Philosophy 101

(1/25/11)

- This is PHIL 101 (section 2) — "Logic, Reason, and Persuasion"
  - **NOTE: the course is full — no SPN's available.**

- If you weren't here last week, make sure to (1) buy the book (Ch. 1 is on the website), and (2) checkout the course website:

http://fitelson.org/101/

- *Chapter 1* of Feldman's *Reason & Argument*:
  - [*Arguments & argument analysis* — did this § last week]
  - [*Reason, rhetoric & argument analysis* — almost done]
  - [*Ways people deal with arguments* — re-cap from 1st lect.]
  - *Impediments to good reasoning*
  - *Truth & correspondence to the facts*
  - *Rational Belief*

Homework #1

- **HW #1 was assigned *last* Thursday**.
- **It is due *next* Thursday: 2/3/11**.
- **It consists of these 5 problems**:
- **(1) p. 8: #4, (2) p. 14: #2, (3) p. 14: #4, (4) p. 20: #4, (5) p. 22: #5**.
- I'll say more about the formatting, structure, *etc.*, of your homeworks on Thursday.

Reason, Rhetoric, and Argument Analysis III

- **GOAL**: to determine whether the premises of an argument provide good reason to believe that its conclusion is true.

- In real life, we're not always interested in achieving this goal.

- Sometimes, we might want to be comforted, or amused, or morally challenged by written (or spoken) words.

- In this course, we will not be interested in such uses of (or ways of interpreting) written or spoken words.

- In some contexts, we are not concerned with determining whether a statement is *true or false*, or whether a body of evidence (*i.e.*, a set of premises) *supports a conclusion*.
  - But, in this course, *that will be our focus*.

Ways People Deal with Arguments (Review)

- Last week, I mentioned that there are various non-rational ways of dealing with or responding to arguments, *e.g.*:
  - Credulity [*accepting* every argument]
  - Contradiction [*rejecting* every argument]
  - Dogmatism [*maintaining* beliefs in light of *any* argument]
  - Skepticism [*not* taking arguments *seriously*]

- The *rational* way of responding to an argument involves trying (in good faith, and in a careful, reflective way) to determine whether the premises support the conclusion.

- In order to do this, we must maintain an open mind, and think very carefully about (a) what is the strongest version of the argument that has been given?, and (b) how strong is it?
  - Next: some *impediments* to good (rational) reasoning.

Impediments to Good Reasoning I

- **Lacking an adequate vocabulary**
  - In order to effectively analyze arguments, we need the right conceptual tools/vocabulary.

  - We've been mentioning "rational strength" and we have *distinguished it* from *rhetorical power* and *literary merit*.

  - But, we have *not* yet said precisely what the "rational strength" of an argument *is* (or *consists in*).

    - That's what we will be doing throughout the course.

  - We will be introducing a precise set of concepts, which will lead us up to a precise *definition* of "rational strength".
    - Having that vocabulary will be crucial for our goal.

Impediments to Good Reasoning II

- **The Desire to be "Tolerant" / "Open-Minded"**
  - Being open-minded — *in a sense* — is important (and a good thing) for successful argument analysis.

  - But, perhaps ironically, one can be *too* open-minded.

  - When we analyze arguments, we have to be willing (in some cases) to say that various sorts of errors or mistakes have been made in the course of a passage/argument.

  - We may be hesitant to make such judgments — out of a desire to be "tolerant" or "open-minded" (in *some* sense).

  - But, there is *no real conflict* between making such judgments and being "tolerant" and "respectful" of others.

Impediments to Good Reasoning II

- **The Desire to be "Tolerant" / "Open-Minded"**
  - There is nothing intolerant or disrespectful about carefully explaining to others errors you see in their arguments.

  - The point of argument analysis is ***not*** to "put down" the arguments of others. Rather, it is to (ultimately) *come to your own conclusion*, *based on the available evidence*.

  - It might be helpful to think of the arguments we encounter in this class as being "given" to us *from an unknown source*.

  - Argument reconstruction is ***not*** a *personal*, but a ***rational*** activity — whose aim is to come up with the best arguments on both sides of issues we think about.
    - Ultimately, it is about *rational inquiry into the truth*.

Impediments to Good Reasoning III

- **Misunderstanding *the Point* of Argument Analysis**
  - So much of what we hear and read concerns the *rhetorical power* of arguments, and *not* their *rational strength*.

  - This may make it difficult to overcome the tendency to think of "arguments" in a non-rational way.

  - One must always remember *the point* of argument analysis.

