Walter Sinnott-Armstrong has developed and progressively refined an argument against moral intuitionism—the view on which some moral beliefs enjoy non-inferential justification. He has stated his argument in a few different forms, but the basic idea is straightforward. To start with, Sinnott-Armstrong highlights facts relevant to the truth of moral beliefs: such beliefs are sometimes biased, influenced by various irrelevant factors, and often subject to disagreement. Given these facts, Sinnott-Armstrong infers that many moral beliefs are false. What then shall we think of our own moral beliefs? Either we have reason to think some of our moral beliefs are reliably formed or we have no such reason. If the latter, our moral beliefs are unjustified. If we have reason to think some moral beliefs are reliably formed, then those beliefs are not non-inferentially justified, because then we’ll have reason to accept something—namely, that they are reliably formed—that entails or supports those beliefs. But then, either way, our moral beliefs are not non-inferentially justified, and so moral intuitionism is false.

This paper takes issue with Sinnott-Armstrong’s interesting and widely discussed argument, which we here call the Empirical Defeat Argument (EDA). According to us, the EDA does not defeat moral intuitionism. In section 1, we will set out the argument, briefly reviewing the rationale Sinnott-Armstrong offers for the premises. Then, in section 2, we identify a critical but dubious epistemological assumption concerning the nature of defeat that undergirds the argument. Finally, in section 3, we will defend our challenge to the EDA by answering two objections.

1. The Empirical Defeat Argument

Sinnott-Armstrong’s target is an ecumenical version of moral intuitionism. Something like this view has been espoused by moral theorists from W. D. Ross and H. A. Prichard to Robert Audi and Michael Huemer. “Moral intuitionism,” says Sinnott-Armstrong, “is the claim that some people are adequately epistemically justified in holding some moral beliefs independently of whether those people are able to infer those moral beliefs from any other beliefs” (2006a, p. 341; cf. 2008a, p. 48, and 2012, p. 13). The theorists just noted, among many others, are intuitionists in that broad sense.

Intuitionism has been challenged on different fronts by its opponents. What is innovative about Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument against intuitionism is that it’s partly driven by empirical claims. He contends that “some recent research in psychology and brain science undermines moral intuitionism” (2006a, p. 340).

How is that supposed to work? We’ll present the EDA as proceeding in two steps. First of all, Sinnott-Armstrong directs his readers...
toward several types of alleged facts about moral beliefs and the epistemic consequences of those facts for moral beliefs:

**Partiality:** “Because people’s moral beliefs affect their self-interest so often in so many ways at least indirectly, and because people are so bad at telling when their own beliefs are partial, there is a presumption that moral beliefs are partial” (2006b, p. 197). Self-interest, of course, is not correlated with moral truth.

**Bias:** Psychologists have identified various cognitive illusions and framing effects that influence moral belief. “Moral beliefs that vary in response to factors that do not affect truth—such as wording and belief context—cannot reliably track the truth” (2008a, p. 54).

**Emotions:** Research from psychology suggests moral judgment is often affect-laden or driven by the brain’s emotion centers. “[M]any moral judgments result from emotions that cloud judgment” (2006a, p. 352).

**Disagreement:** There is considerable disagreement about morality. “[I]f we know that many moral intuitions are unreliable because others hold conflicting intuitions, then we are not justified in trusting a particular moral intuition without some reason to believe that it is one of the reliable ones” (2006a, p. 350).

Sinnott-Armstrong takes it for granted that we, his readership, are well aware of the above facts and their consequences. These facts, he says, imply that “a large percentage” of moral beliefs are false (2012, p. 16).

As a result, we have evidence that our moral beliefs, taken as an entire class, are not reliably formed (2008a, pp. 51–52). For present purposes, we may assume all of this is so. That is Step One of the EDA.

