

Philosophy 101

(2/1/11)

- We are now finished with Chapter 1 and some of Chapter 2 [By now, you should have read all of Chapter 2 (carefully!)]
 - *Chapter 1* sections [covered]
 - [Arguments & argument analysis]
 - [Reason, rhetoric & argument analysis]
 - [Ways people deal with arguments]
 - [Impediments to good reasoning]
- Today, we will continue our discussion about *rational belief*
 - **Rational Belief**
 - **The 3 Epistemic Attitudes:** Belief, disbelief & suspension
 - **Belief and Truth**
 - **Belief and Disagreement**
 - **Reasons for belief (i.e., evidence)**
 - [Next: some causes of irrational belief]

Homework #1 (Cont'd)

- Please write the answers to all homework questions **carefully and legibly**.
- Ideally, you'll **type-up** your homework solutions.
- Write your **name at the top-right of first page**. If there are multiple pages, **please staple**.
- Answers should be **complete & self-contained**.
- **Feldman's answers** to starred exercises (at the end of the book) **are good starting points** for how you should be present your solutions.
- **Complete sentences** (and paragraphs), please.

Homework #1

- **HW #1 is due *this* 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.**
- Last time, I discussed examples, formatting, etc. Here is a brief re-cap of some of that...

Rational Belief I

- **Belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment**
 - There are three **cognitive** (or **epistemic**) **attitudes** one can take toward a proposition. These are the following:
 - **Belief.** If you conclude that a proposition is true, then the appropriate attitude toward that proposition is *belief*.
 - **Disbelief.** If you conclude that a proposition is false, then the appropriate attitude toward that proposition is *disbelief*.
 - **Suspension of Judgment.** If you are *unable to reach a conclusion* concerning the truth-value of p , then the appropriate attitude toward p is *suspension of judgment*.
- **Note:** Belief (and disbelief) *come in degrees*. You may be *certain* that p is true, or you may only be *highly confident* that p is true. These are both *varieties of believing that p is true*.

Rational Belief II

• Belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment

- The following is a crucial fact about the *epistemic attitudes*:
 - **(BP)** Whenever a person considers any proposition, that person must believe the proposition, or disbelieve the proposition, or suspend judgment about the proposition. A person cannot — at any particular time — have more than one of these epistemic attitudes toward one proposition.
- Note: (BP) is *not* about which attitude a person *should* have concerning a proposition (at a given time). It just says that the three epistemic attitudes are *mutually exclusive* and *exhaustive*.
- Note: (BP) does *not* say anything about *other, non-epistemic attitudes* one can have toward propositions.
 - E.g., one can *hope* or *wish* that a proposition is true *while at the very same time also disbelieving that same proposition*.

Rational Belief IV

• Belief and Truth

- When a person believes a proposition, she believes *that the world is a particular way — the way the proposition says it is*.
- Her *belief is true* just in case *the proposition she believes is true (i.e., if the world actually is the way the proposition says it is)*. If the world *isn't* the way she believes it to be, then her belief is *false*.
- That is, *true beliefs correspond to the facts* (as **CP** requires).
- Whether a belief is true *has nothing to do with* how *sincere* or *well-meaning* the person is in holding the belief or *how strongly convinced* of its truth the person is.
- The truth of beliefs — like the truth of propositions — depends **only** on *how the world is*, *not* on the existence or strength of the beliefs (or any other aspects of *believers*).

Rational Belief III

• Belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment

- (BP) does *not* preclude having different epistemic attitudes toward the same proposition *at different times*. One *can believe p at one time, and disbelieve p at another time*.
- We will use the word “belief” in a rather *broad* sense here.
 - As I mentioned above, belief comes in *degrees*, ranging from beliefs in which one is *absolutely certain* (e.g., the belief that one is now in pain) to beliefs that one only has the *slightest inclination* to accept (e.g., that a coin with a very *slight bias* in favor of heads will land heads when tossed).
 - Words other than “belief” are often used to attribute beliefs to people. For instance, words like “thinks”, “feels”, “holds”, “asserts”, “claims”, “contends”, etc. are also used to attribute what we are calling “beliefs” to persons.

