

Book Review

The Need to Observe Forgiveness

A review of Michael E. McCullough, *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2008, 298 pp., US\$24.95, ISBN: 978-0787977566 (hardcover).

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Michael McCullough, a social psychologist who is active in research on forgiveness and the evolutionary bases of religious behavior, has written a book on the natural bases of revenge and forgiveness. It is timely for a number of reasons. The research literature on forgiveness is increasing rapidly and there is need for review, synthesis, and theory construction (Recine, Werner, and Recine, 2007). After having dwelled in separate realities for aeons, evolutionary biologists and social scientists are reconciling forces and expertise in the creation of a new science of human nature (Fowler and Schreiber, 2008; cf. Holden, 2008; Jasny, Kelner, and Pennisi, 2008). This book illustrates this welcome development. Finally, *Beyond Revenge* complements a new direction in comparative research on aggression, focusing on natural mechanisms that keep aggression in check and repair social damage in its aftermath (de Waal, 2000). For those of us with a stake in such enterprises, this book is a welcome event.

McCullough presents us with a range of proximate and ultimate causes of normative patterns of revenge-seeking and forgiving, although he has little to say about development and phenotypic plasticity in vengefulness and forgiveness. McCullough does not fall for the one gene one aspect of human nature fallacy; he is not looking for a forgiveness gene. Instead, he paints a broad picture of possible evolutionary influences that are ultimately linked to cooperation and kinship, and most likely orchestrated by multiple genes. As he puts it in his own, at times somewhat flowery, language: “Rather than thinking of the relationship between revenge and forgiveness as one of disease and cure, or poison and antidote, we’d do better to think of revenge and forgiveness as a team of midwives that helped give birth to human beings’ ultra-cooperativeness” (p. 90).

McCullough initially focuses on revenge and argues that revenge-seeking has proven adaptive across multiple phylogenies. It can deter aggressors from aggressing again (p. 49) and warn would-be aggressors to back off (p. 51). Revenge can also coerce free riders to cooperate (p. 56). The author fleshes out this argument in chapters 3 and 4, illustrating it, in part, with tales of blood revenge and costly punishment in extant humans (pp. 74-78), acts of vengeance in non-

human primates (pp. 79-82), and retaliation toward individuals who do not hold up their end of the bargain in the context of risky predator inspection in guppies (pp. 82-85).

Chapters 5 and 6 deal directly with forgiveness. Much space is initially taken up with a discussion of what the research on iterated games purports to tell us about the evolution of cooperation. As the author admits, this work is only indirectly relevant to the question of the evolution of forgiveness. Not retaliating an opponent's selfish move in a competitive game with a stranger is contextually different from forgiving an act of physical aggression by a close associate (cf. Gauche, and Mullet, 2005), and context matters. The context that matters, according to McCullough, is "our small clique of trusted associates;" within that context "...forgiveness helps us develop a social environment in which we can benefit from direct reciprocity" (p. 106).

Next, McCullough discusses the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness, drawing, in part, on the substantial evidence of reconciliation ("friendly reunions between former opponents") following social aggression in our closest evolutionary relatives, the nonhuman primates (pp. 114-120; cf. Arnold and Aureli, 2006). He suggests that arguments about the distinction between reconciliation and forgiveness are mostly a "tempest in a teapot," as they probably have the same evolutionary roots (p. 114). I'd like to stir up the tea leaves a little bit more by suggesting yet another term in addition to reconciliation and forgiveness: peacemaking. Both peacemaking and reconciliation are processes of restorative peace (Verbeek, 2008). I propose that peacemaking, a primary process of selective attraction between former opponents, can occur both inside and outside of "small cliques of trusted associates," independently of forgiveness. Peacemaking serves to restore tolerance in the aftermath of aggression. Reconciliation, by definition a reconnection, reconnects associates with a shared interest, such as an investment in a mutually beneficial relationship. Forgiveness, an emotional process, can be expected to be closely tied to reconciliation when we consider that successful reconciliation depends on the resolution of emotional issues that left the parties estranged. For aggressors, issues involving emotions of belonging and social acceptance need to be resolved in order to pave the way for reconciliation, while for recipients of aggression this involves emotions of status and individual identity (Shnabel and Nadler, 2008). Nitpicking? Let us hope that future research, particularly that of the observational and naturalistic kind, will tell.

McCullough enthusiastically proclaims that young children from many countries have been observed to have a conciliatory tendency on a par with common chimpanzees: Young children tend to make peace following peer aggression and conflict on average four times of out ten, without any adult intervention (p. 120). Based on my work in this area I propose that a peacemaking tendency is a universal feature of early child development, and is molded by culture, as children grow older. Much of the work testing this hypothesis still needs to be done, however. Since McCullough wrote his book, a few new studies have been published (Kempes, 2008), but further advances will depend in no small part on whether researchers are willing to shift their attention away from quick turn-around survey studies to long term investment in naturalistic observations and experiments.

Having dealt with the meat of the argument in support of the natural origins of both revenge and forgiveness in chapters 3-6, McCullough uses the next three chapters (7-9) to explore forgiveness at various proximate levels of analysis, including brain processes, and relations among individuals and nations. Chapter 10 takes a look at forgiveness in the context of religious behavior. I particularly enjoyed chapter 8, which, among other things, discusses the role of apologies, ritualistic displays, and gestures in forgiveness. The author's judicious choice

of material for this chapter nicely illustrates the very human business of apologizing as a prelude to forgiveness.

Beyond Revenge concludes with McCullough's entry for the name the human species contest, adding his very own *Homo ignoscens* ("the forgiver") to other choice epithets including *H. faber* ("the maker"), *H. ludens* ("the player"), and *H. ultor* ("the avenger"). This brings me to a minor misgiving: McCullough starts his book in the same vein as he ends it, as a man on a mission. In the introduction he sermonizes: "I wrote this book not because I want to tell you what makes "super-forgivers" like Brandon Biggs and Bud Welch unique but, rather, because I want to show you how you can change the world to enable more of us to behave more like them" (p. xvi). Biggs and Welch, it turns out, managed to forgive the callous killers of their kin, and McCullough offers no real clue as to why they did it, or why their type of forgiveness is worth emulating.

Further on in the introduction McCullough presents basic empirical questions about the natural bases of revenge and forgiveness as "truths" (pp. xvii-xviii), and reiterates his mission by offering as his final, self-evident, truth that "To make the world a more forgiving, less vengeful place, don't try to change human nature: change the world!" (pp. xviii-xix). Going by their tone, I presume that the opening and closing chapters of the book have been intelligently designed to score points in the culture war on science. Perhaps *Beyond Revenge* will indeed enlighten some souls as to the possibility of a natural origin of some of the bad (vengefulness) and good (forgiveness) in us; certainly, it reveals McCullough to be a biologically enlightened psychologist. I am not convinced, however, that we should trade in science's questions for "truths" if we want to make the case that applying evolutionary biology to further our understanding of human nature is legitimate, worthy, and revealing. All in all, however, my quibbles with this book are minor, and I recommend it to anyone with an interest in the natural history of what makes us human. I hope that it will help spur more naturalistic observations, case studies, diary studies, field and natural experiments on forgiveness and its role in restorative peace.

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