

Moral relativists gone wild

The Emotional Construction of Morals
by Jesse J. Prinz (Oxford University Press, 2007)

Reviewed by Richard Joyce, *Mind* 118 (2009)
[penultimate draft]

Many of us now have a pretty good idea of what to anticipate from a new book by Jesse Prinz. We expect lively philosophy enriched by numerous studies from the empirical sciences, an ambitious and confident engagement with Big Problems, many novel and intriguing arguments, and an author whose joy at immersing himself in the thick of the argumentative fray is obvious. Yet we also expect to see indulged the temptation to pack so *much* into a limited space that the reader can almost feel Prinz's thoughts eagerly jostling to win a place on the page, with a sense of hastiness and a degree of superficiality the inevitable consequences. In short, we expect a fun ride with a dose of exasperation. *The Emotional Construction of Morals* satisfies and further entrenches these expectations. In what follows I will outline the eight chapters of the book in turn—often very briefly—pausing on what strike me as some of the more troubling aspects of Prinz's case. The critical attitude adopted throughout should not be taken to imply that I do not think it a very stimulating and worthwhile piece of philosophy.

Chapter 1 introduces us to *emotionism*, the thesis that emotions are in some manner essential to morality. Hedonic utilitarianism is a kind of emotionism (since it makes happiness essential to moral status), as is emotivism, as is sensibility theory. Prinz delineates various relations that may hold between emotions and morality and homes in on a strong form of the thesis which he wishes to defend. Phrases used to describe the relation he advocates include the following: “moral concepts ... are constituted by emotions” (p. 16), “moral concepts incorporate emotions” (p. 92), “having a moral attitude is a matter of having an emotional disposition” (p. 29), “moral judgments are linked in an essential way to emotions” (p. 26), and “moral judgments contain emotions” (p. 28). This strong form of emotionism he associates with sensibility theory, among whose advocates he lists John McDowell, David Wiggins, and a handful of leading British moralists of the eighteenth century. This form of emotionism is dubbed “strong” in virtue of its endorsement of two theses: metaphysical emotionism (moral properties are essentially related to emotions) and epistemic emotionism (moral concepts are essentially related to emotions). As things unfold, it becomes apparent that epistemic emotionism is being understood in a particular (non-mandatory) way: that in order to competently token a moral concept, one must have (or have had) a certain kind of emotional episode, or at least be disposed to have that emotion.

Most of this first chapter is devoted to convincing us that strong emotionism is correct. Here Prinz pursues a strategy with which he is confident and comfortable: bringing oodles of interdisciplinary empirical data to bear on a perennial philosophical problem. He examines neuroscientific data, social psychology experiments involving trolley problems, hypnosis experiments, developmental psychology, and the nature of psychopathy. This is all good data to consult when considering the role of emotion in morality, and there is little doubt that, as a body, it reveals an intimate connection. But it is not clear that it establishes the strong *essential* connection that Prinz seeks. Let

me identify three misgivings.

First, all too often Prinz merely describes how the data *might* be explained by emotionism without adequately excluding alternative hypotheses. For example, in describing how the moral/conventional distinction arises in childhood, he writes that “perhaps thoughts about moral transgressions stir up negative emotions, and these remain in place even when children imagine prohibitions being lifted” (p. 36). In providing evidence to back up this “perhaps,” Prinz observes that in offering justification for their judgments about authority-transcendent norms, children often mention emotional episodes, such as the harm that violations cause. Of course, given the way that epistemic emotionism has been interpreted, it is not emotions *per se* that must be mentioned, but the judge’s own emotions. Yet regarding this all-important link, Prinz cites but one study that purports to show that “when people attribute emotions, they also experience them” (p. 36). But surely this is not *always* the case. (No data indicates that when I judge that regarding the outcome of the Battle of Waterloo Napoleon was depressed and Wellington was pleased, I simultaneously experience depression and pleasure.) The fragility of this connection from data regarding the moral/conventional distinction to the strong conclusion that the competent tokening of a moral concept requires emotional arousal is typical of the tenuous link from evidence to target thesis in this chapter. Showing that emotionism merely *can* explain all these data would be more worthwhile if (i) there previously existed some serious doubt about this matter or (ii) no alternative explanatory hypotheses offered themselves. But there is no reason for thinking that either of these conditions obtain.

