

NATURALISM, PLURALISM AND LOCATION PROBLEMS. REFLECTIONS ON JESSE PRINZ'S NATURALISTIC COMMITMENTS

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Jesse Prinz's work encompasses an impressive variety of themes: from aesthetics to concept theory, from metaethics to the psychology of emotion. However, this admirable variety of topics does not prevent from identifying at least two overarching commitments: one to Hume's empiricism, which has sometimes led Prinz to read his own work (for sure too modestly) as a series of footnotes to Hume's; the latter to a throughout naturalism, whose implications are ontological as well as epistemological. This paper focuses on the latter aspect.

Prinz makes his own naturalistic commitments explicit in the preamble to *The Emotional construction of Morals* (2007), where he endorses four varieties of naturalism. The first is *metaphysical naturalism*, which Prinz reads as a denial of supernaturalism:

Our world is limited by the postulates and laws of the natural sciences. Nothing can exist that violates these laws, and all entities that exist must, in some sense, be composed of the entities that our best scientific theories require (Prinz 2007, p. 2)

Existence can be granted only to entities that are required by our best scientific theories. Spirits and fairies are not included in those theories, hence they cannot exist. Metaphysical naturalism is connected to the so called location problems, concerning the attempt to find a place in the world for those facts and entities that do not seem to be included in our best scientific theories. In *The Emotional Construction of Morals* Prinz faces the problem of locating moral facts, so as to avoid that they must be considered non-existent like fairies and ghosts.

Metaphysical naturalism is by no means the only variety of naturalism that Prinz endorses. He actually takes metaphysical naturalism to entail a sort of *explanatory naturalism*: all that exists and is not described in the language of science, must in the end be describable in those terms. Prinz hastens to add that his position does not amount to reductionism: one need not think that lower-level explanations are the only genuine explanations, and that higher-level explanations must be *deduced* from the former. However, higher levels must be tied to the lower levels by some kind of systematic correspondence.

Prinz also endorses a kind of *methodological naturalism*, which he takes to come from Quine: if all the facts are in a sense natural facts, those facts must be investigable by methods suitable to the investigations of natural facts. Prinz also subscribes to a fourth and less popular variety of naturalism, which he again takes to derive from Quine: *transformation naturalism*, according to which we always operate from within our theories of the world; we cannot step outside and adopt a transcendental position, for we cannot think of the world independently of our theories.

In *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, Jesse is very clear in pledging his alliance with naturalism, but he does not argue for the theses he endorses. In this paper I maintain that those theses do actually require an explicit and systematic defence. In section 1 I suggest that naturalism cannot be taken for granted, because of the strength of the theses it entails and of their being significantly controversial. In section 2 I try to cast light on what seems to me a tension within Prinz's naturalism, one that is related his methodological pluralism. In section 3 I briefly sketch an alternative approach to location problems, one that is still naturalistic but that avoids some of the problems of classical naturalism.

1. Why should we be naturalists?

Prinz can hardly be criticised for not providing an explicit defence of his naturalistic commitments, for most contemporary partisans of naturalism seem to take it for granted. However, if naturalism is to be more than a self-justifying dogma, or an intellectual fashion, a defence seems necessary, especially considering that the theses he endorses are strong and by no means uncontroversial. As an ontological thesis, Prinz's naturalism boils down to the idea that no part of the existent can lie beyond the world described by natural sciences: all facts are in a sense natural facts. As an epistemological¹ thesis, it states that all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge, or can be traced back – in one way or another – to scientific knowledge. As a consequence, there is no genuine knowledge out of science; a conclusion that would certainly strike most people as quite strong.

Not only naturalism leads to strong conclusions; those conclusions, however popular in some philosophical circles, are by no means universally accepted. Paul Horwich, for example, does not confine himself to raising doubts about the tenability of naturalism; he seems to suggest that naturalism is entirely unwarranted, and evidently so. On Horwich's view, all we need to get rid of the idea that it is necessary to 'locate' apparently non-naturalistic facts in a natural world is a *superficial* explanation of naturalism's initial appeal:

- a) Naturalism rests on the impression that any non-natural facts would be intolerably weird.
- b) That impression stems from a combination of three factors: first, the singular practical and explanatory importance of naturalistic facts; second, the very broad scope of the naturalistic – the striking range and diversity of the facts that it demonstrably encompasses; and third, the feeling that reality must 'surely' be fundamentally uniform – so all facts must be naturalistic.
- c) This final feeling is based upon a misguided overextension of scientific norms: in particular, the norm of theoretical simplicity. For it is pretty clear (i) that the metaphysical and epistemological variety of possible facts corresponds exactly to the variety of possible meanings (i.e. of possible regularities of word-use); (ii) that the latter will certainly include many that are *non-naturalistic*; and (iii) that many of those will be socially useful and will therefore be deployed.

In order to undercut the sense of 'weirdness' that can stem from our failure to naturalistically 'locate' a given phenomenon it suffices to acknowledge the evident plausibility of this diagnosis. (Horwich 2010, p. 157)

If Horwich's diagnosis is correct, the naturalist is wrong in his ontological and, by extension, in his epistemological claims. Maybe to say that the plausibility of the diagnosis is evident is too optimistic; perhaps, Horwich might be criticised for begging the question on the central point of the issue: the naturalistic assumption that reality is sufficiently uniform as to contain naturalistic facts only. It might be said that, while not evidently true, this thesis is not evidently false either: it is not so clear, in other words, that the many philosophers (Prinz included) who make this assumption are entirely wrong. Thus, reading a conclusive refutation of naturalism in Horwich's text might be too optimistic for the anti-naturalist. However, it seems to me that this argument still does some important work to the effect of showing what I am arguing for: that to the extent that it rests on premises that are by no means uncontroversial, naturalism requires a defence. More precisely, I want to leave the following question open for Jesse: why should we think that a substantive uniformity of reality – which, as Horwich has it, is a necessary precondition for metaphysical naturalism to be tenable – actually obtains? To think so seems to be at odds with evidence from the senses.

