Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Jessie Prinz is a distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center CUNY. He is a notable expert in Philosophy, of Psychology, and a strong proponent of the emerging methodology known as Experimental Philosophy. He is author of The Conscious Brain, The Emotional Construction of Morals, Beyond Human Nature, and Gut Reactions, a Perceptual Theory of Emotion. He was a visiting fellow École Normale Supérieure in Paris, a research fellow at the School for Advanced Study at the University of London, and before coming to the Graduate Center, was the John Jay Rogers distinguished professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Chicago. Welcome Jesse to the thought project.

Jessie Prinz: Great to be with you, Tanya.

Tanya Domi: I'm just going to frame our conversation to say in this moment, in the United States, I'm actually looking at some live footage today, students are walking out in a nationwide protest with regard to a weapons and guns in schools. And we know all about that, been hearing about that. But today we're actually being confronted with the neoliberal regime, led by President Donald Trump, a businessman and American created celebrity, who may have been elected with the help of the Russian government.

Tanya Domi: Trump's campaign has been reported to have had numerous meetings with the members of the Russian government. A special prosecutor is now engaged in an investigation of the campaigns relationships with the Russians and its activity, since taking office last year. More than 20 persons have been indicted, as the investigation continue. This is a period of political upheaval, and Trump has demonstrated little regard or respect for democratic normative practices, including the rule of law. Social Justice Activism has been reignited in 2015, due to the rise of police killings of black youth. And since Trump's election, women have erupted in organizing that has not been evident in the US, since really the second wave of feminism in the 1970s.

Tanya Domi: So you are a moral philosopher. I'm glad you're joining us today. You've written a number of books and articles relating to the philosophical theory of morality, the Emotional Basis of Moral Judgments among others, and of course Invoking the Humean Theory of Moral Judgment. What do you think as a philosopher of David Hume, not only yourself, but of David Hume, and what he would have to say about the moral quandary that is currently facing us in America?
Jessie Prinz: Well, I think Hume would have a diagnosis. He thought that morality is centrally about the emotion. So when you get into moral divides, he doesn't think that reason is up to the task of settling between disputants. There are certain moral debates that have a factual dimension. So I mean, if you talk about racism, a lot of claims made by racists are based on pseudoscience, scientific racism. It has been debunked, and any claims about racial superiority based on those kinds of claims, can be contested and rejected.

Jessie Prinz: But if you get a divide between people who have say, a finder's keepers principle. That those who are in power through pure accident, those who are born rich, for instance, through none of their own toil, just deserve to keep what they have because, well, the role of fortune has given them that advantage. If you disagree with that principal and favor or side of redistribution, that would allow people who are not born wealthy, or a meritocracy where people can earn as a function of their capabilities, that would be a kind of divide that would be very, very difficult to settle by reason.

Jessie Prinz: And I think, so what Hume is seeing is that when you get polarization, when you get division, it's very often impossible to resolve, because the dispute is one that fundamentally involved value as opposed to fact. There's a lot of work being done right now in political polarization, and you might think, "yeah, these are policy differences." A lot of policies really make claims about how the economy works, like does supply side work or not. They look very empirical, very resolvable, but the truth is, preference in the political sphere is not just a matter of policy.

Jessie Prinz: There's work on polarization suggesting that, quite independently of people's platform preferences, their allegiance to being conservative or to being liberal, to being Democrat or Republican, outweighs a specific commitment on any matter of policy, any issue. It's striking and it's disturbing, but what you get from that result is the humean insight, that we develop a strong and emotionally grounded identification with these social group labels. And when we see somebody who belongs to a different group, there's so much animus, so much mistrust, so much contempt that makes us dislike the opponent. That even getting into technical issues about what laws would lead to the most stable society, what would increase wellbeing and justice for all, those questions are almost secondary to how political divisions play out.

Tanya Domi: Well. I think you've absolutely described what we're actually witnessing and experiencing in America at this moment. Even in my lifetime, looking back in the 60s, I was in high school then, uh, during the moratorium marches. Even then, in the height of the Civil Rights Movement for racial justice, there was not this corrosive polarization, it seems like on every level that we're seeing right now. I mean it's, the identification that you've pointed out is more striking and stark now than I've ever personally witnessed or experienced.
Jessie Prinz: I think there is something to that. The, the evidence for polarization is contested but sizable. On the negative side, the naysayers who don't think we're getting more divisive will point out that party memberships have remained constant for the last five or so decades. There's a huge centers, so you might think everybody is getting to become an extremist, but in fact, 42% of the American populace are independents. So we forget that a lot of people really have positions in the middle and there are many, you know, pro choice Republicans and there are many pro gun Democrats. And that gray area is maybe the mainstream. So we sometimes get an exaggerated picture of just how divided things are.

