

Born good? Babies help unlock the origins of morality

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRvVFW85lcU>

Stahl: It's a question people have asked for as long as there have been people: Are human beings inherently good? Are we born with a sense of morality, or do we arrive blank slates, waiting for the world to teach us right from wrong? Or could it be worse-- do we start out nasty, selfish devils who need our parents, teachers, and religions to whip us into shape?

The only way to know for sure, of course, is to ask a baby. But until recently, it's been hard to persuade them to open up and share their secrets.

Enter the baby lab. This is the creature at the center of the greatest philosophical, moral and religious debates about the nature of man: The human baby. They don't do much-- can't talk, can't write, can't expound at length about their moral philosophies. But does that mean they don't have one? The philosopher Rousseau considered babies "perfect idiots, knowing nothing," and Yale psychologist Karen Wynn, director of the infant cognition center here, the baby lab, says for most of its history, her field agreed.

Didn't we just think that these creatures at three months and even six months were basically just little blobs?

Wynn: Oh, sure. I mean, if you look at them, they...they kind of look like little... I mean, cute little blobs. But they can't do all the things that a... An older child can. They can't even do the things that a dog or a pigeon or a rat can.

Stahl: No pulling levers for treats or running mazes for these study subjects.

But they can watch puppet shows.

Up goes the curtain!

And Wynn is part of a new wave of researchers who have discovered seemingly simple ways to probe what's really going on in those adorable little heads.

Wynn: Up goes the curtain!

We watched as Wynn and her team asked a question that, 20 years ago, might have gotten her laughed out of her field-- does Wesley here, at the ripe old age of five months, know the difference between right and wrong?

Wesley watches as the puppet in the center struggles to open up a box with a toy inside. The puppy in the yellow shirt comes over and lends a hand. Then the scene repeats itself, but this time, the puppy in the blue shirt comes and slams the box shut. Nice behavior... Mean behavior... At least to our eyes. But is that how a five-month-old sees it, and does he have a preference?

Wesley, do you remember these guys from the show?

To find out, a researcher who doesn't know which puppet was nice and which was mean offers Wesley a choice.

Who do you like?

He can't answer, but he can reach. That one?

Wesley chose the good guy, and he wasn't alone. More than three quarters of the babies tested reached for the nice puppet. That one!

Wynn tried it out on even younger babies-- three- month-olds, who can't control their arms enough to reach. But they can vote with their eyes, since research has shown that even very young babies look longer at things they like.

Which one do you like? Daisy here looked at the mean puppet for five seconds, then switched to the nice one for 33.

Wynn: Babies, even at three months, looked towards the nice character and looked hardly at all-- much, much, much shorter time-- towards the unhelpful character.

Stahl: So basically, as young as three months old, we human beings show a preference for nice people over mean people.

Wynn: Study after study after study, the results are always consistently babies feeling positively towards helpful individuals in the world. And disapproving, disliking, maybe condemning individuals who are antisocial towards others.

Stahl: It's astonishing.

Wynn and her team first published their findings about baby morality in the journal "Nature" in 2007, and they've continued to publish follow-up studies in other peer-reviewed journals ever since; for instance, on this experiment.

They showed babies like James here a puppet behaving badly. Instead of rolling the ball back to the puppet in the middle, this green-shirted bunny keeps the other puppet's ball and runs away. Then, James is shown a second show. This time, the bunny, who he just saw steal the ball, tries to open up the box to get the toy.

Will James still prefer the puppet who helps out, or will he now prefer the one who slams the box shut?

Who do you like?

He chose the one who slammed it shut, as did 81% of babies tested.

The study's conclusion-- babies seem to view the ball thief as deserving punishment.

So, do you think that babies, therefore, are born with an innate sense of justice?

Wynn: At a very elemental level, I think so.

Paul Bloom: We think we see here the foundations for morality.

Stahl: Paul Bloom is also a professor of psychology at Yale, with his own lab. He's collaborated with Yynn on many of her baby studies, and he also happens to be her husband.

Bloom: I feel we're making discoveries. I feel like we're... We're discovering that what seems to be one way really isn't. What seems to be an ignorant and unknowing baby is actually a creature with this alarming sophistication, this subtle knowledge.

Stahl: And he says discovering this in babies who can't walk, talk or even crawl yet suggests it has to come built in.

So, remember B.F. Skinner, who said that we had to teach our children everything through conditioning. So, does this just wipe him off the map?

Bloom: What we're finding in the baby lab is that there's more to it than that, that there's a universal moral core that all humans share. The seeds of our understanding of justice, our understanding of right and wrong, are part of our biological nature.

Stahl: Wait a minute-- if babies are born with a basic sense of right and wrong, a universal moral core, where does all the evil in the world come from? Is that all learned?

