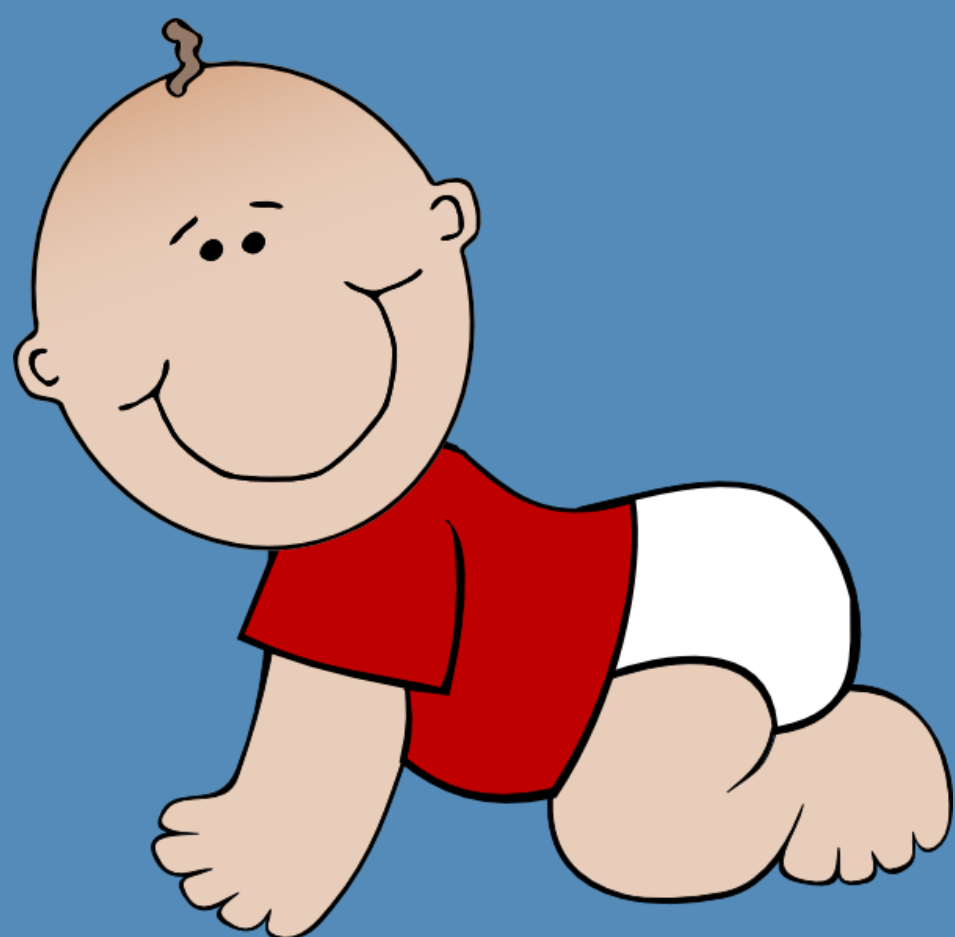




# MORAL PREFERENCES IN PRE-VERBAL INFANTS : NATURE V/S NURTURE

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## Abstract

Humans judge each other on the moral grounds and prefer those who are morally good, help others with good intentions and punish those doing bad deeds. This quality of moral judgement is innate in us and the criteria for the judgement becomes more and more complex as we grow up, and this intricacy is dependent on various factors such as the environment they grew up in, behaviour and values of people around them, etc. We, in this study, are trying to figure out whether this innate characteristic of moral judgement in infants is also affected by the environment they grew up in and if yes, then to which extent?

## Motivation

When we ask babies to tell us a story, they will generally tell tales of noble prince and witch, of superheroes and villains, or of someone who they know misbehaved and was punished. This tendency to judge someone or their actions, moral sense, is an integral part of what it means to be a human. But, where does this moral sense come from – is it innate or acquired?



