

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

Session 7 (13:00-15:00, June 6, 2008)

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In session 7, we read the first section of chapter 5 “Dining with Cannibals”: “Moral Relativism Defined and Defended”. In this section, Prinz clarified his relativist position as a result of the sensibility theory. Prinz dealt with three contrasts in 5.1: Descriptive Relativism versus Metaethical Relativism (5.1.1), Appraiser Relativism and Agents Relativism (5.1.2), and Content Relativism and Truth Relativism (5.1.3). I will present these issues in turn.

Descriptivism Relativism (hereafter, DR) is the thesis that some people have fundamentally different moral values. This is fairly uncontroversial: some say premarital sex is wrong; others do not. On the other hand, Metaethical Relativism (hereafter, MR) is a contentious thesis that the truth conditions of a moral judgment depend on the context in which the judgment is formed. Although DR cannot simply entail MR, Prinz argued MR can turn out to be true if you adopt the sensibility theory; on the sensibility theory, moral properties depend on sentiments of people, and moral facts vary if you have different sentiments.

But, you have to pay attention to the point that not only DR but also MR is descriptive. It was suggested by Prof. Nobuhara in the session. MR can be true under the sensibility theory. But the truth of the sensibility theory was attained from scientific data and observations of our linguistic practice (See Part I of the book). Scientific data and observations of our linguistic practice are, undoubtedly, descriptive. Thus, MR is also a descriptive thesis. I think this labeling is a little misleading. Recall that Prinz’s project in this book is totally descriptive. He tries to figure out what our morality is, not what our morality *should* be. This position is greatly different from revisionist theories of morality such as normative ethics or utilitarianism. Revisionist theorists would not derive metaethical claims only from our current use of moral terms.

The second contrast relates to the truth conditions of a moral judgment. If DR and constructive sentimentalism are right, a moral judgment changes its truth value, depending on sentiments. But, whose sentiments matter? There are two options: sentiments of appraisers of action or those of agents. Prinz endorsed both. Moral judgments are relative to appraisers and also to agents. According to the analysis of the concept of “ought”, we can say “an ought judgment conveys the fact that a norm has authority over the behavior of the person addressed by that judgment” (p. 178). Thus,

an ought-judgment (e.g. X ought to ϕ) becomes true if and only if both the appraiser and the agent have the same sentiment (e.g. a sentiment of disapprobation not to ϕ).

Relativists claim that moral judgment depends on the context. But, there are two kinds of context sensitivity: Content Relativism and Truth Relativism. This is the third contrast. Content relativists maintain the contents of judgments depend on contexts. By contrast, truth relativists maintain judgments have always the same content, but their truth varies across contexts of evaluation. Prinz endorses content relativism. According to the sensibility theory, when you judge something is wrong, wrongness refers to the property which is the object of the appraiser's disapprobation. Thus, if the appraiser changes, the referent property of wrongness can change. The content of wrongness surely looks determined by the context: the appraiser.

To summarize, Prinz adopted Metaethical Relativism, Appraiser Relativism, and Content Relativism. Prinz will defend his position from severe objections in 5.2.