A dilemma for Sinnott-Armstrong's Moderate Pyrrhonian Moral Scepticism.

In order for us to have epistemic justification, Sinnott-Armstrong believes we do not have to be able torule out all sceptical hypotheses. He suggests that it is sufficient if we have 'modestly justified beliefs', i.e., if our evidence rules out all non-sceptical alternatives. I argue that modest justification is not sufficient for epistemic justification. Either modest justification is independent of our ability to rule out sceptical hypotheses, but is not a kind of epistemic justification, or else modest justification is a kind of epistemic justification, but is not truly independent of our ability to rule out sceptical hypotheses.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong defends epistemic justification against sceptical challenges by arguing that epistemic justification is possible even when sceptical hypotheses cannot be epistemically ruled out. This strategy is closely related to, but importantly different from, recent contextualist responses to scepticism. I begin with an outline of the contextualist strategy against the sceptic. In §II, I outline Sinnott-Armstrong's contrastivist alternative. Finally, in §III, I present a dilemma for this alternative.

I

Sinnott-Armstrong begins his *précis* with an apparent paradox. In the classroom, a philosophy professor cannot be justified in believing that a particular act *x* is morally wrong unless he can rule out the possibility that nothing is morally wrong (i.e., can exclude moral nihilism). However, while serving on a hospital committee, the professor can be justified in believing that a particular act *x* is morally wrong without the need to offer reasons for rejecting moral nihilism. If the professor cannot offer reasons against moral nihilism, it seems that he both is and is not justified in believing that an act *x* is morally wrong.

This paradox does not only apply to moral knowledge. While in the classroom, the professor will be unable to rule out all sorts of sceptical hypotheses (e.g., that he is a brain in a vat), and thus he cannot be justified in his beliefs about the external world. However, outside the classroom, he has justified beliefs about the external world. So, given that he cannot rule out sceptical hypotheses, it seems that he both is and is not justified in believing that there is an external world.

One way around this paradox is to argue that we do not always (or usually) need to be able to rule out sceptical hypotheses in order to have epistemic justification. One popular contemporary version of this solution is *contextualist* in character. As Walter Sinnott-Armstrong characterizes it, the contextualist response combines a 'relevant alternatives' account of epistemic justification with a contextualist account of relevance.[1] First, contextualists claim that for *S* to be epistemically justified in believing *p*, *S*'s evidence must rule out the relevant alternatives to *p*. For example, given that Ferraris, Lamborghinis and Maseratis are all slick Italian sports cars, for me to judge that a subject *S* is epistemically justified in believing that the slick Italian sports car in front of him is a Ferrari, *S*'s evidence

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must rule out the relevant alternative possibilities that it is a Lamborghini or a Maserati.[2] Secondly, contextualists claim that which alternatives are relevant is context-dependent. By combining these two claims, a solution to the paradox can be formulated. Contextualists attempt to explain away the apparent contradiction in claiming that the philosophy professor both is and is not justified in believing *p*. They do so by pointing out that in one context, the philosophy classroom, sceptical hypotheses are relevant, and must be ruled out in order for us to have epistemic justification, while in another context, in the hospital committee meeting, sceptical hypotheses are not relevant, and thus need not be ruled out for us to be epistemically justified. The apparent contradiction that we can be both epistemically justified and not epistemically justified in believing *p* on the same evidence in different circumstances is explained away by pointing out that what evidence is needed in order to be justified in believing *p* alters from context to context.

II

Sinnott-Armstrong's alternative solution to the paradox is similar to the contextualist strategy. Like the contextualist, he attempts to explain away the apparent contradiction. However, there are important differences in the details. Sinnott-Armstrong agrees with the contextualist that *S* is justified without qualification in believing *p* if and only if *S* is justified out of the relevant alternatives in believing *p*. However, he thinks it impossible to establish how context determines relevance. So he rejects the contextualist response to the paradox. His alternative approach puts aside talk of unqualified epistemic justification, and instead focuses on justification relative to limited 'contrast classes' of propositions.[3] He then contends that the appearance of contradiction results from not appreciating the fact that *S* is justified in believing *p* out of one (kind of) contrast class, while not being justified in believing *p* out of another (kind of) contrast class. Having thus explained away the contradiction, Sinnott-Armstrong takes himself to have avoided the paradox.

Here is the solution in more detail. First, Sinnott-Armstrong defines a contrast class as follows (*Moral Skepticisms*, p. 85):

What is a contrast class? It is merely a set of propositions, which are potential belief contents, but the members of a contrast class must meet certain restrictions: first, a contrast class must include the belief at issue; otherwise, a believer could not believe it *out* of the class. Secondly, every contrast class must include at least one other belief; otherwise there could be nothing to contrast *with*. Thirdly, members 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.

