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Jesse Prinz has argued that a proxytype theory of concepts provides what he calls the ‘intentionality’ and ‘cognitive content’ desiderata better than any current competitor, and that the hybrid nature of proxytypes allows his theory to combine the informational component of informational atomism with the view that concepts are semantically structured entities. In response, I argue that the hybrid character of proxytypes, far from delivering the advantages Prinz claims, generates a threatening dilemma: either his theory is novel but fails to deliver the intentionality and cognitive content desiderata, or it delivers these desiderata but is not novel.

It has long been argued that intentional content is not sufficient for concept individuation. Concepts need also to be individuated by what most philosophers call ‘narrow content’ (and what Jesse Prinz calls ‘cognitive content’). As is well known, Frege’s puzzles and Putnam’s twin earth cases show, respectively, that intentional contents individuate concepts either too coarsely or too finely. If the content of mental states were exhausted by intentional content, we could not explain (i) why one can assent to ‘The morning star shines’ without assenting to ‘The evening star shines’; (ii) why my twin and I can be said to have the same beliefs about water and the same water-orientated behaviour (on the hypothesis that what we call ‘water’ refers on twin earth to XYZ rather than to H₂O). Appreciation of these facts led to the birth of two-factor theories of content. In Furnishing the Mind, Prinz defends a ‘proxytype theory’ of concepts which falls within this tradition of two-factor theories. Following the lines of Locke’s concept empiricism, Prinz identifies (narrowly individuated) concepts with long-term memory networks of perceptual representations which get their intentional content through nomological relations with their causes. The novelty of proxytype

theory, then, consists in combining the informational component of informational atomism (i.e., the view that concepts get their intentional content through a mind–world relation) with the view that concepts are semantically complex (i.e., the view that concepts have internal structure).

Prinz claims that the novel character of his proxotype theory allows it to accommodate the intentional and cognitive content desiderata better than any other current theory of concepts. In this paper, I shall argue, contra Prinz, that his theory illicitly readmits the idea that cognitive content determines intentional content, and accordingly that either his theory is workable but fails to provide these two desiderata, or it provides these desiderata but is not as novel as it claims to be. A more general moral about the prospects of combining informational semantics with non-atomistic views of concepts may be drawn from my discussion of Prinz’s theory.

I. THE INTENTIONAL AND COGNITIVE CONTENT DESIDERATA

Any theory of concepts, Prinz claims, ought to deliver the intentionality and cognitive content desiderata. ‘Intentionality’ is the property in concepts of representing, or to seeming to represent, things outside themselves; and ‘intentional contents’ are the things that concepts refer to (or seem to refer to). However, Prinz reminds us that there are well known reasons for not individuating concepts by intentional contents alone. These reasons include, *inter alia*, Frege’s puzzles about informative identity statements with co-referential names (‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’). Frege took these puzzles to show that the notion of content cannot be exhausted by reference, and so introduced the notion of sense. *Sense* carries the double duty of explaining our understanding of linguistic items while determining their referents (*viz* explaining why a certain expression picks out a certain object).

But Prinz wishes to distance himself from the letter of Frege’s notion of sense. In particular, he maintains, we should relinquish the Fregean thesis that senses are definitional abstract objects that determine what concepts refer to. His rejection is based partly on his endorsement of the Donnellan, Kripke and Putnam position that the intentional contents of terms and concepts are determined by causal connections with the surrounding environment. Under the so-called ‘causal theory’ of content determination, descriptions we associate with a term or concept are not part of its content; they might account for the psychology of language (e.g., why we understand terms and concepts as we do), but they do not account for its semantics (i.e., why the terms and concepts pick out the objects they do). To mark his
distance from Fregean senses, Prinz calls the component of conceptual content that transcends reference ‘cognitive content’.³

Keeping in mind the role Prinz attributes to cognitive content, I shall now introduce his proxytype theory.

