Little Angels

'Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil,' by Paul Bloom

By SIMON BARON-COHEN
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Is morality innate? In his new book, "Just Babies," the psychologist Paul Bloom draws from his research at the Yale Infant Cognition Center to argue that "certain moral foundations are not acquired through learning. . . . They are instead the products of biological evolution." Infants may be notoriously difficult to study (rats and pigeons "can at least run mazes or peck at levers"), but according to Bloom, they are, in fact, "moral creatures."

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Simone Massoni

JUST BABIES
The Origins of Good and Evil
By Paul Bloom
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He describes a study in which 1-year-olds watched a puppet show where a ball is passed to a "nice" puppet (who passes it back) or to a "naughty" puppet (who steals it). Invited to reward or punish the puppets, children took treats away from the "naughty" one. These 1-year-olds seem to be making moral judgments, but is this an inborn ability? They have certainly had opportunities in the last 12 months to learn good from bad. However, Bloom has found that infants as young as 3 months old reach for and prefer looking at a "helper" rather than a "hinderer," which he interprets as evidence of moral sense, that babies are "drawn to the nice guy and repelled by the mean guy." He may be right, but he hasn't proved innateness.

Proving innateness requires much harder evidence — that the behavior has existed from Day 1, say, or that it has a clear genetic basis. Bloom presents no such evidence. His approach to establishing innateness is to argue from universalism: If a behavior occurs across cultures, then surely it can't be the result of culture. An example he provides is that young children in many cultures expect to be treated fairly — they get upset, or even spiteful or vengeful, when faced with inequality. Supporting Bloom's claim is the fact that similar behaviors can be seen in other species: Researchers report that a dog that gets a smaller share of a treat appears vexed. Dangers of anthropomorphism aside, this hints at nativism.

Another tack Bloom takes is to examine the universality of strong moral emotions like the desire to punish others, the drive to tattle on wrongdoers and the suffering at the pain of those around us. The fact that we see these strong emotions in children as much as in adults may well fit his fascinating thesis that they are intrinsic, not learned. Validating such an argument requires genetic evidence, but in its absence Bloom does a good job of discussing the possible evolutionary benefits of these emotions.

He also describes remarkable classic experiments, some of which left this reader stunned. One study by the psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark involved presenting black

children with black and white dolls. In the segregated South, a majority of children preferred the white dolls and used negative attributes to describe the black dolls. Bloom says this study, referred to in the Brown v. Board of Education decision to end school segregation, "might well be the most important developmental psychology finding in American history." But how it fits into his theory of morality is less clear, since the experiment only really shows that, without exposure to people from different backgrounds, we have a tendency to judge others based on stereotypes.

Bloom also recounts the 1954 Robbers Cave study by the social psychologist Muzafer Sherif, who invited white middle-class boys to a summer camp in Oklahoma and separated them into two groups, the Rattlers and the Eagles. Sherif discovered that even the smallest differences can lead to in-group/out-group conflict. Within a short time, the groups started to emphasize their dissimilarities in dress and conversational styles ("The Rattlers would cuss; the Eagles would take pride in their clean language"), and started using abusive epithets to describe the other boys. The Eagles stole and burned their rivals' flag, leading the Rattlers to destroy the Eagles' cabin. In an astonishing finale, Sherif found that only a shared problem (a broken water pipe) could bring the groups together.

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Simon Baron-Cohen is a professor of psychology at Cambridge University and the author of "The Science of Evil."

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