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Connectionism and Ethics

Since the early 1980's, Paul Churchland has been expressing skepticism about the idea that rationality consists in the transformation of one set of sentences into another set of sentences according to appropriate rules of logic and coherence. By the late 1980's, the connectionist program in neurophilosophy began to exhibit signs of great progress in providing a new and nondiscursive understanding of such basic epistemological concepts as learning, recognition, and theoretical understanding. Rather than being primarily sentence-crunching devices, it became clear that human brains are primarily prototype construction, activation, and deployment machines, and that the prototypes we use to understand the world are not sentences, but are rather embodied in the synaptic strengths among networks of neurons. Connectionism has been making great gains in diverse philosophical fields; the first applications to ethics appeared in Churchland's 1989 book, *A Neurocomputational Perspective*. In his 2007 book, *Neurophilosophy at Work* Churchland brings together a collection of articles primarily centered on the application of the prototype-activation model of cognitive understanding to ethics, and providing connectionist glosses on such diverse concepts as moral learning, moral perception, moral ambiguity, and moral progress. Although I find myself almost entirely in agreement with Churchland's views about the primarily prototypical nature of moral thought, and the acquisition of prototype-deployment skills in moral learning, it seems to me that he is missing the mark in an important way in this book. I think his emphasis falls too much on cognition and the brain and excludes the influence of emotions and the rest of the body. Coming to appreciate the wrongness of lying requires not only the construction of a prototype of lying (coming to understand what qualifies as a lie), but (more importantly, I think) learning to see the world through an emotional axiological lens. After a brief introduction to connectionist views of learning and understanding, I'll try to lay out my disagreement in more detail with the help of the neurologist, Antonio D'Amasio's work. Finally, I'll offer a bit of praise for the clear improvement in Churchland's latest expression of his view about the interaction of the social/moral prototypes in the individual brain and our collective social discussions of the good and the right (the "scaffolding" of our moral thought).

Churchland, Paul M., *A Neurocomputational Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1989)
Churchland, Paul M., *Neurophilosophy at Work* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).