

# The Evolution of Altruism with Michael McCullough (S2 Ep3)

## SPEAKERS

Michael McCullough, Coleman Hughes (CH)

### CH 00:30

Welcome to another episode of conversations with Coleman. My guest today is Michael McCullough. Michael McCullough is a professor of psychology at the University of California, San Diego, where he directs the evolution and human behaviour laboratory. He studies the functions of human behaviour and emotion using the conceptual tools of evolutionary psychology and cognitive science. He's conducted research on forgiveness, revenge, gratitude, empathy, religion, and morality. He's the author of *Beyond Revenge*, *The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*, and *The Kindness of Strangers: How a Selfish Ape Invented a New Moral Code*, which is the focus of today's conversation. Michael and I talk about the field of evolutionary psychology and why it's considered controversial. We talk about Richard Dawkins and *The Selfish Gene* revolution. We discuss the evolutionary roots of altruism towards strangers. We talk about the criticism that evolutionary psych is a collection of just stories rather than actual science. We talk about the evolution of welfare spending over the past few centuries. And finally, we talked about how it's possible for human societies filled with selfish apes to become more altruistic. So without further ado, Michael McCullough. Okay, Michael McCullough, thank you so much for coming on my podcast.

### Michael McCullough 02:26

Thanks for having me, Coleman.

### CH 02:28

So the topic of our conversation today is the kindness of strangers, which is your new book. But before we get into that, can you give people a summary of your background and how you came to study the topics that you study?

### Michael McCullough 02:44

Sure. My PhD work actually is in counselling psychology, I thought what I would spend my life doing is learning how to make, give psychology away, to help people who needed help with kind of problems in living, not necessarily that had psychological disorders but adjustment issues, were trying to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives. I was really into Viktor Frankl and existential ways of thinking about psychology and really thought that a lot of what people needed was a way to make sense of things that had happened to them in the past, and figure out a kind of motivational fuel that would give them coherence and meaning to their lives going forward. So you know, there's a lot of different approaches to counselling and psychotherapy. But those existentialists really got my attention. So I thought that's what I would do, is kind of develop approaches to psychology that help people to, you know, figure out what their stories were, and, you know, build paths for themselves, whether that was in

their careers or their relationships, or whatever. But in that work, I increasingly got interested in my advisors research, and he was interested in religion, and he was interested in also in psychotherapy, but one of the things he was writing about was, was forgiveness, and how might you help clients to forgive harms as a way of helping them to improve marriage problems or relationship problems or, you know, get over bad stuff from their their pasts. And in our conversations, we realise there just wasn't any research on the topic. There was hardly any research really explicitly about revenge or retaliation, but there certainly wasn't anything on forgiveness. And so I got increasingly interested in just as a basic process of human psychology, what does it take, to put aside hostility, the desire to avoid, the desire to see harm come to someone who's harmed you in the past. We didn't really have even a good psychological vocabulary. For something like that other than sort of healing or moving on, but it seemed to me that reconciliation was really important, like if you can find ways to help people repair valuable relationships, even that even those that have been damaged by, you know, something awful, that there might be real benefit on a number of levels from that. So I started working on forgiveness straightaway. And I did my thesis and my dissertation on these topics, and just stayed with that as a topic and still work on it. But I got more and more into sort of the pro-social side of human psychology. So studying forgiveness easily led me into an interest in cooperation and altruism. More recently, I've gotten quite interested in how it is we come to trust people and how we lose trust, which clearly is related to also forgiveness as well. So I kind of work in this little, you know, I guess most of the tricks in my bag have to do with the study of pro-social behaviour in the laboratory, and to the extent that I can also sometimes out in real life.

#### **CH 06:01**

Yeah, and in your research, and in the book, you take the perspective, at least for much of the book, of evolutionary psychology, which is a field that is, at the same time, very interesting and controversial. So I want to start there, because that's where you you start in the book, can you just give people a basic picture of what evolutionary psychology is? And how does it differ from non-evolutionary psychology?

#### **Michael McCullough 06:37**

Sure, most of psychology is built around the desire to understand cause and effect. In my part of psychology, often the way we understand cause and effect is to say, there's some variable out there, there's some feature of the world, some characteristic of a social situation you're in, that seems to create this effect. So someone insults you, you want to retaliate, or you fume about it, or you say something nasty about it, or you want to harm them. So the, the general way you approach this work is to kind of assume there is some event in the world and some response in the world. And so what you're trying to establish, to some extent is you know, is that effect real, you know, is there this causal link, and then if you can establish that there is one, then you want to sort of say, well, what's going on in the middle, to make that effect happen? You know, so someone harms you, and you feel resentment, or you feel some sort of feeling or you suddenly, what comes to memory or other insults from the past that make you even angrier or something and then you want to retaliate. But to a large extent, what happens when we're thinking about that middle part is we just sort of, it's a black box, it's this impenetrable black box, it's the human head, something's going on in there, we kind of don't know, we wave at it. And we assume, well, somehow the mind is ending up feeling vengeful because of this, this harm that's just happened. Evolutionary Psychology, the way I think about it is, an insistence on not blackboxing the mind, what you actually want to do, even when you're studying social behaviour, even

