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Contrasts and Demons: On Sinnott-Armstrong’s moderate Pyrrhonian scepticism

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1. Introduction

In his book *Moral Scepticisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, all page references are to this book), Walter Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that talk about someone being justified in holding a belief is relative to “contrast classes”. Consider a belief p . A set C of propositions is a contrast class if it includes p , contains at least two members, and if each of the members is incompatible with the others (see p. 85). Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that we are justified in holding p relative to C if and only if we can rule out all members of C except p with reference to evidence that does not beg the question (85, 87). Moreover, he suggests that p may be justified for a person A relative to one contrast class even if it is not justified relative to another. So, for example, suppose that we are trying to solve a crossword puzzle and that our clues regarding a certain word are exhausted by the information that it contains three letters and stands for a parent. Then we are justified in believing that “Mom” is the correct

word relative to the contrast class that only, in addition, includes “Mother” but not relative to a class that also includes “Dad”.

Sinnott-Armstrong uses this framework to elaborate and defend a “mixed verdict” on moral skepticism, and, although he mainly focuses on ethics, he thinks that his position can be extended also to other areas. The position is introduced by comparing it with other forms of skepticism. So-called “academic Skeptics” (about a given area) think that our beliefs (in the pertinent area) are never epistemically justified. In support of this view, they imagine various skeptical scenarios (such as Cartesian demons or brains in vats) that seem to undermine the justification of our beliefs and cannot be ruled out in a non-question begging way. According to the first element of Sinnott-Armstrong’s mixed verdict, academic skepticism is correct to the extent that no belief is justified out of the “extreme” contrast class that contains *all* possible competitors to *p* (including demons). No belief is “extremely justified”, as Sinnott-Armstrong puts it. However, according to the second element, our beliefs may well be “modestly justified”. This means that they are justified relative to a more limited contrast class; a class that excludes demons and similar challengers that are anyway not taken seriously in “everyday life” contexts (outside of philosophy seminar rooms). What about being justified full stop? Sinnott-Armstrong suggests an analysis according to which the claim that a belief is justified full stop (i.e., in a non-relativized way) means that it is justified out of the “relevant” or “appropriate” contrast class (95). But he suspends judgment about whether any class *is* the relevant one and therefore also about all claims to the effect that someone is justified in believing something full stop. This is the third part of his position.

Sinnott-Armstrong calls the combination of these theses “moderate Pyrrhonian skepticism” (it is obviously the third part that makes it “Pyrrhonian”). He also stresses that, in defending his position, he does not want to rely on any particularly stringent requirements regarding what it takes to “rule out” a belief (see 68, 87-88). Skeptics are sometimes accused of making justification impossible by imposing unrealistically strong standards. Sinnott-Armstrong wants to avoid that pitfall.

The purpose of this paper is to question Sinnott-Armstrong’s position. More specifically, I shall argue (in sections 2 and 3) that narrowing down the contrast class is not the way to go if we want to find a way in which our beliefs, moral or otherwise, may be justified. If the skeptic’s challenges exclude our being justified out of the extreme class, they exclude our being justified relative to more limited classes as well. I shall also argue (in sections 4 and 5) that in trying to show that no belief is justified relative to the extreme contrast class Sinnott-Armstrong does indeed rely on questionably strong assumptions about what it takes to rule out a belief. There are two interpretations of “rule out”—a weaker and a stronger one—and given the weaker interpretation we can rule out Cartesian demons, etc, in a non-question-begging way.

2. Contrast Classes

The members of a contrast class are required to be “contraries”. Each member conflicts with the rest and at most one of them can be true:

[m]embers of contrast classes must conflict in some way; otherwise, there would be no *contrast*. Specifically, I will assume that members of a contrast class must be contraries in the sense that both cannot be true (85).

Of course, this does not mean that any of them *is* true. False beliefs can be contraries and false beliefs can make up contrast classes. Still, one may ask whether a belief is justified *given*, or under the assumption, that one of the members is true. This is what it means to say that a belief is justified relative to that class (see p. 110).

