

Ethics of Leadership

Moral Subjectivism

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Reading

- Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* (PDF on webpage).
- Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (PDF on webpage).
- Rachels and Rachels, "Subjectivism in Ethics" (PDF on webpage).
- Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn" (PDF on webpage).

Background

Recall that according to **moral relativism** there are no objective and universal moral values, norms, and principles that apply to all people everywhere. Instead, this position affirms that whether or not it is morally right for a person to act in a certain way depends on (is relative to) either cultural or individual acceptance. So far, we have examined **moral conventionalism**, which argues that morality is a matter of cultural or social acceptance. This set of readings now addresses **moral subjectivism**, which argues that morality is a matter of individual acceptance ("morality is in the eye of the beholder") because morality is solely determined by one's own personal reactions or feelings.

In particular, the selections from David Hume present a fairly sophisticated version of this position, arguing that morality is based on individual sentiment and emotion, but not on reason. Contrary to this, James Rachels and Stuart Rachels reject moral subjectivism, defending the use of reason and argumentation in ethics. The excerpts from Jonathan Bennett (you can read the full article in the course textbook, if you are curious for more) present three case studies showing how reason and sentiment (in particular, sympathy) can come into conflict and the different ways in which a person can respond to such a conflict.

Questions

1. According to David Hume, why is morality not derived from reason but from sentiment and emotion? What arguments does he give (using the examples of will murder and ingratitude) to show that reason cannot possibly be the foundation of morality?
2. Why do James Rachels and Stuart Rachels believe Ethical Subjectivism is such a popular position? What arguments do they make against both Simple Subjectivism and Emotivism?
3. In the three case studies presented by Jonathan Bennett, how does each person handle conflict between their reason and their emotions? How might Hume and the Rachels each advise a leader who faces such a conflict? How do you think a leader should respond?
4. Given that they reach different conclusions, Hume and the Rachels cannot both be right. Where exactly in their respective arguments do they disagree? Which position is supported by the strongest and most compelling argument?