

# Aristotelian Virtue Ethics and the Normativity Challenge

*Étienne Brown*

*Penultimate Draft*

Abstract: Aristotelian virtue theorists are currently engaged in a discussion with philosophers who use psychological findings to question some of their main assumptions. In this article, I present and argue against one of these psychological challenges – Jesse Prinz’s Normativity Challenge – which rests on the claim that that findings in cultural psychology contradict the Aristotelian thesis that the normativity of virtues derives from nature. First, I demonstrate that the Normativity Challenge is based on three problematic assumptions about contemporary Aristotelianism. Second, I argue that it presupposes the truth of a metaethical framework that Aristotelians reject: moral relativism.

Résumé : Plusieurs éthiciens de la vertu qui se revendiquent d’Aristote débattent actuellement avec des philosophes qui emploient des données empiriques psychologiques afin de remettre en question certaines des thèses centrales qu’ils défendent. Dans cet article, j’argumente contre l’un de ces philosophes – Jesse Prinz – qui soutient que la psychologie culturelle contemporaine compromet l’idée aristotélicienne que la normativité des vertus dérive de leur caractère naturel. Dans un premier temps, je démontre que le « Normativity Challenge » de Prinz s’appuie sur trois idées préconçues problématiques au sujet de l’aristotélisme contemporain. Dans un deuxième temps, je souligne que l’argumentation de Prinz présuppose la vérité d’une doctrine métaéthique que les aristotéliciens rejettent : le relativisme moral.

Keywords: Aristotelianism; Virtue ethics; Normativity; Cultural psychology; Jesse Prinz.

## 1. Introduction

In the last fifteen years, philosophers have used psychological findings to cast doubt on a venerated philosophical concept: virtue. The debate began with Gilbert Harman and John Doris’s argument that the existence of virtues, understood as efficiently motivating (or ‘robust’) character traits, is not supported by empirical evidence<sup>1</sup>. Most thoroughly defended in Doris’s *Lack of Character*, the situationist challenge has widely been discussed by situationists and virtue theorists alike in the last decade. There is, however, a second empirical challenge to virtue ethics that has received much less

---

<sup>1</sup> See Gilbert Harman, “Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 315-331 and John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

philosophical attention: Jesse Prinz's Normativity Challenge. In Prinz's view, virtue theorists need to provide an account of the normativity of virtues, that is, explain why we *ought* to cultivate them. To do so, Aristotelian virtue theorists usually claim that achieving wellbeing is the natural end of man and that the cultivation of virtues is a precondition of human wellbeing. According to Prinz, however, findings in cultural psychology show that there is no necessary connection between wellbeing and the cultivation of virtues. For this reason, he argues, Aristotelian virtue theorists' attempt to account for the normativity of virtues fails.

In this article, I defend Aristotelian virtue ethics against the Normativity Challenge. More specifically, I argue (i) that Prinz has successfully answered Doris's challenge by showing that the existence of robust character traits is in fact supported by empirical evidence and (ii) that his own Normativity Challenge rests on three problematic assumptions regarding contemporary Aristotelian virtue ethics. In section 2, I define the situationist challenge and show how Prinz rebutted it. In section 3, I present Prinz's own Normativity Challenge. Section 4 offers a critical discussion of the three problematic assumptions I attribute to Prinz. Finally, in section 5, I offer an additional argument against Prinz by showing that the Normativity Challenge is not a purely 'empirical' challenge, but that is in fact motivated by a metaethical disagreement regarding the relationship between moral beliefs and moral concepts such as 'right' and 'wrong'. In my view, the primary reason that Prinz attaches great importance to the empirical study of moral beliefs is that he endorses a metaethical framework that Aristotelians reject: moral relativism.

## 2. Doris's situationist challenge

### 2.1. The challenge

The situationist points to a wide array of experimental results to defend his claim that “behavioural variation across a population owes more to situational difference than dispositional differences among persons”<sup>2</sup>. These results can be divided into two groups. A first set of experiments contradicts the notion of consistency of character. If robust character traits such as virtues exist, it is likely that an individual possessing such traits will exhibit trait-relevant behaviour in a wide variety of situations. Thus, we expect a friend we deem honest to tell the truth in a wide variety of contexts, not only in circumstances where it is advantageous for her to do so. If we discover that our friend routinely lies when telling the truth would disadvantage her, we may come to revise our judgement that she is indeed an honest person.

There are famous experiments that contradict the idea that consistency of character is real. One of these experiments is Hartshorne and May's study of the honest and dishonest behaviour of schoolchildren, which showed that children cannot simply be divided into truth-tellers and liars as no child exhibits sufficient consistency of character to be called one or the other<sup>3</sup>. If these findings were generalizable, that is, if no individual exhibited sufficient consistency of character to be assigned a single virtuous trait (honesty, courage, moderation, etc.), then no individual would resemble the virtuous man described by virtue theorists and we would be forced to conclude that

---

<sup>2</sup> John Doris, *Lack of Character*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May, *Studies in the Nature of Character* (New York: MacMillan, 1928).

no such man exists. Simply put, the ascription of virtues to individuals presupposes consistency of character to be possible, but psychological experiments shed doubt on the fact that it is.

