Knockdown Arguments for Philosophically Substantive Conclusions

I first argue that for most any useful notion of a knockdown argument, there are philosophical arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions that are knockdown even though they have controversial premises. This amounts to a criticism of Metaphilosophical Equilibrism since that view contains the commonly endorsed claim that there are no such arguments. Roughly put, the reason there are knockdown arguments in philosophy is that the controversy regarding premises can be foreign to the context of assessment appropriate for the argument in question.

I next suggest that it is wise to set aside the notion of a knockdown argument entirely in order to focus on two worries typically associated with discussions of knockdown arguments: the worry that arguments in philosophy are always controversial if they have philosophically substantive conclusions; and the worry that since in the sciences there are many uncontroversial arguments for substantive conclusions, philosophy's lack of them is a mark against it compared to those sciences. I close by addressing those concerns.

The philosopher's fantasy: formulate an argument, for a philosophically substantive thesis, that is so overwhelmingly great as to merit the characterization 'knockdown argument'. While we are in the realm of fantasy, we might as well dream about the argument bringing us fame and fortune as well. And as long as we are allowing our fantasies free rein, let's imagine achieving . . . *agreement from our peers* that the argument is sound. That seems even more improbable than the fame and fortune.

Many of us know philosophers who claim to have come up with conclusive, knockdown arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions. When we ask them why their argument has failed to garner much support even amongst those who have studied it, we are usually subject to a glittering display of transparently implausible excuse-making.

- Excuse 1: 'Well, I'm smarter than the people who disagree with me'. Oh really? Are you Saul Kripke? I didn't think so.
- Excuse 2: 'I have crucial evidence they don't have'. Do you mean the evidence you put in the premises of your argument--the one that they find so unconvincing even after studying it? Uh huh.
- Excuse 3: 'I have studied the key issue a great deal more thoroughly than they have'. But surely you know that some of your detractors have been examining, *after* earning their PhDs, the issues relevant to your argument since around the time you were scratching your butt as a ten-year-old.
- Excuse 4: 'They are a lot more biased than I am'. And your primary basis for this comparative

judgment is that they disagree with you? Yeah, sure.

- Excuse 5: 'But their contrary views are deeply implausible, while mine are not.' In whose judgment?

On the other hand, if our friend's allegedly knockdown argument has failed to gather support because almost no one has examined it, then we can snigger at their belief that it--unlike virtually every other argument ever given for a philosophically substantive conclusion--would win widespread agreement if people would bother to understand it.

Hence, it's easy to poke fun at the hubris of some of us. With that point firmly in mind, let me announce to the universe that I have made history by formulating knockdown arguments for philosophically substantive theses. Keep reading!

1. The Context-Sensitivity of Argument Assessment

Arguing with 'knockdown argument' without linguistic elaboration is like arguing with 'idea', 'meaning', 'miracle', or 'conscious' without linguistic elaboration: it will almost inevitably result in rubbish argumentation. The reason is that 'knockdown argument' doesn't always have the same contribution to truth conditions in typical uses of 'X is a knockdown argument for a philosophically substantive conclusion'. In that sense, the term has no truth-conditionally relevant value that is constant across literal uses. For philosophical purposes one can *construct* a relatively precise semantics for 'knockdown', in some relevant sense of 'construct', and some constructions will be better than others relative to certain theoretical goals; see §4 and §5 for three examples.

However, if one is going to construct such a notion, one probably should have it be *relative to the context of assessment*, in the way articulated in this section.