II. PRINZ’S PROXYTYPE THEORY

Proxytype theory is supposed to satisfy both the intentionality and cognitive content requirements by inheriting the best features of non-atomistic theories of conceptual structure (such as, e.g., prototype theory) and informational atomism. According to Prinz (chs 2–4), prototype theory outperforms informational atomism in accounting for cognitive content; but the latter theory outperforms the former in accounting for intentionality. For example, according to prototype theory, concepts refer to whichever objects possess a sufficient percentage of the features considered typical of the kind to which the objects belong. But meeting a critical similarity threshold is neither necessary nor sufficient for explaining intentionality. Eels are fish even if they fail to meet the critical similarity threshold for the FISH prototype; conversely, eels are not snakes even if they do meet the critical similarity threshold for the SNAKE prototype. So prototypes, concludes Prinz (p. 60), ‘cannot determine reference, because they are constructed from features that are superficial, whereas reference depends on category divisions that are not skin-deep’.

Informational atomism, on the other hand, individuates concepts by the information they carry about the environment. A concept C carries information about the property F (or represents F) if there is a counterfactual-supporting causal relation between tokenings of C and instances of the property F. Since reference is determined by reliable causal connections between mental tokenings and objects, a concept refers to an object even if prototypes are constructed from features of objects that are superficial (p. 91). However, informational semantics, when coupled with atomism (as in the case of Fodor), i.e., the view that all lexical concepts lack internal structure, fails to explain cognitive content, because it fails to explain satisfactorily cases of non-synonymous co-referential concepts. Prinz quickly dismisses Fodor’s suggestion that differences in forms of symbol-types can

explain differences between co-referential concepts (viz can explain why one may fail to assent to 'Cicero is Tully'). Prinz’s argument (p. 96) is that ‘there is something fundamentally wrong with thinking of cognitive content as a purely formal property [since] we usually describe differences in cognitive content by appeal to epistemic differences, i.e., differences in beliefs’.

In a spirit of reconciliation, Prinz (p. 123) champions a theory which identifies concepts ‘with semantically structured entities that get their intentional contents through informational relations’. The informational component accounts for intentionality, while the semantic structure accounts for cognitive content (among other things). But how does proxytype theory combine these two features?

Prinz proposes to distinguish between concepts as indicators and concepts as detectors. An indicator is an unstructured entity that stands in a nomological relation to some property $P$, while a detector is an internally structured mechanism that mediates the relation between an indicator and the property $P$ it stands for. So for example, a letter-detecting machine for the letter R might be devised from parts that detect straight lines, semicircles, and so on. An indicator for the letter R, on the contrary, is not analysable into parts that represent letter components (e.g., a light goes on when the machine is presented with R).

Prinz’s claim is that identifying concepts with detecting mechanisms rather than indicators (as informational atomism implies) shows us how to combine the informational component with the semantic complexity of concepts. Concepts qua detecting mechanisms are ‘in nomological relations with properties and they do so in virtue of their structure’ (p. 124; my italics). Accordingly, a proxytype theory identifies concepts with long-term memory networks of perceptual representations, although it acknowledges the fact that only part of the information stored in memory is employed to detect objects on any given occasion. This view stems from the consideration that concepts (qua stored memories) can be possessed even if they are not currently being used, together with the consideration that working memory cannot activate the entire network of stored memories at any given time. Context will determine which stored memories will be recalled on any given occasion. This identification of concepts with detecting mechanisms may, in the end, cause Prinz’s theory to restrict its scope to a much smaller class of concepts than advertised (i.e., to concepts of things or properties that are perceivable). Although Prinz wants to say that all sorts of concepts (even lofty ones such as VIRTUE and NUMBER) are perceptually derived (pp. 165–88), it is not clear whether these concepts (and their like) raise problems for his theory. I shall discuss some of these problems in §III.1 below.


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Proxytype theory, as I hope is now clear, is a hybrid, since it inherits from informational semantics an explanation of intentional content, and from prototype theory the view that a concept contains the shareable and salient features of the category it represents. (I have not explained so far how proxytype theory inherits from informational theories its account of intentionality; this will be the focus of the next section.) Despite its hybrid character, Prinz (p. 164) still maintains that his theory ‘can be unified under a single overarching idea: concepts are mechanisms that allow us to enter into perceptually mediated, intentionality-conferring, causal relations with categories in the world’.

I shall argue, however, that the hybrid character of proxytypes raises a host of problems (outlined in §III), which ultimately generate what I call ‘Prinz’s Dilemma’ (explained in §IV).

