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OFFICIAL APOLOGIES IN THE AFTERMATH OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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Abstract: This article examines the uses of official apologies for massive human rights abuses in the context of democratic transitions. It sketches a normative model of apologies, highlighting how they serve to provide some moral and practical redress for past wrongs. It discusses a number of contributions apologies can make, including publicly confirming the status of victims as moral agents, fostering public reexamination and deliberation about social norms, and promoting critical understandings of history that undermine apologist historical accounts. The article then presents certain normative criteria that any official apology must satisfy, and concludes with a discussion of several theoretical and practical challenges that apologies face in transitional contexts. It draws on Chilean President Patricio Aylwin's apology for his predecessor's crimes as an illustration of some of the promises and challenges that apologies face.

Keywords: apology, forgiveness, reconciliation, reparations, transitional justice.

Over the past several decades, official apologies have been widely used to address legacies of large-scale violations. The popularity of apologies is remarkable: government, religious, and business leaders have all turned to formal apologies for past wrongdoing in order to express remorse and begin "moving forward." In 2000, Pope John Paul II apologized for wrongs committed by the church against Jews, indigenous peoples, women, and the poor (Stanley 2000a, 2000b). Pope Benedict XVI apologized for offending Muslims by quoting a medieval Christian emperor who referred to Islam as "evil and inhuman" (BBC News 2006). President Bill Clinton apologized in 1998 for the failure of the United States and the "international community" to intervene in the Rwandan genocide, and later expressed remorse for American support of the Guatemalan government during its vicious struggle against guerrillas in that country's civil war (Clinton 1998; Babington 1999). In 2000, Belgium's Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt apologized for his country's inaction during the Rwandan genocide (BBC News 2000). And apologies have not been used only internationally: Canada and Canadian churches have apologized for the treatment of indigenous peoples in so-called residential schools and have instituted a reparations program (Indian

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Residential Schools Resolution 2009). In Argentina and Chile, democratic leaders have apologized for the disappearance, torture, and murder of thousands by the military during their respective Dirty Wars. In all of these cases and many more, apologies have assumed a special place for societies grappling with a history of violence and abuse.

Official apologies publicly acknowledge responsibility for serious wrongs, with the ultimate goal of reconstructing badly damaged relations on morally sound foundations. Apologies have become especially popular devices in instances of political transition, where a society is emerging from a recent history of mass violence and is confronted with the moral and social legacies of such violence. Their ubiquity has led one scholar to call this “the age of apologies” (Brooks 1999, 3).

In this essay I investigate several normative aspects of official apologies and conclude with a defense of their use, but with some caveats. I argue that such apologies can serve some political-moral functions provided they satisfy certain criteria, which include issues of presentation, content, and future commitment. The numerous types of apologies that exist—official, unofficial; private, public; domestic, transnational; and so on—means that any discussion must specify its applicability or otherwise operate at too vague a level of analysis. It would be difficult, and probably not too useful, to give a normatively satisfactory theory of apologies that covers all possible examples or types. My focus is more specific. I restrict my comments to apologies given by the state in the context of a democratic transition following significant human rights violations. This means that I will not look at apologies for lesser crimes (such as Nixon’s attempt at an apology following Watergate) or at those made in the context of a stable democratic society (like Clinton’s apology for the Tuskegee experiments) (Taft 2000; Clinton 1997; Bauer 2008; Fish 2007). Nor will I investigate transnational apologies where the perpetrators and victims belong to different nationalities, or apologies responding to historical injustices, since they pose some additional theoretical problems of generational “responsibility” (Gibney and Roxstrom 2001; Thompson 2002; Barkan 2001).

Part 1 discusses how we should conceptualize apologies. Part 2 elaborates on this by turning to official apologies, and identifies a series of political and moral aims that they may further. Part 3 sets out, schematically, some normative criteria that an official apology must satisfy to further such aims. I turn to some illocutionary problems in part 4; and in the final section part 5, I briefly outline and problematize how apologies may further the legitimacy of a fledgling democratic state.

