

Apology, Acknowledgment, Contrition, Reparation

Required Reading

David Bloomfield *et al.*, eds. *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*, pp. 145-62.

Highly Recommended Reading

Trudy Govier and Wilhelm J. Verwoerd, 'The Promise and Pitfalls of Apologies', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33(1), (2002), pp.67-82.

Further Reading

Gibney, Mark, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud and Niklaus Steiner (eds.) *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Press, 2008.

Govier, Trudy. *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Acknowledgment, Reconciliation, and the Politics of Sustainable Peace*. Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2006.

Tavuchis, Nicolas. *Mea culpa: A Sociology of Apology and Reconciliation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.

In-class AV Resource

'Healing the Wounds of War' Programme 9: Demobilising The Fighters (28 February 2002). Demobilising soldiers and demilitarising society.

Additional AV Resource

'Healing the Wounds of War' Programme Programme 10: Returning and Repairing. (7 March 2002). The challenges facing refugees returning to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Gusty Spence, 'Statement on behalf of Combined Loyalist Command', Belfast: 13 October 1994. From BBC audio clip.

Possible Films

Ararat. (2002) 115 mins. Directed by Atom Egoyan. The film traces the struggles of a Armenian family in Canada to make the 1915 genocide more widely known and their own personal struggles as a family in the process.

Questions for reflection.

1. When might 'apology' be an appropriate and/or effective part of reconciliation?
2. What makes an apology sincere and helpful?

A Typology of Apologies

A number of distinctions can be made in the analysis of apologies:

1. Private and/or public
2. Unilateral/bilateral/multi-lateral
3. Individual and/or collective [organisational; institutional; societal]
4. Explicit and/or implicit
5. Apologies that are linked to reparations or self-standing

Govier and Verwoerd on the Meanings of Apology

Govier and Verwoerd draw attention to three different meanings of 'apology'.¹

A defence

An excuse

A moral apology

Govier and Verwoerd go on to argue that a key aspect of a moral apology is acknowledgment.

- Acknowledgment of a wrong done – this includes both that the deed was done, that it should not have been done, and that the victim was wrongly treated

¹ Trudy Govier and Wilhelm J. Verwoerd, 'The Promise and Pitfalls of Apologies', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 33(1), (2002), pp.67-82 [67].

- Acknowledgment of responsibility for wrong doing

Apology, Responsibility and Sincerity

This distinction helps to identify the interplay between truth-seeking and justice-seeking that might be at stake in the desire for an apology.

The acknowledgment of a wrong-done is necessary but not sufficient for moral responsibility. Acknowledgment of moral responsibility for wrong doing (not just the fact of a wrong done) is often critical to whether the apology is helpful or not. This is a matter of both truth-seeking and moral justice-seeking. The apparent sincerity of an apology can be undermined if there is acknowledgment of wrong done without addressing responsibility for wrong doing. If the apology is not seen as sincere it is unlikely to be well received, and is likely to make things worse. The apology appears to be more of an evasion than an acknowledgment.

Apologies and Reparations

Likewise the sincerity of an apology can be undermined by its relationship to reparations.

- If reparations are refused it can suggest that the apology is insincere and/or that there is only a token concern for practical justice not a real concern
- If reparations are seen as an alternative to sincere acknowledgment of responsibility it can be equally harmful.

Apologies and Contrition

Finally, there is contrition. In the same way that the value of acknowledgement can be undermined if there is no acknowledgment of responsibility, so can the value of acknowledgment be undermined if there is no sign of contrition, ie a sense of regret, which might express a sense of responsibility and/or guilt and/or shame.

Apology and Reconciliation

At its best, a sincere apology can make one of the most profound contributions possible to a reconciliation process. At its worst, an insincere apology can make one of the most damaging contributions imaginable.