Of course, Hartshorne and May's subjects were children and one might wonder what would happen if experiments of this sort were reproduced with adult subjects whose character is fully-formed. After all, Aristotle himself did not expect young citizens to be virtuous. As Doris explains, however, "the difficulty and expense of extensive behavioural observation has prohibited exhaustive study in the vein of Hartshorne and May..."<sup>4</sup>. For this reason, situationist psychologists usually employ a slightly different strategy to argue against the existence of robust character traits. Instead of showing that consistency of character cannot be observed in a single individual over a certain period of time, they show that different subjects placed in a similar situation tend to act the same way. In order for virtue theory to be plausible, we must presuppose that virtuous and vicious moral agents will act differently in similar situations. If an infant is drowning, the brave individual will risk her life to save him, but the coward will not. But if the features of situations had sufficient influence to incite all subjects to systematically commit the same actions (imagine, for instance, that people never attempted to save drowning children), then it seems that the distinction between virtuous and vicious individuals would become meaningless. If it is true that we all act similarly under the same circumstances, we will be forced to conclude that character traits like virtues either do not exist or, at least, that they are not robust enough to override situational incentives.

---

<sup>4</sup> John Doris, *Lack of Character*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Many experiments support the claim that situational features – not character traits – are the main determinant of human behaviour. In an experiment carried out by Isen and Levin, a vast majority of people who had first found a coin in a public phone booth subsequently stopped to help a stranger who had dropped some papers, while only a minority of those who had not found any money did the same<sup>5</sup>. When graduate students are late to a lecture, they are also less inclined to stop and help the unconscious person that lies in their way<sup>6</sup>. These experiments demonstrate that situational features that are apparently insignificant influence the behaviour of most individuals in exactly the same way, no matter what their character is supposed to be. But the most famous experiment that supports the situationist's claim is Stanley Milgram's study of obedience to authority<sup>7</sup>. When participants in Milgram's experiment were instructed to administer (what they believed to be real) high intensity electrical shocks to an individual, everyone complied, and 65 % of subjects even continued to administer shocks when subjects screamed, begged them to stop or feigned unconsciousness<sup>8</sup>. While the virtue theorist expects that at least some individuals will

---

<sup>5</sup> Alice Isen and Paula Levin, "Effects of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (1972): 384-388.

<sup>6</sup> John Darley and Daniel Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1973): 100-108.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

<sup>8</sup> Milgram experiments took place between 1960 and 1963 and involved approximately 1000 subjects from Connecticut. Subjects were instructed to administer shocks to another person, with the intensity gradually increasing from 15 to 450 volts. The receiver's screams and protests' intensity increased with the intensity of the shocks, starting with a small grunt and ending with the receiver begging to be released ("Let me out of here!"). After 330 volts, the receiver feigned unconsciousness. All subjects agreed to administer highly dangerous shocks to the receiver and 65 % of them agreed to administer the highest shock on the scale to a (now unresponsive) subject. When participants asked if they should continue, a scientist suggested that they had to ("Please continue").

act in an exemplary manner, Milgram's study suggests that it is fairly simple to convince anybody to do something wrong<sup>9</sup>.

## 2.2. Prinz's rebuttal

Jesse Prinz offered a reply to the situationist's challenge<sup>10</sup>. If we look at a different set of psychological experiments than those used by the situationist, we will end up taking a very different view of human behaviour. According to Prinz, some psychological results do support the existence of robust character traits and this is most evident when we make cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, Levine and his associates found that people are more benevolent in certain societies<sup>11</sup>. One of his studies suggests that Chinese, Indians and Brazilians are more likely to pick up the pen of a stranger who has dropped it than Americans or Italians<sup>12</sup>. But the most spectacular psychological results used by Prinz take us back to Milgram's experiment. When Milgram carried his experiment in the 1960s, his subjects were all Americans. In the 1970s, his experimental settings were reproduced with subjects of different nationalities<sup>13</sup>. This time, the obedience rate varied immensely across cultures: 85 % of German subjects and 65 % of American subjects were fully obedient, compared with only 28 % of

---

<sup>9</sup> Couldn't the virtue ethicist reply that these results are unsurprising given that virtuous behaviour is hard and that few people are virtuous? Some virtue ethicists like Julia Annas have made this argument. See Julia Annas, "Comments on John Doris's 'Lack of character'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (2005): 636-642. I agree with Prinz that this reply has serious shortcomings. First, it underestimates the strength of the situationist challenge, whose main point is that we have no positive evidence at all that people can become virtuous. Second, it may raise the bar too high for moral theory.

<sup>10</sup> Jesse Prinz, "The Normativity Challenge: Cultural Psychology Provides the Real Threat to Virtue Ethics", *Journal of Ethics* 13 (2009): 117-144.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Levine, Ara Norenzayan and Karen Philbrick, "Cross-Cultural Differences in Helping Strangers," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32 (2001): 543-560.

<sup>12</sup> More precisely, all Brazilian subjects helped the person who had dropped her pen while only 31% of New Yorkers did.

<sup>13</sup> See Wesley Kilham and Leon Mann, "Level of Destructive Obedience as a Junction of Transmitting and Executant Roles in the Milgram Obedience Paradigm. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29 (1974): 696-702; David Mantell, "The Potential for Violence in Germany," *Journal of Social Issues* 27 (1971): 101-112.

Australian subjects. As Prinz summarizes: “once we look cross-culturally, character seems to re-appear”<sup>14</sup>.

