

Human newborns spontaneously attend to prosocial interactions

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Abstract

Homo sapiens maintain complex cooperative interactions with unrelated individuals by exploiting various cognitive mechanisms, for instance empathic reactions, the ability to tell cooperative agents from non-cooperative ones, a preference for prosocial individuals, and a desire for the punishment of antisocial individuals. The key role played by these features across moral systems suggests that core processes underpinning people's moral sense are evolved adaptations. Initial evidence consistent with this nativist view came from studies showing preferences for prosocial individuals in preverbal infants. Here we show that 5-day-old neonates can distinguish prosocial from antisocial interactions, looking longer at affiliative/helping behaviors than at avoidant/hindering behaviors. These visual preferences are specific to socially interactive stimuli, helping to rule out low-level perceptual explanations for the results. By revealing a preference for prosocial actions in newborns, these findings provide significant support for theories that posit evolutionary bases for at least some components of the human moral sense.