    ➡ to determine the degree to which the premises of an argument rationally supports the truth of its conclusion.

  - Ultimately, we want to find *the best arguments* in favor of (and against!) any particular statement — with an eye toward *rationally determining whether it is true or false*.

Impediments to Good Reasoning IV

- **The Use of "Argument Stoppers"**
  - There are various quick responses to arguments which have the effect of cutting-off discussion and preventing careful rational analysis of the argument in question.

  - These are called **argument stoppers**. Examples:

    - "Well, that's a matter of opinion."
    - "Who's to say what the truth is about that?"
    - "That's a subjective judgment."

  - Often, these quips are just shorthand for something like:
    - "I would prefer not to think about what you said. I would prefer to continue believing what I have believed up to until now, so I'm going to ignore your argument."

Impediments to Good Reasoning V

- **The Use of "Argument Stoppers"**
  - That is, such statements are often (seemingly) polite ways of avoiding thinking about someone's argument.

  - In some contexts, there may be some substance to the claim that a judgment is "subjective" or "mere opinion".

  - But, as we will discuss in some depth throughout the course, these terms tend to be confusing and are oft abused.

  - Thus, one thing we must do is learn to use terms like "subjective" and "mere opinion" very carefully.

  - This will be a recurring theme throughout the course. It's something very subtle, and we must watch out for it.

Truth and Correspondence to the Facts I

- **The Basic Idea — The Correspondence Principle**

- If a sentence expresses a statement that describes the world *correctly*, then it (and the statement it expresses) is *true*. If not, then the statement (and the sentence expressing it) is *false*.

➡ (CP) A declarative sentence is true just in case it (*viz*., the statement it expresses) *corresponds to the facts as they actually are*.

- Note: (CP) does *not* say anything about when we *know* that a statement is true. It just gives *truth-conditions* for a statement.

- The correspondence principle (CP) may seem so obvious that it's not even worth stating. But, it is worth stating and thinking about (CP) carefully. This will help us as *argument analyzers*.

Truth and Correspondence to the Facts II

- **A Mistaken Objection to (CP)**
  - At one time, everyone believed that the following sentence (the statement expresses thereby) was true:

    - The earth is flat.

  - Was this statement true? Did it correspond to the facts?

  - One might feel uneasy saying that everyone at that time was simply wrong, that their pronouncement was false.

  - You might even hear some people say something like "Well, it was true *for them* that the earth was flat."

  - What might it *mean* when someone says the claim that the earth is flat was "true *for them*" but "false *for us*"?

Truth and Correspondence to the Facts II

- **A Mistaken Objection to (CP)**
  - There are at least two things one might mean here:
    1. A claim is "true for *S*" if *S believes* the claim is true.
    2. "Truths" just *are* "whatever is believed by everyone in (or a sufficient majority of) society (or some population)".

  - Since *they did believe* that the earth was flat — reading (1) results in a *correct* claim, but one that is *compatible* with (CP).

  - That is, if (I) is all one means here by "true *for S*", then this does *not* contradict the correspondence principle (CP).

  - On the other hand, reading (2) *does* conflict with (CP).

  - That is, *we* presuppose that *people can have* ***false beliefs***. And, *we* say: *those people had false beliefs about the earth*.

Truth and Correspondence to the Facts III

- **More on Sentences *vs* Propositions/Statements**
  - We need to be a bit more careful in our talk about sentences and statements/propositions.

  - First, we need to make a distinction between **sentence types** *vs* **sentence tokens**.

  - A *sentence token* is a concrete utterance or a concrete written usage of a *sentence type in a particular context*.

  - For instance, consider the following sentence *type*:

    - "I am at Rutgers."

  - When ***I*** utter/use a *token* of this *sentence type*, I am (thereby) asserting a *proposition* with the content: *Branden is at Rutgers*.

Truth and Correspondence to the Facts II

- **A Mistaken Objection to (CP)**
  - Think about what a clear-headed and fair-minded ancient person who miraculously came back to life today would say.

  - That person, upon seeing pictures of the earth from space (or observing the earth's curvature from a suitable aircraft) would eventually come to believe that the earth is *not* flat.

  - That is, *in light of the evidence we now have*, it is clear that the earth is *not* flat. NOTE: It is *also* true that the evidence *they had then* did *not* strongly support the earth's roundness.

  - This suggests a third possible meaning of "true *for S*":
    3. A claim is "true for *S*" if *S's evidence supports* the claim.
  - Of course, this third reading is *also compatible* with (CP).
  - **Moral**: We should avoid using "true for" talk.