As mentioned above, the situationist discourse rests on the premise that the existence of efficiently motivating character traits such as virtues is not supported by empirical evidence. This claim is corroborated by a series of experiments that shows individual behaviour to be influenced by situational settings rather than character: when experimental subjects are placed in similar situations, they act in a similar manner. But as it turns out, efficiently motivating character traits may not have been observed simply because we have not looked in the right place. Situationist experiments may show that members of the same cultural community act in a similar manner in a given situation, but members of different cultural communities do not. Thus, the findings to which Prinz draws our attention give plausibility to the claim that collectively cultivated character traits do exist and that they efficiently motivate behaviour.

The important question for us is the following: can the empirically observable existence of collectively cultivated character traits rescue Aristotelian virtue theory from the situationist challenge? My answer is that this depends on the kind of Aristotelian virtue theorist one is. A philosopher who would like all people to embark on an individual quest to acquire the virtues might be disappointed as data indicates that characters are collectively cultivated rather than individually formed. Nevertheless, the communitarian Aristotelian might use Prinz’s argument to his advantage. If we have empirical reasons to believe that robust character traits can be collectively cultivated, why not transform our own community into one that facilitates the acquisition of courage, helpfulness or honesty? Why not reshape the educational system in order to

---

<sup>14</sup> Jesse Prinz, “The Normativity Challenge,” art. cit., p. 130.

encourage virtuous behaviour? One might object to this project for political reasons, but not simply by claiming that virtues do not efficiently motivate behaviour. What Prinz successfully demonstrates is that the situationist challenge does not threaten virtue theorists who take into account the influence of culture on character formation. For the communitarian, this is enough to rejoice.

There is a second reason to believe that communitarianism is the *bête noire* of situationists. In his book *Lack of Character*, Doris allows for the possibility to cultivate virtues in certain kinds of environment, an assumption that seems to contradict his previous claims. More precisely, Doris explains that military personnel may exhibit martial virtues or what he calls “reliability in the face of extraordinary situational pressures” if they are trained to do so<sup>15</sup>. He asserts, for instance, that “it would be unsurprising if military training succeeded in securing substantial behavioural reliability at least when its subjects remain within military contexts” and that “perhaps these considerations suggest a workable model of moral education”<sup>16</sup>. In other words, we cannot exclude that the cultivation of virtues is possible in a specific kind of environment. For this reason, Doris stops “short of arguing that no form of education can effect the associated behavioural consistency” on which the virtue theorist’s case rests<sup>17</sup>. Should we therefore reject the situationist challenge?

Doris does not believe so. In his view, the establishment of a militaristic society that strongly encourages the acquisition of martial virtues would be incompatible with political liberalism. On that matter, I agree. Note, however, that this argument is radically different from the ones we have examined so far. We were told that there are

---

<sup>15</sup> John Doris, *Lack of Character*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

no such things as efficiently motivating character traits. We must now understand that such character traits may exist, but that cultivating them would amount to paying “a price in civil liberty that seems too high for even a modestly liberal society”<sup>18</sup>. In the end, Doris’s conclusion is that virtues may be cultivated in certain contexts, but that no individual with liberal sympathies would support institutions that force citizens to acquire them. Not only does this new argumentative strategy weaken the previous one, but it does not itself rely on psychological evidence. The claim that character traits do not efficiently motivate behaviour rests on scientific premises while the claim that the acquisition of virtues is undesirable rests on a normative argument that Doris does not make. The communitarian virtue theorist will be unsurprised to learn that the cultivation of virtue is unpopular amongst liberals and this will not prevent him from believing that we should cultivate the virtues. If Doris’s challenge ultimately brings us back to the liberal-communitarian debate that dominated political philosophy in the 1980s, it is certainly not as innovative as it seemed at first sight. If we are looking for an empirical challenge to virtue ethics that does not rest on normative premises, we may have to look elsewhere.

### **3. Prinz’s Normativity Challenge**

There is, however, a second empirical challenge that awaits the virtue theorist: Prinz’s Normativity Challenge. In his view, this challenge can be summarized as follows: “empirical evidence suggests that there is no purely natural conception of well-being, and that undercuts the account of normativity central to leading versions of virtue

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

ethics”<sup>19</sup>. More precisely, the Normativity Challenge can be broken down into the following three claims. In Prinz’s own words<sup>20</sup>:

(i) First, empirical findings about variation in conceptions of well-being threaten the idea that there is one set of virtues.

(ii) Second, such findings thereby undermine the Aristotelian conception of where virtues get their normative status.

(iii) Third, if virtues have normative status, then they may get that status from another source, such as our sentiments, and if that is the case then norms pertaining to virtues may not be privileged over norms pertaining to actions.

The first two claims allow us to understand who is the main target of the Normativity Challenge: the Aristotelian virtue theorist who believes that there is a single universal set of virtues. In addition, we learn that Prinz believes this Aristotelian philosopher to be wrong regarding the sources of virtues’ normative status. The third and last claim provides an alternative strategy to justify the virtue’s normative status: if virtues are not normative because they are natural, then virtues may be normative because we all feel that they are good. In what follows, I concentrate on the first two claims. In fact, I believe that there is no reason to think that the Normativity Challenge poses a lethal threat to the Aristotelian claim that virtues are normative because they are natural, and therefore no need for an alternative strategy to justify their normative status.

