

# The Origins of the Moral Sense and the Role of Caring in Early Infancy

---

**Primavera Fisogni**

Giornalista de La Provincia di Como

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of the paper is to integrate, according to a phenomenological approach, the debate about the moral sense of the babies. Recent psychological investigations state that humans born equipped with a sense of morality. I especially refer to the results achieved by Paul Bloom (2013). If we assume that inborn moral beliefs are already existing in babies' minds, we have to recognize babies as moral subjects and refuse the idea that infants are born "blank states". The assumption that babies know right from good since the age of about six months, as Bloom assumes, asked to be theoretically founded. We need to clarify: 1) how the infant is able to make an early experience of good and 2) how this good properly is known. If a child is (naturally) acquainted with good, I argue that is properly the act of caring that allows the infant to assume that valuable content.*

**Keywords:** Moral Sense - Care - Infancy - Good – Phenomenology

## ***Le origini del senso morale e il ruolo della cura nella prima infanzia***

*L'articolo esplora la genesi del senso morale nella prima infanzia, in particolare da 0 a 2 anni, con un approccio fenomenologico. Muovendo dalle ricerche di Paul Bloom (2013), psicologo a Yale, per il quale i bambini hanno una certa conoscenza del bene e del male, a partire dai primi mesi di vita, si vuole fare luce su due presupposti fondanti di quelle intuizioni: 1) come il bambino fa esperienza precocissima del bene; e 2) in che modo il bene è conosciuto. Solo attraverso questa giustificazione è possibile superare lo scoglio dell'innatismo, che rappresenta il versante più problematico delle ricerche condotte da Bloom, pure sostenute da una valida serie di evidenze sperimentali. Se, come si intende provare, l'esperienza del positivo promana dall'originaria implicazione con il mondo della vita (Husserl, Tommaso d'Aquino), è la cura parentale/tutoriale – come si argomenta – a consentire, effettivamente, la cognizione del bene in termini assiologici.*

**Parole chiave:** Senso morale - Cura - Infanzia - Bene – Fenomenologia

### Babies: just (pre) moral subject

A two years old child seems to express a certain moral sense, because he judges, punishes and rewards. He possesses a rough cognition of what is right or wrong, although emotional and cognitive competences cannot be comparable to the ones of an adult. Professor Paul Bloom, a developmental psychologist at Yale University has deeply explored the uprising of morality in children. In his essay “Just babies: the origins of good and evil” the scholar argues that «contemporary developmental research tells us something striking about our moral lives» (Bloom, 2013, p. 4). If we assume that moral sense is basically expressed by the capacity to make a distinction between «kind and cruel actions» and that feelings like empathy and compassion are part of the ethical conduct of human beings, we can conclude that since the early stages of life a person has a moral sense. This is Bloom’s argumentation. Experiments with participants of one year old proved that babies are able to react to naughty behaviors. With a cautious approach professor Bloom suggests what follows:

some aspects of morality come naturally to us – and others do not. We have a moral sense that enables us to judge others and that guides our compassion and condemnation (...) But we possess ugly instincts as well, and these can metastasize into evil (p.8).

Interviewed by Garret Cook (2013) professor Bloom described the two pillars he has discussed in “Just Babies”: he firstly assumes that «there are hard-wired moral universals» and secondarily that moral agency is not driven by passions but by reason. He finally concludes that «babies are moral animals. But we are more than just babies». We can agree or not with Bloom, however, we cannot help noticing how relevant his main essay is for the philosophical debate concerning the rising of moral sense in a human being. Since Locke’s critics (“An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, 1690) scholars have taken the distance from innate ideas, for being a dangerous anthropological tool. However, if we assume the possibility of a very early implication with the good, Bloom’s insights about certain moral foundations not acquired through learning could be fully assumed. My paper intends to focus the baby’s implication with the world-of-life (the *Lebenswelt* of phenomenology) that provides the experience of the pre-moral good. This insight, arranged from the phenomenological observation let me able to move further the idea of an *a priori* belief and to integrate, Bloom’s empirical data. I move from the evidence that babies are unable to survive on their own without the parental/tutorial care and I conclude as follows: the act of caring a baby offers the infant some of the essential tools of morality (to choose, to taste, to make distinction, to assess, to consent). The discussion will allow me to conclude that a child has a proper cognition of good. For it he properly learns to be moral when he is able to use some fundamental abilities. This is a crucial passage for the baby’s Self-development dates the weaning phase, from 6/8 months.

### Acquainted with good? A metaphysical apprenticeship

Phenomenological evidences of a native moral sense – the discovering of the other as a valuable term of relation (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 39) and the world-of-life as a source of value (Guardini, 2002, p.

64) - seem to foreshadow a realistic metaphysical apprenticeship that participates in structuring the fundamental functions of human agency. The early infancy's intense implication with the world-of-life sheds light to the pre-moral experience of positive. That's why a one year old baby can reward a "good" puppet and punish a "naughty" one (Bloom, 2013). What I'm going to examine is a *sui generis* goodness, spontaneous, relational, communicative and in no way comparable to innocence. I'll call it the infancy's *candour* (Fisogni, 2010; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c). I precisely refer to a double anthropological movement that consists of 1) the child's relational/affective openness to the other entities and 2) the baby's capacity to grasp at least something of the otherness, through a sensitive-cognitive approach that presides the inclination of the will. The phenomenological intuitions that I'm going to discuss are the following ones:

- An early experience of good takes a relevant part in the structuring the moral sense;
- caring plays a central role in this process.

On these premises, in the conclusions I'll defend the idea that:

- the consciousness of good-as-positive is the native grade of the human awareness.

For what concerns the method of the argumentation, I'll sketch some phenomenological aspects of the experience of good from 0-2 years; then I'll explore how parental caring participates in structuring the ethical conduct. I suggest that the second aspect of the problem cannot be afforded without focusing on the very cognition of the good.