Second, Prinz’s examples of moral transgressions tend to be of a sensational nature, regarding which it surely comes as no surprise to anyone that emotions are present. In presenting “the most obvious reason for taking emotionism seriously,” he notes that it is “hard to remain dispassionate when you read newspaper stories about child molesters, atrocities of war, or institutionalized racism” (p. 21). Later (p. 31) we are asked to consider what reasons we would provide if asked why it is wrong to rape a toddler. But what of more mundane moral transgressions: copyright infringement, or breaking a promise to meet someone for lunch (for trivial reasons), or telling a not-quite-white lie for self-serving purposes? Transgressions can be relatively non-severe without being any less paradigmatically *moral*. Regarding these more commonplace moral misdemeanors there is no doubt that Prinz will continue to urge that emotions of a more calm and cool nature are involved. And he may well be correct. But the data examined do not establish this; we have no grounds for generalizing from the psychology of moral judgments concerning scandalous and dramatic topics to universal claims about moral psychology.

Third, although he expends much energy on trying to show that moral judgments are essentially related to emotion, it emerges later that the thesis really being advocated is that moral judgments are essentially related to *sentiments*—where a sentiment is a disposition to have an emotion (in certain circumstances). This provides Prinz with an escape clause should empirical investigation reveal a moral judgment taking place with no emotional arousal in the picture (“The emotion may be absent, but the disposition to have the emotion remains”). It also makes for a thesis regarding which it is difficult to see just what empirical data should be consulted in order to confirm it. The difficulty emerges in two places. First, how does one empirically prove the presence of a (non-manifest) disposition? Second, how does one empirically prove the presence of an *essential* relation (as opposed to a contingent universal connection)?

Prinz says nothing to address the former, but endeavors to make headway against the latter by eschewing (for a moment) empirical inquiry and instead attempting to convince us *a priori* on the basis of a thought experiment modeled on Frank Jackson's famous example of color-blind Mary. Prinz has us imagine a Mary who has never experienced any moral emotions, who then "coops herself up in a room with masterworks by Kant, Mill, and other normative ethicists" (p. 38). Could Mary ever make a genuine moral judgment on the basis of all this factual information at her disposal while her emotional life continues to be so impoverished? Prinz urges the negative answer, but one suspects his opinion has been guided by his theoretical commitments, for it seems a flimsy intuition at best. More importantly, the argument seems to get muddled. Prinz asks whether Mary could come to know that some action X maximizes utility but coherently wonder whether X is morally right. He likewise asks whether Mary could come to know that performing some action Y would lead to practical contradiction but coherently wonder whether Y is morally wrong. For both questions Prinz answers, plausibly enough: Yes, Mary could wonder. But that answer does not provide Prinz with the evidence in favor of epistemic emotionism that he seeks. For a start, he almost immediately undermines his own argument by acknowledging that if Mary does indeed lack moral concepts, then of course she *cannot* coherently wonder something of the form "I know that X maximizes utility, but is X morally right?", for in order to form such a thought she must first have the concept *moral rightness*. Moreover, the issue is surely not whether either utilitarianism or Kantianism might be coherently doubted by Mary (after all, these theories can be coherently doubted even by those of us with the full emotional repertoire); nor is the issue whether she could conclusively choose between these normative theories on the basis of the stimuli available to her. The issue is, rather, whether Mary—should she come to endorse one of these theories (for whatever misguided reason), and should she go on to apply that theory in her dealings with the world—could be said to be making genuine moral judgments. The insistence on the negative answer seems question begging and I discern no firm intuitions in favor of that response. Whatever intuitions we may have about this case are further muddled by Prinz's admission that in fact it might be possible for Mary to have moral concepts sans emotion after all; it is just that she doesn't have the "standard" moral concepts (pp. 41-2), and the emotionist thesis, it turns out, is restricted to a claim about "standard" moral concepts and judgments.