---

<sup>19</sup> Jesse Prinz, “The Normativity Challenge,” art. cit., p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

How does Prinz's argument against Aristotelian naturalism unfold? If virtues are normative, he argues, the Aristotelian virtue theorist must be able to explain what our reasons are to cultivate them and where these reasons come from. In other words, she must explain why we *ought* to cultivate the virtues. To meet this demand, contemporary Aristotelians usually try to demonstrate that cultivating the virtues is part of our natural end: the achievement of wellbeing (*eudaimonia*)<sup>21</sup>. In their view, wellbeing is the natural end of human life and every human being has objective reasons to strive towards that end. However, there are many competing accounts of wellbeing (pleasure, honour, etc.) and philosophers need to identify the best one. This becomes possible once we understand the natural function (*ergon*) of human beings, which is an "activity of the soul in accordance with reason"<sup>22</sup>. But as living in accordance with reason requires a form of excellence or virtue (*arête*), then we can say that man's function is also "an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue"<sup>23</sup>. To summarize the argument in Prinz's own words, Aristotelian naturalists claim that "the normativity of virtues derives from the fact that they are the end to which our nature directs us, and thus constitute human flourishing"<sup>24</sup>. In an Aristotelian perspective, wellbeing is equivalent to flourishing and one flourishes through the cultivation of virtues.

Prinz does not believe this line of argumentation to be very convincing. When we study the natural behaviour of human beings, we observe many actions that we find morally repulsive. We have reason to believe, for instance, that humans are extremely violent when it comes to protecting their territory, but we nevertheless "hesitate to call

---

<sup>21</sup> In speaking of wellbeing and of flourishing rather than of happiness, I follow Prinz's own terminology.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated and edited by Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 1098 a.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1099b.

<sup>24</sup> Jesse Prinz, "The Normativity Challenge," art. cit., p. 133.

territorial violence a moral good”<sup>25</sup>. When we observe a mother’s natural tendency to protect her child, however, we do not find her behaviour to be objectionable. Some natural tendencies seem worthy of moral praise, while we find others abhorrent. But how can we distinguish natural tendencies that are worthy of moral praise from natural tendencies that are morally objectionable? Prinz believes that Aristotelian naturalists are in fact unable to do so:

To avoid conflating the good with the natural, virtue ethicists are forced to draw distinctions between natural tendencies that are noble and those that are ignoble. It is hard to do this without circularity. One cannot define noble natural tendencies as those that accord with virtue, and then argue that virtues derive normativity from their status as natural<sup>26</sup>.

When faced with the challenge of distinguishing good natural tendencies from bad ones, Prinz thinks that the Aristotelian naturalist will respond that naturally good tendencies are those that are in accordance with virtue. But if she also defines virtuous tendencies as those that are natural, her argument will be circular.

What can the neo-Aristotelian do if her teleological account of nature turns out to be circular? Prinz has a suggestion: to offer an adequate account of human flourishing, “one might investigate the conditions under which we judge our lives to be going well”<sup>27</sup>. In other words, Prinz believes that neo-Aristotelians can trade their teleological account of wellbeing for a properly empirical one. It is now by studying what people are inclined to believe that we will come to an understanding of what can be deemed ‘natural’. If empirical research indicated that people are inclined to believe that the cultivation of virtues is a precondition of wellbeing, then we could confidently say that it is natural to

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133-134.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

cultivate the virtues. Understood in this way, the term 'natural' has more to do with statistics than with natural ends.

Unfortunately for her, the virtue theorist who accepts Prinz's semantic trade-off may have ensured her own defeat. She will now have to prove that people are naturally inclined to accept an account of wellbeing in which the cultivation of virtues is central. Prinz believes that virtue theorists will drastically fail to do this. When we consider empirical data regarding what people believe wellbeing to be, no particular account stands out as the most natural. Indeed, individuals usually disagree about the nature of wellbeing, a fact that is once again striking when we make cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, one study indicates that American women believe self-esteem to be fundamental to wellbeing, while Indian women do not<sup>28</sup>. In Western countries, wellbeing is tied to a specific set of emotions, while it is seen as a matter of fulfilling one's duties in Eastern countries<sup>29</sup>. More importantly, the concept of 'virtue' implies that consistency of identity is central to wellbeing, but this claim "is less important to people in the East"<sup>30</sup>. Even amongst cultures that give special importance to the cultivation of virtues, we also have reason to believe that there is widespread disagreement about which character traits are virtues. When we look back at history, for instance, we realize that humility was a virtue for Augustine, but not for Aristotle. The latter also included pride and wit in his list of virtues, something that strikes Prinz as "specifically Western"<sup>31</sup>.

---

<sup>28</sup> Ed Diener and Marissa Diener, "Cross-Cultural Correlates of Life Satisfaction and Self-esteem," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (1995): 653-663.

<sup>29</sup> Eunkook Suh, Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi and Harry C. Triandis, "The Shifting Basis of Life Satisfaction Judgements across Cultures: Emotions versus Norms," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (1998): 482-493.

<sup>30</sup> Jesse Prinz, "The Normativity Challenge," art. cit., p. 134.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

What do these arguments aim to demonstrate? As we have seen, Prinz believes that the Aristotelian's teleological discourse regarding good natural tendencies is circular. To avoid the circle, he suggests that we understand the adjective 'natural' in an empirical rather than teleological fashion. In this sense, an account of wellbeing is natural if empirical data show that human beings are inclined to accept it. But empirical data show that members of different communities disagree (i) about the general importance of virtues and (ii) about which character traits are virtues. The Aristotelian claimed that virtues are normative because they are natural, but if no non-circular teleological account and no empirical account can show this to be true, we may have to conclude that virtues are not natural at all. The question we need to address, of course, is whether or not Prinz is right to make these claims.

