

Memory, Emotion, Forgiveness

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Introduction

What is your oldest and most treasured grudge? New York Times columnist Tim Herrera says that asking this question is one of his favorite party games is because:

Without fail, every person unloads with shockingly specific, intimate detail about their grudge. Career slights, ... offhand-yet-cutting remarks, bitter friendship dissolutions; nothing is too small or petty when it comes to grudges.¹

Herrera describes “a friend whose grudge stretched back to second grade. A classmate — he still remembered her full name and could describe her in detail — was unkind about a new pair of Coke-bottle glasses he had started wearing. Her insult wasn’t particularly vicious, but he’d been quietly seething ever since.”

If we are all so good at keeping grudges, it must be because keeping grudges is very healthy, right? Actually, not so much. Carrying anger into old age is associated with chronic inflammation and illness.² A study from earlier this year showed that anger reduces our ability to see things from other peoples’ point of view,³ and a 2010 study showed that feeling wronged makes people feel entitled to behave selfishly.⁴ So, feeling like a victim or carrying a grudge is bad, both psychologically and physically.

Is there anything we can do to get rid of our feelings of victimhood or of being wronged? *Revenge* comes to mind; I’ll talk about its disadvantages later. A better approach is *forgiveness*, but forgiveness can be difficult. I’ll end this talk with some practical tips on forgiveness, but for now I’d like to share some perspectives from social psychology about where feelings of being wronged come from, when they are useful, when they are harmful, why they persist, and how to get rid of them. This talk is in six parts: Moral Credit; Justice is Sweet; The World Owes You; Don’t Be Blue; An Eye for an Eye; and Taming the Beast.

1. Moral Credit

Moral credit is a concept used in many areas of social psychology that is based on the metaphor of “well-being as wealth”:

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- 1 Herrera, T., Let Go of Your Grudges. They’re Doing You No Good, New York Times, May, 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/19/smarter-living/let-go-of-your-grudges-theyre-doing-you-no-good.html>
 - 2 Barlow, M. A., Wrosch, C., Gouin, J.-P., & Kunzmann, U. (2019). Is anger, but not sadness, associated with chronic inflammation and illness in older adulthood? *Psychology and Aging*, 34(3), 330-340.
 - 3 Jeremy A. Yip, Maurice E. Schweitzer, Losing your temper and your perspective: Anger reduces perspective-taking, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Volume 150, 2019, Pages 28-45.
 - 4 Zitek, E. M., Jordan, A. H., Monin, B., & Leach, F. R. (2010). Victim entitlement to behave selfishly. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98(2), 245-255.

If you do something good for me, then I “owe” you something, I am “in your debt.” If I do something equally good for you, then I have “repaid” you and we are even. The books are balanced.

...

Moral action is giving something of positive value; immoral action is giving something of negative value.⁵

Many basic moral concepts like reciprocity, retribution, restitution, and revenge, are explainable as attempts to restore the moral balance sheet between two individuals.

Why do human beings need a moral accounting system? Because we’re intensely social creatures who evolved to live in groups, and our unique success as a species arises in large part from our unexcelled ability to *cooperate* with others toward shared goals. However, every cooperating group has to deal with the dilemma that the group does best if everyone does his or her fair share, but each individual can do better by freeloading.

In the case of relationships between two individuals, fairness means *reciprocity*: if I benefit you, then you will benefit me. This form of reciprocity is good for both parties. There is an Inuit saying that the best place to store surplus meat is in someone else’s stomach.⁶ Even vampire bats have been shown to regurgitate a bit of blood for a comrade who had an unsuccessful hunt in the expectation that the favor may be returned one day. But someone who *never* reciprocates is freeloading on the relationship. Too many freeloaders, and the benefits of cooperation evaporate.

With our immediate kin our expectation of reciprocity is typically very loose. It’s unrealistic to think that children will ever repay their parents for the care they receive; the best one can hope for is that they will pay it forward to their own children. Spouses in healthy relationships normally don’t keep track of the balance between each other’s contributions. It’s often a sign that a relationship is in trouble if spouses begin keeping close tabs on each other’s contributions.⁷ But most of our daily interactions are with people who are not close kin, and with them we depend on their willingness to reciprocate.

Keeping track of every positive or negative transaction that we have with each person we know would be a heavy cognitive burden. Fortunately, it’s usually unnecessary because in most relationships we need only a general sense of the balance sheet, something that can be summarized as an *emotion*. In the words of a recent paper:

Beneficial acts trigger emotional responses of liking and gratitude [that] motivate reciprocity ...
Mutually beneficial cycles of reciprocated exchange establish ... goodwill and affection⁸

These emotions make detailed record-keeping unnecessary.