- **Case 1**: in the evaluation of an argument in philosophical aesthetics regarding the use of color to elicit positive emotions, it would be beside the point to address color nihilism, which says that there are no colors in paintings, pictures, films, or even our sensory experiences (e.g., Wright 2003, Pautz 2006).
- **Case 2**: in a debate in the philosophy of sport, it would be "out of bounds" to object to a premise by bringing up compositional nihilism, which says there is no sporting equipment (e.g., Sider 2007).
- **Case 3**: in assessing an argument in epistemology, perhaps regarding what it takes for a true belief to amount to knowledge, it wouldn't be fair to bring up eliminative materialism (e.g., P. M. Churchland 1981 and P. S. Churchland 1986) or the inconsistency view of truth (e.g., Scharp 2013 and Barker 1999), both of which entail that there are no ordinary true beliefs.
- **Case 4**: whereas in many philosophy of mind contexts it's appropriate to ignore eliminative materialism (e.g., in a discussion of the relation of belief and desire), in other philosophy of mind contexts it is not (e.g., in a discussion of mental realism and the ontology of the mental).

It is easy to think of additional cases.

With cases like these in mind, we can see that when assessing the quality of an argument, the *context of assessment* matters: relative to one assessment context a premise or inference of an argument might be

appropriately unquestioned by any competent evaluator who understands it well, but relative to another context of assessment the premise or inference might be rightly seen as controversial or at least in serious need of support. For instance, consider the following familiar Gettier argument from an epistemology discussion.

> Alec is sitting in a waiting room at a hospital. The digital clock on the wall reads '11:32', he sees it, and he comes to believe that it's 11:32 AM. Since it really is 11:32 AM, he has a true belief. Not only that, he is entirely justified in coming to have that belief, as there is every reason to trust that the clock is working. However, as a matter of fact the clock stopped at 11:32 PM last night, and the clock's digital display is "frozen" at '11:32'. Due to the peculiar kind of luck behind his true belief, it doesn't amount to knowledge. Hence, there is a justified true belief that doesn't amount to knowledge.

Not everyone in epistemology accepts the argument's premise that Alec doesn't know that it's 11:32 AM. Neither do all epistemologists agree with the other premise that his belief that it's 11:32 AM is epistemically justified. One can offer intelligent (even if unsuccessful) objections to those two premises.

However, given the epistemological context of assessment, what one does *not* do, is use eliminative materialism to object to the premise that Alec *believed* that it's 11:32 AM. Neither would it be appropriate to object to that premise on the basis of the conjunction of compositional nihilism and the claim that Alec would be a composite object if he existed (the conjunction entails that Alec doesn't exist and, thus, doesn't believe anything). In addition, it would be out of bounds to object to the premise that Alec's belief is true on the basis of either semantic nihilism (there are no truths expressed with sentences containing vague terms; Sider and Braun 2007) or the inconsistency view of truth.

Imagine raising those objections at a conference Q&A and you can see how out of place they are. For what it's worth, when in a philosophical conversation someone brings up views that are unfair, I can actually perceive a "shift" in my own mind, as well as a subtle reaction in the audience's body language, since the conversational rules have been unexpectedly and oddly challenged. It's as though one is playing a card game and one of the players proposes a change in the rules of the *current* game.

I am not going to give anything like a *theory* of assessment context-sensitivity. But I will offer a "top ten" set of remarks that help clarify the notion.

Remark 1. If one knows the context in which an argument is offered, then one typically adopts *that* particular context in argument assessment; to do otherwise is usually uncharitable. But one might have reasons for not adopting it. As someone who often works in multiple areas of philosophy, I can testify that this type of switching of assessment contexts can be surprisingly fruitful (Frances 2022).

Remark 2. The context-sensitivity idea is not that the claims in the argument switch truth-values with switches in assessment contexts. My idea isn't similar to Attributor Contextualism with regard to knowledge attributions (e.g., 'Jo knows she has hands' allegedly switches truth-value depending on speaker's context of use; see Rysiew 2021 for discussion). Under my proposal, what switches with assessment context is the fairness of challenges to the premises or inferences. And the premises need not be knowledge attributions or have anything to do with epistemology, as one can see from many examples.