#### **4. Three problematic assumptions about contemporary Aristotelianism**

As mentioned above, I believe that Prinz's case rests on three problematic assumptions about Aristotelian virtue ethics. In this section, I defend Aristotelian virtue theorists against these assumptions. In the next, I show how these claims are tied to Prinz's defense of moral relativism and argue that the Normativity Challenge is not, contrary to what he believes, a purely empirical challenge.

##### **4.1. First assumption: Aristotelian naturalism is circular**

Let us summarize Prinz's first claim in order to evaluate it better. In Prinz's view, Aristotelians are unable to account for the normativity of virtues without doing so in a circular manner. The tendencies that they identify as natural are the ones that accord with virtue. In fact, it seems that specific natural tendencies are normative because they accord with virtue. But why is virtuous behaviour itself normative? In the Aristotelian's

perspective, virtuous behaviour is normative because it is natural. First, one term (virtuous) is used to account for the normativity a second (natural), then the second term is used to account for the normativity of the first. What we have here is a circular argument.

Would the neo-Aristotelian argue in such a way? I do not believe that she would. In her eyes, only one part of the circular argument is true. Virtuous behaviour is indeed normative because it is natural, but it is misleading to claim that some natural tendencies are normative because they accord with virtue. In Aristotle's view, man has a natural end that is tied to its function or characteristic activity (*ergon*). As we have seen, man's function is "an activity of the soul in accordance with reason" and an individual must acquire the virtues in order to fulfil this end. In other words, virtues are constitutive of our natural end and it is for this reason that they are normative. Thus, we can say that the normativity of virtues derives from the normativity of man's natural end. However, the opposite is not true: the normativity of man's natural end does not itself derive from the fact that it accords with virtue. Virtue, we could say, is not an independent source of normativity from which we could derive the normativity of man's end. In fact, the normativity of man's natural end, which is to function well, does not derive from anything else than itself.

For the Aristotelian naturalist, noble natural tendencies are the ones that contribute to an organism's 'well-functioning' and functioning well is *intrinsically* good for a given organism<sup>32</sup>. On the reading I advocate, we should indeed understand contemporary Aristotelian naturalism as a metaethical theory that supposes certain state of affairs to be intrinsically good for humans. If I am correct, what one needs to

---

<sup>32</sup> See Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

prove in order to defeat contemporary Aristotelians is either that it is false to claim that it is intrinsically good for a human being to function well or that we should generally reject the philosophical perspective according to which some states of affairs are intrinsically good. Those are two legitimate philosophical projects, but neither of them amounts to Prinz's claim that Aristotelian naturalism is circular. In other words, a plausible rejection of Aristotelian naturalism relies on an argument that Prinz does not advance, and the argument that he does advance is not decisive as it unfortunately mischaracterizes what Aristotelian naturalists argue. For the Aristotelian, noble natural tendencies are the ones that allow man to fulfil his end, which is to function well. But the normativity of man's end does not itself derive from the normativity of the virtues: the argument only goes one way.

#### **4.2. Second assumption: Aristotelian virtue theorists cannot allow for disagreement regarding which character traits are virtues**

Another of Prinz's claims is that many Aristotelian virtue theorists believe in the existence of a single universal set of virtues. This is a reasonable claim as many contemporary Aristotelians have indeed a very precise list of character traits in mind when they speak of the virtues<sup>33</sup>. But as we have seen, Prinz is sceptical that such a universal set of virtues exists. When we empirically study which character traits individuals are inclined to treat as virtues, we find cross-cultural disagreement and no set of virtue stands out as universal. Can the Aristotelian virtue theorist simultaneously allow for cultural disagreement regarding which character traits are virtues and defend a universal set of virtues? In what follows, I consider three positive answers to this question:

---

<sup>33</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1988): 32-53.

A first response is the 'partners in crime' argument. The Aristotelian virtue ethicist who adopts this strategy will simply claim that there is no reason to think that cultural disagreement about which character traits are virtues threatens her first-order moral theory anymore than it threatens rival normative theories such as consequentialism or deontology. Here, a comparison with deontology is especially useful. Indeed, we have no reason to believe that a specific list of duties would be subject to less disagreement than a single set of virtues. As we may suspect, for instance, many Hindu caste-duties are incompatible with a Kantian point of view<sup>34</sup>. It is therefore surprising that Prinz focuses his attack on virtue theory and pays little to no attention to other ethical theories. While I do not think that the 'partners in crime' response is entirely convincing as it does not represent a positive defense of virtue ethics, it is convincing insofar as it helps us realize that cultural disagreement is not a specific challenge to virtue ethics. In fact, it is quite plausible to suppose that no normative theory would be subject to universal consent in the first place.

Often, the virtue theorist opens with the partners in crime argument and follows up with a second reply that is considerably more ambitious. The second reply consists of saying that cultural disagreement is in fact *less* threatening to virtue ethics than it is to other normative theories. While the Aristotelian can allow for cultural variation in the meanings given to terms such as 'courageous' and 'moderate', some Aristotelians argue that deontological and consequentialist theories are too rigid to allow for such variation, especially when they include exceptionless duties or precise formulations of the maximization of welfare principle. Thus, Nussbaum argues that questions such as 'What is courage?' or 'What is moderation?' are "susceptible of several or even of many

---

<sup>34</sup> See Oliver Leaman, *Eastern Philosophy: Key Readings* (London: Routledge, 2000).

specifications, in connection with [...] local practices and local conditions”<sup>35</sup> . Furthermore, even if ‘courage’ has diverging meanings in different communities, she argues that no human community is so distinct from ours that it will be impossible for us to claim that courage as we understand it plays no role at all in the social life of its members.

