What is Rachels' defense of this argument? Why is this supposed to be a better argument that those made by moral conventionalists like Ruth Benedict or those made by moral subjectivists like Hume?

Once again, we are seeing how Rachels believes that the serious problem with moral relativism, whether understood conventionally or subjectively, is that it presumes a problematic relationship of the following sort:

x is socially permitted ⟷ x is morally right

x "feels" right ⟷ x is morally right

Rachels' critique of relativism therefore highlights how it severely restricts the type of reasons that one can appeal to when making moral justifications. Rachels' theory of "cognitivism", however, is more inclusive of reasons in general.

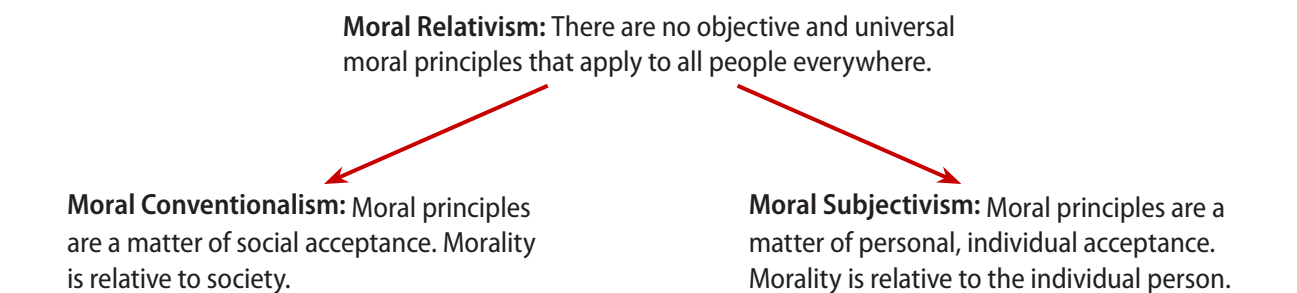
Introduction to Philosophy

Moral Subjectivism

As we discussed last time, ethics is concerned with answering the practical question: what ought I do? In order to answer that question, we have focused on a more particular question concerning the source of right and wrong. According to moral conventionalism, the source of right and wrong is one's own society or culture. This, in turn, answers the practical question by ordering you to obey the local laws and customs of the society or culture in which you find yourself. James Rachels, however, argued that accepting this theory comes at the cost of violating some fundamental notions of commonsense morality.

A die-hard advocate of moral conventionalism might nevertheless be willing to reject these notions. Even so, this does not avoid a cluster of conceptual concerns this theory raises, including the following questions:

1. What counts as "my society" when I belongs to different yet overlapping societies?
2. Whose views count as my society's views?
3. What counts as a "society" in the first place?

In line with this third issue, a person might claim she is already a society of one and so it is her views alone that determine the demands that morality may make upon her. This leads us to today's topic, which is another form of moral relativism called moral subjectivism. Recall the relationship between these three theories:

Moral Relativism: There are no objective and universal moral principles that apply to all people everywhere.

Moral Conventionalism: Moral principles are a matter of social acceptance. Morality is relative to society.

Moral Subjectivism: Moral principles are a matter of personal, individual acceptance. Morality is relative to the individual person.

Similar to what we noted last time about conventionalism, the claim "morality is relative to the individual" may be understood as either a *descriptive* claim about different individual persons or a *normative* claim about morality itself. As we did for conventionalism, we must always be careful to distinguish between them:

Descriptive Subjectivism:

Moral Subjectivism:

The American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908–1979 CE) developed one of the most common forms of moral subjectivism, which is known as emotivism.

