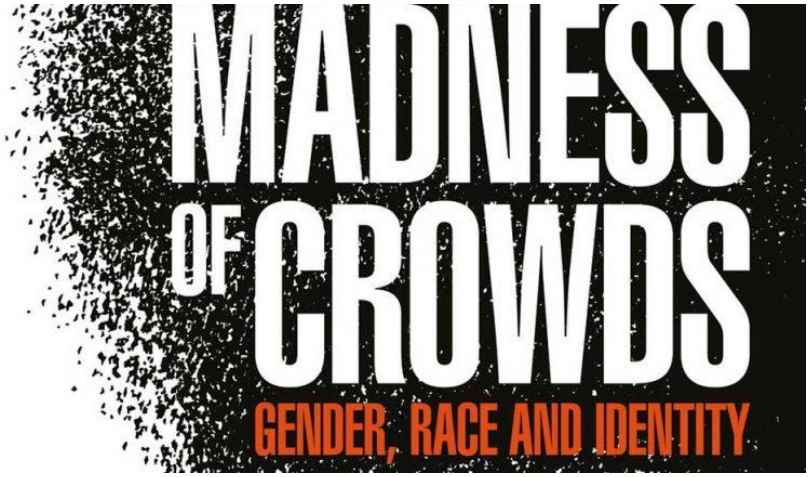

On Forgiveness

Douglas Murray

The arrival of the age of social media has done things we have still barely begun to understand and presented problems with which we have hardly started to grapple. The collapse of the barrier between private and public language is one. But bigger even than that (though partly resulting from it) is the deepest problem of all: that we have allowed ourselves no mechanisms for getting out of the situation technology has landed us in. It appears able to cause catastrophes but not to heal them, to wound but not to remedy. Consider the phenomenon now known as 'public shaming'.

In February 2018, only a few months before Sarah Jeong's appointment to The New York Times editorial board, the paper had announced another recruitment, that of a 44-year-old tech journalist called Quinn Norton. The internet immediately went to work, and – as they later would with Sarah Jeong – analysed her Twitter feed. Again they found tweets which were, in the language of social justice campaigners, 'not good'. Among the things that were found were a number of tweets from 2013 in which Norton had used the word 'fag'. As in 'Look, fag' and (on one occasion with another Twitter user with whom she was rowing) 'you shit eating, hypersensitive little crybaby fag'. On another occasion – back in 2009 – Norton was found to have used the most unacceptable word of all. In 2009, in a row with another Twitter user, she had replied, 'If God had meant a nigger to talk to our schoolchildren, He would have would have [sic] made him president. Oh, but wait . . . Um.' Just seven hours after The New York Times had announced its new hire it backpedalled by saying Norton would not in fact be joining the paper.

In a subsequent piece in The Atlantic Norton explained what she thought had happened. She acknowledged that many things she had written and tweeted in the past had been ignorant and embarrassing. She also explained what it felt like to, in her words, have a 'doppelganger' version of herself swiftly emerge online. In common with other people who had been the subject of

online shaming this version of her that people were railing against was not 'who she was' but a hideous, simplified, out-of-context version of tiny parts of herself.

She explained that she believed herself to have been the victim of what she referred to as 'context collapse'. This is another term for the collapse of the divide between private and public language, where a conversation meant for an in-group becomes known to an out-group with no knowledge of the original context of the discussion. Norton said that her use of the 'n' word had been in the context of an online row in which she was 'in support of [President] Obama'. Since Norton had been in friendly as well as unfriendly rows with various white racists it was possible that she was using vile language to mirror back at someone who was also using vile language. Elsewhere her engagement with 'Anons' (members of the activist collective 'Anonymous') was explained to be the reason for her use of the word 'fags'. Such language gets used in such groups, but clearly does not transfer well to the world of The New York Times. The two worlds met, Norton was history there, and the world stampeded on.

But these cases deserve some reflection. First because cases like Norton's and Jeong's invite the question: 'What is a fair representation of a person in the internet age?' What is a fair way to describe somebody? Norton, for instance, might henceforth be summed up as 'The racist, homophobic tech journalist fired by The New York Times'. She might think a fairer version of her life would be 'Writer and mother'. But then Jeong presumably does not think of herself as a racist either. So who gets to call it? If it is the mob then we are in trouble.

Indeed, only the worst version of someone's life contains the information that makes the internet stop and look. It is pure gold for a network addicted to shaming and schadenfreude. We all know the glee at watching someone fall from grace; the righteous feeling that can come with joining in the punishment of a transgressor. Even (perhaps especially) if their transgression is for a sin we ourselves have committed. And we know from the work of the anthropologist and philosopher René Girard of the societal release that can come from the identification of such a scapegoat. So the inclination is to go for the account of a life which is least understanding and least nuanced: most appalling and most appalled.