Remark 3. For some argumentative conversations in ordinary life or philosophical discussion, it may be indeterminate which views are out of bounds/unfair, and participants in debates might be fruitfully thought to be attempting to *make* certain views unfair or fair via various conversational moves (see DeRose 2004 for thoughts on a similar struggle over contexts of assessment for knowledge attributions).

To see a philosophical example of this type of situation, imagine a conversation amongst four philosophers regarding the Sorites paradox, which can be built up from the following claims (I will need this example in §5 as well).

C_1: Anyone worth less than \$1 (US) is (financially) poor.

C_2: If anyone worth less than \$1 is poor, then anyone worth less than \$2 is poor.

C_3: If anyone worth less than \$2 is poor, then anyone worth less than \$3 is poor.

…

C_{LAST}: It's not the case that anyone worth less than $\$10^{12}$ is poor.

Philosopher P1 says that it's child's play to derive both halves of a contradiction from the Cs, with nothing other than repeated uses of modus ponens. She concludes that we need to figure out which of the Cs is false and why. She takes the argument 'The Cs entail a contradiction; it's not the case that that contradiction is true; hence, not all the Cs are true' to be unquestionable.

But philosopher P2 objects that that approach is entirely wrong-headed. For her, the sorites considerations form part of the overall argument for dialethism (with the semantic paradoxes assisting). P2 says all the Cs are *true* and entail a true contradiction; she says the second premise in P1's argument in the previous paragraph (viz. 'it's not the case that that contradiction is true') is false. P1 responds to P2 by saying that she was presupposing that dialethism is false. P2 counters that P1 can presuppose whatever the hell she likes, but it's a mistake to do so in the context of a discussion of the Sorites paradox since *the lesson of the Sorites* is that the law of non-contradiction is mistaken.

A third philosopher P3 says the Cs are true but don't entail a contradiction; she rejects the first premise in P1's argument (viz. 'The Cs entail a contradiction'), which even P2 agreed to. P3's view is that the Cs have hidden semantic complexities that preclude applying standard elementary inference rules to them in order to derive a contradiction (e.g., because despite appearances C_2 through $C_{LAST\ -\ 1}$ really aren't material conditionals, say). She says that *that* is the very lesson of the Sorites: context-sensitivity is much more grand and hidden than any of us thought.

Philosopher P4 thinks the Cs are true (contrary to P1), no contradictions are true (contrary to P2), and the familiar elementary inference rules do indeed apply to the Cs in the obvious manner (contrary to P3). P4 is a philosopher of logic who holds the surprising thesis that not all the familiar inference rules in question are truth-preserving (but . . . modus ponens? The Vann McGee 1985 alleged counterexample doesn't apply here). She thinks this based on years of examining the Sorites paradox, the semantic paradoxes, and other issues in the foundations of logic.

It isn't hard to see how all four philosophers could be rational (not to say correct!) in their abstract philosophizing. As we know, philosophy is awfully hard--*especially* regarding the paradoxes. In their

discussions of the Sorites, it won't always be clear what is out of bounds to bring up as an objection or otherwise relevant to the discussion—or what *should* be out of bounds, where the 'should' is prudential. Hence, there might be some indeterminacy in what views are out of bounds with respect to a given conversation. That's my only point here.

Remark 4. The views that are out of bounds relative to a given assessment context will sometimes change over time--and the change can occur even though nothing about the conversational participants has changed in the slightest. For instance, if eliminative materialism, color nihilism, or some other anti-commonsensical view acquired almost conclusive supporting evidence, perhaps from innovative empirical investigation, then that new epistemic status would *make* those views fair game in at least some assessment contexts in which they were previously unfair even if the conversational participants are unchanged (cf. the case of relativity theory and presentism is somewhat similar; for discussion see Ingram and Tallant 2022).