Emotivism: Moral language only either tries to *influence* someone's behavior or *express* a person's feelings; moral language can do *nothing* more.
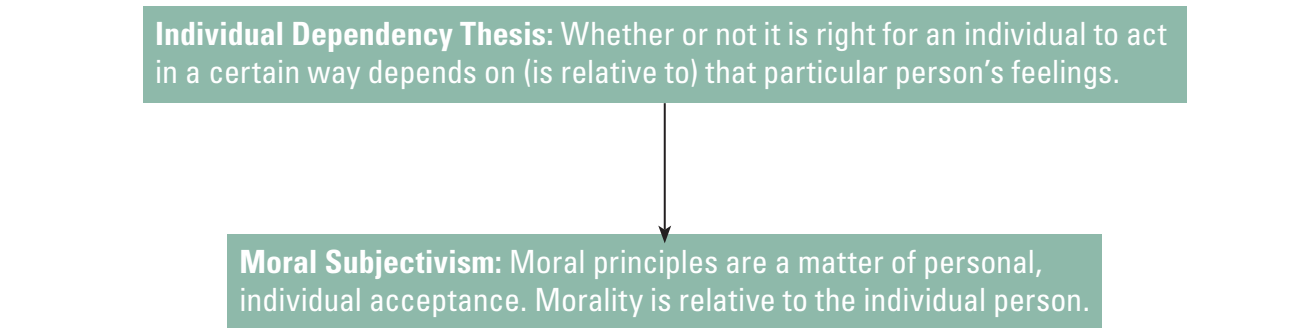
This theory is perhaps best summarized by the American author Earnest Hemming (1899–1961 CE):

So far, about morals, I know only what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.

- Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*.

Emotivism was one of the most influential theories of ethics during the twentieth century. According to proponents of this theory, morality cannot be put into the same category as the disciplines dealing with facts, like mathematics or the sciences, for example. And without facts, so the emotivist continues, morality can only be left to work with attitudes, emotions, and feelings. In other words, it is assumed that there are simply no moral facts, and so morality can only be about personal taste and nothing more.

The basic argument in favor of moral subjectivist theories has a similar structure to the one we saw arguing in favor of moral conventionalism, and this new argument can be diagrammed as follows:

> **Individual Dependency Thesis:** Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on (is relative to) that particular person's feelings.

> **Moral Subjectivism:** Moral principles are a matter of personal, individual acceptance. Morality is relative to the individual person.
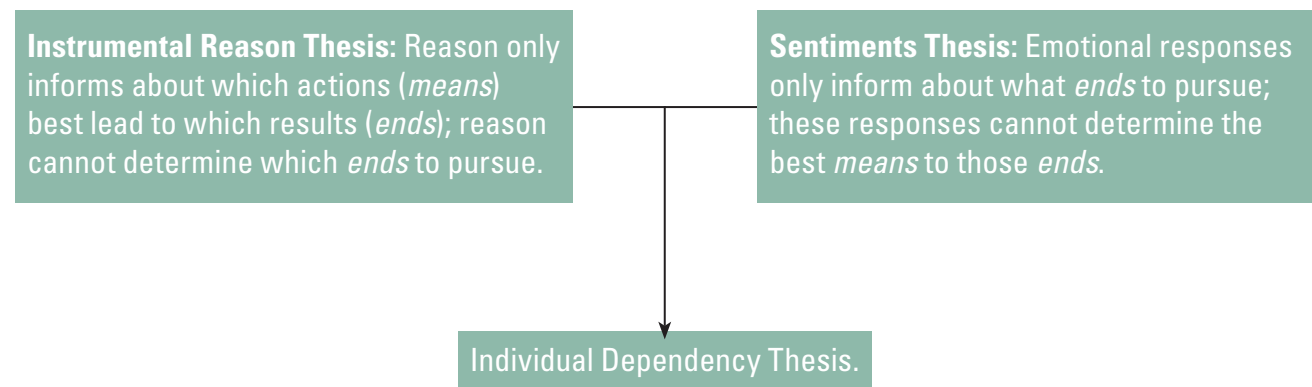
While we will not be reading Stevenson in this class, David Hume was also vigorous defender of moral subjectivism and the individual dependency thesis.

> Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder, for instance. Examine it in all lights, and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call vice. . . . You never can find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; bit 'tis the object of feeling, not of reason. It lies in yourself, not in the object.
> - David Hume, *A Treatise Concerning Human Nature.*

A rough outline of Hume's argument appears in the following diagram:

> **Instrumental Reason Thesis:** Reason only informs about which actions (*means*) best lead to which results (*ends*); reason cannot determine which *ends* to pursue.

