

Morality and the pro-social emotions: a nativist view.

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1. Introduction: Morality differs from pro-social emotions

In one of his central arguments against nativism, Prinz uses a very important distinction between dispositions towards morally praiseworthy behavior (that we probably share with other pro-social animals) and dispositions to behavior guided by moral evaluations or morality proper. Prinz develops two sides to this distinction and I agree that he captures distinctive features of morality. But I am less convinced that they speak against nativism. This passage summarizes the two relevant features:

“...biologically based behaviors...are culturally malleable and insufficient to guide our behavior without cultural elaboration. I think culture makes two contributions to the biological inputs. First, it converts these behaviors into moral norms, by grounding them in moral emotions. Second, it takes the biologically based norms that have highly stereotyped...behavioral effects in our primate cousins and alters them into culturally specific instructions.”(Prinz 2007, 277, my italics)

What he calls “biologically based norms” are in fact pro-social emotions like altruism and concern for others. They are inputs for moral emotions, but differ from them for two reasons. First, they differ along the axis generality/specificity. The evolved (innate) pro-social emotions are “too vague to translate into action” (276). They are best viewed as general constraints that can only acquire specific content through culture; and with specificity comes cultural variability:

“...strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an evolutionary ethics...evolved norms [and their adjoined emotions, AR] do not constitute an innate morality. They are, instead, flexible constraints within which morality emerges.” 259. We can understand many human moral norms as culturally specific variations on the same biological themes.” (Prinz 2007, 274)

Secondly, moral emotions are a distinct type of motivation when compared to mere pro-social emotions. For example, behaviors against sexual fidelity or rank naturally elicit aversion, even in some non-human animals. But moralization of rank and sex is not equivalent to aversive emotion. Moralization means that the thought “it is wrong” is added on top of these emotions. The distinctive character of moral wrongness is important to moral philosophers (see Joyce (2006) and comments in De Waal (2006)). In itself, however, it does not preclude a nativist view, as we shall see.

Both cultural variability and distinctive motivation are important for morality, but Prinz lacks a proper view of how both belong together. This shortcoming emerges in a passage where he tries to explain the need for a distinctive moral motivation. Prinz says that in small-scale

societies “natural niceness”, without morality, was probably enough to produce praiseworthy behavior:

“Very small-scale human societies may not require moral rules, because members of those societies are close enough to be naturally inclined to treat each other well. As population size grows, however, we find ourselves in contact with people who are not close friends or family... Expansion places pressure on cultures to devise ways of extending our natural niceness to strangers. Moralization offers a solution.” (Prinz 2007, 273)

But if un-moralized pro-social emotions suffice to guide praiseworthy behavior in some human societies, it cannot be right that, without culturally constructed rules, evolved emotional constraints are “too vague to translate into action”. Prinz says elsewhere, commenting on Joyce 2006, that all (human) societies need rules (Prinz 2008). In his replies, Joyce puts his finger on the contradiction between this assertion and the one about “natural niceness” (without moral rules) in small-scale societies (see Joyce, 2008). One way out of the contradiction is to deny that rules are dispensable in small-scale societies. But we still need an explanation for why rules are always needed, and I think “vagueness” of evolved emotions is the wrong turn to take. I think two biological facts can provide the explanation. In the following I link these two facts to the distinctive features of morality; and I shall argue that this connection makes the case for an innate morality more attractive than Prinz is willing to acknowledge.

2. Motivational distinctiveness

It is possible, though not yet completely clear, that apes feel pro-social emotions like altruism or concern for others. However, these emotions alone do not make for a moral creature. Morality requires a second-order evaluation of behaviors and first-order emotions. These evaluations are, for example, present in self-directed moral emotions like guilt and shame. These are necessary psychological prerequisites for having ought-thoughts or “oughtitudes” (Prinz 2007, 262). Prinz says:

“We often say that genuine altruism is a form of moral behavior. But the phrase “moral behavior” is ambiguous. It can mean either behavior that we find morally praiseworthy or behavior that is driven by moral evaluations. Suppose apes help each other out of genuine concern. ...This tells us something about the evolution of moral decency, but it tells us nothing, I submit, about the evolution of morality... A creature could behave in noble ways without any capacity to judge that actions are good... These are different... I do think there are important psychological prerequisites on having ought-thoughts, or “oughtitudes.” For an ape to think that he ought to share... he must feel guilty if he doesn’t share. He must also feel angry at those who do not share with him. This kind of motivation differs from what evolutionary ethicists call altruistic motivation..” (Prinz 2007, 261-262, my italics).

However, though evolved pro-social emotions like altruism and concern are not equivalent to moral emotions, I do think that they are necessary, though not sufficient, for having moral feelings. This seems likely, particularly in creatures that also have strong evolved drives towards selfishness. When inclined to follow a course of action that makes me better off at the expense of making others worse off, I can feel the contrary pull of other-regarding feelings of concern. In such a conflict, a third feeling, a moral one, would stop me from too readily yielding to selfish desires. Moral emotions rule that I should act on the requirements of concern, and that I should feel bad about the prospect of ignoring them. This capacity for norms about how I ought to feel and which of two conflicting desires I ought to follow, is essential for morality. Here lies precisely the element that distinguishes a praiseworthy emotion and/or behavior from a strictly moral emotion or behavior.