### **A native experience of good. The openness to life**

Since a human being comes to life a *tsunami* of reality occurs. An immediate relation to other subjects and objects is given from the very first breath: this interaction allows the baby to build cognitive, emotional, interpersonal functions. On a relational ground this native experience of reality presents a predominant affective component: it entails the discovering of the *positive* side of the world of life, its being "something given", a *positivum*, is experimented by the infant as a source of meaning. From this native stage the baby gives rise to a double, interactive movement: he moves toward the objects, making the experience of being touched, involved or hurt by other entities. What is provided by the world of life, the *given* or *positum* in Latin, the language of classical metaphysics, stimulates the newborn into acting and, at the same time, it is revealed by the child's communication (smiling, crying).

Despite the trauma of being born (Leboyer, 2002; Wertz, 1981; Kitzinger, 2006), the baby tends to a condition of balance that attests something *positive*: here and now something exists rather than nothing. This idea is related to the one of birth, a tension that connects human beings as a sort of relational net of the world of life. Thomas Aquinas called it *inclinatio*. Centuries later Edmund Husserl has taken in consideration the native tension of the things to the consciousness when he theorized the concept of intentionality (Husserl, 2000).

## The role of intentionality

Intentionality - a key word of Husserl's philosophy - is basically the presence of the object to the consciousness: all the mental life and the mental states, the German thinker argued, are strictly related to a content. In other words, I don't exclusively think: I think *of* someone or *about* something. It comes that it is cannot be any object – for us – that is not also an object of our consciousness, too. This peculiar being of the object to one's consciousness is properly speaking, intentionality. Husserl's thought highlights on the implication between the two components of life experience. The landmark of his thought is a connection between cognition (I think) and reality (the consciousness). On the one side, the German philosopher outlines that it emerges out the absolute givenness of the utterances "I make the experience", "I think" and so on. On the other side intentionality entails the absolute givenness of what is experienced, thought and so on. Pure consciousness, that in Husserl's theoretical perspective is basically pure time (Husserl, 1981) guarantees that the ego cogito is absolutely given (*absolut gegeben*). According to his idea of intentionality the German thinker could criticize the Cartesian doubt, inferring that objects are constituted by consciousness and they couldn't exist without it, moving from the premise that nothing could be ever conceived without being object of consciousness. Coming back to the purpose of the present investigation, the presumed inborn sense of the good (Bloom, 2013) can be also read through the lens of intentionality. Precisely, the human subject stores, since he comes to life, a number of details of which he is not conscious: they are part of *Hintergrund*, a continuum of data «never chaotic» (Bianchi, 2003, p. 161, the translation is mine). Italian metaphysician Virgilio Melchiorre assumes that it would be more correct to talk about "pre-conscious" because the retentional unity that belongs to consciousness: a sort of original tension between objects and consciousness (Melchiorre, 1985).

At this point the question to be risen is whether the "positive" of reality – its givenness in Husserl's perspective, experimented since the first breath – and the moral experience of positivity are linked. In other term: is pre-moral positivity related to the (experience of) good? Coming back to the early infancy, I simply outline that it is interesting to note how the language is able to communicate the emptiness provided by the breast feeding: the Latin verb *felare*, which means the act of breast feeding, belongs to the Indo European root *dhe-* that we meet also in the Latin *fe-*, a basic component of the word *felicitas*, happiness (Barbieri, 1979; Fisogni, 2013a). Even though the linguistic reference cannot be a philosophical argument to prove the link between the earlier experience of nurturing and the one of good, it intuitively connects two anthropological domains. What the Latin verb underlines is the high grade of happiness and well-being that a newborn experiments when the nutritional fullness has been achieved. When the baby has got his milk, cradled in the parent's arms, he seems not to expect anything else from life, at least until the next suck.

A further step about this main topic – the interrelation between *Lebenswelt* and consciousness - is provided by Eugene Gendlin's investigations about felt sense. Moving from Husserl's concept of intentionality the Us philosopher and psychologists (Gendlin, 1997) assumes that

meaning is created by an act or an intention (all acts are intentional in Husserl's explicit definition of the term).

The act in itself is a principle of epistemology. (p. 277)

His theory entails a relevant theoretical consequence for the present investigation about the early experience of good, I argue. We can say, in fact, that the baby's cognition of good depends upon the felt meaning that provides a direct reference to the things in itself, according to the intentionality process.

### Communication of positive in the early childhood

What exactly happens when a baby comes to life? Since the primary anthropological attitudes (the pursuit of the maternal breast) to more complex behaviors, the newborn plays an active and a creative role in the world. He seems to grasp life with all his person, although hands become prehensile only later.

Psychological studies, nevertheless, have stated the existence of a number of early intentional attitudes (Lagercrantz, 2010) besides the reflex movement of breathing and sucking. In a certain sense, the newborn assumes reality actively (Gopnik, 2010) according to a «tactile contact with the situation» that depends upon a skin «thin, fine, almost without a protective layer» (Wertz, 1981, p. 209). In short: when a child looks at his mother, since the first sucking, he orients his glance to the mum's face, probably because of her voice and the mother's warm. He primarily turns to her, not to other ones, seeking for a safe term, after having been left the tender closeness of the womb.

Since this peculiar experience, both in a physical and relational way, the newborn opens himself to an empathic joining or being with the other. This native tension to the mother (or to her tutorial substitute) represents a privileged space of communication through the reflexive revelation of the Self in the Other that an encounter always entails (Fisogni, 2006).

