The Philosophical Quarterly Vol. 58, No. 233 *October 2008*
ISSN 0031–8094 doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9213.2008.527.x

PYRRHIC PYRRHONISM

By Garrett Cullity

Moral Skepticisms. By Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. (Oxford UP, 2006. Pp. 286. Price £29.99.)

I

In his provocative and refreshing new book, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues for a position with two main components. There is a sceptical part of his view, but also a non-sceptical part.

The full title of the sceptical part is 'Pyrrhonian scepticism about justified moral belief'. This is to be understood by contrast with its more definite cousin, Academic scepticism about justified moral belief. Academic scepticism makes the claim that nobody is ever justified in holding any substantive moral belief. Pyrrhonian scepticism is sceptical about *this*, and does not endorse it. But it does not deny it either. Pyrrhonian sceptics suspend belief about whether or not anyone is justified in holding any moral belief. We can of course generalize these two approaches to the justification of beliefs about any subject-matter *s*. Adopting a shorthand, we could say that Academic sceptics about *s*-beliefs hold that there are no justified beliefs about *s*, and Pyrrhonian sceptics about *s*-beliefs suspend belief about whether or not there are any justified beliefs about *s*. Using this shorthand, Sinnott-Armstrong is a Pyrrhonian sceptic about moral beliefs.

There is also a non-sceptical part of his view. Sinnott-Armstrong does think that some claims about the justification of moral beliefs are true, namely, claims that a given moral belief is or is not 'justified out of a contrast class', when the contrast class is specified. This idea is introduced via a discussion of comparative judgements. Questions about whether something is large, obviously, can only be settled once we fix the contrast class with respect to which the judgement is being made: jumbo shrimp (to take a favourite example) are large for shrimp but not for marine crustaceans. Sinnott-Armstrong advocates a corresponding treatment of the justification of belief. We can say that my believing a proposition is justified out of a given contrast class (a class of propositions which are logical contraries) when the other members of the contrast class can be ruled out, but that proposition cannot. This can sometimes be achieved for moral beliefs: a contrast class may be small enough,

Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA

and the other members of the class implausible enough, for us to be able to say that one moral belief is justified out of that class.

This means that Sinnott-Armstrong's Pyrrhonian scepticism about morality has to be carefully described. He is a Pyrrhonian sceptic about whether any moral beliefs are justified without qualification. But he is not a Pyrrhonian sceptic about whether moral beliefs are justified out of specified contrast classes: he holds that some moral beliefs are justified out of some contrast classes, and also that all moral beliefs are not justified out of other contrast classes.

The line of reasoning which leads him to this conclusion has the following broad structure. A pair of arguments can be offered in support of Academic scepticism. There is a regress argument, which maintains that since a moral belief can only ever be justified inferentially by appealing to other moral beliefs, any attempted justification is either circular or requires an infinite chain of inferences (pp. 74–7), and there is a sceptical hypothesis argument, according to which no moral belief can be justified unless the contrary hypothesis of moral nihilism – the view that there are no moral facts – can be ruled out (pp. 77–81). We can then ask, for different contrast classes of moral propositions, whether these arguments can be defeated, allowing us to justify moral beliefs out of those contrast classes. If we consider the 'modest' contrast class of propositions which most people would think need to be ruled out in order for a belief to be justified, then these sceptical arguments can sometimes be defeated. The sceptical hypothesis can be defeated, since moral nihilism is not in this modest contrast class. The regress argument can also be defeated if we adopt a coherentist approach to moral justification, Sinnott-Armstrong argues in his final chapter. According to coherentism, a moral belief is justified when it belongs to a set of consistent, inferentially connected and comprehensive beliefs. This does involve a kind of circularity, since any given belief *b* is justified by its relationship to a set of other beliefs each member of which is justified by its relationship to a set including *b*. But the circularity is not vicious, unless it is used to claim that one set of beliefs is justified when there is a second, equally coherent set of beliefs that rejects all the beliefs in the first set – for then every claim about the justification of a belief in the first set will presuppose what is denied by someone who holds the second set.

This, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, can secure us justification out of the 'modest' contrast class. However, it will not secure justification for believing any moral proposition out of the 'extreme' contrast class that includes every other contrary proposition, including nihilism, since there is no argument for ruling out nihilism which does not beg the question against it.

So some moral beliefs are justified out of the modest contrast class, and none is justified out of the extreme contrast class. But are any moral beliefs simply justified, without qualification? Such claims can plausibly be interpreted, Sinnott-Armstrong argues, as claims about a belief's being justified out of the *relevant* contrast class. However, there is no convincing ground for settling which contrast class is the relevant one for justifying any given moral belief. This is not a reason for positively denying that there is a relevant contrast class. Sinnott-Armstrong does not argue that the idea that one contrast class is more relevant than others is inappropriate or confused, or that for some other reason we ought to deny that there

is any relevant contrast class. He does not claim that there are no facts of the matter about which contrast class is relevant.[1] Going that far would make him an Academic rather than a Pyrrhonian sceptic. Rather, his view is that there is no good reason for claiming one contrast class to be relevant in preference to others. So we should suspend belief about this.

This leads Sinnott-Armstrong to the circumscribed, 'moderate' Pyrrhonian scepticism described above. He is a Pyrrhonian sceptic about whether any moral beliefs are justified without qualification. He is an Academic sceptic about justification out of the extreme contrast class. He is a non-sceptic about justification out of the modest contrast class: justification of this kind *is* possible for some moral beliefs.

This is a provocative view. Surely there are some moral opinions, the belief that killing homeless people for fun is wrong, for example, which most people do think are justified, without qualification. I know I do: I cannot take seriously the idea that I might not be justified in thinking this. (Not that Sinnott-Armstrong is claiming that I am not: he suspends belief.) But his view is also refreshing, because it is presented so clearly and skilfully, and because of its admirable determination not to accept common opinions without good reason, in the best sceptical tradition.

In what follows, I shall do two things. One is to raise a problem for his position. The other is to explain what I think is wrong with his argument for it.

II

Sinnott-Armstrong describes his Pyrrhonian moral scepticism as a 'second-order' sceptical view. He does not suspend moral belief itself: he is prepared to assert (I assume) that killing homeless people for fun is wrong. But he does suspend a certain kind of belief *about* his first-order moral beliefs, namely, a belief about whether first-order moral beliefs such as this are justified, without qualification.

Of the various possible second-order views one could hold, Sinnott-Armstrong's own view, Pyrrhonian scepticism, is indicated by 2(c) in Figure 1. But we can repeat the demand for justification at the next level up. At level 2, we are asking if our level 1 moral beliefs *m* are justified. The corresponding question can be asked about our level 2 views. At level 2, what Sinnott-Armstrong calls for is suspending belief. Is *this* justified, or not?

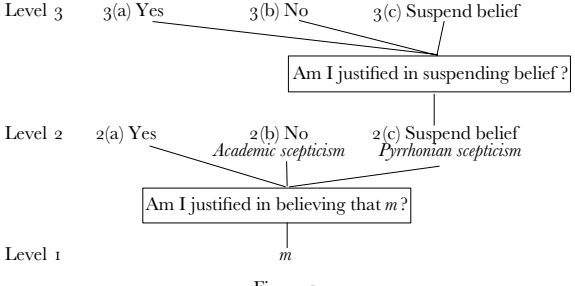

Figure 1

[1] 'This difficulty in determining which contrast class is relevant does not entail that there is no fact of the matter about which contrast class is relevant. However, in the absence of any idea about how to settle on one contrast class as opposed to other candidates, it seems better to avoid any claim that any contrast class is the relevant one' (p. 129).

