe  $p$ ). In this case, it would *not* be epistemically rational for Gilligan to believe  $p$  — *even if* his total evidence says that if he believes  $p$ , then this will increase the probability that  $p$  is true. Why not? Currently, Gilligan's total evidence (concerning the statement  $p$ ) is as follows:

$\mathcal{E}_1$ .  $p$  is more probable if Gilligan believes  $p$  than it is if Gilligan does not believe  $p$ .  
And, Gilligan does *not* currently believe  $p$ .

$\mathcal{E}_1$  does *not* imply that  $p$  has probability greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$  (in fact,  $\mathcal{E}_1$  seems to imply that  $p$  has quite a *low* probability — even less than it would have if Gilligan *did* currently believe it). Therefore,  $\mathcal{E}_1$  — Gilligan's total evidence in this case — does *not* support  $p$ ; hence, it would be irrational for Gilligan to believe  $p$ , on the basis of  $\mathcal{E}_1$ .

- (ii) Assume that Gilligan *does* currently believe  $p$ . In this case, it *might* be epistemically rational for a “neutral third party”(call him Skip) to believe  $p$ . How? Let's look at *Skip's* total evidence,  $\mathcal{E}_2$ :

$\mathcal{E}_2$ .  $p$  is more probable if Gilligan believes  $p$  than it is if Gilligan does not believe  $p$ .  
And, Gilligan *does* currently believe  $p$ .

$\mathcal{E}_2$  *might* imply that  $p$  has probability greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$  — depending on *how much* Gilligan's believing  $p$  raises the probability of  $p$  (and, how probable  $p$  is *a priori*). If Gilligan's believing  $p$  makes the probability of  $p$  greater than  $\frac{1}{2}$ , then Skip *would* be rational to believe  $p$ , on the basis of  $\mathcal{E}_2$ . I doubt it, though. I bet the chances of being rescued from a deserted island (*even if* one's “optimism” keeps one alive for a long time on the island) are less than 50/50!