

ETHICS of LEADERSHIP

Ethical Subjectivism

As you read the material for our 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 reading:

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 about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- Hume, D. (1978). *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2nd ed.) (L. A. Selby-Bigge & P. H. Nidditch, Eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1739–1740).
- Hume, D. (1975). *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. In L. A. Selby-Bigge & P. H. Nidditch (Eds.), *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (3rd ed., pp. 169–323). Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1777).
- Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. (2012). Subjectivism in Ethics. In *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (7th ed., pp. 32–48). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Background

Ethical relativism is the position denying that there are objective and universal moral values, norms, and principles that apply to all people everywhere. Instead, ethical relativism affirms that whether it is morally right or wrong for a person to act in a certain way depends on (is relative to) either individual or cultural acceptance. There are thus two different versions of ethical relativism:

1. **Ethical subjectivism**, which argues that morality is a matter of individual acceptance because morality is solely determined by one's own personal reactions or feelings, and
2. **Ethical conventionalism**, which argues that morality is a matter of social/cultural acceptance because morality is solely determined by the customs and laws of one's society/culture.

These readings lay out the debate over ethical subjectivism. On the one hand, the Scottish philosopher David Hume present a fairly sophisticated defense of ethical subjectivism, arguing that morality is based only individual sentiment and emotion, and not on reason. On the other hand, James Rachels and Stuart Rachels summarize and then reject ethical subjectivism, defending instead the use of reason and argumentation in ethics. (We will address ethical conventionalism in a later class.)

Questions

1. According to Hume, why is morality not derived from reason but from sentiment and emotion? What arguments does he give (using the examples of willful murder and ingratitude) to show that reason cannot possibly be the foundation of morality?
2. Rachels and Rachels mainly focus on one popular form of ethical subjectivism, which they call "emotivism". How does justification work in emotivism? In other words, how should a leader get others to agree with her decisions according to emotivism? (In answering this question, you might compare this to how rhetoric works according to Socrates in the *Gorgias*.)
3. Why do Rachels and Rachels believe that emotivism, and ethical subjectivism more generally, is seriously mistaken?