This is also what is supposed to allow Sinnott-Armstrong to argue that, although no belief is justified relative to the extreme contrast class, it might still be justified relative to more limited classes. For example, suppose that we believe that there is a bird *a* in the vicinity which is a crow. Our evidence consists in beliefs about various features of *a*; about the form of its wings, say, or about its colour or the way it sounds. Sinnott-Armstrong interprets Descartes' demon-hypothesis, the brain-in-a-vat-scenario, and similar skeptical scenarios, as entailing that all our beliefs about the external world are false, including our beliefs about the features of *a* (see, e.g., p. 78). Our evidence for the belief that *a* is a crow is therefore incompatible with those scenarios. Hence, it cannot be used for ruling them out in a non-question-begging way, and our belief about *a* is accordingly not justified relative to the extreme class.

However, the skeptical scenarios must only be ruled out if they are included in the contrast class. For consider the contrast class C^* that, in addition to our belief that *a* is a crow, merely includes the belief that *a* is a raven. To determine if our belief is justified relative to C^* is to determine if it is justified under the assumption that C^* contains a truth. That is, given that the skeptical scenarios are inconsistent with the members of C^* , it is to determine if it is justified under the assumption that those scenarios are *false*. In other words, in establishing that our belief is justified relative to C^* we need not *show* that they are false. Moreover, as our evidence does not beg the

question against the proposition that *a* is a raven, it may well allow us to rule out that competitor in a way that makes our belief justified relative to C*.

However, in my view, Sinnott-Armstrong's suggestion does not capture the sense in which the skeptic's scenarios challenge the justification of our beliefs. Let us focus on the demon-hypothesis. Notice that this idea can be interpreted in two ways. On the interpretation given above, it is incompatible with our beliefs about the external world. However, on another interpretation, which is also in line with how skeptics' use the scenarios, it does not deny our beliefs about birds, crows, etc. It just says that there is a demon that has fed us with the observations and evidence on which we *base* our beliefs. Still, skeptics will say that, if we cannot rule it out (with reference to non-question-begging evidence), it saps the justification of our belief about the bird, also relative to the limited contrast class C* that in addition to the belief itself only includes the proposition that the bird is a raven. For we need some evidence to rule out the latter proposition, and the second version of the demon-hypothesis challenges that evidence. Why think that the beliefs that comprise our evidence provide an indication of truth if they are fed by a demon that might want to delude us? However, to rule out the second version of the demon-hypothesis without begging the question is something we cannot do, as any evidence we might have presupposes that it is false. Indeed, under this interpretation, the demon-hypothesis challenges the justification of *all* our beliefs (in so far as they are based on observations) regardless of which contrast class we relativize it to.

Notice what it is that is going on here. Although the second version of the demon-hypothesis is not incompatible with our belief about *a*, it undermines our evidence *for* it. So, it provides merely an indirect argument against the belief.

However, it is a direct argument against the view that the belief is justified relative to C^* , as that belief is not justified unless we have evidence that allows us to rule out the belief that the bird is a raven. So, when interpreted in the second way, it yields the same kind of skepticism as when considered under the other interpretation. Moreover, there is no way to evade this conclusion by excluding the demon-hypothesis from the contrast class. Narrowing down the contrast class helps the non-skeptic only to the extent that it allows him to ignore competitors that are *inconsistent* with the remaining members. And this is not the case with the demon-hypothesis under the second interpretation.

In other words, by a reasoning that is parallel to that by which Sinnott-Armstrong aims to show that no belief is justified out of the extreme class, we may argue that just about no belief is justified relative to *any* contrast class, regardless of how limited it is. So, narrowing down the contrast class is not the way to go if we want to evade the skeptic's challenges. The claim that there are beliefs that are justified relative to the modest class is just as vulnerable to a skeptic's challenges as the claim that there are beliefs that are justified out of the extreme class.

