

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

Session 12 (13:00-15:00, July 11, 2008)

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In session 12, we read the final chapter: Moral Progress. It seems impossible that theorists endorsing relativism and subjectivism make progress on morality; there is no superiority or inferiority among moral systems. But moral progress looks intuitively possible. For instance, a non-slavery society looks better than a slavery one. In this chapter, Prinz insisted that we can make moral progress, although there are some restrictions.

Prinz admits that there is no transcendental point of view that can assess moral systems. Thus he concedes that we have to evaluate them by extra-moral values. On pages 291-2, he suggested ten standards of assessment. For instance, Prinz contended that a rule which is inconsistent with other rules or based on false factual knowledge should be revised, and he also maintained we should prefer rules which contribute to greater social stability or increase our welfare. According to him, we can say we made progress by abolishing slavery in the light of these values for two reasons. First, slavery was inconsistent with other basic values (for example, freedom) which people supporting slavery endorse. Second, it is supported by false factual knowledge that African descendants are inferior. Even though we can make moral progress, Prinz gave a caution that his standards are not complete. They are merely plausible candidates for our assessment of moral rules. They are values which are not always embraced, and they can vary across cultures.

If Prinz is right about moral progress; that is, we can assess moral systems only by extra-moral values, a serious problem emerges. We suspect that we might have to abandon morality at all. Prinz dealt with this doubt in 8.2.4. Prinz responded negatively to this suspect by mentioning four extra-moral virtues of moral sentiments. I explain two of them. First, moral sentiments motivate acts. We can keep to moral rules because of moral sentiments. Second, moral sentiments facilitate rule transmission. Emotionally-based rules are easy to pass on. Prinz thought it is obvious that you should not abandon morality if you take these into account. But I think Prinz missed the point here. Moral deflationists would argue that morality cannot be means or tools of something and morality must have an intrinsic value. To mention practical merits does not soothe deflationists’ anxiety.

This rift concerning intuitions about morality relates to one of the points we

discussed. We discussed whether progress envisaged by Prinz is really *moral* progress. Prinz admitted we can evaluate moral rules only by extra-moral values. Thus it is at best progress of moral systems but not *moral* progress of the systems *contra* the title of this chapter. This consequence gave us an impression that relativism cannot make moral progress after all. Then we have two options: relativism without moral progress, or absolutism. I think it is coherent for Prinz to take the former option. But there is still a problem of whether morality which is only assessed by practical respects is really worthy to be called morality.

In this final chapter, Prinz dealt with the problem of moral progress. He claimed we can make moral progress, although it is limited. But this is doubtful because Prinz's moral progress simply means practical progress of moral systems. In sum, his project seems successful in a descriptive domain; his constructive sentimentalism sounds right. For example, it is likely that we have moral emotions when we make moral judgments and we do have diverging moral values. But when it comes to a normative domain, where he recommended moral relativism, there are some problems. Even if we have various moral values, it is a different thing that we should adopt relativism. Actually, we have another intuition favoring absolutism.