Chapter 2 advocates a general noncognitive theory of the emotions, and then proceeds to analyze moral emotions. Prinz presents a speculative taxonomy of emotions that sees many of them—including the moral emotions—as "blends" of more basic emotions. Contempt is a blend of anger and disgust; guilt is sadness directed at a certain kind of object; and so on.

Chapter 3 is the heart of Prinz's metaethical case. Here he describes in some detail his version of sensibility theory, and proceeds to defend the theory from ten objections. Chapter 4 is, in a sense, an extension of chapter 3, responding to yet another objection to sensibility theory—namely, that it fails to accommodate moral objectivity. This is a bullet Prinz is willing to bite, and he devotes a lot of energy to making the embrace of moral subjectivism palatable.

Prinz's sensibility theory begins with formulations of moral wrongness and rightness (pp. 90-1) that fit a standard format:

An action A has moral property M just in case A causes subjects of type S to have responses of type R in circumstances C.

(It's not quite standard, since it would be more orthodox with a different modality: "...just in case A *would* cause...", thus allowing A to have M even if unobserved.) Prinz then presents an argument (pp. 91-2) that he thinks allows him to drop all references to variable C, via making S's response R a *sentiment*, which (as I noted above) is a dispositional property. The idea, I take it, is that this disposition will have circumstances of manifestation already built into it. The sentiment S, for example, will be something like "the disposition to feel F *in circumstances C*."

A conspicuous problem is that when earlier describing sentiments (pp. 84-6), Prinz has said next to nothing about the circumstances of manifestation. He does mention that fear of flying is something that manifests itself only when on a plane (p. 85), but when he comes to the moral sentiments the need to specify circumstances seems to have been forgotten. Resentment, for example, is characterized simply as the disposition to feel "bitterness, anger, or contempt" (p. 86). But when? Does Fred have the sentiment of resentment? In some circumstances observing transgressions will make Fred angry; in other circumstances observing those very same things will leave Fred cold. If "circumstances" can include variation in Fred's upbringing, or whether he has suffered brain damage, or whether he lives in the Pleistocene or on Mars in the 23rd century (all variations consistent with him remaining *him*), then we lose all handle on what he might feel when observing transgressions. In fact, without circumstances specified, the incomplete phrase "the disposition to feel F" fails to denote any property at all. (When summarizing later, Prinz unexpectedly mentions subjects being "in good epistemic conditions" (p. 102)—something that was not mentioned in his detailed presentation. In any case, the problem remains. In some circumstances observing transgressions when in good epistemic conditions will make Fred angry; in other circumstances observing those very same things, in equally good epistemic conditions, will leave Fred cold; and so on.)

Not only is there a problematic imprecision regarding the type of *circumstances* relevant to the sensibility theory equation, Prinz also places few constraints on the relevant kind of *subject* in his formulation. It appears that so long as there exists "an observer" who has the sentiment in question in response to A, then A has the moral property in question (p. 92).

Prinz is aware of the strong relativism that this introduces into his theory, and he works hard throughout the book to convince us that it is something we can live with. But the extent of the problem seems to have escaped him. If the domain of "observer" is left entirely open, it can include saints and sociopaths, Gandhi and Jack the Ripper, Fred in a good mood and Fred on drugs, Cro-Magnons and Martians. Given this openness, any given action could instantiate the full complement of moral properties: Hitler's Final Solution could be good, bad, permissible, evil, blameworthy, praiseworthy, obligatory, unfair, reasonable, and supererogatory—all *at the same time*. And now we can, perhaps, see why Prinz chose to formulate his theory in terms of the *existence* of an observer, rather than in the modal terms of how an observer *would* respond (were she to observe). Although (for Prinz) the Final Solution *could* have all these moral properties at once, it actually does instantiate only those for which there really are observers having the sentiments in question. But this is hardly a satisfying escape, leaving the theory at the mercy of chance. Yes, Cro-Magnons on drugs will be excluded, but sociopathic Nazis (to say nothing of Hitler himself) will leave us with a troublingly wide array of moral properties simultaneously instantiated by the action.