3. A Different Relativization

Is there a way to save Sinnott-Armstrong's mixed verdict? Perhaps by redefining the notion of a contrast class. Given Sinnott-Armstrong's definition, members of a contrast class are contraries. This means that, since the second version of the demon-hypothesis is not inconsistent with our belief about a , it is not a potential member of a contrast class for that belief. Accordingly, it makes no sense to talk of "excluding" it. However, in a footnote (on p. 85), Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that the concept of a

contrast class might be redefined in such a way that a contrast class for p may not only include beliefs that are incompatible with p but also beliefs that challenge p in a weaker sense (e.g., by entailing that p is improbable or by undermining our support for it). This would mean that the second version of the demon-hypothesis is, after all, a potential member of a contrast class for our belief about a .

But that does not in itself help. To repeat: The central idea in Sinnott-Armstrong's argument is that determining if a belief is justified relative to C^* is to determine if it is justified under the assumption that C^* contains a truth, which allows us to ignore non-members that are inconsistent with the remaining members. But, as that does not hold for the second version of the demon-hypothesis, although the new definition of a contrast class means that it can be treated as a potential member of a contrast class for our belief about a , we accomplish nothing by excluding it.

So maybe it is the central idea itself that has to be revised. Perhaps we are to assume not only that beliefs that are inconsistent with the members of C^* are false but that the same holds for other propositions that do not belong to C^* . Which ones? *All* other propositions? That would obviously be absurd, as it would, again, leave us with no evidence on which we could base our belief (so the conclusion would, again, be that making a contrast class very narrow does not make us justified in accepting a belief relative to that class). The new idea must instead be that there is only a subset of the non-members of C^* whose members are to be ignored—a subset that may include propositions that potentially challenge the justification of our belief regardless of whether they contradict it.

What this means is that there really is another relativization in play here, namely a relativization to potential objections or to assumptions that these may rely on. A

belief may be justified under the assumption that some such assumptions are false even if it is not justified relative to others, and this relativization does not map onto the initial relativization to contrast classes. Moreover, given the new relativization, one may instead question the third—“Pyrrhonian”—element of Sinnott-Armstrong’s mixed verdict.

According to the third element, we should suspend judgment regarding all unqualified statements to the effect that a belief is justified. Sinnott-Armstrong assumes that a belief is justified full stop for a person if and only if it is justified relative to the “relevant” contrast class, but is skeptical towards the possibility of determining, in a non-arbitrary way, which class that is. However, the new relativization (to objections or assumptions they may rely on) provides us with two options that seem neither arbitrary nor clearly implausible.

Let us distinguish assumptions that we have some positive evidence in favour of from those we have no evidence against. These sets have vague boundaries, of course, partly due to the vagueness of the concept of evidence, but that fuzziness has no bearing on the point I want to make. The sets also overlap to some extent, but there are propositions that belong to the second set that do not seem to belong to the former. The claim that the number of living rabbits at the moment is odd is an example, presumably. Let us call the first set CP and the second CN.¹ Since CP and CN do not overlap completely, p may be justified for a person relative to CP even if it is not justified relative to CN. For example, given that the demon-hypothesis belongs to CN but not to CP, it might sap the justification of p relative to CN but not relative to CP.

¹ Perhaps these sets may include different propositions for different people, given that people are in possession of different sets of evidence.

Which set is the relevant one? There is at least something to be said for focusing on CP. Suppose that a person has been independently pointed out as the perpetrator of a crime by reliable witnesses in several witness confrontations but that we are later told that the suspect has a twin who lacks alibi. Intuitively, this might undermine our justification in thinking that she did it, but only, on one view, if it is possible to gather some evidence for the existence of such a twin. This intuition is captured by the idea that CP is the relevant set. On that idea, if CP does not include any challengers that cannot be ruled out with reference to non-question-begging evidence, then p is justified for a person full stop, regardless of whether CN contains such challengers.