Jessie Prinz: On the other hand, since the civil rights rights act in the Johnson administration, and with changes in demography, the racial divide has become closely tied to the political divide. So political party membership, you see white people settling the verdict when and Republican wins. Nonwhites are playing a disproportionate role when Democrats win, and that the feed between political parties that they've been traditionally understood, and group battles between ethnicities and various identity politics groups is more pronounced than it has been, I think of the past.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I actually agree. And I would say that the two most significant changes are the demographics, and the change in American demographics, that we’re increasingly multiracial, and in the younger cohorts, sociological cohorts. The other thing that I think makes one feel that it's so polarized is the new technology, the social media platforms. Where people are facing off with one another in these discussions, or not having discussions. And so, that's an interesting intersection now of the presence of technology, and how we relate to one another.

Jessie Prinz: I do think that is changing the landscape in very dramatic ways. Exactly what plays in here is a matter of some controversy. So on the issue of polarization, there has been a big increase since the rise of social media. So if you look at say, Republican and Democrat attitudes towards members of the other party, just back in the 1990s, polls in 1994, which is reason history, found that about 15% of Democrats had a strongly negative attitude towards Republicans, and conversely. Now, it's over 50%.

Jessie Prinz: So 55% of Democrats have a very negative attitude towards Republicans. 58% of Republicans have a very negative attitude towards Democrats. When did this start? Coincidentally, around the sort of start of these major social media outlets, like Facebook and Twitter. That said, if you look at online consumption of news, people are mostly going to the mainstream. They're mostly going to CNN, not to the fringes. So, we're still trying to figure out whether social media are really driving people further apart, or reflecting something that's coming from some other source.

Tanya Domi: Interesting point. So that actually is a nice dovetail to the next aspect of your own writing on, is empathy necessary for morality? And actually, this is where
the polarization feels extremely visceral. Because there appears to be a
tremendous dearth of empathy in our exchange, in our interactions. One of the
descriptions actually, of Mr Trump himself, is that there's a lot of commentators
and pundits are saying, "Well, he lacks empathy." And they draw conclusions
about who he might be, which yields to something akin to like, he's a sociopath.
He reflects a Sociopathic Personality Disorder. So what do we say about this
moment where it feels like there's just a dearth of empathy for one another?

Jessie Prinz:
You know, I think though certain polls will suggest that empathy tends to fall
more on the left than the right. You know, empathy I think has been a part of a
right wing movements. There's a rise of right populism across the Western
world right now, and I think there are many people who feel like they are part of
a great silent majority to use a Reagan-esque phrase, whose voices have been
silenced, who are part of a common struggle and they're forgotten. And they're
forming bonds of solidarity in alliance with each other. That's suggests a lot of
kind of collaborative, cooperative group style social commitment and
engagement.

Jessie Prinz: 
Ironically, David Brooks, who is a conservative columnist for the times had a,
from a liberal reader perspective, somewhat incendiary column a few days ago
where he said, "All these liberals who are forming these political correctness
committees, and marching on the street, and calling everybody a racist, they are
the ones who are really polarizing. There's another approach to politics, where
you all want to converge in the center and make deals with each other, and
humanize each other, and view each other with dignity and respect. It brooks,
you know, opens with a kind of snipe against empathy. But he was actually
making a plea for empathy, as against what he sees is a very unempathetic left.

Jessie Prinz:
There was a study of hippies that I read from the 60s, when that movement was
gaining traction, where they look that hippie attitudes towards each other and
found there's a lot of rhetoric about empathy, and community, and family, and
oneness. But when they talked about the squares, when they talked about the
right, or people outside of their community, they were anything but empathetic.
So, I think all too often empathy is a code for a certain ingroup, outgroup
thinking. And the really big challenge is how do we develop a kind of empathetic
response to people who differ from us, people who are far away from us,
people whose values might conflict with our own, and I don't know, that may be
an insuperable challenge. So empathy, to the extent that it's been part of a
certain factionization is something that should always be viewed with a certain
degree of caution.