Remark 5. Although I've been writing of *claims* being unfair or fair, relative to assessment context, I suppose that things such as arguments, problems, issues, questions, and thought experiments are also things that can be assessment unfair/fair. So X's being assessment unfair doesn't mean, for instance, that the conversational participants are disposed to think X is *false*, which would entail that X is a claim. In addition, the item being assessed need not be an argument; it could just be a claim being evaluated. Hence, in 'x is unfair for assessing y in assessment context c', x need not be a claim and y need not be an argument. Even so, in this paper I focus on *claims* being fair/unfair for the assessment of *arguments*.

Remark 6. It isn't obvious what it means to say an item is unfair. For starters, we should separate views that are *unfair* from those that are *irrelevant*. For many philosophical and non-philosophical conversations, compositional nihilism will be unfair *but relevant* (e.g., if it's true, then the argument under consideration has a false premise), while 'Knowledge is reliably generated true belief' and, more obviously, 'Willie Mays was a better hitter than Mickey Mantle' will be irrelevant, no matter how one fills out 'irrelevant'.

Remark 7. One might think that if claim X is unfair to an argument in a specific assessment context, then X is assumed false in that context by the conversational participants. However, the participants might have never even heard of X (e.g., philosophers of sport might not have heard of nihilism about color, artefacts, or composites). So, an item being assessment unfair doesn't mean *assumed to be false*, even when the item in question is a claim. I suspect it doesn't even mean 'the conversational participants are *disposed* to think the view is false'. For one thing, there is little reason to think we are perfectly reliable about what's fair or unfair in a given assessment context, even when we are in it. For another thing, X might be so complicated and foreign that the conversational participants have no solid dispositions about it. Instead, I suspect they will often be disposed to think nothing more than the vague "None of this matters!" in response to unfair objections that are relatively bizarre. In filling out what it means to be assessment unfair we could look to related parts of philosophy for inspiration (e.g., relevant alternatives theory in epistemology; e.g., Dretske 1981).

Remark 8. There is the closely related issue of what *makes* something unfair in a given assessment context. Going by induction on other contextual issues of relevance to philosophy, I would guess that this is a highly

complicated affair! For instance, as remark 4 suggests, it might not be entirely a matter of speaker presuppositions.

Remark 9. The context sensitivity of fair challenges to an *argument* is probably derivative of the context sensitivity of fair challenges to a *claim*. In the Stopped-Clock example, the unfair objections targeted premises of the argument. Other examples would show that unfair objections target not premises but claims of inferential truth-preservation (e.g., whether the conclusion really follows from the premises, perhaps for arguments that use controversial inference principles from modal logic). Furthermore, the reason a thought experiment, problem, or argument X is unfair is usually derivative of a claim Y being unfair, where Y is closely associated with X.

Remark 10. It's not just *objections* that are unfair; supporting arguments can be as well. For instance, suppose that in aesthetics you are arguing that there are no works of art that are immoral yet have high artistic value. It would be out of bounds/unfair to argue *for* your thesis by using compositional or artefactual nihilism as a premise. That is, you don't get to argue for 'No immoral yet great art' by arguing for 'No art whatsoever'. The probable reason for this is that you were implicitly granting that there are works of art, some of them are immoral, and some have high artistic value; hence, those nihilistic theories are inconsistent with your implicit assumptions. Hence, in assessing a claim C1, a claim C2 can be unfair even though it entails C1. So, just because C2 is unfair to use when one is arguing for C1 doesn't mean that C2 is inconsistent with C1.

As stated earlier, I am not giving a theory of assessment context sensitivity. In its boldest version, such a theory might have the following form.

> In assessment context C, proposition P1 is assessment unfair as part of an objection to or argument for proposition P2 if and only if ___.

As we saw earlier, if C is a typical epistemology discussion of the Stopped Clock case with P1 being 'No one believes anything' and P2 being 'Alec had a justified true belief that didn't amount to knowledge', then P1 is assessment unfair. But if P1 is 'Epistemic justification is externalist and inconsistent with Gettier luck', then P1 is assessment fair.

