

# Survivor's Guilt

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Sometimes, individuals who survive a tragedy, such as the Holocaust, an airplane crash, or a tidal wave, report feeling guilty that they lived while others close to them – others at least as deserving – perished. What should we say about this report? Is it real guilt? Is it appropriate to feel? I first distinguish various manifestations of survivor's guilt, and consider whether any count as genuine forms of guilt. Then, I consider arguments for and against the view that such an emotion is reasonable.

## The Nature of Survivor's Guilt

Broadly speaking, survivor's guilt is feeling bad about oneself for one's associates having died, for not having died along with them, or for not having saved them, even though one did no culpable wrong in contributing to their deaths. By this account, it is not survivor's guilt when one feels bad because one is unsure of whether one was in fact morally responsible for others' deaths. It is also not survivor's guilt when one feels bad about clearly having been morally responsible for their deaths, albeit with a lower degree of culpable wrongdoing than intentional killing, e.g., when one negligently caused the deaths of others or failed to rescue them when one could and should have. Instead, survivor's guilt, at least of the sort that raises particularly interesting questions, presumes that an agent either did no wrong, or was faultless for having done so. The clearest case is one in which there was no ability for the survivor to have causally affected the victims, i.e., neither to have killed them, nor to have rescued them. However, depending on one's views of culpability, survivor's guilt could appear upon having causally contributed to others' deaths in a way that was completely unforeseeable and so not at all blameworthy.

Many survivors of large-scale tragedy for which they are not at all morally responsible report feeling guilty, at least some of the time. Consider Jewish people who made it through the Holocaust (*see* GENOCIDE; HOLOCAUST), soldiers who escaped war with their lives, and gay men who did not contract HIV (reported in Baumeister et al. 1994: 251–3). It was also common among the Japanese who survived a tsunami some years ago, as recounted by the film-maker Tatsuya Mori: “On the day of the earthquake I was drinking beer with my friends in Roppongi. Thousands of people lost their lives, but I was drinking beer. I didn't know what was happening at the time, but when I realised, I was ashamed. I felt guilty” (quoted in Arpon 2012).

These examples and the above definition imply that “guilt” in the present context picks out an emotion, something subjective, and so is to be distinguished from guilt as something objective, i.e., the fact of having done something culpably wrong.

Survivor's guilt is, at least at first glance, the *feeling* of guilt (or something like it) despite *not being* guilty.

There is some debate about whether this emotion is in fact best described as "guilt" (*see* GUILT) (setting aside, until the next section, whether it is appropriate). More than a few in the field maintain that, either logically or substantively, "one can feel guilt only about actions" (Hurka 2001: 106; see also Williams 1993: 89–93). If that were true, then what is commonly called "survivor's guilt" would probably not in fact be guilt, supposing it was not one's action (or the "action" of inaction) that was responsible for others' deaths. Many of these thinkers would contend that the emotion in question is better understood as shame.

However, others maintain that this analysis of the essential nature of guilt is too narrow, and that it is instead possible to feel guilty about facets of oneself that do not concern one's actions. For example, it appears to some philosophers that one can feel guilty about emotions one feels and even about mere states of oneself that do not involve culpable wrongdoing (Greenspan 1992; Jäger and Bartsch 2006: 195–8). Similarly, according to some psychologists, "in fact, people may be able to feel guilty without believing that they have done anything wrong. The perception of oneself as responsible for a transgression is not necessary to produce guilt feelings" (Baumeister et al. 1994: 253).

Even if one can feel real guilt simply for being alive when others are not, shame could still be relevant to the presence of survivor's guilt, or guilt for having performed actions could still be relevant to what makes survivor's guilt possible. It might be that action-based guilt is a necessary background condition for feeling guilt about attitudes or states (as per Deigh 1999), and it might be that shame is also partially constitutive of survivor's guilt, alongside guilt (as per Griffioen 2014).