III. PROBLEMS WITH PROXYTYPE THEORY

Prinz claims that concepts, qua memory networks of perceptual representations, function as proxies for the categories they represent. But problems emerge when he explains how perceptions and memories become proxies for the categories they represent. As a way of explaining how concepts represent properties, he writes (pp. 124–5)

... detectors, unlike indicators, directly participate in establishing content-conferring causal relations with properties.... If concepts are detectors, how a concept gets its intentional content is determined in part by things intrinsic to it. This allows concepts to play a role in determining their intentional contents.

The key to understanding Prinz’s proxytypes is, then, to comprehend how the part of the theory which identifies concepts with internally structured detection mechanisms relates to its informational component. There are at least four possible ways of understanding this relation, but each generates problems. I shall examine in turn each possible interpretation and its problems.

III.1. The over-determination problem

Prinz’s identification of concepts with internally structured detection mechanisms risks reintroducing through the back door the shunned Fregean view that cognitive content determines reference. This is adumbrated by Prinz’s claims that ‘if concepts are detectors, how a concept gets its intentional content is determined in part by things intrinsic to it’, and that ‘concepts [i.e., their intrinsic content or cognitive content] ... play a role in
determining their intentional contents’. I do not mean to suggest that descriptivism per se is bad. On the contrary, there could be good reasons for endorsing it. My critical point is only that it is not clear whether Prinz can admit any element of descriptivism, given the way he characterizes ‘cognitive content’ in the first chapter of Furnishing the Mind (pp. 6–8).

The reintroduction of an internalist account of content determination is also suggested by Prinz’s description of how detection mechanisms work. Returning to the letter-detecting device, he writes (p. 125)

... detectors are less arbitrary than indicators. In a letter-detecting device a light of any colour could be used to indicate any letter.... Detectors are more constrained.... An R-detector is generally more like a B-detector than an O-detector because they detect common letter components.

A detector view offers a better (because less arbitrary) explanation of why concepts represent what they do. The concept of R represents the letter R because that letter satisfies the features of being an R contained within the concept (e.g., it satisfies the features of being composed of two straight lines and a semicircle). So the concept of R represents what it does in virtue of a satisfaction relation rather than a causal one.

In conclusion, I believe that Prinz’s view, that concepts are internally structured detection mechanisms in nomological relations with properties, embodies an internal tension: either concepts are internally structured mechanisms that play a role in determining intentional contents, or they are in nomological relations with their objects. They cannot be both. As it stands, Prinz’s theory of intentional content is over-determined, since what concepts refer to is determined both by the structure of the concepts and by nomological–causal relations.

In order to free Prinz’s theory from the charge of over-determination one might concede that his example of the letter-detecting device is confusing, but suggest that it is not really representative of his theory. This is because Prinz introduces in ch. 10 of Furnishing the Mind a distinction between nominal and real contents. This distinction is reminiscent of Locke’s distinction between nominal and real essences. According to Locke, the concept of gold, for example, refers to (i) perceptual properties, such as being yellow, shiny and so on, by which we identify gold; (ii) the real essence of gold. Accordingly, Prinz defines ‘nominal content’ as the set of appearance properties that help us to identify an object as belonging to a certain category, and ‘real content’ as the real category to which the object belongs. The example of the letter-detecting device, one might maintain in defence of Prinz, deceptively suggests that for him, proxytypes refer to appearance

5 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, II xxxi 6, III iii 15.
properties and hence determine reference, because letters are what they appear to be: there is no distinction between what letters appear to be like (their nominal content) and what letters are really like (their real content). However (one might continue), in the case of natural-kind concepts, it is clear that Prinz wants to say that proxytypes only track natural kinds (their real content) through a set of appearance properties (their nominal content) – thereby showing that proxytypes do not determine reference.

There are two ways to respond to this suggestion. First, the example of the letter-detecting device is supposed to introduce proxytype theory and its empiricist background (pp. 104–27). So one would expect the example to illustrate Prinz’s theory clearly (rather than confusedly). And that is why one may suspect that the confused example indicates a deeper confusion. Secondly, the above suggestion may create more problems for Prinz than it solves, since it intimates that his theory works at best for natural-kind concepts. This, in the end, may be right, but it strikes me as the wrong way to defend Prinz’s theory.