when you're studying interpersonal relationships, how people harm each other, help each other, cooperate, you know, undermine each other, whatever it is you're studying, talk to each other, convince each other, we don't want to blackbox what's going on in the head. Instead, we want to assume that there are active tools in the the head, computational mechanisms, that natural selection designed to perform specific kinds of jobs, that are ultimately doing that work of mediating the relationship between these environmental events, you know, our social lives and the ways we behave in response to these social lives. Evolutionary Psychology is just psychology. But what we try to do is take very seriously the fact that you don't get the mind for free, you can't, you know, it's not a solution to a problem. It's the problem for psychologists, understanding the cognitive processes that create behaviour is that's the whole game. And so we often just sort of say, well, there's clearly something going on, but we want to understand how information from the world is getting processed and producing behaviour and by understanding input output relationships, trying to make some inferences about the ways in which natural selection actually built our minds. So we can figure out what is in a sense the mind for, if we can figure out what it's good at doing and when it's bad at doing, our hope is we can figure out what the functions of all those circuits are, what the functions of all these cognitive processes are. So we're trying to link information processing, you know the mind as a basically a collection of little computers, with the theory of natural selection to figure out, like, what are the cool programmes in there? What did we evolve to do psychologically and behaviorally? So there's nothing controversial about it. Really, if you take that step back, and you just say, like, we're just trying to reverse engineer the mind and figure out what kind of circuits are in there.

**CH 10:34**

And another way of putting it is that it's just evolutionary biology, which is uncontroversial. Applied to the brain and the mind, right?

**Michael McCullough 10:46**

That's exactly right. Yeah, the two tools, I think that are the most important tools for psychology, probably ever, are the theory of natural selection. And the computational theory of mind, or if you like, you can call it the information processing theory of mind. The theory of natural selection tells us that what evolution produces are really cool tools that enabled populations of organisms to get important work done. And what work was that, that was work that enabled evolving individuals to increase their reproductive success. So natural selection builds cool things, it builds design. And that applies to minds, as well as the bodies, it applies, as you know, to humans, as well as to non-human animals. That's how we get structured. That's how we get features in the biological world, including, including the human biological world that enable us to get interesting jobs done. So we're not just blobs of cytoplasm.

**CH 11:43**

Yeah, I think part of why it's controversial is that if you accept evolutionary psychology as a way of thinking, then you have to accept that there is such a thing as human nature. And though human nature might allow for a vastly wider spectrum of behaviours than say, dog nature, that there's, there's nevertheless, a conversation to be had about how we are programmed at birth. Right, that might put limits on limits that are nevertheless much wider than most animals, but limits nonetheless, on how you can expect it, human beings and therefore societies, to turn out. And that becomes controversial whenever it bumps up against politics, and so on, and so forth. And your book touches on, actually a

great deal on that, sort of in the later half. But let's talk a little bit about the relationship between evolution and selfishness. As a concept, we have the just though common notion of selfishness that we use to mark out people that are particularly annoying and selfish and, you know, don't reciprocate and what not. But can you talk about the relationship between selfishness in the conversation about the selfish gene and, and evolution and misunderstandings of that are commonplace there.

**Michael McCullough 13:14**

Absolutely. The place, I think that's really important for people to get to, in trying to get the whole evolutionary psychology thing, is that the features of our minds and bodies we have, that are reliably produced in our species that make every human being the same, that make us identical, in every important way, are the are structured the way they are, because the genes that produce them, the genes that give rise, you know, genes are just recipe books, as you know, as you know, just recipe books that tell you what to put where, across development to build a creature. The genes that had the most salutary effects in creating stuff around them, that increased those genes, rates of reproduction, are the genes that stuck around. So, you know, at the most fundamental level, of what a gene does is it gives a recipe for a protein, you make a protein, and you, a gene tells those proteins where to go and where to exist in a cell and on what scheduled to end up there. Genes that end up doing those things in the right way, that are arranged in the right way, and produce an effect over and over across multiple generations, end up building features around themselves like hands or eyes or a digestive system, that is better than the ways they could have built these bodies. And as a result, the bodies that are best at helping those genes to make more copies of themselves in the future, are the bodies we end up with. So the reason we have the bodies we have today, in a, you know, in a word, in a little put a little bow on it are the bodies that have all the possible bodies that were in competition with each other with each other, were the ones that lead to the highest reproductive rates of all of the genes in the population of genes that constitute them. So genes are doing things in the world, that raise their own rates of reproduction. They don't have minds, they don't have an agenda, they're not looking forward and saying, gosh, I'd like to make more copies of myself and here's a good way to do that. Obviously they don't have any, you know, forward thinking agenda. But the way they operate through time makes it look as if they have these agendas. Because they build things that are cool, they build things that are effective at enabling them to push themselves out into the generations in the future. So, it's in that sense, that the famous evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, introduced in 1976, in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, the concept of the selfish gene. And so what he meant by that was very much, it was just a beautiful way of illustrating that what genes are good at doing is making stuff that enables them to be better at the job of creating copies of themselves in future generations. So, fundamentally, that's what it means for genes to be selfish, is that they're good at doing things that raise their rates of replication.