There is a variety of what one might call "impure" cases of survivor's guilt or cases related to it, in which one feels bad not merely for surviving when others did not or for failing to rescue others when one could not have done so, but also for having had certain desires or feelings about those who perished. For example, imagine that a person had wanted others to die, and then they did, but not by virtue of anything he had done or not done. For another example, consider a person who feels pleased upon learning of others' deaths, for which he, again, was not morally responsible. In both cases, the person might feel guilt about having wished others ill, not merely about having survived when others did not, which is at the core of survivor's guilt.

Another sort of impure or related case is where one has benefited in certain ways from others' deaths, say, by having received an inheritance when family members died or been given a promotion when co-workers did. Finally, there are also scenarios in which one has failed to perform some duty in respect of the dead, e.g., neglected to bury someone properly or to look after her children adequately (*see* DUTIES TO THE DEAD). Although there is not, *ex hypothesi*, culpable wrongdoing for having contributed to deaths in these cases, they involve complications, in that what prompts the negative emotion is not the mere fact that others died and one did not, or that one did not rescue others (even though one did no culpable wrong in contributing to their deaths).

Most of the debate in the literature is not about subjective guilt for having manifested attitudinal vice, benefited from others' misfortunes, or failed to do right by the dead, but instead focuses strictly on the emotion of feeling bad *for having survived* when one's fellows did not. Beyond understanding the nature of this emotion, ethicists want to know whether it is reasonable to exhibit it, discussed in the next two sections.

### Survivor's Guilt as Unreasonable

The default view is that survivor's guilt is normally not reasonable, at least in the light of moral-theoretic positions common in recent Anglo-American philosophy. Contemporary theories of morality in the English-speaking literature seem to entail that survivor's guilt is inappropriate, barring unusual situations.

First off, from a standard utilitarian perspective, one has moral reason to let oneself feel bad insofar as doing so would be expected to produce good, particularly by preventing one from doing wrong in the future. However, few survivors of the present sort, viz., who have done no culpable wrong, need such a heavy emotion to keep them on the straight and narrow.

Some utilitarians might suggest that survivor's guilt would prompt people to go out of their way for others, and so is morally desirable for that reason. As one survivor of the Japanese tsunami remarks: "[H]aving survived the tragedy made me feel like I have to do something for the good of society" (quoted in Osaki 2015). Even though he does not say that it is *feeling bad* that prompted him to contribute to the general welfare, it plausibly could have been (for empirical discussion, see Baumeister et al. 1994).

However, it would be natural for a utilitarian to suggest: "It will do no good to feel guilt merely for having survived." It would be better if people went out of their way to maximize the general welfare, but without the painful emotion of guilt. Where it is feasible to go forth and promote pleasure without one feeling pain, utilitarianism prescribes it.

Kantianism, too, seems to entail that survivor's guilt is typically inapt. It would be characteristic of a Kantian to say: "You did nothing wrong, and so have nothing to feel bad about." As Herbert Morris (1987) points out in his classic discussion of the issues, the common view among Kantians is that guilt ought to track culpable wrongdoing. If one's basic duty is to treat people with respect in virtue of their capacity to make moral decisions, then one ought to respond to them in the light of how they have mis/used it. For a standard Kantian, that means some kind of retributive outlook (*see* RETRIBUTION), where the amount of blame (*see* BLAME) that is right to dish out for a given action should be proportionate to the degree of its wrongness in combination with the degree of the agent's responsibility for it (e.g., Nozick 1981: 363–93). Self-imposed blame, i.e., guilt, should presumably be based on the same factors, so that the more wrongful one's act, and (roughly) the greater one's control over it and the more central to one's plan it was, the more the wrongdoer should feel guilty for having performed it.

This approach entails that, where there has been no wrong done, or no responsibility for the wrong, one is innocent such that there should be no blame, i.e., neither punishment nor guilt. As one contemporary Kantian puts it: "Strictly speaking, survivor guilt is not rational guilt, for surviving the Holocaust, or surviving battle ... is not typically because a person has deliberately let another take his place in harm" (Sherman 2013: 185; see also 182; and Jäger and Bartsch 2006: 195–6).

