

# Skeptical Hypotheses and Moral Skepticism

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**Abstract:** Epistemic moral skeptics maintain that we do not have moral knowledge. Traditionally they have not modeled their arguments on the kind of skeptical hypotheses we find among perceptual skeptics about the external world, such as Descartes' deceiving demon. But some believe this can be done by appealing to hypotheses like moral nihilism, which deny the existence of moral facts. While some, such as Nagel, have only gestured at the idea, Sinnott-Armstrong has provided a detailed defense of moral skepticism based on a skeptical hypothesis argument. Moreover, he believes skeptical hypotheses have special force in the moral case. But I argue that skeptics have failed to specify an adequate skeptical scenario, which reveals a general lesson: skeptical hypothesis arguments are not a promising avenue for moral skeptics to take. Not only are they no more powerful for morality than perception, they're weaker.

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## 1. Introduction

Perceptual skeptics argue that we do not know whether there is an external world of mind-independent objects. They typically invoke the possibility of scenarios in which one fails to have knowledge of an external world, such as Descartes' deceiving demon or the brain-in-a-vat scenario. But one could maintain a similar position about morality, yielding a form of *epistemic moral skepticism*—the view that no one has any moral knowledge. Such moral skeptics claim, for example, that no one knows whether abortion in the third trimester is immoral. But likewise they argue that no one knows whether it's morally permissible.

There are several ways to deny moral knowledge, and so there are several forms of epistemic moral skepticism. Since, on standard accounts, knowledge of some proposition  $p$  requires at least justified, true belief that  $p$ , one can deny moral knowledge by claiming that one or more of these necessary conditions systematically fails to be satisfied with respect to moral beliefs. Strict *non-cognitivists*, for example, deny that moral judgments are truth-apt. So they count as moral skeptics in virtue of denying the existence of moral beliefs; there are only expressions of emotion, or some other kind of non-cognitive state. Other skeptics about moral knowledge, however, admit moral beliefs but deny that there are substantive moral truths. *Moral nihilism* of various sorts, for example, denies the existence of moral facts—i.e. true moral propositions (e.g. Joyce 2001).<sup>1</sup> These two forms of skepticism, however, rest primarily on metaphysical claims. A distinctively epistemic version holds that our substantive moral beliefs are simply not justified or lack warrant (e.g. Miller 1985; Joyce 2006, ch. 6). On this taxonomy, all of these views are either a form of (epistemic) moral skepticism or entail it.<sup>2</sup>

Moral skepticism has traditionally been supported by directly arguing for a specific version, such as nihilism or non-cognitivism. But I shall focus on the more epistemic form of epistemic moral skepticism which denies us moral knowledge because we lack sufficient justification. Like perceptual skeptics, these moral skeptics might try to argue for their position via skeptical hypotheses, which can often appeal to

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<sup>1</sup> Of course moral nihilists will likely want to only deny the existence of certain moral facts, such as positive, atomic, or existentially quantified ones (Sinnott-Armstrong 2006, ch. 3.1). We can set aside such complications here.

<sup>2</sup> Many of the preceding views are simply labeled “moral skepticism.” I will often use the term “epistemic moral skepticism” to distinguish the general view that interests us here—i.e. the thesis that we lack moral knowledge. However, for convenience, I will often drop “epistemic” in what follows.

merely possible scenarios, avoiding more tendentious claims about the actual world. A *skeptical hypothesis argument* for moral skepticism attempts to show that we are not justified in believing any moral propositions (and thus to not know them) because our evidence doesn't rule out certain contrary hypotheses, such as the moral nihilist's hypothesis that there are no moral facts. Thomas Nagel (1971), for example, draws an analogy between perceptual skepticism and the kind of value-skepticism that goes with a sense of life's absurdity. In the perceptual case, Nagel says we ask "why we should believe the evidence of our senses at all" while in the practical domain we ask "not only why we should take aspirin, but why we should take trouble over our own comfort at all" (pp. 723-4). According to Nagel, the "philosophical judgment of absurdity"—a kind of skepticism about life's significance—is supported by "contrasting the pretensions of life with a larger context in which *no* standards can be discovered" (p. 722). And Nagel concludes that, just as in the perceptual case, we cannot fully escape this skepticism. Similarly, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2006) recently argues that moral skepticism in particular lingers in part because there is "no way to rule out moral nihilism" (p. 79).

What are the prospects of vindicating moral skepticism in the way that perceptual skeptics traditionally do? I shall argue that they are rather dim by focusing primarily on Sinnott-Armstrong's recent attempt to do so. On any of various characterizations or extensions of such arguments, they fail to specify an adequate skeptical scenario. Moreover, this general problem with skeptical hypothesis arguments in the moral domain reveals that, not only are they no more powerful for morality than perception, they're weaker. We are thus led to a general lesson: skeptical hypothesis arguments are not a promising avenue for moral skeptics to take.