Well, maybe not. Take a look at this new series of discoveries in the Yale baby lab.

Would you like a snack?

In offering babies this seemingly small, innocuous choice, graham crackers or cheerios, Yynn is probing something big-- the origins of bias, the tendency to prefer others who are similar to ourselves.

Wynn: Adults will like others who share even really absolutely trivial similarities with them.

Stahl: So will Nate, who chose cheerios over graham crackers, prefer this orange cat who also likes cheerios over the grey cat who likes graham crackers instead?

Which one do you like? Apparently so.

But if babies have positive feelings for the similar puppet, do they actually have negative feelings for the one who's different?

To find out, Wynn showed babies the grey cat, the one who liked the opposite food, struggling to open up the box to get a toy. Will Gregory want to see the graham cracker-eater treated well? Or does he want him treated badly?

Which one do you like? That one. Okay!

Gregory seemed to want the different puppet treated badly. That is amazing. So he went with his bias in a way. And so did Nate and 87% of the other babies tested. From this, Wynn concludes that infants prefer those who harm others who are unlike them.

Bloom: What could be more arbitrary than whether you like graham crackers or cheerios?

Stahl: Nothing.

Bloom: Nothing. But it matters. It matters to the young baby. We are predisposed to break the world up into different human groups based on the most subtle and seemingly irrelevant cues. And that, to some extent, is the dark side of morality.

Stahl: We want the other to be punished?

Wynn: In our studies, babies seem as if they do want the other to be punished.

Stahl: We used to think that we're taught to hate. I think there was a song like that. This is suggesting that we're not taught to hate, we're born to hate.

Wynn: I think that we are built to, you know, at the drop of a hat, create "us and them."

Bloom: And that... And that's why we're not that moral. We have an initial moral sense that is, in some ways, very impressive, and in some ways, really depressing; that we see some of the worst biases in adults reflected in the minds and in the behaviors of young babies.

Stahl: But Bloom says understanding our earliest instincts can help.

Bloom: If you want to eradicate racism, for instance, you really are going to want to know to what extent are babies little bigots? To what extent is racism a natural part of humanity?

Stahl: Sounds to me like the experiments show they are little bigots.

Bloom: I think, to some extent, a bias to favor the self-- where the self could be people who look like me, people who act like me, people who have the same taste as me-- is a very strong human bias. It is what one would expect from a creature like us who evolved from natural selection, but it has terrible consequences.

He says it makes sense that evolution would predispose us to be wary of "the other" for survival, and so we need society and parental nurturing to intervene.

He showed us one last series of experiments being done in his lab not with babies, but with older children of different ages.

The kids get to decide how many tokens they'll get versus how many will go to another child they're told will come in later. They're told the tokens can be traded in for prizes.

So you can say "green," and if you say "green," then you get this one and the other girl doesn't get any. Or you can say "blue," and if you say "blue," then you get these two and the other girl gets these two.

So green or... Green!

Stahl: The youngest kids in the study will routinely choose to get fewer prizes for themselves... ..Just to get more than the other kid... In some cases, a lot more.

Bloom: The youngest children in the studies are obsessed with social comparison.

So you get these seven. She doesn't get any. Yay!

Bloom: They don't care about fairness. What they want is they want relatively more.

Stahl: But a funny thing happens as kids get older. Around age eight, they start choosing the equal, fair option more and more. And by nine or ten, we saw kids doing something really crazy... Deliberately giving the other kid more.... They become generous. Chalk one up to society.

They've already been educated?

Bloom: They've been educated, they've been inculturated, they have their heads stuffed full of the virtues that we might want to have their heads stuffed with. Culture and education.

Stahl: So we can learn to temper some of those nasty tendencies we're wired for-- the selfishness, the bias-- but he says the instinct is still there.

Bloom: When we have these findings with the kids, the kids who choose this and not this, the kids in the baby studies who favor the one who is similar to them, the same taste and everything, none of this goes away. I think, as adults, we can always see these and kind of nod.

Stahl: Yeah. It's still in us. We're fighting it.

Bloom: And the truth is, when... When we're under pressure, when life is difficult, we regress to our younger selves, and all of this elaborate stuff we have on top disappears.

Stahl: But, of course, adversity can bring out the best in us, too-- heroism, selfless sacrifice for strangers-- all of which may have its roots right here.

Bloom: Great kindness, great altruism, a magnificent sense of impartial justice have their seeds in the baby's mind. Both aspects of us, the good and the bad, are the product, I think, of biological evolution.

Stahl: So it seems we're left where we all began-- with a mix of altruism, selfishness, justice, bigotry, kindness-- a lot more than any of us expected to discover in a blob. Well, I end my conversation with you with far more respect for babies. Who knew?