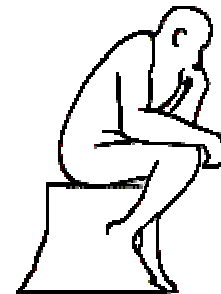


# BIOETHICS NOTES

a newsletter from the Bioethics Review & Advisory Committee



December 2007

**"Do we invent our moral absolutes in order to make society workable? Or are these enduring principles expressed to us by some transcendent or Godlike authority?"**  
E.O. Wilson

## Moral Compass

By Joel Berberich

**Is social evaluation a biological adaptation and is there an early developmental foundation for moral thought and action?**

One of our goals in distributing these Bioethics Notes is the discussion of newer thoughts regarding ethical issues. Thus, a recent article in Nature regarding the development of a moral compass by individuals is interesting. However, a brief background in order to frame that article follows.

Moral theories are either ethically subjective or ethically objective. Ethical subjectivism holds that moral claims must be understood in some sense as expressions of human beliefs, feelings or attitudes. The argument most used to support this is moral relativism: moral appraisals are essentially dependent upon the standards that define a particular moral code, the practices and norms accepted by a social group at a specific place and time. In turn, this is composed of three theses: (1) diversity thesis: moral beliefs vary from culture to culture and even in the same culture over time (2) relativity thesis: moral beliefs are true or valid only relative to some group, and (3) toleration thesis: judgments should not be passed or attempts made to change the moral beliefs of other cultures.

Ethical objectivism holds that there are objective standards of morality that are not simply the reflection of human feelings or cultural norms. This can be expressed as three theses: (1) divine command theory: moral judgments have their foundation in a God (2) moral realism: at least some

**MEET OUR COMMITTEE MEMBERS**  
**JOEL J. BERBERICH**

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statements are true regardless of feelings and beliefs, and (3) moral intuitionism: the moral quality of goodness is an inherent part of the world.

This last thesis holds that goodness is just as much a part of the world as color, number, size and weight. A leading exponent of this thesis was G.E. Moore, a British moral philosopher whose principal work, [\*Principia Ethica\*](#) was published in 1903. Moore has said: "Good is good and that is the end of the matter."

So much for this prelude to provide a background for investigation of development of one's moral compass. An article in the journal Nature (November 22, 2007; 450: 557-559, 2007) explored the development of moral qualities and found that this may occur much in earlier in humans than had been thought. J. Kiley Hamlin and colleagues at Yale University placed children on their parents' laps to view a climbing character made of wood with two large eyes glued onto it whose progress up the hill was either aided by a helper or was pushed down the hill by a hinderer. Infants were encouraged to choose between the two by reaching for either the helper or hinderer. Fourteen of sixteen 10-month old infants reached for the helper; all twelve 6-month olds reached for the helper. Among other controls, they conducted the study with the climber with eyes removed and undergoing no self-propelled motion and found no preference

for helper or hinderer in this circumstance where there were no social interactions.

The authors concluded that their “findings constitute evidence that preverbal infants assess individuals on the basis of their behavior toward others. This capacity may serve as the foundation for moral thought and action.”

So we might paraphrase G.E. Moore: “Good is good and that is the end of the matter—even infants know that!”

Respectfully Submitted,  
*Joel J. Berberich*

### **Additional Reading**

Neuroethics

[http://www.geisinger.org/professionals/services/bioethics/b\\_notes/july2004.pdf](http://www.geisinger.org/professionals/services/bioethics/b_notes/july2004.pdf)

The Biological Basis of Morality

<http://www.condition.org/eowilson.htm>

Response To Edward O. Wilson

<http://gnosis.cx/publish/mertz/eowilson.html>

The Triviality of the Debate Over 'Is-Ought' and the Definition of 'Moral'

Peter Singer

<http://www.utilitarian.net/singer/by/197301--.htm>

Moral Minds - How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong

By [Marc Hauser](#)