## 2. An Initial Skeptical Argument

Sinnott-Armstrong has done the most to develop a skeptical hypothesis argument for moral skepticism analogous to the argument for perceptual skepticism, with its origin primarily in Descartes. The Cartesian deceiving demon hypothesis is intended to show that it's possible we're being deceived into thinking there is an external world when there is none. Sinnott-Armstrong claims that a similar type of hypothesis applies to the moral case, causing the same problems: "Almost everyone believes that it is morally wrong to torture babies just for fun, but we might be deceived in our beliefs that babies feel pain or that they have moral rights" (2006, p. 78).<sup>3</sup>

Of course, believing in the sentience of babies may not be morally fundamental or in some sense *core*. Perhaps it is more of an empirical belief, which combines with decidedly moral beliefs (e.g. about the relevance of pain) to render a moral judgment about the torture of babies. In that case, it doesn't pose a challenge for morality proper. Compare the analog in the perceptual case: Suppose almost everyone believes that Kima's jacket is green because Omar told us that Kima's jacket is the same color as this patch of grass, which we see is green. But Omar could have deceived us. While a testimonial belief may combine with a decidedly perceptual belief, we haven't generated a skeptical problem for perception by pointing to the possibility of faulty testimony. Sinnott-Armstrong's reference to beliefs about rights is perhaps more apt for the moral case, since they are more like the kinds of beliefs relevant to the contention

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<sup>3</sup> Unless stated otherwise, all page references to Sinnott-Armstrong are from his book (2006).

that: as with perception, our *core* moral beliefs could be illusory. If this is true, we have a skeptical challenge for moral belief.

However, Sinnott-Armstrong worries that one might object that demon hypotheses are too outlandish to warrant anyone's consideration. So he formulates the argument in terms of "the skeptical hypothesis of moral nihilism" (p. 74). In fact, he thinks this makes the skeptical hypothesis argument for moral skepticism even more powerful than the analog argument against perceptual knowledge. Moral nihilism after all has more proponents and it leaves less unexplained, unlike the brain-in-a-vat or deceiving demon scenarios (2006, p. 124, n. 6; cf. 2008, pp. 227-8). Thus, he says that "skeptical arguments have special force within morality" (p. 74), which we can label the *Special Force Claim*.

Following the standard "closure argument" for perceptual skepticism that has become so popular, Sinnott-Armstrong's initial argument involving moral nihilism is as follows (pp. 79-80, my emphasis):

#### Initial Skeptical Hypothesis Argument for Moral Skepticism

1. I am not justified in believing that **moral nihilism** is false.
2. I am justified in believing that (*p*) 'It is morally wrong to **torture** babies just for fun' entails (*q*) '**moral nihilism** is false.'
3. If I am justified in believing that *p*, and I am justified in believing that *p* entails *q*, then I am justified in believing that *q*.
4. Therefore, I am not justified in believing that (*p*) it is morally wrong to **torture** babies just for fun.

There are several things to note about this argument. First, as Sinnott-Armstrong points out, the argument is meant to generalize to all moral beliefs; there is nothing special about this particular moral belief about torture (p. 80). Second, the argument is

formulated in terms of justification, but it is supposed to apply to knowledge as well (p. 80, fn. 26). Third, the final premise is an instance of a *principle of closure*. Such principles are notoriously difficult to formulate in ways that make them immune to counter-example. But the reader can substitute whichever version seems most plausible. Fourth, according to Sinnott-Armstrong, this is all based on a “common standard for justified belief” (p. 78) according to which “I am not justified in believing something if there is any contrary hypothesis that I cannot rule out” (p. 77). A similar idea can be found in Nagel: “all our decisions and certainties [which assume life is significant] are possible only because there is a great deal we do not bother to rule out” (1971, p.723).<sup>4</sup>

Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument is complicated by his contrastive theory of justification. *Contrastivists* maintain that all of our beliefs are justified relative to some contrast class: we are not justified in believing that *p* (e.g. Allison is holding a pen); we are justified in believing that *p* out of contrast class *C* (e.g. Allison is holding a pen rather than a cat or a harpoon gun). So moral beliefs are always justified at least implicitly as compared to some contrast class (e.g. I know it’s immoral to kick babies for fun, rather than footballs).<sup>5</sup> This leads Sinnott-Armstrong to argue for only a *moderate* moral skepticism: we only lack justification for believing moral claims that are relative to their “extreme contrast class”—i.e. the class that includes extreme hypotheses, like moral nihilism, as a member. Sinnott-Armstrong does believe we can

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<sup>4</sup> Neither Nagel nor Sinnott-Armstrong explicitly define “ruling out.” Sinnott-Armstrong only provides various examples of the phenomenon (see esp. 2006, ch. 5). Although, in a response to critics, he writes: “To rule out a member of a contrast class, believers need a conflicting ground that does not beg the question” (2008, p. 194).