4. Ruling In and Ruling Out

The distinction between claims that we have positive evidence for and claims that we have no evidence against also leads to my second main point, namely that “rule out” can be interpreted differently. In Chapter 4 of the book, Sinnott-Armstrong discusses two arguments for academic skepticism about ethics; arguments he tries to exploit in support of the claim that no moral belief is relative to the extreme class. The second of these arguments is called the “skeptical hypothesis argument”. Although (versions of) it applies to other areas as well, Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that it provides a special problem for ethics (74).

The basic idea underlying the argument is the now familiar view that we are justified in holding a belief p relative to a class C only if we can rule out all the competitors to p that belong to C . The fact that the first version of the demon-hypothesis is included in the extreme contrast class for every belief about the external world excludes any such belief from being extremely justified. However, Sinnott-

Armstrong thinks that few are going to be very worried by this argument, as no one believes in the existence of such a demon anyway. In the case of ethics, by contrast (and this is what is supposed to explain the contrast), there *is* a general competitor that is believed by some people, who furthermore have some reasons for their belief.² The competitor is called “moral nihilism”, and is stated as follows:

Moral Nihilism = Nothing is morally wrong, required, bad, good, etc (79).

Sinnott-Armstrong assumes that we are justified in holding particular moral beliefs (such as the belief that it is right to give to charity) out of the extreme class only if we can rule out nihilism. But, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, we can't. For it won't help to appeal to other of our moral beliefs, as they beg the question against nihilism, and to appeal to non-moral beliefs won't help either, according to, as no moral conclusion can be derived from non-moral premises alone.³ So we lack resources to rule out nihilism. Hence, our belief is not justified relative to the extreme class.

However, the reasonableness of this argument depends on what is meant by “rule out”. Consider again the suspect who was pointed out as the villain by several reliable witnesses. How should we react to the defense attorney's claim that she has a twin with no alibi and that it is this twin, rather than the suspect, who committed the crime? Must we prove the attorney wrong? Or is it enough that no evidence of such a

² That it is the fact that there are reasons for nihilism that makes challenges based on it more serious is stressed in many passages, see, e.g., 59, 74, 79.

³ This claim may be questioned, especially as Sinnott-Armstrong says that ruling out competitors does not necessarily mean that we must have conclusive reasons to think they are false (see p. 86). However, I shall ignore that possibility in what follows.

twin could be produced? For example, suppose that it is practically *impossible* to prove the attorney wrong, perhaps as the suspect has amnesia and since no one knows where she grew up, etc. Must we still take the defense attorney's claim seriously?

A negative answer illustrates one way of interpreting "ruling out". Suppose that we believe p . We rule out a competitor to p in the present sense if we can show that the evidence offered in support of it is no good or, more ambitiously, that there is no such evidence. Of course, that we are able to rule out the competitors to p is not sufficient in order for our belief to be justified (relative to the pertinent contrast class). It must also be the case that we cannot, in the same sense, rule out p . However, the present point is that, on this interpretation of "rule out", a non-skeptic regarding ethics can respond to the skeptical hypothesis argument. The response goes as follows.

Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that, although the denial of nihilism cannot be *derived* from our non-moral beliefs, they may provide reason for nihilism. He refers more specifically to the traditional arguments against moral realism. These are surveyed in Chapter 3 and invoke considerations such as moral disagreement and the alleged queerness of moral properties. In this connection, Sinnott-Armstrong mentions J.L. Mackie, who, on the basis of those considerations, argued that although ethical sentences express beliefs, all those beliefs are false (at least insofar as they actually ascribe some moral property, see Mackie's *Ethics. Inventing Right and Wrong*, New York: Penguin, 1977). Of course, there is a contrast between the way in which Mackie states his thesis and Sinnott-Armstrong's nihilism. What Sinnott-Armstrong calls nihilism is explicitly stated in normative terms (as it says that no action is right or wrong, and so on). This is crucial in order for nihilism to be a competitor to our particular moral beliefs. Mackie, by contrast, states his theory in metaphysical terms

