The Practical Irrelevance of Relativism
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I learned a lot from reading Jesse Prinz’s ambitious and entertaining book, The Emotional Construction of Morals. I think he’d be pleased to know that I learned many interesting things that I would not ordinarily find in a book of academic philosophy. Also, even when I disagreed with him, almost all of my questions were anticipated and addressed as the book proceeded, which is a very satisfying experience as a reader and (in my opinion anyway) high praise in philosophy. I say ‘almost all’ of my questions because there are a few that remain. These centre around a puzzle about Prinz’s relativism, which is the focus of my comments.

The puzzle is about why the kind of relativism we get from Prinz’s meta-ethics matters to normative ethics or moral practice. I think it does not (or at least not directly and not in the ways he thinks it does). Moreover, I think many things Prinz says – about the advantages of relativism, about practical moral questions, and about moral progress – should have led him also to conclude that relativism doesn’t matter. But he doesn’t draw this conclusion; hence I am puzzled rather than simply disagreeing.

Before I get into the puzzle, it will be helpful to explain the kind of relativism Prinz defends. According to Prinz, the truth of judgements about wrongness depends on the values (and hence the sentiments) of the person who makes the judgement (180). So, when a person says ‘it is wrong to kick puppies’, this is true only if the speaker has moral values that proscribe kicking puppies. This is so, in part, because moral judgements are constituted by emotions (such as shame and disgust) that are caused by our sentiments, and sentiments represent the secondary quality of causing disapprobation in the person whose sentiments they are. When we make moral judgements we ‘convey our feelings and also aim to assert a fact’ (100), for example, the fact that the action we are judging to be wrong has the property of causing disapprobation in us. As long as people have different sentiments, whether or not an action has that dispositional property will vary depending on the speaker. Prinz spends a good bit of time convincing us that people do indeed have different moral sentiments (this is the claim that descriptive relativism is true defended in Chapter 5). If people have different moral sentiments, and if moral judgements assert facts about moral sentiments, then we can see how the truth of moral judgements will be relative to individual agents (175).

An interesting feature of Prinz’s relativism, one that begins to reveal my puzzle, is that ought judgements are treated differently from judgements of wrongness. According to Prinz, ought judgements (as opposed to judgements
A judgement that \( X \) ought to \( \Phi \) is true if and only if it is wrong not to \( \Phi \) on the value systems of both the speaker and \( X \) (180).

Notice that this does not follow from Prinz’s analysis of moral judgements in terms of sentiments, because the speaker’s judgement could accurately reflect his sentiments even though these sentiments are not shared by \( X \). Now Prinz’s view is that ought judgements are importantly different from judgements about wrongness because they ‘convey the fact that a norm has authority over the behavior of the person addressed by that judgement’ (178). Since moral judgements, on his view, do not have authority in virtue of universal, mind-independent facts, they do not have the kind of authority that would warrant judging that \( X \) ought to \( \Phi \) when \( X \) does not have any sentiments that recommend \( \Phi \). I think this argument wrongly assumes that the only way for a judgement to have authority would be for it to be backed up by universal, mind-independent facts. In my view, even in the absence of such facts, some judgements are more authoritative than others in virtue of how well justified they are. If this is a possibility, then Prinz’s meta-ethics doesn’t have implications for the ought judgements we can make. And this leads us to my puzzle about why Prinz’s relativism matters.

The easiest way to see why one might think it doesn’t is to start with what he says about moral progress in the final chapter. Here he defends the view that we improve our moral judgements by appeal to ‘extramoral norms’ (such as norms that recommend moral rules that promote well-being and social cohesion) are less subject to genealogical critique, and are as universal as possible (291–2). Prinz thinks we improve our morality by assessing and recalibrating our moral sentiments with respect to these extramoral standards (301). By introducing extramoral standards Prinz is not abandoning his relativism: it is not the case that extramoral norms are suitable as norms of improvement because they have a special, foundational status (304), or because they are true.\(^1\) Nothing in Prinz’s story of moral progress makes reference to truth and, in fact, he is explicit about the irrelevance of truth to the project of moral improvement: ‘We cannot make moral progress by asserting that certain moral claims are truer than others; what’s false here may be true elsewhere’ (297). Relativism, according to Prinz, is a view about the truth conditions for moral claims. So, it turns out that even if the truth of a moral judgement is relative to the speaker, it is still the case that our judgements can be better or worse and that we can revise them to conform

\(^1\) Though Prinz does not explicitly discuss the meta-ethical status of extramoral norms, the most charitable interpretation is that they would also receive a relativistic, sentimentalist analysis.
to the standards for better. This is why I think Prinz’s relativism is irrelevant to moral practice.