We could also say that the relational rush turns the human subject to the world of life. Relation to the mother, in particular, may be interpreted as a privileged space of communication because it properly represents the space *par excellence* of the nutritional happiness, at its earlier grade. Italian pediatrician Marcello Bernardi who deeply investigated this topic, assumes that the baby «tends to embody *the good object*», in this case the mum-milk and then «absorbs his mother through the whole body» (Bernardi, 2007, p. 124, the translation is mine). It may be seen, on the phenomenological ground, as the fruitful achievement of treating the newborn as a lover, according to Leboyer's lesson (Leboyer, 2002) of love and touch as main ingredients with which to address to the child's own world and language. We would no longer speak of this topic without quoting Melanie's Klein masterful investigation about the schizoid character type in the early infancy. As a part of the separation process, the good object is separated from the bad object within a polar opposition (Klein, 2002). She wrote:

I have often expressed my view that object-relation exists from the very beginning of life, the first object being the mother's breast which to the child becomes split into good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast, this splitting results into a severance of love and hate. (p. 293)

At this point of the discussion, a question arises.

How can we talk of a “positive” attitude of the newborn to life if crisis affects the extra-uterine life of the newborn? (Wertz, 1981).

As I’ve noticed in the previous paragraph, the notion of positive is basically addressed to the experience of being acquainted with the world of life. This intentional openness to life let a baby to perceive, for instance, the value of the “transitional objects” (Winnicott, 1971) within early development. A powerful agent of development, since they integrate what the newborns «lacks in the way of relations» (Wertz, 2007), transitional objects could ever take a role in the newly born’s existence without an even rough cognition of positive. An operation that moves through the act of sensing, as I’m going to argue.

### The role of sensing in the early experience of good as positive

For a better understanding of how a baby deals with a set of values (good, happiness) learned by the sensitive domain (the mum’s breast, the milk, the objects all around him) we need a theoretical foundation of this crucial step. What we are precisely asked is how the will – the barycentre of the human conduct – works. The question is whether the objects that we experiment through sensations and cognition (Husserl, Gendlin) are also involved with the process of deliberation.

In my doctoral dissertation (Fisogni, 2009) I’ve argued that the classical and realistic metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas sheds lights on this process. I’ll briefly sketch it in order to integrate the discussion. I would like to explore now the relation between the newborn and the *positive* of being-in-the-world, through the lens of the Aquinas’ metaphysics of sensing, which still offers a valuable point of view for realistic approach to the world of life.

In the Doctor Angelicus’s doctrine – I especially refer to the *Quaestio* 15 of the *Ia-IIae Summa Theologiae* – the role of sensing represents a basic component of the will. The *act of sensing* cannot be compared to a mere perception or a sensitive feeling: it primarily allows to make an idea of the object itself or of the person herself and, secondarily, it is a crucial component of the action’s. Sensing, for being an act, activates ethical conduct through these passages, according to the *Quaestio* 15: 1) it makes a direct involvement with the *res*; 2) it provides a taste of the *res*; 3) both the intellectual knowledge and the appetitive tension represents the very heart of moral judgement.

Therefore sensing entails a peculiar experience of good, more sensitive than intellectual: it allows the human being to be acquainted with something given (*positum*), a pre-moral good that orients to something tasted as valuable, moving the will to it. Coming back to our issue – the primacy of good in the moral life of the babies – I assume that the world provides to the newborn a native ontological positivity. The baby, in a sensitive way through a reflexive movement, assumes the idea of otherness: in other words it exists something that is not reducible to himself. Babies have already available the basic moral-related skill that made them able to make those basic moral operations that professor Bloom describes in his essay.

This is, properly speaking, the good of being something, the experience of positive that reinforces identity and orients human agency towards the Self-respect and the Other-respect. Researches focused on the decline of moral sense in children (Narvaez, 2010a; 2010b) and children’s

well-being (Unicef, 2007) outlines the negative effects of a not adequate affective parenting in the early infancy. A little responsive care, I argue, deprives child of sensing with relevant consequences on empathy (Anisman et al., 1998).

### Sensing, emotions, intention and the pre-moral experience of good

At this point of the discussion we need to ask whether sensing could ever be distinguished by the realm of emotional life. This is, in fact, a crucial matter, in order to focus the specificity of sensing, for at least a couple of reasons: emotions and sensing, primarily, involve a relation to the ethical conduct and thus they take a relevant part in a person's own flourishing. However they are not the same phenomenon, nor they can be said two faces of the same coin. To sketch a plausible answer I refer to Martha Nussbaum's theory of emotions, as the Us thinker has theorized in her masterpiece *Upheavals of Thought* (Nussbaum, 2001). For what concerns the moral domain, emotions are essential because of their being «acknowledgements of our goals and their status», stresses Nussbaum. That's why love, hate, grief – just to quote some of them – «are closely connected with action» (p. 135). Emotions, on the other side, refer to an object that may be important for our well-being, as well as for our discomfort. Sensing, nevertheless, cannot be simply reduced to what results from the bodily experience – to a «résumé de notre expérience corporelle» (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p.115) – nor a passive attitude to the world-of-life.

One of the salient ideas about emotions in Nussbaum's *Upheavals of Thought*, is the one of «the salience of external objects as elements in one's own scheme of goods». They can originate – Nussbaum states – beliefs/judgments and desires. The essential trait of emotions belongs to their «intimate connection with motivation that other beliefs do not».

Sensing occurs in intention, a crucial component of the will.

To briefly give an account of it, intention is not just the act of «bringing about some state of affairs», not a simple volition, but that kind of knowledge that allows to reach a goal. In her essay *Intention* Anscombe writes (Proposition 8) that an intention belongs to class of «non-observational knowledge», the «class of movements known without observation». If we reflect: when we say «I open the windows» I make a number of operations in order to perform that act. My act is intentional because I know all the passages that allow me to open that window.

Intention, I assume, moving from Anscombe's theory and the recent interpretation of the two Spanish scholars Torralba and Llano (2008; 2010), needs the knowledge of the means to achieve the goal (to open a window). Sensing, in its grasping reality, for allowing will to consent, has a main role in defining the means. That's the argument on which I state that this act builds up intention.