(as the claim that there are no moral properties or no true moral judgments). But let us assume that Mackie's theory entails what Sinnott-Armstrong calls nihilism.⁴

Now, a non-skeptic can proceed as follows. He could show that the reasons that Mackie and others adduce in support of his theory (and in support of other theories that entail nihilism) are better explained by competing theories. For example, consider expressivism. Expressivists also appeal to similar considerations, and expressivism does not entail nihilism. Expressivism is a theory about the nature of our moral convictions or the function of evaluative sentences, not about the moral status of actions, so it does not, unlike nihilism, entail that murder isn't wrong, etc. Indeed, if expressivism is combined with minimalism, which is a possibility Sinnott-Armstrong ponders in Chapter 2, it does not even entail that it is not true that murder is wrong. Thus, if we can show that expressivism, or some other theory that does not entail nihilism, accounts for the considerations mentioned in favor of Mackie's theory better than their competitors, we have ruled out nihilism in the weaker sense. So, including nihilism in a contrast class does not, given the present interpretation, guarantee that we are never justified in holding a moral belief relative to that class.

Notice that my point is not that it is *evident* that expressivism provides a better account of moral disagreement and the other considerations to which nihilists may appeal than for example Mackie's theory. The point is rather that while Sinnott-Armstrong thinks that he has formulated nihilism in such a way as to leave "no way to

⁴ In a footnote on p. 79 (no 22), Sinnott-Armstrong also mentions other theories as examples of nihilism, such as "moral egoism" and Gilbert Harman's relativism (see his 'Moral Relativism Defended', *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), 3-22). But those theories, when conventionally understood, do not entail that no action is right, etc. Harman does not have to deny that it is wrong to torture for fun. He just insists that the content of such a claim must be relativized in a certain way.

rule it out” (79), on the weaker notion of “ruling out”, this is not so. In order to explore if it can be ruled out, we need to determine which of the meta-ethical theories it is that best accounts for the considerations adduced in support of theories that entail nihilism. If it turns out that expressivism has the upper hand, Sinnott-Armstrong’s version of the “skeptical hypothesis argument” for the claim that we are never extremely justified in holding moral beliefs fails.

But there is also a stronger interpretation of “ruling out”, according to which we rule out a competitor only if we are (positively) justified in believing that it is false. Given this interpretation, the argument might go through. But there are several things to note about such an idea. First, this is a question of how strong conditions to impose on epistemic justification. So, *pace* Sinnott-Armstrong, his argument does rest on assumptions about that question. Second, we have not been given a reason to prefer the stronger interpretation to the weaker. Whether to do so is the crucial question, and the answer is not evident. For example, the weaker interpretation seems enough to account for our intuitions about cases such as the one with the crime-suspect and the witnesses. It explains why there are conditions under which the defence attorney’s claim about the twin undermines our suspicion. Third, if we after all adopt the stronger interpretation, the claim that there is a special problem with the justification of moral beliefs seems difficult to establish. That is, one of the considerations that were supposed to show that there is a contrast between ethics and other areas was that, in ethics, there is a competitor that (unlike the demon-hypothesis) is believed with some reason. If these reasons can be undermined, the only remaining contrast is that more people are supposed to believe in nihilism than in the competitors pertinent to

other areas. And that cannot, as Sinnott-Armstrong himself concedes, make any difference.⁵

5. The Argument Put to Use: Coherentism and Naturalism

In part II of the book, Sinnott-Armstrong discusses various approaches that non-skeptics might try to use to respond to the skeptical challenges, such as coherentism and naturalism. The upshot of the discussions is that although these approaches might enable us to show that moral beliefs can be modestly justified, they fail to show that our moral beliefs can be justified out of the extreme class. This is supposed to provide further support for the part of Sinnott-Armstrong's mixed verdict that says that we are never thus justified. In this section, I shall illustrate the strategy suggested in the previous section by explaining how coherentism and naturalism can after all be used for defending that moral beliefs can be justified out of the extreme class.

