

A conversation with Paul Bloom
author of
JUST BABIES
The Origins of Good and Evil
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Photo Credit: Greg Martin

Q. What's up with the title?

A. It's meant to be playful, because it has two quite different meanings. *Just Babies* can express a reasonable skepticism about the abilities of these tiny creatures—what do you expect of them, they're just babies? But of course “just” also derives from justice—as in “a just society”—and so the title captures one of the main arguments of the book, which is that we are born as moral creatures. We start off as *just* babies. I know this sounds like a remarkable claim, but I hope that my book will convince people to take it seriously.

Q. What made you choose to write this book at this moment?

A. These are exciting times for anyone interested in morality. There are major developments in areas like social neuroscience, evolutionary theory, and moral philosophy. And several research teams—including my own at Yale—are making surprising discoveries about the moral lives of babies and children. I think that now, perhaps for the first time in history, we have scientifically informed answers to some of the questions that matter most: How is it that we are capable of transcendent kindness—and unspeakable cruelty? How do evolution, culture, parenting, and religion conspire to shape our moral natures? How do we make sense of people's strongly held opinions about abortion, gay marriage, affirmative action, and torture? And how can we become better people? *Just Babies* tries to answer these questions.

Q. Ok, let's cut to the chase: Are we naturally good or naturally evil?

A. Both! We are born with empathy and compassion, the capacity to judge the actions of others, and a rudimentary understanding of justice and fairness. Morality is bred in the bone. But there is a nastier side to our natures as well. Contrary to the wishful thinking of many psychologists and philosophers, our initial morality turns out to be biased and parochial. We favor those who look like us and are naturally cold-blooded towards strangers. Our natures are not just kind; they are also cruel and selfish.

Q. How can you even study morality in babies?

A. In most of our own studies, we use puppet shows. We show babies characters who interact in certain ways—such as one individual helping another or one individual hitting another—and then see who the babies want to interact with, who they want to reward, and who they want to punish. Using these methods, we have discovered that even young babies have the capacity for moral judgment.

Q. What about compassion and empathy? How important are they to morality?

A. Very important. The worst people in the world are psychopaths, and the problem with psychopaths is that they lack these gut feelings—they are indifferent to others' suffering. Most of us do care, and it is our

hard-wired capacity to put ourselves in the shoes of other people that makes morality possible. And, just as with moral judgment, we see compassion and empathy in young babies, and, to some extent, in other animals.

Still, there is a lot more to morality than warm feelings. A mature sense of right and wrong involves figuring out who deserves empathy and who doesn't. Who should you worry more about: the slave or the slave-owner, the cow or the carnivore, the pregnant woman or the fetus? One main argument that runs through *Just Babies* is that the development of a mature morality is the product of careful reasoning—gut feelings are never enough.

Q. What about other moral emotions, such as shame, guilt, and anger?

A. Some of these also show up early in development. The neural systems that underlie these feelings have evolved to guide us to live in cooperative groups and, to some extent, they make us better people. Someone who didn't feel ashamed of their bad acts, who didn't get angry at injustice, wouldn't be a good person to have around. Then again, a lot of the evil in the world has been caused by moral outrage; a lot of suffering is due to inappropriate guilt and shame. I think these more dangerous emotions need to be restrained by reasoned deliberation.

Q. What about disgust?

A. A lot of disgust has nothing to do with morality—think of the queasy feeling that you get from sniffing rotten meat or looking at an open wound. But disgust counts as a moral emotion because it can have a profound influence on how we think about and interact with other people. Consider the reaction that many people now have toward gays and lesbians (particularly gay men), or look at the historical record that shows how disgust has been the impetus for genocide, prejudice, and hatred.

Unlike other moral emotions, I think there is no upside to disgust—we would be better off without it.

Q. You argue that babies are natural-born bigots. What do you mean by that?

A. There's a lot of evidence that even the youngest babies carve the world into Us versus Them—and they are strongly biased to favor the Us. We are very tribal beings.

Q. Does this mean that prejudice and racism are inevitable?

A. Happily, no. For one thing, social experience really matters—babies and children have to learn who Us versus Them is by observing how those around them act. So while some distinctions are inevitable, such as friends versus strangers, others are not. Notably, it is only pretty late in development—by about the age of five—that some children come to use skin color and similar cues when decide who to befriend and who to prefer. Before this, they don't know that race matters, and so whether or not children will be racist is dependent on how they are raised; what sort of social environments they find themselves in.

Also, we are smart critters, smart enough to override our impulses and biases when we think they are inappropriate. Once we learn about these ugly aspects of our nature, we can move to combat them. We can create treaties and international organizations aimed at protecting universal human rights. We can employ procedures such as blind reviewing and blind auditions that are designed to prevent judges from being biased, consciously or unconsciously, by a candidate's race—or anything other than what is under evaluation.

Q. Is religion a force for moral good?

A. A lot of people think it is. Most Americans say they would never vote for an atheist, for instance, because they believe that they are not moral enough to hold positions of power. As Dostoyevsky put it, without God, all is permitted. Then again, there are others—including many of my friends and colleagues—who think that religion is a force for evil, who agree with Christopher Hitchens that “religion poisons everything.”

I think both extremes are mistaken. The studies that I review in *Just Babies* suggest that there is

no consistent moral effect of religion—we can be perfectly good (or perfectly evil) without it. If you want to raise a moral child, or create a moral society, religion is not essential.

Q. It seems as if a lot of your interest is in how we come to transcend our hard-wired morality.

A. That's right. A complete theory of morality has to have two parts. It starts with what we are born with, and this is surprisingly rich. But a critical part of our morality—so much of what makes us human—is not the product of evolution, but emerges over the course of human history and individual development. It is the product of our compassion, our imagination, and our magnificent capacity for reason. We bring all that to bear when we consider such questions as: How much should we give to charity? Is it right to eat meat? Are there any sorts of consensual sex acts that are morally wrong?

Q. What do you want to accomplish with this book?

A. Two things. First, many people believe that we are born selfish and amoral—that we start off as natural-born psychopaths. And many argue that we are, as David Hume put it, slaves of the passions: our moral judgments and moral actions are the product of neural mechanisms that we have no awareness of and no conscious control over. Intelligence and wisdom are largely impotent. This is an ugly view of human nature. Now, if it were true, we should buck up and learn to leave with it. But it's not true; these dismissive claims are refuted by everyday experience, by history, and by the science of developmental psychology. We are moral animals, and we are powerfully influenced by our capacity for reason.

Second, I think there are practical implications to the scientific study of morality. If you're interested in reducing racism and bigotry, for instance, it is critical to understand our inborn proclivity to favor our own group over others; if you want to create a just society, you'll want to learn about how we naturally think about fairness and equity. Good social policy is informed by an understanding of human nature at its best and its worst, and this is what *Just Babies* is all about.