Tanya Domi: 
Very interesting. I think that I read the Brooks column, I was ... felt very
negatively about it and about him, and I'm someone who's worked in the media
world for a long time. Some of these commentators on the page feel to me, and
I think to a lot of people, that they're really disconnected with our reality. I think
the lack of women in that page has been a real ... I think it's a real problem for
the New York Times. The addition of Michelle Goldberg is a late addition. It's like
25 years late, in my view. And guy's like a Friedman and Brooks are just sort of, they've got like four columns ,and they repeat them in different ways. I'm a harsh critic, without a doubt.

Jessie Prinz: I certainly agree with you about those individuals and about the times. I also think, I mean more generally with respect to the message, that it's the left that has been pushing towards the extremes. Even if it's true, and I think it's not true that this is left, I think it's both sides, our assumption that polarization is bad needs to be looked at . Because I think that polarization that prevents conversation may be bad. But when you get people saying, look, let's call patriarchy, patriarchy. Let's call white supremacy, white supremacy. Let's say black lives matter. Let's fight this. You know, I think an important part of America is long overdue, an ongoing healing process. That if people can't really engage in liberation politics, that says a certain group that have been neglected, and I think often neglected by both parties, has a voice and is going to use it.

Jessie Prinz: Those are really great moments of growth. If you look at, I didn't know, going, rewinding the clock to Stonewall or something like that, where a group of people who were living in secrecy basically said, no enough, this is a tipping point. We're out in the streets, were here and we're not going away. You’re gonna hear our voices. That's been a long struggle. But I never expected to see gay marriage legislation in my lifetime. So there's something about going out and refusing to deny who you are, refusing to compromise, that I think can really move us forward. Right now when we see an extreme of hate and, as we perceive it emerging, we find that chilling. But on the other hand, when it’s out there overtly, and we can see it, and confront it, and dialog with it, then we might be in a better position to make progress on it than when everybody is sweeping it under the table.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I think that's a very good point. And as a matter of fact, now the ERA effort is being relaunched, and I can't think of a better moment to in fact, bring that issue back into our political discourse. And I agree with you that calling out power differentials, and calling them for what they are needed, if change is going to evolve, if change is going to be brought forward. And your point about Stonewall is spot on. But also what seems to be rattling around, and you know, yesterday's is an example. Yesterday was a jaw dropping day of news. I mean, I'm sitting at my desk, it started at 9:15 with the announcement of Tillerson dismissal on twitter, by the President. It ended last night with, perhaps a congressional seat going blue in a very red district in Pennsylvania.

Tanya Domi: But what a jaw dropping day. So what I'm seeing, and I know I'm not an exception here, is tremendous irrationality. This is where philosophy is a useful touchstone. The political situation feels irrational. The social compact, the social political compact in America, feels really up in the air. And, Republicans are refusing to investigate a president, but they choose to retire. They don't speak out, but they retire. Or, they contrast that by aiding and abetting this president's
worst impulses. Oh, this feels really irrational to me. Can you talk about irrationality, and how perhaps that could inform this current situation?

Jessie Prinz: I do think democracy is broken, profoundly broken. We live in a country where policies are really increasingly decided by an elite, whose votes don't correspond to what the majority want. We live in a two-party system in a very large, pluralistic society, where the majority of voters don't think either party represents their views. We live in a society where we have one chief executive for a huge nation, who turns out to be the most powerful human being in the world and in world history, with more executive powers than have ever been granted to a president in our history. I think obvious things like finance, a campaign finance and all of that, prevents more voices from entering into politics, are continuing structural problems that prevent us from having a country that can be truly considered demographic.

Jessie Prinz: Even the voting age, the fact that felons can't vote, the fact that green card holding longtime residents can't vote, issues with voter turnout for people who feel disenfranchised because they are, all these things suggest we're very, very ill. That said, there are issues about rationality that crop up as soon as you talk about the very concept of democracy, which presupposes our capacity to arrive at good decision through deliberation. And if you look at deliberation, it's fraught with the very basic limitations of human psychology. All kinds of biases and prejudices and power plays. Tali Mandelberg, who's a political scientist at Princeton, does work showing that when small groups deliberate, women and minorities voices are not heard. They're silenced, they're interrupted, when they're heard, they're ignored. And when they have to make decisions, they capitulate to white men in the group if white men don't budge.