Prinz remains unimpressed by this response. In his view, one can indeed define virtues “so vaguely and abstractly as to obtain traits that most people would regard as worthwhile, but in doing so, one would render them vacuous”<sup>36</sup>. There may be some truth to this claim, but it could be more thoroughly argued. Even if benevolence does not have the same meaning for a Bedouin and for an Englishman, the claim that benevolence is a universal virtue and that we should cultivate it may not be a vacuous one. Not all communities face the same needs and it is reasonable to suppose that these needs ought to shape the social relations of their members. The traveller who has been crossing the desert for many days requires a very different type of help than the tourist who is lost in Brixton, but there is reason to believe that helping both of these individuals amounts to being benevolent in a meaningful way.

A third reply relates to the previous one and aims to explain why certain traits might seem more valuable in specific social and political circumstances than in others. Once again, an example will be useful. Most individual would admit that physical security is a precondition of human wellbeing. In 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens, the physical security of inhabitants was constantly threatened by the risk of an enemy invasion. In this context, showing courage on the battlefield was considered virtuous as the sake of

---

<sup>35</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Non-relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,” art. cit.

<sup>36</sup> Jesse Prinz, “The Normativity Challenge,” art. cit., p. 135.

the city-state depended on the courageous actions of its members. In contrast, the level of insecurity western citizens experience today is certainly not the same as those of ancient Greece. In fact, many of our contemporaries believe that wars carried out abroad do not directly contribute to their physical security. Today, courage and military valour do not seem as vital for the citizen of western democracies as it was for citizens of Ancient Greece. The important idea for us is the following one: even if the Aristotelian virtue theorist is committed to the existence of a single universal set of virtues, she may explain disagreement regarding which character traits are virtues by underlining that it is harder to realize that certain traits are virtue in contexts that require little use of them. Cross-cultural or historical comparisons, however, allow us to realize that traits are deemed superfluous by members of a specific community not because they are generally unimportant, but because it is not vital for them to cultivate them *hic et nunc*. Furthermore, even if she believes that virtues such as courage and moderation are virtues for all human beings, the Aristotelian need not argue that all persons must exhibit the same level of courage and moderation in all circumstances. She can accept without contradicting herself that the extent to which an individual must cultivate a specific trait depend on the circumstances of his wellbeing.

I take it that the combination of these three answers gives some plausibility to the claim that virtues may be universal even if there is substantial disagreement about which character traits are virtues. There is, however, a fourth strategy that the Aristotelian could employ if her interlocutor remains unconvinced. She could indeed fundamentally undercut the Normativity Challenge by questioning the extensive role given to empirically assessable disagreement in Prinz's argumentation. By doing so,

she would raise a methodological question: does the empirical study of collective beliefs provide sufficient evidence in order for philosophers to accept or reject a specific first-order theory of morality? In my view, it is on this very issue that Prinz and Aristotelian virtue theorists fundamentally disagree. How so ?

#### **4.3. Third assumption: Aristotelian virtue theorists agree that the empirical study of beliefs provide enough evidence to accept or reject a specific first-order theory of morality**

Consider Prinz's circularity charge once again. Prinz's strategy is to argue that Aristotelian naturalism is circular and then, to invite Aristotelians to trade their teleological account of nature for one that would be rid of any references to concepts such as 'natural end' or 'ergon'. As I mentioned above, what Prinz means by 'natural' is indeed quite different from what the Aristotelian naturalist has in mind. In his view, an account of wellbeing is natural if people are inclined to accept it. Thus, if we found out that most cultures believe virtues to be an integral part of wellbeing, we could confidently conclude that the cultivation of virtues is natural.

What will happen if the Aristotelian virtue theorist use 'natural' in the same way as Prinz does and drops her teleological framework? For her, the consequences of such a semantic trade-off will be profound, as she will now have to admit that her own account of wellbeing is unnatural if we can show that many cultural communities are inclined to reject it. If the Aristotelian takes this step, Prinz will then argue that many cultural communities indeed reject the cultivation of virtues as a central part of wellbeing and her conceptual framework will quickly fall apart. If the Aristotelian cannot

claim that virtues are natural because they are a precondition of human wellbeing, it will become impossible for her to claim that they are good and that we ought to cultivate them. Her whole theory rests on the premise that virtues are normative because they are natural<sup>37</sup>.

We can draw an uncontroversial conclusion from these considerations: the Aristotelian naturalist should not define the term 'natural' as Prinz does if she wants to resist the Normativity Challenge. If I am correct to claim that Aristotelian naturalism is not circular, she has in fact no immediate reason to accept the semantic trade-off suggested by Prinz and to drop her teleological framework. But if this teleological framework is not threatened by Prinz's argumentation, then she will have no reason to think that inquiring into the nature of collective beliefs will allow us to define wellbeing. Even if many cultural communities are inclined to think that committing a specific act is morally good, for instance, she might still judge that committing such an act is wrong because it is contrary to man's end. In her view, not many men are virtuous and not many communities are good. It is therefore plausible to believe that communities who reject the cultivation of virtues simply rely on the wrong set of normative beliefs, that they do not properly grasp the real nature of man's end.

Once again, it will be useful to compare the Aristotelian's discourse to the perspectives of other normative theorists. Is the Aristotelian the only philosopher who believes that empirical studies about collective beliefs do not immediately allow us to determine what is right and what is wrong? I suspect that many theorists would follow her on this point. Even if he knew that cross-cultural disagreement exists over the value of lying, the orthodox Kantian would continue to believe that it is always wrong to lie.