**CH 16:42**

Yeah. And what's important and novel about that, is that it was an important, maybe revisionist, too strong a word, but an important addition to the Darwinian theory of evolution, which, in Darwin's time, we didn't know that there were such things as genes. And there was a view that the unit on which natural selection operates is the individual. And that introduced the obvious problem, perhaps not so obvious problem, but the problem why aren't people simply selfish all the time? And can you talk about how the genes I view could possibly help explain that?

**Michael McCullough 17:26**

Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, this is one of the really unfortunate things that Richard has had to live with for 45 years, 44 years. When you talk about genes is selfish, and you sit, you know, you kind of try to alienate people from themselves a little bit, just so they can see how marvellous evolution is, you present this view of that, of genes as having these kind of selfish effects. It tempts you to come to the conclusion that well, people must be selfish, all the way down, if what genes do is build bodies that have the effect of causing in, you know, the genes to have higher reproductive success, and it must build individuals who are just out there trying to grab every bit of food, they can and knocking rivals out of the way and, you know, poisoning their enemies and poisoning their stepfathers, or whatever it is they're doing. But that's a misleading conclusion to draw, because what actually, all that means is, of the possible infinity of behaviours you might engage in, the behaviours that we'll have on the menu is things we will be inclined to do, are things that, over the long haul, of a full life end up, leading to higher reproductive success. So what we can do is start to think, like economists, you know, once we say, people will have minds that incline them to do things that make them better off, you know, make them better off than that, in the game of reproductive success, then you can start to say, hmm, well, the gains of trade are something that make people better off, you know, it's you don't have to just simply be devoted to trying to kill everybody. You know, you can say, hmm, there, it seems like, you know, an organism might be better off, it could if it could figure out how to make things that other individuals wanted and buy things, you know, for other individuals that they don't feel like making themselves, then you can say, hmm, well, it seems like these creatures could understand trade. Or you could make organisms that could understand reciprocity. Or you could make organisms that care about their loved ones and their families. And in fact, natural selection is done that a lot. It's built, designed into lots of organisms that cause them to care about their offspring. And that's, that seems sort of obvious. You know, like, well, of course, every animal cares about its offspring. But you have to build that in, you have to build that kind of concern for others into the bodies and minds of these evolving creatures. So just as a fundamental step, you're going to have individuals that care for their offspring, you have to build instincts. And you can see where those instincts can be built by selfish genes. No selfish genes that cause organisms to take concern their children, would be genes that are better off. So they build, care, they build concern, they create parental love. So, that's almost as soon as your social, once as soon as you are, you know, an organism that produces young that require a lot of care, you're going to get unselfishness as a product of these selfish genes.

**CH 20:40**

Yeah, and the key link there is that the gene inside me, you know, the gene inside me benefits if it makes me the type of person that cares about my sister and my children if I had any, because there's likely to be a copy of that same gene in them.

**Michael McCullough 21:00**

Yeah, that's right. And this is where the gene stay selfish. And one of the great insights and this is really what Dawkins says motivated him to write *The Selfish Gene*, he'd come across a couple of early papers, by I mean, not so early was just a couple of, you know, a few years before Dawkins was working on the book, but by a biologist named Bill Hamilton, who's gone now. But what Hamilton had to say, was, imagine you're a gene. You don't care what individuals gonads, you're locked in, doesn't matter. What matters to you is how many copies you can get out into the world. And the more copies of

yourself you can manage to get out into the world, the more copies there will be of you in the world. And they will have the same propensity as you do. So Hamilton's genius was to say, Hmm, there aren't just copy in Mike McCullough, there aren't just copies of Mike McCullochs genes in Mike McCullough, there are copies of Mike McCullough's genes, and you know, his offspring, or his siblings, or his cousins are second cousins. So I, Mike McCullough might have a gene that causes him to behave in a way that benefits those other individuals at a cost to Mike McCullough. But in so doing, if it's a really valuable benefit to those other individuals, even if really costly to Mike, that gene can still go up in frequency or in or in its representation in the population. If, by helping those other individuals who bear the genes, at the end of the generation, there are more copies out there. So, a rare gene in me is likely to, you know, 50/50, likely to be in one of my siblings. So, if I'm able to do something really valuable for that sibling, even if it's at a cost to me, at the end of us all doing are reproducing, you know, having all of our kids, there may be more copies of that gene in the world, and if so, that's a gene that's on the move. And that's a gene that's got a future. And what the future will have is motivating individuals to provide benefits to their relatives, even if it comes at a cost to them. And that's a gene that can take over the population. So the gene doesn't care whose body it's in. And that was one of the, you know, amazing insights that we only got in the 1960s. I mean, that's not that long ago, you know, but that's the evolution of care like that's the first place we see individuals really beginning to care about. We get biological design psychology, if you like that, that enables individuals to take a concern for the welfare of other individuals. It's through relatedness.