1. Conceptualizing Apologies

Apologies are often considered to be an easy way to move society “forward,” but they have also been heavily criticized. They risk appearing

as cheap ways to minimize guilty feelings while providing a sense of self-satisfaction for confessing wrongs (Steel 1998; Leo 1997; Bowman 1998). Such skepticism is understandable. Apologies often seem insincere, given more for the belief that the past can be passed over quickly or even left unexamined, rather than as an attempt at confronting the moral consequences of earlier violations. An apology may bring attention to the deaths and suffering of thousands, but certainly this is not an adequate response in itself to such violations. Many survivors of mass violence feel that there is an almost constitutive impossibility of closure for past injustices; while suffering may be ameliorated through truth telling, punishment, and reparations, a symbolic gesture on its own is unsatisfactory.

However, apologies do have value. They are often demanded by victims, who see them as a necessary expression of regret for wrongful suffering. As expressions of regret, apologies include elements of truth telling, victim acknowledgment, and—to the extent that responsibility is accepted—accountability. Furthermore, they may communicate something beyond mere acknowledgment and point to the importance of a fundamental transformation in the relation between perpetrators and victims, creating a moral space for a new beginning. They involve a kind of deeply symbolic “ritual cleansing,” in the words of Stanley Cohen (2001, 236). This transformation is often associated with religious language, particularly Christian language. Cohen usefully highlights the host of terms that are intimately tied to apologies in the context of massive atrocity: “*expiation*: making amends for previous sins; *exorcism*: expelling evil forces by invocation of the good; *expurgation*: purification by removing objectionable matter; the many variations of *contrition*, *confession*, *atonement* and *repentance*” (236). Similarly, Nicholas Tavuchis (1991), the foremost scholar on apologies, has shown how the transformative vision of atonement is a powerful and suggestive one for victims and (repentant) perpetrators, because it points to the gravity of the crimes (sins) that demand contrition.

In the Christian tradition, apology as confession is of central importance, for it is closely connected to the faculty of forgiveness and the creation of a new relationship between violator and violated (Ritschl 1900, esp. chap. 3; Mackintosh 1927; Lehman 1986; Lederach 1997; also see Dorff 1998). Theologian Martin Marty (1998) argues that the apology and forgiveness serve as important instances of the transformative capacity of the spirit, signaling the beginning of a change in the relationship between the transgressor and the victim, on the one hand, and a change in the relationship between the sinner and God, on the other. A number of Christian theologians have taken this formulation into the public domain, arguing that apologies can work to rebuild badly damaged social and political relations. Public leaders should fashion their apologies as a sincere confessional act that transcends the bitterness

of past conflict in an effort to open a space for a new future (Johnston and Sampson 1994; Lazre 2005).

This argument is particularly important because it underscores how apologies should be something beyond the mere instrumentalism of “moving on” by requiring public reflection and deliberation about the past. Nevertheless, such a theoretical approach requires further conceptual elaboration to connect it to practical political challenges (Radzik 2008). Erving Goffman has sketched a secularized version stripped of the more overtly ontological requirements of its religious formulation. He posits that a proper apology contains several elements: it must express embarrassment or dismay; awareness of knowing what conduct was expected; recognition of the appropriateness of a sanction; rejection of the harm; a commitment to pursue a proper course of conduct in the future; and a commitment to do penance or offer restitution (Goffman 1971, 113). Goffman does not explicitly state the importance of accepting responsibility for the wrongdoing, but it is apparent from his list of elements. In any case, his account avoids the deep ontological shift typical of theological approaches, but retains a number of their normative components: the recognition of the moral status of victims, a public expression of remorse and acceptance of responsibility, and a commitment to change future relationships, which may include some form of reparation. In a similar vein, Martha Minow has argued that apologies, properly understood, “acknowledge the fact of harms, accept some degree of responsibility, avow sincere regret, and promise not to repeat the offense” (1998, 112; also see Minow and Rosenblum 2002; Gibney et al. 2008; Shriver 1995).

Using these elements, we can begin identifying the key aspects of an apology. As Daniela Kramer-Moore and Michael Moore note, at its most basic an apology is different from an excuse, which implies the wrong was unintentional, or a justification, which admits only limited culpability by pointing to external conditions that made the violations necessary (Kramer-Moore and Moore 2003). Rather, an apology is a speech act that conveys “an expression of sorrow or regret” both to the victim and where appropriate to a broader audience. The wrongdoer acknowledges the legitimacy of the rule or norm that was violated, admits responsibility, and expresses genuine remorse for the harm caused to the victim by the transgression. In this respect, an apology is a type of “expressive speech act,” in John Searle’s words, insofar as it primarily expresses regret or sorrow for what was done (Searle 1969; also see Borneman 2005; Scher and Darley 1997). Furthermore, it signals recognition of the victim’s claims to moral respect. By leaving a serious wrong unaddressed, the victim is implicitly characterized as unworthy of moral respect.¹ An

