

## Deconstructing Prinz's moral theory

### Desconstruindo a teoria moral de Prinz

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#### Abstract

This paper focuses in an explanation of Prinz's moral proposal in the book *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, specific in the role that emotions and sentiments play in his system. The first part relates to the presentation and explanation of his two main theses, namely, a metaphysical and an epistemic approach of morality. A good understanding of the main concepts worked by the author may shine a light in what he understands as morality, providing a better view of how and when he turns away from naturalism, despite of the large number of empirical studies that he presents in his book. The result of this paper will be a better understanding of the position he defends and how his approach is a deception in terms of a naturalistic view of morality, arguing that his theses are, at the end, an empirically disguised culturalism.

#### Keywords

Prinz; Moral; Emotionism; Naturalism; Culturalism.

#### Resumo

Este artigo foca numa explicação da proposta moral de Prinz no livro *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, especificamente no papel que emoções e sentimentos desempenham no seu sistema. A primeira parte é relativa a apresentação e explicação de sua duas teses principais, a saber, uma aproximação metafísica e uma epistêmica da moralidade. Uma boa compreensão dos principais conceitos trabalhados pelo autor poderá trazer luz sobre o que ele entende como moralidade, provendo uma visão melhor sobre como e quando ele se afasta do naturalismo, apesar do grande número de estudos empíricos que ele apresenta em seu livro. O resultado desse artigo será uma melhor compreensão da posição que ele defende e como sua aproximação é enganosa em termos de uma visão naturalista da moralidade, argumentando que sua tese é, no fim, um culturalismo empiricamente disfarçado.

#### Palavras-chave

Prinz; Moral; Emocionismo; Naturalismo; Culturalismo.

Jesse Prinz's book *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007) is the third in trilogy paralleling the structure of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. The first one was *Furnishing the Mind* (2002), followed by *Gut Reactions* (2004), where he presents empiricist theories of concepts and emotions. His approach of morality follows the same argumentative structure present in his previous work, namely, drawing on the best available evidence provided by psychology and anthropology in order to support a philosophical thesis. This makes his sentimentalist theory of morality quite interesting for an analysis, since he tries to establish a relation between empirical data and the traditional problem of the foundation of moral judgments. Few moral philosophers seek to ground their approach of such questions in neighbor disciplines, which make his work quite unusual in its philosophical scope and depth.

Drawing on his previous work, the author seek to sustain an emotionism built upon a non-cognitive theory of morality based on emotions, in order to establish the priority of these

latter over any other moral judgment. In his embodied appraisal theory (2002; 2004), emotions are conceived as somatic signals representing concerns about the world. In this sense, they are representations functionally grouped in calibration files by their capacity to cause certain somatic signals. To put shortly, there would be a few number of these kinds of signals that would produce different emotions, either by changes or combination in the calibration files that activates them.

In what concerns of this line of thought, Prinz's work is original in terms that he is bridging several gaps between different scientific communities that should interact more with each other. However, Prinz's end up with a point of view that goes against a naturalistic explanation of morality and, therefore, against the very own data that he uses to sustain his theory. It is impossible to cover all the ground discussed in Prinz's book in a short article, but let me at least highlight the main theses defended in the book in order to show how he is more a culturalist than a naturalist.

### **1. Introducing Emotionism**

The emotionist theory of morality defended by Prinz has two main theses. The first is a metaphysical one, where an action has the property of being morally wrong or right in case it causes feelings of disapprobation or approbation in regular observers under certain conditions. Here Prinz argues that moral properties, in the way they are expressed in ordinary moral concepts, are impossible for us to grasp without our ability to experience emotions. Ultimately these sorts of reactions are the only base to unify moral properties for lack of any other distinctive feature. This leads us to his epistemic theses, where this kind of disposition is view as a possession condition of the standard concept of wrong or right. His argument goes here in the direction of the impossibility for those who lack emotions, such as psychopaths, to have moral concepts.

