On Not Being Sorry About The Morally Bad

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Bad things often happen, and morally good people ought to be sorry that they happen. People are sometimes morally permitted not to do anything about such bad things, not to have to struggle to prevent them from occurring (otherwise the demands of morality would be excessive). But what could be more obvious to a good person than that one ought to be sorry about the occurrence of bad things? Even more so, it would seem, if the bad things occur in one's vicinity, or one is involved with them. I shall argue that sometimes it is morally (at least) permissible not to be sorry when bad things happen. Perhaps it is even permissible to be happy about it.

Consider a case that is unambiguously bad. Before you were born your parents gave birth to a seemingly normal daughter, except that she was born with a severe defect in her heart, which led to her death after only a few weeks. Let us bracket the effect on your parents. You were then born. In time, you learned that, had your sister survived, your even having been conceived would have been precluded. Are you sorry that she died?

The death is a morally bad state of affairs. By contrast, your not having been born would not have been morally bad. The number of times that babies are not conceived is literally uncountable, and this fact, barring a very unusual story, is not plausibly thought of as sad, let alone morally bad. Yet I do not see that you should be sorry that things happened as they did. Gloating would be inappropriate, and you can and should be sorry for her in the sense of feeling sympathy and pity (as well as counterfactual regret that things could not have turned out such that both of you could have been alive). But in the overall sense, you are permitted not to be sorry that things have happened as they have. To distinguish the two senses, we can call the first sense of sorry 'sorry *for*', and the second 'sorry *that*'. You ought to be sorry for her, but you are permitted not to be sorry that things (including her death) have happened as they did, for then you would not be alive. You are even morally permitted to be

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happy to have been born, even though you know that, for your birth to have occurred, your sister had to have died.[1]

Nothing in this implies that you would be permitted (in a science-fiction sort of way) to bring about her death. Yet it also seems that (a) her death is clearly bad, and that (b) you may permissibly not be sorry about it, in an important sense. Morally it is bad (overall) that she died; this is a worse state of affairs than her continuing to live and your not having been conceived. But you are permitted not to be sorry about this. In this way, morality is much more lenient than we usually suppose.

It may be broadly *useful* if people believe that they always ought to be sorry about the occurrence of bad things, and that they certainly must not be happy about them. Strong human tendencies towards hatred, malevolence, envy, and cold indifference certainly need to be countervailed. But this is a different matter. In certain cases one may permissibly not be sorry about the occurrence of bad things, even when *the only reason one could be not-sorry is that one gains from it*.

We should not think that this conclusion follows from some curiosity about the case we considered or from an odd point of view on it. Assume that a crazed gunman happens to open fire in your direction on the street. By chance two pedestrians step into the line of fire, thus dying, but your life is thereby saved (both were necessary for the bullets not to have reached you). Morally, the death of two people is clearly worse than the death of one, even though *that* one would have been you. You ought to be sorry *for* those two people, but need you be sorry, overall, *that things happened as they have*? In fact, we are not sorry implicitly quite often when such things occur, if a bit less dramatically. If I am successful in love, or win that breakthrough job, this often follows from the fact that my competitor has had something bad happen to him or her (say, he or she had a mental breakdown, or was just not born too bright or attractive). Outside of the context of competition, I may wish him or her well, but within this specific context I am not sorry, all things considered, to have the upper hand. Typically we do not (or would not, if we could) do anything to change things, we do not think that we must change them, and we are not sorry to be as well off as we

[1] Surely there would be limits. Many people were born because their parents met while fleeing Nazi persecution. While their births might not have occurred except for the Holocaust, one cannot morally be glad that the Holocaust occurred.

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are, when bad things occur to other people.[2] To our credit, we do not often think about these things in this way ('I am so pleased that he failed, because I thereby received that chance'). But if anyone who reflects on his or her responses in such competitive situations declares that he or she is sorry (in the 'sorry that' sense) to have won, we would suspect that that person was being hypocritical.

