

Exercise: Philosophical Motivation

Due by e-mail: Tuesday, March 11th

Goal:

To successfully engage with a particular view, it is important to not only appreciate the exact commitments of that view—i.e. the specific set of claims that constitute the view—but also the philosophical motivations behind that view. This is something we tacitly do a lot, for example, when we frame a point we make as a “friendly amendment” rather than as “a worry I have about your view”. A contemporary example I like concerns cognitivism about intention (or at least, certain proponents of the view). It is one thing to appreciate that cognitivism about intention is the view that intentions are (at least partially) constituted by beliefs, but to really engage with cognitivists, it is important to understand that they are moved to embrace this position because it would allow them to reduce norms on intentions (i.e. norms of practical rationality) to norms on belief (i.e. norms of theoretical rationality).

This understanding is obviously more important to achieve when the philosophers you are engaging with can no longer respond to you. Cognitivists about intention can speak up about why an amendment you propose does violence to their underlying project, Hume cannot.

In the Hume reading for this week, Book 3.1, Hume offers a negative thesis about the source of “moral distinctions” (3.1.1) and a positive thesis about the source of “moral distinctions” (3.1.2). This exercise has three components.

In part (A): Give a one paragraph (5-8 sentence) summary of the negative thesis Hume takes in 3.1.1, and a one paragraph (5-8 sentence) summary of the salient features of that thesis (including the considerations he offers in support of it). In addition to being quite concise, I want you to attempt to avoid the use of jargon or opaque terminology.

In part (B): Repeat the above instructions for the positive thesis advocated in 3.1.2. Again, pay special attention to the need for both conciseness and clarity.

In part (C): Compose two paragraphs outlining Hume’s philosophical motivations for these theses. Some information about what drives Hume to take these positions will be stated explicitly in the reading. But you should also re-consult the introduction to the *Treatise*, and the *Abstract of a Work Lately Published*, to remind yourself of Hume’s broader systematic aims/commitments.