

These consequences of the social dependency thesis reveal that it sets up a problematic relationship between what is socially permitted and what is morally right:

x is socially permitted \longleftrightarrow x is morally right

Rachels’ critique therefore highlights a crucial problem with this relation: it very severely restricts the type of reasons that one can appeal to when making moral justifications. One can only appeal to the practices of one’s society, and *nothing* more, no matter what.

Of course, the advocate of moral conventionalism might be willing to reject commonsense morality and so accept the seemingly unsavory consequences of the social dependency thesis. One problem with this, however, is justifying why national and cultural boundaries so privileged. Indeed, a critic of moral conventionalism may claim that there is only one boundary that matters: the human body. That is, morality is simply a matter of individual acceptance and not that of society. We will address this form of moral relativism, known as moral subjectivism, at our next meeting.

Introduction to Philosophy

Moral Conventionalism

Today we move into the second unit of the course, which is on the nature of ethics and morality (I will use these two words interchangeably). Put simply, ethics is concerned with answering what is known as the practical question.

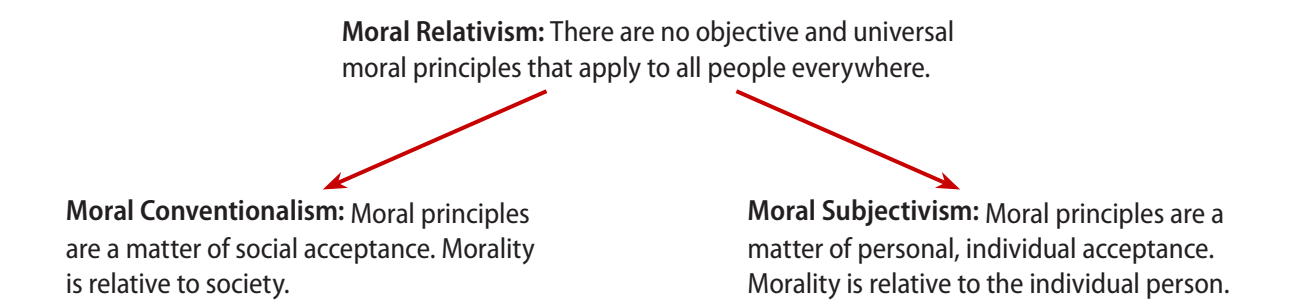
The Practical Question: What ought I do?

Trying to answer this question, however, raises a whole host of questions, two of which we will focus on in this unit:

1. What is the source of right and wrong?
2. What matters morally?

This unit will examine various answers to these questions, showing how they influence one’s possible answers to the more general practical question. Today, and for the next few classes, we focus on possible sources of right and wrong. After that, we will consider alternative understandings of what matters morally.

Today we begin by looking at moral conventionalism, which is a form of moral relativism.



Next class, we will discuss moral subjectivism, which is a very different form of relativism.

In beginning our analysis of moral conventionalism, it is important to recognize that the claim “morality is relative to society” can be understood as either a *descriptive* claim about different cultures or a *normative* claim about morality itself. You should recall this distinction from our previous discussion of Plato’s *Apology*, where the sphere of facts (or realm of the sciences) was distinguished from the sphere of values (or the realm of philosophy). When talking about conventionalism, we must always be careful to distinguish between the following:

Cultural Conventionalism:

Moral Conventionalism:

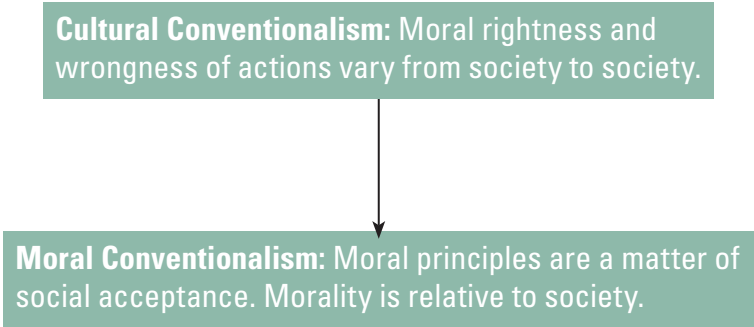
In her article, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”, the American anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948 CE) uses her research concerning various cultural practices of different societies to provide a defense for moral conventionalism.