¹ Indeed, we could argue that refraining from an apology constitutes a second wrong, one of moral nonrecognition. See Honneth 2007.

apology may not fully restore a broken relationship, particularly one with a long history of violence and mistrust, but as Martin Golding has shown, it does represent a type of *moral redress* for past actions.²

Apologies also have a material, or practical, dimension. An apology should include a commitment to some form of restitution or compensation that binds the speaker to some set of future actions. I call this the need for *practical redress*. Shorn of a practical commitment to change future behavior, an apology becomes a hollow symbolic statement, securing no real transformation in the status of victims as equals deserving respect. Apologies with no practical commitment to future change are problematic precisely because an apology carries with it a promise of future reform, though this may be only implicit. The recognition of a past act as a moral wrong implies rejecting such behavior in the future.

An apology's future-oriented character revolves around a commitment to change behavior; it creates a promise. Certainly a promise can be broken; it is a normative rather than empirical constraint. It binds the actor to a certain kind of future behavior that she *ought* to follow. Nevertheless, the important point here is that the promise contained in an apology means that the apology is not fully instantiated when it is given. As Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd (2002b) have forcefully argued, an apology should be understood not simply as an act but as a *process* including a commitment to a future relationship. Apologizing may be brief, but does not exhaust the apology itself; it requires changes to ensure that the past is not repeated.

Consequently, an apology contains both moral and practical dimensions. It is a first step in recognizing the victim as a moral person with legitimate claims to moral respect, and furthermore implies a promise on the part of the transgressor to make some form of reparation. More generally, apologies are both past-oriented and future-oriented; they direct our attention to a past act or series of acts and cast them as wrongs while also drawing our attention to the necessity of establishing a future relationship where such wrongs will not occur.

2. Official Apologies

An official apology acknowledges state responsibility for a serious moral wrong (or wrongs) remaining unaddressed in current political life. "The [official] apology," write Ridwan Nyatagodien and Arthur Neal, "is an admission that those in positions of authority failed to act when action was necessary, and recognizes that blameworthy behavior was ignored,

² He discusses how making moral amends speaks directly to the resentment held by the victim. "One of the main functions of other-oriented regret, in the interpersonal situation, is the negation of the justifiability of the injured party's resentment." Golding 1984–85, 133. Also see Govier and Verwoerd 2002a, 69–70.

rewarded, or in some way excluded from normative sanction” (2004, 470). Furthermore, it seeks to reform the relationship between the government and the population by underscoring a change in future governmental policy (Marrus 2006; Harvey 1995). There can be numerous motives behind an official apology, but it is not uncommon for (at least some) political elites to endorse apologies for moral (rather than *merely* political-instrumental) reasons. An official apology ought to reflect a sincere future commitment to certain norms and an acknowledgment of past injustices.

There is no doubt that the deep symbolism of apologies, combined with their quick and easy public dissemination, makes them choice tools for political elites seeking a powerful way to respond to complex social issues. What could be easier and cheaper than issuing an apology? The risk of political manipulation always remains a serious threat. Tavuchis rightly notes the danger of instrumentality in official apologies: “An authentic apology cannot be delegated, consigned, exacted or assumed by the principals, no less outsiders, without totally altering its meaning and vitiating its moral force” (1991, 49). Some scholars minimize their instrumentality and prefer to cast them as devices that reframe moral relations, and thus play a central role in promoting reconciliation (Tutu 1999; Graybill 1995; Couper 1998; Casarjian 1992; Muller-Fahrenheit 1997; Suchoki 1994). I am hesitant to adopt the latter approach, for the very use of apologies in deeply politicized contexts requires that we identify the relation between their instrumental and moral aims, and focus on whether they can satisfy, to some extent, both moral and political demands.

These demands can be addressed in several ways. Most important, apologies publicly affirm the moral status of victims. As Govier notes, apologies focus public awareness on victims and communicate to the community the necessity of reframing moral obligations (2002, 153). Such reframing requires that victims be treated as political, legal, and social equals deserving recognition of their moral status. Clearly, apologies do not accomplish this by themselves. At best, they can begin a process of moral reframing and repositioning victims as equals; however, this will require sincere engagement and reflection by the community as a whole and over a long period of time, as Andrew Schaap has noted (2005, 127–31). Nevertheless, drawing public attention to the moral value of victims represents an important first step.

