

The Unbearable Arbitrariness of Deploring

As a self-identified non-Neurotic man, I'm not surprised by the social ubiquity of anger, sadness, and fear. When something bad happens, my instinctive reaction is to say, "Calm down, it's OK" – especially if it doesn't personally affect me. But I recognize that I'm odd. When something bad happens, a psychologically normal person's instinctive reaction is to say, "Oh my God, that's terrible!" – whether it personally affects them or not.

At this point in my life, I'm almost inured to the anger, sadness, and fear that normal people chronically express. They're clearly just built differently than I am. While I suspect they could markedly improve their outlook if they wanted to, they don't want to. Pride, I guess. But while I've grown to accept their general negativity, I'm still astounded by what people choose to be negative *about*. To my eyes, the specific items that people deplore look deeply arbitrary.

Let's start with the latest scandal. People all over the country – indeed, the world – have recently discovered that many celebrities are habitual sexual harassers. Each new expose leads to public outrage and professional ostracism. Why does this confuse me? Because many celebrities do many comparably bad things other than sexual harassment, and virtually no one cares.

Suppose, for example, that a major celebrity is *extremely* emotionally abusive to all his subordinates. He screams at them all the time. He calls them the cruelest names he can devise. He habitually makes impossible demands. He threatens to fire them out of sheer sadistic pleasure. But the abuse is *never* sexual (or ethnic); the celebrity limits himself to attacking subordinates' intelligence, character, pride, and hope for the future. I daresay the average employee would *far* prefer to work for a boss who occasionally pressured them for a date. But if the tabloids ran a negative profile on the Asexual Boss from Hell, the public wouldn't get very mad and Hollywood almost certainly wouldn't ostracize the offender.

A similar point holds for celebrity gropers. When exposed, lots of people proclaim it "unforgivable." But if a celebrity repeatedly got into same-sex bar brawls, there would be no outcry. Even if the celebrity received probation after paralyzing an innocent stranger for life, he could probably keep working in show business.

Or to take a far more gruesome case: When the Syrian government last used poison gas, killing roughly a hundred people, the U.S. angrily deployed retaliatory bombers, to bipartisan acclaim. But when the Syrian government murdered vastly more with conventional weapons, the U.S. government and its citizenry barely peeped. The unbearable arbitrariness of deploring!

In the past, I've made similar observations about Jim Crow versus immigration laws, and My Lai versus Hiroshima. In each case, I can understand why people would have strong negative feelings about *both* evils. I can understand why people would have strong negative feelings about neither. I can understand why people would have strong negative feelings about the greater evil, but not the lesser evil. But I can't understand why people would have strong negative feelings about the lesser evil, but care little about the greater evil. Or why they would have strong negative feelings about one evil, but yawn in the face of a comparable evil.

Well, I'm not at a total loss. Perhaps strangely, I can *explain* what I cannot accept. When I witness the unbearable arbitrariness of deploring, two unsympathetic types of explanations come to mind.

First, people's negative emotions depend far more on the *vividness* of the evil than its badness. A hundred stories about celebrity harassers would upset the world far more than ironclad statistical proof that 10% of celebrities harass. Indeed, it's likely that *one* detail-rich story about a celebrity harasser would upset the world more than the *best* statistical study ever performed.

Second, people's negative emotions are intensely social. People don't want to rage alone. They want to get mad with their friends and countrymen. So when a new round of ugly stories pop up, almost no one asks, "Is this really the best target of our collective anger?" Instead, they jump on the bandwagon. Who cares where we're going, as long as we're united in negativity?

You could insist that my ranking of the seriousness of various offenses is wrong – or at least no more judicious than the broader public's. But even if I'm wrong on the specifics, am I really wrong about the underlying psychology of anger, sadness, and fear? Whatever vexes you, it's hard to deny that vividness and herding – not intrinsic badness – provide the standard targeting system for human negativity. And if you want to be upset about what really matters, you must start by deploring vividness and herding, the eternal deceivers of mankind.