What goes in the biconditional's blank will be references to factors of C (as well as to other factors). I haven't said what those factors are. For my purposes in this paper all I need is the existential generalization over such factors: *there are* assessment context factors such that whether P1 is assessment unfair to P2 depends on those factors.

2. Context-Sensitivity and Knockdown Arguments

Although the context-sensitivity of argument assessment has nothing specifically to do with knockdown arguments, it does have lessons for them. We know that the claim 'This argument is knockdown' is an assessment of the argument's strength. And we have seen that such an assessment can be context sensitive. So, it's natural to fill out the notion of a knockdown argument using that notion of context-sensitivity.

If we proceed in that fashion, we will see that an argument can be knockdown relative to some but not all contexts. For an example, consider the following philosophical argument.

> Jo is playing poker with several friends. She is very drunk. The cards are dealt and without looking at them (they are face down on the table), she comes to believe that she has a pair of aces amongst her five cards. Her belief is based on nothing other than her entirely unreliable drunkenness and insecurity at losing. She has made similar guesses many times during the evening, and they have never been accurate. Hence, her belief is not based on excellent evidence. Even so, her belief is true: she has a pair of aces face down on the table. Hence, there are true beliefs that aren't based on excellent evidence.

I don't know of anyone in epistemology who would object to any part of this argument *in a conversation firmly in epistemology*. I would guess that on most conceptions of a knockdown argument for a philosophically substantive conclusion, this qualifies as one provided we pair it with the intended assessment context. However, if we uncharitably switch the assessment context, then both 'She believes she has a pair of aces' and 'Her belief is true' are controversial, for the reasons given above. Hence, relative to different assessment contexts, the argument isn't knockdown.

Some philosophers will say that the argument's conclusion, 'There are true beliefs that aren't based on excellent evidence', isn't philosophically substantive; so, the Poker argument doesn't qualify as "knockdown for a philosophically substantive conclusion". But that's false for at least some entirely reasonable precisifications of 'philosophically substantive'. Philosophically substantive ≠ philosophically controversial. There are three reasons for this.

- The conclusion in question *is* controversial amongst philosophers relative to discussions for which radical views such as eliminative materialism, semantic nihilism, compositional nihilism, or the inconsistency view of truth are relevant.
- Any philosopher who actually listens to non-philosophers, knows that the conclusion is unobvious if not controversial for non-philosophers (which of course is not to say that all or even most non-philosophers go so far as to reject it). Hence, even if the conclusion were uncontroversial amongst philosophers (so set aside my first bullet point), that would not mean it isn't philosophically substantive. There are many scientific truths such as 'Heavy objects fall just as fast as light ones, other things equal' that are clearly scientifically substantive even though uncontroversial amongst scientifically educated people.
- By pooling together claims that almost all philosophers agree upon, such as 'There are true beliefs that aren't based on excellent evidence', philosophers can occasionally derive philosophically interesting and unexpected results. For instance, sometimes sets of alleged platitudes are inconsistent; other times they entail something philosophically interesting and unexpected.

So, there are three separate, and individually sufficient, reasons to think 'There are true beliefs that aren't based on excellent evidence' is philosophically substantive. Of course all I need is one.

Thus, the familiar question, 'Are there knockdown arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions?' has to be handled carefully, as the Poker example suggests: a given argument can be knockdown in some but not all philosophical "contexts", so the question 'Is this a knockdown argument in philosophy?' does not always have a simple answer. The possibility of a substantive philosophical argument that is knockdown with respect to *every* assessment context will be addressed in §5.

To clarify, when I say that 'Are there knockdown arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions?' has no simple answer, my thesis is *not* that there are multiple notions of 'knockdown argument' and they give different answers to that question (e.g., the answers 'yes, lots of them', 'yes, but vanishingly few', 'no, none at all'). I agree that thesis but that's not the one I am articulating and defending here.