Finally, consider virtue theory in recent Western philosophy, much of which draws on the Aristotelian tradition. One salient theoretical approach to virtue is the view shared by Thomas Hurka (2001) and Robert Adams (2006), according to which virtue consists (roughly) of loving or being for the good and hating or being against the bad. When it comes to moral virtue, one has it (again, roughly) insofar as one performs right acts, likes doing so, does so for their own sake, etc., or insofar as one feels guilty when one has acted wrongly or exhibited vice.

There is no reason, within this framework as normally expounded, for a survivor to think of either herself or her survival as bad or wrongful. Although neither Hurka nor Adams addresses survivor's guilt, Hurka does take up the related case of someone who accidentally strikes another with his car, noting, "If the driver was driving safely, his action was not wrong and involved no vicious attitude, so he has no ground for guilt" (2001: 204). Similar remarks apply to someone who was, say, merely lucky enough to survive a tsunami. These virtue ethicists would likely say that some kind of regret could be appropriate in these cases, but that is not the same as guilt.

In sum, prominent normative ethical theory in the contemporary West appears to support the judgment that survivor's guilt is unreasonable. There is as yet no substantial literature on what the correct responses are to misplaced guilt. For example, should one feel bad for having inappropriately felt bad?

### **Survivor's Guilt as Reasonable**

There have been three major strategies to show that it is often reasonable to experience survivor's guilt, which, in rough catchwords, appeal to prudence, imperfect duty, and loyalty. These are not attempts to explain psychologically why people feel survivor's guilt (on which see, e.g., Baumeister et al. 1994; Jäger and Bartsch 2006: 197; Sherman 2013: 186), but rather to show that they should feel it. The conclusion of these arguments is normally the weak claim that it would not be unreasonable to have such an emotion, as opposed to the strong claim that it would be unreasonable not to have it.

According to the prudential rationale, a survivor has good reason to exhibit guilt in that it would serve the function of indicating to others that they have no grounds to envy him. Patricia Greenspan says that showing others that a survivor feels guilt would do the job of "keeping social frustration from focusing – as it naturally might – on him" (1995: 180), while J. David Velleman similarly says that such guilt is a form of "anxiety about warranting envious resentment" (2003: 248). In order to prevent others who may have survived a tragedy, but not come out as clean as you, from taking out their jealousy or anger on you, Greenspan and Velleman are suggesting that you should make it clear to them that you feel bad and are also suffering.

One prima facie concern about this argument is that its logic prescribes feigning survivor's guilt, not actually feeling it. Insofar as the point is to ward off attacks from others, one would be best off not experiencing a negative emotion but convincing others that one is.

Another worry is that this argument cannot make sense of the idea that survivor's guilt has some moral backing or is a virtue. If it is justified, it does not seem so merely for reasons of personal well-being. Many of us are disposed to think that a good person would be inclined to feel survivor's guilt, even if it has been difficult to articulate theoretically why it would be apt.

A second argument avoids these concerns, for appealing to the idea that a survivor has not lived up to certain moral obligations. Nancy Sherman (2011) suggests that survivor's guilt is apt, at least in large part, for having failed to fulfill imperfect duties to others, that is, duties to aid other people that are not readily specifiable and cannot be fully upheld:

[F]eelings of guilt and responsibility tangle with feelings of having betrayed fellow soldiers. At stake is the duty to those soldiers ... The guilt that soldiers feel ... is fitting because it gets right certain moral (or evaluative) features of a soldier's world – that good soldiers depend on each other, come to love each other, and have duties to care and bring each other safely home. Philosophers ... have called these “imperfect duties”: even in the best circumstances, we can't perfectly fulfill them.

The argument appears to be that surviving when others have not means that, say, a soldier has failed to live up to his imperfect duties to aid others and, in particular, to have saved them from death (for a related, phenomenological account, see Christensen 2013). Sherman's point is not merely that a surviving soldier should consider whether he had lived up to his duties, but rather that he would be reasonable in feeling guilty for having failed to live up to them.