Step Two attempts to show that an important epistemological conclusion follows from Step One. Sinnott-Armstrong’s idea is that if we are aware of those facts about moral belief and their consequences, then we should recognize that none of our moral beliefs are non-inferentially justified, and so that moral intuitionism is false. Although Sinnott-Armstrong’s defense of this conditional claim has changed as he has refined his argument, the basic idea has remained the same.

It is useful, we think, to state Step Two of the EDA in terms of undercutting defeaters—that is, reasons to give up belief in some proposition that are consistent with that proposition being true (see Pollock 1986). Now suppose that we accept Step One: on the basis of the facts Sinnott-Armstrong calls attention to, we think a large percentage of moral beliefs are false. As soon as we recognize that any particular moral belief of ours, B, is a moral belief, we then have an undercutting defeater for B. That’s because we would have a reason to think members of the class of moral beliefs, such as B, are to a large degree likely to be false. Thus, if there is no defeater for the undercutting defeater here, B is not justified.

Sinnott-Armstrong grants that we might gain a defeater for the undercutting defeater for B. His proposal is that the defeater for B is itself defeated only if we have reason to think B falls into a subclass of sufficiently reliably formed moral beliefs. Sinnott-Armstrong offers the following example in support of his proposal (see 2008a, p. 51). Imagine that you look at a figure from afar and come to believe that she or he is shorter than six feet tall (call this belief “S”). Then you remember that your beliefs concerning the height of objects at a distance are unreliable. Indeed, many of them are false. Your awareness that your height beliefs at a distance are unreliable constitutes an undercutting defeater for S. In order to restore justification for S, Sinnott-Armstrong suggests, you need to find some positive and undefeated reason for believing that S is sufficiently reliably formed; you might gain this by walking closer to the figure or asking a trustworthy source.

Importantly, Sinnott-Armstrong insists that whenever we have a defeater for the defeater for a belief B—again, a reason to think B is a member of a subclass of reliably formed moral beliefs—we’re thereby committed
to what he calls a “justificatory inferential structure.” He defines that term of art as

a set of propositions where some propositions provide epistemic support for others. To be committed to such a structure is to accept or have a disposition to accept the supporting propositions in that structure or other propositions that entail or support the supporting propositions in that structure. (2012, p. 13)

So, whenever we’re committed to a justificatory inferential structure with respect to B, we accept or are disposed to accept propositions that entail or rationally support B. Thus, if we have a defeater for the defeater for B, we’re in a position to infer B from other beliefs of ours. But if we are positioned to infer B from other beliefs—and if we must be so positioned in order to defeat the defeater to B and to remain justified in believing B—then B is not non-inferentially justified.

In the end, Step Two of the EDA comes to this: after having taken Step One, we have a defeater for each one of our moral beliefs. That defeater is itself either undefeated or defeated. If it is undefeated, our moral beliefs are not justified. If it is defeated, our moral beliefs are not non-inferentially justified. Suppose the argument is successful, it shows that any moral belief is either unjustified or not non-inferentially justified. It follows that moral intuitionism—the view on which “some people are adequately epistemically justified in holding some moral beliefs independently of whether those people are able to infer those moral beliefs from any other beliefs” (2006a, p. 341)—is false.

2. THE TROUBLE WITH THE
EMPIRICAL DEFEAT ARGUMENT

We think Step Two of Sinnott-Armstrong’s EDA has a fatal, but so far unrecognized, defect. Here is the trouble: it is not necessary, in defeating a defeater for a belief B, to have a reason to think that B was formed in a sufficiently reliable way. Thus, it also isn’t necessary, in defeating a defeater for B, to be committed to a justificatory inferential structure with respect to B. An example, followed by subsequent discussion, will bear this out:

McCoy visits the local widget factory and sees what seems to be a red widget being carried along a conveyor belt. He believes that the widget is red (call this belief “B”). Soon enough, a stranger approaches McCoy and says that the widgets are actually white but are illuminated by red lights. (Call this event “D”.) Upon seeing this conversation, another stranger—who seems to McCoy to be a factory employee—tells McCoy not to listen to the other stranger: he is a trickster, McCoy is told, who likes to mess around with visitors. (Call this second event “F”.)