This is because Prinz himself writes that although concepts (narrowly individuated) are proxytypes and proxytypes refer to appearance properties, concepts do not refer to appearance properties. Why not? Because, Prinz writes (pp. 276–82; the choice of examples is significant), concepts like gold and cow refer to natural kinds (their real content) through their appearance properties (their nominal contents). But admittedly there may be lots of properties to which the nominal/real content distinction does not apply. And are not concepts of these properties a problem for Prinz’s theory? I think so. Prinz (pp. 165–88) advertises his theory as having the advantage of being able to accommodate a large variety of concepts ranging from the perceptual to the most abstract – viz of providing what he calls the ‘scope desideratum’ much better than any currently available theory. In discussing the concept humour and the property it stands for, Prinz writes ‘the property of being humorous does not look like anything but it is instantiated in various perceivable things: jokes ... garish make-up.... We can track properties by their instantiations’ (p. 170). But, I wonder, in what sense in this case are appearance properties tracking something over and above (or, one might say, beneath and below) the appearance properties themselves (as in the case of gold)? There is no nominal/real content distinction here to appeal to. But if this is the case, then there are at least some concepts that do not fit Prinz’s theory (and the examples could be multiplied). In these cases, proxytypes do refer to appearance properties and therefore determine the intentional content of the concept they (i.e., proxytypes) are associated with. Although an empiricist could simply concede that some concepts refer to appearances, Prinz cannot concede this. His claim is that the Lockean
distinction between nominal and real content allows his proxytype theory to combine the informational component of informational atomism with the view that concepts are structured entities (pp. 276-9). But if Prinz ends up conceding that concepts refer to appearances, in what sense does his theory inherit any feature from informational semantics? In what sense are concepts qua proxytypes tracking properties in the world to which they (i.e., proxytypes) are nomologically connected? Is not the nomological connection totally irrelevant in the case of concepts such as *humour*, *virtue*, *disjunction*? In all these cases, what the concepts refer to seem to be determined entirely by how we define or characterize humour, virtue and logical disjunction.

Prinz could simply concede that his account of conceptual content works best for natural-kind concepts. However, that would force him to concede that his theory has a much more limited scope than it is advertised as having. And I doubt that this is a concession he would be prepared to make. Another option for him would be to say that concepts such as *number*, *virtue*, and so on, refer to abstract objects, and that we use appearance properties only to track these objects. However, this is not a desirable option, I take it, for a professed follower of Locke’s empiricism.

III.2. The ‘magic harmony’ problem

A more charitable interpretation perhaps is that intentional content is determined *in part* by factors intrinsic to the concept, and also *in part* by extrinsic ones. This picture, however, only reintroduces the very problems which, e.g., prototype theory has already been diagnosed as having. As Prinz points out, prototypes may be inaccurate representations of the objects they stand for, and as a consequence, intrinsic and intentional content may come apart. However, Prinz believes that his proxytype theory does not have the same problem, because the intrinsic and extrinsic intentionality-conferring factors operate in sync. As he puts it, ‘concepts are mechanisms that allow us to enter into perceptually mediated, intentionality-conferring causal relations with categories in the world’ (p. 164). But if the suggestion is that these two factors operate in sync, so that the intentionality-conferring function of the one ‘mirrors’ that of the other (thereby avoiding over-determination), then an explanation of this harmony which does not simply invoke magic is in high demand.

Prinz does attempt to elucidate how the intrinsic (cognitive content) and extrinsic (intentional content) factors operate in harmony. He characterizes his theory as a two-factor theory which individuates content both narrowly and widely. Narrowly individuated concepts are proxytypes, and proxytypes refer to sets of appearance properties. He names the narrowly
individuated content ‘nominal content’ (reminiscent of Locke’s nominal essence). ‘Real content’ (reminiscent of Locke’s real essence) is the real object the concept stands for. The worry that nominal and real content may drift apart, so that what the concept cognitively represents differs from what it referentially represents, is contemplated (pp. 263–82), but quickly dismissed. In Prinz’s own words,

... there is ... an important harmony [between real and nominal contents]. The proxytypes that embody our concepts are responsible for mediating the relations that endow them with real content.... The changes in our proxytypes are dictated by features of real contents. The ... nature of proxytypes reflects the fact that it is their function to track such contents (p. 282; my italics).