This argument appears to sit uneasily with what Sherman also recognizes as a key aspect of survivor's guilt, namely, “the desire ... to help frustrated by the inability, through no fault of one's own, to do so” (2011; cf. Sherman 2013: 190–1). While it is true that “we can't perfectly fulfill” duties to aid others, insofar as we have duties to act in particular ways, the dictum that “ought implies can” seems relevant. If a soldier truly could not have helped his comrades, not even by having done something differently earlier, then it is implausible to think that he has violated any duty to have helped them, not even an imperfect one. The respect in which imperfect duties cannot be completely fulfilled is arguably not, *contra* Sherman, that it is impossible for one to aid everyone to the degree one is clearly obligated to aid them. It is rather that, for those whom one could aid, there are a variety of ways one could do so and an inherent lack of clarity about when one violates duties in respect of them.

A third argument for survivor's guilt appeals to moral considerations, but not ones of having violated a duty. It focuses not so much on action, but rather on attitude. According to this approach, one would be a better person (even if not better off) upon feeling survivor's guilt.

One strand of this virtue-oriented rationale maintains that survivor's guilt would likely bring certain desirable traits in its wake. If one were routinely disposed to feel

bad whenever associates are seriously harmed, one would be led to reflect carefully on one's behavior. It is plausibly good for its own sake to be a person who often thinks honestly and thoroughly about whether she is living up to moral norms. At least it is a vice to be prone to ignore evidence of one's having been responsible for serious harm (LaFollette 2016).

One concern about this rationale for survivor's guilt is that it provides a merely instrumental justification of it. If moral reflection could be prompted without survivor's guilt, then, by this rationale, there would be no point in feeling it. However, there might be something virtuous about survivor's guilt in itself, roughly because it is an expression of loyalty (*see* LOYALTY) and related values.

Morris appears to have been the first to suggest this idea, briefly proposing that survivor's guilt can "manifest one's solidarity with others" (1987: 237). Since then, others have developed more fully the idea that virtues of loyalty, solidarity, and similar goods can make it appropriate to feel survivor's guilt. In fact, Sherman suggests this sort of approach when she remarks of one soldier, "The guilt ... marks his deep connection to his troops and his moral accountability to them and to himself ... Though they do no wrong, they blame themselves as a way of sharing the ill fate. Sharing the evil is a way to negate the awful sense of betrayal" (2013: 182, 186).

Although survivors may feel as though they have betrayed those who perished, it is implausible to think that they in fact did so. There remains, however, the deeper point that being disposed to feel survivor's guilt might be a form of good character *qua* one who is bound up with others. Thaddeus Metz (2018) appeals to relational virtues salient in the African philosophical tradition (*see* AFRICAN ETHICS) to argue that those who feel survivor's guilt display excellence for prizing communion with associates. According to him, survivor's guilt is a way to experience feelings attuned to the condition of others with whom one identifies, to judge that one has not exhibited the excellence of helping them (as opposed to having violated a duty toward them), to acknowledge that one has not shared the same fate with them, and to impart something of that fate to oneself.

A key question for this approach is whether survivor's guilt is essential to manifest the virtue of one who shares a way of life with others, including emotionally and practically. Why not exhibit other negative emotions, such as embarrassment, loneliness, or bewilderment? Or why not avoid negative emotions altogether and demonstrate one's tie to the dead simply by doing whatever one can to help others harmed by their death?

## Conclusion

It was only in the early 1960s that the phrase "survivor's guilt" entered the psychiatric literature, as a result of engagement with Holocaust survivors (according to Sherman 2013: 185), and it was only in the 1990s that English-speaking ethicists began to address the matter in any depth. There is surely not yet enough written by moral

philosophers about what survivor's guilt is, whether there is good reason to exhibit it, and how to respond if it is unreasonable to do so. In addition, there needs to be further reflection on what, if any, underlying ties there are between survivor's guilt and other forms, such as "vicarious" or "collective" guilt (*see* COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY) in which one feels bad for the actions of others (for a bit of such analysis, see Christensen 2013).

**See also:** AFRICAN ETHICS; BLAME; COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY; DUTIES TO THE DEAD; GENOCIDE; GUILT; HOLOCAUST; LOYALTY; RETRIBUTION

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