Secondly, he defines justification out of a contrast class as follows ('Moderate Classy Pyrrhonian Moral Scepticism', §II, p. 459):

S is justified out of a contrast class *c* in believing the proposition *p* when and only when *S* is not able to rule out *p* and is able to rule out the disjunction of all other members of *c*.

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He then draws a distinction between two different kinds of contrast class, which he uses in his solution to the paradox. 'Extreme' contrast classes are contrast classes that contain propositions which represent sceptical scenarios. 'Modest' contrast classes are contrast classes that do not contain propositions which represent sceptical scenarios. His solution to the paradox is then as follows. The philosophy professor, whether in the classroom or not, is justified in believing various claims out of modest contrast classes, given that his evidence rules out various non-sceptical alternatives. However, he is not justified in believing various claims out of extreme contrast classes, since no matter how good his evidence, he cannot rule out various sceptical hypotheses. Thus the professor can at the same time be justified out of the modest contrast class, while not being justified out of the extreme contrast class. So there is no contradiction in being both justified and not justified in believing *p* on the basis of the same evidence. The professor's evidence allows him to be modestly justified, while not allowing him to be extremely justified. This view Sinnott-Armstrong (p. 450) christens 'moderate scepticism':

Moderate scepticism about justified belief = scepticism about extremely justified belief but not about modestly justified belief.

III

According to Sinnott-Armstrong (*Moral Skepticisms*, p.), 'the idea behind modest justification is to locate a way of being justified that can be independent of whether sceptical hypotheses are true or whether they can be ruled out epistemically'. This independence is essential if moderate scepticism is to be a sustainable position. In this section I shall offer two interpretations of Sinnott-Armstrong's independence claim, and argue that neither interpretation ensures the stability of moderate scepticism.

S is modestly justified in believing *p* if and only if *S*'s evidence rules out all and only the modest alternatives to *p*. This is presumably what Sinnott-Armstrong means when he says that modest justification is 'a way of being justified that can be independent of whether sceptical hypotheses are true or … ruled out epistemically'. There are at least two ways in which the claim that modest justification is thus independent of sceptical hypotheses can be interpreted. One interpretation takes Sinnott-Armstrong to be making a weaker claim, the other a stronger. I shall present him with the following dilemma. The weaker version of the independence claim is more plausible, but leaves it unclear why modest justification counts as a kind of epistemic justification. The stronger version makes it clear why modest justification might count as epistemic, but this version of the independence claim is implausible.

The weaker version of the independence claim is that modest justification is independent of sceptical hypotheses in so far as modest justification allows knowers simply to ignore sceptical hypotheses. The stronger interpretation of the independence claim is that modest justification is in some way immune to sceptical challenge.

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The weaker claim seems incontestable. It is definitional of modest justification that it does not require S to be able to rule out sceptical hypotheses. However, on this understanding of the independence of modest justification from sceptical hypotheses, it remains unclear why modest justification would ever count as epistemic justification. Granted, if we ignore sceptical hypotheses, our evidence may well favour one modest alternative over all the others. But this will not placate sceptics and convince them that what we have in such cases is an instance of epistemic justification immune to the sceptical challenge.

In ch.5 of *Moral Skepticisms*, Sinnott-Armstrong responds (pp. 84–90) to the worry that modest justification is not epistemic. He asserts that modest justification is epistemic in so far as it is tied to truth and normative in character. As I understand it, modest justification is tied to truth because having modest grounds for believing p increases the probability of p on the condition that sceptical hypotheses are false. My worry is that the high conditional probability of the claim that 'p is true given that sceptical hypotheses are false' does not constitute being tied to the truth of p. I can see that a ground for belief is tied to truth if it shows that the belief is true. I can also see that a ground for belief is tied to truth if it increases the probability of the truth of the belief. What I do not accept is that a ground for belief is tied to truth if it increases the conditional probability of the belief *given that* sceptical hypotheses are false. The worry is that having a high probability of being true given that sceptical hypotheses are false does not entail having a high probability of being true.

The stronger version of the independence claim has more to say in response to the sceptic. In *Moral Skepticisms* (pp. 97–103), Sinnott-Armstrong argues that modest justification has a *conditional* structure. S is modestly justified in believing p if and only if S has reason to believe that p is true if any of the modest alternatives are. The stronger version of the independence claim takes it that S's modest justification in believing p entails that S is extremely justified in believing the conditional 'p is true if any of the modest alternatives are'.

