

Validity, Truth, Knowledge, and the Good Life

Keith Burgess-Jackson

Validity is a property (feature, characteristic, attribute) of argument forms. Some argument forms have it; some do not. *Valid* argument forms are those that are truth-preserving. This means that if you put truths into them (as premises), you will get a truth out of them (as the conclusion). If we did not value truth, we would not value validity. Like currency, validity has only extrinsic (instrumental) value. It is valued as a means to something else we value (namely, truth) but not as an end in itself. This is not to say that validity has no value; it is to specify the *type* of value it has. (Some things, such as friendship and knowledge, are valued both intrinsically *and* extrinsically.)

By definition, no valid argument has both true premises and a false conclusion. (If it did, it would not be truth-preserving.) Think of it this way. It is logically impossible (i.e., ruled out by definition) for an argument to have *all three* of the following properties:

| is valid |
| has true premises |
has a false conclusion

Suppose a given argument is known to have *two* of these properties. Then it can be inferred immediately that it lacks the third. There are three cases:

1. If a *valid* argument has *true premises*, then it does *not* have a *false conclusion* (i.e., it has a true conclusion).
2. If a *valid* argument has a *false conclusion*, then it does *not* have *true premises* (i.e., it has at least one false premise).
3. If an argument has *true premises* and a *false conclusion*, then it is *not valid* (i.e., it is invalid).

We can go further. Suppose a given argument is known to have *one* of these properties. Then it can be inferred immediately that it lacks at least one of the others. There are three cases:

4. If an argument is *valid*, then either (a) it has a false premise or (b) it has a true conclusion (or both).

5. If an argument has *true premises*, then either (a) it is invalid or (b) it has a true conclusion (or both).

6. If an argument has a *false conclusion*, then either (a) it is invalid or (b) it has a false premise (or both).

What this shows is that if you remember the definition of “validity,” you will be in a position to draw inferences about arguments from what you know about them—even if you know very little. Inference, whether inductive or deductive, mediate or immediate, is a means of extending knowledge. Because we value knowledge, we value truth (which is essential to it). Because we value truth, we value validity (which is a means to it). Validity turns out to be the key to knowledge! But wait; it gets better. If knowledge is essential to the good life, as the Greek philosopher Socrates implied when he said that the unexamined life is not worth living, then *validity* is the key to the good life. And you wondered why we were studying validity!