### Learning the moral judgment by tasting

At the light of the discussion made above I can hold that sensing, in the very early childhood, provides the experience of values, a building block of moral agency. Furthermore, sensing takes a part – a crucial part – in the uprising of moral judgment. How does it happen? At the beginning, it is basically

a question of taste. The baby, in fact, shows a different behavior when he is held in his mom's arms or deals with who does not belong to the parental group. He has *good taste*, because appreciates his mother's smell, her peculiar way of pampering him. The baby reveals a knowing naiveté that engenders the capacity to make evaluations and distinctions among events, to prefer a situation to another, to feel better when he deals with those who take care of him and so forth. He has a peculiar taste for what is good for him. It is not the revelation of an inner sense for what is good or bad.

More properly all the senses work in the taste-judgment that allows the infant, little by little, to develop more and more complex emotions. According to Alisdair MacIntyre newborn babies possess a sort of instinctual rush to the good as a sort of answer to the primary needs (MacIntyre, 2006). As the phenomenological observation reveals, according to the principle of our fidelity to the phenomena (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p.8) a baby experiments the *taste* of the reality before being conscious of the meaning of it. The problem is: how does the taste of the good-as-positive enter in the human agency? How is possible to move from the delight of a baby sucking her mother's breast to a decisional act?

Will is an act that can be graphically resumed as a linear tension towards an object (the end). Moving in the direction of the things requires the involvement of the whole person. It primarily asks for a very peculiar ingredient: the appetite, a word in which are rooted both a tension (*ad-petere*: to get to) and the desire (of food). In the dynamic flow of the human act, we are at the moment in which is experimented a further, deeper relation to the thing in itself, that consists of a sort of conjunction with it (*coniunctio*, in the language of Thomas Aquinas).

Willing something, getting to it, grasping it are phases of an act (the will) in which the human being makes an inner experience of the object intended, inclining to the world of life not for a sort of instinct but because of a deliberation. This primarily experience of good as positive is continually made by the person. However, it seems to be particularly meaningful for exploring the origin of moral development in relation to space. In his essay *Welt und Person* Italian-German phenomenologist and theologian Romano Guardini reflects on the experience of value made by a human subject, moving from his/her being in the world. (Fisogni, 2013a)

### **Caring a child. The role of parental/tutorial caring**

A question arises at this point of the paper: *how is possible for an infant, to move from the earlier experience of good-as-positivity to a structured moral behavior?* This is also the crucial problem that lies beneath professor Bloom's essay without being satisfactorily solved by the empirical evidences.

The first consideration is that a person – in the early stage of the infancy –  
is basically unable to understand theoretically the moral rules.

On the other side the intuition of positive is certainly not enough to explain the making of ethical conduct, although it grounds *de facto* some cognitive abilities and deliberation. The idea I'm going to discuss, in the following pages, is that caring takes a relevant part in making a child aware of the experience of good. I'll do it in three steps: 1) by clarifying the essential traits of caring a baby; 2) by focusing on the difference between the inclination to the good and the proper moral act; 3) by



exploring how the practices of care transmit and reinforce, in the baby, the apprenticeship of the moral rules.

When a mother holds a baby, she does not only takes care of the newborn; she communicates her decision to take care of him, her attention to the baby's needs, her emotions (Kochanska, 2002). In other terms, all the person – an active center of emotions, will, understanding (Scheler, 1921) – is deeply involved with the act of supporting a baby. There are psychological evidences of the importance of the maternal caring in the early infancy. A baby deprived of her mother's/parents' loving caresses and, in general, those who don't get the emotional nurturing in early childhood, are expected to grow with cognitive-relational deficiencies (Narvaez, 2010a; 2010b; Cirulli et al., 2002). At this stage of the development the child becomes aware, through the adult's imitation, of the goals that move (intentional) actions and receives the "sense" of language from his environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 34)

Well known case-studies are the ones of wild children who were unable to use the verbal communication to express themselves and the ones of the Sarajevo orphans whose cognitive deficits have been explained as a main consequence of the lack of caring during the Bosnian conflict. Far from being of a great interest in building the moral sense of the child: on one side, this aspect reveals how selective is the baby in making a sharp distinction between what is good for his own flourishing; on the other side, the mother understand to deal with another Self, already capable to communicate with her.

This also brings to light the existence of the affective knowledge of the infant, who is constantly involved with the world of life. And because is primarily implicated with the mother, it comes that the quality of the maternal care is a primary source for Self-identity (Schoe, 1994). The affective experience of good facilitates the warmth of the parental care that takes a part in the anthropological process. There is a link between the experience of good and the one of caring. In a very rough terms, in fact, to take care of someone basically means to let the other person in the condition to experiment the proper well-being.

What makes a sharp distinction between *caring* and *service* is, furthermore, the capacity of the caregivers to feel the other as a subject; who gives a service, on the contrary, is not strictly asked to perceive whether the other feels good or not. Moving from this essential trait of caring in general, we can get to another aspect of it: to take care of something means also to care for the *relation* in which the two subjects are involved (Hrady, 2009). For it caring radically differs from keeping. A guardian is expected to custody more properly what has been given to him, not to make it flourishing. A care-taker has the task to preserve and protect something (a place, a property) without being asked to have any personal involvement with what he has been protecting for a long or a short time. Differently from it, the act of caring always requires to move from one's own point of view to the other's, in order to feel whether the subject of care feels good or comfortable. For it caring never means a custody; it is properly a relation.

That's why caring is a so complex anthropological issue, at the border of ethics, that cannot be afforded without taking in consideration the responsibility towards the other term of relation. Differently from the service, where the dealer is legally responsible of the quality of the assistance given, the care-giver entails a larger role. As Italian philosopher Luigina Mortari assumes, the act of

caring involves the charge of promoting those experiential environments that can facilitate the other to assume the responsibility of pursuing his/her proper well-being (Mortari, 2006).