Here lies an additional quagmire. There is little enough recourse when old school journalism tramples across someone's life. But on the internet there is not even a regulatory body to appeal to if your life has been raked over in this way. Thousands – perhaps millions – of people have been involved, and there is no mechanism to reach all of them and get them to admit that they raked over your life in an unfair manner. Nobody has the time, few people are deemed important enough. There are other

people to move onto. And unlike the pool of people the old media might trample over, tech can pick on almost anyone on the planet and spin them around in the tornado.

The second thing that is important about stories like those of Norton, Jeong and others is the question that the internet age has still not begun to contend with: how, if ever, is our age able to forgive? Since everybody errs in the course of their life there must be – in any healthy person or society – some capacity to be forgiven. Part of forgiveness is the ability to forget. And yet the internet will never forget. Everything can always be summoned up afresh by new people. A future employer will always see Norton's use of the 'n' word and wonder, context aside, whether this is the sort of person they would really want to hire.

The controversial tweets of Norton and Jeong have been erased from their Twitter pages, but they have been captured for posterity by multiple other users. To see them online today can prompt a reaction as great as though they appeared not a few years ago, or a decade ago, but yesterday or today.

Until very recently a slip-up or error made even by a very famous person would be whittled away by time. There are some things so big that they will never be forgotten. Someone being tried in a courtroom or going to prison keeps that on their record. But living in a world where non-crimes have the same effect is especially deranging. What court can be appealed to? Especially when the nature of the crimes, or what constitutes a crime, can vary almost from day to day. What is the correct way to refer to somebody who is trans today? Did you use this word as a joke or an insult? How will what we are doing now look in 20 years? Who will be the next Joy Reid, held to account for the 'wrong' view expressed at a time when everybody else was also expressing the 'wrong' view? If we do not know the answer to these questions then we have to try to ensure that we can predict the crowd-turns not just of the next year but of the rest of our lives. Good luck with that.

It is wholly unsurprising that studies show an increase in anxiety, depression and mental illness in young people today. Rather than being a demonstration of 'snowflake'-ism it is a wholly understandable reaction to a world whose complexities have squared in their lifetimes. A perfectly reasonable response to a society propelled by tools that can provide endless problems but no answers. And yet there are answers.

In November 1964 Hannah Arendt delivered a lecture at the University of Chicago titled 'Labour, Work, Action', part of a conference on 'Christianity and Economic Man: Moral Decisions in an Affluent Society'. The main subject of her lecture was the question of what an 'active' life consists of. What do we do when we are 'active'? But towards the close of her lecture Arendt reflected on some of the consequences of being active in the

world. Every human being's life is able to be told as a story because it has a beginning and an end. But the actions between those two fixed points – what we do when we are 'acting' in the world – have consequences that are unbounded and limitless. The 'frailty and unreliability of human affairs' means that we are constantly acting into a 'web of relationships' in which 'every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction'. This means that 'every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes'. A single word or deed could change everything. As a consequence, says Arendt, 'we can never really know what we are doing'.

What makes the 'frailty and unreliability of human action' worse is the fact that, as Arendt says:

Though we don't know what we are doing when we are acting, we have no possibility ever to undo what we have done. Action processes are not only unpredictable, they are also irreversible; there is no author or maker who can undo what he has done if he does not like it or when the consequences prove disastrous.

Just as the only tool to protect against unpredictability is some ability to make and keep promises, so Arendt says only one tool exists to ameliorate the irreversibility of our actions. That is 'the faculty of forgiving'. These two things necessarily go together – the ability to bind together through promises and the ability to stay bound through forgiveness. Of the latter Arendt writes:
Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.

This was a truth before the rise of the internet, but how much truer it has become since.

One key to addressing this lies in historical rather than personal forgetting. And historical rather than personal forgiveness. Forgetting is not the same thing as forgiving, but it often accompanies it and certainly always encourages it. Terrible things are done, by a person or a people, but over time the memory fades. People gradually forget the exact details or nature of a scandal. A cloud surrounds a person or an action and then that too dissipates among a mass of new discoveries and experiences. In the case of the worst historical wrongs the victims and perpetrators die out – the one who gave offence and the person to whom offence was done. Some descendants may remember for a time. But as the insult and grievance fade from generation to generation those who hold on to this grievance are often regarded as displaying not sensitivity or honour but belligerence.

As well as helping people to remember, the internet helps make people approach the past from a strange, all-knowing angle. This makes the past hostage – like everything else – to any archaeologist with a vendetta. Events that were scandals long ago but which have not been for generations can be brought to the surface again. How could we have forgotten about this crime committed over a hundred years ago? Should we not all know about it? Should we not feel shame? What does not knowing about it say about us now?