---

<sup>37</sup> Once again, this point is most evident when we consider Philippa Foot's latest work.

The same could be said of the act utilitarian who realized that across all cultures, people have a strong tendency to reject the maximization of utility as a valid normative criterion: she would not reject this criterion for this reason. What is true for the Kantian and the utilitarian is also true for the Aristotelian virtue theorist. To put the point in a systematic manner, I will argue that any theorist who accepts the following claim should reject the idea that cross-cultural disagreement poses a direct threat to virtue ethics or, for that matter, to any normative theory:

It may be morally right for a specific agent to  $\phi$  even if empirical cross-cultural comparisons show that there is substantial disagreement about whether she ought to  $\phi$  or not.

Of course, all of the aforementioned theorists (the Kantian deontologist, the utilitarian consequentialist and the Aristotelian virtue theorist) share a similar assumption about the objectivity of ethics. In their view, an act may be morally right even if people do not come to realize it. One could argue, however, that it is precisely this assumption that empirically assessable moral disagreement threatens. If this is true, then the Normativity Challenge will ultimately have to be reframed as a metaethical debate between moral objectivists and moral relativists, not as a specific challenge against virtue theory. In the next section, I would like to provide some grounds for thinking that the Normativity Challenge is indeed supported by a metaethical disagreement. If this is true, I take it that the Normativity Challenge turns out to be less appealing than it was at first sight. Indeed, Prinz's challenge was initially presented as a purely empirical challenge, not as a challenge that rests on the truth of specific metaethical assumptions.

## **5. Moral relativism and the Normativity Challenge**

Prinz defends a version of moral relativism in *The Emotional Construction of Morals*<sup>38</sup>.

In his view, if we picture a discussion between X and another speaker, the following statement is true:

A judgment that X ought to  $\phi$  is true if and only if it is wrong not to  $\phi$  on the value systems of both the speaker and X<sup>39</sup>.

Thus, if a contemporary human rights activist had a discussion with a 14<sup>th</sup> century Aztec priest and argued that he ought not to commit anymore human sacrifices, his statement would be false, provided of course that the Aztec priest's value system implies that he ought to commit human sacrifices. Moreover, the version of relativism endorsed by Prinz relativizes the truth-value of moral judgements to individuals, a view that he calls "Agent relativism"<sup>40</sup>. If we discovered that our Aztec priest secretly disagreed with the value system of his community and individually believed that he ought not to commit any human sacrifices, then the claim of the human rights activist would be true.

If Prinz's claim is true, then he is right to argue that empirical data about people's belief will be extremely useful to determine what they ought to do. As he explains:

If the good is that which we regard as good, then we can figure out what our obligations are by figuring out what our moral beliefs commit us to. Figuring out what we believe about morality is a descriptive task par excellence, and one that can be fruitfully pursued empirically. Thus, normative ethics can be approached as a social science<sup>41</sup>.

Some of Prinz's critics have argued that this view has disastrous consequences. If all moral 'oughts' rest on subjective beliefs, we will have to admit that a group of totalitarian fanatics really ought to act the way they do if they all share the same value

---

<sup>38</sup> Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177-179.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

system<sup>42</sup>. It is tempting to argue against Prinz's moral relativism by raising similar objections, but my ambition here is more modest: as I mentioned, I only want to argue that the Normativity Challenge rests on implicit metaethical assumptions.

What does moral relativism à la Prinz entail for the Aristotelian virtue theorist who engages in conversation with a moral agent to convince him that he ought to cultivate the virtues? The answer depends on the value systems of both the Aristotelian and her interlocutor. If the interlocutor's value system is incompatible with the cultivation of virtues, it will be false for the Aristotelian to claim that this individual ought to cultivate the virtues. But note that it will also be false for the interlocutor to claim in return that the Aristotelian ought to stop cultivating the virtues if this claim is incompatible with her own value system. Here, we see that Prinz's view is quite radical as it entails that two speakers will 'lose grip' of each other as soon as their diverging value systems lead them to disagree about the validity of a specific moral obligation. In case of conflict, moral reasons that are not shared reasons are not to count as moral reasons at all.

However, disagreement will only entail such a consequence if we are committed to a metaethical framework similar to Prinz's own. Indeed, moral disagreement will not entail the same conclusion for the moral relativist and for the moral objectivist who believes that it is possible that an agent ought to  $\phi$  even if some or all of his interlocutors disagree that he ought to  $\phi$ . If we do believe that disagreement due to diverging value systems has the power Prinz attributes to it, then the data he uses to pose the Normativity Challenge will force us to conclude that we have no moral reason

---

<sup>42</sup> See Richard Joyce, "Review: Jesse J. Prinz: *The Emotional Construction of Morals*," *Mind* 118 (2009): 508-518.

to cultivate the virtues. But if we are not moral relativists, disagreement will not immediately destroy our moral 'oughts'. This is not to say that moral disagreement will have no impact whatsoever on the way we practice philosophy. As Enoch noted, it would be quite dogmatic to simply ignore moral disagreement as a fact about human life when we engage in moral theorizing<sup>43</sup>. This claim, however, does not amount to saying that moral disagreement has the power to destroy all of our moral obligations as Prinz seems to believe. Before judging that it has such a power, we will need anterior reasons to believe that it does and my claim is that in Prinz's argumentation, moral relativism provides those reasons.