This said, it is rather evident how many educational implications are linked with caring, that in no way can be reduced to a service, nor to a merely an assistance to rational-depending-animals (McIntyre, 2006). A newborn is totally dependent on his mother's care. However, it is also true that the act of caring a child consists of increasing his autonomy, making the child aware of the fact that those acts are good for him. Dependence and autonomy, in other words, are strictly related issues in the caring activity. Given this anthropological evidence, I'll come back to the problem of my paper, that can be reduced in the following answer: *how is possible that an early experience of good gives rise to a moral behavior?* What I'm going to defend is that moral knowledge begins since a baby comes to light and it cannot be reduced to a set of rules taught by parents. To learn a rule, in fact, means to be able at least to understand the statement of the command. A competence that belongs to a two years old baby: at that age, in fact, the child has structured all those cognitive skills that let him able to assimilate and to perform the rules.

### **Caring and the tools of moral sense**

The age between 0-2 years old seems not to give information about how an infant builds up the moral sense. What limits the investigation is properly an idea of consciousness that primarily deals with cognitive skills and does not take in consideration the affective awareness that is mainly part of the earlier steps of the human development. My proposal, differently from professor Bloom's one does not lie on a set of moral universals. I intend to sketch some basic attitudes learned by the being-in-the-world and refined in the tutorial relation that represents the core of morality.

The following paragraphs are aimed at showing how the act of caring a child properly structures the moral cognition. I'll take in consideration: 1) the rising of the acquaintance with good; 2) the experience of being chosen that a newborn experiments as a privileged object of love for his mother or for who, in the parental domain, takes lovely care of him; 3) the apprenticeship of deliberation, in weaning, when the parental care opens up possibilities for the baby to grow his Self-cognition in the world of life. These three aspects of the infant's moral sense participate in structuring his consciousness. The aim of the following paragraphs is to discuss the possibility of an earlier, conscious access of the baby since he comes to life moving from the process by which a child can found his moral sense through the affective relation with the world of life, from the experience of good-as-positive to the predominant attachment relation with the mother and, finally, to the detachment from her since the weaning step.

### **From the experience of good to the cognition of good**

To be morally assumed, a good needs to be known. It cannot be simply a universal idea. It is true that human beings always pursue what is good for them; however one thing is the possibility to make the experience of something good and another is the decision to incline ourselves to it. Only in the second case, a moral cognition is properly given. I've already sketched the possibility, for a newborn, to be acquainted with the good by the act of sensing. The aim, now, is to focus on the capacity of baby to

orient his life to good. In other words, time has come to investigate the role of maternal/parental care in structuring the ethical conduct. For it, I'll show that – on a metaphysical ground – the moral sense originates only through this peculiar relation.

The first step of the discussion moves from a main question: *how is possible that a newborn could understand a moral discourse?* This is the typical problem posed by the common sense, in front of the cognitive limits of a baby. I suggest to carefully consider the structure of the human act, in order to answer the question posed before. The will, at the very heart of the human act, is moved by the so called intention: basically a movement toward something, from the Latin statement *in-tendere ad aliquid*. In the previous paragraphs, we saw that a baby, since his first breath, is in relation with the world of life; he makes a certain experience of the object in itself, by grasping and sensing what is all around him, from his mother's breast to the other entities. For it, the baby inclines to the outer world. In the Aquinas' language, I would say that a newborn makes *quasi experientiam quandam sumens de re cui inhaeret* (1, resp.). This inclination, then, is at the origin of the so called act of consent. The baby consents to what is good for him, to the mother first of all, to the food, to the careful practices that provide him the well-being. All these aspects of will have been noticed before. They are essential for the dynamic flow of the will, nevertheless they are not enough to explain it. A further step, in fact, is required: it is the one in which the will chooses among different consents.

For example: a 8 months old baby likes to eat chocolate, because it is tasty, sweet, delicious; he dislikes green leaves vegetables, less attractive. The consent of the baby will be probably directed to chocolate, however his body needs also some vegetables. He has to learn this "rule" for his well-being. In the Aquinas' doctrine of the human act, that deals with Aristotle's metaphysics, the act of election – the choice – is definitively the moment in which will is fully given. The exercise of orienting the deliberation to what is good for the child refers, properly speaking, to the moral domain and is at the origin of the ethical conduct.

If the baby is the main actor in inclining to the world of life, experimenting that something (*positivum/positum/positive*) exists, to choose what is good for him to grow up and to flourish has to be learned: this is the main task of the parents of a baby at the early stage of his development. It is rather evident how relevant is the role of caring in this peculiar education. Nevertheless, rules cannot be taught until the baby has the linguistic skills that allow him to have a right comprehension of the parents' claim. It remains to explore how caring gives a child the possibility to improve his *appetitivus intellectus, vel appetitus intellectivus* of which basically consists «the complete act with which will determines herself» (Gilson, 2011, p. 425, the translation is mine). At this point of the paper, we have enough elements to move on.

A 6-8 months old child can realize the different shades of his mother's voice, so that he will be able to understand what she approves and what not. Mom will join her denials – «don't eat this chocolate, eat the vegetables» – with some positive statements («you'll become stronger and smarter») and rewards («I'll tell a story, after lunch, if you eat the beans»). Differently from the service, caring a child – we saw before – is a relational act, aimed at making the other person in the condition to experiment well-being and autonomy. Many competences are required. However, all of those are transcended by the careful openness to the child, an affective relation in which the idea of good is central for both the mother and the baby. This is particularly true before the age of weaning, when the newborn's linguistic skills are limited.