Sinnott-Armstrong does not raise this question explicitly. (After all, 2(c) is not itself a *belief* whose justification we need to consider.) However, the answer it is natural to attribute to him creates a problem. It is natural to read his book as an argument *for* Pyrrhonian scepticism. Having set out the problems for attempts to settle which contrast class is really relevant for the justification of moral belief, he concludes that this 'makes it attractive' to avoid claims about what is really relevant, that there is more than one 'reason to avoid' those claims, and that it is 'better to avoid' them (pp. 127, 129). The problems for the alternative views are presented as counting in favour of Pyrrhonism. So he seems committed, at level 3, to believing that his level 2 Pyrrhonism is justified (at least permissively). At level 3, then, Sinnott-Armstrong is not a sceptic: he is committed to 3(a).

In arguing as he does, he commits himself to two things. One is the truth of the following claim:

P. It is better to avoid claims about what is justified without qualification.

The other is that there is a good argument for (P) – the argument that leads him to draw this conclusion.

However, this creates the following problem. Given the worries which lead Sinnott-Armstrong to suspend belief at level 2, why do not the same worries equally support the suspension of belief about (P) at level 3? Those worries, after all, concern the fact that we have no argument for ruling out nihilism which does not beg the question against the nihilist. When *s* is morality, our inability to give a non-question-begging refutation of nihilism about *s* supports Pyrrhonian scepticism about beliefs about *s*. So, at least, Sinnott-Armstrong argues. But then if this argument is sound when *s* is morality, it should be equally sound for any other subject-matter that is substituted for *s*. In particular, it should be sound when *s* is the justification of moral beliefs. (P) is a proposition for which Sinnott-Armstrong argues. It has a nihilistic rival, the view that there are no facts about what it is better or worse to avoid. Is there any non-question-begging refutation of this nihilistic view? It is hard to see how Sinnott-Armstrong could be in a position to allow this. After all, it is hard to see what stops this kind of nihilism from being just as coherent an alternative to (P) as moral nihilism was in relation to the alternatives at level 1. If that is right, a parallel argument favours Pyrrhonian scepticism about the justification of (P). But that is position 3(c), not 3(a): it conflicts with his acceptance that there is a good argument for (P).

This is a version of a very old objection to Pyrrhonian scepticism.[2] Commentators often describe this ancient objection as the complaint that Pyrrhonian scepticism is 'inconsistent', or 'self-refuting'. I would not put it in that way. For that invites precisely the reply that Sextus Empiricus gave to it the first time around. When Sextus was challenged with the objection that his Pyrrhonian scepticism was

[2] Walter Sinnott-Armstrong himself pointed this out to me. For commentary, see M. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Skeptical Tradition* (Univ. of California Press, 1983); M. Frede, 'The Sceptic's Beliefs', and 'The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent', in M. Burnyeat and M. Frede (eds), *The Original Sceptics: a Controversy* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), pp. 1–24, 124–52; J. Barnes, *The Toils of Scepticism* (Cambridge UP, 1990).

self-refuting, he replied by denying that he was arguing *for* it. The Pyrrhonian sceptic, according to Sextus, points out the flaws in others' attempts to provide positive reasons for the alternative views; he does not claim to have positive reasons for his own views. That seems enough to avoid any inconsistency. You can *be* a Pyrrhonian sceptic without inconsistency. However, my point is that you cannot consistently *argue* for Pyrrhonism (unless you have a way of restricting it to a particular level). That seems a significant problem. After all, what is the point of undermining the arguments for the rival views unless that counts in favour of the Pyrrhonian alternative? Without that claim, the chain of reasoning that consists in challenging those arguments and then suspending belief ends in a *non sequitur*.