The only restriction Prinz appears to place on the observer is that the sentiment in

question must exist “in long-term memory.” But this does little to alleviate the substance of the concern. Hitler’s sentiments were as longstanding as Gandhi’s. Nor does the later revelation that the truth of a judgment of moral wrongness depends on the sentiments of “the contextually salient individual(s) (usually the speaker)” (p. 180) tame the relativism gone wild: When Hitler thinks that exterminating Jews is a reasonable plan his judgment must be assessed relative to one context (according to which it is true); when we think it an abhorrent moral crime our judgment is assessed relative to another context (according to which it is true). The problem is not that this amounts to incoherence (something that Prinz is worried about on pp. 195-99); it is that it represents a spectacular misfit between proffered theory and pretheoretical desiderata.

Over the course of thirty pages Prinz defends sensibility theory from ten objections. There is certainly much of value here, though the arguments, counter-arguments, and rejoinders are packed so tightly that important lines of reasoning are rarely given the space to develop in the manner necessary to render the conclusion convincing. It is a relief that one important objection to sensibility theory—that it fails to secure moral objectivity—is given the whole next chapter.

Prinz’s strategy here is to pick off objectivist metaethical contenders in turn. Ideal observer theory, transcendentalism, virtue ethics, and consequentialism all come under fire. He concludes that although philosophers have long sought an objective foundation for morality, “each of the leading theories ... has serious flaws” (p. 164). “Other objectivist theories might be devised in their wake, but I am not optimistic about their success” (ibid.). Much could be said both for and against the many arguments deployed in this chapter; I should like to focus on just one. Prinz contemplates the possibility that moral concepts are (in some sense) objective even though the world does not satisfy these concepts (pp. 149-51). He considers John Mackie’s view that moral concepts essentially involve “objective prescriptions”—where *objectivity* is a kind of mind-independence, and *prescriptions* are “essentially motivating” (and thus mind-dependent)—which Prinz interprets as implying that “moral concepts must be incoherent” (p. 151). Prinz doubts the truth of this, but his main point here is to note that even if it were true, concepts “can contain mistakes” (ibid.) without this leading to an error theory, because concepts can have “fallback plans”: adjusted versions of themselves with the flawed element expunged. In Mackie’s case, the family of erroneous objective moral concepts can be reinterpreted as being a family of successful *subjective* moral concepts (Prinz’s own sensibility theory concepts, to be precise).¹

Let me make a couple of minor comments and then a broader point. First, if the problem with moral concepts is their attempt to combine mind-dependence with mind-independence, it is not obvious why we should fall back on the *subjective* surrogate. One could, seemingly with just as much justification, drop the aspirations of being “essentially motivating” and instead embrace some purely mind-independent property. Second, Mackie in fact does not claim that moral concepts are incoherent. He concedes that if theism were true, then “a kind of objective ethical prescriptivity could be introduced” (*Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Penguin, 1977: p. 48). When we combine this with the fact that in Mackie’s comprehensive case against theism (*The Miracle of Theism*, Clarendon, 1982) the existence of God is repeatedly said to be “improbable” rather than impossible, then we must conclude that Mackie

¹ This is reminiscent of comments made by David Lewis in “Dispositional theories of value” [1989] in his *Papers in Ethics and Social Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2000: 68-94).

thought that the error in morality is but a contingent matter. Prinz's earlier quick argument against Mackie's moral error theory on pp. 88-89 is also based on a misreading. Mackie famously claims that moral properties are "queer" because they are objective but "action-guiding." Prinz interprets the latter as having something to do with *prompting* motivation, and thus concludes that sensibility theory provides a persuasive answer to Mackie's challenge. But "action-guidingness" is better interpreted as the quality of *demanding* motivation (see Garner, "On the genuine queerness of moral properties and facts," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1990): 137-146), and nothing in sensibility theory promises to satisfy this central idea that moral properties are, or imply, practical *demands*. (More on this in a moment.)