The general idea is that although the intentional content of concepts is determined by a nomological relation, in a sense intentional content is also determined by nominal content, if nominal and real contents coincide plus or minus a bit. But then the issue becomes: what guarantees this harmony? Prinz pays only lip-service to this pressing question. The harmony is alleged to result from the fact that ‘real contents exert normative control over proxytypes. Proxytypes transform because they are designed to help us track real contents’ (p. 282).

I believe this answer is unsatisfactory, for two reasons. First, an overt appeal to teleology might explain harmony, but Prinz denies that his semantic theory is teleological. As he puts it (p. 325, fn. 9), ‘neither nominal nor real content depend on teleology’. But if neither nominal nor real content depend on teleology, how does teleology explain the harmony between the two? Maybe Prinz wants to say that it is not for any teleological reason that concepts have the nominal and real contents they have. But it is for a teleological reason that the nominal and real contents stay in harmony. However, in the absence of some further elaboration on the teleological reasons which keep nominal and real contents in sync, his teleological explanation of the harmony is no better than an appeal to magic. Secondly, if we take what Prinz says as an explanation of the harmony, then his explanation is circular. What is to be explained is why proxytypes track their correct objects. And the answer seems to be ‘because they are designed to help us track their correct objects’. But an explanation which makes use of the notion needing to be explained is circular. We would need an explanation of why proxytypes are designed to track their correct objects which is independent of their function of tracking them and of their success in doing so. And without this independent explanation, the harmony between nominal and real contents still seems miraculous. In fairness to Prinz, I may be reading too much into the very little he says about teleological explanation.
However, the fact that he says so little is part of the problem. If teleology can explain the harmony between nominal and real contents, and the success of Prinz’s theory relies on a reasonable explanation of this harmony, then more should definitely be said about teleology.

III.3. The ‘non-trivial constraint’ problem

One might suggest an alternative explanation of Prinz’s postulated harmony between real and nominal contents. The harmony, one might argue, is explained by the fact that real contents put non-trivial constraints on nominal contents. For example, a concept \( C \) carries information about the property \( F \) (or represents \( F \)) only if \( C \) exhibits certain salient features. The relational property of being a driving gear illustrates this. Only things with a certain shape, made out of a certain material and so on, would satisfy this relational property.

This is an interesting suggestion, and it is certainly a possible interpretation of Prinz’s claim that ‘real contents exert normative control over proxytypes’. But there are important disanalogies between the gear example and concepts. It seems plausible to think that an object must have certain features in order to have a certain function. But it does not seem plausible to claim that a concept ought to be associated with a set of appearance properties in order to be in a counterfactual-supporting causal relation with a certain property. In fact Prinz concedes this much by clarifying that ‘the counterfactuals to which we appeal in individuating a concept by its real content do not require that the proxytype associated with those concepts remain fixed’ (p. 280). In conclusion, the above attempt to explain the harmony between nominal and real contents reintroduces the need of a fixed proxytype (or a set of necessary properties a concept must be associated with in order to be said to refer to a certain object). But Prinz himself denies that proxytypes associated with concepts remain fixed, and he claims instead that different proxytypes are bonded together by their being in a causal connection with the same object. Moreover, his very claim that proxytypes mediate the referential relation only by tracking the object (pp. 279–82) seems to imply that a concept need not be associated with a set of properties that its referent must satisfy in order for the concept to be said to refer to this object. This remark takes me to my last point.

III.4. The ‘tracking’ problem

Prinz’s claim that proxytypes only track real contents may suggest a third way of understanding the harmony between nominal and real contents.

\(^6\) I owe this suggestion (or some variant of it) to Jonathan Cohen.
Proxytypes at best mediate the referential relation, rather than being constitutive of it. In the end, what distinguishes proxytypes from Fregean senses is precisely the fact that the proxytypical properties are not ones that things falling in the extension of the concepts are required to have (contra what the explanation of the harmony suggested in §III.3 above implied). Rather, they are properties that the objects falling in the extension of the concepts will very probably have as a consequence of the general reliability of our belief-forming mechanisms. And if this is the correct way of understanding how proxytypes relate to reference, then the harmony between nominal and real content is explained as a matter of contingency (rather than necessity or miracle).

