

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

Session 10 (13:00-15:00, June 27, 2008)

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We dealt with chapter 7: The Limits of Evolutionary Ethics in our tenth session. We read the first half of the chapter (7.1-7.2.2). In this chapter, Prinz tried to deny the existence of innate morality, examining evolutionary ethicists who endorse it. He handled with evolved behaviors which can be construed as morally relevant (7.1), and subsequently criticized evolutionary ethics (7.2).

In 7.1, Prinz introduced three domains of morally relevant behaviors which can be also seen in the animal kingdom: behaviors that are altruistic, relevant to social dominance hierarchies, and related to sexual relations. First, we share things with others and help them. Second, we have norms forbidding violations of social rank. Third, we have other norms against infidelity and incest. All of these behaviors are explained in terms of natural selection, and similar behaviors are seen in animals.

Relying on these empirical evidences, evolutionary ethicists contend our norms which are achieved in the process of evolution (say, “natural norms”) are authoritative, compared with norms which are varied across cultures. But evolutionary ethicists diverge from each other on the status of morality. There are two positions: skepticism and realism.

The skepticist claims our morality is a hard-wired illusion by our genes.¹ This is a sort of Nietzschean criticism: evolutionary biology reveals our natural norms are not what we presumably believed. Prinz responded that our morality is not so fixed as Ruse supposed. We can change our values by enculturation. Prinz criticized Ruse’s argument as follows: misunderstanding the origin of morality does not make our morality an illusion. On the other hand, the realist claims anything biologically fitter is morally better. Natural norms are products of natural selection, and thus they are authoritative. But this concept of “good” is highly counter-intuitive. Hence neither skepticism nor realism is persuasive. Prinz concluded there is no reason to think natural norms should be privileged.

In 7.2.2, Prinz negatively assessed the possibility of non-human primates' morality. Although many evolutionary ethicists endorse it, Prinz argued morality is exclusive to human beings. Non-human primates apparently do moral behaviors, such

¹ Ruse, M. (1991) “The Significance of Evolution”. In P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*, pp. 500-10. Oxford: Blackwell.

as sharing, helping, and so on. But you can interpret them in non-moral ways. These interpretations are even simpler than moral ones. Prinz also pointed out that our morality is “a system of rules and values used to assess actions, agents, and attitudes” (p. 261), and thus oughtitudes are central to our morality. To have oughtitudes, non-human primates must have emotions like guilty or anger, but this is not likely the case. Prinz concluded non-human primates do not have enough capacities for morality.

I have a comment here. In 7.2.2, Prinz cast doubt on altruistic motives of primates. Prinz said that one can do altruistic behaviors without altruistic motives and these deeds can be brought about from selfish motives. But it is at least philosophically controversial to ascribe any motive to non-human animals if you think motives belong to the space of reason. Prinz presumably used “motives” in another way. He seemed to believe one can be said to have an altruistic motive if he/she systematically conducts altruistic behavior even in cases that recipients of the behavior would not reciprocate it. In this sense, non-human animals can also have a motive. Although this usage is not inconsistent, it was safer for Prinz to refrain from animal motives because the concept of motive is tied to more awkward concepts such as self-knowledge or responsibility.

In 7.2.2, Prinz concluded morality does not prevail in the animal kingdom. Hence, the comparative method is not available for the proof of innate morality. We are going to read the remainder of the chapter (7.2.3–7.3) next week, where Prinz will show nurture is the key to morality.