Rational Belief V

• Belief and Disagreement

- When two people *disagree* about a proposition, one of them *believes* the proposition (believes that it is true) and the other one *disbelieves* the proposition (believes that it is false).
- Since a proposition can't be true *and* false, it follows that *if two people disagree, then only one of them has a true belief*.
 - No matter how sincere or well meaning both these people are, one of them must have a false belief. The world can't both be and not be the way the proposition says it is.
- Not all *apparent* disagreements are *genuine* disagreements.
- Recall that the same sentence can be used to express different propositions. This is one way in which *apparent* disagreements can turn out to involve *no disagreement at all*.

Rational Belief VI

• **Belief and Disagreement**

- Here is an example of this (not uncommon) phenomenon:
- Suppose someone (Jack) asserts the following *sentence*:
 - Hasno License can't drive a car.
- Jill might *appear* to disagree with Jack. She might begin to argue with Jack about what he just said.
- Suppose Jack intended to express the following *proposition*:
 - Hasno License *is not allowed (by law)* to drive a car.
- Jill might have interpreted Jack's assertion as expressing:
 - Hasno License *does not know how to* drive a car.

Rational Belief VII

• **Belief and Disagreement**

- In this case, Jack and Jill are *not* actually disagreeing. They are using the same sentence (type!) to express *different propositions*. And, so, their *apparent* disagreement is *not* one.
- This is pretty common. It often happens that people who *appear* to be disagreeing about a proposition, are actually just *using the same sentence to express different propositions*.
- In order to determine whether there is a genuine disagreement between two people (concerning a proposition p), we must determine *their epistemic attitudes toward p* .
- It is *only if* one party *believes p* and the other *disbelieves p* that we will have a *genuine case of disagreement regarding p* .
- There are some subtle cases, e.g., on *matters of taste...*

Rational Belief VIII

• **Belief and Disagreement**

- When two people *appear* to be disagreeing about a “matter of taste”, they are often *not* actually disagreeing at all.
- For instance, if Jack says “I liked the movie.” and Jill says “I didn't like the movie.”, then there is probably *no disagreement*.
- Typically, when a discussion of this sort occurs, all that is happening is that Jack is asserting that *Jack* liked the movie, and Jill is asserting that *Jill didn't* like the movie. These are *different propositions*, and so there is *no disagreement* here.
- Jack and Jill might go on to give *explanations* as to *why* they liked (or didn't like) the movie. But, these are *not arguments*. [Jack doesn't need to *convince* Jill that *he* liked the movie!]
- Sometimes, there *can* be disagreement in such cases...

Rational Belief IX

• **Belief and Disagreement**

- When movie critics are discussing a movie they've both seen, they *may* manage to *disagree* with each other.
- For instance, when Jack (a movie critic) says “I liked this movie”, it could be that Jill (another critic) understands that Jack intends to express a different sort of proposition, like:
 - This movie *is a good film* (in some precise critical sense).
- Now, Jill can certainly disagree with *this* proposition. She might believe that this movie is *not* a good film (in the same, precise, critical sense that Jack has in mind).
- That is, if Jack and Jill are critics *who share a set of standards* by which they *assess* “goodness” of films, they *can* disagree about *whether a particular movie meets those standards*.

Rational Belief X

• Reasons (or Evidence) for Belief

- Sometimes people have *good reasons* (or *strong evidence*) for things they believe, and sometimes they do *not*.
- When they do, their belief is **rational** (o.w., it's **irrational**).
- *Suspension of judgment can also be rational*. In fact, there are several (reasonable or rational) ways this can happen:
 - One's evidence may be *equally balanced* in favor and against a proposition (see the next slide for an example of this case).
 - One may *not have any evidence* that is relevant to the claim (perhaps it's an issue you know nothing about yet).
 - One may not be in a position to *assess the weight of evidence* (e.g., complicated/subtle scientific evidence, etc.).

Rational Belief XI

• Reasons (or Evidence) for Belief

- Example of rational suspension of belief of the *first kind*:

Example 2.2

Wanna Bet is standing in front of a roomful of people. She has tossed a coin and allowed it to land on the floor where no one else can see it. Hasa Hunch is one of the people in the room who cannot see the coin. Wanna has said nothing about whether the coin came up heads or tails. Hasa Hunch believes that the coin landed with the head side facing up. She accepts Wanna Bet's offer to make a bet about this.

