24.903 Grice Cheatsheet

The following is meant to replace the calculation on p. 201–202 of Portner's book. [Changes are highlighted with italics.]

"It's possible that there's life on Mars"

Speaker's meaning: It's not certain that there's life on Mars.

  i S uttered "It's possible that there's life on Mars" to H.

 ii S is not acting in a play, under the influence of drugs, or the like; S knows that H speaks English, is attending to what he says, etc.; S knows that H knows all of this. And so S is apparently speaking with the intention to mean something by the utterance.

iii By the cooperative principle, H can assume that S is behaving rationally and cooperatively.

 iv One aspect of behaving rationally and cooperatively is conformity with the maxim of quality.

  v The semantic meaning of S's utterance is that it is possible (perhaps certain) that there's life on Mars.

 vi There is no reason to believe that S is flouting quality by speaking ironically or the like.

vii Therefore, H can conclude that S intends to communicate that it is possible (perhaps certain) that there's life on Mars.

viii Another aspect of behaving rationally and cooperatively is conformity with quantity maxim (a).

 ix So H can assume that S intends to provide as much information as is required for the purposes of the exchange.

  x S and H are discussing whether there is life on Mars. For these purposes, it is cooperative (by quantity (a)) for S to give all information pertaining to how likely it is that there is life on Mars.

 xi If S *is convinced* that it is certain that there is life on Mars, this is relevant.

xii Therefore, if S *was convinced* that it was certain that there is life on Mars, he would have said "It is certain that there is life on Mars", or the equivalent.

xiii S did not say "It is certain that there is life on Mars", or the equivalent.

xiv Therefore, H can conclude that S *is not convinced* that it is certain that there is life on Mars.

 xv (The following only applies in a context where S can be assumed to be maximally opinionated about the topic under discussion) *H assumes that S is maximally opin-*

ionated on the topic. That is, either S is convinced that it is certain that there is life on Mars or S is convinced that it is not certain that there is life on Mars.

xvi Since by xiv *S is not convinced that that it is certain that there is life on Mars, H can conclude that S is convinced that it is not certain that there is life on Mars.*

xvii All of this reasoning is pretty easy, and so H can assume that S expects for H to go through this reasoning.

xviii Therefore H can conclude that S intends to communicate that it is not certain that there is life on Mars.

xix Steps vii and xviii together allow H to conclude finally that S intends to communicate that it's possible, and not certain, that there's life on Mars.

xx *Whether or not H will believe that S is right and conclude that in fact it is possible but not certain that there's life on Mars, depends on whether H trusts that S's opinions are accurate.*