<sup>5</sup> While similar to contextualism, contrastivism is importantly different (see Schaffer 2004). Moreover, Sinnott-Armstrong does not necessarily support his theory by appeal to the famed “bank cases” (see May, Sinnott-Armstrong, Hull, & Zimmerman 2010). In fact, he says: “I happily admit that my [contrastivist] account is not embedded in common usage” (2008b, p. 484).

make sense of claims about someone's justified belief full stop or "without qualification" (2006, ch. 5). But he thinks such claims implicitly assume some contrast class is relevant. As a *Pyrrhonian* skeptic about *relevance*, Sinnott-Armstrong doesn't take a stand on that issue. Instead, he requires that one specify the contrast class one has in mind when making claims about justification. Returning to the Initial Argument, then, Sinnott-Armstrong in effect believes it is sound only if it makes explicit the relevant contrast classes. In particular, the conclusion must be relative to the extreme contrast class, yielding (roughly): I'm not justified in believing that it's morally wrong to torture babies just for fun *rather than* moral nihilism is true.

At any rate, Sinnott-Armstrong's argument is intended to be analogous to the familiar brain-in-a-vat (BIV) scenario that underwrites a key argument for perceptual skepticism:<sup>6</sup>

#### Closure Argument for Perceptual Skepticism

1. I'm not justified in believing that: I'm not a **BIV**.
2. I'm justified in believing that: I have **hands** entails I'm not a **BIV**.
3. If I'm justified in believing that  $p$  and that  $p$  entails  $q$ , then I'm justified in believing that  $q$ .
4. So: I'm not justified in believing that I have **hands**.

Of course, like the skeptical hypothesis argument for moral skepticism, this argument is supposed to generalize to all propositions about mind-independent physical objects. If I'm not justified in believing that I have hands because I'm not justified in believing I'm not a BIV, then I am likewise not justified in believing there are any other mind-independent physical objects.

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<sup>6</sup> I assume familiarity with the details of the BIV scenario. For a helpful discussion of the "closure" structure of the skeptical hypothesis argument, though in terms of knowledge, see Anthony Brueckner (1994).

Following Sinnott-Armstrong, I will bypass discussion of attempts to rebut such skeptical hypothesis arguments by denying either the second premise or the third premise (the closure principle). In both of the above arguments, the crucial premise is the first one, namely, that I don't know that I'm not in the skeptical scenario. This claim relies on an argument involving the details of the skeptical scenario and specifically how one's evidence is not sufficient to show that the skeptical scenario is less likely to be true than the ordinary scenario with an external world. So the subsequent discussion will focus on support for the first premise.

Notice, however, that there is a crucial disanalogy between Sinnott-Armstrong's Initial Argument and the Closure Argument for perceptual skepticism. While the brain-in-a-vat and evil demon scenarios are genuine skeptical scenarios, moral nihilism alone isn't.<sup>7</sup> Moral nihilism is just the metaphysical view that there are no moral facts. The analog of moral nihilism in the debate about perceptual skepticism is something like *idealism*, which let's just stipulate is the view that there are no mind-independent objects. Of course, idealists might not put it this way. They would likely maintain that we *do* have hands but that they are simply ideas or mind-*dependent* objects. After all, even Berkeley thought he was defending common sense (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, p. 224). In any event, we simply need a view to play the relevant role, and idealism as normally understood is at least close enough to co-opt for our purposes. We need only assume that "hands" as it occurs in the skeptical arguments is meant to refer to

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<sup>7</sup> I owe special thanks to Aaron Zimmerman for first making this general worry salient to me. Zimmerman (2010) addresses Sinnott-Armstrong primarily on fronts other than the skeptical hypothesis argument, such as the regress argument and Harman-style arguments against abductive moral knowledge (see chapters 4 and 6, respectively). However, he does mention (in ch. 5) the idea that distinctively epistemic arguments for moral skepticism based on skeptical scenarios must describe said scenarios in sufficient detail in order to have any force (see esp. p. 122). James Beebe (2010, sect. 1) also makes this general point about skeptical hypotheses.

essentially *mind-independent* objects. In other words, idealism in our perhaps technical sense is one way to render false our ordinary beliefs about hands and other parts of the external world.

Comparing nihilism to idealism, the perceptual analog to Sinnott-Armstrong's argument for moral skepticism is really this:

Odd Argument for Perceptual Skepticism

1. I'm not justified in believing that **idealism** is false.
2. I'm justified in believing that: I have **hands** entails **idealism** is false.
3. If I'm justified in believing that  $p$  and that  $p$  entails  $q$ , then I'm justified in believing that  $q$ .
4. So: I'm not justified in believing that: I have **hands**.