#### **CH 23:32**

So the Dawkins Selfish Gene innovation helps explain why it's a human universal to be kind towards your family and towards your offspring. But then there's this separate question, which is really the focus of your book, which is, why would primates such as ourselves, so constructed, be kind to strangers? Why, why do I, very occasionally, in New York, when I'm in the mood, give \$1 to the person begging, when that person is clearly not my family? Why do people routinely donate to charity, donate to charities that are working in places that are so far away that they're almost abstractions? And you sort of start out by looking at some of the explanations within evolutionary psychology. And there are two that you highlight and sort of explain as both inadequate, but they're useful to think about just to grab on to the evolutionary psychological way of thinking and those are the stranger adaptationist model and the blessed mistake model. So could you explain those two?

#### **Michael McCullough 24:51**

Yeah, yeah. I mean, there's, there's generally, you know, a lot of social scientists and biologists are interested in where niceness comes from. You know, clearly we've got this kinship thing going on this thing, this Hamilton thing that I talked about. We've got some some other theorists, it's all to say this is a, sociality is a huge part of evolutionary biology. And so evolutionary social scientists have taken an interest in it as well. And in general, they fall into two schools to explain, why do we care about strangers? Why do we, why do we tip in restaurants, we'll never visit again, or when we go to a conference, and we're going to be going to a cafe where we'll never benefit from having helped somebody. Why do we leave a tip? Why do we do all these things towards strangers that we seem to get no benefit from? And there's, as I size it up, there's two camps. There are groups of theorists who say, no, no, no, we have evolved to take an interest in the welfare of strangers. And we can just look back into the history of human demography, and look at how groups were structured. And we can see

ways in which there were strangers in our midst, that would have generated a payoff to us to have a genuine, abiding intrinsic care for. So I call them a stranger adaptationist. Well, I'll move on to the second one, the second group of people, and Dawkins is really at the vanguard of them, I refer to as blessed misters. And this is a term I actually got from Dawkins, in one of his latter, more recent books. He was trying to give people a sense for why we do care about strangers, and he compared it to something like sexual desire. Where he says, you know, sexual desire clearly exists for the purpose of facilitating reproduction. But today, we can know that fact, and know that we don't want to have children. And nevertheless, we still continue to have a desire to have sex and have a mate. So, even though the passion is still there, we don't necessarily need to, it can, motivate behaviour in, under situations in which there's no hope of it fulfilling its end goal, which is to cause us to have, you know, to have offspring. So he says that we can have the same concern for others around us, even if there's no chance of us getting a benefit from helping them. Because the psychology that motivates us to care about others evolved in a world in which caring for others ended up meaning caring for your friends, or your family, because, an other, people that you would encounter that you lived among, were people who cared about you. And so any random person you just grabbed out of the universe of people you knew and decided to help was going to be somebody you knew. So why wouldn't natural selection bother making that system any smarter than that, you know, you can imagine, in a world where you essentially know everybody, you know, everybody's in your contact list that you're ever going to run across. Natural Selection could just say like, hey, any, when you come across, help them. So to help people today is a blessed mistake, it's a lovely thing, it makes the world a better place. But we're not doing it because we care about the welfare of strangers, we're doing it because our minds have this rule of thumb that says, if you see it, and it's needy, help it. Because in a world in which that sentiment involved, that would make the individual better off. So I have some reasons to think that that is an incomplete explanation as well. But those are the two kinds of alternatives on offer that I was trying to steer between. I didn't find either of them fair, completely satisfying. So in some ways, my book is really about trying to steer a different way forward to understand. The book started out is that the provisional title, was why we don't give a damn, because I didn't realise how fun it would be to write about why we do give a damn. But ultimately, it's why we give a damn about strangers. And I don't think either of those two, you know, sort of alternatives really get the job done.

