Problems For Sinnott-Armstrong's Moral Contrastivism

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Some Problems for Moral Contrastivism.

Comments on Sinnott-Armstrong

Peter Baumann

Abstract

In his recent book 'Moral Skepticisms' Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues in great detail for contrastivism with respect to justified moral belief and moral knowledge. In this paper I raise three questions concerning this view. First, how would Sinnott-Armstrong account for constraints on admissible contrast classes? Second, how would he deal with notorious problems concerning relevant reference classes? And, finally, how can he account for basic features of moral agency? It turns out that the last problem is the most serious one for his account.

There is a lot to think and talk about in Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s brilliant and original book. I would like to raise three questions here: whether there are constraints on admissible contrast classes (I), whether contrastivism can accommodate a certain indeterminacy of relevant reference classes (II), and how contrastivism can account for

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moral agency (III). I take it to be an open question whether contrastivism à la Sinnott-Armstrong can offer a satisfying response to these questions.

I. CRAZY CONTRAST CLASSES

There are many different contrast classes. But it seems that only some of them ever matter. Take non-moral cases first. Do I know that I am tasting vanilla ice cream right now? Only if I can rule out that it is strawberry or chocolate ice cream. In normal situations at real ice cream parlours I don’t have to rule out that it is really fish cleverly “disguised” as vanilla ice cream. Things might be different, however, if I am a food inspector for the City Council checking on some fishy “ice cream vendors” close to the harbour.

What do views like contextualism\(^3\) or subject-sensitive invariantism\(^4\) (SSI) tell us about such cases? Contextualism can be very roughly characterized as the thesis that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions can vary with circumstances (practical interests, conversational factors, etc.) of the attributor. Subject-sensitive invariantism can be very roughly characterized as the thesis that there is no such variation with the context of the attributor but rather with the circumstances (practical interests, conversational factors, etc.) of the subject of the attribution. Both contextualists and SSI-ists can agree that our (the subject’s or the attributor’s) practical purposes

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determine (at least partly) which contrast class is relevant in the circumstances (more on relevance later). Sinnott-Armstrong, however, does not like this talk of practical purposes determining relevance.\textsuperscript{5}

It is interesting that some contrast classes simply seem weird: Do I know that it is vanilla ice cream if I can only (because of weird taste buds or a lack of sensitivity to ice cream flavours) distinguish it from fish fingers but not, say, from strawberry ice cream? In that case it rather seems correct to say that I know that it is ice cream (or something sweet) rather than fish fingers. It seems incorrect to say more, namely that I know it is vanilla ice cream rather than fish fingers. Given that I cannot distinguish vanilla from strawberry, the contrast class (\{it is vanilla ice cream; it is fish fingers\}) seems inadmissible or besides the point. We do not seem to be able to think of practical interests (or anything else) which would determine this particular contrast class. Since our practical interests are usually not wild ones, we usually only pick certain contrast classes out of the class of all contrast classes.

Let us now look at moral cases. There are weird or crazy moral contrast classes, too. But there is, as it will turn out, also an interesting asymmetry with non-moral cases. Suppose I am travelling through the Gobi desert with my truck. In the midst of the desert, I run into a guy who is about to die of thirst. I have got three kinds of liquid on the back of my truck which I could offer him. I could

1. offer him some of my 500 bottles of sparkling water, or

2. some of my 100 litres of gasoline (not good for your stomach but also not lethal in small doses, let us assume), or

3. some of my 10 litres of liquid insecticide (lethal for humans).

Am I justified in believing it is morally acceptable to offer him some gasoline as a drink? Rather than the lethal insecticide? Is it acceptable to restrict the contrast class just to options 2 and 3? Clearly not. That would be a crazy contrast class. I have to include the option of offering him some of my sparkling water.

What determines the craziness or adequacy of a moral contrast class? Certainly not (simply) practical purposes like in (at least some) non-moral cases: not even the practical purposes of the thirsty guy. His practical purposes may determine which contrast class is relevant when it comes to prudential judgments. However, moral judgments are different: They are certainly less “pragmatic” and more “absolute”. There is a moral value at stake here: the value of the survival of the thirsty guy. This value "forces" us to include certain options in our contrast class, like the option of offering him sparkling water. It is not clear whether moral contrastivism can accommodate this idea. In both moral and non-moral cases the class of admissible contrast classes is thus restricted: In non-moral cases by pragmatic purposes (and perhaps some other factors) and in moral cases by moral values. All this adds a further dimension to Sinnott-Armstrong’s contrastivism.