Instead, I'm saying that most any useful notion of knockdown argument will have to be context sensitive in the way I am outlining (an exception is the one discussed in §5, which is derivative of a context-sensitive one), and in many cases a given argument will be knockdown via one context of assessment but not another. And the differing contexts can be wholly within one field, such as philosophy, and not merely across fields. In fact, they can fall wholly within one subfield of philosophy: one could give an argument in a part of the philosophy of mind for which eliminative materialism or color nihilism are out of bounds, but if we switch to a new philosophy-of-mind context in which they are salient, then the argument is no longer knockdown due to the presence of premises that are controversial in the new context.

3. Ballantyne's Objections

Ballantyne (2014) comes close to addressing the context-sensitivity of argument assessment in his criticism of the view that "In a geological or historical context, there are certain sorts of assumptions that hold. But in a philosophical context, quite different assumptions hold" (2014, p. 538). That quote expresses a view at least superficially similar to my proposal in the previous section. Ballantyne says that this view (and, probably, my proposal) will be unattractive to many philosophers, for the following reason.

> But according to many philosophers . . . philosophy and non-philosophical fields are *not* 'separate epistemic realms' in the sense that completely different assumptions hold in them. In fact, van Inwagen regards science as contributing to the established pre-philosophical data, on which he builds his theories (p. 538).

On my proposal, for many arguments given in a non-philosophical conversation, certain philosophical objections are unfair. This suggests that my proposal is saying that philosophy and non-philosophical fields are "separate epistemic realms", which is what Ballantyne is criticizing. That's the criticism of me.

However, there are two fatal problems with Ballantyne's criticism when applied to my proposal.

First, as noted at the end of the previous section the context-sensitivity of argument assessment occurs wholly *within* philosophy--in fact, it can occur within a *subfield* of philosophy, as we have seen above with eliminative materialism and the philosophy of mind. Hence, claims about how philosophy and science are or are not "separate epistemic realms" will not suffice to address my proposal.

Second, and much more importantly, there is no tension between my theses and the twin ideas (mentioned in Ballantyne's remark) that science contributes established data to philosophy and we use that data in philosophizing. What makes data D "established" in a particular science is the fact that D passes the tests *in that particular scientific context of assessment* (if not all sciences), not that D passes all the tests in philosophy. That is, in a given scientific context of assessment, certain objections to premises or other claims are "out of bounds" or "unfair", but when we switch to some (but not all) philosophical contexts, those objections are now fair. The fact that the premises of the argument pass the scientific tests *is* relevant for philosophy. In fact, for *some* philosophical contexts, the fact that the premises are

scientifically acceptable make them just as acceptable in those philosophical contexts. And even when we move to a philosophical context in which there are serious objections to the premises that were unfair in any science, the fact that the premises had no serious scientific objections remains true and relevant to our philosophizing. Lastly, all this is true for context switching within philosophy, or even one of its subfields.

4. Constructing a Context-Sensitive Notion of a Knockdown Argument

At the beginning of §1 I remarked that 'knockdown argument' fails to have a set semantics. *Perhaps* one can reasonably search for informative necessary and sufficient conditions for 'is a hydrogen molecule', but it would be unwise to do so for 'is a knockdown argument'. You may or may not agree with me on that issue, but no matter what, there are difficult choices one must face when attempting to construct a reasonable precisification of 'knockdown argument' in such a way that a significant number of arguments are knockdown (see Ballantyne 2014 and Keller 2015 for discussion of potential definitions).

For instance, consider argument TS 'Taylor Swift is or is not human; hence, 1 = 1 or 1 ≠ 1'. There are exactly two choices here: hold that that TS is, or isn't, knockdown. Let's consider each option.

First suppose TS is knockdown. Then either the premise supplies good reason to accept the conclusion or it doesn't. If it doesn't, then we have reached the surprising conclusion that there are knockdown arguments whose premises don't supply good reason to accept their conclusions. On the other hand, if the premise does supply good reason to accept the conclusion, then 'Taylor Swift is or is not human' amazingly supplies good reason to accept '1 = 1 or 1 ≠ 1', which is bizarre as well

Now suppose instead that TS isn't knockdown. Then we have the surprising result that infinitely many *obviously sound* arguments aren't knockdown, since we can construct infinitely many arguments just like TS.