#### **CH 29:32**

So let's move on. I think we could dwell more on evolutionary psychology. And there's actually one thing I do want to dwell about, which is, as you said, ultimately, probably the majority of your book is not about, really about evolutionary psych, but about the historical and sociological and cultural and economic reasons why we've grown so much more generous over the past several 100 years as measured by things like, how much, what percentage of gdp goes to social spending and whatnot. But I do want to address one common critique of evolutionary psychology before we get there, which is the notion that evolutionary psychologists are telling just so stories. That they're really working backward from a conclusion. And they're working backward from their baseline hypothesis, which is that our minds are shaped by evolution, and you can see the imprint of evolution in our behaviour today. And they just take that for granted. And then whatever behaviour they see today, empirically, they tell a convenient story about why that would have made sense evolutionarily. So it's not really a science, it's not making predictions and so on. So I'm sure you've heard that? What's your reply to that?

**Michael McCullough 32:17**

Sure. I mean, this is a really common critique. And I think there was a time in which it was a fair critique. In fact, I think today still, that's a fair critique to make about some of evolutionary psychology. Like any field, the quality of the work is not uniform. Like any field, there are people who are doing top quality work and there are people whose, you know, maybe, there's not their work is not top quality. So, like, you know, in any field or any endeavour of human life, if you enjoy dealing in black and white blanket statements, then you can do the same thing in ev psych. But I think more and more, that critique is an unfair and inaccurate one. Because evolutionary psychologists have learned that for any behaviour you see, you have to realise that there is more than one evolutionary hypothesis for it. So you, there could be a number of reasons that natural selection might have put together a particular psychological system. So the goal is generally not to tell a just so story, but it's to test a number of possible stories. And as we do in science, in general, try to knock down the bad ones, and then be left with the ones that are good. So it's an effort to rule out bad ideas, just like one would do in any field of science. The difference, I think, is what we want to see and decreasing though what we are seeing, is a forward looking predictive power, where we can predict new phenomena on the basis of basic evolutionary theorising. So I think a great example, it's just it's one of my favourite examples of bringing the predictive power of natural selection thinking to understanding human behaviour, actually goes back to kinship and figuring out how it is we come to learn who our siblings are. This is worked by one of my friends and former colleagues, Deborah Lieberman. The question was, how do we figure out who our siblings are? We can say, on one hand, what a dumb question, people tell us who our brothers and sisters are, you live with them. But again, you don't get anything for free psychologically, something had to create, the system that we use, and what Lieberman figured out is, it may be that we use the amount of time we live with somebody as offspring as children. There's a little odometer in our heads that just counts the number of days that we live under the same roof with somebody, and our minds just count up days. And that's a pretty good heuristic you might use. But for older siblings, there's another thing you could use, which is whether you saw your mom care for the younger child. Okay, so imagine you're an older sibling, you see your mom, breastfeed your dumb little brother. And you can use this cue to lock in a sense, like, yep, that's my sibling. What Lieberman found out, I think this is just genius. You've got those two cues available. Older siblings can see mom caring for younger, younger can't see mom caring for older. Because the age gap is different. She wanted to know how long would you have to live with an older sibling in order to feel the same care and love for them, that your older sibling would feel for you, given the fact that your older sibling had this really rock solid cue, because they saw mom taking care of you. Mom's taking care of that one that and I know that's my mom. And that's probably my sibling. Turns out for that younger sibling - 15 years. And you get to the same amount of concern that the older sibling has for the younger sibling. Why is 15 years good, because that's about the amount of time that children in the environment we grew up with, would have been under the same roof with an older sibling. Before that older sibling took off and started trying to make a way for itself for himself or herself. So 15 years, once you get to 15 years of living together, that's when that bellow feeling, you know, that feeling of commitment and, you know, brotherly sisterly love sort of reaches its peak, and older siblings get there right away. So, the entire ecology of our lives together as children, tells us that 15 years is kind of a magic number. And by the time you get to 15 years, that's where, you know, 15 years of living together, is where sort of fraternal love reaches its peak. That's a powerful prediction that no one has ever made, ever thought to make, about how we come to care about our brothers and sisters. And there it is, first principles, knowing what we know about what human life was

like, before we were modern, before we were living in cities, knowing that natural selection makes good stuff that does its job, right, that it doesn't like us to make mistakes. It doesn't want you treating complete strangers like siblings. And no, you know, this, these are discoveries no one had even thought to ask the questions about and wouldn't have if they hadn't been thinking about the mind as this tool designed by natural selection to get jobs done.

**CH 37:50**

Yeah.

**Michael McCullough 37:50**

So you see, you work with what you know, we know a lot about what our human history was like, we know that we get certain jobs done. And so an evolutionary psychologist says like, let's figure out how it works. Novel predictions.