Consider now a case in which very bad things happen to morally bad people. Even such cases may be relevant for us, since the bad that befalls these persons may be very disproportional to what they deserve. A group of racist neo-Nazis, consumed with hatred for Jews and blacks, are glad about the suffering or death of any Jewish or black person, yet do nothing seriously bad to any Jewish or black person. On a certain day, this group of people (and only they) is travelling on a bus that swerves on the road and falls off a cliff. Death is a punishment that seems to go beyond even what virulent but passive racists deserve. Hence their death is a morally bad thing. It is morally bad, overall, that they died. Ought Jews and blacks to be sorry that they died? Or, indeed, sorry for them? That seems too excessive for morality to require. Similarly for a case in which a vicious rapist escapes justice, but then falls into the hands of thugs, who torture him. We can assume that torture is morally forbidden, certainly in such a case. But ought the women whom the rapist raped to be sorry for him? Due to certain facts about the person involved (an 'agent-relative' component), sometimes a person is permitted not to be sorry when morally bad things occur to others. In the cases of the Neo-Nazis and of the rapist, not being sorry in both senses seems permissible.

Four objections can be anticipated. First, one could doubt whether deciding to be sorry or not sorry is at all within our power, thus putting it beyond the reach of moral consideration. This, however, is implausible. At issue here is not necessarily some deeply emotional response, but merely the basic sentiment that one regrets that something is the case. We *can* understand that we have moral reason to be sorry about certain occurrences, and we *do* have some ability to affect our pertinent attitudes. Note also that this criticism goes too far: surely we want to say that someone who is not sorry about the gratuitous murder of children is (if sane) morally at fault.

[2] Certain types of egalitarians and (for different reasons) utilitarians would be more strongly committed here. They would very often be sorry that bad things happened to others rather than to themselves. But that statement might only be a *reductio* of those positions. For a related argument on these matters, see my 'Choice-egalitarianism and the Paradox of the Baseline', *Analysis* **63** (2003), 146–51.

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Second, the perspectival and biased nature of our emotions can be put forward as making my claim to be 'no big deal'. After all, we are typically permitted to care more about those close to us and for our emotions not to track impersonal objective value closely. It is natural to be saddened by the death even of one's pet, out of all proportion to the objective moral weight of the loss, and morality permits it. This, however, is not quite the same thing. At issue in this essay is the idea that people may be not at all sorry (or may even be happy) at the occurrence of something morally bad, such as unjust death or torture. Namely, that people's reactions will be in clear *opposition* to morality on issues of great importance, e.g. when fundamental moral constraints have been breached—while morality permits this. And that, if true, is surely surprising.

Third, it might be thought that my case presents nothing but the familiar idea of agent-centred priority and agent-centred permissions. For example, if a boat we are travelling on capsizes, we are allowed to save our loved ones even if we could instead save a larger number of strangers (thereby bringing about an objectively better state of affairs). However, this objection misidentifies the nature of my examples: we are *not permitted* to kill the baby (who dies shortly after birth), or the neo-Nazis (whose bus falls off a cliff). In the random shooting we are not permitted to push two bystanders into the line of fire in order to shield ourselves. All things considered, morality does not make these deaths acceptable (as it makes acceptable the deaths of the strangers we do not save because we have instead saved our loved ones). Yet I have argued that it would not be morally wrong for relevant parties not to be sorry, in a central sense, about the deaths of the baby, the unlucky pedestrians, or the neo-Nazis.

Finally, it might be claimed that moral seriousness precludes my conclusion. If we are committed to morality, then we must be sorry in the sort of cases that I presented; our attitudes ought to track moral judgment. It is mere hypocrisy to avow morality but not to expect of oneself the appropriate sadness towards the occurrence of the bad. But this absolutist view seems too strong. I think that my examples make a convincing case for setting limits to the moral expectation for sorrow, even from those who are moral. When one cannot reasonably be expected to feel sorrow (at least sorrow overall, sorrow *that*), perhaps the call for sorrow is itself a mere call for hypocrisy.

Bad things happen even to good people who are innocent, states of affairs that are bad overall often prevail, and people are morally wronged by others. But we may often permissibly not be sorry.

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Morality does not seem to demand that good people must always be sorry when morally bad things happen. Quite how this can be so, and when we ought to be sorry and when we may not be sorry, are difficult and important questions that await further inquiry.[3]

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