- Suppose Hasa knows that the coin is *fair* — equally likely to land heads or tails. In this situation, it seems *irrational* to believe (p) the coin landed heads. It *also* seems *irrational* to believe it landed tails.
- This is a case in which *Hasa's evidence is balanced equally between p and $not-p$* . Thus, Hasa **should suspend judgment** on p .

Rational Belief XII

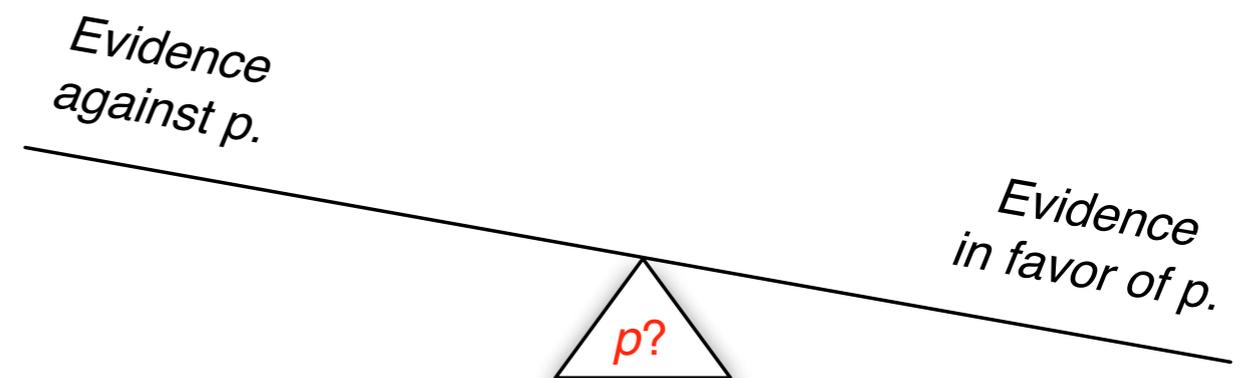
• Reasons (or Evidence) for Belief

- All the information we have that is relevant to (the truth-value of) a proposition p is called our **evidence** regarding p .
- We have all sorts of information (from various sources) regarding the things we believe. We can obtain evidence from *observation, memory, testimony, inference*, and other sources.
- When our (total) evidence *supports* (or *favors*) a proposition, then it is rational (or reasonable) for us to *believe* p . When our (total) evidence *goes against* p , then it is rational for us to *disbelieve* p . [Otherwise, it is rational to *suspend judgment*.]
- **(RB)** If S 's evidence concerning p *supports* p , then it is rational for S to *believe* p . If S 's evidence *goes against* p , then it is rational for S to *disbelieve* p . And if S 's evidence is *neutral* (which might happen in several ways) then it is rational for S to *suspend judgment* on p .

Rational Belief XIII

• Reasons (or Evidence) for Belief

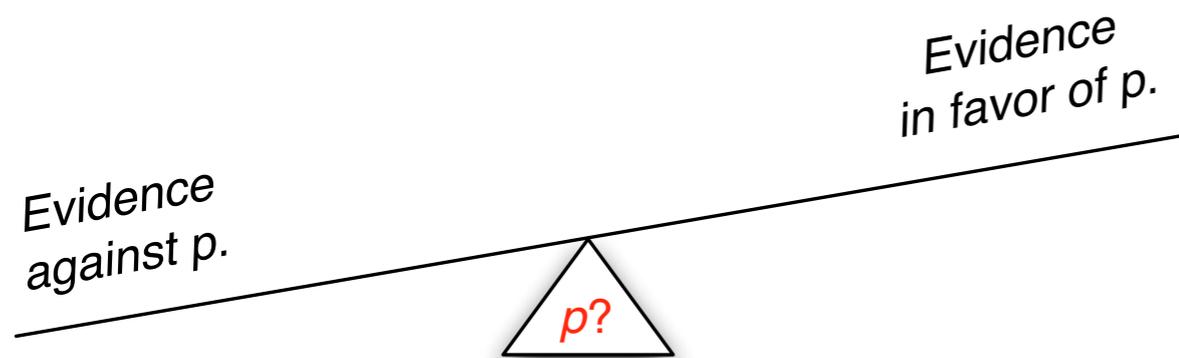
- I will adopt a “beam balance” metaphor in my discussions of evidence, belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment.



