

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Moral Skepticisms*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 286 pages. ISBN: 0195187725 (hbk.). Hardback/Paperback: £29.95/-.

At once an accessible introduction to contemporary moral epistemology and a forceful argument in favour of moderate moral skepticism, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong's *Moral Skepticisms* is important reading for all those with an interest in the justification of moral beliefs. Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion of moral skepticisms focuses on the arguments for Pyrrhonian skepticism about moral beliefs. The book is structured in two parts: part one covers the varieties of moral skepticisms, culminating in Sinnott-Armstrong's Pyrrhonian skepticism. In part two, Sinnott-Armstrong applies this Pyrrhonian skepticism to naturalism, intuitionism, normativism, and coherentism. I will focus on the arguments of part one, as they are richly detailed and present an original response to the problem of moral skepticism. Sinnott-Armstrong aims to reach his Pyrrhonian skepticism through the notion of contrast classes. Classy Pyrrhonism is meant to provide a moderate moral skepticism that can temper the pervasiveness of moral nihilism. The work surveys the terrain of moral skepticism with great clarity and precision, and the presentation and application of classy Pyrrhonism is elegant and convincing. My hesitation about the ultimate success of this work rests on the question of whether Sinnott-Armstrong's classy Pyrrhonism does eventually support moderate moral skepticism.

Sinnott-Armstrong begins by distinguishing: epistemological skeptical doubts about moral knowledge and justified moral belief; doubts about moral truth; doubts about moral facts or properties; and doubts about the practical efficacy of moral reasons. Having described meticulously the various targets of doubt, Sinnott-Armstrong describes two ways of doubting. Academic skepticism (named for its association with Plato's academy) claims that no one knows or is justified in believing anything. Pyrrhonian skeptics, however, refrain from such forthright dogmatism, and suspend belief about justification of belief or knowledge. Pyrrhonian skeptics are not only doubtful about moral knowledge and the justification of moral beliefs, they also doubt the Academic skeptic's claim that beliefs or knowledge are never justified.

In part one, Sinnott-Armstrong examines arguments for Academic moral skepticism. Expressivist objections to the truth-aptness of moral assertions are rejected as unsatisfactory, as Sinnott-Armstrong argues that such assertions fit with truth-functional contexts. Such fit suggests that truth related functions, such as negation, are appropriate for moral assertions and that moral beliefs may be truth-apt. Sinnott-Armstrong goes on to argue that expressivists seek to supply within their model the features of moral realism that seem to underpin our ordinary moral discourse. However, this either undermines the distinctively expressivist nature of their arguments against truth-aptness, or implies that expressivism is itself insufficient to account for our ordinary moral language and its use. Sinnott-Armstrong

recognises that his arguments may not carry the day entirely, but he makes a strong claim that expressivists have not yet shown convincingly that moral beliefs are not truth-apt.

Whilst we may accept that moral beliefs are truth-apt, it is a further claim to establish that moral beliefs relate to some moral reality about which they can be true. This is skepticism about moral truth. Mackie's error theory is a well-known example of skepticism about moral truth. Sinnott-Armstrong finds that error theory arguments from relativism, evolution, and queerness do not establish the dogmatic Academic skepticism that there are no moral facts. Rather, they suggest that we should suspend belief about whether there are such facts or not. For example, Sinnott-Armstrong claims that '... even if we have no epistemic access to moral facts, that does not show that they do not exist' (p. 46). Thus Sinnott-Armstrong argues that Pyrrhonian suspension of belief, rather than Academic moral nihilism, follows from skepticism about moral truth.

Whilst skepticism about moral truth may not provide grounds for moral nihilism, epistemological skepticism about moral knowledge and justified moral belief is far more threatening, and on two fronts. Firstly, Sinnott-Armstrong presents a regress argument; secondly, he develops a skeptical hypothesis argument. The regress argument begins by establishing that justification must be inferential (non-inferential justification seems to allow too much, including contradiction). Beliefs can be inferred from non-normative premises; from some normative premises without moral premises; or from moral premises. Justifications of the first kind fall foul of the is/ought prohibition, as it is unclear how one can provide justification of a moral belief from non-moral premises. Skeptics press that such justification reflect suppressed moral, and therefore normative, premises. Consequently, the argument from non-normative premises is shown to be incapable of providing justification. Inference from normative but non-moral premises is a justificatory strategy employed by contractualists. Contractualists, typically, identify non-moral normative premises, such as the rational choices that should be made by individuals in ideal circumstances. By applying these choices to moral matters, such as principles of justice or reasons against wrongdoing, contractualists hope to show that the moral beliefs about these moral principles are justified in terms of the non-moral normative premises. Sinnott-Armstrong points out, as have many other critics of contractualism, that the characterisation of the non-moral normative premises is hotly disputed, and seems to be informed by moral considerations. Therefore, contractualist style justification from normative but non-moral premises seems to involve suppressed premises and questionable validity also. The third form of inferential justification relies on the justification of one moral belief inferentially from another. The problem of suppression does not apply here, but skeptics complain that the inference from other moral beliefs is circular, or regresses infinitely. If a moral belief,  $p$ , is justified inferentially from a set of moral beliefs  $S(-p)$ , this may avoid the problem of circularity, but by inference from what is  $S(-p)$  justified?