Once generalized, this form of argument entails we're not justified in believing *perceptual realism*—that there is an external world of mind-independent objects. Yet this is already guaranteed by the first premise. The rest of the argument is simply drawing out particular consequences of lacking justification for rejecting idealism. This is not a skeptical hypothesis argument. The traditional brain-in-a-vat and deceiving demon are attempts to spell out the details of a *skeptical scenario* in which one's relevant beliefs are false while one's evidence for them remains fixed. In addition to moral nihilism, Sinnott-Armstrong also says that other "extreme hypotheses" can work just as well. He mentions ethical *egoism* and moral *relativism* (p. 79, n. 22). But these suffer from the same problems. While they may be in some sense skeptical *hypotheses*,

they alone are not skeptical *scenarios*, since they don't specify how our evidence fails to rule out these hypotheses.<sup>8</sup>

The details of such a skeptical scenario must involve what we might call an “evidence-truth gap” between the relevant epistemology and metaphysics (cf. Audi 1997, p. 67; Bergmann ms). The famed brain-in-a-vat scenario, for example, is meant to show that one's evidence about the external world would be the same even if one were a handless brain in a vat. It is not meant to show that idealism is true or that we're not justified in believing it's false. The point of the scenario is merely to substantiate the first premise of the main skeptical hypothesis argument: that I'm not justified in believing that I'm not in the skeptical scenario. More precisely, a skeptical scenario must establish, among other things, the following:

*Equal Evidence Claim*

The evidence for one's ordinary belief that  $p$  (e.g. I have hands) does not provide better evidence for  $p$  than for skeptical hypothesis  $q$  (e.g. I'm a handless BIV).<sup>9</sup>

Such a thesis is closely related to the idea, as Sinnott-Armstrong puts it himself, that: “When both of two hypotheses would predict an observation, that observation cannot be used as evidence for one as opposed to the other. This standard is accepted even outside morality” (pp. 191-2). The idea in the perceptual case is that I'm not justified in

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover, egoism and relativism can serve the same role as nihilism only if moral judgments can never be true if ultimately self-interested or subjective. This requires some argument.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Richard Feldman (2002, p. 142). This is also similar to Beebe's (2010) account of one criterion for skeptical hypotheses, though he focuses on “subjective indistinguishability” (p. 466). My use of “evidence” and similar terms isn't meant to presuppose evidentialism or anything like it. Perhaps some moral beliefs are basic and thus don't require anything like positive evidence or justification. Perhaps we simply have a default entitlement to them. If so, read “evidence” as including broader notions like warrant or entitlement.

believing there is anything out there beyond my experiences because my evidence (perceptual experience) does not “rule out” the skeptical hypothesis that I am a brain in a vat. After all, everyday perceptual illusions show that perceptual experiences are compatible with both: (a) things are the way they seem (e.g. I have hands), and (b) things aren’t the way they seem (e.g. I’m a handless BIV). Consider the famous hollow-mask illusion in which a concave mask appears to us as convex, just as a normal face is. Such illusions seem to show that perceptual experiences are in some sense compatible with the world being the way they represent it and with the world being some other way.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of perception, the skeptic and her opponent are assumed to have a fairly similar view about the epistemology and metaphysics of external objects. And this common ground allegedly leads to a perceptual version of the Equal Evidence Claim. The epistemology is supposed to be (roughly) one according to which one’s perceptual beliefs are based on perceptual experiences, which provide a mental representation of the objects. And the metaphysics is supposed to be (roughly) one according to which objects in an external world are mind- or observer-independent. In other words, there must be a gap between one’s evidence and the purported facts in order for the skeptical challenge to get off the ground at all. That is why certain views about perception diffuse the challenge, although at the expense of denying what seems to be the intuitive metaphysics and epistemology of perception. Phenomenalists, in

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<sup>10</sup> The traditional BIV scenario involves *hallucination* rather than illusion. But some theorists believe hallucinations aren’t perceptual experiences (they’re less like representations and more like mere sensations). If such theorists are right, then a scenario involving hallucination might not involve the same evidence as when we are normally perceiving objects (whereas veridical perception and illusion presumably would). If so, then the moral skeptic’s scenario should be amended just as the BIV scenario should so that they involve illusion rather than hallucination. For simplicity, I’ll simply suppose such a modification has been made and speak of the BIV experiencing an illusion.

claiming that physical objects are nothing but constructions out of phenomenological experiences, close the gap between the epistemology and the metaphysics by modifying the traditional account of the metaphysics to fit directly with the assumed account of the epistemology. Direct realists about perception, in claiming that we are directly acquainted with physical objects of the external world, make the opposite move: they close the gap by modifying the assumed account of the epistemology to fit directly with the traditional account of the metaphysics.

The Initial Argument under consideration fails because it doesn't grapple with anything like the Equal Evidence Claim. While it is surely not Sinnott-Armstrong's considered formulation, the other ways to interpret the proposal likewise suffer from one or more substantial problems. I address these in turn.