- In the above picture, the evidence *in favor of p* slightly outweighs the evidence *against p* . The **rational attitude** to have here toward the proposition p is one of **belief** — to a slight degree.

Rational Belief XIV

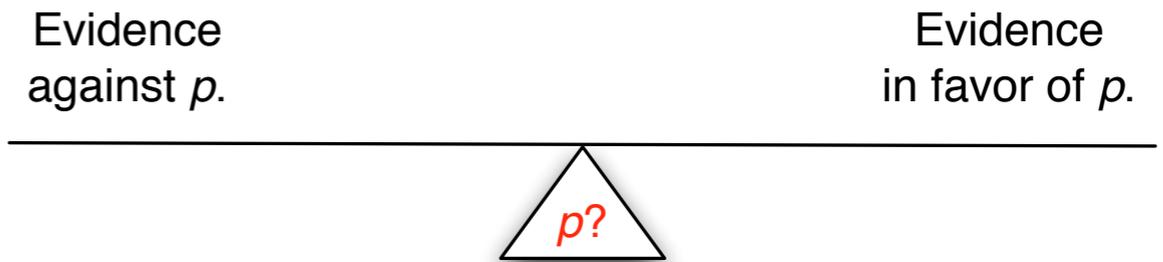
- **Reasons (or Evidence) for Belief**



- In the above picture, the evidence *against p* slightly outweighs the evidence *in favor of p*. The **rational attitude** to have here toward the proposition *p* is one of **disbelief** — to a slight degree.

Rational Belief XV

- **Reasons (or Evidence) for Belief**



- In the above picture, the evidence *against p* and the evidence *in favor of p* are balanced. The **rational attitude** to have here toward the proposition *p* is one of **suspension of judgment**.
- Remember, this is *just one of the several ways* in which *suspension* can be the rational attitude to have toward *p*.
 - [Note, also, that *suspension* does *not* come in degrees.]

Rational Belief XVI

- **Fallibilism**

- It is very important to note that *our evidence can be misleading*. That is, it can sometimes be rational to believe something which happens to be *false*. This is called *fallibilism*.

Example 2.3

Prior to the presidential election of 1948 it was widely believed that the Republican candidate, Thomas Dewey, would defeat the Democratic incumbent, Harry Truman. Polls showed Dewey to be far ahead and nearly all the experts predicted his victory. Early election returns conformed to the predicted pattern, and the early editions of some newspapers reported that Dewey had won. A famous photograph shows a triumphant Truman holding a newspaper with a banner headline reading "Dewey Wins." To everyone's surprise, Truman won the election.

Rational Belief XVII

- **Fallibilism**

- In this case, it would have been *rational* for the average person (when they went to bed on the night of the 1948 presidential election) to believe the following proposition:
 - (†) Dewey won the 1948 presidential election.
- All the information available the night before all the election results were in pointed to (*supported*) a Dewey victory.
- As it turned out, Truman had actually won the election.
- But, the evidence available the night before strongly supported the opposite conclusion – that (†) was *false*.
- **Moral:** *inconclusive evidence can be misleading!*

Rational Belief XVIII

- **Conclusive Evidence**

- Sometimes, however, our evidence is **conclusive**.
- That is, in some cases, our evidence in favor of a proposition p is *so strong* that it leaves no room for the falsity of p .
- When this happens, we say the evidence for p is *conclusive*.
- But, it is actually quite rare that we are in possession of conclusive evidence for p . As a result, it would be a mistake to require conclusive evidence for rational belief.
- If we required conclusive evidence for rational belief, then it would *almost never* be rational to believe (or disbelieve!) *anything*. We'd end-up *suspending judgment on everything*.
 - **Remember**: *beliefs come in degrees, and so does evidence!*