The idea that an individual enjoys a certain moral value means that his value is not merely a consequence of his usefulness for achieving external ends. That is, the moral worth of an individual is not a result of his utility to others; rather, he carries a certain moral status that normatively prohibits his instrumentalization by others. When his moral status is violated, we speak of a moral wrong: violations against bodily integrity, such as torture, murder, and rape, are examples of moral (as well as

physical) wrongs because they reduce the victim to an object that (who) enjoys no subjective rights, dignity, or autonomy. The very notion of a moral wrong implies that there is a victim who carries a certain moral value, and that his moral status was transgressed. An official apology conveys recognition of the moral value of victims by signaling the wrongness of the harm they experienced. This public affirmation of the moral status of victims is an apology's central contribution.

Second, and closely related, an apology draws attention to basic *social norms and values*. State violations are normally framed as “necessary” responses to some perceived threat, and thus retain a certain legitimacy with some parts of the population. Under authoritarian or genocidal regimes, harassment, abuse, massacre, and terror are officially sanctioned methods of dealing with some minorities or political enemies, and society's basic moral grammar is rewritten to cast all opponents of the regime as “deserving” of what they get. An apology helps reinterpret state actions as wrongs that violate basic social norms, and force a society to confront these abuses and reflect more deeply on what it means to be a member of the polity. Apologies demand, in other words, that citizens reflect both on “who is included within the universe of obligation” (Fein 2007, 11) and on what kind of society they want. Clearly, an apology cannot secure the adoption of human rights, national consensus on basic values, or reconciliation. But it can generate public debate about what those values ought to be by reframing the terms of deliberation.

Third, and perhaps less directly, an official apology may promote an alternate and *critical* reading of history. I follow Nietzsche in thinking of critical history as the systematic interrogation of the basic assumptions and presuppositions used in our historical understandings. As Nietzsche argues, a critical history requires “the strength to break up and dissolve the past” (1997, 69). Critical interrogation remains skeptical of what he calls “monumental” histories, which ground the present in some distorted “great moments” appeal to the past (or any unrealizable transcendental justifications). Similarly, Melissa Nobles (2008) has argued that apologies reshape the meaning of the past and dislodge monumental histories by resituating victims at the center of historical interpretation. While an apology cannot achieve such a critical reorientation on its own, it implicitly redraws the topography of historical truth, and thus redirects our attention to the importance of engaging in a critical history. In this respect, it contributes to a much broader debate about national identity and history.

Official apologies can perform at least three key tasks. First, apologies promote the restoration of victims' sense of moral value, and represent a first step at integrating victims as citizens. Second, apologies can generate public reflection and debate about social norms by focusing public discussion on their violation and requiring a new consideration of desired relations between the state and society and among citizens. Third,

apologies can make critical reinterpretations of history necessary by reframing the past and consequently undermining apologist historical accounts. While these are significant accomplishments, they are obviously not the same as societal reconciliation. Much more must happen for a society to be reconciled, including commitments to accountability, the elimination of impunity, and the long-term promotion of norms of respect and tolerance among citizens. Indeed, without real governmental policy changes, skepticism about the efficacy of apologies is appropriate. Apologies should be part of a broader reckoning with the past (Verdeja 2006). Nevertheless, they can make real contributions to social change. In the following section I identify some criteria for a satisfactory official apology.

3. Criteria for a Normatively Satisfactory Official Apology

Cases of political violence differ widely in their details. There may be specific patterns of abuse, different types of victim groups, and differing degrees of state complicity. In some situations abuses may be localized, immune to investigation and wider public knowledge; in other cases large parts of the population may be subjected to violence, and the emphasis on uncovering the extent of violations is less pertinent than publicly repudiating them. Because of such variation, official apologies should be tailored to the particularities of each case. There is no standard model that can be employed across all situations. Nevertheless, as Gibney and Roxstrom (2001) and others have argued, there are certain normative criteria we can specify for an adequate official apology. Here I will sketch what I believe are the primary criteria that should be employed, which fall into three general categories: framing, content, and future commitments, the latter pointing beyond the specific speech-act of apologizing. As an illustration, I will draw on Chilean President Patricio Aylwin's apology for crimes committed by his predecessor, the dictator Augusto Pinochet.