One might wonder whether contrastivism applies to that dimension of constraints, too. There could be contrast classes of constraints for contrast classes. That
someone is justified in believing a particular constraint to be the appropriate one would have to be understood in the following way: The subject is justified out of a given contrast class of constraints for contrast classes to believe that a particular constraint is the appropriate one. Apart from first-order contrast classes which do not have constraints for contrast classes amongst their members we would also have to deal with second-order contrast classes which do have constraints for first-order contrast classes amongst their members. More generally, contrast classes of the n+1th (for n>0) order would have constraints for contrast classes of the nth order amongst their members. Tempting as it might seem to discuss the intricacies of higher-order constraints, I won’t go into that here.

To come back to the main point here: The introduction of values won’t make the contrastivism Sinnott-Armstrong is talking about go away. There can be more than one value at stake and all those values might conflict with each other; contrastivism may offer insights in such cases. We might be justified in going with one value – out of a particular contrast class of conflicting values. Apart from that and more importantly: Even given one and only one value that is at stake, there is still variation between contrast classes. Is my belief that I ought to give the guy some sparkling water justified even if I cannot rule out moral nihilism or some wild hypothesis according to which it is really better all things considered if I let lonely travellers in the desert die (I trust that some utilitarian could come up with examples here)? Sinnott-Armstrong’s difference between more and less modest or extreme contrast classes comes in handy here. But it
would be interesting to see what he thinks about the idea of constraints on admissible contrast classes.\(^6\)

II. A TROUBLING INDETERMINACY

Sinnott-Armstrong holds\(^7\) that we should be Pyrrhonian (meta-) sceptics about relevance: There are or might be facts of the matter about relevance but we cannot figure them out. It is, by the way, not quite clear what exactly Sinnott-Armstrong's position is here. He says: "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."\(^8\) On a weaker reading, Sinnott-Armstrong is not committed to the thesis that there are facts about relevance. On a stronger reading, he is and would (probably) accept the existence of facts about relevance. The weaker reading suggests the combination of Pyrrhonian scepticism concerning criteria of relevance with Pyrrhonian scepticism about the very idea of there being objective facts about relevance. The stronger reading suggests a non-sceptical position with respect to the latter idea, combined with Pyrrhonian scepticism concerning the first idea. We can leave it open here which reading is the one to go by. More important is something else.

I have suggested above that there are certain constraints on relevant contrast classes (even though they will not be sufficient for determining one unique contrast

\(^6\) See also G. Hough, Reply to Sinnott-Armstrong, *Philosophical Quarterly*, this issue, at sec. 3 on this.


class in a given situation). I can leave it open here whether these constraints are determined by “objective”, mind-independent facts or not. There is another dimension of our subject matter – not dealt with by Sinnott-Armstrong - with respect to which there is a troubling indeterminacy of relevance. With respect to at least some cases, I will argue, we cannot identify matters of facts (fully) determining relevance in that sense. Hence, with respect at least to this second dimension, we should either be (Pyrrhonian) sceptics about relevance or even deny that there are any "objective", mind-independent facts which fully determine relevance. If I am right, this will have serious implications not captured by Sinnott-Armstrong’s account.

The indeterminacy I have in mind has to do with a different type of variation of the truth conditions of moral judgments and attributions of justification and knowledge. Let me explain by using examples.\footnote{See also the interesting series of examples J. Greco, 'Virtue, Luck and the Pyrrhonian Problematic', Philosophical Studies, forthcoming presents in a different context.} Consider the following case:

(I) A is driving in his car at 20 mph on deserted Z-street. Suddenly a kid appears out of the blue and runs onto the street. A cannot avoid to hit and kill the child.

Something terrible has happened. But did A act in a morally reprehensible way? A was not drunk and was, let us assume, driving even more carefully than one should normally expect under these circumstances. Only very rarely does somebody, especially a kid, get to deserted Z-street. There is a sense in which A suffers from bad luck: It was only by
chance that his behaviour lead to disastrous consequences. It is a moot point if this has a moral side, too, but if it has, then one would have to see it as a form of moral bad luck.

Now consider the following case:

(II) A is driving in his car at 20 mph in the densely populated X-neighbourhood. Suddenly a kid appears out of the blue and runs onto the street. A cannot avoid to hit and kill the child.

Again, something terrible has happened. A was not drunk. However, it is obvious that there are many kindergartens and schools in this neighbourhood, including warning signs. There is a high chance in this neighbourhood that kids suddenly run onto the street. A knows all this. We want to say something like the following: He should have driven more carefully. A has made a moral mistake and everyone would criticize him morally. A cannot claim to suffer from bad luck, especially moral bad luck. Case (2) is a case of morally bad behaviour whereas (1) isn’t and just involves bad luck (perhaps even moral bad luck).