**CH 38:01**

Yep. So I want to move on now from evolutionary psychology. And because I think one of the kind of motivation for the structure of your book is that evolutionary psychology, it tells us what human beings have in common and why we have it in common, and what separates us from other animals psychologically, in terms of our broad tendencies. What it doesn't, what it can't, by definition tell us is why societies have changed psychologically over short periods of time. Why is the typical American today is a very different person than the typical American in 1750. And evo psych, operating on long timelines, probably can't tell us very much about why that is. We have to look to other disciplines, like history and sociology, and, so on, and so forth. And the second half of your book is spent explaining this puzzle, this sort of long term historical trend line towards greater kindness towards strangers, where right now we're spending something like 20% of GDP on social spending, up from virtually zero a few 100 years ago. And you go even further back. So can you sort of sketch in broad historical terms, what the evolution of kindness has been, like, not on the evolutionary timescale?

**Michael McCullough 39:41**

Yeah, yeah. It is a strange thing to imagine a world in which we didn't have a social safety net, in which the only insurance policies you had were family and friends and, you know, whatever fat you could store on your bodies for when you're going to be hungry. But that's the state of nature, the state of nature is friends, family and fat. So what seems to have happened, as humans became sedentary, and we stopped living, as you know, egalitarian hunter gatherers, is that we find ourselves settling down in cities that become larger and larger, and have more and more people. And our economic life becomes more and more specialised. And we find ourselves in cities in which it really becomes possible through the accumulation of bad luck to end up with very bad luck indeed, over the course of multiple generations. If you have a bad harvest, you end up with a bad piece of land, or you have the, you know, the cattle die. You know, that's bad luck that could reverberate for centuries to your lineage. Likewise, if you have good luck, then you're going to pass on more, you know, good luck to your offspring. So we see the kind of an explosion of inequality in these earliest in these earliest city states, in the archaic world. This was the first time anyone thought to care about the welfare of complete strangers. Well, they'd thought to care about them before that, but the way they thought to care for complete strangers was just killing them. You know, our relationship to absolute strangers, we did have a relationship to

them, and, you know, in the pre-states world, but that was a relationship with like, let's kill as many of them as possible as quickly as possible. We move into a period of indifference once we start to settle into cities where we can co-exist with people we don't care about. But pretty much right away there, this starts to the suffering of strangers starts to generate second order problems. Cities are not fun, if there are people dying in the streets of exposure or disease, cities are not fun if people are walking around, not able to meet their own daily caloric needs. And so, what we have leftover are legal codes from the ancient, you know, cities, you know, Samaria and Mesopotamia, telling us that the poor were regarded as requiring, needing, a special kind of consideration, just to prevent vast amounts of exploitation. So, the idea that poverty creates second order problems, I think, is the fundamental, motivating engine, conceptual engine, for why societies began to take an interest in the welfare of complete strangers. It's because they're here. They're here with us. We got to figure out what to do about this, because of this second order problems. So I see human history over about 10,000 years, being a history of looking at second order problems, on a variety of scales, or in a variety of denominations, and asking, what are, you know, how do we want to cooperately cope with these second order problems. Some of the second order problems are really material, they're really basic problems, like epidemics, not fun. It's bad for morale, to see people dying in the streets, it's bad for business, you know, very, very material, second order problems. But then what I think I've seen through history as well, is that some of the second order problems become problems with meaning or ethics. Like, I just don't like seeing what's happening here. It's violating certain ethical or spiritual or moral principles I have. So how do I want to deal with those second order problems as well. So to me, I see an inventive species, where strangers are stuck with strangers, generating like, consequences for them, and then trying to figure out how best to handle those second order consequences.

#### **CH 43:44**

In their the context of your book, I found one of the passages really interesting about the golden rule. And when we're thinking on such long timescales, going back to hunter gatherers, all the way up to today, it becomes interesting to notice that several different societies came up with some version of the golden rule within the same, you know, 2 to 500 year period. And then you begin to wonder whether there were structural, the structural changes that were going on around the world, in agricultural societies at that time, didn't lend themselves to such a rule. So can you talk about that a little bit?

#### **Michael McCullough 44:31**

Sure. It's the oddest thing. I mean, you know, you see the notion of, you know, something like that which is evil to you do not visit on others. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Maybe you know more in the positive frame, popping up in Axial Age Judaism and Yellow Valley Chinese religion and Indus Valley Indic religion, you know, it comes up in Buddhism and Confucianism, later in Christianity and Islam, obviously. But this golden rule, it just appears seemingly out of nowhere. And all of these places. You have to, I mean, you have to assume they were all getting it from the same source, but that's lost to time, if that's the case. Instead, what we're left with is that perhaps there were, as societies became, what, again, ever larger, and war became ever more effective, and more nasty on a larger scale, people started to, you know, ask really deep ethical questions about what the meaning of life was. And it looks like the solution they came to in all of these societies was that you know, a meaningful life or a spiritual life, or a life, you know, of fulfilment, needed to be a life of compassion, the assumption is that they wouldn't have come to this conclusion if it hadn't been for wars, having become

so bloody and leaving so many bodies, and having a sense that just the existing religious systems couldn't explain this. So you do, you get the evolution of compassion, the, you know, the emergence of compassion as a spiritual mandate, really, for the first time. I mean, it's weird to think like people have always been religious. But the idea that the essence of religion was compassion, like that would have sounded really weird prior to the Axial Age, but it starts you know, now we, we hear it, and it sounds just, it sounds second nature, it's hard to, you know, imagine a world religion that would try to distance itself from that idea. But it was an innovation, it came from somewhere, there was a time in which that was a absurd thing to say. And now we just we just, it's hard to imagine otherwise. That's the golden rule coming out, seemingly coming out of nowhere.