However, the claims I quoted above suggest that Sinnott-Armstrong is not taking this ancient route. His treatment of justification in terms of contrast classes equips him to make a different reply. He can (and I think, must) say this. His view is only fairly identified as 2(c) if that is a view about what is justified, *without qualification*. He is not a Pyrrhonian about justification out of a contrast class, when the class is specified. The only argument for Pyrrhonism he offers, and the only argument available to be reapplied at higher levels, is an argument about *unqualified* justification. He can consistently extend his Pyrrhonism to level 3 – and indeed, to every higher level – as long as it is a Pyrrhonism about unqualified justification, while claiming that, at every level, the Pyrrhonism is justified *out of a contrast class that does not include nihilism*. A Pyrrhonian about justification without qualification, all the way up, can still consistently claim that Pyrrhonism is modestly justified, all the way up.

III

So far so good: Sinnott-Armstrong's apparatus of justification out of a contrast class suggests a way of avoiding an ancient problem for this kind of sceptical view. However, I shall now take a closer look at what 'justification out of a contrast class' amounts to.

Sinnott-Armstrong emphasizes that when he identifies a contrast class and says that we are justified in believing a proposition out of that class, this involves no claim about the merits of this contrast class in comparison with others. In particular, when he defines the modest contrast class for a proposition as the class of all those contrary propositions that need to be ruled out in order to meet the usual epistemic standards, he makes a point of emphasizing that he is not *endorsing* those standards (p. 89). He had better not be: that would mean abandoning his Pyrrhonism.

However, unless there is something to be said in favour of a given contrast class, it is hard to see how the fact that a belief of mine is 'justified out of a contrast class' can *count in favour* of my believing it. The force of this point is illustrated by a proposition which we have no evidence for or against – that Julius Caesar took an even number of breaths on the day of his death, for example. The set consisting of this proposition, the proposition that he took one breath on that day, and the proposition that he took 1,000,001 breaths, meets Sinnott-Armstrong's description of a contrast class: the propositions in the class are contraries. We can rule out the

second and third propositions on inductive grounds: the second is implausibly small and the third implausibly large. So, given what being 'justified out of a contrast class' amounts to, we must say that the first proposition is justified out of this contrast class. The problem is that we have said *nothing* to support it. This gives us no reason whatever to believe the first proposition: we still have no evidence for or against it. Presented with these three propositions, the only sensible thing would be to reject the second and third, and suspend belief in the first.

This makes it misleading to think of 'justification out of a contrast class' as a kind of justification. If a belief can be 'justified out of a contrast class' even though there is nothing that counts in favour of it, then to say that a belief is 'justified out of a contrast class' does not have the right kind of normativity to amount to a claim about justification. For surely, when we ordinarily say that a belief is justified we are saying that there is something that recommends it or counts in its favour.

Sinnott-Armstrong does consider the objection that claims about justification out of a contrast class are not normative enough to be epistemic. In reply, he points out that 'even if certain believers consider only a narrow range of options, they can still do a good job of determining which option is best among the options that are considered' (p. 107). Judging that one option is better than others is a normative judgement, even if the normative judgement is only comparative rather than absolute. When I judge that this is the best winter tomato, I am making a normative judgement, even if I am only comparing a limited range of alternatives.

However, the Julius Caesar example shows that this is not enough to support claims about *justification*, if justification is a way of counting in favour. No doubt the first of the judgements in that example is better than the second and third: there is no evidence against the first judgement, whereas there is compelling evidence against the second and third. However, there is no evidence *for* it. Sometimes there is good reason to choose from a restricted range of alternatives: if I am making a salad in winter, I had better make do with the best winter tomato. Likewise, if I do have a good reason for committing myself to one of the propositions in a contrast class (rather than suspending belief), then I should believe the one that is likeliest to be true. But in the Julius Caesar example, I do not have a good reason to do that. Since there is nothing to be said in favour of considering this contrast class, showing that one proposition in the class is not as unlikely as the others does not furnish me with evidence which counts in favour of believing it rather than suspending belief. The kind of normativity required in order for 'justification out of a contrast class' really to count in favour of a belief is not just that it is better than others, but that we have a good reason to hold the best belief out of the set which is considered. If I have good reason to think that the class contains every relevant alternative, then eliminating all the others does seem to count in favour of believing the only remaining proposition. But otherwise, I have the option of suspending belief, and simply showing that one proposition is better than others will fall short of giving me a reason to believe it.

