

Are Humans Born Good or Evil?
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Thinkers have debated for centuries about the basic nature of human beings. Do babies really come into the world innocent? Are they blank slates who are shaped by the culture in which they are born? Or are they, as some religions say, born in sin and must work hard to redeem themselves with God to go to Heaven when they die

These are questions that cannot be answered scientifically until we determine what "good" and "evil" are. Better to ask if human beings are programmed to be benevolent and cooperative with each other or hostile and aggressive. Also, ask if their programming is thanks to genes or culture. We still wrestle with these issues and have no definitive answer yet.

We have learned from baby psychologists that infants as young as six months react to moral issues. Puppets performing generous or unfair actions get reactions from babies, who prefer generosity and fairness. A puppet taking a toy away from another puppet gets clear distress from babies. This seems to be programmed in, except rarely, when it isn't.

Much of human behavior is learned from their first teachers, mothers, and later from their society. But there is also the genetic wiring, how their brains are programmed. Some of this programming comes from their wiring at birth, and other programming comes from environmental issues: health, diet, and treatment by the adults charged with their care. Abuse can change the brain's wiring; a normally benevolent disposition can be changed to a distrusting, hostile one.

This leaves us with a complexity that we have not yet resolved. Benevolent adults look for goodness in their offspring and believe that all babies are born good. Damaged adults damage their children and expect only bad of them. But even this is not certain. Some benevolent adults have children who are lacking empathy, leading them to criminality and evil actions. They cannot explain it.

Other children born to violent and damaged adults turn out benevolent. I think of Thomas Cromwell, the Prime Minister of Henry VIII, who was starved, beaten, and abused by his father, yet educated himself and rose to leadership. He was a decent, brilliant man, who thrived despite his early programming. We cannot explain this.

This issue came up recently in an interview with James Comey, the last FBI chief who was fired by Donald Trump because he would not swear loyalty rather than follow the law. He has written a number of excellent books about justice and the law, but now has tried his hand at a novel: Central Park West, which is making the rounds of reviews on TV.

Comey was asked if, considering his experience with Mafia criminals brought to justice, if he believed that these felons were evil. Are people good or evil, he was asked. No, he said. I think people are both good and evil. Even bad people have some good in them, and even good people have some bad. Usually.

However, there are some people whose actions are so malevolent that it is difficult to find good. There are some powerful men or women who have no empathy at all. They care only about their own feelings. A father who sexually molests his or other people's children, or a mother who starves, addicts, or beats her children without guilt is evil.

When a really powerful person, a leader, is so bereft of empathy, there is little room for goodness. Think of Hitler, Stalin, and in history Genghis Khan and Atilla the Hun: where is the good? Are such people capable of love? Can they be compassionate to their children or wives? History does not provide us with an answer here.

I think we are born neutral, and with the combination of our programming (wiring) and rearing by decent adults and societies, including physical health and loving nurture, we grow to be more good than bad. We behave with responsibility, feel guilt when we harm others, and create the society we have today: one that grows its empathy and tries to better the world we live in.

We are the majority.

681 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of "How Do You Know That?"
Contact her at Lfarhat102@gmail.com or www.globalthink.net.

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