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Commentary title:

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Abstract:

Commentary main text:

Aggressive impulses are endemic to the human species. And perhaps it is the case that all humans are prone to exhibiting and enjoying cruelty under certain conditions, (even if these conditions are never met in their particular circumstances and lifetimes). The story of human evolution proposed by past anthropologists (mostly male) seemed to center upon positing such impulses as the drivers of our destiny. More recent accounts recognize the obvious (but often neglected) truths that humans are also cooperative, caring, nurturing beings, and that if it were not for these latter traits, our species' history – although undeniably bloody -- would arguably have been far less characterized by peaceful periods and everyday cooperation, far less filled with constructive, creative accomplishment, and much shorter. However gloomy today's human scenario may appear, then, it is important to keep a sense of balance and hope.

I have no doubt whatsoever that Victor Nell would agree. His research project is in no way intended to contest the above perspective, but rather, to take on the challenge of understanding and to the extent possible, to help counteract and neutralize the violent and cruel tendencies that are so evident and widespread, cross-culturally, in the contemporary world. These are laudable objectives, for two reasons. First, Nell's approach forces us to look at violent and cruel acts as having positive reinforcement for the perpetrators. Only if we learn how this process works can we improve our chances of control and rehabilitation in this arena. Second, his project has the underlying significance that ordinary people should not have to live in fear for their safety, and victims of violence should not have to bear the onus of readjusting to a hostile social environment taken as the norm. Yet I wonder whether, in addition to Nell's approach, we might still need to give careful consideration to the compassionate side of our nature as an antidote to "the rewards of cruelty."

Nell presents strong evidence for regarding the perpetration and enjoyment of cruelty as having deep evolutionary, neurological, and biochemical underpinnings, and we probably must accept this. However, within the context of his thoughts on mitigating the problem of violence and cruelty in human life, very little is said about the role of compassion in defining who and what we are, and in describing the human potential. In section 6.2, Nell acknowledges that the human motivational repertoire comprises both cruelty and compassion. But little more is said about the latter. Granted, Nell has another research agenda. I respect that and wish to make it clear here that my

purpose is not to try to refute his approach, but rather to supplement it, in the positive spirit of collaborative scholarly exploration.

Compassion is defined as “deep awareness of the suffering of another coupled with the desire to relieve it” (American Heritage Dictionary 2000). This formulation illustrates that compassion is a deeper sense than empathy, inasmuch as compassion entails not just resonant fellow-feeling, but also the desire to ameliorate another’s negative situation. While the above definition is an etymologically faithful rendering, I believe compassion has come to have an even richer meaning than is suggested here, namely, to embrace what the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer calls “loving-kindness” (Schopenhauer), or everyday caring concern for the other and his or her interests, and the wish to see the other flourish. I have given careful thought to the idea that compassion might be, as Schopenhauer claims, the sole motivational foundation of ethics, the primary moral emotion (Schopenhauer). Two principles of right conduct might be considered as absolutely basic: “Do no harm” (nonmaleficence) and “Do good whenever possible” (beneficence or benevolence). Both can be construed as following naturally from the compassionate side of our nature. This is not the place to debate whether compassion is the whole of morality. But it may be of interest to reflect upon just how central it is to a better world.

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