The question I want to raise is a very simple one: What if case I = case II? What if Z-street is located in the X-neighbourhood? According to what I have said so far, the agent seems to both deserve and not deserve blame. But this is a contraction. What is the way out of this problem?

I cannot go into the details here but here is a very short and sketchy answer. Judgments about moral responsibility like the ones just mentioned can apparently (in
some cases) be relative to underlying (spatial, etc.) reference classes (street vs. neighbourhood, for instance). Given the long history of failed attempts to solve the reference class problem in probability theory\textsuperscript{10} and to show what determines the relevant reference class, we have good reasons to assume either that all this is beyond our cognitive reach or that there simply is no such thing as the one relevant reference class. In both cases, we should accept the conclusion that some of our moral judgments have to be relativized to “pickings” of reference classes. It is us who pick reference classes. This need not be arbitrary but will usually reflect practical interests, values, beliefs, etc. Some of our moral judgments seem to reflect particular perspectives which are defined by such attitudes and lead to the selection of particular reference classes. Hence, I'd propose to add a second aspect of relativization: not just to contrast classes but also to different kinds of reference classes in the sense explained above. This obviously has serious implications for our conception of moral judgment and its objectivity even if this indeterminacy is restricted to certain cases and certain kinds of reference classes. The question whether an agent like A deserves or does not deserve blame for his action does not always seem to allow for just one answer. It all depends on the reference class. Given one reference class, our driver in the example above is to blame, according to another reference class he isn't. Given the reference class chosen by the prosecution in court, he might be to blame; given the reference class chosen by the defence in court, he might not be to blame. The implications of all this go far beyond Sinnott-Armstrong’s account. All this also makes, I think, a certain version of

\textsuperscript{10} See, e.g., A. Hájek, 'The Reference Class Problem is Your Problem, too', \textit{Synthese}, forthcoming.
contextualism plausible. Neither can I go into the details here nor can I discuss Sinnott-Armstrong’s objections against contextualism.\textsuperscript{11} However, I wonder what Sinnott-Armstrong thinks about the problem mentioned above, and what he would suggest as a way out in case he agrees that there really is a problem.

\textbf{III. DILEMMA AND PARALYSIS?}

As it turns out, the argument in section I suggests a reduction of indeterminacy with respect to acceptable contrast classes whereas section II suggests an expansion of indeterminacy with respect to relevant reference classes. There is no tension here because these are two independent dimensions of evaluation of moral statements. Apart from that, the first one concerns the justification of moral beliefs, the second one their semantics (especially their truth conditions). There is a third problem with moral contrastivism I would like to raise. Can we live with contrastivism about moral justification? What when it comes to action? Can moral contrastivism account for that?

Suppose Ann is returning from her moral philosophy class. She runs into a pedestrian who just collapsed on the street and is in serious need of help. Ann is the only person around who could help. She reasons like this (leaving aside the details of her reasoning):

\begin{quote}
(A-1) This person badly needs my help and I could help her with little effort
\end{quote}

Whenever someone badly needs my help and I could help with little effort, then I ought to help that person.

Hence, I ought to help that person.

Now, Ann's philosophy class just discussed moral nihilism. Ann knows that she cannot rule out nihilism. It is "unclear" to her whether there are any moral obligations in the sense that she decides to suspend judgment on the question whether there are any such obligations. She therefore also reasons like this (again, leaving the details aside):

This person badly needs my help and I could help her with little effort.

Even if someone badly needs my help and I could help with little effort, it is still unclear whether I have any obligation to help; if that is unclear and if there is an (admittedly small) cost to helping, then I should, all things considered, not help.

Hence, I should not help that person.

Ann holds the following view here: If it is unclear whether one has an obligation to act one way or another, then one should go with one's own (perceived) self-interest. Which piece of practical reasoning, then, is the right one here, (A-1-3) or (B-1-3)? A contrastivist à la Sinnott-Armstrong cannot pick one of the two and give a decisive answer to this question. Ann is justified out of one contrast class in believing (A-2) but
she is also justified out of another contrast class in believing (B-2). Since moral contrastivism does not offer us reasons for preferences amongst contrast classes, the contrastivist is also lacking an all-things-considered answer to the question what Ann should do in that situation. Contrastivists can only give “relativized” answers: Relative to this or that particular contrast class, S ought to X. But the contrastivist cannot say anything of the form S ought to X (taken as not being elliptical for a proposition which is relativized to a contrast class).

