

IMPOSSIBLE PREMISES AND CORRECT ARGUMENT*

ALEX BLUM

*Philosophy Department,
Faculty of the Humanities,
Bar-Ilan University,
52900 RAMAT-GAN,
ISRAEL*

BLUMAL@ASHUR.CC.BIU.AC.IL or BLUMAL@POPEYE.CC.BIU.AC.IL

1. We offer a defense of the controversial thesis that arguments with impossible premises are valid.

Classically an argument is valid iff it cannot both be that its premises are true and its conclusion false. Thus in any complete classical system we can derive any conclusion from any set of premises which contains inconsistent premises.

Many have felt that something is wrong, and as a result have constructed various non-“explosive” systems acting as “corrective” to the classical system.

But we may look at an argument as asserting that there is no better reason to accept the premises than there is for accepting the conclusion. Let us call an argument of which this is true a *correct* argument. Hence any argument where the prob-

* I am deeply grateful to my Phil-Logic List colleagues for their stimulation.

ability of its conclusion being true is no less than that of the premisses jointly held is correct.

2. One immediate consequence of our operating contention is that if it is equally rational to accept both p and $\sim p$ then it is irrational to accept either. For to accept both is irrational and to accept one without the other is irrational as well.

Hence any conclusion follows rationally in an argument which contains a premise whose probability is equal to or less than half. It then follows that the argument:

$$\begin{aligned} (A) \Pr(\text{Bill will become rich tomorrow}) &= n \\ \Pr(\text{it will be a summer-like day on July 25}) &\geq n \\ \text{Bill will become rich tomorrow} \\ \therefore \text{It will be a summer-like day on July 25} \end{aligned}$$

is a correct argument.

3. On our operating conception an argument relates the truth chances of conclusion to premise(s). (A) is thus a correct argument. For the truth chances of its conclusion is no less than that of its premisses.

A valid argument is a correct argument with perfect truth chances. So that the probability ratings of the premise(s) and conclusion are irrelevant. For, in a valid argument, given that it cannot be that the premisses are jointly true and the conclusion false, it cannot be more reasonable to accept the premisses than the conclusion. And this is true irrespective of what may be the reasonableness of accepting either.