Even things that seemed settled can be unsettled again. In his poem 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', W. H. Auden famously wrote of literary reputations: 'Time that with this strange excuse / Pardoned Kipling and his views, / And will pardon Paul Claudel, / Pardons him for writing well.' Except that now we learn that if Kipling was ever pardoned then he can also later be unpardoned. Perhaps such writers always could to some degree, but today this can be done far away, remotely, fast and fanatically.

In July 2018 students at the University of Manchester painted over a mural of Kipling's 'If' – a poem which has previously been voted Britain's favourite. But however moving or inspiring many people find that poem, these students decided to erase it. Perhaps inevitably, they wrote a poem by Maya Angelou over the top of it. The 'liberation and access' officer at the university's student union justified the action by explaining that Kipling was guilty of having 'sought to legitimate the British empire's presence in India' and of 'dehumanising people of colour'.

Before the advent of the internet, people's mistakes could be remembered within their communities or circles. Then being able to start a new life somewhere else in the world was at least a possibility. Today, people may be followed by their doppelgänger wherever they go in the world. And even after death the excavation and tomb-raiding will go on, not in a spirit of enquiry or forgiveness but in one of retribution and vengeance. At the heart of which attitude lies the strange retributive instinct of our time towards the past which suggests that we know ourselves to be better than people in history because we know how they behaved and we know that we would have behaved better. There is a gigantic modern fallacy at work here. For of course people only think that they would have acted better in history because they know how history ended up. People in history didn't – and don't – have that luxury. They made good or bad choices in the times and places they were in, given the situations and shibboleths that they found themselves with.

To view the past with some degree of forgiveness is among other things an early request to be forgiven – or at least understood – in turn. Because not everything we are doing or intend to do now will necessarily survive this whirlwind of retribution and judgement. Can such an attitude of forgiveness be applied to the

personal as well as the historical? To the people going through history with us?

Over New Year's Eve 2017/18 the British government slipped out news of a new government appointment: the journalist and schools founder Toby Young had been appointed as one member of a government advisory board on higher education which was being set up by the Department of Education. For some years Young had been best known as a prominent advocate of the government's 'free schools' programme and had dedicated his time to opening a new school in London and heading up the New Schools Network. Before taking this route Young had been the author of, among other things How to Lose Friends and Alienate People – an account (also made into a film) of his failure to crack America. It was a rumbustious, self-lacerating and revealing book, and like many of Young's journalistic columns it relied to some extent on shocking readers. Perhaps a Damascene conversion from one phase of his life to the next could have led to some forgiveness, but for a period Young was certainly riding two horses: funny and shocking journalist plus person helping children from poorer families get a better education. It was at the crossroads that the online mob caught him.

In the hours and days after his appointment was announced Young's Twitter account – and back articles – provided a treasure trove for offence archaeologists searching for errors. Indeed, for anyone unfamiliar with his work it must have been the online shaming equivalent of finding Tutankhamun's tomb.

It was discovered that in 2009 Young had expressed an interest in women's breasts on a number of occasions and was willing to talk about them on Twitter to his followers. He talked about one friend's 'massive boobs'. Watching Prime Minister's Questions on television he asked his followers on Twitter: 'Serious cleavage behind Ed Miliband's head. Anyone know who it belongs to?' As he later said, none of these comments was among his proudest moments. But the excavation would not stop. In a piece in The Spectator from 2001 he had written about a new television programme on the 'Men and Motors' channel called 'The glamour game' which he said was basically pornography and that he liked it. A sub-editor gave the piece the headline 'Confessions of a porn addict'. Almost two decades later this became one of the principal charges against him. Labour and Conservative MPs criticized him. The Times of London headlined its piece, ""Porn addict" Toby Young fights to keep role as student watchdog'. London's commuter paper The Evening Standard ran with 'New pressure on Theresa May to sack "porn addict" Toby Young from watchdog role'.

He was found to have once used the term 'queer as a coot' to describe a gay celebrity and once sat at the back of the audience of a conference on IQ and genetics that took place at a London university. Essentially, he was found to have nicked every single

tripwire of the era. Nine days after the announcement of his new position, as the potential for examining Young's back catalogue looked like it could go on all year, he withdrew from the appointment. Within a few more weeks he had lost every other job and position he had tried to hold onto, including the job of running the New Schools Network, which was his principal source of income and the passion of this second phase of his life. Nobody would defend Young's tweets about women's breasts. Plenty of people would question the judgement of anyone tweeting out self-confessedly 'sophomoric' humour as an adult. But what the Young case, like all the other cases of public shaming, raises is the most important question of all. Is there any route to forgiveness? Could Young's years of voluntary work helping disadvantaged children ever have the possibility of eradicating the sin of the boob tweets? If so, how many would be needed on each side, how many children helped in order to eradicate how many boobs? And what is a decent interval of time between an error and forgiveness? Does anybody know? Is anybody interested in working it out?

