

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

Session 1 (13:00-15:00, April 18, 2008)

Presented by Eisuke Nakazawa

Reported by Ryoji Sato

This session held on April 18 was the opening session. We read the Preamble: “Naturalism and Hume’s Law”. First, I will briefly explain the content of the Preamble. After that, I will mention our discussions and comments in the session.

In the Preamble, Prinz sets his theme in this book. His main concern is how naturalists deal with normativity. Naturalists are those who emphasize continuity between philosophy and science. In a metaphysical sense, naturalists think all entities are natural ones which can be investigated by empirical sciences. In a methodological sense, naturalists claim that there is no a priori tool for philosophers that is distinguished from empirical tools used in sciences.

According to Hume’s law, we cannot deduce a sentence which has prescriptive force from descriptive sentences. Although it allures philosophers to regard morality as something supernatural or to take moral nihilism, Prinz pursues a naturalist way to investigate morality. For this purpose, we must deal with Hume’s law. In the sections “Breaking Hume’s Law” and “Saving Hume’s Law”, Prinz scrutinizes the entailment of it.

Before we tackle Hume’s law, I have to mention Prinz’s claim on a strong connection between morality and emotion. According to him, an ought judgment expresses what he calls “a prescriptive sentiment”. Prinz says, “A prescriptive sentiment is a complex emotional disposition. If one has this sentiment about a particular form of conduct, then one is disposed to feel badly if one doesn’t (p. 4)”. Since he thinks moral judgments are tied to a sentiment of a particular person, Prinz endorses the subjectivism of morality.

The connection between morality and emotion mentioned above plays a central role in Prinz’s argument that derives an ought from is. If naturalism is right, every prescriptive fact supervenes on descriptive facts. In other words, a prescriptive fact has an underlying descriptive fact. This is “breaking a Hume’s law” in a sense. Then, Prinz gives an argument. I will cite it from the book (p. 5).

1. Smith has an obligation to give to charity if “Smith ought to give to charity” is true.
2. “Smith ought to give to charity” is true, if the word “ought” expresses a concept that applies to Smith’s relationship to giving to charity.
3. The word “ought” expresses a prescriptive sentiment.
4. Smith has a prescriptive sentiment towards giving to charity.
5. Thus, the sentence “Smith ought to give to charity” is true.
6. Thus, Smith has an obligation to give to charity.

In this argument, all premises (1-5) are descriptive, but the conclusion (6) is a prescriptive fact. It certainly seems violating Hume’s law.

But, Prinz says Hume’s law is not violated in another sense, because the term “prescriptive fact” has ambiguity. You can think “a prescriptive fact is just a fact about what someone is obligated to do”, or you can think a prescriptive fact is a prescription (p. 6). We should construe the conclusion in the former sense, because the conclusion was that “Smith has an obligation to give to charity”, not that “Smith ought to give to charity”. Prinz says, an “ought” expresses a prescriptive sentiment of a speaker of the sentence, but there is no premise that the speaker has any emotional disposition to charity. Hence the premises can entail not an “ought” but an “obligation”, which does not necessarily have a prescription. “Obligation” conversationally implicates “ought” but not as a semantic entailment. Finally, only prescriptive facts in the former sense can be deduced by the argument. You cannot deduce a prescription from it.

In the section “Defending Subjectivism”, Prinz claims morality is subjective. He says moral concepts like “good” and “bad” or “right” and “wrong” are subjective concepts as “ought”. Moreover, he wants to derive metaphysical facts from psychological facts. Concepts “good” and “bad” refer to good and bad, and if our moral concepts are strongly tied to subjective responses,

moral concepts may refer to something subjective.

I have thus far reviewed the Preamble. In the following, I will introduce our discussions and comments in the session. We examined the argument above. One might wonder premise (1) is needed. It seems that you can entail that Smith ought to give to charity from disquotation of (5), which is derived from premises (2), (3), and (4). If you are convinced of a distinction between “ought” and “obligation”, you come to think premise (1) is indispensable.

Furthermore, we concluded that a sentence in the argument, “Smith ought to give to charity”, should have the phrase, “uttered by Smith”. The reason for this is a prescriptive sentiment is that of the speaker. In this argument, a person who has a sentiment is none other than Smith, thus the sentence “Smith ought to give to charity” has to be uttered by Smith.

At the end of the session, we discussed our stances to Prinz when reading his book. He endorses subjectivism and relativism, although academic trends in ethics are moral realism and anti-relativism. We shall look carefully into strength of connections between emotionism and subjectivism or emotionism and relativism. Whether they are dissociable is an interesting question.