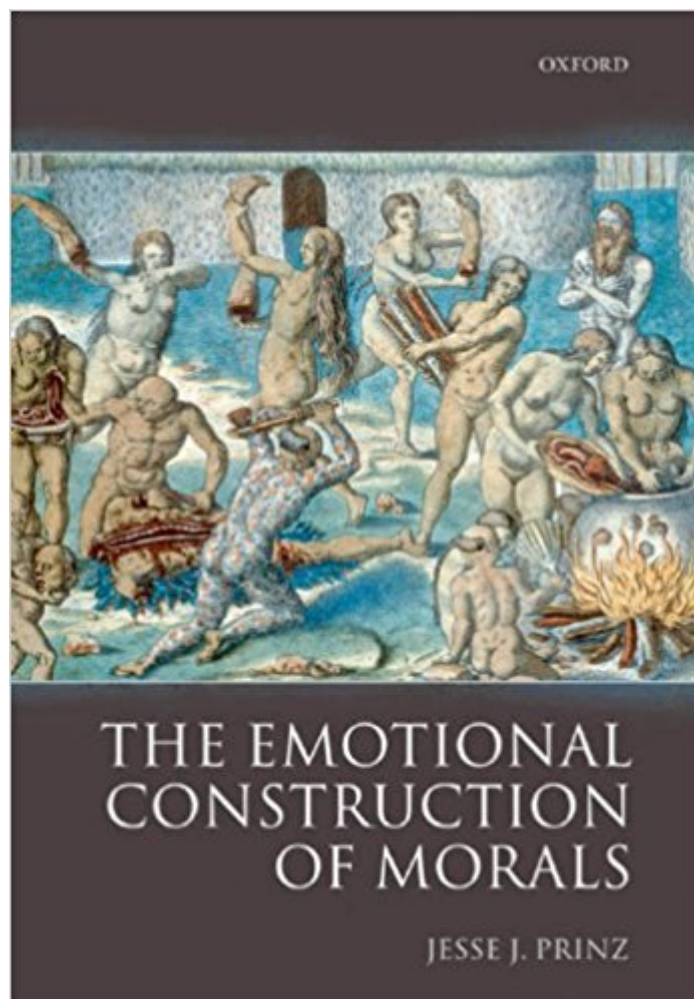


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# The Emotional Construction Of Morals



## Synopsis

Jesse Prinz argues that recent work in philosophy, neuroscience, and anthropology supports two radical hypotheses about the nature of morality: moral values are based on emotional responses, and these emotional responses are inculcated by culture, not hard-wired through natural selection. In the first half of the book, Jesse Prinz defends the hypothesis that morality has an emotional foundation. Evidence from brain imaging, social psychology, and psychopathology suggest that, when we judge something to be right or wrong, we are merely expressing our emotions. Prinz argues that these emotions do not track objective features of reality; rather, the rightness and wrongness of an act consists in the fact that people are disposed to have certain emotions towards it. In the second half of the book, he turns to a defence of moral relativism. Moral facts depend on emotional responses, and emotional responses vary from culture to culture. Prinz surveys the anthropological record to establish moral variation, and he draws on cultural history to show how attitudes toward practices such as cannibalism and marriage change over time. He also criticizes evidence from animal behaviour and child development that has been taken to support the claim that moral attitudes are hard-wired by natural selection. Prinz concludes that there is no single true morality, but he also argues that some moral values are better than others; moral progress is possible. Throughout the book, Prinz relates his views to contemporary and historical work in philosophical ethics. His views echo themes in the writings of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzsche, but Prinz supports, extends, and revises these classic theories using the resources of cutting-edge cognitive science. *The Emotional Construction of Morals* will stimulate and challenge anyone who is curious about the nature and origin of moral values.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Wedding sociological and psychological speculations to well reasoned philosophical analyses that cover the ground laid out before him by Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill and Nietzsche, Jesse Prinz, who teaches philosophy at the City University of New York Graduate Center, argues in a recent book, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, that morality is entirely grounded in our emotional life. Elaborating on the classic Humean position that moral judgment is the application of our sentiments to the things we encounter in the world in which we operate, Prinz builds the case for understanding moral systems, and the judgments they constitute, on a purely emotional basis. Hume argued that human beings have a natural tendency towards sympathy for others and that morality is the manifestation of that, albeit shaped by the cultural education (both explicit, through education, and implicit, through observation and imitation) that we undergo. Prinz' book sets out to offer a more detailed and refined account of this picture, one suitable for our modern era, arguing along the way that while moral relativism is an outgrowth of this position, precisely as its critics maintain, such relativism is not nearly the problem for us and for the practice of moral valuing that it appears to be. Prinz' account hinges on an analysis of our emotional life which he maintains is grounded in some core, basic biologically determined experiential reactions we have to the world in general. With William James, Prinz proposes that emotions are our experiences of our own bodily reactions to the world in terms of what we are biologically programmed to want and need, as well as to fear and avoid. Such emotions, he notes, are representative in the same sense that our perceptual experiences of the world around us are representative of that world. In the case of emotion, the experiences represent not the elements outside of us that affect us but the "concerns" we have as the organic creatures we are. That is, our emotions represent our reactive interests to our world as opposed to the world itself. Prinz goes on to suggest that it is from these basic building blocks, these core concerns as represented in our feelings, that we develop more complex, sophisticated

