

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

Session 2 (13:00-15:00, April 25, 2008)

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The session on April 25 was our second session, we read chapter 1: “Emotionism”. As I reported the last session, I give a summary of the chapter, and then proceed to several points discussed in the session.

In chapter 1, Prinz proposed emotionism: the thesis which claims morality is essentially related with emotions. Then he distinguished two kinds of emotionism: metaphysical emotionism and epistemological emotionism. Metaphysical emotionism is the thesis that moral properties are essentially related to emotions, and epistemological emotionism is the thesis that moral concepts are essentially related to emotions. Prinz endorsed both kinds of emotionism, and named this type of emotionism “strong emotionism”.

After Prinz clarified his position, he tried to argue for emotionism, citing a lot of empirical data from empirical psychology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, and psychopathology. His main aim in this chapter is to support epistemic emotionism. For this purpose, he showed emotions can influence our moral judgments first of all. He claimed “[c]onflicting rules have different emotional strength, and the stronger emotions win out” (p. 25). He examined the famous trolley case here.

Second of all, not only emotions can influence moral judgments, Prinz showed moral judgments have an emotional basis which cannot be justified by reason alone. He mentioned dumbfounding results to make his case. Let me explain the dumbfounding results by quoting from Prinz. “If we ask people why they hold a particular moral view, they may offer some reasons, but those reasons are often superficial and post hoc. If the reasons are successfully challenged, the moral judgment often remains” (p. 29). Prinz continues as follows: “When pressed, people’s deepest moral values are based not on decisive arguments that they discovered while pondering moral questions, but on deeply inculcated sentiments” (p. 29). Prinz says “we have hit rock bottom” (p. 31). In other words, we have basic values without justification.

Third of all, Prinz attempted to show that we cannot master moral concepts by a non-standard way which does not involve emotions. He has thus far showed the actual relationship between emotion and morality, and then he tried to show the relationship is not contingent, but necessary. Then he invented a thought experiment: the story of moral Mary. This is a variation of Frank Jackson’s Mary. Moral Mary has not had moral experiences and educations at all, but she knows all there to know about normative ethics. It seems that Mary can wonder whether her moral judgment is really right, however. Prinz concluded that concepts appear in normative ethics differ from moral concepts such as “right” or “wrong”. Moral concepts are more tied to emotions.

In this way, Prinz supported epistemological emotionism: moral concepts are essentially related to emotions. He used so many scientific data that I cannot explain all here. Prinz regards emotionism as an empirical theory. It is “inferred to the best explanation”.

Now, I explain about what we discussed in the session. I will mention two topics. First, we discussed the relationship among Moral Mary, an amoralist, and a psychopath. Amoralists are those who can make moral judgments without any motivation. Psychopaths are real people those who chronically commit crimes and use violence without feeling guilty or sorrow for victims. Although they appeared in different contexts, it is not impossible to compare Moral Mary, an amoralist, and a psychopath. I think Moral Mary and a psychopath are very similar, but an amoralist is different from them. Please see (Table 1).

	Moral Mary	Psychopath	Amoralist
Emotion	×	×	?
Moral judgment	△	△	○
Motivation	?	×	×

(Table 1)

It seems to me that the only difference between Moral Mary and a psychopath is the latter's lack of knowledge about normative ethics. They cannot make the same moral judgments as do normals. Hence they do not have a right sort of moral concepts. But putting aside the mystery about the mechanism, an amoralist can have emotions and make moral judgments as do normal people by definition, and thus he/she has genuine moral concepts.

Second, we argued emotionism might face a very tough problem. This problem is a parallel with the problem of the dispositional account of color. According to the dispositional account of color, a color is at least partly constituted by a disposition that causes a relevant sensation in us. Then it becomes hard to say like, "This box seems red to me, but it is not red in reality" or "It does not seem navy at all, but it is navy". This is because an ability to cause a certain sensation is the essence of the color. This is the problem which the dispositional theory of color faces. It seems that you cannot talk about the validity of your color experiences. Emotionism might face a similar difficulty. According to emotionism, morality at least partly consists in a disposition to cause a relevant feeling. Then it seems that we cannot say, "It is bad, even though you do not feel bad". But we have an intuition that we can say as such. We do not regard all of our "bad" feelings as right. We admit we sometimes make mistakes. How could Prinz explain these intuitions? Emotionism thus far can be interpreted as a thoroughly empirical descriptive theory. How normativity is established in morality seems an important problem for emotionism.