### **3. Moral Nihilism and Debunking**

Perhaps we should not focus on moral nihilism alone, since it is often accompanied by a *debunking explanation* of how we form our moral beliefs. Nihilists, after all, do often provide a story about how our moral beliefs are acquired in an unjustified way—e.g. by relying on psychological traits we've acquired through the presumably non-truth-tracking process of evolution (cf. Joyce 2006). At one point, Sinnott-Armstrong does write: “Such moral beliefs appear obvious to almost everyone who is not a moral nihilist, but that appearance is just what would be predicted by the moral nihilist's hypothesis that all moral beliefs are *evolutionary or cultural illusions* (just as Descartes' hypothesis predicts our experiences)” (p. 191, my emphasis).

This leaves many questions unanswered. What exactly is the moral nihilist's hypothesis that our moral beliefs are evolutionary or cultural illusions? What is the evidence for our moral beliefs, and how does it fail to rule out these hypotheses? The answers are lacking because a debunking argument for moral nihilism yields an account of how our moral beliefs are unjustified without specifying a scenario that fits with the Equal Evidence Claim. This should be expected, since such arguments fall under the category of direct grounds for a different form of moral skepticism. In fact, the two are not so intimately connected. Richard Joyce (2001), for example, has provided an argument for moral nihilism that is independent of any debunking explanation. In short, he argues that moral beliefs presuppose the existence of special "external" reasons, but there aren't any. His later argument, however, is for the conclusion that our moral beliefs aren't *justified*, not that they are false—a point Joyce himself emphasizes. He argues only that "our moral beliefs are products of a process that is entirely independent of their truth, which forces the recognition that we have no grounds one way or the other for maintaining these beliefs" (2006, p. 211).<sup>11</sup> But this is not a skeptical hypothesis argument, like those based on the brain-in-a-vat scenario, because it doesn't satisfy the Equal Evidence Claim. It doesn't describe a scenario illustrating that the reasons for our moral beliefs fail to provide better evidence for their truth rather than the hypothesis that they are illusory (i.e. seem true but aren't).

Perhaps Sinnott-Armstrong could simply assert that such a debunking explanation is possible, not actual. But merely describing a possible debunking scenario for some moral beliefs doesn't necessarily establish the Equal Evidence Claim for morality.

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<sup>11</sup> Joyce still holds fast to his old view; he simply understands the arguments as separable (see 2006, n. 17, p. 244).

While the scenario may be merely possible, and needn't necessarily be plausible, it must illustrate something about our actual evidence—namely, that it underdetermines the skeptical versus the non-skeptical hypotheses. Without this further explanation, we're left with only the claim that *our* evidence *could* be faulty in the relevant way. Consider, for comparison, the belief many of us have that  $2+2=4$ , which we can hopefully claim without controversy isn't based on visual perception. But imagine a skeptic says to me: "You know, it's logically possible that your belief that  $2+2=4$  is based on visual perception, which is compatible with it being illusory (as illustrated by this BIV scenario...)." This doesn't pose a skeptical challenge at all since it doesn't connect with *my* evidence. It matters little to me that visual perception can be illusory when my mathematical belief is based on some different evidence. The basic problem is not particular to skeptical scenarios either. If I believe Professor Plum committed the murder solely based on DNA evidence, a skeptic can't show that this belief is unjustified by pointing to the fact that the eye witness's testimony is unreliable. The upshot is that, again, the skeptic must accurately specify the evidence we have for our beliefs of the relevant sort, and then describe a scenario in which this evidence is compatible with the falsity of those beliefs. So we need to know roughly what our justification is in order to construct a skeptical scenario that challenges it.

There admittedly isn't a very specific story about the scientist in the BIV scenario, so we might think we can do the same in the moral case. For example, perceptual skeptics don't (and needn't) say what chemicals are used to keep the brain alive, what color hair the scientist has, and so on. These details of course aren't relevant for the argument. Skeptics do, however, need to characterize what our evidence is and what it

supports—i.e. they must establish the relevant version of the Equal Evidence Claim. Suppose, for example, that a perceptual skeptic says only this: “It could be that your perceptual beliefs are illusory.” That may sound like a challenge worth taking seriously, but only because we have a rather clear idea about how it could be fleshed out. Without that, it doesn’t pose a skeptical challenge at all. Perceptual skeptics capitalize on the fact that perceptual beliefs seem justified by perceptual experiences, which can seem to be entirely compatible with things being as they appear or not. This derives from a fact about what seems clearly to be the justification or warrant for our perceptual beliefs. So a skeptical hypothesis argument must provide a scenario that appeals to what is plausibly our actual evidence for our moral beliefs and motivates the idea that this evidence underdetermines appearance versus reality. Given that it’s more difficult to determine what justifies our moral beliefs, and given that it is not obviously like perception, we need to say more than we normally would in the perceptual case in order to motivate the idea that our moral beliefs could be subject to a skeptical scenario.