However, this also means that when someone doesn’t reciprocate, we experience the emotion of anger.

5 Lakoff, G. (1995). Metaphor, Morality, and Politics, Or, Why Conservatives Have Left Liberals in the Dust. *Social Research*, 62(2), 177-214. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7vp15113>.

6 P. Farb, (1968). *Man’s Rise to Civilization*, New York:Dutton.

7 Kollock, Peter. (1993). "An Eye for an Eye Leaves Everyone Blind": Cooperation and Accounting Systems. *American Sociological Review*, at 770-771.

8 Mislin, A. A., Boumgarden, P. A., Jang, D., & Bottom, W. P. (2015). Accounting for reciprocity in negotiation and social exchange. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 10(6), 571-589.

2. Justice is Sweet

Freeloading is such a fundamental problem in group life that we are exquisitely finely tuned to detect it. It's estimated that people spend between 65%⁹ and 80% to 90%¹⁰ of day-to-day conversations gossiping, and that the most common subject of gossip is other peoples' failures to honor their commitments.¹¹ We have such a strong desire to keep freeloaders from profiting from their misbehavior that we will actually *pay* to see them punished. This is called "altruistic punishment" - altruistic because the punisher gets no *individual* benefit from the costs of punishment, but the entire group benefits when freeloaders get punished.

The classic experiment demonstrating altruistic punishment is what is called the "public goods" game.¹² The game starts with a group of subjects each being given \$20. Next, each subject can contribute any portion of the \$20 to a common pool. After everyone has contributed, the pool is doubled and the total divided evenly among all the subjects. So, if each subject contributed all \$20 to the pool, every subject would get a total of \$40, as opposed to \$20 if no one contributed. Just like real life, right? We're all better off when we all contribute to the common good. The problem is, a subject can make even more money if everyone contributes to the pool but they don't. They could keep their entire \$20 plus get a share of everyone else's contribution. So, the experimenters added a third stage in which player can pay to punish any other player who acts in this selfish way: it cost one dollar to impose a \$3 penalty. Even though the players were anonymous, cooperators nevertheless happily paid to punish freeloaders, collectively fining them about as much as they got by cheating. Classical economics would predict that no one would ever pay to punish someone else, because there is no reward for it. But subsequent work showed that punishing an offender stimulates the same pleasure circuits of the brain as respond to cocaine, tobacco, and chocolate.¹³ Justice is sweet.

3. The World Owes You (Moral Self-Licensing)

Just as we can run a moral account between each other, we can also run an account with the entire universe. If we've been *misbehaving*, we may feel that we should pay off our moral debt to the world by being especially generous or kind. On the other hand, if we've been *particularly good*, we may feel that we can afford to spend a bit of that moral capital by cutting a few corners. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as *Moral Self-Licensing*.

In a typical experiment, some subjects were asked "to write a short story about themselves ... using nine morally positive trait words (e.g., fair, kind), others [were asked] to use nine morally negative trait words (e.g., selfish, mean). At the end of the study, participants were given a chance to donate part of their compensation to charity. ... [Those] assigned to write about *themselves* using *positive* traits donated the *least* out ... [whereas those] who wrote about themselves using *negative* traits donated the *most*, as if they were compensating for feeling immoral." There was no difference in donation amount between people assigned to use positive or negative traits to write about *someone else*.

In another experiment, subjects were randomly assigned to select products from a set of mostly environmentally friendly "green" items, like LED blubs, or from a set of conventional items, like

9 Dunbar, R. I. M. (2004). Gossip in an evolutionary perspective. *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 100–110

10 Emler, N. (1994). Gossip, reputation, and social adaptation. In R. F. Goodman & A. Ben-Ze'ev (Eds.), *Good gossip* (pp. 119–140). Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas.

11 Bianca Beersma Gerben A. Van Kleef, Why People Gossip: An Empirical Analysis of Social Motives, Antecedents, and Consequences, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* banner, Volume 42, Issue 11, November 2012, Pages 2640-2670.

