

What is the most important difference between human beings and other living creatures? A larger brain? Upright posture? The power of speech? We know that there are animals with larger brains, and have upright postures, and have the ability to communicate with others of their kind.

I would maintain that the single thing that sets us apart from the animal kingdom is the possession of a conscience. It is our innate awareness that there are some things that are wrong and should not be done.

Animals can understand that some actions are dangerous. Domesticated animals and household pets know that some actions will lead to their being punished. Trust me, Phoebe knows the definition of the word, 'no.' Animals can be useful and obedient but they don't know how to be good, because goodness involves making moral calculations. Humans sense the rightness and wrongness of some actions, not only of their consequences. Human beings are the only creatures blessed, or burdened, with a conscience, the awareness that there are some things we simply should not do.

The definition of acceptable or unacceptable behavior may vary slightly from one society to another, but basic awareness of good and bad seems universal.

Even very young children seem to understand that. For some children the first or one of the first declarative statement they ever make is, “That’s not fair!” The sense of justice seems to be born into humans.

In his 2013 book *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*, the psychologist Paul Bloom shares studies that indicate very young children have an innate response to unfairness.

In one experiment cited by Bloom, one-year-olds were shown a puppet show featuring a good puppet who returned a ball to its owner and a selfish puppet who kept the ball for himself. The puppets were each given a treat, and the children were told that they could take away the treat from one or both of the puppets if they wanted to. Just about all of the children took the treat away from the selfish puppet. Studies have shown that even virtual newborns are distressed at the sound of another baby crying and show a desire to comfort the crying infant.

In Bloom’s view, moral foundations do not have to be taught. They are “the products of biological evolution.” Bloom concludes, “Babies are moral animals, equipped by evolution with empathy and compassion, the capacity to judge the actions of others, and even some

rudimentary understanding of justice and fairness.” No other living creature can be described that way.

What we do need to be taught are the boundaries defining to whom we owe that empathy. It has taken humankind in its history a long time to learn that- torture, slavery, the mistreatment of females, discrimination against people of other races, religions, and nations- are no longer acceptable in most quarters. Terribly, such behavior is still acceptable in some quarters.

Of course, there are some people who are psychopaths and/or sociopaths, who seem to lack empathy entirely. They have no hesitation, no discomfort with being cruel to others. Fortunately, such people are rare, perhaps 1% of the population or less. But even they maybe had things happen in their childhood that turned them to mental illness. They might have been typical in Bloom’s experiments when they were one-year old.

Where does this conviction of the wrongness of some behavior come from? The source cannot be as simple as rational thought. For some people and in some situations, the benefits of lying and stealing can seem objectively attractive. We know there are people who resort to those behaviors even though they know they are wrong. So what is the source of our innate ability to know right from wrong?

I find the fingerprints of God all over our sense of justice and compassion. I have a good friend named Michael Teasdale with whom I'm taking a philosophy course on line. We have 'class meetings' once a week to discuss the lectures. He gets my sermons each week. We were discussing my sermon called "The Fog Warning" in which I used a painting of that name to make my point. My point was that God does not exercise power in the world by sending storms and disease to punish people for their sins but is in the still small voice that inspires people to do the right things and the courage to do things they didn't think they could do.

Michael is an agnostic. He doesn't know if there is a God or not. Michael is a highly principled man whom I admire greatly. I was telling Michael that I believe the still small voice is in people who do not believe in God. I believe that the still small voice is in those babies who have a sense of justice and compassion before they can even speak. I believe it is there in people who choose to ignore it and beat it down.

C.S. Lewis writes beautifully of the innate sense of right and wrong in his landmark book, *Mere Christianity*. He calls it a Law of Nature. Lewis writes, "This law is the Law of Nature because people thought that everyone knew it by nature and did not need to be taught it."

Dr. Lawrence Collins headed up the project that mapped out the human genome. He is also a devout Christian. For him, there is no conflict between science and religion. At some point in human evolution, Dr. Collins believes, “God literally restructured the human brain” so that we developed the capacity for altruism and empathy, so that we learned to recognize the rightness of some things (giving blood, rushing to aid the victims of an accident) and the wrongness of others (slavery, child abuse).

Logic and rational thought have nothing to do with this sense of right and wrong. It is the realization that some things are not just inappropriate or against the law, but wrong. That sense, I believe, is God given. The evolutionary advantage conferred by the impulse to altruism does not help us live longer but it helps us to live more deeply. It confers on us the profound experience of being touched by God.

Of course, the most famous story about this topic of recognizing good from bad is in chapter 3 of the book of Genesis. This is the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. It is widely believed that the act by Adam and Eve is original sin for which God punished them and us. I read this story very differently.

First, remember that Adam and Eve are not historical figures. This is myth about how humans became different from other creatures. As I read the story, what God spells out for Adam and Eve in the wake of

eating the fruit is not ‘punishment’ but ‘consequence.’ The key to it is remembering the name of the fruit. It was not ‘the fruit you’re not supposed to eat.’ It was “the Fruit of the Knowledge of God and Bad.” Eve, who in the story, is the driver of the action to eat the fruit, through the centuries has been blamed for the sin. Again, I don’t see it that way.

Eating the fruit ushers humans into a world that animals will never know. Intimacy, which comes so naturally, so free of complications for other creatures, will be a source of complexity and concern for humans. Human relationships become a powerful urge surrounded by rules of right and wrong.

Might it be that God, speaking to Adam and Eve in Genesis and sending them forth into the world, is not so much punishing Eve for gaining a knowledge of Good and Bad as alerting her to the anguish it will cause her? She will know that some things are wrong. She will see her kids doing them and will be powerless to stop them.

In a similar way, God’s words to Adam, “By the sweat of your brow you will earn bread to eat” can be seen as anticipating the difference between animals who know instinctively how to find food, and humans, who have to prepare themselves for careers and worry finding, then keeping a job.

Eve, in my understanding of the story, is not the villain whose giving into temptation brought misery into the world. That is a

distortion written by male commentators with Hellenistic bias, and perhaps a need to put women down. Eve is the heroine. If having a conscience, knowing the difference between Good and Bad, is what makes humans different from other creatures, Eve was the first one, bravely stepping across the line that separates humans from other creatures and inviting her husband to follow her.

Where did she get the courage to do this and where did she get the Knowledge of Good and Bad? She got them from God, just like you and me. AMEN