The emotionism sustains that moral emotions are those triggered by the detection of a behavior that conforms or violates a social rule. According to Prinz (2007, p. 29), "having a moral attitude is a matter of having an emotional disposition". However, he makes a distinction between reactive moral emotions, such as anger, contempt or disgust for a person transgressing a norm, from the reflexive moral emotions, related here to the varieties of shame and guilt one may experience when himself are the transgressor. These sorts of emotions are context-sensitive occurrent manifestations related to a long-term memory disposition that Prinz call moral sentiments. Notice that they may vary across different social contexts, but are not relative inside these contexts.

Prinz's approach constitutes some sort of phenomenology of moral emotions that he tries to relate with psychological and anthropological experiments. He associates this form of emotionism with sensibility theories, such as the ones defended by most of the British moralists of the eighteenth century. For the author, the epistemology of his theory should be understood in a particular non-mandatory way. Accordingly, in order to competently taken a moral concept, the individual must have, or have had, some sort of emotional episode, or at least be disposed to have that emotion. In fact, Prinz (2007, p. 16) states that "moral concepts [...] are constituted by emotions". The question that remains here is about the necessity of an individual be able to recognize concepts in order to be able to have moral sentiments and how he does that in the non-cognitive way that Prinz seek to defend. A look into Prinz's sentimentalist theory may share some light on that.

#### *1.1 Prinz's sentimentalist theory*

In his epistemic theses, Prinz defines ordinary moral concepts as detectors of the properties of rightness or wrongness existing in a socio-cultural environment. These detectors comprise a

sentiment that disposes an individual to feel emotions in the approbation or disapprobation range. Moral judgments have their foundation in concepts of this kind, been equated with sentiments that elicit emotions in a person. Prinz (2007, p.36) mentions the *Trolley Problems* as a case that purports to show that “when people attribute emotions, they also experience them”. Although the articulation of this sort of judgment can be inferential, their ultimate grounding norm resides in a social sentiment accessed by one's emotions. “The standard concept WRONG is a detector for the property of wrongness that comprises a sentiment that disposes its possessor to experience emotions in the disapprobation range” (Prinz, 2007, p.94).

Prinz's explanation of moral rightness and wrongness has a formulation that fits a standard format. For example, an action **A** has the moral property **M**, just in case of **A** causes in subject **S** a response of the type **R** under circumstances **C**. The author seeks to withdraw all the references to variable **C**, establishing **S**'s response to **R** a sentiment, understood here as a dispositional property, which already has circumstances of manifestation built into it. In other words, the sentiment **S** is going to be the disposition to experience **F** under circumstances **C**. Prinz bases this structure in evidences from experimental psychology that presents observations of people mentioning emotional episodes as justification for their judgments about moral norms, such as the harm that violations cause.

Prinz's sentimentalist theory ends up being a new version of this kind of sensibility approach about morality, but taking the moral properties as having a response-dependent nature. The main cost of his theses is an exterior-relativism, since that the sentiments to which emotions are directed can be different if we consider the existence of a huge variety of social environments. He accepts that, but argues in favor of an internal-realism about moral properties. Prinz (2007, p. 168) claims that “they are made by our sentiments, and, once made, they can be perceived”. This form of sentimentalism promotes a relative-relativism, where context contributes towards the determination of the content of moral judgments. However, it is not relative inside the social environment, when one's emotions could be considered right or wrong in relation to the sentiment that prevails in the society in which he lives. Prinz's constructive sentimentalist theses explain how these social sentiments emerge and develop, but the explanation is based on culture construction and not in evolutionism.

I do not deny that morality is ecumenical, but I think it is not innate – at least that the current state of evidence is unpersuasive. Morality, like all human capacities, depends on having particular biological predispositions, but none of these, I submit, deserves to be called a moral faculty. Morality is a byproduct – accidental or invented – of faculties that evolved for other purposes (Prinz, 2008, p. 01).

Considering that the social-relativist aspect of his theory might give room for the justification of totalitarian governments, he seeks some kind of objective genealogy of moral values. He grounded this on an edifying discourse that sustains a moral progress based on the relation between knowledge and moral improvement, contradicting the non-cognitive approach he looks for in the beginning of his book. The argument goes in favor of the discourse that knowledge promotes a healthy tolerance, improving our social conditions. In other words, the biological foundation of the social behavior would not yield morality without cultural elaboration. Prinz ends up putting the foundation and origin of morality in artificially constructed bases, putting aside a naturalistic thesis in favor of a more conventional culturalism.

## 2. Deconstructing Prinz's naturalism

Prinz's construction of a moral theory based on emotions brings a strong relativism, namely, the idea that moral properties are culturally relative. He points out, however, that the sentiments

presented within these social environments may actually converge, being directly related to the artificial aspects of cultural education. For the author, only social relations establish inside a culture can develop sentiments, which are recognized and accessed by the emotions presents in any individual, functioning as guides to determine the righteousness and wrongness of an action. According to Prinz (2008, p. 28), “religion, like morality, appears everywhere, but not because it is innate. It appears everywhere because it is a nearly inevitable consequence of other capacities”. In other words, moral sentiments are acquired through sufficient moral education in a culture, but may vary in different cultures.

There are three main aspect emphasizes by Prinz in what concerns the role that culture plays in morality. The first one is that culture is the cause of morality, since that in his view all moral values came from a culture. A second aspect is that culture ends up being an effect of morality. Notice that individuals who have acquired similar moral values in some culture are more inclined to cooperate with each other, maintaining the social structure for their culture. Last, but not the least, culture is the reason for the existence of morality. This can be understood in the sense that morality exists because it has served for cultures as maintenance system of its social relations. Namely, the moral behavior emerged as a necessity for making and maintaining a socio-cultural community stable.

Prinz uses several studies in the field of psychology, biology and anthropology to sustain that emotions are related to how individuals realize moral distinctions. However, the central point of his thoughts on morality relies in the essential relationship between sentiments and moral judgments, where sentiment is a disposition to experience emotions under certain circumstances. Following the argumentation strategy proposed by Prinz, namely, use data from science to support a philosophical position, the problem in this case regards of what empirical data should be consulted in order to confirm this sort of relation.

There are two main problems in Prinz’s approach. The first one consists that he can’t prove the presence of a non-manifest disposition, adding a metaphysical element to his theory. The second derives from the first, and is in the impossibility to empirically prove the presence of an essential relation between moral judgments and the non-manifested phenomena of culturally based sentiments, as opposed to a naturalistic explanation grounded in natural characteristics presents in social mammals. In this point, Prinz is just throwing away all the empirical data from evolutionary biology, ethology, experimental psychology and archeology that show a huge variety of social structure communities, which do not need complex artificial constructions for the individuals to maintain their social relations or their capacity to approve and censor social behaviors.

### **3. Conclusion**

This article is indeed a small analysis of Prinz’s theory and it does not enter in all the small nuances of his proposal. However, I think it is sufficient to show that his alleged naturalism is just a traditional cultural based investigation of morality, disguised by the several experiments that he so hardly explain throughout his book. In this sense, his claims are a bit less original than his first works, such as *The Emotional bases of Moral Judgments* (2006), where he gives more credit to the natural disposition that inclines social mammals in engage into social behaviors. I grant that he seeks a new approach, but ends up with no radically new conclusions.

The most disturbing problem in the moral psychology advocated by Prinz is that there are no real clues about the natural mechanisms that connects the emotional bases of morality and its actual functioning in social groups. In the end, there is no empirical evidence that can show how a moral rule is sentimentally stored and related to the basic emotions experienced by individuals. It is a fact that the basic emotions listed by Prinz are found in a great number of

cultures, but this do not establish cultural aspects as necessary for the operation and emergence of these empirically identifiable social rules.

There is no way to know that the compliance between emotions and moral norms are linked in the way that Prinz claims to be, and not rather by other and more natural characteristics. Without a new evolutionist genealogy that explains the basic emotional ground underlying the moral norms, the constructive part of the naturalistic approach remains unfinished. In what concerns morality, Prinz fails in this task once that the objectivity awarded by him is nothing more than a position of a metaphysical culture based principle, rather than a factual and causal explanation of the emergence and development of this mechanism in the world.

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