12 Fehr, Ernst and Gächter, Simon, Altruistic punishment in humans, *Nature* (2002). vol 415, number 6868 137-140.

13 S. Pinker, *The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined*, Viking (2011) at 531.

incandescent bulbs. Those who chose from the *green* items were more likely to *cheat* to get more of the experimenter's money than those who were assigned to choose among the *regular* items. Similarly, subjects who were asked to imagine doing something altruistic, like volunteering for charity, were more likely to subsequently choose a luxury item (like designer jeans) than a practical necessity (like a vacuum cleaner).¹⁴ Moral licensing can even be prospective: "when people think they can choose a more virtuous item *later* (e.g., a highbrow movie or healthy snack), they are more likely to choose a frivolous item in the *present* (e.g., a lowbrow movie or cookie)".¹⁵

Of course, in many religious traditions this moral credit account isn't with the world in general, but specifically with *God*: sinning or otherwise violating God's rules *debts* ones' moral account, whereas charity and religious observances *add* to ones' account. A sufficient act of expiation may even zero-out the deepest debt. For many believers, life consists of a constant stream of moral debits and credits, and every choice is evaluated for its effect on ones' current moral account. But even non-believers seem unconsciously to strive to maintain equilibrium in their moral credit line with the world.

One aspect of moral self-licensing that may strike you as odd is that it seems to contradict the effects of *cognitive dissonance*, which predicts that people try to act in line with their previous behavior and their sense of themselves. This idea (though not the term) dates back at least to Benjamin Franklin, who told an amusing story in his autobiography about how he dealt with a hostile rival legislator:

Having heard that he had in his library a certain very scarce and curious book, I wrote a note to him, expressing my desire of perusing that book, and requesting he would do me the favour of lending it to me for a few days. He sent it immediately, and I return'd it in about a week with another note, expressing strongly my sense of the favour. When we next met in the House, he spoke to me (which he had never done before), and with great civility; and he ever after manifested a readiness to serve me on all occasions, so that we became great friends, and our friendship continued to his death.

This story shows how people adjust their *attitudes* to match their *actions*; if you get someone to *act* like a friend, they may actually *become* your friend. In general, it usually makes people very uncomfortable to act contrary to their self-image. So, which is it: do good actions make us act better, because they show that we're the kind of person who does good things, or do they make us act worse, because we've earned the credit to pay for some delicious bad behavior?

It turns out that *either* can be the case depending on how we *frame* the initial behavior. When we view a positive action as a *commitment* to a certain goal or standard, then we are more likely to continue to act in that manner. If instead we view the action as *progress* toward achieving the goal, then we are likely to feel like we can take a break and enjoy some of that hard-earned moral credit. For example, when subjects were led to think of studying hard as a sign of their *commitment* to the goal of acing a test, they continued to study hard. Subjects who were prompted to view studying hard as *progress* toward that goal felt switched to other goals, like partying. So, the same initial behavior (studying hard) can have opposite consequences depending on how we think of it.

4. Don't Be Blue (Victimhood)

14 Merritt, A. C., Effron, D. A., & Monin, B. (2010). Moral self-licensing: When being good frees us to be bad. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4(5), 344-357.

15 Jessica Cascio, E. Ashby Plant, Prospective moral licensing: Does anticipating doing good later allow you to be bad now?, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Volume 56, 2015, Pages 110-116.

What happens when you can't punish transgressors and moral debts go unpaid? If someone fails to reciprocate your positive actions or fails to make amends after harming you, the imbalanced moral account may make you feel angry or sad. Now, while we don't normally think of them that way, negative emotions like anger and sadness exist because they are adaptive. Anger can give us the energy to overcome obstacles and reverse injustices, whereas sadness can help us reprioritize our goals from things we can't achieve to those we can and can help recruit social support.¹⁶ But these emotions are beneficial only if they are *temporary*, resulting from a specific situation. *Chronic* negative emotions can be very destructive:

The combination of rumination and negative mood is [particularly] toxic. Research shows that people who ruminate while sad or distraught are likely to feel besieged, powerless, self-critical, [and] pessimistic...¹⁷

As mentioned above, chronic feelings of being wronged negatively impact both ones' health and ones' capacity for acting morally. Getting rid of these negative feelings is clearly vitally important. If the offender won't set things right voluntarily, how about revenge?

5. An Eye for an Eye (The Moralization Gap)

The perils of revenge can be illustrated by an ingenious experiment in which participants were asked to read a story about a college roommate who offers to help a struggling student with coursework but then reneges, causing the struggling student to get a low grade in the course, change majors, and switch to another university. The participants were randomly assigned to retell the story from the perspective of the perpetrator, the victim, or a neutral third person. The embellishments and omissions in the stories as they were retold reveal that everyone seems to have two distinct built-in narratives that are triggered simply by taking the view of a victim or perpetrator. These narratives are something like the following:

Perpetrator's Narrative: The story starts with a harmful act, but I had good reasons for doing it. I was responding to an immediate provocation, or I was just reacting to the situation in a way that any reasonable person would. I had a perfect right to do what I did, and it's unfair to blame me for it. The harm was minor and easily repaired, and I apologized. It's time to get over it, put it behind us, let bygones be bygones.

