

Is Prinz's Perceptual Theory of Emotion Covertly Cognitive?

....Prinz notes that emotions are non-cognitive only if cognitions are necessarily concept-laden. He concedes that if other kinds of states – those that do not explicitly require concepts -- can count as cognitive, then emotions may actually turn out to be cognitive.¹ So Prinz is implicitly suggesting that if it can be shown that there exist states that should count as cognitive, yet do not directly involve concepts, then it will also be shown that emotions are indeed cognitive after all. If a mental state that is partly constitutive of an emotion can succeed in carrying information about bodily states and our relation to the world *without* the explicit use of concepts under organismic control, then emotions are cognitive. But this is not the only way to proceed, and I argue that the cognitivist need not see her task in exactly this way in order to show that emotions are cognitive. She need not show that emotions do not require concepts in order to count as cognitive. Instead, I want to show that Prinz's own theory is cognitive in a weaker sense – even if it is not obviously so, his theory carries with it an implicit commitment to propositional attitudes as causes. Furthermore, I deny that cognition requires the exploitation of concepts under organismic control. It is sufficient for cognition that they represent, whether or not that representation is under organismic control.

It is apparent in his treatment of cognition that his argument against the cognitivist hangs on a crucial distinction: the distinction between *cognitions* and *cognitive acts*. The organismic control requirement allows him to draw such a distinction. A cognition requires the possession of a concept under organismic control at the time the cognition is occurring. He appeals to the following example: Seeing a dog immediately causes in me the thought *there is a dog*. This thought, however, is not under organismic control. It was not formed as a matter of will; I could not willfully have done otherwise. My thoughts about dogs are capable of being under organismic control generally, but not on this occasion. Contrast that with the following situation:

¹ Prinz, 41

I willfully conjure an image of a dog and think – again – *there is a dog*. In this situation, my dog-concept is under organismic control, and thus qualifies as a cognitive act.²

Prinz argues that a cognitive theory of emotion requires that emotions involve not just cognitions, but cognitive *acts* essentially. This requirement is too strong. There is a place in theoretical space for a truly cognitive theory of the emotions that only requires cognitions, not cognitive acts. ...

So what is the source of Prinz's misdiagnosis? I suspect that it has its roots in his early discussion of the hypothesis that emotions involve propositional attitudes. He argues that cognitivists assume that the cognitions involved in emotions are propositional attitudes, but notes that this hypothesis is ambiguous. There are two possible interpretations of this claim:

I. CT_w – Emotions are directed at propositional objects.

I shall hereafter call this the weak cognitive theory. ... But there is a stronger reading of the hypothesis that emotions involve propositional attitudes. I shall call this the strong cognitive theory:

II. CT_s – Emotions are constituted by propositional attitudes.

While Prinz accepts the weaker thesis that emotions are directed toward propositional objects, he rejects this stronger reading: that emotions are constituted by propositional attitudes. He argues that one who endorses the strong cognitive theory is committed to the following thesis:

Fear can be considered independent of the propositional object it happens to attach to.

The hypothesis that emotions are constituted by propositional attitudes entails that fear, considered on its own, is constituted by a mental state that can be expressed using one or more that-clause.³

Prinz is right about what the strong cognitive theorist is committed to, viz., that the fear itself just is a propositional attitude. But one need not endorse such a strong thesis to say that emotions are

² Ibid., 46

³ Ibid., 23

essentially cognitive. An active endorsement of the weak cognitive theory is sufficient, and this is the theory I am actively endorsing here.

One could be afraid *that* the snake will bite, happy *that* the Cardinals won the World Series, or anguished *that* a loved one has died. This does not entail that the emotion is reducible to a belief (or other propositional attitude) as the strong cognitive theorist would have it. Nevertheless, these are all examples of emotions *directed at* propositional objects, with the emotion connected to the object by a *that*-clause. The question now becomes this: could the emotion occur without the propositional attitude as an antecedent cause? Prinz answers this question affirmatively. I do not. ...

Prinz provides us with a functional/mechanistic rendering of the emotion process in a diagram on page 69. The diagram represents what happens in the case of fear caused by a snake.

snake → perception of snake → change in bodily state → perception of bodily change

The snake causes our perception of the snake, which leads to a change in bodily state, which causes a perception of the bodily change that is fear. (This is an admittedly incomplete rendering of the diagram, but I think it will suffice for my purposes).

There is a key piece of the causal story missing in the diagram. Between our perception of the snake and the change in bodily state, there must be some assessment *that* the snake is dangerous. This assessment is a mental representation insofar as it carries information and can be erroneously applied. Notice, also, my locution: the assessment is of the form *that* the snake is dangerous. This assessment involves a *that*-clause and seems clearly to be a propositional attitude. It is a necessary causal precondition for the perceived change in bodily state (i.e., the fear) that the snake be represented as dangerous. *That the snake is dangerous* to me is a core relational theme.

Any theory of the emotions – including Prinz’s – that connects external stimuli (in the above case, the snake) with some affective state must have a causal link somewhere in between. That causal link must be a representation, insofar as it must carry information about the perceiver’s relation to the world. In order to carry this information, the representation must take the form of a that-clause, and as such is propositional in nature. It need not be what Prinz calls a cognitive act, insofar as it need not be under organismic control. But it is still weakly cognitive, in that it involves essentially the exploitation of a concept.

I suspect that Prinz might be respond in the following way. *Certainly, the emotion requires some kind of assessment. But the assessment is not the emotion. Only the perception of the bodily change is constitutive of the emotion.* Again, I see little motivation for this kind of insistence. If the danger-assessment in the above case is required for the fear to be set off, then this is suggestive that what we have is a unified mechanism, beginning with the perception and ending with the qualitative feel, the whole of which is constitutive of the emotion. In this way, I am following Robinson in suggesting that emotion is most accurately depicted as a *process*.⁴

Prinz seems to anticipate something like my objection. He says, “Perhaps the model I am proposing covertly demands that emotions have disembodied appraisals as causes”.⁵ This is precisely what I have suggested. He concedes that this line of objection has some force, but attempts to head the objection off at the pass by suggesting – again – that not *all* emotions work this way. He appeals, again, to his paradigmatic case of a non-cognitive emotion: snake-fear. He argues that the mere sight of the snake is enough to induce a racing heart. But as I have suggested above, the racing heart is not possible without some kind of threat assessment which I have argued involves a mental representation essentially, and as such, is weakly cognitive.

⁴ Robinson, 2005

⁵ Prinz, 74