Jessie Prinz: So even in cases where you have people in a space where they're supposed to be exchanging reasons on the basis of shared information, like a jury deliberation, you see tremendous forces of irrationality and bias. I think liberals are too confident in their convictions, knowing that the basic determinants of political preference, our demography, where you grew up, your life experience play such a big role in how you vote. That if we don't step back and try to resolve political debates by first principles, rather than are inculcated knee jerk responses, we'll end up in cases where even if we could have a voice in politics, the voice wouldn't necessarily be the best one, the most rational one, the most authentic one. I think we should give up party affiliations. We should give up a two party system. Each of us should think through each policy on the basis of the specifics of that policy, not because it's delivered to us and a very polarized platform.

Tanya Domi: So you're, I think you're talking about now, here, that connects to your essay on the emotional basis of rational judgment. It seems like you're talking about how the stories that we like to tell in America, he grew up, pulled himself up by his boot straps, worked his way up to become the successful person. So there's a lot of emotion, this is a very emotional laden American narrative, the Horatio
Alger story, right? And now we know, according to this last election, that there are a lot of people who feel left out of that. That there's nothing to pull from, and quite frankly, they've been disappointed, and they're disaffected, primarily living in the Midwest, where I'm from originally. And, all this identity politics that you liberals are talking about, squeezed us out and we're gonna show you.

Tanya Domi: And I actually have had some personal experiences with that, having gone back to Indiana in the last few months, having to stay conversation, of which I was being very careful because I knew where it could go. And it did go there. Not through my own choice. But the person who attacked me was a white male, who didn't get a PhD, got an EdD. And he's resented his whole life because he couldn't get into the program, and he accused me of being an elitist liberal from New York, and it went all downhill from there. So, the emotional underlay of all of us comes into play in this polarities, that can inform, or actually diminish a debate. And there's a lot of preconceptions about who we are, when we present these labels. So, I happen to be a lesbian who was thrown out of my home, and made her way through the US Army, to get the Gi Bill. So there's a whole story behind that. So, people may have conceptions about who I am, but I'm many things as Walt Whitman wrote. We are multitudes.

Jessie Prinz: Yeah. I'm reminded too, of Audrey Lorde who played into this set of contradictory identities. And we all are contradictory identities, we're all multiplied entities. We all are multitudes. I think there's one reason that identity politics is fraught, we end up putting ourselves in a single basket, and we really are many. And the plurality of opinions get somehow masked by that. On the other hand, identity is really important, and the labeling of identities, and the solidarity alliances that can be formed through identity are very, very powerful. As one voice we are silent, but in a multitude we can be heard. Part of the problem is the classifications that we're given, exert a big influence on which solidarities form.

Jessie Prinz: So America, which has been in tremendous denial since its inception about class, ends up in a situation where everybody identifies as middle class, everybody panders to the middle class, but the truth is the middle class is shrinking. And there are great class divisions, and so many of the deepest social woes are tied up with class. That if you don't bring that into the discussion, you really won't make adequate progress. An example, mass incarceration, mass incarceration is clearly very fundamentally an issue about race, but race and class are bound up. And of course, part of the problem is policies that are incarcerating people for small crimes. But part of it as the criminalization of poverty.

Jessie Prinz: If you don't have a country that affords equal opportunity, and the people who were unemployed or disproportionately people of color, and crime becomes a rational choice in conditions of poverty. Not that it's a choice that everyone makes, but a choice that some make, like getting involved in the drug trade. And that puts you behind bars, basically you've criminalize being unemployed, but
you've created unemployment through racial inequality. So the ways in which economic identity and economic variables, which low income is one of the biggest predictors of incarceration. The way they interact is so important to understand, and I think it can be used as a tool for figuring out which identities, which groups, which classifications are the most important to make visible and vivid, when thinking about injustice.

Tanya Domi: I completely agree. We sent a whole generation, and more, of black men into prisons. Not only that we see LGBT children in the police pipeline, from school to prison. The people being thrown away because of their skin color, or their sexual orientation. And the issues for women is just incredible violence, women are experiencing in America. Epidemic levels of sexual violence, and violence at the hands of their most intimate partners. And now with Me Too, and Time's Up, and we can thank Mr Trump for that. And his constellation of white privileged men, who could just buy and purchase whatever they want, including women's bodies.

Tanya Domi: Now you're having this moment where women's voices are now demanding their place in the discourse. And it's really an incredible thing to witness, and also share in it as well, I might add. It is very emotional, because it affects many of us, you know, going back to one childhood. It's that visceral, and that actually I think, almost primal in some cases.