A more substantive complaint against Prinz's employment of the "fallback plan" argument against moral skepticism is that he does not extend to his rivals the same courtesy. Consequentialism, for example, is criticized for being counterintuitive in various ways, and thus Prinz concludes that we must consider it a revisionist theory—not as a description of moral concepts "as they currently exist" (p. 159)—and thus not a rival to his favored sensibility theory. But why not instead claim that consequentialism is the fallback plan of a flawed concept—the flaws being those very non-consequentialist intuitions that are to be excised? (This would not be to construe consequentialism as "revisionist" in the sense just mentioned; the surrogate concept would purport to descriptively capture the concept as it is presently used.) The more general worry here is that we have no principled way of deciding when we may legitimately employ this strategy. Problematic concepts with successful fallback plans (mentioned by Prinz) include *blue* and *gorilla*; those lacking them include *phlogiston* and *witch* (pp. 150-51). The difference is supposed to be that the former exhibit "utility and projectability" (p. 151), meaning (roughly) that we can use the surrogate concept in daily life in exactly the same way as we use the flawed concept. The crucial question, then, is whether we really *can* use non-objective moral concepts in all the ways (or in enough of the ways) that we use objective moral concepts. Prinz obviously thinks so, but I believe that this empirical question calls for a more delicate and detailed examination than he has yet brought to bear.

One might, for example, claim with some plausibility that a key pragmatic role for morality is to act as bulwark against various forms of motivational infirmity and to strengthen social cohesion. Arguably, it is precisely the strong inescapable objective categoricity with which moral judgments are imbued that allows them to play this role effectively (irrespective of whether this kind of authoritative normativity is philosophically defensible). Could a response dependent surrogate play that role? Arguably not. Consider, for example, the question of why anyone should care about moral properties if they are like Prinz describes. Prinz will begin his answer by saying that we *do* care, since the standard way of recognizing the presence of one of these dispositional properties is to have the emotional episode in question, and emotions are ways of caring. But suppose a person (Amy) reflects upon this, and realizes that when she judges a violent crime to be wrong, all that is really happening is that she is having an emotional response to the dispositional property of causing subjects like Amy to have that kind of emotional response. It does not follow that Amy's emotion will evaporate, such that she ceases to care, but it would not be surprising if she felt rather deflated and uneasy about the grounding of her moral judgment. Prior to her "enlightenment" she supposed her moral judgments to be tracking something more than just *that*. It is not at all clear what kind of effect this knowledge might have on Amy's practical and emotional life, and thus not clear that concepts representing the sensibility theorist's dispositional properties can be smoothly used in daily life as

surrogates for the (possibly flawed) objectivist concepts.

Prinz does not address this matter until Chapter 5 (which begins Part II of the book). This chapter defines relativism(s) more carefully, describes real-world cases of radical moral disagreement, and defends relativism from objections (in particular, that it is incoherent and that it is pernicious). It is under the last heading—that relativism is insidious—that he considers the aforementioned possibility of relativism undermining moral convictions. He imagines a “taste absolutist,” who believes that chocolate is “objectively, universally, and absolutely wonderful” (p. 211). Coming to realize that this is all mistaken, and that the yumminess of chocolate is a subjective affair, *surely* (Prinz urges) shouldn’t lead her to lose her passion for chocolate. But it is a shady analogy to contemplate someone who has a bizarre objectivist belief and then comes to share our ordinary views. More revealing—but also more damaging to Prinz’s case—would be to consider someone who starts out with a perfectly reasonable objectivist view and then comes to believe in the subjectivity of the matter. Imagine someone coming to believe that the danger of falling from a great height is a purely subjective matter, or that whether shooting people will harm them is wholly subjective. One should not, from the disadvantageous perspective of one’s armchair, pronounce with any confidence what effect such a dramatic change in view might have on the person’s actions and attitudes.