### **Caring a child and the moral development - To be chosen in order to choose**

I've already quoted the cases of children grown up without a stable, affective parental relation, affected by cognitive, emotional, relational deficiencies. Why is caring, a *loving caring* so crucial for the human flourishing? It allows the baby to reinforce Self-identity, as recent psychological investigation has underlined (Narvaez, 2010a; 2010b). This is particular true for what concerns the moral development: in fact, as we saw before, the choice among different goods has to be oriented by someone. Moral disorientation, on the contrary, seems peculiar of those contexts in which a child is left alone, at the social borders. To understand why parental care structures the ethical conduct we have to come back to the earlier stage of childhood, when the relation parents/newborn is primarily affective. It is, in fact, at that time that a human being begins to make the experience of love; it is at that very early phase of life that a person realizes what a *choice* is. Without this basic set of moral competence a human subject is unable to act morally because – as we noticed before – a good has to be chosen among others for orienting one's conduct. Love provides the cognition, affective and intellectual at the same time, to be the subject of an election. A criticism can be moved against this idea: how is possible that love could teach how to make a choice?

What happens in the first stage of life, between a mother and her child, seems to avail a metaphysical issue of the Aquinas. It is well known that the Doctor Angelicus, in his attempts to ground the human knowledge, introduced the topic of the so called *species*. A sort of medium between the subject who knows and the object of knowledge, the species presents always something of the objects, that – however – can be assumed by the subject. If we come back to the concept of choice in the newborn, it is rather evident that it cannot be given through a theoretical discourse, but only in a sensitive-affective way. The mother's love, expressed through the acts of caring (caressing, pampering, kissing), in this perspective, could be equate to the *species impressa* of the experience of choice. Held on by the mom, the baby will perceive comfort (affective knowledge) and that someone – the mother – is caring for him, not for another person (intellectual understanding).

### **Learning how to choose. Objectivation-detachment and the structuring of self-deliberation**

After having sketched the main traits of the *candour* – as an original experience of good, peculiar of the early infancy – we ought deal with the crisis of the positive in the world of the baby. It bursts on the scene of life with weaning, a crucial phase for moral development. Philosophically speaking the human subject moves from the experience of *good* as something *given* to a good *deliberately willed* to which one orients with the more appropriate means.

In the fast world of the infant discoveries, weaning marks a deep cognitive-emotional turn between the age of 6-8 months. At this phase the child experiment the first crisis of his life (Kitzinger, 2006), linked to the experience of objectivity. Since the relation baby-mother is exclusive and mom is the baby's sole source of food, stimulation, communication the infant is totally involved with the world of life. The mother *is* properly the world, the horizon of disclosure of the baby. The more crucial moment in which the newborn takes the distance from reality pops up at that time of his life. Weaning does not only allow the child to taste new foods, with a wide variety of tastes: it strengthens

his self-identity. A further step in the development is made possible by exploring the otherness of what is experienced. If the baby seems to live the fullness of all his senses when he sucks from his mother's breast or from the infant feeding bottle, weaning throws light on the world as it has never happened before. A more complex horizon compared with the one inhabited with the mother, marked by a continuous interaction with the objects. When the infant looks at whatever happens around him, when he plays or takes his meal, he realizes that something is *given* to him because he can use it or deal with it.

At the age of 6-8 months the baby is aware of it. That's why we can conclude that – in the moral development – the age of weaning corresponds to the time of the making of the Self. On the contrary, in the earlier infancy, characterized by the sucking of milk the perception that something is given seems more linked to necessity, it seems less free in other terms. Without *that* food the baby would die. It exists, then, at least at the beginning a relation of necessity in the child's nutrition that does not exist anymore in weaning, when the baby's taste becomes finest and he is able to make distinctions. All these new attitudes – especially shown when the infant gets his meal - reflect also on the ability to take decisions and to judge. Now the infant can choose to eat a piece of bread and to refuse some cheese; he looks all around him; grasps what he likes, observes it, throws it to the ground and so on. All these experiences are not something different from nutrition, however, they represent a metaphysical intuition. From a philosophical point of view all these activity made by the infant are ingredients of the objectification, the experience of direct relating to the world of life. It is a crucial time for the sculpture of the Self: only taking the distance from whatever is not "I" a human subject realize of being an "I". The law of contradiction – "X cannot be not-X" – that grounds the western classical logic is grounded on the experience of identity - A is A.

The infant is more able than before in dealing with the world. Here is the essence of *given* and of the *gift*. Precisely the infant lives a situation in which he is completely far from necessity. A gift can be accepted or refused, can provide emotion, joy or dislike. Of course, feeding is a necessity for living and flourishing. However, every time he does it, a child can find his own way to deal with the food: he experiments, with the use of the world, the limits of his autonomy. Weaning makes the child experimenting the dark side of being in the world, the absence of a stable point of gravity where to feel secure (Gartstein & Bateman, 2008). The state of anxiety that the child lives when the mother is absent is at the origin of the de-realization experimented with anguish since the first year of the life. In a metaphysical frame this painful experience may be said the consequence of a sort of void. The child experiments a loss of reality (the mother) that corresponds to a deprivation of both positive and good.

Anguish, in the one year old child «adds up to the disappearing of the world, an absolute disappearing, a total absence of good». The baby, in other words, realizes that «in his universe *the good does not exists* anymore, that he misses it» (Bernardi, 2007, p.119).

### Conclusions

Babies are moral subjects not because of some moral universals available since the first breath, as professor Paul Blooms states, but for the capacity to assume reality as an ingredient of the will and of the ethical conduct. This native metaphysical apprenticeship revealed by the phenomenological description allows a human being the availability of some essential moral tools: something exists rather

than nothing; what is given is also valuable, for its being positive, something *positivum*. However, we can properly speak of moral sense of a baby only when this pre-moral insight – not an inborn idea – is properly known and willed. As I argued in my paper, parental/tutorial care plays a main role in structuring this ability.

At this point of the investigation, I move further arguing that the consciousness of good-as-positive is the native grade of the human awareness.