According to coherentism, our moral beliefs are justified to the extent that they cohere with our general system of beliefs. Sinnott-Armstrong considers the possibility of ruling out moral nihilism by showing that nihilism "is less coherent overall than its denial". But he concludes that the prospects are bleak (see Chapter 10, Section 5). For compare a system where all moral beliefs have been deleted (and replaced by nihilism) and one that still includes them. The deletion of all moral beliefs does not introduce any inconsistencies, and the remaining members are just as connected (evidentially, logically, probabilistically) as in the original system. Of course, it

⁵ In connection with mentioning C.S. Peirce's famous dismissal of the challenge posed by Descartes' demon ("No one seriously believes in such an entity"), Sinnott-Armstrong responds: "I do not see why this matters" (p. 79).

appears to cover less ground than the original system and is therefore, in a sense, less comprehensive (which is a feature that Sinnott-Armstrong thinks adds to a system's coherence). But that cannot count as an advantage, as the view that it is an advantage presupposes that nihilism is false and that there is such a ground to cover, which is just the question at issue. Hence, the nihilistic system is not less coherent than the original one, and nihilism can therefore not be ruled on coherentist grounds.

But this argument may be questioned. Sinnott-Armstrong assumes that nihilism is ruled out in the relevant sense only if the revision that includes nihilism and excludes all one's moral beliefs can be shown to be less coherent than the initial system (we assume that the initial system includes moral beliefs). The idea is, presumably, that we need a positive reason for *not* making the revision in question, and, as our moral beliefs beg the question against nihilism, they cannot provide such a reason. However, a coherentist may well argue that it is sufficient if there is no positive reason for *making* it. It is important to remember that coherentism is usually construed as involving a crucial conservative element. Candidates for inclusion in one's system are to be evaluated in light of the beliefs one actually *has*.⁶ Thus, one possible ground for embracing nihilism, and thus for deleting one's moral beliefs, could be that it is entailed by a meta-ethical theory that explains other of one's actual beliefs better than its competitors, such as beliefs about the extent and nature of moral disagreement. In the absence of such a ground, however, a coherentist will argue, we have no reason to make the revision. Therefore, our moral beliefs remain in the

⁶ See, e.g., BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985, and Lehrer, K., *Theory of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1990.

system and each of them may cohere with it system in virtue of cohering with each other, which is enough to make them justified according to coherentism.

Of course, one might argue that such coherence provides little consolation when confronted with the skeptic's challenges. As we know, there are familiar objections to coherentism. It is for example often pointed out that a set of false beliefs could be just as coherent as a set of true ones, which makes it doubtful if coherence can plausibly be seen as an indication of truth. However, in the present context, such a response is irrelevant. Note that Sinnott-Armstrong wants to make a *conditional* claim—that moral beliefs can never be extremely justified, due to the possibility of nihilism, even if we *accept* coherentism. This is the claim that I have challenged.

Another approach that Sinnott-Armstrong discusses (in Chapter 7) is naturalism. By naturalism, he refers to the attempt to infer moral conclusions from purely non-moral premises (see p. 135). For example, he considers (in Section 4) the possibility of justifying moral convictions by appealing to an authority. Suppose that we have good reason to think that someone is generally reliable—i.e., that her beliefs are generally correct, regardless of their content. For example, suppose that we have found that she has been correct about many different matters, that we have no reason to think that the truth in other areas are determined in a different way, and that we also have a believable account of *why* she is thus reliable (perhaps involving assumptions about her cognitive skills and talents). Then, if this person sincerely thinks that torture is wrong, we are, it might be held, justified in thinking so too. Moreover, as the claim that this person is a generally reliable authority seems to be a non-moral assumption, we see how non-moral considerations can justify a moral belief.