To my ear, the process of ‘rigorous reconsideration’ and revision that Prinz outlines in the chapter on moral progress sounds like a process of justification. One way of putting my point about relativism, then, is that from the practical point of view what matters is justification and Prinz has divorced justification from truth. But perhaps Prinz would deny that what he calls moral progress or improvement is the same thing as justification, thus allowing him to maintain the connection between justification and truth. Prinz does sometimes discuss justification in this way. For example, consider what he says about self-justifying norms:

I have argued that moral concepts refer to response-dependent properties. It follows that moral judgements (at least those that express grounding norms) are self-justifying. If I make a judgement that something is wrong, and that judgement is made under epistemic conditions in which I have accurately accessed my long-term memory and discovered a sentiment of disapprobation toward that thing, then my belief is warranted because WRONG refers to that toward which I have such a sentiment. If this account is right, it applies even if my response-dispositions are set up as a consequence of historical events. Warrant is cheap if constructive sentimentalism is true (236).

Here justification is a matter of whether your judgement accurately tracks your sentiments. In this sense, justification is at least indirectly truth-tracking, because truth is given by response-dependent properties that our sentiments represent. But justification in the sense used here doesn’t have anything to do with moral progress or the improvement of our moral judgements as Prinz describes it.

However, he doesn’t always take justification to be a truth-tracking feature in accordance with his sentimentalism. For example, consider his discussion of the open question argument and Moral Mary. Moral Mary has been raised without any moral education and has no ‘intact innate moral attitudes’ (38). Prinz invites us to think about what we must add to Mary in order to make it inevitable that we would attribute moral beliefs to her (40–1). His discussion of the thought experiment is complicated and Prinz uses it to make a number of different points; I want to focus on one conclusion he draws from it, namely, that ‘there is a conceptual link between moral judgements and moral responses’ because ‘[w]e attribute moral attitudes if and only if a person has certain emotional responses’ (41). Let’s grant this claim for the sake of argument so that we can focus on what it reveals about justification. Prinz claims that even though this conceptual claim closes some questions about moral judgement, others remain open; further, he expresses the remaining open questions as questions of justification:
... one might object that the link between moral concepts and emotions leaves us with open questions. Suppose Mary feels outrage at those who steal. She can still wonder whether stealing is really wrong; she can wonder whether the attitude is justified.

Here Prinz seems to be relying on a common sense notion of justification, the one connected to improvement or progress: when Mary wonders whether it is really wrong to steal, she is wondering whether 'stealing is wrong' is a good thing to think, or (as we might put it) whether 'stealing is wrong' should be included in the best moral attitudes to have. This is the relevant open question and here Prinz takes it to be a question about justification. Notice, though, that it is not a question about justification in the truth-tracking sense that I discussed above. In that sense, to ask whether her attitude is justified is just to ask whether she is accurately accessing her sentiment of disapprobation toward stealing. This isn’t the question Mary is asking when she wonders whether stealing is really wrong, nor does Prinz think it is.

In short, I think both notions of justification – a common sense notion that is concerned with moral progress and a technical notion that fits his meta-ethical theory – are at work in Prinz’s book. But even if he were to insist on reserving ‘justification’ as the label for a truth-tracking feature according to his sentimentalist meta-ethics, it is still the case that there is a notion of something like justification that travels with what he calls ‘moral improvement’. The important point for me is that what we do when we moralize, when we engage in moral practice (whether as normative theorists or as moral agents), is justification qua moral progress, not qua Prinz’s meta-ethics.

One might have thought that a meta-ethical theory that gives the truth conditions for moral judgements is relevant to moral practice by way of justification. The truth conditions ought to tell us how we are to go about justifying, and hence improving, our moral judgements. As I have argued, this is not so for Prinz. (Hereafter, I will mean ‘justification’ in the sense of improvement unless otherwise specified). If truth and improvement are not related, then it is unclear why it matters to our practice that the truth conditions make moral claims relative. Given that Prinz himself offers us an account of moral improvement that does not refer to truth, it’s also unclear why he thinks otherwise. Of course, Prinz thinks his meta-ethical theory has some particular practical upshots that do not forge the link between ethics and meta-ethics by way of justification. I’ll consider two such possibilities next. In both cases, I argue, the facts of individual and cultural variability may have practical importance, but this is so only in virtue of a practice in which we take the question ‘which norms have authority?’ not to be automatically settled by the facts about our feelings.

