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Can a Humean Be a Contractarian?

Abstract:

In this paper I argue, contrary to Hartmut Kliemt, that it is possible to be both a Humean and, in James Buchanan's sense, a contractarian. Hume sees principles of justice and political allegiance not as actual or hypothetical products of explicit agreement, but as conventions that have emerged spontaneously. However, it is fundamental to Hume's analysis that conventions are mutually advantageous, and hence cognate with agreements. The core idea in Buchanan's contractarianism is that the proper role of government is to implement voluntary exchanges between individuals, not to define and maximise a unified conception of social welfare. Although real politics cannot be based entirely on unanimous agreement, the voluntary exchange approach provides a valuable structure for normative economics.