It is time we at least tried. After all we have now entered some of the most perilous territory of all. We now have cross-generational shaming. In August 2018 Lilly Diabetes announced that they were withdrawing from their sponsorship arrangement with the professional racecar driver Conor Daly just before the 26-year-old was about to make his NASCAR racing debut. This time the scandal was not about something Daly himself had said. The sponsors withdrew their support because a story surfaced from the 1980s. That decade – before Conor was born – his father had given an interview to a radio station in which he had used a derogatory term to refer to African-Americans. Daly senior declared himself 'mortified' and said that the term had a different meaning and connotation in his native Ireland and that he had only just moved to the US at the time. He expressed shame and regret and asked for forgiveness for the offence. But his son still lost the sponsorship deal.

In some manner with which we still haven't even begun to wrestle, we have created a world in which forgiveness has become almost impossible, in which the sins of the father can certainly be visited upon the son. And we remain remarkably unconcerned to create any mechanisms or consensus over how to address the resulting conundrum.

The consensus for centuries was that only God could forgive the ultimate sins. But on a day-to-day level the Christian tradition, among others, also stressed the desirability – if not the necessity – of forgiveness. Even to the point of infinite forgiveness. As one of the consequences of the death of God, Friedrich Nietzsche foresaw that people could find themselves stuck in cycles of Christian theology with no way out. Specifically that people would inherit the concepts of guilt, sin and shame but would be without the means of redemption which the Christian religion

also offered. Today we do seem to live in a world where actions can have consequences we could never have imagined, where guilt and shame are more at hand than ever, and where we have no means whatsoever of redemption. We do not know who could offer it, who could accept it, and whether it is a desirable quality compared to an endless cycle of fiery certainty and denunciation.

So we live in this world where everyone is at risk – like Professor Tim Hunt – of having to spend the rest of their lives living with our worst joke. And where the incentives lie not in acting in the world but in reacting to other people: specifically to audition in the role of a victim or judge for a piece of the moral virtue that suffering is mistakenly believed to endow. A world where nobody knows who is allowed to give alleviation for offence but where everybody has a reputational incentive to take it and run with it. A world in which one of the greatest exertions of 'power' is constantly exerted – the power to stand in judgement over, and potentially ruin, the life of another human being for reasons which may or may not be sincere.

To date there are only two weak, temporary answers to this conundrum. The first is that we forgive the people we like, or the person whose tribe or views most closely fit our own, or at least aggravate our enemies. So if Ezra Klein likes Sarah Jeong he will forgive her. If you dislike Toby Young you will not forgive him. This is one of the surest ways imaginable to embed every tribal difference that already exists.

A second temporary route that has been found is the route that another racing driver – Lewis Hamilton – recently took. At Christmas 2017 he released a video on his Instagram account. It showed Hamilton saying 'I'm so sad right now. Look at my nephew.' The 32-year-old then turned the camera-phone to show his young nephew wearing a pink and purple dress and waving a magic wand. 'Why are you wearing a princess dress?' Hamilton asks him. 'Boys don't wear princess dresses,' he adds. The boy laughs during this.

But this soon all turned deadly serious for Hamilton and his career. An anti-bullying charity condemned him for using his social media platform to 'undermine a small child'. Across the internet Hamilton was slammed for being transphobic and for embedding dated gender stereotypes. The media picked up on the story and made it a headline news item. An anti-rape charity which campaigns to help rape survivors called for the driver to be stripped of his MBE. Hamilton himself swiftly went on social media to apologize for his 'inappropriate' comments and tell everyone how much he loved his nephew. 'I love that my nephew feels free to express himself as we all should,' he said in one message. In another he said, 'I have always been in support of anyone living their life exactly how they wish and I hope I can be forgiven for this lapse in judgement.'

This clearly wasn't enough. Some months later, in August 2018, readers of the men's magazine GQ would find a picture of Lewis Hamilton on the cover, with a large interview and photo shoot inside. All of this – including the cover shot – was done in a skirt. As well as showing off his rippling abs and pecs in a lurid open multi-tartan top, he was also prominently wearing the kilt-like garment of many lurid patches and colours. The front-cover headline accompanying this image read: '"I want to make amends." Lewis Hamilton refuses to skirt the issue'. So this is the only other currently available mode for forgiveness. If you are rich enough and famous enough, you can use PR people and the front cover of a men's magazine to dress in a skirt and prostrate yourself before the swiftly moving dogmas of the age. Perhaps it is no wonder that an increasing number of people are persuaded that they should simply go along with those same dogmas. No questions allowed. No questions asked.

Taken from *The Madness of Crowds* by Douglas Murray.