Of course, in order for an argument like this to be logically valid, we must assume not only that the authority is often correct, but that she is always so. That seems unrealistic. Moreover, given that the authority has views about ethics, it might be objected that the assumption that she is generally reliable does, after all, have moral content. However, Sinnott-Armstrong's main objection is another. He again invokes nihilism. For a nihilist will have no reason to accept the premise of the argument—the claim that the authority is generally reliable. After all, the alleged authority has moral beliefs, and the nihilist rejects that any such belief is true. So even if the nihilist might have reason to regard the person in question as an authority on others matters, she has no reason to treat her as an authority about ethics. Sinnott-Armstrong concludes that the argument appealing to an authority cannot make our moral beliefs extremely justified:

[A]ppeals to authority [...] cannot make any moral belief justified out a contrast class that includes moral nihilism. We cannot be justified in believing the premises of such appeals to authority without assuming moral beliefs that moral nihilists question. Thus, it will always beg the question against moral nihilism to assume that anyone, including an authority about all non-moral matters, is an authority about moral matters, since moral nihilists deny that there are any real authorities about moral matters (although there can be authorities about who holds which moral beliefs). The debate will always come down to whether there is some other reason to believe those background assumptions. This kind of argument cannot justify its own assumptions. Thus, extreme justification is beyond the reach of such arguments (150).

But this objection can also be questioned. Sinnott-Armstrong assumes that, unless we can refute the nihilist without begging the question, we have no reason to accept the premise about the authority's reliability. However, such a requirement is questionably strong, and it might well be argued that it is enough if we can show that the nihilist has no justification for her position, by showing that the considerations offered in support of nihilism—moral disagreement, the alleged queerness of moral facts, etc—are better explained by a competing meta-ethical theory.⁷ Why is the mere *possibility* that the premise is false supposed to sap the argument's justificatory force? Again, the idea is that the fact that there is a possible objection to our beliefs in an area that we cannot refute on the basis of non-question begging evidence is not in itself decisive. What matters is—in accordance with the reasoning underlying the weaker interpretation of “rule out”—if we have any reason to think that the objection is true. Again, notice that my aim is not to *defend* the reasoning Sinnott-Armstrong attacks. Perhaps appeals to authority cannot, ultimately, justify our moral beliefs. The point is just that this is not shown merely by the possibility of nihilism being true.

6. Concluding remarks

I have argued that Sinnott-Armstrong's contrastivism does not help him to defend the middle position on moral skepticism he seeks; the view that moral beliefs can be modestly but never extremely justified. If skeptical scenarios exclude the latter, they exclude the former as well. I have also argued that there is an interpretation of “rule

⁷ For a discussion of the implications of moral disagreement, see Tersman, F., *Moral Disagreement*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

out” that allows non-skeptics to argue that moral beliefs can, after all, be extremely justified. Whether we should adopt this interpretation or a stricter one is a matter of how strong conditions we should impose on epistemic justification. So *pace* what Sinnott-Armstrong thinks, the viability of his skepticism does hinge on such issues.

Finally, a crucial element in Sinnott-Armstrong's argument is that our grounds for ruling out competitors must not beg the question. This requirement about neutrality is in many contexts reasonable. However, when faced with such general competitors as Descartes' demon and the brain-in-a-vat scenario it is problematic, and this, it seems to me, is what underlies the problems with his argument. The reason is that, when considering such scenarios, the demand for neutrality presupposes, implausibly, that we can somehow reach a standpoint wholly external to our system of belief, from which the truth of its members can be evaluated—or that we can do “first philosophy” as Quine used to call it. Requiring a refutation of skepticism that does not rely on any of our beliefs is a bit like telling a carpenter to make a cupboard after having taken away all his tools and materials and after having blindfolded him and tied up his arms and legs. Obviously, he is going to fail. The inevitable possibility that our system is infected with systematic and radical error leaves us (or some) with an itch, of course. But it is an itch that cannot really be scratched.

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