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I WAS WRONG: THE MEANINGS OF APOLOGIES

Apologies pervade our news headlines, and our private affairs but how should we evaluate these often vague and deceptive rituals? Discussing numerous examples from ancient and recent history, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* argues that we suffer from considerable confusion about the moral meanings and social functions of these complex interactions. Rather than asking whether a speech act "is or is not" an apology, Smith offers a nuanced theory of apologetic meaning. Smith leads us with a clear voice though a series of rich philosophical and interdisciplinary questions, arguing that apologies have evolved from a confluence of diverse cultural and religious practices that do not translate easily into pluralistic secular discourse. After describing several varieties of apologies between individuals, Smith turns to collectives. Although apologies from corporations, governments, and other groups can be profoundly significant, Smith guides readers to appreciate the kinds of meaning that collective apologies often do not convey and warns of the dangers of collective acts of contrition that allow individual wrongdoers to obscure their personal blame.

Dr. Smith is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of New Hampshire. A graduate of Vassar College, he earned a law degree from SUNY at Buffalo and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Vanderbilt University. Before coming to UNH, he worked as a litigator for LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene, and MacRae and as a judicial clerk for the Honorable R. L. Nygaard of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit. He specializes in the philosophy of law, politics, and society, and he writes on and teaches aesthetics. He is working with Cambridge University Press on the sequel to *I Was Wrong*, applying his framework for apologetic meanings to examples in criminal and civil law. His writings have appeared in journals such as the *Continental Philosophy Review*, *Social Theory and Practice*, *The Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Culture*, *Theory & Critique*, the *Rutgers Law Journal*, and the *Buffalo Law Review.*

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For Nicole and Ulysses

"over and beyond ourselves
in which our love will outlive us"

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Please forgive me, sir,
for getting involved

in the music—
it's my innate weakness

for the cello: so human.
Please forgive me
for the attention

I've given your wife
tonight, sir.

I was taken by her
strand of pearls,
enchanted by piano
riff in the cortex,
by a secret

anticipation. I don't know
what came over me, sir.

After three Jack Daniel's
you must overlook

my candor, my lack of
sequitur.

I could talk
about Odysseus

& Athena, sexual
flowers, autogamy
or Nothingness.

I got carried away
by the swing of her hips.

But take no offense
if I return to the matter
as if hormonal.
I must confess
my love for black silk, sir.
I apologize for
the eyes in my head.

Yusef Komunyakaa, "When in Rome – Apologia," from
Neon Vernacular[1]

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Frontmatter
More information

Contents

Acknowledgments *page* ix

Introduction: Apologies as a Source of Moral Meaning in Modernity 1

Part One: **Apologies from Individuals**

1 **The Meanings of Apologies** 17
2 **Elements of the Categorical Apology** 28
A. Corroborated Factual Record 28
B. Acceptance of Blame 33
1. *Distinguished from Expression of Sympathy* 33
2. *Causation and Moral Responsibility* 38
3. *Accidents and Denials of Intent* 46
4. *Standing* 52
C. Identification of Each Harm 55
D. Identification of the Moral Principles Underlying Each Harm 57
E. Endorsing Moral Principles Underlying Each Harm 59
F. Recognition of Victim as Moral Interlocutor 64
G. Categorical Regret 67
H. Performance of the Apology 74
I. Reform and Redress 80
J. Intentions for Apologizing 91
K. Emotions 96
3 **Apologies and Gender** 108
4 **Apologies in Diverse Religious and Cultural Traditions** 114
5 **Unusual Cases: Apologizing to Animals, Infants, Machines, the Deceased, and Yourself** 126
6 **The Relationship between Apologies and Forgiveness** 132
7 **Varieties of Apologies** 140

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Nick Smith
Frontmatter
More information

Part Two: **Collective Apologies**

8 **The Collective Categorical Apology** 155
9 **The Problem of Consensus** 159
10 **Issues Specific to Collective Apologies** 167
A. Collectives Corroborating Factual Records 167
B. Collectives and Blame 173
1. *Distinguished from Collective Expressions of Sympathy* 173
2. *Collective Causation and Collective Moral Responsibility* 175
3. *Collective Accidents and Denials of Intent* 204
4. *Collectives, Standing, and Delegation* 207
C. Collectives Identifying Each Harm 221
D. Collectives Identifying the Moral Principles Underlying Each Harm 223
E. Collectives Endorsing Moral Principles Underlying Each Harm 225
F. Collectives Recognizing Victims as Moral Interlocutors 227
G. Collectives and Categorical Regret 229
H. Collectives Performing Apologies 232
I. Collectives Reforming and Providing Redress 233
J. Collective Intentions for Apologizing 239
K. Collective Emotions 240
11 **Varieties of Collective Apologies** 245

Conclusion: Previewing the Meanings of Apologies in Law 253

Notes 259
Index 293

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Frontmatter
More information

Acknowledgments

It can be easy to forget what an extreme luxury it is to work as a professor of philosophy, especially when we become habituated to its daily routines. As we stare at our screens, often tired and alone, we can also lose sight of what a great privilege it is to have one's work published, read, and discussed. The opportunity to follow my mind and conscience, rather than the orders of an employer, has been a life-defining gift from many people in my life.

Above all others, I must thank my wife, Nicole. Before I came to the University of New Hampshire in 2002, I worked as an attorney at a large firm in Manhattan. My career change meant not only a precipitous decline in our family's income, but also a move away from Nicole's beloved home city, family, and friends. She embraced this transition with her usual enthusiasm, and in her extraordinary work as a teacher at a local public elementary school we share our commitments to social justice through education. I hope that our students see us as an example of two people enjoying deeply meaningful lives together doing inherently valuable work. In many respects, my relationship with Nicole led me to the topic of apologies. We learn the most about apologies in intimate and vulnerable moments, and much of this book explains how these interpersonal meanings often translate poorly into axioms of social and political philosophy. Our relationship has been a laboratory for apologies, not only in my clumsy attempts to get them right but also through interacting with an exemplar of sincerity like Nicole. Nicole was also the closest reader of this book, saving readers from many ham-fisted, overwrought, and repetitive passages. Our first child was born during the final stages of preparing the text, and my memories of Nicole cheerfully editing the chapters on collective apologies with Ulysses asleep on her lap evoke pangs of profound gratitude in me. She has made my life almost unbearably good.

I would also like to thank my parents, my grandparents, my brother, and his family. They always told me that white lie that I could be whatever I wanted when I grew up, but I doubt that they had philosophy professor in mind as one of the outcomes. They believe in me more than I believe in

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myself, and I am just now learning how to pass this on to my own family and students.

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Just as I argue that one can apologize to a pet in certain respects, I should also thank our dog, Grady. He has been a constant source of joy in our lives, and he appears in many examples.

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