

NOTE:

“Soundness” Unsound

DAN GOLDSTICK *University of Toronto*

It's obvious that reasoning can be “sound” in the technical sense without being any good; and that it can be technically “unsound” yet rationally conclusive. To satisfy oneself on the latter score, it is only necessary to recall any nondeductive argument on considers conclusive. And, as far as the first point goes, atheists can consider, *e.g.*,

“If god exists, I’m a monkey’s uncle.

I’m not a monkey’s uncle.

Therefore, God doesn’t exist.”

and theists can entertain the parallel argument starting with the premise

“If God doesn’t exist, I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

instead.¹

The “sound”/ “unsound” distinction, in the technical sense, is much used in the introductory teaching of logic, though it plays no part in logic itself. The only ground for objection, really, is to the appropriation of the words ‘sound’ and ‘unsound’, which otherwise could be used to mark good and bad reasoning in general.

Who, then, originated this objectionable appropriation? It seems the original perpetrator of the objected-to usage was Irving M. Copi, on page 11 of the 1953 First Edition of his much-used *Introduction to Logic*.²

I am not saying a deductive argument’s soundness or unsoundness has nothing in any way to do with its merits—for indeed only a sound argument can ever deductively *prove* anything. But surely it must be accepted that a sound deductive argument is only any good (probatively) where the acceptance of all its premises is rationally warranted, though not solely on account of that argument. Whoever, unlike me, thinks a circular argument is never any good can delete “(probatively)” and “though not solely on account of that argument” here. (One way of not being any good, no doubt, is being superfluous.)

¹Cf. the editor’s Introduction to John Hick (ed.), *The Existence of God* (Macmillan: New York, 1964), pages 4-5.

²Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, (Macmillan: New York, 1953). A medium thorough review of earlier logic texts would appear to bear the statement out. And, in a private communication of 7 August 1998, Professor Copi stated that he could not recall any writer who used the term “sound” earlier to characterize valid arguments with all-true premises.