This example will support our contention that Step Two features a false assumption. It is but one example. There are others, with slightly different details, and we think such examples are commonplace for a whole host of non-inferential sources of justification.

Let’s consider B, D, and F, in order to show how they undermine Step Two.

McCoy forms a belief, B, in a basic way. His belief is based on a perceptual experience or seeming. Given that Sinnott-Armstrong’s target, moral intuitionism, is a foundationalist theory, let’s assume foundationalism concerning perceptual justification in the example. So, B is initially non-inferentially justified for McCoy in some way (we remain neutral on the details) by the appropriate experiences or seemings.

D is a defeater for B. Hearing from another person that the widget is white but illuminated with red lights throws enough doubt on McCoy’s belief B to defeat its initial justification. We remain neutral on how this testimony defeats. Perhaps testimony directly justifies (absent defeaters), or perhaps McCoy has good reasons to trust people in general and the testifier doesn’t seem untrustworthy to him.

F is a defeater for D. F is what is sometimes called a “defeater-defeater” (see Pollock 1987). The factory employee’s testimony
undermines the evidential force of the other person’s testimony. Since F defeats D, D no longer defeats the initial justification for McCoy’s belief B. McCoy is, therefore, justified in B upon learning F.

Our example has the following pattern: B is initially non-inferentially justified, B is then defeated by D before D is later defeated by F, and, as a result, B is justified once again. According to Sinnott-Armstrong, in order for F to defeat D and restore justification to B, F must provide reason to think that B was formed reliably and, as a result, McCoy must be committed to a justificatory inferential structure in support of B. Note well: that is not what we find in the example. The factory employee’s testimony that the stranger is a trickster doesn’t imply that McCoy’s belief that the widget is red was reliably formed. Accordingly, McCoy is not committed to a justificatory inferential structure in support of B by way of obtaining a defeater for D.

All of that said, we grant that McCoy might be able to construct an argument for the conclusion that B is reliably formed—perhaps, for example, he can give a track-record argument. But that ability is irrelevant to our contention: his being able to come up with such an argument is not required to defeat D. Having F is by itself sufficient to defeat D, independently of his ability to give arguments in favor of B.

Therefore, contrary to Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument in Step Two of the EDA, it is not necessary that a thinker defeat a defeater for a non-inferentially justified belief B by way of a reason for believing that B was reliably formed and thus committing one to a justificatory inferential structure supporting B. A defeater-defeater can do its job merely by showing that the defeater of B has no or negligible evidential force. That can be accomplished without giving evidence for thinking B is true or that B was reliably formed, as with our example. Furthermore, once the defeater is defeated, B is clearly non-inferentially justified. Whatever initially made B justified continues to justify B once the defeater has been defeated. McCoy’s belief that the widget is red is justified by his perceptual experience or seeming (perhaps together with the fact that his perception is reliable)—even after D has been defeated by F.

We do not deny that McCoy is committed to some inferential structure. Indeed, he’s committed to the following inference: F, F defeats D, hence D is defeated. And since McCoy is aware of D, he wouldn’t be justified in B unless he was aware of F and recognized that F defeats D. Does this mean B is inferentially justified? Not at all. It’s important to distinguish between B’s justification depending upon an inference and B being supported (and thus justified) by an inference. McCoy’s belief B has the former feature, but not the latter, though it is the latter that Sinnott-Armstrong claims results from defeating his empirical defeaters.

We say that B is justified only if McCoy is positioned to make the inference we noted: F, F defeats D, hence D is defeated. In that sense, the justification for B depends upon an inference. Yet, plainly B is not supported by that inference. B is supported by experiences or seemings alone, without any inference to B from reasons indicating that B was reliably formed. These experiences, all by themselves, without an inference, produce justification for B, whereas F, the defeater-defeater, preserves the justification that the experiences produce for B. It’s like this analogy: a spark on dry wood produces a fire while the tarp covering the fire pit preserves the fire by shielding it from the rain. The tarp doesn’t create or sustain the fire, of course, but it preserves the conditions for the fire’s sustenance. The production of justification for B is non-inferential even though the preservation of B’s justification is inferential.