First, Prinz thinks that relativism promotes tolerance. He takes this as a psychological fact – tolerant attitudes are easier to sustain psychologically
than absolutist attitudes when you think there is no ‘single true morality’ (208). Insofar as this is a purely psychological claim, it does not forge a link between meta-ethics and moral practice because from within the moral stance we are looking for reasons to do this or that (or, alternatively, for what would be of value in doing this or that) and the fact that tolerance will be the result of believing relativism does not by itself give us a reason to accept relativism or to be more tolerant. But sometimes he writes as if relativism gives us a reason to be tolerant, a reason not to impose our values on others who don’t accept them. For example, he imagines our reasoning in this way about a possible case of intervention: ‘since there is not a single true morality, I will refrain from imposing my morality on others, because it has no claim over them’ (210).

Why does the fact that there is no ‘single true morality’ give us a reason to be tolerant? Here’s more:

If you impose your values on others knowing that your values have no greater claim to truth, then you must have a moral value according to which such an imposition would be acceptable. You must believe, for example, that you have the right to impose your preferences on people who do not share those preferences (213).

Remember that moral truth can be discovered by investigating sentiments, on Prinz’s view, and that it is not what we aim at when we aim to improve our moral judgements. Why, then, should I care about truth when the moral question before me is whether to be tolerant, or whether I have a right to impose my preferences on other people? Of course I may be a person who thinks that the fact that some people don’t share my sentiments is a reason not to impose my values on them. But whether I think this or not is a matter of what values I have, what I take to count as a justification, or what my particular moral stance is. Prinz would agree, but given the context – a defence of relativism against the charge of perniciousness and a discussion of its practical advantages – it’s not clear that he accepts the implications, namely: first, that meta-ethical claims are relevant to the practical point of view only when they get uptake from the norms that define this point of view; second, that variability in people’s sentiments (the root of relativism) only counts as a reason to be tolerant for people who have internalized norms about the importance of sentiments to the point of view from which they justify their moral judgements; and third, that therefore the fact that there is no ‘single true morality’ in Prinz’s sense may just be irrelevant from the practical point of view of most people.

The argument for the third claim relies on the familiar point that moral justification does not typically reference feelings. There are many people who don’t take facts about their sentiments (by themselves) to justify moral judgements at all. Taking myself as an example, I worry about the way in which sentiments can lead us astray. I worry that this is particularly true of disgust,
which often seems to lead us to favour moral prohibitions against behaviours (such as homosexual sex) that harm no one.\footnote{It seems to me that one might interpret the dumbfounding literature Prinz discusses (29–32) to show that people generally do not regard disgust as a reason, which is why they are dumbfounded by not being able to articulate their reasons. If they thought disgust by itself justified their moral judgment, they wouldn’t be bothered by not being able to come up with reasons. (And people do report being confused and irritated when asked to discuss these cases (Björklund, F. Unpublished manuscript)).} If I were to try to convince someone to be more tolerant, I would offer the kinds of reasons that come from Prinz’s extramoral norms: tolerance promotes social well-functioning and individual well-being, the genealogy of intolerance is suspicious in a way that should undermine conviction in it, and so on. And it is because it has all these things in its favour that I would think I have the right to impose my preference for tolerance on others (at least in certain circumstances). It is my conviction that valuing tolerance is justified in some way that sustains my judgement that I can impose it on others. The fact that others have different sentiments and don’t see the value of tolerance is only relevant if I already accept norms that make these facts relevant.

