Introduction to Philosophy

The Nature of Morality: 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.

Readings

- David Hume, "Morality as Based on Sentiment".
- James Rachels, "Subjectivism in Ethics".

Background

Moral subjectivism is a form of moral relativism that views moral validity as based on personal decision ("morality is in the eye of the beholder"). David Hume defends a fairly sophisticated version of this conception of morality and James Rachels presents an argument against it.

Questions

1. According to David Hume, why is morality not derived from reason but from sentiments (i.e., 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 does James Rachels believe is Ethical Subjectivism such a popular position? What arguments does he make against both Simple Subjectivism and Emotivism?
3. Given that they reach different conclusions, Hume and 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?