We do not any longer make the mistake of deriving the morality of our own locality and decade directly from the inevitable constitution of human nature. We do not elevate it to the dignity of a first principle. We recognize that morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits. Mankind has always preferred to say, “It is a morally good”, rather than “It is habitual”. . . . But historically the two phrases are synonymous.

- Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”, p. 73.

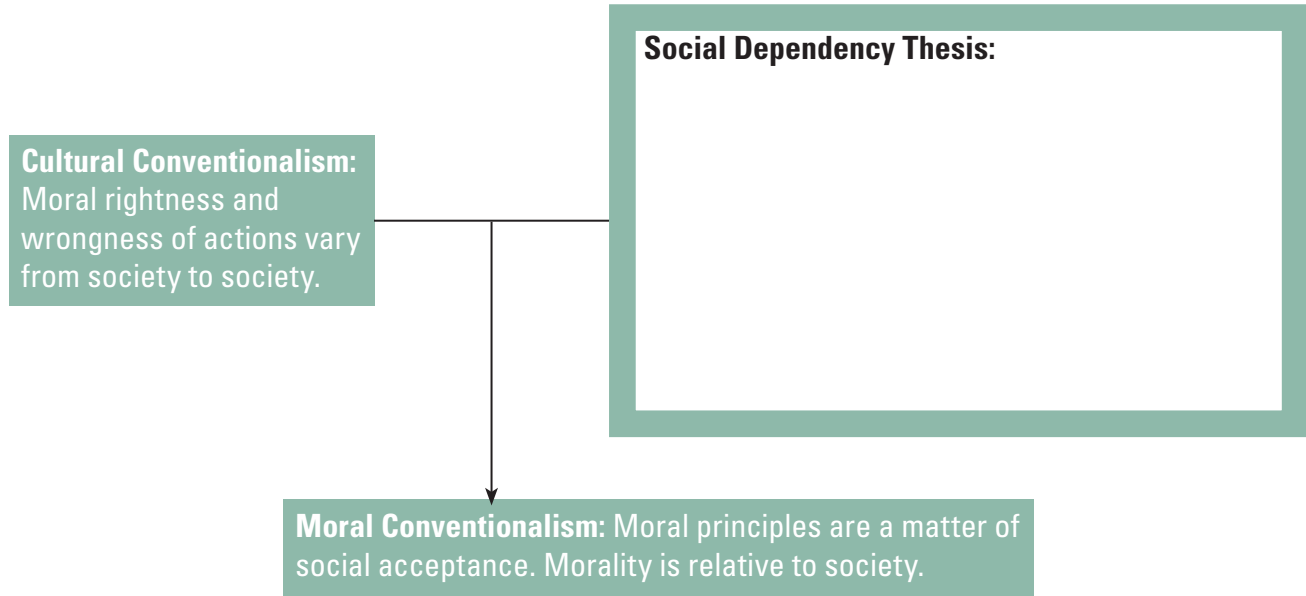
What sort of reasons does Ruth Benedict give in her article to convince us to accept moral conventionalism?

This allows us to create the following diagram illustrating her “cultural differences” argument:



The American philosopher and ethicist James Rachels (1941–2003 CE) is not convinced by this sort of argument. What simple logical problem does he accuse it of making?

Rachels’ criticism is serious and devastating. However, we can fix Benedict’s argument so that it is at least valid:



Rachels is still not impressed. First of all, how does he cast doubt on the truth of moral conventionalism?

Denying moral conventionalism, however, does not actually refute this argument. Why not?

This probably explains why Rachels spends a lot of time attacking the social dependency thesis. Rachels’ strategy here appears to be one of *reductio ad absurdum*. Recall from our discussion of the ontological argument for God’s existence, that this strategy involving accepting some claim for the sake of argument and then showing this claim contradicts more deeply held beliefs. In this case, Rachels assumes that the social dependency thesis is true and then shows how accepting this thesis contradicts some very deep beliefs people have concerning morality. Rachels gives some consequences of accepting the social dependency thesis, arguing that each of these contradicts commonsensical notions concerning the nature of morality:

Cannot criticize the practices of other societies:

Cannot praise the practices of other societies:

Cannot criticize the practices of our own society:

Moral “progress” is severely limited: