

Seminar “Reading Prinz’s *The Emotional Construction of Morals*”

Session 6 (13:00-15:00, May 30, 2008)

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In session 6, we read chapter 4: “Against Objectivity”. We finished reading the Part One of Prinz’s book. We will proceed to the Part Two: “Constructing Morals” next week.

In this chapter, Prinz tried to argue for his subjective theory of morality. First, he claimed that there are varieties of objectivity. He carefully distinguished them in 4.1. Subsequently, he criticized a series of objectivist theories in 4.2, and finally proposed his “subjective realism” in 4.3.

Prinz classified objectivity into four types. Two kinds of objectivity relate to impartiality. The remaining two kinds of objectivity have relevance to psychological independence.

Prinz claimed an objective fact corresponds to an impartial judgment in a sense. You can construe an impartial judgment in two ways: one is a judgment without any biases, or the other is a judgment made by a rational process. The first type of objectivity is involved with the ideal observer theory, and the second one is related to Kantian ethics. Prinz examined Kantian ethics in chapter 3, and he refuted it there. Prinz also criticized the ideal observer theory in 4.2.1. In the ideal observer theory, “something is right (or wrong) if it causes approbation (disapprobation) under ideal observation conditions” (p. 142). “Ideal observer conditions” can be satisfied when an observer has no bias. Prinz objected that our moral practice does not relate to such impartiality; our morality is related to our biased cultural setting. The ideal observer theory fails to capture our morality.

Prinz mentioned another intuition that objectivity tied to psychological independence. But you can interpret psychological independence in two senses. Transcendental objectivity is one of the psychological independent objectivities. When a fact can exist without any minds, it is transcendently objective. The natural kinds theory discussed in 4.2.2 adopts this kind of objectivity. The natural kinds theorists claim that moralities are natural kinds: they have objective essences like water. Prinz pointed out some nonconformities with ordinary natural kinds. Thus, he claimed moral concepts do not refer to mind-independent properties.

Another kind of the psychological independent objectivities is representation independence. When something can have a property without being represented as such,

this fact is objective. The objective theories which adopt this type of objectivity are virtue ethics, consequentialism, and conventionalism.

Virtue ethics relates to virtuous characters. These traits surely depend on psychology, but do not depend on a representation. Although Prinz defended virtue ethics from some objections, he finally rejected it; you cannot figure out what morally good traits are.

Consequentialists claim that “the moral merit depends on outcome” (p. 158). In classic utilitarianism, a morally good thing maximizes happiness. If you interpret happiness as a psychological state, consequentialism is psychologically dependent but representationally independent. Prinz regarded consequentialism as a revisionist theory in that it does not intend to describe our moral practice. Hence it does not conflict with his theory.

Conventionalism regards moralities as social facts. Our consensus creates them. Conventionalists think morality is just like a marriage. If you follow certain procedures, a marriage lasts even if there is no practice or psychological state. In this regard, conventionalism relates to a weaker notion of representation independence: a social fact needs to be represented only once. Prinz partially agreed with conventionalism: moral properties are social constructions. But he objected that moral rules demand practice. Thus, morality is not objective even in the weakest sense.

After he rejected all versions of objectivism, Prinz proposed his subjective realism in 4.3. Although he regarded moral properties as socially constructed, he argued moral properties are real. According to certain kinds of realism,¹ you can count something as real when it has causal power. Prinz insisted that moral properties are causally efficacious. Prof. Nobuhara pointed out that Prinz’s argument for the causal power of a moral property was not straightforward. It was enough for Prinz to show a parallel between functional and moral properties.

Take a speedometer for example. It is said to have a function to indicate a speed of a vehicle and by indicating the speed it causes safer driving. It can sometimes fail to cause smooth driving. For example, brakes may be broken, or a driver might fall asleep. But a speedometer reliably causes smooth driving under normal conditions. Moral properties perfectly square with this functional case. Moral properties are emotion-inducing properties, and they cause our relevant emotions. Hence, moral properties are subjective and real.

¹ Harman, G. (1977). *The Nature of Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;
Sturgeon, N. L. (1985). Moral Explanations. In D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (eds.), *Morality, Reason and Truth*, pp. 49-78. Totowa, NJ: Rowan and Allanheld.

In this chapter, Prinz objected to objectivist theories of moral properties. According to him, moral properties are subjective: moral facts are social constructions. But he also claimed that moral properties are real. He named his position *constructive sentimentalism*. He will focus on this constructive side of morality in the Part Two.