As it happens, a central point of dispute between moral intuitionists of various stripes and non-intuitionists is whether justification
for moral beliefs is (or can be, or often is) produced non-inferentially. Almost any theory of justification for moral beliefs, and non-moral beliefs alike, will be committed to saying that the preservation of justification is inferential: for facing and evading defeaters is an everyday occurrence for all sorts of beliefs. To see why, consider the following defeater for any and all of our beliefs: we often encounter defeaters for our beliefs. We know that we often encounter defeaters for our beliefs because we often form beliefs in poor conditions, such as when we are exhausted, or looking too hastily, or multi-tasking, or relying on biased information. That defeater is defeated for most of us and for most of our current beliefs by simply avoiding known sources of defeat. We don’t normally do any of this consciously, but we do it nonetheless. Here is an example. You automatically look closely at a book’s spine to make out the title, rather than quickly glancing. If you had instead glanced hurriedly and later remembered this, you might have gotten a defeater for your belief about the title. But since you recall that you took a careful look in this instance, the “I looked too hastily” defeater gets defeated. Your justification for your belief is preserved by inference, even though that justification was produced non-inferentially. Saying that the preservation of justification for our moral beliefs is inferential is not saying much—the same goes for nearly any kind of belief, no matter our favored theory of how justification is produced.

Remember that the critical dispute, and the one under investigation here, is whether the production of justification for our moral beliefs is at least sometimes non-inferential. That’s the dispute that the EDA is designed to settle. Sinnott-Armstrong aims to show that moral beliefs need confirmation in light of the defeaters he presents, and he thinks that such confirmation requires the ability to infer that some subset of moral beliefs is true (see 2006b, pp. 212–213). But, as we’ve argued, Sinnott-Armstrong’s argument does not show that production of justification must be inferential.

Before concluding, let us consider two objections to our argument.

3. Two Objections

Consider this reply to our argument: “An undercutting defeater for a belief B, such as the empirical defeaters presented by Sinnott-Armstrong, raises a question about B at the higher epistemic level: Is B justified? If you have no reason to believe that your belief is justified, and you recognize as much, then you won’t in fact be justified in believing B. The higher-level question must be resolved, since the defeater pushes the issue to that level. But if you have reason to believe that B is justified, despite the defeater, then you’ll be in a position to infer B from the belief that you are justified in believing B. Thus, when you are faced with an undercutting defeater, in order to defeat the defeater, you will be committed to an inferential structure supporting B.”

This won’t do. The objection mistakenly assumes that the higher-level question of whether B is justified must be resolved in order for B to be justified. Let’s say that the true epistemic principle has the following form: a belief B is justified if and only if condition C is met and there are no defeaters for B. Then suppose that C is met. To illustrate, we can suppose that C is that it seems to the thinker that B is true. Then along comes a defeater. As a result, the principle implies that B is no longer justified. Now a defeater for that defeater arrives. By the principle, B is justified for the thinker once again. Over and above that, the thinker needn’t be justified in believing that B is justified. Arguably, if the thinker had serious doubts about whether B was justified, and could not resolve those doubts, then B would lose its justification (see Bergmann 2005). But suppose she lacks any such doubts. She has what it takes to be justified and defeats the defeaters she faces. The
epistemic principle implies that B is justified
for her.

Turn to a second objection. Our complaint
with the EDA implies that defeaters can be
defeated without furnishing evidence to think
that the original belief was reliably formed.

To be sure, sometimes particular defeaters are
defeated by evidence that the original belief
was reliably produced. With that in mind,
one might attempt to rehabilitate the EDA
by contending that

RP A thinker can defeat the empirical defeaters
(namely, Partiality, Bias, Emotions, Dis-
agreement; see section 1) only if the thinker
has reason to think that moral beliefs are
reliably produced.