Choose the bullet you would like to bite! No matter what, the infinitely large collection of these odd, obviously sound arguments *requires* us to reject at least one initially highly plausible claim about knockdown arguments:

- In a knockdown argument the premises supply good reason to accept the conclusion.
- The claim 'Taylor Swift is or isn't human' fails to provide good reason to accept '1 = 1 or 1 ≠ 1'.
- If an argument is *obviously* sound, then it's a knockdown argument.

There are other issues one must face when coming up with necessary and sufficient conditions for 'knockdown argument'. For instance, can there be knockdown arguments for falsehoods? Those who think of knockdown arguments as "conclusive" and who think 'conclusive' sounds like a success term will answer negatively. If there can be knockdown arguments for falsehoods, could there be a knockdown argument for P and another knockdown argument for ~P? Good questions.

I will not address these issues. Instead, I want to note that any such definition of 'knockdown argument', whether intended constructively or not, should incorporate the context sensitivity of knockdown status. So, for instance, both of the following would be a decent rough draft of such a definition:

DEF 1: X is a knockdown argument relative to assessment context C iff X's conclusion is true and were person S to understand X and follow the assessment rules for C, then it would be irrational for S to hold that there are good, undefeated objections, relative to C, to X's premises or the truth-preservation of its inferences.

DEF 2: X is a knockdown argument relative to assessment context C iff there are no good, undefeated objections, relative to C, to X's premises or the truth-preservation of its inferences.

DEF 1 but not DEF 2 says that knockdown arguments must have true conclusions, thereby illustrating the two ways one might go on that issue. DEF 1 appeals to irrationality in the definition, whereas DEF 2 might not, depending on how 'good, undefeated objection' gets filled out. I'm not going to address those issues. Instead, I will illustrate the definitions' common reference to assessment context sensitivity.

Suppose Maria is an eliminative materialist. Despite that philosophical commitment, when "doing" epistemology she wouldn't object to the Poker argument given above for the conclusion 'There are true beliefs that aren't based on excellent evidence'. Maria does not accept the Poker conclusion (as well as one of its premises), since she sees that it's inconsistent with her eliminative materialism. But she agrees that any *contextually relevant* challenges to the argument's premises and inferences fail, since the context of the Poker argument is firmly in epistemology. With her endorsement of eliminative materialism, Maria thinks there are contextually *unfair* but good challenges to the argument. Hence, although she rejects the conclusion of the Poker argument, she agrees that the argument is knockdown, given its appropriate context of assessment.

But Maria need not be an eliminative materialist! If she is just agnostic on it, she can still hold that the Poker argument is knockdown--since she sees that we are setting aside radical views such as eliminative materialism.

5. Holy Grail Arguments and the Science-Philosophy Comparison

I'm not convinced that there will be much philosophical interest in formulating and evaluating definitions of 'knockdown argument'. That is why I don't further develop or defend the proposals in the previous section. Frankly, I don't know of any significant benefit to formulating necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of 'knockdown argument'. Why bother?

By my lights, it's more interesting to set aside linguistic intuition-mongering with respect to 'knockdown argument' in favor of asking questions such as, "How strong do philosophical arguments ever get, and are they more or less strong than the best ones in other fields, such as the hard sciences?" I think those are the relevant questions to ask because when it comes to the general topic of knockdown arguments in philosophy, there are two worries that are front and center:

- The worry that arguments in philosophy are *always* controversial, at least if they have philosophically substantive conclusions.
- The worry that since in the sciences there are plenty of uncontroversial arguments for substantive conclusions, philosophy's lack of them is a mark against it compared to those lovely sciences.

We need not fuss with 'knockdown argument' in order to address these two worries. So, let's briefly address them.