emotional responses. One class of these more sophisticated, compound emotions (jealousy, for instance, is described as a compound of more basic emotions like anger, fear, suspicion and desire) are, on his view, those we take as moral. That is, only some of our more complex emotions are of a moral nature, those, he suggests, which prompt in us reactions of anger, disgust, contempt, etc., or their opposites and which, he proposes are different depending on their target (whether at others or at ourselves). Dispositions to have certain groups of emotions he calls "sentiments" thus linking his analysis to Hume's moral sentimentalism. On Prinz' view, our moral life cannot be reduced to our biological programming, however, the way animals respond. Rather, he suggests, our more complex emotions, including and especially those with moral import, grow out of the social potentials built into human behavior by evolution, potentials which enable us to build a framework of socially binding dispositions, sentiments, which encourage and support social binding through cooperative behaviors, e.g., the granting of rights to others, the capacity to hold others accountable and to enforce such accountability, etc. As Prinz puts it towards the end on page 299: "Moral systems are tools for social organization" adding "as such, they should be tailored to the varying material conditions of culture." By this last he makes the point that on his view there cannot be, and we should not expect, a fixed universal moral code, one that, as he puts it, is transcendent above all actual culturally located moral beliefs. While granting a certain commonality between human beings, given the similarity in individual members of our species, and a common world in which we all stand, and noting, as well, that this will often lead to similarities across cultures, he argues that there is, in fact, no fixed, inherent moral point of view. Each moral system is culture-specific and has developed along the lines of its own history. He acknowledges here that relativism follows from his reduction of moral judgment to emotionality in this way. But he denies that this implies an inability to reject others' moral beliefs, those we may find repulsive for instance, or to make moral progress by improving the moral codes we hold ourselves. Prinz maintains that our judgments of others' practices are always situated in our own cultural beliefs, our own belief systems, and so can never be taken as providing a standard against which to judge others who do not, themselves, subscribe to our standards. But because moral systems are "tools for social organization," he suggests that we can select and improve our tools (just as we do with any social institution) with an eye towards making them more conducive to the kind of societies we come to believe is best for us as human beings. What we want, of course, is dependent on what we need as living organisms of the type we are and that, he thinks, can be scientifically ascertained. But he acknowledges that even such judgments, however empirically developed and argued, reflect a valuational bias, too. Indeed, he argues that valuation cannot be dispensed with at this, deepest of levels. He notes, however, that