We doubt that RP can be sustained, and we’ll
now establish the point.

Sinnott-Armstrong’s empirical defeaters
may be defeated by simply gaining evidence
that some of the defeaters are false. Thus, we
don’t need reason to think our moral beliefs
are reliably produced in order to defeat the
empirical defeaters. To see why, notice that
each of those defeaters has the following form:
empirical information E shows that moral be-
liefs in general are not reliably produced. We
can have evidence that such a defeater is false
if we have reason to think either that E is false
or that E does not show that moral beliefs in
general are not reliably produced. For instance,
someone could gain reason to think that, for
some classes of beliefs, Partiality and Bias
aren’t significant enough to show that those
beliefs are not reliably produced. Someone
might also argue that the information described
earlier in Emotions does not show that moral
beliefs are not reliably produced.10 Since the
other empirical defeaters can also be defeated
in this way, it’s highly doubtful that RP is true:
Sinnott-Armstrong’s empirical defeaters can
be defeated without reason to think that moral
beliefs are reliably produced.

One might reply as follows: “If we don’t
question (or if we lack reason to question)
the truth or justification of the empirical
defeaters, then the only way to defeat them
is to obtain evidence that moral beliefs are
reliably produced.” This reply runs into two
problems. First, it dramatically restricts the
significance of the EDA’s conclusion. After
all, we’ve noted there is another way to defeat
the defeaters—namely, by questioning the
truth or justification of the defeaters. The re-
ply just sweeps that possibility aside, despite
the fact that further reflection and evidence
could cast doubt on the truth or justification
of the defeaters. Again, questioning the truth
or justification of the defeaters certainly
seems to allow moral beliefs to remain non-
inferentially justified.

There’s a second problem for the reply. The
empirical defeaters work by first identifying
features of moral beliefs that apparently sug-
gest the beliefs aren’t reliably formed, and
then arguing that most moral beliefs have
these features. Upon becoming aware of the
defeaters, we thereby have reason to believe,
of any moral belief, that it likely has these
features, and so is likely to be unreliably
formed. But if we learned that some subset
of our moral beliefs lacks those features,
then we wouldn’t have the defeaters for those
beliefs. Suppose the beliefs in that subset
were non-inferentially justified before we
learned about the empirical defeaters. Since,
by hypothesis, those beliefs don’t have the
features that generate defeat (and we realize
this), they are not defeated and, thus, they
would remain non-inferentially justified. In
this kind of situation, the empirical defeaters
are defeated by being avoided, and they’re
avoided by obtaining evidence that the defeat-
ing features aren’t possessed by a subset of
our moral beliefs. Furthermore, notice that
the defeater is defeated without invoking
evidence that the beliefs in the subset are
reliably formed. So, again, RP is false.

This is worth briefly illustrating. The “Dis-
agreement” defeater can be avoided if we
check whether there is considerable disagreement over a given moral belief, B, and then learn there isn’t. The idea here isn’t that we use widespread agreement as evidence that B is true or that B was reliably produced, even if we could run an argument to that effect. Instead, the idea is that we position ourselves so that the defeater doesn’t apply. Similarly, the “Bias” defeater is harmless when we’ve got reason to think we are not in a situation that typically leads to biases. Likewise for defeaters posed by Partiality and Emotions—if we have reason to think that a subset of our moral beliefs isn’t subject to any defeating kinds of partiality and emotional influence, then the defeaters are avoided for that subset.

It could turn out that only a few of our moral beliefs avoid defeaters by way of the strategy described above. If that’s how things go, one could argue that the empirical defeaters still defeat those few beliefs, albeit in a less direct way. Suppose the subset of beliefs that we have reason to think lack the defeating features is small in number. Perhaps the empirical defeaters could still challenge members of the subset because the defeaters would provide reason to think that the subset’s members have some of the defeating features, but that we haven’t yet been able to recognize or detect those features.

