ASAGE (Allison Fritz): I’ll start out with the really obvious question. How did you arrive at the philosophical juncture that you are currently at?

Jesse Prinz (JP): I wish I knew what juncture that was. In some ways I think everything I do has been a continuation of or a footnote on the empiricist tradition. I sometimes joke that I am just plagiarizing Hume. So if you think about the empiricist project, it’s really about grounding knowledge in experience. And there are lots of domains where that seems like a challenge—how do you ground concepts in experience? How do you ground morality in experience? So again and again I come back to that kind of project.

Right now I am writing two new books. One of them is about the self and grounding the self in the social experience. Another is about metaphysics and it’s really an effort to try and defend the view that more or less everything is really a social construction. So take the idea seriously that human activity creates boundaries rather than discovering them; in some way that’s the reversal of the usual empiricist project—we pick up knowledge from experiencing the world. The flip side of that is that we often impose knowledge on the world after experiencing it and we have to make decisions of where to divide and cut.

Within aesthetics I was really picking up on another aspect Hume, which is this idea that sentiments are very central to aesthetic judgment. I think that there were a bunch of questions that people were asking in the 18th century about the role of emotion in art that in some way drifted out of the contemporary debate, and so I wanted to revisit them.

A: This is kind of related, and I guess I already know the answer if you want to elaborate. Your work is highly empirically based, which is one of the reasons that I really enjoy it. And by ‘empirically based’ I don’t just mean empiricist, I mean taking that idea very seriously and going out in the world and looking at the research and the data. But you have two degrees in philosophy, and you focus now on the philosophy of psychology. Is this where your focus and interest in some of neuroscience and psychology experiments come from? How did you get there?

JP: There’s this dirty little secret that I never took a psych course in my life, nor a neuroscience course. I really had a pretty strict humanist education. I did some social science like sociology, and the theory side, which looks a lot more like philosophy. And I took a lot of literature courses, and courses in art and art history—and obviously philosophy. And when I went to graduate school, I really had none of the patience to get interested in psychology. I had been really interested in the philosophy of language, among other things, which brought me into contact with linguistics. I also had been very interested, in the past, in philosophers like Foucault who really are in constant contact with history. So, in some ways, I never have been that ‘pure philosopher.’ Even being interested in philosophy of art puts you in contact with the arts, and so it’s interdisciplinary by nature.

As I got more and more interested in questions of how the mind works, I think it struck me as immediately obvious that psychology was relevant. Part of it is that I was inspired by people like Hume very early on. I think Hume was basically a psychologist; his questions aren’t conceptual questions. When he says that “ideas are grounded in impressions,” it’s not supposed to be conceptual analysis, it’s supposed to be a kind of observation about how the mind works. So I was very fortunate that I started dabbling in these ideas in graduate school. And I met a psychologist there—a very excellent psychologist—named Larry Barsalou, who was exploring the same kinds of ideas through psychology. And I think a lot of it was just our shared interest, and that discovery led to some collaboration but also,
for me, legitimated this quest to find answers in psychology. At that point I made the logical next step, which is becoming an experimentalist, and I do a fair amount of experimental work.

But in a way, all of that is always subsidiary to this broader philosophical project. And so, for me, I said “what is philosophy?” I’d say it is not a methodology. There are many methods in philosophy, from narrative to formal logic. I’d say it's a set of questions, it's a set of issues that have historically been of concern to philosophers, but also a set of issues that are unified by a kind of breadth or grandeur or depth, one might say. Philosophy is interested in big questions, to use that cliché. But if you define a field by its questions then it means anything goes. So, for me, if reading social history, cultural anthropology, psycholinguistics, psychology, or neuroscience could contribute to the questions I'm interested in, then it's fair game.

A: Okay, dovetailing on that, then, what are the current questions that motivate you?

JP: Well, the ones mentioned before in context of these book projects are pretty high on my agenda. I started thinking about the self, and I was concerned that standard philosophical theories of the self are very individualistic. So we think about narrative, or we think about agency, or, most famously, we think about memory. And those are all things that I have as an individual but that don’t really drive my connection to the social world. But if we think about things as simple as what you list as your identity in a Facebook questionnaire when you are presenting yourself to the world... It’s your political affiliation, your religious affiliation, your status with respect to being single or involved with someone. So there are ways in which our projections of identity toward others are very clearly not individualistic, but social. So I got interested in really pushing that. For me, the guiding question there is to what extent is the self really not an isolated individualistic thing, but a fundamentally collective or group-based thing?

With the metaphysics project the question has been “what’s the role of human decision-making in grounding our categories?” And I grew up with very mainstream philosophy of language. I learned externalism on my philosophical mother’s knee. And that meant, well, two things: externalism and realism were absolutely axiomatic to me, to the point of mockery. If somebody was not a realist or an externalist, you would think that they just didn’t get it. And at this point I think both of those doctrines are wrong. One of the things that was really a eureka moment for me is that realism and externalism have been defended on naturalist grounds. So the idea is that if we take science seriously, if we take the natural world seriously, we need to be realist and we need externalists. But if we look at our actual scientists' work or how philosophers of science describe the process of scientific theory construction, it’s often a matter of arbitrary fiat. So you get scientists making decisions based on pragmatic considerations about how to divide categories. Reference no longer looks like pointing to the world and discovering it, it’s more of a dialogue with the world. Nature presents itself and we examine it, but we make all kinds of decisions about how to organize nature that’s useful for us. So there, the guiding question is: what’s our role in category construction?

With art, the art project for me is really motivated by the question: what is the role of emotion in aesthetic evaluation? That was the starting place. But I became increasingly convinced that when you start to answer that question, you can start to see emotions playing an even more foundational role in the essence of art: what is art may fundamentally involve emotions. In contemporary aesthetics, when people talk about emotion in art, they are very often asking questions about expression: how does an artwork express emotions, or even how does it induce emotions? But they more rarely ask questions about the role of emotion in the essence of art. That’s a question that was absolutely central to thought in the 18th century. And this is really a re-visititation of some of those old notions.

A: One last question, and I’ll start it with a compliment. My boyfriend designs book covers—he’s an artist and does a lot of things for poetry publishers, like McSweeny’s. And he really hates the covers of philosophy books. He sees my books and thinks they're terrible. We were at another philosopher’s house and he happened to see your book, The Conscious Brain, and he said “Oh finally! Finally a philosophy
book with a decent cover.” And then I got to tell him “I’m pretty sure he actually designed the cover for that book.” And so: you do your own art?

**JP:** You know, I think philosophy and art are really similar fields because they are really about human excess in a certain kind of way. And I mean that in a non-pejorative way. We can do things and think about things and create things that are very removed from the practical. Philosophers have agonized over the meaning of life and, I think, in a way most life has too much meaning. If you think about non-human animals, their constant waking activities are dedicated towards very practical ends. And much human life is like that too: it’s sublimated through the career choices that we’ve constructed in our very artificial world. But people go to the office and maybe they unwind at the end of the day. And art and philosophy are just these extraordinary things that human beings can do that have no obvious application. I think that they *can* be wonderfully applied, but to reflect on philosophical questions is a little bit like painting. I was art-trained. I went to an art high school, and was really inclined to pursue a career in the arts. For me, coming to philosophy was a very natural transition from that art background. But in abandoning that path, I’ve always retained this… not quite a ‘what if’ nagging thought, but a ‘how can’ thought, which is: how can I incorporate art production and also art consumption into my day-to-day life and my work-life? And so making book covers, for me, is really a way to retain that side of myself.