Despite a large consensus among scholars about early infant consciousness and some recent neural evidences reported on *Science* magazine (2013) yet, demonstrating conscious access in infants remains challenging (Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2013) because of babies' incapacity to report their thoughts. However, this perspective can be discussed, because it grounds on the idea of consciousness as a cognitive Self that is only a part of a wider personal domain. Consciousness is one of the more blurring topics of thought, because, as J. Searle noticed, it highlights the complexity of mind-body relation, a topic at the very heart of modern philosophy (Searle, 1983). In this anthropological frame a main challenge of both philosophy and neurosciences is to answer the question whether babies have a conscious access to the world of life. Ghislaine Dehaene-Lambertz and colleagues, in order to prove babies awareness, studied whether an electrophysiological signature of consciousness found in adults, corresponding to a late nonlinear cortical response (300 milliseconds) to brief pictures, already exists in infants. After having recorded 80 infants (5 to 15-month-old) they argued that «the brain mechanisms underlying the threshold for conscious perception are already present in infancy but undergo a slow acceleration during development» (Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2013, p. 376). If further experiments will confirm and complete this report, strong neural evidences will thread on a more secure ground a result on which there is already a large consensus in psychology and philosophy: I precisely refer to the fact that a baby has a conscious access to the world of life.

Phenomenology can fill the hiatus between neurosciences and philosophy of the mind, by throwing light on a more comprehensive idea of consciousness dealing with the capacity of intention in early infancy, strictly related with the capacity of being acquainted with the world of life. When I talk about intention I refer to Anscombe's theory of «the class of things known without observation» and «be something that we can express» (*Intention* §3.1).

This kind of conscious attitude requires 1) the capacity of perceiving objects and, what is more relevant 2) to consider them as means in order to get to an end. Since weaning begins (6 to 8 months) a child perfectly knows how to deal with the world of life, how to act intentionally for either being a subject of intentionality (§I.3) and for the imitation of the adults for what concerns the goal of an action (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 34). This phenomenological intuition – theoretically grounded on the role of sensing in the making of personal identity, enables us to prove the early conscious access to the world. Affective primarily than cognitive, it might thread recent neural investigations about early infant consciousness on a more anthropological ground.

As we saw before, the theoretical experience of the world of life is mainly affective at a very beginning of childhood. It means, as I noticed both from a phenomenological and metaphysical point of view, that a newborn assimilate reality from a sensitive attitude: the intentionality that marks, since the beginning, the baby's behavior proves the existence of a sophisticated knowledge of the outer world. This means that sensation goes along – at least on a metaphysical ground – with an *act of*

*sensing* with which the human subject grasps something essential of the object that experiments. Of course, this conscious access can be compared to the capacity to say “I”: a child is assertive through his gestures, not with verbal abilities. We could say that the first degree of consciousness is located at this pre-linguistic frame, in which the child’s communication is given through affective responses.

## References

- Anisman, H, Zaharia M.D., Meaney, Z. & Merali, M.J. (1998). Do early-lives events permanently alter behavioral and hormonal responses to stressors? *International Journal of Developmental Neuroscience*, 16 (3-4), 149-164.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1957). *Intention*. London: Blackwell. Trad. it. (2004). *Intenzione*. Roma: Edusc.
- Barbieri, A. (1973). *Latino delirante*. Milano: Celuc.
- Bernardi, M. (2007). *Il nuovo bambino. Una guida per i genitori di oggi. Da 0 a 11 anni*. Milano: Fabbri.
- Berry Brazelton, T. & J. D. Sparrow (2006). *Touchpoints. Birth to three. Your child’s emotional and behavioral development*. Boston: Da Capo Lifelong Books. Trad. it. (2009). *Il bambino da zero a tre anni*. Milano: Fabbri Editori.
- Bianchi, I.A. (2003). *Fenomenologia della volontà. Desiderio, volontà, istinto nei manoscritti inediti di Husserl*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Bloom, P. (2013). *Just babies: The origins of good and evil*. New York: Crown.
- Bloom, P (2010). The moral life of babies. *The New York Time Magazine*, 5<sup>th</sup> May.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss. Vol 1: attachment*. New York: Basic Book. Trad. it. (1999). *Attaccamento e perdita. Vol. I: Attaccamento*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Cirulli, F., Berry, A., & Alleva, E. (2002). Early disruption of the mother-infant relationship. Effects on brain plasticity and implication for psychopathology. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 27, 73-82.
- Cook, G. (2013). The moral life of babies. Yale psychology professor Paul Bloom finds the origins of morality in infants. *Scientific American*, November 12.  
[www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-moral-life-of-babies/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-moral-life-of-babies/)

- Dehaene-Lambertz, G., Kouider, S., Stahlhut, C., Gelskov, S.V., Barbosa, L.S., Dutat, M., de Gardelle, V., Christophe, A., & Dehaene, S. (2013). A neural marker of perceptual consciousness in infants. *Science*, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 340 (6130), 376-380.
- De Monticelli, R. (2003). *L'ordine del cuore. Etica e teoria del sentire*. Milano: Cortina.
- Kochanska, G. (2002). Mutuality responsive orientation between mothers and their young children: a context for the early development of conscience. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 11, 191-195.
- Fisogni, P. (2013a). *Il candore*. Firenze: Maremmi.
- Fisogni, P. (2013b). Svezamento e senso morale. *Mondo Zero Tre*, 4, 5-6.
- Fisogni, P. (2013c). *L'infanzia porta a Dio*. *Vita Pastorale*, 9, 38.
- Fisogni, P. (2012). *The primarity of good. The role of good in the making of the human cognition between 0 and 2 years. A metaphysical investigation*. Conference paper, International Conference of Philosophy of Education, Chicago, November, 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup>.
- Fisogni, P. (2012). L'inaridimento della persona come perdita di inclinazione al bene. Fenomenologia e metafisica tomista a confronto. *Studii Tomiste XI*, 41-57.
- Fisogni, P. (2011). L'infanzia, il bene e l'essere. Una ricerca sull'inizio. *Infanzia*, 3, 187-190.
- Fisogni, P. (2009). *L'inaridimento dei terroristi*. Roma: Edusc.
- Fisogni, P. (2006). *Incontro al dialogo. La sfida dell'intesa nei tempi della crisi*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Gartstein, M. A., & Bateman A. E. (2008). Early manifestations of childhood depression: influences of infant temperament and parental depressive symptoms. *Infant and child development*, 17, III, 223-248.
- Gendlin, E. (1997). *Experiencing and the creation of meaning. A philosophical and psychological approach to the subjective*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Gopnik, A. (2009). *The philosophical baby. What children's minds tell us about truth, love, and the meaning of life*. New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux. Trad. it. (2010). *Il bambino filosofo. Come i bambini ci insegnano a dire la verità, amare e capire il senso della vita*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.