#### **CH 46:50**

So as you move on in the book, you spent a good deal of time talking about the past, say, 300 years, and the evolution of kindness to strangers, as manifested in the welfare state. So can you tell that story and sort of connect it to the broader themes of this conversation?

#### **Michael McCullough 47:13**

Yeah, yeah. The welfare state is something you start to see, you see a hint of this, in the writings of the late 18th century, and then coming through, I think, three thinkers, Rousseau, Kant, and Adam Smith. Who all gave rise to the idea that there was a fundamental human dignity that even the poor had. I mean, this is a collection of ideas that I think get put together into a notion of distributed justice, right about the turn of, you know, the the end of the 1700s, beginning of the 1800s. There's a fundamental human dignity. And as a result of that, we owe a certain duty to each other to be, to treat each other in an ethical way that's caught. From Smith, we get the idea that everyone has worth everyone has a genius. And markets are great, but they require some regulation in a couple of really sensitive tender areas of human life, which are education and the actually the job market. And then from Rousseau, you get this notion of inequality, which does as as an empirical fact seemed to have, we can see cropping up in the very first sedentary societies. And his notion that inequality is something that as a kind of multi-generational dynamic behind it. These all get put into an idea of distributive justice, which becomes really something and you know, Okara, around the time of the French Revolution, but this fundamental human dignity, idea sticks. And as that idea makes its way, through a lot of 19th century minds, we reached the end of the 19th century. People are getting rich, they're starting to get rich, life is starting to get a lot better as we enter the industrial age. Welfare is increasing, wages are increasing, people are leaving the countryside in droves for the opportunity to work in the dark satanic mills of the industrial age. Because, that's how you get comfortable. That's how you develop a life for yourself where you know, you can feed a family and be comfortable. It's leaving the country for the places where the jobs are. So, you know, by the second half of the 19th century, what England, Germany, Austria, you know, what, Poland, what the large industry, you know, the large country, you know, industry engines of industry were realising is, you know, we've got all these folks here, if we can create some basic, since we've pulled them away from their families, which is what they essentially relied upon as kind of insurance policies, there's you know, social insurance policies. We've all moved here into the cities, if we can make some provisions for them, so that if they're too sick to work, you know, they're not going to end up out on the streets or they're too old to work, or they're too disabled to work. If we can begin to put some social insurances in place to hedge people against these slings and arrows of life, then we can prevent more second order problems, you know, we can prevent the situation where

no one has, nope, these folks have got another 20 years of life to live, but they don't have any money to live it with. So, life is good. It becomes possible to tax, because prosperity is high. And what you see happening in a lot of different countries around the same amount of time 1890s, to the 19 teens, is the addition of social insurances. The first ones showing up in Germany and Poland, disability insurance for workers, illness insurance for workers. And gradually, these innovations just diffuse through 20, 30 nations really quickly, like in a matter of decades, and every society in Western Europe has a programme for disability insurance or illness insurance or old age pensions. And so what we see is through a matter of just cultural copying, I think, all of these societies sort of realising, hey, this is a way to ensure like the workforce stays healthy and intact. And we're not leaving people destitute just because they died 10 years before the actuarial tables, you know, said they ought to die. So, the welfare state starts with these basic social insurances, we get to World War One, the Great Depression, this is seen as an opportunity to extend those programmes even further. And so, all through Europe, obviously, North America as well, and all the English speaking countries, see an accumulation. And the program's just expand universal education. There's not a place in the world now, where you wouldn't imagine that being something you'd want as a social good, everyone has it now, some sort of Social Security programmem old age pensions. They're just everywhere now. And essentially every possible benefit that we can imagine providing as a way of establishing a kind of basic level of wellness or what welfare somebody is experimented with, and tried to put in place. And following World War Two, it was possible raise so much income, you know, for the war effort, that tax rate stayed hot, very high for a long time. And through into the Johnson administration, we were able to continue to experiment with ways to, social security and other things to try to keep people out of poverty. So it's crept in this kind of tentacular way and gone from, as you say, from a time when we, you know, the percent of GDP spent on social spending was zero to a place now where it's 20 plus percent everywhere, including in the United States.