As we have seen, the short answer is that yes, there are uncontroversial arguments in philosophy, provided the context of assessment is appropriate. Hence, they reach that sociological level of strength. But philosophy is different from science in one key relevant respect: in philosophy but not science there almost always are contexts of assessment "available" according to which a given argument will be controversial, if it has a substantive conclusion. I say 'almost' because I suspect that there are some rarified philosophical arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions that are rationally unquestionable with respect to *every* context, philosophical or not. Call those the *Holy Grail* arguments; these are the ones I was being humorous about in the introduction to this paper.

I suspect that when philosophers say that there are no knockdown arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions, what they mean, charitably put, is twofold: there are no Holy Grail arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions, and any philosophical argument for a conclusion that philosophers actually discuss will be (rationally) controversial relative to the assessment contexts in which it is actually evaluated.

The Sorites dispute given in §1 provides some evidence that they are right in about the nonexistence of Holy Grail arguments, since that was a case of profound disagreement regarding the soundness of what certainly appeared to be an airtight argument $\{C_1, C_2, \dots, C_{LAST}\} \vDash (P \,\&\, \sim P)$. Perhaps so! But that negative assessment *might* be mistaken. Despite their radical disagreements, philosophers P1-P4 might well agree with the deductive soundness of something like the following argument.

> Premise: If the Cs are all true, elementary inference rules R apply to them in the manner we have always expected they did, and the R rules are truth-preserving, then a contradiction is true.
>
> Conclusion: Hence, either (i) not all the Cs are true (as philosopher P1 concluded), (ii) R doesn't apply to the Cs as we expected (as P3 concluded), (iii) R is not truth-preserving (as P4 concluded), or (iv) a contradiction is true (as P2 concluded).

The term 'philosophically substantive claim' doesn't have a set semantics any more than 'knockdown argument' does. Even so, I think no matter how one understands the term reasonably, it will turn out that the above argument has a philosophically substantive conclusion regardless of its logical status. Why?

My argument for that claim has two premises: first, before studying the Sorites paradox one would not have guessed it; second, and more importantly, the truth of any disjunct in the conclusion has significant philosophical consequences (and yet at least one must be true). That is, one of the disjuncts has to be true, but each is inconsistent with much philosophical or ordinary opinion and, hence, shows that a good portion of philosophical belief is mistaken. The argument is a good candidate for (i) a Holy Grail argument for (ii) a substantive conclusion (for elaboration--that I promise doesn't walk back much--see Frances 2022).

One can generate other Holy Grail arguments for philosophically substantive conclusions from other, select, philosophical problems: roughly put, choose ones that are as sharp and counterintuitive as the

Sorites. However, even if I'm right about that, the existence of rational doxastically stingy philosophers shows that *almost* no arguments for philosophically substantive claims will achieve Holy Grail status.

If there are no, or virtually no, Holy Grail arguments, is that a bad thing? I don't see why. Yes, there are loads of uncontroversial arguments in science—but that's only because in virtually all cases the range of contexts isn't as demanding as it is in philosophy. The reason there are so few *completely* uncontroversial arguments in philosophy is that the demands often increase wildly when we pass from science to philosophy in general.[1] This might not mean the number of Holy Grail arguments hits zero, but it does mean they will be few and far between, and will usually not have ordinary, substantive conclusions such as 'Type identity theory is true' or 'Epistemic externalism is true' or even commonsensical claims such as 'Some people know some truths', 'There are trees', and 'Some tomatoes are red'.

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[1] I suspect that some fair objections in some scientific assessment contexts might not be fair in philosophical contexts (e.g. certain bizarre objections from speculative theoretical physics). So it's not as though it's obvious that for every scientific assessment context S and philosophical assessment context P, if a view is fair in S it's also fair in P. But in general, more views are fair game in philosophy than in science, especially scientific contexts other than those in theoretical physics.