- Guardini, R (2010). *Die Lebensalter: Ihre ethische und pädagogische bedeutung*. Munich: Topos.  
Trad. it. (2011). *Le età della vita*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Guardini, R. (1995). *Welt und person. Versuche zur christliche lehre von menschen*. Mainz: Matthias Grünewald. Trad. it. (2002). *Mondo e persona*. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- Kitzinger, S. (2006). *Birth crisis*. London: Routledge.
- Klein, M. (2002). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. In M. Klein, P. Heimann, S. Isaacs, & J. Riviere, *Development in psychoanalysis* (pp.292-319). London: H. Karnac Books Ltd.
- Husserl, E. (1913). *Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*. Halle: Niemeyer. Trad. it. (2000). *Fenomenologia e teoria della conoscenza*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Husserl, E (1976). *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. Den Haag, Nijhoff, 1976, "Husserliana", vol. III/1. Trad. it. (1981). *Idee sulla fenomenologia pura e sulla filosofia fenomenologica*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Husserl, E (1964). *Phenomenology of internal time consciousness*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Trad. it. (1981). *Per la fenomenologia della coscienza interna del tempo*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Hrdy, S.B. (2009). *Mothers and others. The evolutionary origins of mutual understanding*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Lagercrantz, H. (2006). *The newborn brain. Neurosciences and clinical application*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Trad. it. (2010). *Il cervello del bambino. Come si forma la mente*. Firenze: Giunti.
- Leboyer, F. (2002). *Birth without violence*. Us: Inner tradition Bear and Company.
- Locke, J. (1690). *An essay concerning human understanding*. London: Thomas Baffet. Trad. it. (2007). *Saggio sull'intelletto umano*. Milano: Bompiani.
- MacIntyre, A. (1999). *Dependent rational animals. Why human beings need the virtues*. New York: Carus Publishing. Trad. it. (1999). *Animali razionali dipendenti*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero.
- Melchiorre, V. (1985). Note di fenomenologia. *Il tempo della memoria. La questione della verità nell'epoca della frammentazione*, 299-300. Atti del secondo colloquio su Filosofia e Religione, Macerata, 16-18 maggio, 1985, Torino: Marietti.

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *Consciousness and the acquisition of language*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Mortari, L. (2006). *La pratica dell'aver cura*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori.
- Narvaez, D (2010a). Moral complexity: The fatal attraction of truthiness and the importance of mature moral functioning. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(2), 163-181.
- Narvaez, D (2010b). The emotional foundations of high moral intelligence. In B. Latzko & T. Malti (Eds.). *Children's Moral Emotions and Moral Cognition: Developmental and Educational Perspectives. New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* (129, 77-94). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Narvaez, D. (2008). Triune ethics: the neurobiological roots of our multiple moralities. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 26, 95-119.
- Nussbaum, C. M. (2001). *Upheavals of thought. The intelligence of emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scheler, M. (1921). *Der formalismus in der ethik un die materiale wertethik*. Halle: Verlag von Max Niemayer. Trad. it. (1996). *Il formalismo nell'etica e l'etica materiale dei valori*. Milano: Spano.
- Schore, A. N (2001) (Ed.). Contributions from the decade of the brain in infant mental health. *Special issue of Infant mental Health Journal*, 22, 73-82.
- Schore, A. N. (1994). *Affect regulation and the origin of the self. The neurobiology of emotional development*. Mahweh: Erlbaum.
- Searle, J. R. (1983). *Intentionality: an essay in the philosophy of mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Trad. it. (1985). *Della intenzionalità: un saggio di filosofia della conoscenza*. Milano: Bompiani.
- Tommaso d'Aquino (1985). *Somma teologica*, testo italiano e latino, edizione maggiore leonina, Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano.
- Tommaso d'Aquino *Summa Theologiae* (1996). Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, II vol.
- Torralla, J. M., & Llano, A. (2008). *Intention*. Conference paper held in Rome, at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, international conference about G.E.M. Anscombe, 28-29

February, 2008. Then published: Torralba, J. M., & Llano, A. (2010). Representaciòn y conocimiento pràctico. *Thémata, Revista de Filosofia*, 43.

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) (2007). *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child well-being in rich countries, a comprehensive assessment of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations*. Report card 7, Florence: United Nations Children's fund Innocenti Research Centre.

Wertz, F.J. (1981). The birth of the infant: a developmental perspective. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 12 (1), 205-219.

Winnicott, D.W. (1971). *Playing and reality*. Middlesex, England: Penguin. Trad. it. (2005). *Gioco e realtà*. Roma: Armando.

Winnicott, D.W (1987). *Babies and their mothers*. London. Perseus.

**Primavera Fisogni**, Italian, is Phd in Metaphysics and journalist. Her investigations are focused on the pre-moral origin of evil-doing. Main publications: "Terrorismo. Implicazioni antropologiche e filosofiche", *Nuova Enciclopedia di Filosofia*, Bompiani, 2006; *Dehumanization and Human Fragility* (2013, London); "Lone Wolves. Updating the Concept of Enemy in the Social Media Age" (*Journal of Cyber Terrorism and Warfare*, Us, 2014).

Contacts: [vera.fisogni@tiscali.it](mailto:vera.fisogni@tiscali.it); [v.fisogni@laprovincia.it](mailto:v.fisogni@laprovincia.it)