

Inconsistency, Validity, and Unsoundness

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Let me explain why an argument with inconsistent premises is valid. First, some definitions. To say that a set of two or more propositions is **consistent** is to say that it is *possible* for all of them to be true (even if, *in fact*, one or more of them is false).¹ To say that a set of propositions is **inconsistent** is to say that it *not possible* for all of them to be true (in other words, that at least one of them is false).

A valid argument is one that preserves truth. To say that an argument is **valid**, therefore, is to say that it is not possible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false. To say that an argument is **invalid** is to say that it *is possible* for its premises to be true and its conclusion false. But if an argument has inconsistent premises, then, by definition (of “inconsistent”), *it is not possible for (all of) its premises to be true*. Therefore, if an argument has inconsistent premises, *it is not possible for its premises to be true and its conclusion false*. This is precisely the definition of “valid argument.” It follows that an argument with inconsistent premises is valid.

This may seem a bizarre and unacceptable result, but it’s not. The saving grace is that no argument with inconsistent premises is *sound*. Why not? Because a **sound** argument, by definition, is a valid argument with true premises. If an argument’s premises are inconsistent, then, by definition (of “inconsistent”), they cannot all be true. But if they cannot all be true, then the argument cannot be sound, for sound arguments have true premises. So an argument with inconsistent premises is *valid but unsound*. If your goal is to produce a sound argument, do not use inconsistent premises. Your argument will be truth-preserving, which is a good thing, but there will be no truth to preserve.²

¹Here’s an example. The propositions “John Kerry was elected president in 2004” and “Detroit won the 2006 World Series” are false, but consistent. We can easily imagine a world in which both are true. This shows that a set of false propositions can be consistent. But a set of true propositions cannot be inconsistent. Do you see why?

²Remember the life-preserver analogy? We value life-preservers because—and *only* because—we value life. If the person to whom we throw the life-

preserver is dead, it does no good. Analogously, if one or more of the premises we put into a valid argument form are false, the validity of the form does no good. There is a difference between the cases, however. A dead person cannot be brought back to life by a life-preserver, but a valid (i.e., truth-preserving) argument with one or more false premises *can have a true conclusion*. The truth of the conclusion in that case would be a fluke (i.e., an accident).