Humanities 117: Philosophical Perspectives on the Humanities

First Paper

Instructions

The paper (4–6 pages long) is due Mon., May 2, in class.

As was the case with the papers last quarter: the below topics are suggestions. If you want to write on another topic, feel free to do so. It might be a good idea, however, in that case, to check me and/or the writing intern first.

Note that the topics tend to have many sub-questions. You need not (and probably should not) try to answer all of them. (You *certainly* should not just answer them one after another in order—that would make a bad paper.) I put them there to suggest various directions for thinking about the topic, and in particular to head off superficial or excessively simple ways of thinking about it.

All but one of the below topics are designed to get you to write about both Hume and Kant, and that is in general strongly recommended. If you have an idea which involves writing about only one of them, you should check with me (but I'll probably still advise against it). Some of the topics also suggest (and, in one case, requires) the use of other sources; in general you are welcome to bring in such other sources (especially things you read in previous quarters of Phil Perspectives) if you think they're relevant. If you do so, however, please make sure it's still clear that the paper was written for this course.

The intent of the paper is to interpret the views or attitudes of Hume and Kant. You should try to say something original, but that original thing should be about what Hume and Kant mean, and in particular about the relationship between the two of them. The point of your paper should *not* be your own opinion about (for example) what is the basis of morality, nor should it be aimed mainly at criticizing Hume and/or Kant or deciding which one of them is better. It also should not be like two papers stuck together, one about Hume and the other about Kant: the comparison should somehow be the point of the paper.

If you're using the editions I ordered, you can refer to the readings just by giving the page number. If you use a different edition and/or some other source, please give at least enough bibliographical information that I can find it if necessary. There's no need for a separate bibliography or title page.

Suggested Topics

1. How do Hume and Kant use *examples* in their arguments—how are the uses the same and how are they different? To what extent do these similarities and differences follow from their explicit views? In particular: to what extent do they follow from their respective views on the role in ethics of "empirical anthropology" (meaning not necessarily what we today call the science of anthropology, but simply the study of human nature as it's actually found to be)? (Notice this is tricky because it would be all too easy to prove that, from Kant's point of view, all examples are useless. But that must be wrong, because he does use them! Why? One possible line of thought: what is the importance for Kant of the appeal to "common understanding"?) What about the citing of ancient authorities (historians and/or moralists) and biblical texts— how do Kant and Hume differ in this respect, and why? (Are these the same or different from more abstract or contemporary examples?)

2. Consider a distinction between a moral philosopher, on the one hand, and a moralist—roughly speaking, someone who tries to get people to be moral—on the other. Is this distinction ultimately valid, according to Hume or Kant or both, and if so how and why (i.e., why aren't these the same thing)? What methods should a moralist (whether or not this is the same as a moral philosopher) use? That is: (a) what methods will be effective; (b) what methods are legitimate (permissible)? (Is there any distinction between questions (a) and (b), for Hume or Kant or both? Is the goal, "getting people to be moral," the same for both Hume and Kant, or does it mean different things for each?) In particular, should a moralist attempt to teach people what morality is ("metaethics"), or what things are moral ("ethics"), or both? If so, how, and how will the content of this teaching be the same as or different from the content or moral philosophy? Can we (again, according to Hume and Kant) be optimistic that moralists will be successful?

3. A related topic: one of the many motives that influence human action is

the motive of "speculation": i.e., people (at least some people) are motivated to investigate matters of truth or falsehood concerning certain ("interesting") topics. How, according to Hume and Kant, is this motive related to other motives, and in particular to *moral* motivation? Is speculation, according to them, always or sometimes (privately or socially) useful and/or moral, or, on the contrary, is it always or sometimes pernicious and/or immoral? Conversely: are moral truths and/or moral people, according to Hume and Kant, always "interesting" in a speculative sense, or are they (always or sometimes) boring? Given whatever problems may appear in these areas, how (if at all) do Hume and Kant try to justify their own investigations (as interesting and/or moral)?

4. What, according to Hume and according to Kant, would an exemplary, ideally moral person be like? What kind of *personality* would such a person have (according to each)? (That *can't* be answered well just by quoting Kant and Hume: you need to add up different things they say about morality and its motivations and imagine for yourself what kind of person they have in mind. In particular, if you say something like, "According to Kant, the ideally moral person would follow the categorical imperative," then you aren't understanding the question correctly.) How would each judge the other's moral person? How would each of them judge themselves? That is: how, based on their writings, do their own personalities compare to those of their respective exemplary moral people? (Can you think of another point of view from which both of these exemplary moral people, and/or both Hume and Kant, might seem deficient? E.g., what would Aristotle say, or Socrates, or Cervantes, or Achilles?)

5. The concepts of universality and objectivity (being the same for everyone, from every point of view) are important for both Hume and Kant. To what extent do they play the same role in both systems, and to what extent do they play different roles? Do they mean the same thing? (Who is "everyone"?) How do Hume and Kant's uses of these concepts relate to the traditional or common-sense notions that morality means treating others the way we would want them to treat us ("do as you would be done by")? (Can Hume and/or Kant be seen as interpreting such notions? As correcting them?) In what ways would

Kant say that Hume's analysis of morality, in terms of these concepts, is correct, and exactly where would he say Hume has got things wrong? What about Hume: what would he say about Kant in this respect?

6. Compare Kant's argument, at the beginning of section I of the *Grounding*, that the only absolutely good thing is a good will, with Socrates' argument in the *Meno* that knowledge is the good. (That argument officially begins near the end of 87b and continues to the beginning of 89c. But see also 77c–78b). How are these two arguments related? How might Kant think they are related? (Note his explicit mention of Socrates and the Socratic method towards the end of the section.) Would Kant say that Socrates goes wrong somewhere in his argument (thus ending up with knowledge rather than the will), and if so where would he say is the mistake? Or can Kant understand Socrates in such a way as to agree with him? What might Socrates say about Kant's argument, and how would Kant reply? Note that Socrates and Kant might not mean the same thing by "happiness" (or by "misery," which is the opposite of happiness).