I believe this is the best and most charitable interpretation of the relation between nominal and real content. However, there is a remaining and rather pressing worry. Prinz claims that proxytypes mediate the referential relation by tracking the object. But informational semanticists like Jerry Fodor never denied that the nomic co-variance between tokenings of a certain concept and whatever it stands for might be mediated by a detection mechanism. Fodor only denies that this mediation is content-determining: ‘ostensive definitions, “guiding conceptions” and the like may be among the mechanisms that occasion or sustain such nomic relations [i.e., those constitutive of reference]; but they aren’t constitutive of semanticity; only the nomic relations themselves are’.³ Prinz’s view could be interpreted along these lines, especially in those passages where he writes that detecting mechanisms only play a role in ‘establishing content-conferring causal relations with properties’ (p. 124), and that concepts should be identified with ‘semantically structured entities that get their intentional contents through informational relations’ (p. 123). In the end, even according to Prinz, what determines intentional content is the nomological relation alone. But if this is the correct interpretation of Prinz’s proxytype theory, then the theory does not substantially differ from informational semantics – whether or not concepts are indicators (i.e., are internally unstructured) or detectors (i.e., are internally structured). At best, his proxytype theory identifies concepts with complex indicators. My claim is not that Prinz may refuse to endorse an informational semantics, but that his endorsement of this semantics does not square very well with his promise earlier in the book of offering a novel theory in which the intrinsic component of content together with a nomological relation determine intentional content. Moreover, even assuming that he happily endorses an informational semantics and only wants to add that proxytypes must be part of the nature of concepts, he would still

have to face the rather pressing problem of explaining the compositionality of concepts. He does provide an explanation of the compositionality of concepts (pp. 283–312), but I do not find it convincing. Unfortunately, I shall not be able to discuss this issue here.

In conclusion, the claim that a set of appearance properties tracks an object is very different from the claim that a set of appearance properties (at least partly) determines the object the concept stands for (as Prinz suggests at the beginning of his book). A tracking property bears no obligation of similarity to the object. Any property could be so exploited — either simple or complex. The question of content determination requires an answer as to why gold refers to gold. And this is explained by a nomological relation, on Prinz’s own theory. Proxytypes only function to track the object. But then we are left in the dark as to how to understand Prinz’s theory. We must interpret him either as claiming that proxytypes determine reference, and so that concepts refer to appearances (with the unhappy result that he cannot retain his realism about natural kinds), or as claiming that proxytypes only track the causal relations between concepts and objects, with the result that his theory is not substantially different from informational semantics. It may be objected that it is possible to rescue Prinz’s theory from this dilemma by claiming that he is only responsible for giving the false impression at the beginning of the book (with the unfortunate example of the letter-detecting mechanism) that proxytypes contribute to reference determination more than they actually do. However, as I remarked above, the letter-detecting device example is introduced by Prinz to illustrate his proxytype theory. So it would be very surprising if such a key example turned out to be just an unfortunate choice of example. Rather, I believe that the confused example of the letter-detecting device reveals the deeper problems for Prinz’s theory which I have been pointing out.

IV. CONCLUSION: PRINZ’S DILEMMA

The problems raised above generate the following dilemma for Prinz’s overall project. Either proxytype theory is a novel theory according to which an intrinsic component and a nomological relation jointly determine intentional content, and hence Prinz’s theory does not meet his own requirements (as I have shown above, according to Prinz, cognitive content explains only our understanding and use of concepts). Or else his theory meets the relevant requirements, but he does not produce the theory he wants, viz a novel theory that differs from informational atomism in as much as concepts qua detecting mechanisms explain why concepts represent certain
properties rather than others. After all, if Prinz denies that the intentional
content of concepts is determined by their internal structure, how would his
view differ substantially from Fodor’s?

Prinz’s project is to provide a theory with advantages over currently avail-
able theories of concepts, by delivering both the intentionality and cognitive
content desiderata in virtue of combining the informational component
of informational atomism with the view that concepts are semantically
complex. However, the hybrid character of his proxytype theory has the
unwanted effect of cornering Prinz in the unhappy dilemma of choosing
between a theory which does not deliver the intentionality and cognitive
content desiderata and a theory which does deliver these desiderata but fails
to have the novel character advertised.8

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