The problems of the infinite regress of inferential justification of moral beliefs leads Sinnott-Armstrong to conclude that Academic skepticism about moral beliefs cannot be refuted.

The second argument for Academic skepticism follows from the skeptical hypothesis. The skeptical hypothesis argument claims that a belief is not justified if any one of the alternative contrary hypotheses cannot be ruled out. Descartes' deceitful demon provides a pervasive contrary hypothesis. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that skeptical hypothesis cannot be fully ruled out or refuted, and consequently our moral beliefs cannot be justified without qualification. Thus Academic skepticism leads to moral nihilism, from both the regress and the skeptical hypothesis arguments independently, although both are often combined.

Thus Sinnott-Armstrong finds that Academic skepticism and moral nihilism prevent us from providing full and final justification of our moral beliefs. But the persistence of moral nihilism should not forbid more modest, limited justification of moral beliefs. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that whilst we cannot achieve a global justification of our moral beliefs, we can justify them more locally in terms of contrast classes. If I am at a concert and I am asked to identify a composition, I may be able to identify it as work of classical music by Mozart. This belief could be justified by contrasting the classical music composition with jazz, pop, and blues compositions. However, if I am asked whether the work I hear was composed by Mozart or by a sophisticated computer programme designed to create stylistically perfect Mozart imitations, I may not be justified in my original belief. This example shows that the class with which I contrast my beliefs can provide a perimeter of justification. The narrower the class the more secure the justification. The widest contrast class for moral beliefs of course includes Academic skepticism. This extreme contrast class includes the regress and skeptical hypothesis arguments, and contrast classes are in this instance ineffective against moral nihilism. They become much more effective tools in justification as soon as they are defined more narrowly.

If justification is possible through contrast classes, the constitution of these classes is crucial to the possibility of justification. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that the classes may be defined by their context and purpose, so that a professor of ethics might include moral nihilism in a seminar on moral epistemology, but exclude moral nihilism during service on a hospital ethics committee. Whilst this is helpful as a rule of thumb, Sinnott-Armstrong admits that we cannot determine with certainty which contrast class is really relevant. This indeterminacy leads Sinnott-Armstrong to argue that there is a basic doubt about which contrast class is really relevant. Is it an extremely narrow and local class that may provide limited justification, or is it the extreme contrast class that includes moral nihilism? The indeterminacy of this answer leads directly, Sinnott-Armstrong claims, to Pyrrhonian skepticism. We recall that Pyrrhonian skepticism doubted the validity of the dogmatic Academic skeptical claim that no moral belief is justified. We can now see that this suspension of belief derives from the indeterminacy of

the class that constitutes justification. If we cannot be certain whether moral nihilism is to be included in the class or not, then we cannot be certain whether justification is possible or not. This lack of certainty about the relevance of contrast classes grounds the suspension of belief that characterises Sinnott-Armstrong's Pyrrhonian skepticism.

The essence of Sinnott-Armstrong's argument is that the recalcitrance of moral Academic skepticism, when combined with the notion of contrast classes, can produce moderate moral scepticism. However, the indeterminacy of the contrast classes means that we cannot know which members of the class are really relevant, and consequently we should suspend belief about whether a moral belief is justified fully or not, as we cannot establish whether the moral nihilism is a member of the really relevant contrast class. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that this leads to a Pyrrhonian skepticism where we doubt the claims of Academic skepticism as it is indeterminate whether they are included in the contrast class.

It seems to me that there is a tension between the commitment to moderate moral skepticism derived from justification through contrast classes, and Pyrrhonian skepticism as a suspension of belief, and that this tension results from the indeterminacy of the really relevant members of the contrast class. Sinnott-Armstrong gives examples of how contrast classes may be constituted, for example by purpose or context. But the possibility of moderate justification rests on the possibility of determining a relevant contrast class. Pyrrhonism arises because it is indeterminate whether moral nihilism is a member of the class or not, but if this indeterminacy applies to moral nihilism, it applies to other beliefs also. This must surely challenge the notion of moderate justification that is meant to follow from the application of contrast classes. I find the arguments for Pyrrhonian skepticism powerful and convincing, but I am less convinced of the nature of the moderate justification that is meant to be allowed by contrast classes, and question whether the indeterminacy of the contrast classes allows for the moderate justification that Sinnott-Armstrong claims for his classy Pyrrhonism. I therefore hesitate before accepting that classy Pyrrhonism allows for moderate justification of moral beliefs, but I have no hesitation in commending this book for its impressive style, structure, and substance.

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