Why is this a problem? After all, the main thrust of Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion is precisely to distinguish between judgements about justification out of a specified contrast class and the kind of judgement of unqualified justification that contains a commitment to relevance. He argues that in the absence of any clear

reason to prefer one view of relevance over any other, we are not warranted in judgements of the latter kind. My complaint, though, is that the replacement he recommends, 'justification out of a contrast class', is not a way of *counting in favour* of a belief. The earlier discussion shows why this poses a problem for him. He is making claims in his book about what counts in favour of Pyrrhonism. But this is the sort of justificational claim that is not supported by talk of 'justification out of a contrast class'.

I conclude that his view faces a dilemma. Either all that can be claimed for his own views is that they are 'modestly justified', which falls short of claiming that anything counts in their favour, or Sinnott-Armstrong claims (as he actually does) that his arguments do count in favour of Pyrrhonism – but then those arguments are inconsistent with their own higher-level reapplication. The success of those arguments would be a Pyrrhic victory for Pyrrhonism.

IV

So far I have argued that the position Sinnott-Armstrong presents is problematic. Now I shall offer, more speculatively, a diagnosis of what is wrong with his argument for this position.

This argument has the following general form. We cannot be justified in believing a proposition about subject-matter *s* out of a given contrast class unless we have non-question-begging grounds for ruling out the other propositions in that contrast class. There is no non-question-begging ground for ruling out nihilism about *s*. So we are not justified in believing any non-nihilistic proposition about *s* out of the extreme contrast class that includes nihilism. Since we cannot tell whether or not the extreme contrast class is the relevant contrast class, we should suspend belief about whether any belief about *s* is justified without qualification.

Sinnott-Armstrong's interest is in the case where *s* is morality. I am going to begin by considering a different substitution for *s*, for which an argument of this form would fail. Then I shall explain how this helps to show what is wrong with the argument when Sinnott-Armstrong applies it to morality.

The substitution for *s* I shall begin with is *reasons for action*. One obvious-looking claim about a reason for action is the fact that my doing a certain thing will harm me is a reason for me not to do it. Most people accept this. In accepting this, we accept the following claim:

R. There is a reason for me not to perform this action.

Moreover, we can say what this reason is – it is the following fact:

F. This action will harm me.

This fact, (F), is a reason for not performing the action – a practical reason. My believing (F) is a reason for believing (R) – a theoretical reason.

So, at least, most people ordinarily think. Is it irrational to think this? Some philosophers say 'Yes' to this, because they find reasons metaphysically odd. They

embrace practical nihilism, the view that there are no reasons for action. Most people, in contrast, do not think that there is a rationally compelling case for nihilism. But an argument of Sinnott-Armstrong's form needs to be considered after we have had that debate. (That is a debate about whether we should be *Academic* sceptics about practical reason beliefs.[3]) There may be no rationally compelling case *for* nihilism about practical reasons; but what is the case *against* it? Is there any way of presenting evidence for the falsity of practical nihilism without begging the question against the nihilist? If not (an argument of Sinnott-Armstrong's form will run) I cannot rule out nihilism on epistemic grounds. So I cannot justify (R) out of the extreme contrast class that includes practical nihilism. Therefore, in the absence of any grounds that will settle which contrast class is the relevant one for justifying beliefs about practical reasons, I should suspend belief about whether any opinion of form (R) is justified.

What should we make of this argument? I agree that there is no non-question-begging piece of evidence for the falsity of practical nihilism. At least, I cannot think of any. However, should that lead us to suspend belief about whether we are justified in holding opinions of form (R)? I think not. In fact, Sinnott-Armstrong's discussion of contrast classes can help to explain why that would be a mistake.