We agree that if the subset of beliefs that we have reason to think lack the defeating features were small in number, then its members might be defeated in this way. However, if the subset were large enough and unified in various ways (e.g., the beliefs concern certain types of actions or motives), then it seems that the defeaters would be avoided. For all we know, there is a large enough unified set of beliefs that lack the defeating features. If so—and we had reason to think it were so—then beliefs in that set would remain non-inferentially justified.

One might retort that even if there is a large, unified set of moral beliefs, M, that we have good reason to believe lack the defeating features, the beliefs in M would still be defeated. The idea might be that Sinnott-Armstrong’s empirical defeaters make salient the following possibility: that M’s members (or many of them) do possess some of the defeating features, or perhaps some other defeating features, but we haven’t so far recognized this. The idea is that, given we have possibly failed to recognize M’s members have defeating features, that’s enough for the members of M to be defeated.

Does this suggestion save the EDA? According to us, no. That mere possibility—again, that M’s members possess defeating features we haven’t yet recognized—is not significant enough to fully defeat the beliefs in M. At most, we’d have a partial defeater. The mere possibility is too distant to do enough damage. By way of explanation here, allow us to compare the present suggestion for salvaging the empirical defeaters to an argument from Sextus Empiricus’s Outlines of Scepticism (Bk. I.xiii). Our reply to the suggestion parallels what we regard as the sensible response to Sextus’s argument. Writes Sextus:

[When someone propounds to us an argument we cannot refute, we say to him: “Before the founder of the school to which you adhere was born, the argument of the school, which is no doubt sound, was not yet apparent, although it was really there in nature. In the same way, it is possible that the argument opposing the one you have just propounded is really there in nature but is not yet apparent to us; so we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument.” (2000, p. 12)]

Let’s say that someone offers us an apparently strong argument. We know that there are often replies to strong arguments. We think, and then think some more, but don’t come up with a good reply. To be sure, there may be a good reply that we haven’t noticed. Recognizing this possibility is enough, Sextus claims, to
defeat our belief that the original argument is strong. Sextus is correct: this possibility is salient, just as the possibility noted above concerning the empirical defeaters is salient. But, normally, these possibilities seem too distant to fully defeat our beliefs. In both cases, we may find ourselves with a partial defeater, but this merely lowers the degree of justification for our belief. So, even if the justification for our M beliefs is diminished, our justification remains non-inferential (on the assumption that our beliefs in M were originally non-inferentially justified, which Step One of the EDA grants for argument’s sake). It is just that whatever justifies our belief doesn’t justify as much as it would have if the partial defeater were not present.

Let’s take account of our argument against RP. We’ve said that RP is false for a pair of reasons: (i) we could gain evidence that the defeaters are false without having reason to think that some subset of our moral beliefs is reliably formed, and (ii) we could discover that a large, unified subset of moral beliefs M doesn’t possess the defeating features, and thus is not subject to the defeater. Then we noted that, given (ii), the beliefs in M may be partially defeated, but they would still remain non-inferentially justified.

But even if we’re wrong and RP is true, the EDA still fails. According to RP, we need reason to think that our moral beliefs are reliably produced in order to defeat the defeaters. Suppose that we come by such a reason, R. This reason defeats the defeaters and commits us to a justificatory inferential structure. R provides evidence for our moral beliefs, in virtue of the fact that the moral beliefs can be inferred from R (together with other information). So, our moral beliefs are justified, in part, inferentially. From this, it doesn’t follow that they are not justified non-inferentially. That’s because the epistemic status of beliefs can be overdetermined, and our moral beliefs are often epistemically overdetermined in this kind of situation. We’re supposing, again, that some of our moral beliefs were originally justified non-inferentially by some condition C (their seeming true, say). Sinnott-Armstrong’s empirical defeaters defeated the justification C provides, but once we get R, the defeaters are defeated, and C can once again justify our moral beliefs directly. And so our moral beliefs are justified inferentially by R and non-inferentially by C. Since those moral beliefs are still justified—in part, non-inferentially—moral intuitionism is not defeated. True, our beliefs would not be justified without R in this situation, but this doesn’t mean that R is the sole source of justification production for our moral beliefs. R does double duty, both producing and preserving justification: it produces justification for our moral beliefs inferentially and preserves the justification that C provides.