In 1991, President Aylwin publicly presented Chile's official Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report and proffered an official apology in Santiago's National Stadium, where many arrests and tortures had occurred in the first weeks of military rule (Aylwin 1995). Aylwin's choice of location emphasizes the importance of *presentation*: the apology should be given in a setting that both reflects the gravity of the subject and signals, in a symbolically appropriate way, the seriousness with which the state views the violations. The importance of social context and meaning (Cooper 2003, 1–15) is well captured by the fact that the president, rather than a subordinate, apologized, highlighting that the speaker should be someone with sufficient authority and symbolic stature to apologize (a complex issue I will return to below). In addition, the apology should be made *publicly*—in this case, in a public forum covered by the media. It must be disseminated widely, not simply restricted to a select audience or

limited in any way that would translate into a deflection of the state's acceptance of responsibility. This assures that the acknowledgment given to victims is shown to the broader public as well, signaling to the entire population the state's admission of crimes and its commitment to a new relationship to its citizens.

An apology should also satisfy certain content criteria. It should contain an explanation of the acts themselves that explicitly underscores the state's acceptance of *responsibility*; it is not sufficient, in other words, merely to state passively that "violations occurred." Aylwin, for example, referred to disappearances as "executions" by "agents of the state" (1995, 171). Specific acts should be identified, and the state's responsibility should be clearly indicated. Also, the apology should be as *inclusive* as is possible and reasonable given the facts, ensuring that no arbitrary distinctions will be created between people who are worthy of an apology and others who are not. There must also be some *reflection* about the events for which the state is apologizing. For an apology to be morally appropriate, it is insufficient simply to list a series of violations. Elites must engage with the question of why the state did what it did and what the moral and social consequences were, and do so publicly in order to generate a genuine national debate about the past. In the Chilean case, Aylwin situated the abuses within the history of the military coup, and noted the climate of terror that developed when the military took power.

A final category concerns implicit and explicit commitments to the future. First, the apology should contain a commitment to *symbolic recognition and material reparation*. The symbolic aspect is, of course, partially fulfilled through the enunciation of the apology itself. Such a speech-act recognizes victims (in the moral sense) insofar as they are recognized as fellow human beings with moral value and dignity. But apologies can also signal a promise to practical material redress by indicating a commitment to future reparations for victims. Material reparations can cover a wide array of initiatives, such as monetary compensation for torture, death, and other violations, restitution of lost property, psychological and medical assistance, educational support, and employment and development programs in affected communities. None of these initiatives needs to be spelled out in an apology, but there should be a commitment to practical material reparations. Shortly after Aylwin's apology, his government began a reparations program for victims, as recommended in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report.

Apologies should include a commitment to *accountability*, to holding at least the most egregious perpetrators accountable for their crimes. In a minimal sense, apologies already contain an element of accountability insofar as they signal certain behavior as morally reprehensible, thus tarnishing the reputation of the actual individuals responsible for abuses and delegitimizing their actions. But while apologies implicitly stigmatize

violators, they are only a first step; a program of accountability that begins and ends with an apology is hardly satisfactory. At the very least, there should be a promise to prosecute the most egregious perpetrators as well, or at least ensure that they will not retain positions of power.³ In Chile, an existing amnesty and the threat of military violence prevented prosecutions until very recently, and many Chileans viewed the apology combined with a lack of justice as deeply unsatisfactory (Verdeja 2000).

Finally, the state should commit itself more generally to change its behavior, embarking on institutional reforms where appropriate, removing officials responsible for crimes, promoting the rule of law, and espousing principles of respect and tolerance toward previously targeted groups. Admittedly, aside from the institutional reform component, many of these more general commitments run the risk of becoming rhetorically empty promises. Promising future tolerance and respect does not by itself guarantee anything, obviously. But to the extent that the more practical claims of material and symbolic redress are combined with accountability, institutional reform, establishment of the rule of law, and democratic practices, the strength of mutual respect and tolerance may emerge over time. What is clear from this last set of criteria is that an apology is not a discrete act terminating with the end of a ceremony. Rather, it signals the beginning of a long process of coming to terms with the past and a promise to change behavior in the future. The promise of reform begins an open-ended and admittedly fragile process, one requiring significant commitment on the part of the state and elites.