moral valuation is only one kind of valuing we engage in and argues that we can adjust our moral beliefs, our moral systems, in terms of our many other values based on empirically determined possibilities. Thus, he points out, when confronted with a moral problem that seems to cross cultures or when we find ourselves at moral odds with someone in our own culture or even internally (in discourse with ourselves) we can take an approach like the one Otto Neurath (and Quine after him) sketched out for science, i.e., we can rebuild our raft while yet afloat. For we cannot abandon the raft entirely without sinking. The best we can hope to do is repair it as we go. We do this, Prinz argues, by applying various valuational standards to the beliefs we find ourselves unsure of. That is, we will look for logical coherence (if two core moral beliefs we hold are contradictory we can either live with that contradiction or abandon one for the other as we are likely to be forced to do when they actually conflict in our decision making). Too, we look for simplicity (that which has the least implication for our other beliefs) and for conformance with the facts. In this way Prinz proposes that we can and do deal with moral beliefs and systems which strike us as vile or present challenges we may face within our own belief systems. Yes, this, too, is a form of valuation, albeit not the moral kind. Yet, he avers, we adjust our moral valuations by testing them against the larger body of values we hold and facts we believe. It's in this fashion he argues that we have achieved moral progress in human history, gradually coming to favor some practices while disfavoring others like suppression of women, human slavery, human sacrifice, child abuse, etc. In this way, too, he thinks we can deal with modern evils like Nazism and the terrorism that has recently come to assault the Western world from certain quarters of the Middle East. Prinz, that is, rejects the notion that grounding moral beliefs and judgments in our emotional life denies the possibility of so-called moral truths, thus undermining moral practice -- or that acknowledging the relativist implications of his position empowers a moral nihilism which leads to acceptance of a might-makes-right scenario. He does not think discarding the possibility of transcendence in our moral judgments undermines our ability to condemn Nazi or ISIS beliefs and practices. It just means, for him, that we have to approach this from a sociological standpoint, using our intellectual capacities to discover what's good for human beings in terms of the kind of life they should lead and then making sure we tailor our own beliefs and the education we give to others of our kind, in accordance with that. What's good for human beings, of course, remains the problem since the Nazis surely believed that humanity is best served by forcibly adjusting the population to maximize certain types at the expense of others and to make use of the less good types to serve superior types. One might argue, presumably with Prinz, that we in the West have seen the poverty of that view and have demonstrated our better vision by having soundly beaten that other ideology. The Nazis failed in head to head confrontation with the

espousers of the values we, ourselves, espouse today. Yet we can't assume that our victory was a foregone conclusion, can we? It might have gone the other way, not least because it was not a pure victory of so-called Western values but one that was surely made possible by the relative economic capacities of the two sides and a series of military judgments by Hitler and his general staff which went awry and by the participation in the war against the Nazis of the Soviets (due to strategic miscalculations by the Nazi regime) who surely did not subscribe to the values held by the Western nations in the war against the Nazis. That Hitler failed and the West triumphed was as much a contingency of history as anything else. A different outcome might have left us, today, with a different picture of what moral progress amounts to. So Prinz' notion that moral progress is possible, if one assumes moral emotionalism, seems spurious if only because, at any point in history, human beings can be seen to have held many different views in many different places and we have no reason to believe that we are where we are now because of some inevitability in our intellectual and moral progress. Human history does not travel in a steady upwards trajectory but has peaks and valleys and even if humanity has a greater and more robust presence on the planet today, with technological capacities superior to anything mankind ever had in the known past, there is no guarantee, as the Nazi war machine showed us, that larger societies or advanced technology go hand in hand with moral progress. Presumably Prinz would grant this, however, and acknowledge that moral progress is not foreordained by history, that it is only possible. But his argument for its possibility hinges on a study of what has changed for human cultures over the centuries to now. If moral progress reflects a rejection of institutions like slavery, it might have been otherwise had the Nazis triumphed and we have no reason to think they might not have. Similarly, even with the defeat of the Nazis in the mid-twentieth century, we have seen a rebirth of similar barbarism in our own time by radical groups like ISIS based in the Middle East. Why should we assume that they and their worldview could not triumph over time against societies holding values like ours under certain circumstances and that moral philosophers a century from now would not then look back on us and count moral progress as the globalization of the jihadist belief system which today's primary terrorist organizations espouse? Prinz' account, to the extent it can give us no reason to reject such barbarism regardless of the cultural standpoint in which it is grounded, must finally come up short if its aim is to show why relativism isn't the problem it appears to be. Moral judgment, by its very nature, requires that we believe that it holds for others as well as for ourselves in comparable cases and any moral account which fails to show how such trans-cultural judgment can be sustained fails the test such an account must provide: an explanation of how moral judgment overrules the merely prudential or the conventional. Yes, we can and do argue moral beliefs within, and even between,