I complained earlier that unless there is something that counts in favour of choosing from a restricted contrast class, establishing that one belief is the best out of a contrast class will fall short of finding something in favour of believing it. However, if a belief is justified out of the contrast class to which there is good reason to restrict ourselves, then things are different: this does count in favour of that belief. As I shall now argue, when we are assessing propositions of form (R), there *is* something that counts in favour of restricting our attention to a contrast class that excludes practical nihilism, even if we have no non-question-begging argument against it.

Accepting practical nihilism is incompatible with agency – at least, with agency in the sense that you and I are agents. Being an agent in this sense, rather than a mere emitter of behaviour, involves making judgements about which actions are preferable to which. Being an agent involves the guidance of our actions by such judgements: it involves acting for reasons – acting from the thought that there is more reason to do one thing than another. This presupposes accepting the existence of reasons for and against action. So nihilism, if we could achieve it, would be a state of abandoning agency.

This is not a non-question-begging argument against nihilism. But it is a case for thinking that nihilism is not relevant to our thinking as agents. After all, we *are* agents. It seems strongly to us that there are facts – facts like (F) – that provide us with compelling reasons for action. If that were irrational, the conclusion to draw would be Academic, not Pyrrhonian scepticism. But if the arguments for Academic scepticism fail, there is no irrationality in occupying the perspective of agency. The perspective of agency is the perspective of figuring out what to do. Nihilism is

[3] Thinking that there is a rationally compelling case for practical nihilism is sufficient but not necessary for Academic scepticism about justified beliefs concerning practical reasons. Another kind of Academic scepticism would deny that any positive belief concerning practical reasons is justified, but deny that a belief in practical nihilism is justified too.

irrelevant to that. The question for an agent is what favours doing one thing rather than another; it is not whether to recognize reasons for action at all. Nihilism about reasons for action is not in the relevant contrast class for an agent to consider when working out what to do. In order for our practical opinions to be justified, without qualification, they must be justified out of the relevant contrast class, and that contrast class does not include nihilism.

Thus, if I am seeking to justify my opinion that (F) is a reason not to perform an action, I need to have grounds for favouring it over the non-nihilistic alternatives – not over nihilism. What can I say to identify those grounds? Four obvious points to appeal to are these. First, it seems to me that there are strong reasons against the action. Secondly, I can say what those reasons are – I do this by describing the respects in which the action will be harmful. Thirdly, I am aware of the factors that can distort evaluative judgements – such judgements, as Sinnott-Armstrong points out, can be 'partial, controversial, emotional, subject to illusion, and explicable by dubious sources' (p. 210) – and my best efforts to assess whether those factors are distorting my judgement here suggest not. Fourthly, everyone else whose practical judgement I have reason to trust agrees with me. The only people who sincerely disagree with me are either in the grip of a false religious worldview or philosophical theory, or are suffering from some kind of mental incapacity.

These are at least the first points that could be made in order to make a case for thinking that my judgement about this reason is more coherent than the non-nihilistic alternatives. As Sinnott-Armstrong rightly emphasizes, an important part of a case for the coherence of a set of beliefs will be connecting my first-order beliefs to second-order beliefs about the conditions in which first-order beliefs are reliable (pp. 230–3). I need to have a basis for confidence that my own first-order beliefs meet those conditions and others' contradictory beliefs do not. This is what I am doing when I make the third and fourth points just mentioned.

If this is right, it would be a mistake to think that the absence of a non-question-begging argument against nihilism about reasons for action supports Pyrrhonism about our beliefs concerning those reasons. I accept that from a point of view which is not committed to the existence of practical reasons, it is hard to see what conclusive evidence could be given for their existence. If we were not already agents, it is hard to see how we could argue ourselves into agency. But we are; there is nothing irrational about that; and if so, we can justify our opinions about reasons for action from amongst the alternatives it makes sense for us to consider. We cannot give a non-question-begging argument against nihilism, but we do not rationally need one.

However, to return to Sinnott-Armstrong's own view, he is not a Pyrrhonian about the justification of beliefs about reasons for action generally: he is a Pyrrhonian about the justification of *moral* beliefs. Having objected that an argument of his form would not work when applied to reasons for action, I now need to return to the application he does make of it, to morality. There have been moral nihilists who are not nihilists about reasons for action: they advocate the rejection of morality as part of their views about what there is reason to do. Nietzsche was a moral nihilist of this practically committed sort, a moral nihilist within ethics. He thought that the best way of living is to reject morality. If there is no non-question-begging way to rule out

a moral nihilism of this kind, then (Sinnott-Armstrong argues) we should suspend belief about whether any moral belief is justified.

I have just argued that we should reject an argument of this form for Pyrrhonism about the justification of beliefs concerning reasons for action. Even if we cannot produce a non-question-begging argument against nihilism concerning reasons for action, we can justify our beliefs about those reasons out of the *relevant* contrast class, since that class does not include nihilism. The objection to Sinnott-Armstrong's own argument concerning morality is different, but connected. Given that our beliefs concerning practical reasons can be justified, we should deny that the rejection of moral nihilism begs the question against the nihilist.

To explain this, I shall consider just one of the many different forms that a moral nihilism within ethics might take. Ethical opponents of morality can have different targets in mind. 'Morality' might be characterized in terms of a particular subject-matter – a particular set of considerations that are held to provide reasons for action. It might be characterized in terms of a claim to provide us with reasons which have a distinctive force in relation to other reasons for action (a distinctively 'categorical' commandingness, perhaps). Or it might be characterized in terms of a distinctive set of accompanying attitudes and actions, such as guilt, blame, reparation and punishment. Each of these ways of characterizing morality might be (and has been) used to define a target of ethical criticism. In my view none of them will support an argument of Sinnott-Armstrong's form, from the absence of a non-question-begging argument against moral nihilism to his Pyrrhonian moral scepticism. Rather than trying to discuss every possibility, I shall briefly explain why I think this is so by discussing one version of moral nihilism – one that thinks of 'morality' in the first of these ways.

One simple version of ethical egoism is a view according to which the only considerations that really count in favour of my actions are those bearing on my own well-being. If killing homeless people will make me happy without getting me into trouble, that could be the best thing to do. Suppose someone advocating this view thinks of morality, equally simplistically, as a set of assertions about ways in which other people's well-being provides us with reasons for action independently of their effects on our own well-being. The ethical egoist then denies all these claims, and proclaims himself a nihilist about morality but not about ethics.

An ethical egoist, as just described, is a selective nihilist. He accepts that facts about the way my actions can affect my own interests can give me reasons to perform them; but he denies that facts about the way they affect others' interests can do so. When it appears to us that facts of the latter kind count strongly for and against action too, he maintains that that is an illusion. The first thing to say about this view is that the onus appears to be on its proponents to defend it. A nihilism of this selective kind is like the hypothesis of an evil demon that deceives us about the lecture theatre but not the campus cafeteria. Why should we take that view seriously? What is it about other people's interests that disqualifies them from providing us with reasons? The ethical egoist owes us an argument for this claim. But such arguments fail – they usually involve a confusion about the relationship between reasons for action and desires.