A debunking explanation could satisfy the Equal Evidence Claim provided the evidence for our moral beliefs does systematically underdetermine appearance versus reality. Suppose, for example, that our core moral beliefs are based on intuitions relevantly similar to experiences. In perhaps much the same way we acquire justified perceptual beliefs, certain propositions may just seem intuitively obvious to us, and our belief is based on this “seeming” or experience. If these seemings are like perceptual experiences in that they are mental representations subject to systematic misrepresentation, then one may be able to generate a skeptical hypothesis with them. A moral skeptic might argue, for example, that we have the moral seemings we do

precisely because they were fitness-enhancing for our ancestors (in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness); yet natural selection doesn't track the moral truth, so they are unwarranted. Notice, however, that the work here is done by the claim about our moral evidence and how it satisfies the relevant Equal Evidence Claim. The genealogical story provides an *explanation* for how we came to acquire the beliefs, but it alone does not suffice to show that the *warrant* for our core moral beliefs depends on these seemings. So again the success of the argument depends on fleshing out the evidence we have for our moral beliefs, regardless of a debunking explanation of how we came to hold them. Focusing on such genealogical accounts is a red herring, as they provide defeaters for our moral beliefs that may or may not support the Equal Evidence Claim. So the skeptic might as well appeal to an evil demon—to which we'll turn in Section 5.

#### **4. Moral Nihilism and Theorists**

There is another way to interpret the moral skeptic's proposal, and one that makes a clear claim about what our evidence is. In defending his skeptical conclusion against moral intuitionists, Sinnott-Armstrong considers that they might claim certain moral propositions are just obvious, but:

...appeal to such a moral belief in an argument against moral nihilism clearly begs the question (in much the same way as it would beg the question to appeal to a belief about the external world in an argument against Descartes' deceiving demon hypothesis). (p. 191)

And Sinnott-Armstrong believes this problem afflicts any form of moral anti-skepticism, not just intuitionism:

[Moral nihilism] is constructed so as to leave no way to rule it out. Since moral nihilists question all of our beliefs that anything is morally wrong, and so on, they leave us with no moral starting points on which to base arguments against them without begging the question at issue. (p. 79)

But this again is disanalogous to skeptical hypothesis arguments for perceptual skepticism. Recall that the analog of moral nihilism is something more like idealism. Just as the opponent of the anti-skeptic about perception is not specifically the idealist, the opponent of the anti-skeptic about moral knowledge is not specifically the moral nihilist.

Moreover, even if we replace the idealist with the skeptic, anti-skeptics about any domain needn't *convince* the skeptic. As several commentators have pointed out in the perceptual case, the primary goal is to undermine the skeptic's *arguments*—to provide good reasons to reject them—not to convince the skeptic. We mustn't conflate dialectical and epistemic issues (cf. Feldman 2003, p. 121; Rescorla 2009). To take a simple example, suppose Fred believes the earth is flat, and we try to convince him otherwise. We might have the *dialectical* goal of convincing him that the planet is roughly spherical. And this might be underwritten by a concern to improve Fred—to get him to correct his belief. Or perhaps we might just want to alleviate the anger his ignorance gives rise to in us. But such dialectical goals are not primary in epistemology. Rather than attempting to convince particular people of certain theses, we examine arguments to see whether they are any good, which is a decidedly *epistemic* goal. Whether the topic is perception or morality, we look to evaluate the arguments; a focus on a dialogue or dialectic is misleading (cf. Rescorla, forthcoming).

Focusing on the dialectic between anti-skeptics and their opponents raises a more important disanalogy. Sinnott-Armstrong focuses on the justification of anti-skeptics,

but skeptical hypothesis arguments are meant to pose a problem for us all, not just ethical *theorists*. Perceptual skeptics do not argue that philosophers lack sufficiently compelling arguments against idealism, or even perceptual skepticism. Instead, they maintain that *ordinary* people's evidence (perceptual experience, not theoretical argument) doesn't provide more evidence for their ordinary perceptual beliefs (e.g. that they have hands) than for the skeptical hypothesis that they are handless brains in vats. The analog of this interpretation of Sinnott-Armstrong's argument is this: anti-skeptics about the external world do not have good enough theoretical arguments for the falsity of perceptual skepticism because all the arguments beg the question. A skeptical hypothesis argument for moral skepticism should appeal instead to the ordinary evidence we have for our ordinary moral beliefs.

## 5. Retreating to Demons

Perhaps we can simply drop moral nihilism as a skeptical hypothesis and rely on the evil demon who deceives us about our moral beliefs. This maneuver has several costs, though. First, it immediately undermines the Special Force Claim—that moral beliefs are especially susceptible to skeptical hypothesis arguments. Unlike moral nihilism, intelligent people do not argue for the existence of such a demon or anything like it. So we are immediately down to skeptical hypothesis arguments for moral skepticism being *no better* than their perceptual analogs. This is not necessarily devastating, though, since one could concede it without losing skepticism about justified moral belief (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 2008a, §2.1). Nevertheless, our moral beliefs are on much better

ground if they are merely subject to the kind of scenarios skeptics raised against our perceptual beliefs.