systems (the latter to the extent the shared systems have sufficient common core beliefs between them) in the ways Prinz allows. We can and do look to the coherence of our beliefs, and to the facts of each case and to limiting impacts, etc. But none of this seems quite enough to enable us to offer reasons to prefer certain core beliefs over others, e.g., that human beings who fall outside our belief system, for instance, ought not to be killed on that account or have gratuitous harm inflicted on them, etc. If a moral system cannot deliver that kind of judgment for us, a judgment that applies beyond our own group and its norms, then we ought to reject that account and call on others to do so, as well because it fails to adequately explain the moral enterprise. More, the capacity to support our moral beliefs as having tran-cultural implication is the only thing that can make the concept of moral progress, itself, possible. Otherwise, the only "progress" we can hope for is change -- which is not progress at all. The very notion of "progress" implies improvement, getting better. But if no moral judgment is any better than another because each must and can only be assessed within its own cultural universe, then there cannot be the progress Prinz wants to support. There can only be an illusion of progress. If we cannot offer reasons to defend our rejection of inflicting harm on others, reasons which can convince others on rational grounds (though they may not because human beings have varying capacities of comprehension), then our moral claims can hardly be held up as examples of progress or of making such progress possible. If moral judgments are entirely culture-specific in the way Prinz envisions, then relativism remains not just an explanatory problem but a moral one because the possibility of moral progress, which even he acknowledges is important to the concept of moral judgment, will have been fatally undermined.

Dr. Prinz gives us another very interesting way to look at morals. I have always found Dr. Prinz's works to be clear and thought provoking.

The first thing to understand about moral rules is that they are made by people, in the same sense that art, music, and theatre are made by people. People also are responsible for mathematics and science, but here there is a crucial difference: we discover mathematical truths and the laws of the Universe, we do not make them. This distinction is blurred by the fact that we attach truth value to moral rules, but not to art or music, thus giving the impression that a moral rule has something in common with a mathematical or scientific truth. The reason for attaching truth-values to moral rules is that there is a kind of moral modus ponens: if  $p$  implies  $q$  and  $p$  is morally valid/obligatory/missible, then  $q$  is morally valid/obligatory/missible. Despite the pragmatic value of this sort of modal reasoning, it does have the drawback of appearing to place moral rules in

