

**PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy**  
*Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology*

**Spring 2013**

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**[Handout #17]**

**Jesse Prinz, “The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgments”**

**§ Main Theses**

1. **On the connection between emotions and moral judgments:** Emotions are not merely correlated with moral judgments but they are also, in some sense, both necessary and sufficient.
2. **On sentimentalism:** Sentimentalism is true: to judge that something is wrong is to have a sentiment of disapprobation towards it.
3. **On moral facts: Moral facts are response-dependent:** the bad just is that which cases disapprobation in a community of moralizers.
4. **Moral internalism: Motivational internalism is true** – ordinary moral judgments are intrinsically motivating, and all non-motivating moral judgments are parasitic on these.

\* Milgram’s experience of asking for seats on subway – why was it difficult? What does this experience demonstrate?

**§ Motivational Internalism vs. Motivational Externalism**

**Q: Can we make moral judgments without being motivated to act?**

**[Motivational Internalism]:** The nature of moral judgments is such that they motivate necessarily and on their own. No one could sincerely judge an act morally right or a state of affairs good, while remaining *wholly* unmotivated to act on the judgment. Moral judgments are essentially action-guiding.

**[Motivational Externalism]:** Moral motivation is external to moral judgment itself. Moral judgments need the intermediation of a desire or some other mental state to motivate action.

**Prinz will defend a version of motivational internalism that also incorporates emotions.**

Q: Do our ordinary moral concepts have an emotional component?

Q: What goes on in our heads when we use moral terms such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘right’ and ‘wrong’?

## § Correlation between Moral Judgments and Emotions

**Current evidence favors the conclusion that ordinary moral judgments are emotional in nature.**

The brain scans simply add empirical support to a pretheoretical intuition that emotions arise when we respond to a wide range of morally significant events, including rudeness, unfairness, law-breaking, and saving lives.

**Prinz's Theses:**

- 1. Emotions co-occur with moral judgments:** Moll, de Oliveira-Souza, and Eslinger (2003): when subjects made moral judgments, as opposed to factual judgments, areas of the brain that are associated with emotional response were active.



- 2. Emotions influence moral judgments:** A negative emotion can lead us to make a more negative moral appraisal than we would otherwise have (Subjects at the disgusting desk rated the vignettes as more wrong than subjects at the clean desk).



- 3. Emotions are both sufficient and necessary for moral judgments:** Emotions are not only sufficient for moral judgment, they are also needed for moral development (*diachronically* speaking).



- 4. Emotions are also *synchronically* necessary for moral judgments:** To condemn an act  $x$  is to be *disposed* to having negative emotions towards  $x$ . If someone attest that killing is wrong without being disposed to have negative emotions towards killing, then such a person must be confused or insincere.

**\* In support of #3:**

**Psychopaths** are the perfect test case for the necessity thesis, because they are profoundly deficient in negative emotions, especially fear and sadness.

\_\_\_ They rarely experience these emotions, and they have remarkable difficulty even recognizing them in facial expressions and speech sounds (Blair et al. 2001, 2002).

\_\_\_ Psychopathy results from a low-level deficit in negative emotions. Without core negative emotions, they cannot acquire empathetic distress, remorse, or guilt. These emotional deficits seem to be the root cause in their patterns of antisocial behavior.

\_\_\_ Psychopaths cannot make genuine moral judgments. They give lip service to understanding morality, but they do not have moral concepts that are like the ones that normal people possess.

**\* In support of #4:**

1. Reason and observation of facts lead to convergence of opinions over time.
2. If moral judgments were based on something other than emotions—something like reason or factual beliefs — we would expect more moral convergence cross-culturally.
3. However, cross-culturally there is staggering divergence in moral values.
4. These divergent moral values are induced by culturally inculcated passions.
5. Therefore, emotions must be a necessary component of moral judgments.

Q: How do you evaluate this argument? Does cultural relativism support the thesis that emotions are necessary for moral judgments?

**§ A Sentimentalist Theory of Moral Judgment**

**[Sentiment] = A disposition to have emotions**

Q: What is the difference between a sentiment and an emotion?

Sentiment	Emotion
Approbation	?
Disapprobation	blame, shame, guilt, anger, disgust, contempt, annoyance, ...

Shweder et al. (1997) have argued on the basis of anthropological evidence that there are three broad categories of moral rules:

Moral rules	Sentiment	Emotions
1. Rules designed to protect persons (prohibitions against	<b>Disapprobation</b>	Crimes against persons elicit <b>anger</b> .