Figure 1. Infant viewing the morality play

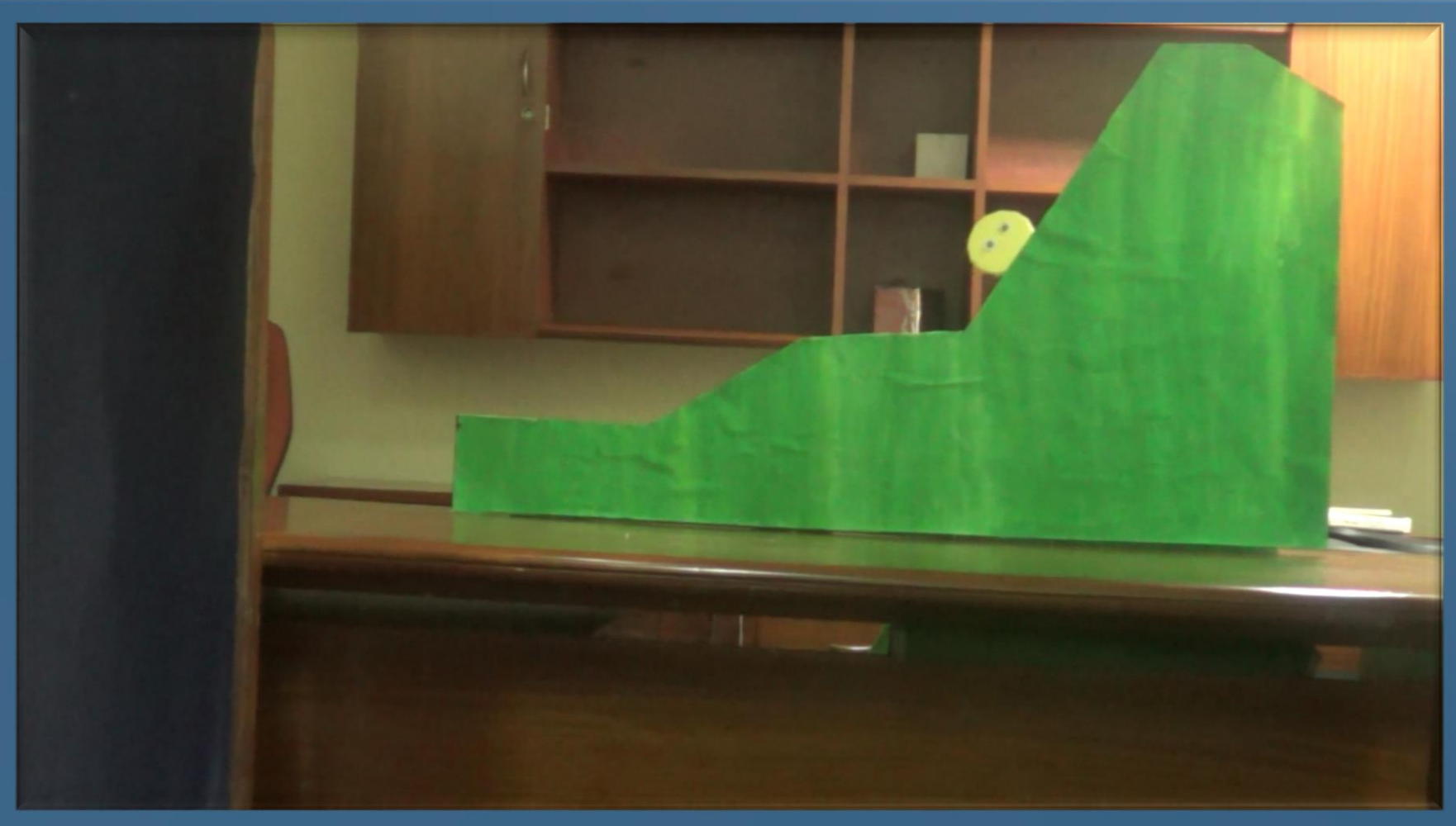


Figure 2. P repeatedly trying to climb up the hill.