> **Sentiments Thesis:** Emotional responses only inform about what *ends* to pursue; these responses cannot determine the best *means* to those *ends*.
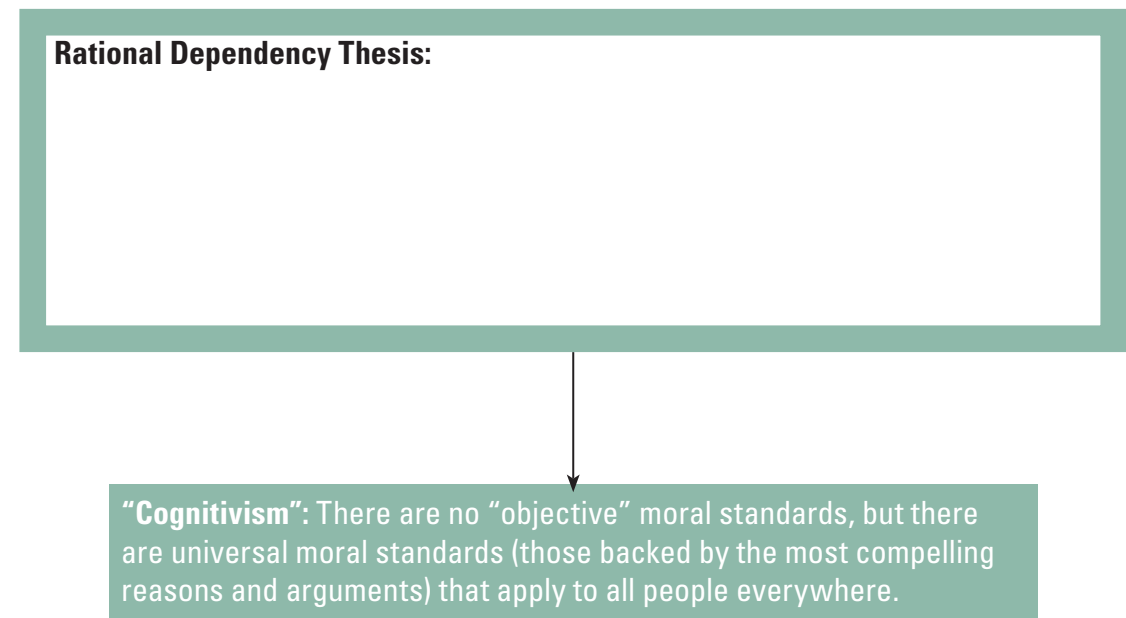
> Individual Dependency Thesis.

What reasons does Hume give for us to accept the truth of these two theses?

Recall the *reductio ad absurdum* strategy that James Rachels employed when challenging the truth of the *social* dependency thesis. That is, Rachels assumed this thesis was true and derived consequences that contradicted commonsense morality. How might this strategy be employed against the *individual* dependency thesis?

Hume was almost certainly aware of objections like this. For instance, the bishop of Gloucester wrote to Hume's publisher with concerns about the consequences of accepting moral subjectivism. How does Hume appeal to features of human psychology in order to attempt to answer these concerns without giving up moral subjectivism?

Rachels is clearly aware of this response and the more general difficulty of challenging moral relativism in either its conventionalist or subjectivist forms. This is why Rachels instead offers an alternative argument concerning the foundation of morality, which may be diagrammed as follows:

> **Rational Dependency Thesis:**

> **"Cognitivism":** There are no "objective" moral standards, but there are universal moral standards (those backed by the most compelling reasons and arguments) that apply to all people everywhere.

I call Rachels' conclusion here "cognitivism" because of the important role it has reason play at the very foundations of morality. I use the quotes around the word, however, to indicate that I am using this term rather loosely. Philosophers typically mean something a bit different when they talk about cognitivism (without the quotes).