Sinnott-Armstrong does not claim that the arguments for moral nihilism (in this or any other form) succeed. On the contrary: he holds moral opinions that are incompatible with it. But he suspends belief about whether such non-nihilistic opinions can be justified, without qualification. This is because he thinks that the rejection of moral nihilism begs the question against it. But is that right? Am I simply begging the question against the ethical egoist when I express confidence in my judgement that killing homeless people for fun is bad? Pressed to say why I am confident about this, I would say four things. They correspond to the four things that the ethical egoist can say to justify the belief that harm to himself counts against an action. First, the nature of the action of killing homeless people for fun makes it seem to me that there are very strong reasons against it. Secondly, I can say what those reasons are, by describing what is so vile about it – that is, the respects in which doing this is morally wrong. Thirdly, I am aware of the factors that can distort evaluative judgements, and my best efforts to assess whether those factors are distorting my judgement here suggest they are not. Fourthly, everyone else whose practical judgement I have reason to trust agrees with me. The only people I have ever come across who deny this claim are people who are either insincere or in the grip of a false philosophical theory; and the only other kinds of people I have heard of who deny it have been incapacitated by their nature or upbringing from being able to appreciate the reasons bearing on this action.[4]

Saying these things does beg the question against a complete practical nihilist, who holds that no facts about actions provide reasons for or against them. However, we are entitled to reject practical nihilism, and adopt instead the perspective of agency. In doing so, we commit ourselves to the existence of reasons for performing some actions rather than others. Once we do this, I cannot see how there is anything question-begging in appealing to my own best efforts to identify what counts in favour of some actions over others, together with my ability to say what is fallacious in attempts to argue for ethical egoism, and citing this to justify my non-egoistic opinions about what I should do. Once we are committed to the existence of reasons for action, all that each of us can sensibly do is to make our own most serious efforts to identify what those reasons are, and to examine why we should trust our own judgement in cases in which others disagree with us.

Of course, none of this will guarantee that my moral belief is true. My best efforts to see what counts for and against action cannot be guaranteed to succeed. But if those best efforts do suggest that there are good reasons against an action such as this, and that I should not trust the judgement of those who disagree with me, then those are grounds for claiming that I am justified in holding this moral belief.

It might seem that the point at which this begs the question against the egoist is when I say that those 'whose practical judgement I have reason to trust' agree with me. There are ethical egoists who disagree with me, so I am claiming that I do not have reason to trust their practical judgement. That is right; I am (of course) committed to claiming that my practical judgement is better than that of people who think there is no good reason that counts against killing homeless people for fun. But

[4] The people who actually do such actions often appear capable of appreciating those reasons: see http://www.cnn.com/2007/US/02/19/homeless.attacks/index.html.

I am not begging the question against them: I am not simply assuming that they are wrong, as a starting-point to argument. Rather, I am asking why we should think that the apparent reasons to further our own welfare really are reasons, but the apparent reasons to benefit and respect other people are not reasons. The arguments which egoists give for that distinction are bad arguments (and if they were good arguments, they would support Academic, not Pyrrhonian scepticism).

These remarks are not intended as a positive contribution to moral epistemology. On the contrary: the four points I have mentioned will be common to any plausible view in moral epistemology – whether a version of coherentism such as the view favoured by Sinnott-Armstrong, an intuitionist view, or any of the other theories he surveys in his book. Developing these points in a fully adequate way means answering challenges of many kinds. My aim here has only been to argue that once we have rejected practical nihilism, the further rejection of a view like ethical egoism need not beg the question against its proponents.

To summarize: I agree that there appears to be no non-question-begging argument against nihilism about practical reasons. But this should not lead us to withdraw the claim that our non-nihilistic opinions are justified. Once we abandon scepticism about practical reasons, and consider ethical critics of specifically moral judgement, I cannot see why we should concede that our grounds for disagreeing with those critics beg the question against them.

That is my suggested diagnosis of why Sinnott-Armstrong's argument for Pyrrhonian scepticism about justified moral belief fails. In the earlier sections of the paper, I argued independently of this diagnosis that appealing to justification out of the modest contrast class is insufficient to show how a Pyrrhonian can present any argument that really does count in favour of adopting Pyrrhonism.[5]

University of Adelaide

[5] I am grateful to Walter Sinnott-Armstrong for his comments on two earlier drafts.