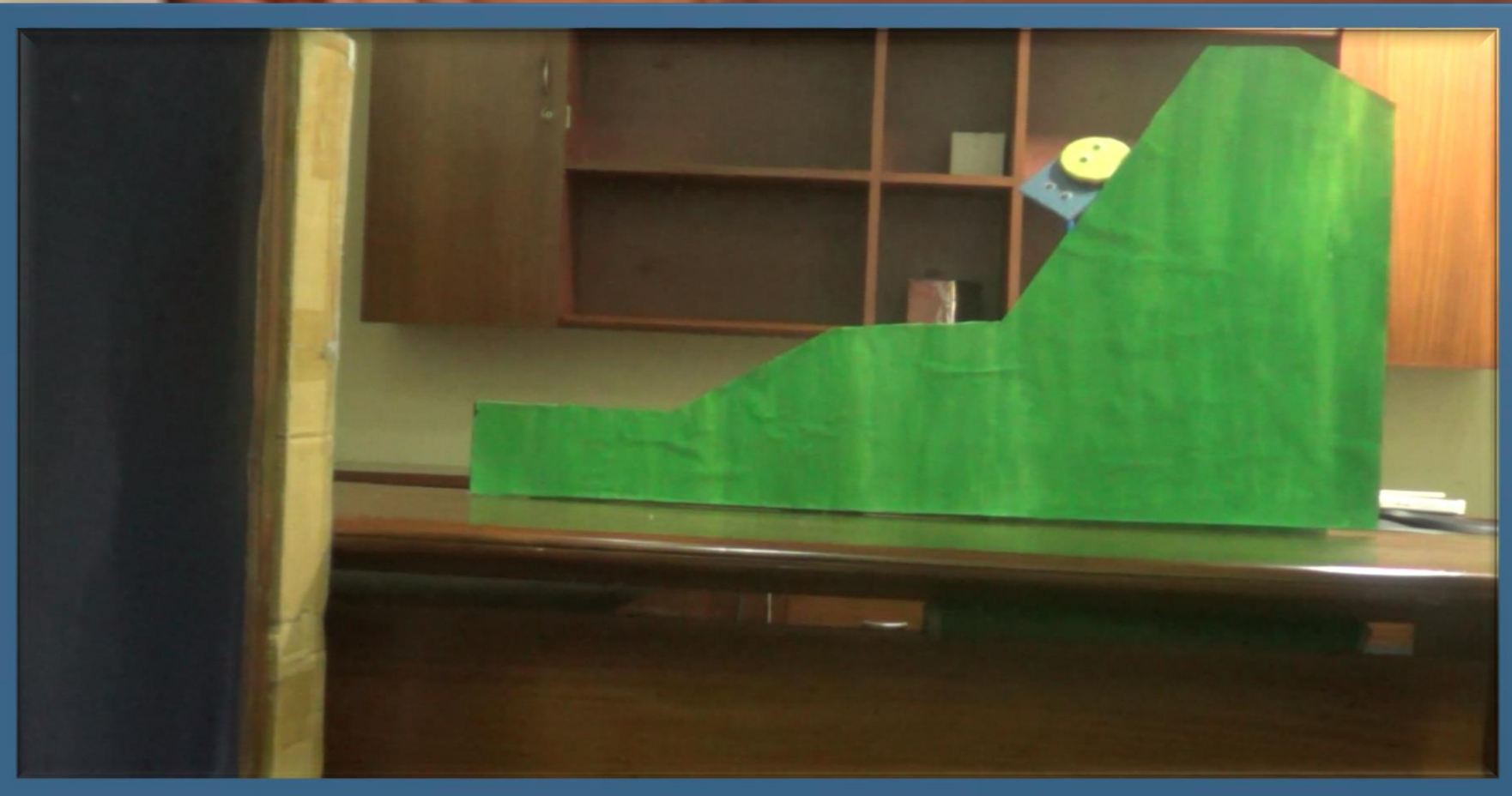


Figure 3. "Helper" pushes P up the hill.