In his defence of relativism against the charge that it will undermine our values, Prinz says that ‘we embrace our values because they are our values. We value the things that we value. This tautology is the key to conviction. The fact that others do not value what we value is entirely moot unless our valuing something depends on the assumption that the value is universal’ (211). Prinz and I are in agreement, then, that the fact that others do not value what we value is irrelevant to our own conviction, but I think Prinz is wrong about the basis for conviction. For many of us, moral conviction is not secured by reflecting on how we feel. To press the point, it may help to think about an example about which Prinz’s readers are likely to have some conviction, since Prinz’s favourite examples of cannibalism and sexual morality are ones about which many of us have lost it. (In my discussions with various people about cannibalism, I have been hard pressed to find anyone with much feeling about it once it is distinguished from the killing of innocent people.) Consider child sexual slavery. Why do I think that it is wrong to sell an eight year old girl to a brothel as a prostitute? I don’t think the reason it’s wrong has anything to do with my feelings. Rather, I judge that it’s wrong because it is extremely detrimental to her well-being, or a gross violation of her rights, or a wanton act of cruelty and selfishness. I also feel disgusted by the thought, but this isn’t what sustains my conviction. What sustains my conviction are thoughts about the girl’s welfare, her rights, and the bad intentions I attribute to the perpetrators of the crime. I take it this is typical; it certainly reflects the reasons offered against child sexual slavery in the media coverage of this abhorrent practice. Further, it reflects the reasons offered in Prinz’s own discussion of moral progress; there, the fact that a person is disgusted by something is not regarded as having any particular
authority in the process of moral improvement. (Conviction about basic values and norms presents a further problem, which I discuss below.)

A second example of relativism’s potential practical relevance has to do with the moral permissibility of intervention in others’ actions. Prinz argues that the kind of tolerance facilitated by relativism does not demand that we abandon unwilling victims to aggressors with whom we do not share basic moral norms (208–10). We can protect unwilling victims against aggressors because

if the victims of their actions do not share their morality, then my initial reason for not intervening doesn’t apply. The factors that make it problematic to impose our values on those who do not embrace those values do not apply in the case of unwilling victims. Unwilling victims of practices that we condemn also condemn those practices. When we intervene in such cases, we are imposing our values on the perpetrators of the harms, but we are not imposing anything on the victims. A committed relativist can choose to assist people with similar values (210).

Here again Prinz seems to take relativism to have normative implications, but I don’t think the argument shows this. Why does it matter that we’re not imposing our values on the victims, but only on the aggressors? Prinz says that my initial reason for not intervening doesn’t apply. I take it that the initial reason for not intervening is that I must be open to the possibility that the aggressors’ views are right (for them) (208). If this is so, how does the fact that their victims do not share their values remove this reason for not intervening? I can think of several ways that it might (by drawing our attention to the harm done to the victims or by emphasizing the disrespectful, intolerant attitudes of the aggressors), but they all push us into the practical point of view from which some norms are taken to be more authoritative than others, some particular judgements are shown to stand up to scrutiny, while others are overridden and rejected.

At this point Prinz may think that the claims I am making about conviction and the practical point of view fly in the face of the empirical evidence he discusses, particularly when it comes to conviction about basic values that provide justification for particular moral positions. I don’t think this is the case. I agree with Prinz that whatever counts as a justification from the practical point of view will have to make reference to other values or norms a person has, whether these are ‘extramoral’ values, epistemological norms, or other kinds of commitments. I agree that there is no view from nowhere from which we can justify our values. But this does not mean that there is no distinction between normative reasons and psychological claims about the causes of our moral judgements. The practical task of figuring out which norms have authority is different from the scientific investigation into the causes of our judgements. What it is about a particular norm that gives it this status from the point of view of a particular person will depend,
I suspect, on the psychology of that person: firmness of conviction, centrality in a web of commitments and beliefs, and a sense of self-evidence are some possibilities. At one point Prinz rejects a view like the one I am defending, according to which moral judgements are taken to be justified from the practical point of view. He rejects the view because he assumes that someone who thinks that our moral judgements are supported by (and themselves imply) justifying reasons must also think that these reasons take the form of ‘well worked out rational argument’ (125):

If grounding norms were construed as preference-independent, moral interlocutors should feel some compulsion to justify them in purely rational terms. But, I would guess that such attempts at justification have no significant role in ordinary moral discourse. It’s not the case that I value human life because of some well worked out rational argument, and I don’t feel any obligation to generate such an argument. If I encounter someone who baldly states that human life has no value, I assume that the person is depraved, not dumb. I respond, not with reason, but with the fist (125).3