an ethereal sphere with the axioms of arithmetic and the theory of relativity---truths that are independent of our will. The greatest offender in this regard was probably Kant, for whom moral behavior was obligatory and impersonal, and for whom deriving pleasure from doing good was a detraction from the pure morality of the act. Jesse Prinz is a latterday defender of the sort of naturalist approach to morality expressed in the previous paragraph, taking up where Hume and the English empiricists left off. "morality derives from us." Prinz asserts (p. 1) "The good is that which we regard as good. The obligatory is that which we regard as obligatory....Thus, normative ethics can be approached as social science." Much of this volume is a defense of this position in face of the voluminous criticism of philosophers with other views. I am very grateful for this defense, although I found it more than a little wearying to go through Prinz's critique one incorrect argument after another. I am just glad he is on my side, so I can forget about the philosophical details. But, if you love philosophical details, you will certainly not be disappointed in this book. How does morality derive from us? Prinz's answer is that we are emotionally predisposed to assert certain rules as moral and others as immoral. This predisposition is not intellectual or deeply cognitive; rather, to assert a moral rule is akin to asserting a taste for a particular color or food---it is our personal emotional, sentimental, inclination, although we may share it with many others, and we may delight in sharing moral rules in a way that we do not delight in sharing musical or artistic tastes. This position makes Prinz a thorough-going relativist, and indeed, he does not shy away from this position. Prinz recognizes that there are moral rules that are virtually universal, but this is because we have biological predispositions towards some rules, and cultures that promote prosocial norms tend to drive out other cultural forms. Prinz correctly notes that the fact that a certain practice is virtually universal among humans does not mean that it is absolute, that it is genetically determined, or that it is immutable. Moreover, Prinz stresses that in fact almost any imaginable principle has been elevated to the position of a moral obligation in one society or another. Prinz's moral relativism brings him into opposition with some versions of evolutionary psychology that denigrate culture and privilege genetically determined brain modularity as the mechanism accounting for human morality. For Prinz, culture is the original fount of morality, and moral relativism is an aspect of cultural diversity. Like many philosophers, Prinz objects to a form of evolutionary psychology, biological determinism, that is not supported by any serious sociobiologist. "I will concede that we are biologically prone to have certain kinds of values, but I will deny that there is an innate morality." (p. 245) But, who ever spoke of an "innate morality?" The very idea is contradicted by gene-culture coevolutionary theory or even gene-culture developmental biology. Prinz says he is happy with a scientific approach to ethics, but the principle that we have an evolved genetic predisposition to



embraces some moral principles and to reject others is about as scientific a principle as I can imagine. Prinz would do well to rethink his rejection of morality as an adaptation, and to actively embrace the sort of gene-culture coevolutionary theory that is the foundation of scientific approaches to social theory, as developed by Marcus Feldman, Luca Cavalli-Sforza, Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson. He should accept this approach because it is correct, and no amount of philosophical hair-splitting can alter this fact. The final chapter of this fine book is not fine. It is simply unsophisticated and uninformed. Prinz argues that morality is not a human adaptation, but a side-effect of other human capacities. His arguments are weak and not worth repeating. Moreover, Prinz fails to come to terms with the several well-known models of the evolution of morality. Indicative of this immaturity, one of Prinz's arguments is that because humans prefer to behave prosocially, there is no need for morality. "If we are naturally prone to share, help, and to reciprocate, why do we ever moralize these behaviors?" (p. 273) His answer is that there is no need until we have large-scale societies. This astonishing answer implies that there was no such thing as human morality prior to the rise of settled agriculture and urbanization in the past 10,000 years. Yet, we know that the secondary emotions associated with morality---shame, remorse, guilt, self-esteem, honor, empathy, etc.---are intimately bound up with morality, yet evolved over tens of thousands of years, involving changes in brain structure and hormonal balance. Moreover, there is no dearth of morality in hunter-gatherer societies around the world. One reason we need a moral sense is that punishment of moral transgression on the part of an individual must be accompanied by a sense of shame and guilt, or else the punishment will be seen by the punished individual as an unprovoked attack, and will generally be met with a counter-attack, rather than a resolve to make amends and behave better in the future. Indeed, in laboratory experiments, some individuals do react to being punished by punishing back, rather than reforming. This behavior was recently the object of a fifteen society study of "anti-social punishment" by Herrmann, Thoeni, and Gaechter, in *Science*. I am certain there are other benefits of morality even in small-scale societies, where the threat of violence is constant and the need for adjudication of differences and regulation of the proceeds of the division of labor are ever-present. Humans are the source of morality, and are biologically predisposed to honor the moral rules of the societies in which they live. This is an evolved predisposition that accounts for our evolutionary success as a species.

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