In any event, the second issue is that invoking scenarios involving demons or evil geniuses will more drastically undermine the Special Force Claim. It leads to the conclusion that constructing such skeptical scenarios is *more* difficult in the moral case, not merely *just as* difficult (or easy) as with perception. We can begin to see this by noting once again that the skeptical scenario has not yet been fully fleshed out. It must establish a version of the Equal Evidence Claim for the moral case. We need enough of an account of moral truths and our reasons for believing them to construct a scenario supporting the Claim. That is, our evidence for our moral beliefs must be plausibly compatible with their being illusory. We cannot simply assert that, whatever the right account of the evidence we have for our ordinary moral beliefs, there is a skeptical scenario that fits the Equal Evidence Claim.

We might worry, for example, that in the moral case a skeptical scenario can't easily get off the ground, because our justification for our core moral beliefs is *a priori*, or because the contents of those beliefs are necessarily true. While somewhat controversial, the existence of *a priori* justification and necessary moral truths is more plausible, or at least more often defended, in the case of morality than perception. Suppose one of our core moral beliefs is in something like the Principle of Utility: One should maximize aggregate happiness. Or consider a Kantian moral principle: always treat humanity as an end, never merely as a means. Many proponents of such principles have been comfortable deeming them necessary or *a priori*. While these are theoretical principles, something like the Golden Rule is a possible candidate as well for something

that might serve as a core moral belief of ordinary folks. In any event, as Sarah McGrath (2010) has recently put it, the consensus among philosophers seems to be that the warrant for our moral beliefs does not at least seem to paradigmatically involve experimentation or induction via observation. Thus, “moral knowledge seems to resemble mathematical knowledge more than it resembles the kind of knowledge that is delivered by the empirical sciences” (pp. 108-9).

Moreover, there is a rather intuitive way to motivate the idea that basic moral truths—whatever they may be—might be necessary. Consider the phenomenon of “imaginative resistance” recently popularized by Tamar Gendler (2000). When constructing a story, it is rather difficult (to say the least) for an author to get readers to imagine that women are inherently inferior to men, that causing pain is usually the right thing to do, that one’s own interests are always more important than others’, and so on. The problem seems importantly similar to trying to get readers to imagine that five is an even number. Yet we have no problem imagining that Neo is in the Matrix, in which his perceptual experiences are radically illusory. Why is this? Perhaps it is because true moral beliefs are necessarily true, or they are justified *a priori*. Both conjectures could explain the difficulties we have in imagining basic moral facts being otherwise. Yet if basic moral beliefs are, say, necessarily true (if true at all), it isn’t possible for there to be a scenario in which the beliefs are illusory—in which they seem true but aren’t.

Of course, it is difficult to determine whether the basic moral propositions we believe are good candidates for necessary truths, or even whether imaginative resistance can shed any light on this. Thankfully, we needn’t settle the issue here. It is at least clear that perceptual beliefs and the evidence on which they’re based are in some way

different from moral beliefs and moral evidence. This makes it all the more difficult to generate a skeptical argument for moral skepticism. In particular, even if moral truths are not necessarily true, our evidence for them may not lend support for the Equal Evidence Claim in the moral case. If certain foundationalists or “intuitionists” about morality are on the right track, then the evidence we have for some of our moral beliefs may provide more support for their contents than anything else. Like perceptual “dogmatists” (e.g. Pryor 2000), the moral dogmatist would emphatically deny that the warrant we have for our moral beliefs supports them no better than skeptical hypotheses, whatever they may be. Again, these are controversial issues, but the point is simply that moral skeptics must address them. Unlike perception, it is not so clear what our evidence is for our moral beliefs, and that spells trouble for the moral skeptic who wants to provide a skeptical hypothesis argument. Dogmatism about perception may at least seem to be the revisionary account with the burden of proof, but that status doesn’t clearly transfer over to the moral case.

Some of these differences between morality and perception may derive from the plausibly *a priori* nature of some moral justification. But this may be entirely irrelevant if, as some philosophers believe, skeptical scenarios can be constructed even for putatively *a priori* knowledge of necessary truths. James Beebe (2010; forthcoming) has recently argued for this explicitly. His central case is of a “bumbling evil demon” who tries to exploit the intellectual seemings that allegedly support our beliefs in “putatively *a priori* necessities,” such as  $2+3=5$  or basic truths of logic. The demon tries to give us the feeling of veridicality (so to speak) for affirming the consequent instead of modus ponens, but is unsuccessful. Beebe contends that one would lack knowledge of modus

ponens in such a case given that the belief, while accurate, arose in a faulty way. As Beebe notes, this scenario is similar to G. E. Moore's famous one involving the Duke of Devonshire, who dreamt he was in the House of Lords and woke up to find he was. While the belief he presumably had in the dream turned out to be true, its being based on a dream seems to preclude knowledge. Such scenarios can then apparently be used to yield an *a priori* skeptical argument (Beebe forthcoming):

*A Priori* Skeptical Argument

1. If I know that modus ponens is correct, then I know that my belief that modus ponens is correct is not based on faux intuitive experiences induced in me by a bumbling evil demon.
2. I don't know that my belief that modus ponens is correct is not based on faux intuitive experiences induced in me by a bumbling evil demon.
3. Therefore, I don't know that modus ponens is correct.