This seems to be a huge problem for any moral theory which does not claim to be sceptical without any restriction (remember that Sinnott-Armstrong wants to be a moderate sceptic, not a radical sceptic). Either the contrastivist wants to be able to say, as contrastivist, that Ann ought to help that person. But then the contrastivist lacks the resources to defend that answer. Or the contrastivist does not want to be able to recommend helping behaviour to Ann. This would be in line with contrastivist theory but would certainly conflict with a strong intuition many people have: namely that Ann should help that person (and perhaps not even think about it much). This leads back to section 1 above about constraints on contrast classes: There are moral values which impose constraints on admissible contrast classes. Moral contrastivism seems caught in a dilemma: Either it is more sceptical in practical respects than it is supposed to be (second horn) or it does not have the resources to avoid the collapse into straightforward scepticism when it comes to action (first horn).
Here is a slightly different version of the same basic problem. Suppose the
doctor in Sinnott-Armstrong’s example\textsuperscript{12} wonders whether she should lie to a patient
about their condition. Suppose further the doctor is also a contrastivist à la Sinnott-
Armstrong. How could she then make a final decision and act? Wouldn’t contrastivist
relativism paralyze her?

Suppose she knows she is justified out of a modest contrast class in believing
that she should lie. But she also knows that she is not justified out of a more extreme
contrast class. Suppose she knows that she must make a decision and act. Which
"knowledge" should she take as the basis of action? Contrastivism cannot recommend
one over the other. Should she then toss a coin (heads for lying, tails for not lying)? But
that either results from non-commitment to any particular contrast class (a kind of
scepticism with respect to contrast classes), or it only reflects and expresses preference
for the extreme contrast class (otherwise she wouldn’t have to toss a coin and could just
go with the modest contrast class and lie to the patient). According to contrastivism, we
have no reason to go for coin tossing. Should the doctor then rather just go with the
modest contrast class and lie to the patient? Again, the problem is that contrastivism
tells us that we have no reason (not relativized to some contrast class) to do that rather
than something else. Should the doctor, perhaps, toss a coin in order to determine
whether she should toss a coin or just go with the modest contrast class (a kind of
“second-order tossing”: heads for tossing a coin (with heads for lying, tails for not
lying), tails for lying)? Even with a fair coin, chances would be biased (3:1) in favour of

\textsuperscript{12} See Sinnott-Armstrong, 'Moderate Classy Pyrrhonian Moral Scepticism', at p. 1.
lying. Even if that were compatible with contrastivism it would radically undermine moral agency. The agent would be in a Moore-paradoxical predicament: She could say something like

“\( \text{I am (not) going to lie but the decision to do so is completely arbitrary (determined by a toss of a coin, etc.).} \)"

This would lead to a debilitating alienation of the agent from his own actions. Certainly, Sinnott-Armstrong does not want that. But how can he avoid it? It won’t help to say that we should hope that moral agents are not usually aware of the truth of contrastivism. The problem is that the contrastivist does not seem to have the resources to say that this kind of ignorance is or can be (moral) bliss.

The root of both versions of our problem lies in the “absoluteness” moral action requires, - an absoluteness which is in tension with contrastivist relativization. The question is, more generally: How can contrastivists be moral agents and how can they account for moral agency?

IV. LEFT OUTS

One could also raise questions concerning closure of knowledge or justification under known entailment (or under justified belief in such entailment). I won’t go into that here; Jonathan Schaffer has something on offer for contrastivists.\(^{13}\) Another issue one might have in mind as a problem is cross context talk. H, with his more demanding

\(^{13}\) See J. Schaffer, 'Closure, Contrast, and Answer, Philosophical Studies, 133 (2007), pp. 233-255.
standards, denies that Mary has a justified moral belief that feeding the hungry is obligatory whereas L, with his more relaxed standards, asserts that Mary’s belief is justified. Both H and L might be right, given that they have different contrast classes in mind. Suppose H is a contrastivist who accepts that L is right to attribute a justified belief to Mary. How can he do that if he, H, holds that Mary doesn’t have a justified belief? Relativization to contrast classes will do the trick here but I won’t go into the details.\(^\text{14}\) I just mention these two problems in order to signal that the kinds of objections typically made against contextualism or SSI do not seem to work against contrastivism. It would be much more interesting to see what Sinnott-Armstrong thinks about the three problems discussed above.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) I would like to thank Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Gerry Hough for comments and discussion.


Greco, John forthcoming, Virtue, Luck and the Pyrrhonian Problematic.

Hough, Gerry 2006, Reply to Sinnott-Armstrong, Ms.


Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter 2006b, Moderate Classy Pyrrhonian Moral Scepticism, Ms.