4. Conclusion

Sinnott-Armstrong has developed a novel argument against moral intuitionism. We’ve argued that his Empirical Defeat Argument features a mistaken assumption about what is required to defeat a defeater. We’ve also argued that various fixes will not save the argument. Nevertheless, we believe that the general project of examining the possible epistemic implications of empirical research on judgment and reasoning is important. The project has the potential to yield insights, and we commend Sinnott-Armstrong for moving it forward. Sinnott-Armstrong writes that “philosophers cannot continue to ignore developments in psychology, brain science, and biology.” He adds a word of caution: “Of course, philosophers need to be careful when they draw lessons from empirical research” (2006a, p. 339). We couldn’t agree more.

Nathan Ballantyne,
Fordham University

Joshua C. Thurow,
University of Texas at San Antonio
NOTES

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1. This paper is the product of full and equal collaboration between its authors.


3. Ross (1930); Prichard (1957); Audi (1996, 2004); and Huemer (2005, 2008).

4. Step One has been critically discussed by Bedke (2010); and Smith (2010).

5. As we’ve noted, the details of Step Two have changed since Sinnott-Armstrong’s first statement of his argument. In Moral Skepticisms (2006b), what we’ve called Step Two is captured in principles 1–5 of section 9.3 and his discussion in section 9.5.2; the argument in “Moral Intuitionism Meets Moral Psychology” (2006a) is basically identical. We find Step Two in premise (1) in “Framing Moral Intuitions” (2008a), and premise (3) in “An Empirical Challenge to Moral Intuitionism” (2012). Our statement of Step Two expresses the core features of Sinnott-Armstrong’s statement of the argument.

6. The “widget factory” example—not counting what is introduced by F—is standard fare in epistemology these days, but was originally devised by the late John Pollock.

7. Consider another example that features memory as the source of non-inferential justification. Imagine that today is Madeleine’s wedding anniversary: she’s with her husband and mother, fondly reminiscing about the special day eleven years earlier. Madeleine believes that she had a wild dance with her unpredictable and somewhat creepy uncle Rex (call this belief “B”). Laughing, she asks her husband if he remembers the dance with Rex. “No, honey,” says her husband, “Rex wasn’t there. Remember? He didn’t make it—he crashed his pickup on the road from Vegas, after yet another gambling binge. ‘What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas’ . . . not quite.” (Call Madeleine’s husband’s statement “D”.) Then Madeleine’s mother pipes in: “Oh, you’re thinking of another wedding—Rex didn’t make it to Madeleine’s sister’s wedding!” (Call the mother’s statement “F”.) Each of the claims we make about the “widget factory” example hold for this example too.

8. This point doesn’t pre-suppose McCoy would need to use the terminology of defeat in order for F to help him evade D for B.

9. Externalist theories might require that the process of believing based on those experiences be reliable or in accord with a thinker’s proper function.

10. See, for example, Smith (2010) for such arguments.

11. What sort of belief do we have in mind? Shafer-Landau proposes this (“R-rated”) belief: that “the deliberate humiliation, rape, and torture of a child, for no purpose other than the pleasure of the
one inflicting such treatment, is immoral” (2008), p. 83. We say that’s a plausible example of a non-inferentially justified moral belief that would survive a check for disagreement.

12. Huemer’s (2008) “revisionary intuitionism” recommends, among other things, avoiding disagreement and checking for potential sources of bias as a method to screen out problematic intuitions. For all that, Huemer seems to—and should, if our argument is correct—regard moral beliefs based on intuitions that survive such a screening as non-inferentially justified.

13. See Machuca (2011) for more on Sextus’s argument from possible disagreement.

REFERENCES