The worry that moral relativism may undermine convictions is not, in my opinion, best categorized under the heading of the possible insidiousness of relativism. (I entirely agree with Prinz that “you cannot refute a descriptive theory by showing that it has unpleasant consequences” (p. 207).) The worry is, rather, that Prinz’s relativism may not have the kind of *authority* that we would wish of a morality, in which case these relativistic properties may simply not be viable contenders for the constituents of the moral realm. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with moral relativism *in general* being married to practical authority. Picture moral norms as objective, categorical, inescapable, overriding, and binding as you wish; it remains logically possible that one set of such norms applies to me and a different set applies to you. The problem lies with specific relativistic proposals—Prinz’s response dependence version, in particular. The most pressing element of the problem is not that the embrace of this moral ontology will cause people to feel more lackadaisical about their values (though that may be true); it is that these response dependent properties do not demand that anyone do otherwise. The response-dependent properties favored by Prinz do not, in fact, in any obvious way provide *demands* at all. Consider the dispositional property of making subjects of type S to have emotion E in circumstances C. If Sally is an S in C, confronted with the dispositional property in question, then she *will* have E, but there is no place in this ontology for claiming that the dispositional property demands this response of her. Alternatively, if Sally is not a subject of type S, or is not in circumstances C, then the claim that the presence of the disposition somehow makes a practical demand of her seems even more farfetched. (It makes no difference if we add that Sally recognizes the presence of the dispositional property; nor does it make a difference if we add that Sally acknowledges that being an S in C would be a desirable state for her to attain.) If the emotional responses in question are in no sense demanded by the presence of the disposition, then nor (*ceteris paribus*) are the actions and omissions that the emotions are likely to prompt. But if we cannot make out how a property can be construed as making a practical demand, then what business have we identifying that property with moral rightness or moral wrongness?² It is as if

² It would go a long way towards defeating this line of criticism if the proponent of the dispositional

Prinz is satisfied to explain how it is that humans come to experience the world as making demands upon us, but feels no need to explain how the world actually *does* make demands upon us. This is analogous to thinking that one might prove the existence of ghosts by providing a sociological and psychological explanation for why people come to believe in ghosts.

Chapter 6 is possibly the lightest chapter of the book, and is largely dispensable to Prinz's over-arching argument. Here he reveals his admiration for Nietzsche through an examination of the latter's views on the genealogy of morals (an admiration that is undimmed by the fact that he disagrees in every salient respect with Nietzsche's views on the matter). Prinz proceeds to outline the historical roots of some real values: pertaining to cannibalism and marriage. He plainly relishes pursuing anthropological digressions on lurid topics like cannibalism; elsewhere we are treated to lengthy and carefully-researched discussions of female circumcision and incest. He examines some possible principles that would allow one to move from descriptive genealogy to the kind of dismissive skepticism that characterizes Nietzsche's attitude towards Christian ethics. Prinz rejects each such principle, though one is left wondering whether his survey of fairly simplistic principles has exhausted the domain of possibilities.

Chapter 7 continues the genealogical theme, criticizing recent attempts to advocate moral nativism. Prinz both dismantles particular pro-nativist arguments and presents his own alternative hypothesis: that human morality is a byproduct of other evolved capacities. Though Prinz does not acknowledge it, his anti-nativism serves to further release his moral relativism from a potential source of constraint.

