

To Cultivate or Extirpate our Emotions:  
a coherentist, anti-relativist view of emotion and reason

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A rationalist picture has dominated Western understandings of moral competence. The skills possessed by moral agents have been thought to be cognitive: skills of reasoning, judgment, decision. A morally good person possesses sound reasoning skills and makes clear, effective decisions about what to do. Enacting those decisions, while necessary, was thought to follow more or less from correct decisions. On these views, cognition is the defining feature of human beings, so also cognition represents the foundational moral skill.

More recently, due to influential voices in moral philosophy<sup>1</sup> and to a wealth of empirical findings,<sup>2</sup> this rationalist picture is being replaced by a view that sees emotions at the center of moral skill. On this new view, moral judgments are caused or even constituted by emotions.<sup>3</sup> This view has many strengths. It appears to accord with empirical studies showing that moral cognitions are influenced by manipulations of emotions (for instance, inducing disgust by seating subjects at a dirty desk). This view seems in line with neuroscientific evidence from fMRIs that

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe, Michael Stocker, Bernard Williams, among others.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in neuroscience, empirical psychology, and empirical philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> The judgment that “x is morally wrong,” is respectively an aversive emotional reaction to x, a cognitive judgment that is the result of an aversive emotional reaction to x, or a cognitive judgment that, counterfactually, would have been different had the agent had a different emotional reaction to x.

correlates moral judgments with increased activity in areas of the brain involved with emotions.<sup>4</sup> Centering emotions in morality makes sense of neuroscientific findings that people with autism and people with psychopathy are hindered (weakly and drastically, respectively) in their ability to make moral judgments and show decreased activity in areas of the brain involved in emotions.

Taking emotions to be central to morality corrects centuries of inaccurate hegemony of reason and also seems to fit data about how human beings approach moral problems. At the same time, some philosophers are questioning whether these data demonstrate that emotions constitute or influence moral judgments.<sup>5</sup> But even when this issue is resolved, still, questions about morality cannot be resolved by data alone:<sup>6</sup> moral questions are not simply factual, but normative, questions about how best to live.

If we learn from data that emotions influence moral judgment, this leaves unanswered the question of how to address this influence. The Stoics, for instance, argue that human lives go best when emotions are largely removed. On their view,

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<sup>4</sup> Individuals considering a Trolley Problem in which they must flip a switch to save several lives appear to approach that dilemma rationally, while individuals considering a Trolley Problems in which they must push another person to their death in order to save several lives seem to approach that problem emotionally.

<sup>5</sup> For instance: Bryce Huebner, "Do Emotions Play a Constitutive Role in Moral Cognition?" *Topoi*, (2015) 34: 427-440; Heidi Maibom, "What Experimental Evidence Shows Us about the Role of Emotions in Moral Judgment," *Philosophy Compass* (2010) 999-1012; Hanno Sauer, "Psychopaths and Filthy Desks: Are Emotions Necessary and Sufficient for Moral Judgment," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2012) 15: 95-115; Daniel Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*, MIT Press, 2011; Frank Hindriks, "How Does Reasoning (Fail to) Contribute to Moral Judgment: Dumbfounding and Disengagement," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2015) 18: 237-250; and Bennett Helm, *Emotional Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Data from neuroscience, empirical psychology, and empirical philosophy can reveal important facts about how human beings do or don't develop morally, they can reveal obstacles to the development of moral competence or moral excellence, and they can reveal heuristics and processes that facilitate its development.

morality involves extirpation of emotions, and cultivation of perception and reason. This is a normative answer to the question raised by data. But it is not the only possible answer.

I argue that we should reject views that see reason as the core of morality (Stoic ones for instance), but that we should also reject some views that see emotions as the moral core. According to certain of the latter views, emotions serve as the unassailable foundation of morality. The result of this unassailability is a kind of moral relativism. Jesse Prinz,<sup>7</sup> for instance, embraces relativism, holding that different cultures license different emotional reactions. Since emotional reactions determine moral judgments, different cultures hold different moral judgments to be true: someone in culture A responds to a moral situation with revulsion, while someone in culture B responds to that situation with acceptance. In culture A, the action is immoral, in B, it is not. Prinz argues that there is no way to bridge this gap in moral judgments because there is no way to transcend the individuals' different emotional reactions. The emotion is the bedrock upon which the moral judgment is built.

My aim here is to diagnose why Prinz's view must be committed to relativism and defend an alternative to that view. In brief: Prinz's view embraces relativism because Prinz, like most of his rationalist predecessors in the history of Western philosophy, is committed to foundationalism when he holds that emotions are the unassailable foundation of moral judgments.

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<sup>7</sup> Jesse Prinz, [The Emotional Construction of Morals](#), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007 and "The Normativity Challenge: Cultural Psychology Provides the Real Threat to Virtue Ethics," [Journal of Ethics](#), 2009.

But I argue that this foundationalism is incompatible with important aspects of our moral practice. We can and do routinely query our emotional reactions: did I celebrate that achievement too much? was I justified in getting upset at that loss? Many philosophers<sup>8</sup> and psychologists<sup>9</sup> take questions about which emotions to cultivate and which to extirpate to be central to moral life. Moreover, moral development is largely a process concerned with emotional development. Thus, we need not be relativists who simply accept an individual, or cultural, endorsement or rejection of a particular emotional response. Certainly, it may be difficult to decide whether an emotional response should be cultivated or rejected, but it is coherent to ask the question. I argue that we can appeal to human flourishing to answer it. In rejecting emotional foundationalism, I argue that we should accept coherentism about emotions and reason: we evaluate one in light of the other and consider whether particular emotional responses promote flourishing.

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<sup>8</sup> Martha Nussbaum argues that our lives go best, both morally and prudentially, when we extirpate both anger and forgiveness. See: Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Psychologist David DeSteno argues that cultivating gratitude, compassion, and pride, enables us to keep our commitments to others, including our future selves, better than does cognitive, will-based self-control. See: Emotional Success: The Power of Gratitude, Compassion, and Pride, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, 2018.