#### **CH 53:01**

So this will be my final question. But I think people listening to this might feel that there's a kind of schizophrenia to the conversation. Because, you know, the whole first half is spent talking about evolutionary psychology and the way in which we didn't really dwell on this, but the way in which it limits our capacity for empathy and for kindness to strangers were, yes, however we get there, it's possible to feel empathy for people. But we should bet very much against the possibility of being able to raise a whole generation to care just as much about strangers, than they do themselves. You know, just the mere fact that I can be selfish enough to do this podcast that I enjoy, rather than spending every moment of my time figuring out how to help others. There's just this casual level of selfishness and attention on ourselves that you point out in the book that we're not even aware of. And we take for granted that we don't realise how far we are from being the picture of a saint or someone who is truly caring about others. And that's just baked into our psychology. There's really no, fundamentally, there's no reinventing ourselves. That's not on the menu. But at the same time, you see this almost inexorable trend throughout history towards caring more and more about strangers. So how do you resolve those two facts?

#### **Michael McCullough 54:40**

Yeah, I actually don't think empathy is done a whole lot of the work, through history of bringing us to where we are now. I mean, there are, we have emotions, we have care, we have concern we pity

others, we feel sorry. I don't think those kinds of human, warm sentiments, have driven a lot of the action we've seen over the past 500 years. I think the evolutionary endowments that have done the work for us, are the endowments that allow us to look around our lives and see things we don't like. I mean, this is, it's so fundamental, it almost sounds stupid to even put words to it. But I really do think these are the instincts that have done the work. You look around you, you see conditions you don't like. And we do this all the time. And then we say, well, what are our options for addressing these issues? You know, what are, we can find our incentives. And then like many animals can do, we can see pathways to that will allow us to track those incentives and obtain them. For human beings, these are, what we've done is we've tried to find our incentives at the societal level. So great, it would be better for business, it'd be make for more competitive country, if we had a healthy workforce rather than a destitute workforce. That's a problem. Let's have a conversation about how we want to deal with that. So, what I actually see through history is people using reason, seeing conditions that they don't like, finding through science, perhaps, you know, certain conditions, are bad for business. They're bad for flourishing, they cut against certain ethical principles we value, and then getting together for debate an argument, actually. What should the tax rate be, you know, what's the right tax rate? Which of these programmes work, you know, which of them create more problems than they solve? Which of them disincentive, you know, incentivize all the wrong things? Like, these are arguments. And we've, you know, as I look through the long course of history, it's not people saying, like, let's love one another. Let's remember, you know, that all you need is love or something to solve problems. It's been fine, okay, what's the right amount at which to do this? What's the right amount we should spend on this? Does this thing work or not? So, it's only through vigorous reasoning and argumentation, I think to make a dent in most of these social problems. You know, how much should we be sending to developing countries around the world? Isn't that money just going to end up in the hands of dictators? You know, isn't that money just going to be converted into bribes? And it's not going to improve anybody's lives at all? Like, these are real arguments. And I think, this is where the engine of history has been, in helping us to become more compassionate as you know, as a society as a world.

#### **CH 57:29**

Hmm. Yeah, that's one thing that sometimes overlooked when talking about evo psych, is that reason is one of the things that we are built to be capable of.

#### **Michael McCullough 57:40**

That's right. We are built to reason and we reasoned in groups. We talk a lot about the biases and myopias that humans have in their decision making, and we do. But a lot of those myopias and biases fall away, when you have to argue your case, among other people. The other people were looking at your case and saying, well, I assume this that what this guy's gonna say is stupid. So let me just hear it through and let me see the way to find the flaws, let me do him the favour of finding the flaws in his reasoning. So we engage in, you know, conjecture and refutation. And that's what sharpens arguments. You know, if I just walk around with arguments in my head, they're bound to be terrible arguments, because I can't argue well with myself. But when we reasoned together, we can end up with increasingly better arguments. So I think that's what's been happening. And we have we have instincts for this, this doesn't come naturally, either. We evolved to try to figure out collective problems together. Which way did the deer go? You know, let's look at the tracks and use our expertise and try to figure it out. Everyone can have really different ideas about the answer to that. But at the end of the day,

everybody wants to find the deer, everybody wants to be correct. So through argument, you can get rid of the bad arguments and hopefully leave the good ones standing.

**CH** 58:52

On that optimistic note, thank you so much, Michael McCullough, the book is "The Kindness of Strangers". And we only really scratched the surface of it, in this conversation. So, I encourage you to all go out and buy it and get beneath the surface. But, it's been a pleasure to talk to you. Can you point listeners in the direction of any online home that you have? Or if not, perhaps a Twitter handle?

**Michael McCullough** 59:22

Sure. me\_McCullough on Twitter, and I'm on the UCSD website. That's an easy place to find me in the Department of Psychology. And I also blog at [socialscienceevolving.com](http://socialscienceevolving.com). So, those are probably the best three places to interact with me online.

**CH** 59:40

Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Michael. Thanks, Coleman. It was really great talking with you.