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ABSTRACT: In two recent essays (Ennis, 2001, in press) I have offered and refined an approach to argument appraisal that, instead of classifying an argument before appraising it, bypasses classification (because that process has fatal flaws) and successively applies sets of argument standards. (An example of a set of standards is the set of soundness standards.) If the argument satisfies some set of argument standards, it is deemed a good argument, and its conclusion is thus a good basis for further operations. If it fails them all (assuming that all legitimate sets have been applied), the argument is deemed unsatisfactory, and its conclusion is not deemed a good basis for further operations (which of course is different from being deemed not a good basis for further operations). There is much more to say about this approach to argument appraisal (which incidentally does not yet commit itself to any particular comprehensive set of sets of legitimate argument standards), but this is not the place.

Rather, this approach to argument appraisal provides the context for the current essay about the meaning of the word 'probably.'

One of the problems in the application of soundness standards is the paucity of arguments that satisfy soundness standards because of the paucity of deductively valid arguments in real life. There are many arguments in real life that approach deductive validity, but, as argued in the second of the recent papers mentioned above (Ennis, in press), fail to be deductively valid because of the inclusion of qualifying terms like 'probably' in the conclusion.

In the current essay, I suggest that an explanation of this failure of deductive validity of most arguments containing the word 'probably' in the conclusion resides in Stephen Toulmin's speech-act claim about the meaning of the word 'probably', a claim that seemed reasonable to me when I first encountered it as a grad student, and still seems reasonable.

About the word 'probably', Stephen Toulmin said 'When I say 'S is probably P', I *commit myself guardedly* (tentatively, with reservations) to the view that S is P, and (likewise guardedly) *lend my authority* to that view' (1956, p. 165; and with slight revisions in punctuation and wording, 1964, p. 53). If Toulmin is right, in this speech-act interpretation of 'probably' (and I shall here suggest a defense of that claim), then a conclusion containing the word 'probably', such as, 'The raccoon will probably not bother you', would not follow necessarily from such premises as: 'Raccoons rarely attack a human when they do not feel threatened and do not feel that their young are threatened. The raccoon that is ambling across the yard does not feel threatened by us, and it does not feel that its young are threatened--its young are not around.'

Toulmin's hypothesis seems reasonable partly because it explains for one thing the difficulty we experience when trying to assign numbers to the alleged degree of probability implied by 'probably.' For another, it explains the inconsistency between saying 'Probably I will not roll a one' and 'I believe I will roll a one', in contrast to the lack of inconsistency between saying 'The probability of rolling a one is one sixth' and 'I believe that I will roll a one.' The latter contrast may exhibit irrationality, but not inconsistency of the sort evidenced by the former.

The hypothesis also explains the fact that A and B are disagreeing when A says, 'Probably the horse will win' and B says, 'Probably the horse will not win', disagreement that is not explained by the subjective probability view with which I am familiar, because A and B might both well agree that A's degree of belief that that horse will win is .9 and that B's degree of belief that the horse will win is .1; the disagreement disappears when the claims are translated into such subjective probabilities.

This supporting evidence for the Toulmin hypothesis will be further explored in the more complete essay to be presented at the conference. The exploration will be presented in a tentative spirit in the hope that the discussion will bring more clarity to the situation -- which it probably will.

REFERENCES

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