While modus ponens may be necessarily true, and our knowledge may be *a priori* if we have it, Beebe maintains that this does not prevent an *a priori* skeptic from generating the familiar skeptical hypothesis argument.

Even if Beebe is right that such arguments pose challenges for putative *a priori* knowledge, they cannot help our epistemic moral skeptic. First, like Sinnott-Armstrong, our moral skeptic is attempting to establish that we lack justification for our core moral beliefs. Yet Beebe's bumbling demon scenario, and the other cases like it, only pose problems for knowledge. As he admits "as far as *a priori* skepticism is concerned, you might even have a good deal of *a priori* justification for these beliefs" (p. 24). This is presumably because the argument exploits the widely held belief among epistemologists

that factors of luck erode knowledge. In fact, Beebe's bumbling demon scenario is a kind of Gettier case: the subject seems to lack knowledge only because there is an element of luck in her justified belief turning out to be true. Yet it is precisely part of the formula for such cases that the agent is justified. So the analog in the moral case will not threaten moral justification. In this way, Beebe's *a priori* skeptic is importantly different from the traditional *a posteriori* one. It is certainly an interesting epistemological challenge, but it does not provide a model for moral skeptics to take that will undermine moral knowledge by undermining justification, in the way traditional skeptical hypotheses do by attempting to establish a version of the Equal Evidence Claim.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Beebe's bumbling demon scenario relies on a somewhat controversial assumption about the nature of evidence in the *a priori* case—namely, that it consists in a kind of phenomenological seeming. This allows the bumbling demon to simply swap the feelings of veridicality around, just as the perceptual demon does. (One is reminded of the kind of indiscriminate swapping of which qualia are apparently capable.) But it is not clear whether mathematical, logical, and similar beliefs are based on such mental states. It could be, for example, that our basic mathematical beliefs are justified in a less experiential way, in which case the demon could not simply swap feelings. Just as in the moral case, it becomes clear that the epistemology and metaphysics is much more contested for the *a priori* than perception. As a result, leveling a skeptical hypothesis requires taking on controversial assumptions, which puts morality and other potentially *a priori* domains in a better position than perception in this respect.

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<sup>12</sup> Beebe also mentions as a model case Freud's explanation of religious belief as generated by mere wish-fulfillment. Such cases resemble the debunking explanations we encountered in §3, and thus those same worries apply here as well if the moral skeptic wishes to co-opt them.

Once again we encounter difficult issues that we cannot adequately address here. For our purposes, we need only see that simply asserting a demon can deceive us about our basic moral beliefs is more akin to claiming a demon can deceive us about basic mathematical beliefs. While this may be possible, it's not so clear it can be done (hence the novelty and interest of Beebe's claims about *a priori* skepticism). Thus, while a moral demon scenario can perhaps be constructed, it requires substantial argument and encounters difficulties that are not present in the perceptual case. And it puts serious pressure on the Special Force Claim, leaving skeptical hypothesis arguments *less* powerful for morality than the external world.

## 6. Conclusions

All of the various attempts to develop a moral analog to the skeptical hypothesis argument for perceptual skepticism are problematic. Crucial features of skeptical hypothesis arguments generally fail to be met in the moral case. First, we have seen that moral nihilism is not the main opponent of the moral anti-skeptic when addressing a skeptical hypothesis argument. The opponent is one who makes a claim about one's moral evidence failing to rule out a skeptical hypothesis (the Equal Evidence Claim). Even coupled with a debunking explanation, moral nihilism does not amount to a skeptical scenario. Second, while it *might* be true that as theorists we do not have non-question-begging arguments against moral nihilism, this alone does not undermine ordinary people's moral beliefs (or even perhaps a theorist's moral beliefs if they are based on the same evidence). Substantiating moral skepticism via skeptical hypothesis arguments employing moral nihilism is fraught with difficulties.

The most promising skeptical hypothesis argument appeals to something like a deceiving demon with special powers. Yet even this formulation incurs a host of problems when attempting to explicitly spell out a scenario in which the evidence for our moral beliefs is illusory. While one could perhaps develop a plausible moral demon scenario, it significantly undermines the Special Force Claim. Since intelligent people do not actually believe there is such a demon and offer arguments for its existence (as is the case with nihilism), such a skeptical hypothesis argument for moral skepticism is no more powerful than the same form of argument in the perceptual case. Moreover, it is more plausible that some core moral facts are necessarily true, and accordingly less clear that the warrant for our core moral beliefs resembles that of perceptual beliefs. Given this, skeptical hypothesis arguments have *less* force in the moral domain. Our moral beliefs are thus on safer ground.<sup>13</sup>

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