In my view, Prinz's argumentation is indeed supported by a conditional claim: *if* disagreement between two speakers has the power to destroy their moral reasons to  $\phi$ , *then* empirically assessable disagreement over the importance of cultivating the virtues will be an immediate threat to Aristotelian virtue theorists. Shedding some light on this conditional claim provides grounds for thinking that Prinz's case is less appealing than it was at first sight. The truth of moral relativism is not self-evident and the philosopher who rejects it – no matter if she has deontological, consequentialist or virtue theoretical tendencies – will not have any reason to consider that empirically assessable moral disagreements constitute enough evidence to reject the first-order theory of morality she defends. Behind the Normativity Challenge – which Prinz presents as a purely empirical challenge – lies a traditional metaethical disagreement between moral relativists and Aristotelian naturalists who defend a form of moral objectivism. In Prinz's view, the rightness and wrongness of moral claims supervene upon belief (there cannot

---

<sup>43</sup> David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

be changes in the rightness or wrongness of moral claims without corresponding changes in moral beliefs) while for the Aristotelian naturalist, the rightness and wrongness of moral claims depend on their relationship with man's natural end, which is itself independent from our beliefs. In the end, the Normativity Challenge is not an innovative empirical challenge, but a new version of a traditional debate. Moreover, normative theorists who reject moral relativism have no reason to feel threatened by it. Of course, one may argue that normative theorists should be moral relativists, but the plausibility of this statement goes beyond the scope of the Normativity Challenge, which does not itself contain arguments in favour of moral relativism.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper, I provided some grounds for the argument that Aristotelian virtue theories are not lethally threatened by Doris's situationist challenge and by Prinz's Normativity Challenge. More specifically, I argued that Jesse Prinz provides us with convincing arguments to reject the situationist challenge as cross-cultural comparisons supply evidence for the claim that efficiently motivating character traits can be collectively cultivated. In the rest of the paper, I argued that Prinz's Normativity Challenge is supported problematic assumptions regarding Aristotelian virtue ethics, and that it ultimately rests on his endorsement of moral relativism. However, I did not offer any reasons to prefer virtue ethics to other normative theories, nor did I provide reasons to reject moral relativism itself as a metaethical framework. Moreover, my argument is not intended as a general argument against the use of empirical data in moral philosophy. If we had empirical evidence that robust character traits are not efficiently motivating, I believe that philosophers would have reason to abandon virtue

ethics as a normative theory. Note, however, that the empirical *data* used by Prinz are of a very specific kind: they regard what people from different cultural communities believe, and I indeed deny that such data are sufficient in order for us to accept or reject a specific first-order theory of morality. In the end, such a decision rests on specific metaethical assumptions.

Although Prinz's works represent an important contribution to contemporary moral philosophy, I argued that he is wrong to claim that cultural psychology provides an immediate threat to Aristotelian virtue ethics. Many challenges certainly await Aristotelians virtue ethics in the future but meanwhile, we do not have any empirical reason to reject their philosophical project.

### **Acknowledgments**

The author would like to thank the participants of Prof. Thomas Schmidt's practical ethics seminar for their valuable comments. Many thanks also to Zoe Williams, Renaud-Philippe Garner and Hannah Altehenger. While writing this paper, the author has benefited from the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

### **References**

Annas, Julia

2005 "Comments on John Doris's 'Lack of Character'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71 (3): 636-642.

Aristotle

2004 *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated and edited by Roger Crisp.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Darley, John and Daniel Batson

1973 "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27 (1): 100-108.

Diener, Ed and Marissa Diener

1995 "Cross-Cultural Correlates of Life Satisfaction and Self-Esteem," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (4): 653-663.

Doris, John

2002 *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Enoch, David

2011 *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*.  
Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Foot, Philippa

2001 *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harman, Gilbert

1999 "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99: 315-331.

Hartshorne, Hugh and Mark May

1928 *Studies in the Nature of Character*. New York: MacMillan.

Isen, Alice and Paula Levin

1972 "Effects of Feeling Good on Helping: Cookies and Kindness"  
*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 21 (3): 384-  
388.

Joyce, Richard

2009 "Review: Jesse J. Prinz: The Emotional Construction of  
morals," *Mind* 118 (470): 508-518.

Kilham, Wesley and Leon Mann

1974 "Level of Destructive Obedience as a Junction of  
Transmitting and Executant Roles in the Milgram Obedience  
Paradigm," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29  
(5): 696-702.

Leaman, Oliver

2000 *Eastern Philosophy: Key Readings*. Routledge: London.

Levine, Robert, Ara Norenzayan and Karen Philbrick

2001 "Cross-Cultural Differences in Helping Strangers," *Journal of  
Cross-Cultural Psychology* 32 (5): 543-560.

Milgram, Stanley

1974 *Obedience to Authority*. New York: Harper and Row.

Mantell, David,

1971 "The Potential for Violence in Germany," *Journal of Social Issues* 27 (4): 101-112.

Nussbaum, Martha C.

1988 "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1): 32-53.

Prinz, Jesse

2007 *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge: University Press.

2009 "The Normativity Challenge: Cultural Psychology Provides the Real Threat to Virtue Ethics," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99: 315-331.

Suh, Eunkook, Ed Diener, Shigehiro Oishi and Harry C. Triandis

1998 "The Shifting Basis of Life Satisfaction Judgements across Cultures: Emotions versus Norms," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 74 (2): 482-493.