I think the mistake Prinz makes here is to think that justification must be cashed out in terms of ‘well worked out rational argument’. We don’t have to think this. Instead, we can think that justification requires supporting your position with other norms you take to have (at least provisional) authority, or with a sense of self-evidence, or with a story about what has gone wrong with someone who doesn’t share them. In fact, Prinz inadvertently gives us one example of the kind of justification that might be in the background of conviction about the basic value of human life. Someone who does not see the value of human life, he says, ‘is depraved’. Notice that to say that a person is depraved is not just to say that his sentiments are different from mine. Rather, it is to say that there is something profoundly wrong with him. This is a moral judgement that can be part of my justification for thinking that human life is a good value to have. When it comes to more basic values (such as happiness or human life) people may have nothing further to say that looks to philosophers like a reason or argument. But this does not mean that people think the authority of these norms simply boils down to how they feel.4 Conviction requires the assumption that the norms we have are good ones to have, and for many this assumption will need a story that refers to

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3 As an aside, we might wonder why the fist is permitted here when the lack of a single moral truth is supposed to lead us to turn the other cheek in the argument about relativism and tolerance.

4 In studies on values-as-truisms, people asked to give reasons for fairly basic values (e.g., altruism and equality) gave reasons that did not reference their own feelings about these values (Bernard et al. 2003; Maio and Olson 1998). These studies indicate that cognitive support for basic values is often lacking and that values are causally sustained by feelings,
more than feelings. Moreover, even someone who takes their feelings as evidence for this assumption does so from a practical point of view that includes a norm that gives authority conferring power to feelings. Such a norm can itself be evaluated – I’ve already said why I reject norms that grant authority conferring power to disgust. Whatever the results of this evaluation turn out to be, my point is that the fact that our moral judgements are caused by sentiments and the fact that sentiments vary from person to person do not settle the matter.

Prinz speaks of the recognition of the truth of relativism as the discovery that our values are not privileged (e.g. 207). But what does this mean? If privileged means true, where truth is unrelated to progress and improvement, then why should we care if our values aren’t privileged? If, on the other hand, privileged means better, then whether or not our values are privileged depends on how well they stand up to the norms of improvement we have, and a lack of universality in sentiment does not necessarily take this privilege away. Let me emphasize that I do not think this makes psychology irrelevant to ethics. Psychological facts are very often relevant from the practical point of view as information that we must consider when we reflect on and apply our norms. Variation in sentiment, for example, can be a reason for tolerance in light of norms about the value of individual flourishing and self-direction, or the indefensibility of elevating prejudice and fear of difference to the status of a moral norm. So, we can learn from Prinz that many of our values are not privileged even in the second sense because they would not stand up to reflection on the facts about human psychology. But psychological facts do not dictate what we should think about moral questions outside of the context of a practice in which we weigh, evaluate, and apply our norms. I think much of what Prinz says can be interpreted in this light, which is why I was puzzled by the parts that cannot.5

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References


but this is a separate issue from what counts as justification when that is what is explicitly at issue.

5 For helpful discussion I would like to thank Roy Cook, John Doris, Josh Gert, Peter Hanks, Jimmy Lenman, Jesse Prinz, and the students in my graduate seminar on moral psychology in the fall of 2008.
The Significance of Moral Variation: Replies to Tiberius, Gert and Doris

JESSE PRINZ

I am exceedingly grateful to John Doris, Josh Gert and Valerie Tiberius for their gracious, thoughtful and penetrating commentaries. They have each brought out aspects of *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (ECM) that are both core to the project and in need of further elaboration and defence. Or, better than ‘defence’, I should say discussion, since I take many of these issues to be unsettled. Also, the commentaries are refreshingly constructive. In a limited space, they manage to advance substantive theses about the nature of morality. These are not book reviews; they are significant contributions to the literature. Tiberius stakes out a subtle strategy for rendering relativism irrelevant. Gert offers a rosy new way of viewing the analogy between morals and secondary qualities. Doris crafts an innovative story about why history should matter to moralists. In my replies, I offer some reasons for upholding the perspective charted out in ECM, but my thinking about all of these issues has been deepened by the exchange.

1. Does relativism matter?

Of all the views I hold in philosophy, none disturbs me more than metaethical relativism. Consequently, I was very happy to read Tiberius say that relativism does not matter, and I find much of what she has to say reassuring. She argues that we can go on with our moral practices, even if relativism is true, and that we can engage in progressive moral criticism and reform. This is an important and original suggestion. Most moral philosophers try to refute relativism because they see it as pernicious or, at least, as incompatible with how we operate in the moral domain. Some expressivists have tried to glibly diffuse the threat of moral variation by arguing that, when we encounter people who tolerate what we find immoral, we can still criticise them for being, say selfish and cruel. Tiberius’s strategy bears a superficial