Sinnott-Armstrong seems to endorse this version of the independence claim in *Moral Skepticisms* (p. 110):

S is modestly justified in believing p if and only if S is extremely justified in believing p, *given that* sceptical hypotheses are false.

But this version seems at odds with his scepticism about extreme justification. However, it may be possible to reconcile extreme justification for beliefs of the form 'p is true if any of the modest alternatives are' (where p is also modest) with moderate scepticism. For we determine whether a subject is justified in believing the above conditional claim by assuming that the disjunction of the modest alternatives is true, and then determining which of these alternatives the subject's evidence supports. Assuming that one of the modest alternatives is true is equivalent to assuming that sceptical hypotheses are false. So we are justified in believing conditionals of the form 'p is true if any of the modest

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alternatives are' even if we consider sceptical hypotheses. For 'p is true if any of the modest alternatives are' is equivalent to the claim 'If sceptical hypotheses are false, then p', and the possibility that a sceptical hypothesis might be true will not undermine our justification in believing conditionals of the latter form. Thus we can be extremely justified in believing propositions of the form 'p is true if any of the modest alternatives are'. The strong version of the independence claim is as follows: when S can rule out all modest alternatives other than p, S is not only modestly justified in believing p, but also extremely justified in believing that p is true if any of the modest alternatives are. Thus modest justification is independent of sceptical hypotheses, since S can have modest justification regardless of whether sceptical hypotheses are true or can be ruled out epistemically.

Despite appearances, however, this version of the independence claim does not make modest justification immune to scepticism. To be extremely justified in believing anything, S must be able to rule out sceptical hypotheses. However, once we grant the possibility that S is a brain in a vat, it is no longer the case that S's evidence best supports the modest claim p over the other modest alternatives. In fact, once we introduce the possibility of sceptical scenarios, S's evidence (no matter how good it is) will not support any one modest proposition rather than another.

For example, suppose I can see numerous famous Edinburgh landmarks around me: Edinburgh Castle, the Scott Monument, Waverley Station. This evidence allows me to be justified in believing the proposition *I am in Scotland* out of the modest contrast class {*I am in Scotland*, *I am in England*}. Thus I am modestly justified in believing that I am in Scotland, given that I am in Scotland or England. However, once I consider the possibility that my senses are systematically deceiving me (e.g., if I were a brain in a vat, or deceived by an evil demon), then I am no longer justified in believing the conditional claim that I am in Scotland, if I am in Scotland or England. I may very well be in England, but be tricked into thinking that I am in Scotland.

The stronger version of the independence claim does not give good reason to think that modest justification is immune to sceptical challenge. As I understand Sinnott-Armstrong, he is claiming that modest justification is the only kind of justification immune from scepticism, and thus the only plausible candidate for epistemic justification. However, I have argued that the stronger version of the independence claim is implausible, since modest justification in believing p does not entail extreme justification in believing that p is true if any of the modest alternatives are.

Moderate scepticism requires that modest justification is 'independent of whether sceptical hypotheses are true or whether they can be ruled out epistemically'. If the independence of modest justification simply consists of ignoring sceptical hypotheses, then it is unclear how the moderate sceptic will convince the radical sceptic that modest justification is a kind of epistemic justification. On the other hand, I have argued that the stronger independence claim that modest justification is somehowimmune to the sceptical challenge is false.

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IV

Epistemologists worry about sceptical hypotheses because these seem to undermine epistemic justification and knowledge. Sinnott-Armstrong tries to overcome the worry by arguing that we can be epistemically justified even when we cannot rule out sceptical hypotheses. Specifically, he claims that many instances of modest justification are instances of epistemic justification, even though we can be modestly justified regardless of whether sceptical hypotheses are true or can be ruled out epistemically. I have suggested above that we might interpret Sinnott-Armstrong as arguing that one reason for taking modest justification to be epistemic is that modest justification is somehow immune to the sceptical challenge (unlike unqualified and extreme justification). However, I have also argued that modest justification is not immune to the sceptical challenge. Sceptical hypotheses even undermine claims about modest justification. As I pointed out by means of the example in §III, once attributors consider the possibility that *S* might be systematically deceived, then they cannot even say that *S* is modestly justified in his beliefs.

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[1] W. Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms* (Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 90–103.

[2] This example is taken from M. Steup, 'Knowledge and Skepticism: a supplement to "The Analysis of Knowledge"', in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2006/entries/knowledge-analysis.

[3] Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moderate Classy Pyrrhonian Moral Scepticism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 58 (2008) (this issue), pp. 448–56, at §§IV–V. See also *Moral Skepticisms*, ch.5.

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