

Unforgivability and Collective Guilt

When people debate the character of a public figure, a standard tactic is to find a single “unforgivable” action – something so damning that there is no need to examine further evidence. I call this the Unforgivable Heuristic. And while this heuristic has its place, we greatly overuse it:

The main problem with the signaling analysis, however, is that a large share of “unforgivable” offenses are trivial. People get ostracized for “unforgivable” tweets every day, and most of those tweets plainly do far less harm than, say, punching a stranger in a bar brawl, or cheating on your wife. The sheer randomness is also striking. When the media says, “Famous person X said Y!” they almost never bother to ask, “How many other people also said Y today?” If saying Y actually revealed definitive information, you would try to find all the Y-sayers and ostracize the whole lot of them, not join the dog pile of the day.

The danger of misuse grows far greater, however, when you interact the Unforgivable Heuristic with collective guilt. Why? Because every large, long-lived group of humans – whether they be countries, religions, or ethnicities – has, at one point in its history, done heinous things.

Really? Yes. Take countries. The United States had slavery and extermination of the Indians. The Germans had the Holocaust. The Mexicans had the bloodbath known as the Mexican Revolution. The Chinese had the Great Leap Forward. Even the Belgians had the atrocities of the Congo.

The underlying mechanism is straightforward. Countries, religions, ethnicities – they’re all large, unselective groups. Given the base rates for human villainy, basic statistics practically ensures that every collectivity will contain villains who commit villainies. As I’ve explained before:

Every large, unselective group includes some villains. Say whatever you like about the average moral caliber of Christians, atheists, Democrats, Republicans, plumbers, comic book fans, or Albanians.

The fact remains that each of these groups contains some awful people. While this isn't logically necessary, it is an iron statistical law. If X has more than a few dozen members, and you can join group X by (a) being born into X, or (b) saying "I'm an X," then X will have some unsavory characters.

If you combine the Unforgivable Heuristic with collective guilt, there's a strong logical implication: *Every large, unselective group is "unforgivable."* Not only are we all sinners; we're all beyond redemption. In practice, of course, almost everyone applies this logic selectively. You find the worst stuff your *least-favorite* collectivities have done, then declare the whole group unforgivable. Once you know about the Holocaust, the Germans are damned for eternity. The rest of their past doesn't matter; neither does their future.

What's the purpose of this flagrant motivated reasoning? Most of the time, it's just another way to savor your contempt. But collective unforgivability also serves a bigger function. If you yearn to do something awful to Group X, just find one awful thing the group has done. Since they're officially "unforgivable," they deserve whatever you do to them, right?

On an individual level, the Unforgivable Heuristic typically leads to hysterical overreactions to minor misdeeds. On the collective level, however, the Unforgivable Heuristic is a pathway to limitless self-righteous atrocities. It's classic bait-and-switch. The Unforgivable Heuristic sounds like a high bar. At the collective level, however, this bar lies at ground level. Everyone's maximally guilty, so everyone's vulnerable to maximum reprisals.

I take all this as a *reductio ad absurdum* of collective guilt. You might deem such a *reductio* superfluous, but belief in collective guilt – especially *national* collective guilt – remains widespread. People use collective guilt to deny tragic moral trade-offs. Who wants to specify the conditions under which murdering innocent Russian children is morally permissible? Far easier to just say, "The Russians are unforgivable and we're going to make them pay for what they did."