Morality is often regarded as one of the greatest achievements of the human mind. Knowing right from wrong and acting based upon moral principles sets us apart from other animals, and we take pride in our ability to be moral and believe morality to be the product of a mature mind. However, recent research shows that babies might have already figured out many of these complex problems.

In his book *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* Paul Bloom takes us on a quick journey through children’s developing morality and uses examples from research on the moral psychology of adults to support his claims. Thus, *Just Babies* is not only about babies, but about a new proposal for morality research that draws upon insights from diverse intellectual traditions.

Bloom argues that humans possess a basic moral sense, already present in the first year of life, that is based upon evolutionarily shaped, innate processes. He reviews studies in which babies can choose to touch one of two geometrically shaped agents with googly eyes — and they prefer to touch one who helps a struggling fellow up a hill rather than one who pushes that fellow down. This indicates that babies like helping and despise harming others, even if they are only a third party who observes how other people treat each other. Beyond their judgments of the actions of others, young children also display helpful tendencies in their own behavior. Bloom reviews the extensive work on toddlers as young as 18 months of age who display a tendency to comfort others who are in distress, and spontaneously help clumsy people by picking up dropped objects and holding doors open. Last but not least, preschool children seem to have a sense of fairness when faced with the task of divvying up desirable resources, with equality already serving as a guiding principle.

Yet, Bloom points out that although this basic moral sense shares some of the features we find in adults, it also has major limitations. Specifically, he develops the claim that our natural endowment is designed to act morally among family and friends, but has not prepared us to interact with individuals outside these circles in moral ways. He states that while we are by nature caring and just towards our ingroup, we are rather indifferent and perhaps even hostile towards strangers.

Bloom emphasizes that although our basic, parochially bound moral sentiments come naturally to us without much effort, applying these principles to strangers takes some mental effort. It requires that we employ perspective-taking in our interactions with others even though some may be remote and distant others whom we get to know only through stories, others’ reports, and modern media. Expanding our moral circle to include strangers thus depends on socialization and abilities that develop only in late childhood.

Bloom is generous in attributing a basic moral competence to babies. By contrast, he characterizes young children as relying mainly on adults when it comes to taking justice into their own hands. Specifically, although he concedes that children will have an urge to defend themselves when someone does them wrong, he describes children as mainly soliciting adult intervention when others break rules that do not directly affect them. However, new evidence suggests that children take a more involved and active role in establishing justice and policing others. Concretely, three-year-olds will spontaneously protest and intervene directly against norm violators of various sorts, such as those who don’t play by the rules, take away other people’s belongings, or destroy other people’s artwork [1–3]. Beyond these recent studies of an emerging vigilante justice, seminal work by Piaget showed that children will make up their own rules and negotiate with their peers in a manner not dissimilar from what one might encounter in a city council [4]. Thus, in Bloom’s picture, evolution has equipped the Lady Justice that resides in young children’s minds with a scale, but not necessarily a sword. It seems to me that she might carry both.

In the second half of the book, Bloom makes a major proposal for the direction of future research in moral psychology: namely how our moral sentiments are prepared for and shaped by our interactions first with kin and later with friends. In accordance with his dual-origins approach, he conjectures that our evolutionarily evolved morality is prepared for kin and friends, but not for strangers. This can be seen in young children’s ingroup biases and toddlers’ stranger anxiety. This is an important distinction. Even so, I find it also striking that human children depend more on interactions beyond the immediate family than do our closest evolutionary relatives. Specifically, anthropological research suggests that raising a human child is much more energetically costly and depends greatly on support from other people in the community [5]. Infants thus have to tolerate being handed around and interact with many unfamiliar people from early on. We might therefore expect infants to be open-minded and vigilant at the same time, creating their social circles in a more sophisticated manner than ducklings who follow either white feathers or men with white beards, whichever they see first. And it seems as if they do so, not in a naive fashion, but in a sophisticated way that balances risk and opportunity. Thus, with Bloom, I concur that evolution
might not have provided us with off-the-shelf solutions to amicable interactions with unfamiliar individuals. However, evolution has also equipped us with curiosity and the desire to connect with those who at first seem strange, complemented by cognitive and communicative abilities to figure out how we can get along.

Acknowledgments
I thank Alexandra Rosati and Anna Hofvander for helpful comments.

References