The credibility of naturalism is sometimes upheld by presenting it as an alternative to supernaturalism, where supernaturalism is read as entailing the existence of entities we uncontroversial know to not exist. This informal argument runs more or less like this:

- A) Thinking that naturalism is false is tantamount to admitting that fairies and ghosts exist
- B) Fairies and ghosts do not exist

¹ It seems to me that Prinz's explanatory and methodological naturalism can be combined in order to yield this strong epistemological conclusion.

hence

C) Naturalism is correct

It should be evident, however, that this argument only becomes interesting if combined to a conflation of supernaturalism (the thesis that supernatural entities such as fairies and spirits exist) and non-naturalism (the thesis that non-natural properties such as moral properties exist without supervening on natural properties). This conflation, however, is unwarranted: one may well think that the latter exist, without necessarily granting existence to the former. The non-naturalist's justification for a similar attitude might be that while science can be granted authority over facts concerning ghosts and fairies (entities that, if existent, would be 'out there' just like cats and birds), it is not up to the task of adjudicating on the existence of moral facts, which concerns properties of a totally different kind. Apparently, this boils down to just a legitimate delimitation of the scope and authority of science. Maybe a similar delimitation is in the end incorrect, but again, the burden of the proof seems to rest on the naturalist to show that her position is the good one.

2. A tension in Prinz's naturalism

In the previous section I have confined myself to showing that naturalism cannot be taken for granted. I will now raise a problem for the variety of naturalism endorsed by Jesse. As should be clear, on Prinz's accounts natural facts mark the borders of what really exist. But what are natural facts? Talk about nature risks being empty in the absence of further specification. Of course, Prinz provides this specification by appeal to a the following principle: natural facts are those that can be investigated using the methods of natural sciences, and can be expressed by statements employing the vocabulary of natural science only. What unifies the universe of natural facts is their privileged relationship with the methods and the vocabularies of the natural sciences. But is this principle strong enough to really grant unification? This is a serious question. For if it were shown that the set of the so called natural facts (which for Prinz are the only genuine facts) were indeed internally heterogeneous, it might be suspected that its borders are established in a purely arbitrary fashion. If there is no substantive uniformity within the set of the facts thus identified as natural, why should not the set be open to, e.g., moral facts?

Of course, in order to establish whether the criterion employed by Prinz to identify natural facts yields or not a substantially uniform set, it is necessary first of all to establish what counts as natural science. On the one hand, it is possible to identify the natural sciences with the hard sciences. In this case, one will probably find in the methodological and explanatory procedures of those sciences a sufficient degree of uniformity as to grant the conclusion that the facts described by those sciences comprise a substantially uniform set. At any rate, one will be able to find a similar degree of uniformity within physics, that is often thought of by empirically-minded metaphysicians as the best source of insights concerning the fundamental nature of reality. But Prinz's methodological naturalism encompasses a far broader array of disciplines, and extends to sciences such as history, that are often thought of as human or social rather than natural sciences. The problem is not whether cultural history deserves or not the label of a natural science, for that is simply a linguistic matter. The crucial point is whether a substantially uniform set of 'natural' facts can include at the same time the facts described by sciences that are so different in the methods and the vocabularies they employ: physics on one side, history and anthropology on the other. In order to be allowed to draw metaphysical conclusions from his sources of empirical evidence, Prinz needs to answer affirmatively. But then the question is: if the universe of natural facts is so heterogeneous as to include at the same time the facts of physics and those of cultural history, why could not that set also include facts about morals, causation, or modality? Prinz's pluralism helps us to recognize that there is no uniformity in reality; but acknowledging that seems to undercut the vary rationale behind talk of location problems and the naturalistic commitments that underpin them.

3. Maximizing pluralism: a subject naturalistic perspective on location problems

It seems to me that pluralism is the key to a more satisfactory treatment of location problems. However, it is necessary to distinguish two kinds of pluralism. One variety of pluralism is *horizontal pluralism*, which concerns a plurality of ways of doing the same thing – of performing, as it were, the same linguistic task. According to Quine’s principle of ontological relativity, for example, there exists a plurality of alternative scientific worldviews, “each empirically adequate to more or less the same degree, and none, even in principle, having privileged claim to provide a truer description of the world” (Price 1992, p. 389). As a moral relativist, Prinz is a horizontal pluralist: he admits the existence of a range of equally coherent moral viewpoints, none objectively superior to any other. However, the important move towards a novel treatment of location problems consists in adopting a further variety of pluralism, which I will call *discourse pluralism*. Discourse pluralism consists in recognizing that philosophy deals with an irreducible plurality of kinds of discourses, of games of language: for example, the moral as well as the scientific. When it comes to morals, the discourse pluralist will agree with Prinz that moral facts cannot be reduced to non-moral facts; however, she will resist his suggestion that in order to take them to exist, one needs to ground them on non-moral facts. She will reject the very idea that different domains of discourse need to be unified, and that there is one single universe of facts that exhausts the scope of reality. I do not have the time to spell out this alternative view in the details here. I hasten to say, however, that it need not lead to any bizarre form of naturalism. To the contrary, the approach it yields is fully naturalistic, even though the variety of naturalism it exemplifies is different from the one endorsed by Prinz. While Prinz, as most contemporary naturalists, is interested in the objects and properties that can be deemed really existent, I am more concerned with the different functions and roles that language can play in the life of natural creatures like us human beings. The concern is, as it were, with the subject rather than the object. As a consequence, this different approach has been labelled *subject naturalistic* (Price 2004).

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