The final and shortest chapter ("Moral Progress") resounds with the squeal of brakes as Prinz tries to elude the looming monster of rampant moral relativism that he has labored so hard to unleash. Although there is an "unbounded number" (p. 288) of possible equally true moralities, we may still have grounds for preferring one moral system over another. A morality that embraces slavery may be considered inferior to one that rejects it; a morality that allows suffrage for woman may be superior to chauvinism. The key to securing this friendly result is that moral systems may be assessed and compared according to various "extramoral" values, such as consistency, ease of use, the improvement of welfare, and increased social stability (see pp. 291-2).

The case appears desperate. First of all, Prinz's test cases (concerning slavery, etc.) describe how a society's moral system (which seems repulsive to us) *might* fall foul of these extramoral criteria, without showing us that they do. Concerning the moral acceptance of slavery, for example, Prinz (in characteristic fashion) provides us with a well-researched potted history of slavery; yet the details of the case that are supposed to show that supporters of slavery were undermining their own extramoral values are entirely speculative. A mid-nineteenth character called "Smith" is invented, whose psychological profile is carefully fleshed out in such a way that Smith's pro-slavery stance should be overturned by his own lights. Yet one could just as easily tell a fictional story according to which a pro-slavery normative system *doesn't* violate these criteria. One could, for that matter, describe a fictional modern liberal American in such a way that she is committed to overturning her anti-slavery stance. Prinz picks and chooses his examples. Pol Pot's genocidal activities are shown to have backfired

theory of morality were instead to advocate a *normative* version, such that moral wrongness (say) is the property that *merits* R in S in C. (McDowell advocates such a view.) But Prinz nowhere hints at this strategy, and, besides, the normative version brings serious problems of its own. See N. Zangwill, "Against moral response-dependence," *Erkenntnis* 59 (2003): 285-290.

in pragmatic terms (pp. 300-301), but other more “practically successful” genocides (e.g., the Native Americans) are conveniently unmentioned.

Second, more than a few of the alleged extramoral values seem critically under-described. Do we really all value welfare? One might well allow that each of us values our *own* welfare (and that of our friends and family, say), but it’s not at all clear that from this observation one can draw the conclusion that “improving welfare,” in some generic sense, is a shared value. If this is so, however, then although an individual may assess and compare moral systems on the basis of how *his* well-being will fare, it doesn’t follow that moral systems can be assessed according to their influence on the general well-being of their adherents. (Here, as so often in this book, Prinz plays fast and loose with words like “us” and “our” and “we.”)

Third, it turns out (p. 303) that these extramoral values are themselves parochial and optional; a culture or individual could coherently reject them and substitute others. Upon making this admission, Prinz stresses that he is merely trying to show how moral progress is *possible* even if relativism is true; he is not out to prove that any moral system deemed unspeakably horrible (by us) is required, by its own lights, to undergo change. However, surely we all knew that progress is *possible* in the relativist’s world: So long as a non-moral value is embraced (*any* non-moral value), then a moral system can do a better or worse job of satisfying that value. In other words, we all knew that relativism allows that *from a given point of view* one moral system can be preferred to another. The whole trick is to get beyond that “point of view”—to satisfy the strong intuition that a person or culture that relishes violence and mayhem (against certain groups, say) is wrong—*really* wrong—without the limping addendum “...from our point of view.” Perhaps it is just obviously unreasonable to expect a relativist to fulfill this intuition, but, by the same token, it would be more honest of the relativist to stand up and bravely admit that his theory fails to satisfy an entrenched desideratum, rather than subjecting his reader to convolutions of rhetoric that constantly suggest otherwise but ultimately fail to deliver.

I have been hard on Prinz’s book in this review. It is a good book. Prinz has a roaming, eager mind that is fun to engage with, and his defense of sensibility theory is full of new resources that promise to invigorate the metaethical debate. On almost every page there is something to excite one’s interest; on many pages there is something with which to take philosophical umbrage. But even when *The Emotional Construction of Morals* is infuriating, it is infuriating in the best of ways.