Victim's Narrative: The story begins long before the harmful act, which was just the latest incident in a long history of mistreatment. The perpetrator's actions were senseless, incomprehensible. Either that or he was a sadist, motivated only by a desire to see me suffer, though I was completely innocent. The harm he did is grievous and irreparable, with effects that will last forever. None of us should ever forget it.¹⁸

The discrepancy between how those who are harmed and those who harm view the same events – sometimes called the *moralization gap* – can lead to cycles of revenge because a retaliation that seems proportionate and just to a *victim* almost always seems disproportionate and unjust to the *perpetrator*, causing the perpetrator to feel like a victim who has a right to retribution. It can make a consensus on justice almost unattainable because victims and perpetrators can never see eye to eye.

¹⁶ Barlow, *supra*.

¹⁷ Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness: A scientific approach to getting the life you want*. New York: Penguin Press, (2008).

¹⁸ Pinker at 538.

A clever experiment shows how the moralization gap can lead to an escalating cycle of retaliation. Experimenters created a device that applied a precise amount of pressure on a finger placed beneath a bar. Experimental subjects were told to “press down on the finger of a second participant for three seconds with the same amount of force they were feeling. Then the second participant got the same instructions. The two took turns, each matching the amount of force he or she had just received. After eight turns the second participant was pressing down with about *eighteen times* as much force as was applied in the round that got it started. ... [P]eople underestimated how much force they apply compared to how much force they feel, so they escalated the pressure by about 40 per cent each turn.”¹⁹ In real-world disputes, the misperception isn't about pressure on one's finger, but about other issues of fairness or harm. The gap in perception between those who inflict and those who receive pain can drive a spiral of revenge. Like the Hatfields and the McCoys, or Israelis and Palestinians, each side each becomes increasingly merciless because each side feels itself to be the victim.

6. Taming The Beast (Forgiveness)

This talk began by inviting you to think about a lingering grudge. I've tried to put this universal human experience into perspective through a high-speed tour of the psychology of moral credit. To recap, we maintain moral credit lines with other individuals and often feel positive or negative emotions based on our credit balances; we detest freeloaders who overdraw moral credit from the entire community and relish seeing them punished; we run an account with the entire universe in which good deeds can make us act better if we think of them as commitments, but worse if we think of them as supplying some moral capital that we can spend on naughtiness; feeling like a victim is unhealthy and makes you selfish and unempathetic; revenge is satisfying, but differences in perceptions about who is the victim and who is perpetrator give rise to cycles of revenge. So, where does all this leave us when we feel wronged, that is, when a moral debt goes permanently unpaid? What's left?

Often the best approach is *forgiveness*; just zero-out the account and move on. As novelist Anne Lamott puts it, “*Not* forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.” It hurts you, not the person who wronged you. How does this apply to that opening grudge, which may have been scratching at its cage during this entire talk. How can we open the door of this cage and let this burdensome beast go free?

One possible approach was shown by the Stanford Forgiveness Project, which studied the effects of *forgiveness training*. Participants, who had at least one unresolved hurtful interpersonal experience that still elicited negative feelings, were trained in taking less personal offense, blaming the offender less, and offering more person and situational understanding of the offender and of oneself. Those who completed the training experienced lowered stress, anger, and physical health symptoms and better coping skills.²⁰

The founder of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, Dr. Frederick Luskin, emphasized 3 key things about forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is for you, not the offender.
2. It's best to do it now.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Harris, A.H., Luskin, F., Norman, S.B., Standard, S., Bruning, J., Evans, S.C., & Thoresen, C.E. (2006). Effects of a group forgiveness intervention on forgiveness, perceived stress, and trait-anger. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 62 6, 715-33 .

3. It's about freeing yourself — forgiving someone doesn't mean you have to like what they did or become their friend.

Luskin recommends the following steps:

- First, calm yourself down in the moment. ... [S]low down and collect yourself to create a little distance between what happened and how you're going to react to it.
- Next, shift how you think and talk about the source of your grudge. "Change your story from that of a victim to a more heroic story."
- Pay attention to the good things in your life "so you [can] balance the harm."
- Finally, remind yourself of one simple truth: Life doesn't always turn out the way we want it to. Combining the last two ideas can "shift the ground" and dramatically lower your general level of stress.

And so I conclude by hoping that your pet grudge has been tamed, if not completely set free. May you frame your *good* deeds as commitments to do even *better*, not as licenses to spend your moral capitol on misbehavior. May you stand up for your community by chastening freeloaders, but may you never be drawn into cycles of revenge. And finally, may you have the strength to make your life a narrative of strength and affirmation rather than being mired in the hurts of the past.

So be it.