

Exercise: Inconsistent Triads

Due by e-mail: Tuesday, March 25th

Goal:

Arguments tend to get top billing in philosophy, but any formally valid argument is secretly equivalent to a set of inconsistent claims, and an attitude about which one needs to be rejected. While there is much value to figuring out which claim needs to go, there are many circumstances in philosophy, especially historical philosophy, where it is more important to ask ourselves what it looks like to reject each individual claim, rather than to try and settle the question of which claim you personally think should be given up.

Let's take a simple example:

- (1) Knowledge requires certainty.
- (2) We can be certain only about our own ideas.
- (3) We have knowledge of the external world.

Claims (1)-(3) are, absent equivocation, jointly inconsistent. While any two can be used to frame an argument against the third, it is often valuable for us to reframe things in the neutral format of an inconsistent triad (or tetrad, or n -ad more generally). Then, rather than asking ourselves whether or not we think (1) is false, it is more natural to ask what one's view would have to look like, to maintain that (1) is false. We can use this structure to categorize the various positions in logical space.

For each of the following arguments Hume gives in the assigned reading, I want you to re-present the argument he offers for it in the form of an inconsistent triad (or tetrad, etc.), and, for each claim in that set, briefly articulate (2-3 sentences) a view that would make sense of denying that claim. There should be more to this than merely stating the negation of the claim as the view, but you don't need to work out the positions in full detail. Aim for triads whenever possible.

- A) The argument that all virtuous action derives merit from virtuous motives.
- B) The argument that regard to virtue cannot be the primary motive for virtuous acts.
- C) The argument that public benevolence cannot be the motive to justice.
- D) The argument that property would not be possible in the golden state.
- E) The argument that property would not be possible in the state of nature.