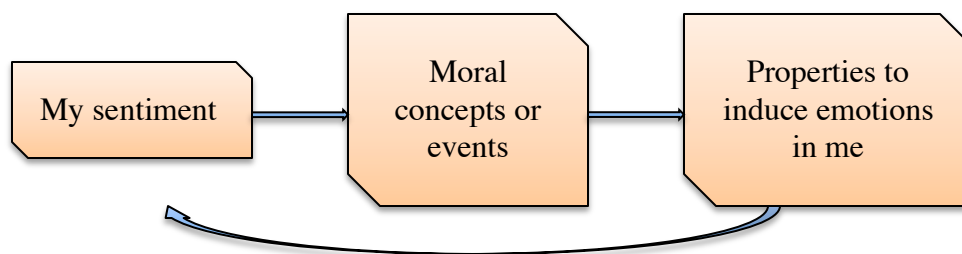
physical harm and rights violations)		
2. Rules designed to protect the community (usually pertaining to rank or public goods)	<b>Disapprobation</b>	Crimes against community elicit <b>contempt</b> .
3. Rules pertaining to the perceived natural order (such as sexual mores or religious dietary rules).	<b>Disapprobation</b>	Crimes against nature elicit <b>disgust</b> .

In addition, the intensity of the felt emotion can vary with the wrongness of the action.

### [Sentimentalism]

1. [Hume] – To believe that something is morally wrong is to have a sentiment of disapprobation towards it; to believe that something is morally right is to have a sentiment of approbation towards it.
2. [Prinz] – When we judge that something is wrong, one or another of the negative emotions will ordinarily occur, and that the judgment will be an expression of the underlying emotional disposition.

Note: This view is not the same as **expressivism**, according to which a moral judgment is simply an expression of the utterer's attitude or emotions. Prinz endorses a different theory: **sensibility theory**, according to which moral judgments express sentiments, and sentiments refer to the property of moral concepts, which have "*response-dependent*" properties – i.e., they have the property of causing certain reactions/emotions in us.



In this way, the properties in question (e.g. *funny*, *likeable*, *delicious*, etc.) are not "intrinsic" properties; they are relational in that they depend on reactions in us. **We project our experiences onto the world.** [Prinz does not want to specify whether moral properties are intrinsic or relational, however. We should discuss the ramifications of either view in class.]

**\*\*\* Prinz's theory = sentimentalism + speaker relativism**

Two problems:

1. The problem of *the possibility of error*: If ‘wrong’ refers to whatever that causes disapprobation in me, then I could not ever be in error when I judge something to be wrong.
2. The problem of *disagreement*: If ‘wrong’ means ‘wrong for me’, then debates about what is wrong turn out to be spurious.

### § The Explanatory Power of Sentimentalism

1. Under sentimentalism, motivational internalism is true because moral judgments are essentially motivating. If sentimentalism is true, thinking that an action is wrong disposes one to having negative emotions towards it, and negative emotions are inhibitory.
2. Second, sentimentalism offers an attractive explanation of the distinction between moral and conventional rules: moral rules are directly grounded in the emotions, and we are less emotional about conventional rules. Furthermore, we will tend to moralize mere conventions if we learn them through a process of emotional conditioning.
3. Sentimentalism can explain why moral judgments seem like intuitions; seem self-evident. If moral judgments are sentimental, and they refer to response-dependent properties, then the judgment that killing is wrong is self-justifying because killing elicits the negative sentiment expressed by that judgment and having the power to elicit such negative sentiments is constitutive of being wrong. Sentimentalism explains the phenomenology driving intuitionism, and it shows how intuitionism might be true.

### § Dispassionate Moral Judgments

Sentimentalism allows two kinds of dispassionate judgments about morality:

- (i) First, we make judgments that express sentiments, even when those sentiments are not at the present time manifesting themselves as occurrent emotions. Such judgments are not immediately motivating, but they express a dispositional state that would motivate under the right circumstances.
- (ii) Second, there are judgments that refer to the motivational states of others, as when we talk anthropologically about the obligations of other cultural groups. Psychopaths may use moral talk in this way.

In both of these cases, the dispassionate moral judgment is *parasitic* on the passions.

### § Summary of Prinz’s view

1. To harbor a moral belief is to have a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation.
2. Emotions co-occur with moral judgments, influence moral judgments, are

sufficient for moral judgments, and are necessary for moral judgments, because moral judgments are constituted by emotional dispositions (either standing dispositions or manifest dispositions).

3. However, there surely are conditions under which we make moral judgments dispassionately. A sentiment is an emotional disposition, and I can have a sentiment without manifesting it. These dispassionate moral judgments are parasitic on the emotional cases.
4. Judgments that completely lack a sentimental component would not even be moral judgments in the ordinary sense.
5. Ordinary moral concepts refer to response-dependent properties; hence, they fundamentally make reference to our sentiments.
6. The concepts we ordinarily express using moral vocabulary are linked essentially to our sentiments, and, in this sense, motivational internalism is true.

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**\* Suggested term paper topic:**

1. What is the difference between Prinz' sentimentalism and expressivism if he also endorses Dreier's speaker relativism? Has Prinz successfully defended speaker relativism against the problem of error and the problem of disagreement?
2. How do we answer this question for sentimentalism: whose responses matter and under what conditions? How does one establish objectivity of moral judgments if moral judgments are grounded on responses and emotions? (In other words, can we have sentimentalism *without* speaker-relativism?)