Prosocial emotions are necessary if a selfish creature is to be able to evolve moral feelings. More precisely, it is the biological conflict between selfishness and pro-social emotions that makes possible the emergence of a meta-emotion telling me that concern should override the selfish temptation. Prinz admirably recognizes the link between meta-emotions and morality. But he is more concerned about explaining their derivative character: He says: "Indignation is not a basic emotion; it derives from anger. Indignation is anger calibrated to injustice." Or "Guilt is sadness that has been calibrated to acts that harm people about whom we care." (Prinz 2007, 77). Instead, I would here emphasize the importance of the conflict between prosocial emotions and selfishness, and the fact that the meta-emotions are calibrated to avoid neglect of the prosocial emotions. Norms of justice or norms against harming others only originate in the first place when this third moral feeling emerges to resist the pull of selfishness and avoid the neglect of prosocial emotions.

3. Cultural variability and the public negotiation of rules

The conflict between selfish tendencies and pro-social emotions is one of the necessary biological conditions for the emergence of moral norms or meta-emotions, but Prinz's makes no use of it in his theory. Moral emotions condemn the selfish neglect of pro-social emotions, which partly explains concepts like duty or moral wrongness. However, these concepts involve one further and very important factor. The organism that experiences the inner conflict and evolves meta-emotions is also engaged in a process of public negotiation. The reason is that the internal conflict affects other group members if it is resolved in favor of selfishness. Others have an interest in the selfish outcome being avoided as often as possible. The solution must be in the range of what is usually understood as fairness, taking both self and others equally into account. Solution points are publicly negotiated and then fixed through explicit and public rules. This drive to publicity is a further biological pre-condition for the emergence of the typically moral emotions and norms at a higher level, and it completes the concept of duty or moral wrongness. The management of internal conflicts with a view to public rules explains both the distinctive character of moral motiva-

tion and the fact that moral rules are specific and culturally variable, for public negotiation happens in a particular time and place. The cultural variability of specific moral rules comes from the conflict between pro-social and selfish emotions and from its public negotiation. We do not understand meta-emotions like guilt or shame unless we factor in their connection to the public negotiation of rules.

This type of relationship between the moral and the basic pro-social emotions can be traced in any of the domains for which we have moral rules, including the domains of sexuality and rank or hierarchy. A necessary condition for the emergence of morality is the existence of a conflict between selfish and pro-social drives. For example, natural selection will program feelings motivating fidelity (a pro-social emotion) between mates in species where bi-parental care is obligate. But feelings driving to infidelity persist, because they are also adaptive. Animals follow one or the other according to circumstance. They may form private rules for when to follow one or the other; or they may not, and wantonly follow their moods. But animals lack public rules to solve their inner conflicts, whether they form private rules or not. As Prinz says:

“Infidelity does occur. ...even bird species known for their long-term monogamous relationships often sneak in some romance on the side. There is no evidence that non-human animals regard such behaviors as immoral, rather than merely risky.” (280)

Only humans (for all we know) have developed the moral emotions and meta-norms to manage those conflicts. Only humans publicly negotiate the conditions under which following their drives to infidelity constitute, or not, a breach of fidelity. This negotiation produces different norms depending on contingent cultural or environmental factors. Prinz refers to cultures that allow women extramarital sex, not considered infidelity. The source of this variation is not that pro-fidelity emotions are intrinsically vague, but that conflicts between selfish and pro-social feelings in humans are negotiated in a public way. When all parties have to be publicly committed to a solution that represents a regular and predictable behavior, specific rules are negotiated. Since the negotiation happens in a particular context, variable rules come into being.

4. Innate morality

In Prinz's view, morality is a bio-cultural phenomenon, where culture has incomparably greater weight than biology. The “vagueness” of the biologically evolved dispositions serves to emphasize this greater weight in his theory. I have rejected this idea above. Cultural variability and specificity comes from a biologically given inner conflict and its public negotiation.

Another strategy to emphasize the weight of culture is to present morality as a by-product. “The best way to defeat nativism” Prinz says, “is to present an alternative account. ... If

morality can be explained as a byproduct of other capacities, there is little pressure to say that it is innate.” (Prinz 2007, 269) The capacities he has in mind include emotions, memory, rule-formation, imitation, and mind-reading (272). The two distinctive features of morality – cultural specificity and motivational distinctiveness – are closely connected to mind-reading and rule-formation. This connection can be illuminated by viewing moral emotions as built upon two biological facts: a conflict between selfishness and pro-social emotions, and a pressure to manage this conflict through public rules. There is little doubt that the existence of a conflict between selfish and pro-social emotions is an inherited fact in many organisms. On the other hand, the pressure to manage it in a public way was probably ubiquitous and ancestral in human social evolution. Meta-representational abilities, the attribution of mental states to others (mind-reading) and the ability to follow rules were required, as humans had to be aware of the conflict and of its public management.

Prinz’s by-product theory assumes that meta-representation, mind-reading and the ability to follow rules were already there and were “exapted” for morality. But what other function could they have served, besides the one we are here concerned with? What else could have driven their evolution? One possible answer is manipulation of others (Humphrey 1976; Alexander 1987). Agreed, but arguably, morality and manipulation are related phenomena and evolved under similar pressures. In any case, it seems likely that the pressure to deal with an inner conflict in a public manner drove and further shaped the evolution of those abilities. At the least, they co-evolved with the public management of inner conflict. Their genetic basis must have been influenced by that fact. Given this, it is not preposterous to assume that a tendency to public justification is biologically inherited in humans (see Carruthers and James 2008). As for why our ancestors felt a social pressure for the public negotiation of conflicts between selfishness and pro-social emotions, I already mentioned that the conflict harms other group members if it is resolved in favor of selfishness. I close with a quote from Joyce (2006, p. 117) that connects moral judgment to group cohesion through shared or public justification: “...moral judgments can act as a kind of “common currency” for collective negotiation and decision making. Moral judgment thus can function as a kind of social glue, bonding individuals together in a shared justificatory structure and providing a tool for solving many group coordination problems.”

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