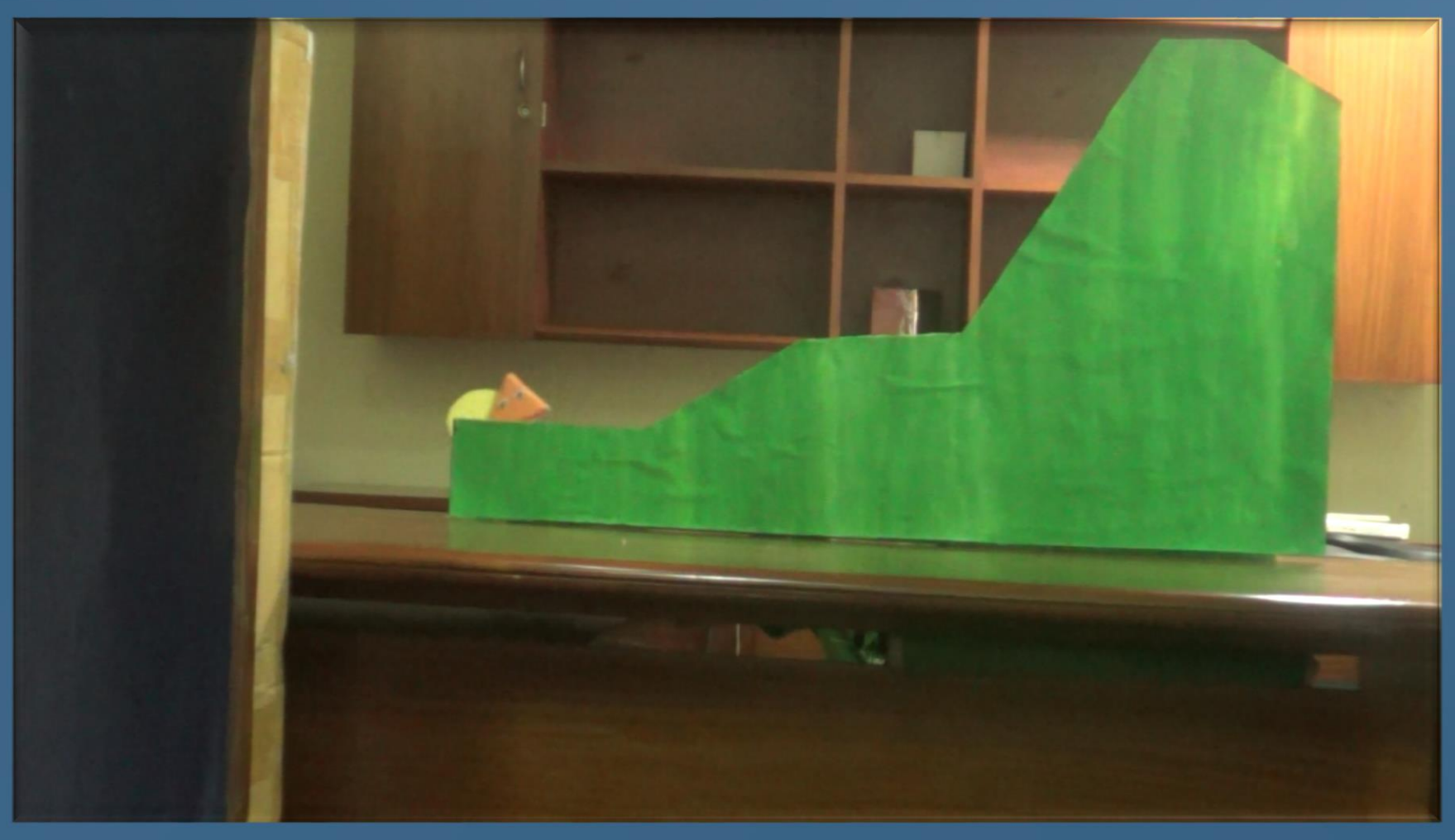


Figure 4. Hinderer pushes P down the hill

## Methods and Materials

**Experiment:** Infants viewed (Figure 1) live "Morality Plays," in which a "Protagonist" puppet (P) tried, but failed, to achieve a goal (Figure 2). A goal-failure scenario, including a thermocole, googly-eyed puppet trying to reach the top of a hill, was tested.

A "Helper" facilitated P's goal (bumped P up the hill) (Figure 3), and a "Hinderer" prevented P's goal (bumped P down the hill) (Figure 4). Infants' preference for the Helper versus the Hinderer was determined by reach behaviour.

**Materials:** To overrule the possibility of colour or shape preference in the infants we made multiple toys of different colours/shapes.

## Results

We started with 13 infants in the age group 5-12 months (6 white-collar working family ; 7 blue-collar working family).

Out of these 13 infants, 2 called off to visit the venue of the experiment. 1 could not complete the experiment due to crying and another 1 from the blue-collar class did not show any preference (probably due to shy nature).

At last we finished the experiment with 9 infants (4 white-collar working family ; 5 blue-collar working family). Out of these, 8 infants chose the helping guy and only one from the white-collar class chose the hinderer.

## Conclusions

To sum up, the study corroborates the claim that some aspects of moral sense are innate in humans. From an early age infants exhibit morally-relevant motivations. All infants who successfully completed the experiment chose Helper puppet except one who chose Hinderer. The infant who chose Hinderer puppet was the eldest among all the subjects.

Table 1. Experiment results

Age	Working class	Toys Used (Help/Hind)	Choice
8m22d	Blue-collar	BS/OT	BS
5m17d	Blue-collar	PS/OT	PS
7m6d	White-collar	GT/BS	GT
12m4d	White-collar	OT/PS	PS
11m8d	Blue-collar	BS/OT	BS
6m19d	Blue-collar	BS/OT	BS
9m28d	White-collar	BS/GT	BS
6m11d	White-collar	GT/PS	GT
9m1d	Blue-collar	OT/PS	OT

BS : Blue Square  
OT : Orange Triangle  
PS : Pink Square  
GT : Green Triangle

## Future Work

- This study can further be improved by increasing the number of subjects for the study.
- Some interesting future work we came up with involves giving the infant a prime of what's good and what's bad before showing him/her the morality play and asking to choose the toy.
- A further question that arises is whether babies possess more subtle moral capacities than preferring good and avoiding bad.

## References

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- Slater, A. et al. Newborn infants prefer attractive faces. Infant Behav. Dev. 21, 345-354 (1998).
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*"It was no wonder that people were so horrible when they started life as children."*

*- Kingsley Amis, One Fat Englishman*