Jessie Prinz: Absolutely. I do think, that's another case where, polarization may be bearing some fruit, without the extremity, the perceived extremity of the Trump phenomenon, I think maybe Me Too wouldn't have happened, but it's another place that illustrates the importance of keeping things like class in the equation. That the systematic exploitation of women stems from the patriarchy, and the Patriarchy is fundamentally economic. It's men controlling economic power, and women who depend on men economically, because men have the more powerful jobs, or the employers are the bread winners, are in a particular position of vulnerability. So without treating those inequities, at the same time as we treat a sexual violence in all its forms, is to miss out one of the sustaining causes of that very violence.

Jessie Prinz: So, we have a lot of very, I think, important middle class liberation movements going on right now. But I think if we started thinking about the economic variables here, we'd draw group boundaries a bit differently. And so, this is one place where it doesn't matter if you're Democrat or Republican, person of color, a white person, your exposure to threats of sexual violence really are a function of economic as empowerment and gender. And I think that if we say, let's set up a party structure that reflects that alliance. You know, people think Trump was voted in by a kind of confused working class, former manufacturers who are looking at a weakened economy. But in fact, Trump voters were relatively affluent. And in terms of things like home ownership and income, were actually doing better than the Clinton voters.
Jessie Prinz: And I actually think that, the real underclass in America are not part of the political equation right now. They're not perceived as a voting block or functioning as a voting block, but if they came together and voted together, and not just them but women, people of color, anyone who's been economically disadvantaged because of their group membership, and foreign party alliances along that dimension, the whole electoral landscape would change quite dramatically.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, I absolutely agree with that. And it's a very interesting thing. You're talking about class, and about the disempowered. Those voices are not in the discourse. Now, Reverend Barber, who's put together this Poor People's March that's gonna go to 32 states, is actually priming the pump of the very thing that you're describing. This is sort of a throwback, again, to 1968 and Martin Luther King, because if you can't eat, you certainly ... if you don't have any food to eat, you certainly can't participate in the democracy process, the deliberative engagement of citizenry.

Tanya Domi: It's one of the expressions I used when I did democratic development work abroad, in a dozen countries. You can't eat democracy. You have to have a social welfare system that lifts all boats. So that people have an opportunity to have a decent quality of life, and therefore then from that, from those fruits and abundance, they can participate. And so, yes, I think we're at a really difficult place in the road, on this American democratic experiment.

Tanya Domi: And I just lastly, I'd like to hear what you have to say about, the morality and ethics that inform, just basically informed this disengagement right now. This is, I think, a particularly perilous moment. But I also think it is a moment where opportunity can actually be presented, and those who are brave enough to walk through that door, may take us on another path out of this ... this confusion I think, this difficulty. I'd like to hear what your thoughts on that.

Jessie Prinz: I think we've come to a point where we have a kind of moral rock bottom in confidence. That we have certain principles that are non-negotiable, that can serve us and guide us. And if you look at those principles, and I'm thinking here with things like equality, and tolerance, and democracy, and freedom, they're all carrying historical baggage that makes them very, very imperfect. So we talk about the importance of equality, but we live in a country with acute huge class divide. We talk about tolerance, but Islamophobia and antisemitism and other forms of bigotry are at an all time high in recent decades. You talk about democracy, but have a country where the two-party system, and the economics of electoral politics disenfranchises the vast majority. So we have these ideals.

Jessie Prinz: You talked about freedom. You mentioned, how can you talk about these various liberties when you don't even have freedom from need? So our notion of freedom has been sort of unyoked from those kinds of economic freedom, the freedom to live well and thrive, that is not afforded to the great many. We live in a country that sort of exports its great liberal vision of what it is to be an
ethical society, but we do so while exploiting the global south. We do so through regime change and military intervention. So there's so much hypocrisy, and so much failure to understand even these foundational principles. That our moral confidence has led us to a position, where in the name of things that sound really good, because we've come to think these terms are unimpeachable, we're doing really, really bad things. So I think one thing that philosophy can do, is return us to our foundations, rethink what these principles are. How we understand them, the errors we've made in their implementation, and maybe devise improved versions that can help guide us into the next period of human problem solving.

Tanya Domi: Thank you very much. Thanks for joining us today.

Jessie Prinz: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Professor Jessie Prinz. The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV, located at the Graduate Center in the heart of New York City. Being a part of the largest public urban university in the world, the Graduate Center fosters pioneering research, and scholarship in the arts and sciences.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with CUNY TV located at the graduate center in the heart of New York City. With production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz. I'm Tanya Domi, tune in next week.