4. The Illocutionary Problems Surrounding Official Apologies

This discussion has been relatively positive in its treatment of apologies (provided they meet certain criteria), but it is clear that they face several problems. Govier and Verwoerd (2002a; Govier 2002) have identified a number of challenges faced by apologies, but here I want to focus on a few challenges that specifically confront official apologies. These challenges are tied to an apology's illocutionary status and tell us something about the role of political elites in reconciliation.

The first challenge concerns how survivors respond to an apology. In interpersonal contexts, there is an individual who can choose to accept the apology. She may decide that it was inadequate—it was insincere, it minimized culpability, and so on. Regardless, she maintains the ability to accept or reject it, and thus retains her moral autonomy. Minow (1998, 115) argues that official apologies should allow for “a stance that grants power to the victims to accept, refuse or ignore the apology,” but in those

³ Of course, holding individuals accountable for large-scale, systematic violations is problematic for a number of reasons, which I cannot discuss here. See Roht-Arriaza and Mariezcurrena 2006; Mayer-Rieckh and De Greiff 2007.

contexts there is no identifiable addressee who can accept or refuse it. Certainly, some survivors may take the position of representing victims, but the notion that they can accept an apology (much less grant forgiveness) for all victims is morally problematic, for it ignores those victims who may choose to reject it. The absence of an identifiable addressee with the power to accept or reject it means that its positive illocutionary force—the sense, in other words, that it is a *fait accompli*—faces little challenge. I refer to the apology's illocutionary, not perlocutionary, character on purpose. While it may seem that official apologies are perlocutionary speech-acts—that is, they must persuade or convince the listener, and do not gain force simply from the utterance of the apology (an illocution)—the lack of an identifiable addressee means that practically speaking, once the apology is uttered the speaker can claim that the apology was in some sense “successful,” that it was “accepted” by the victim group. Certainly there is a perlocutionary component as well, but the illocutionary dangers are particularly apparent in official apologies. From the state's perspective, of course, this illocutionary aspect can be politically attractive. A public official can apologize and argue that the apology itself is a first step toward “reconciliation.” Normatively speaking, the impossibility of total acceptance and the space this provides for political exploitation are ineradicable weaknesses of official apologies.

If the first problem points to the constitutive impossibility of an adequate addressee response, the second concerns the risk that an official apology may be perceived as bestowing forgiveness, or at any rate mitigates the ability of victims to make future legitimate grievances. President Aylwin (1995, 171) asked for “forgiveness from the victims' relatives,” and many Chileans considered his apology sufficient for the state to be “forgiven” and thus leave the past behind. Official apologies, then, may be interpreted as already bestowing an element of forgiveness on the speaker and the represented institution, such as the state or some agency of the state implicated in abuses. Citizens who were not victims may argue that an official apology is a sufficient statement of the state's acceptance of responsibility and represents at least some form of amends for the past. Apologies, then, may be seen by some as carrying a surplus of illocutionary force; not only is the apology itself instantiated when given, it may also imply some degree of forgiveness, or at least the belief that some past actions have been adequately addressed, and therefore any additional demands by victims are seen as an attempt at using their position to demand irrelevant and undeserved privileges.⁴

⁴ This concern was raised when Argentine President Néstor Kirchner apologized for disappearances and torture during the Dirty War, and several victims' groups refused to accept his apology, on the grounds that to do so would constitute forgiveness and thus result in a loss of public and official attention to the era of military rule.

There is, however, an important counterclaim. What if an appropriate official, such as a prime minister or president, sincerely apologizes and asks for forgiveness from victims? Shouldn't there be an obligation or at least reasonable expectation of forgiveness?⁵ Don't sincere symbolic gestures acknowledging responsibility and seeking forgiveness require, at a minimum, that victims explain why it is reasonable to continue their resentment, as Ian Buruma (1999) has argued? Many theoretical formulations include an assumption that forgiveness should follow a properly sincere apology, and if the apology satisfies the criteria set forth above one could plausibly contend that forgiveness can reasonably be expected. Joanna North (1998) and Margaret Holmgren (1993) have argued that forgiveness following an apology is not only appropriate, it also indicates the victim's ability to recapture his dignity through proactive behavior. In this reading, the conceptual formulation that connects the apology and forgiveness also includes positive consequences, including the reaffirmation of the victim's sense of self-worth. This is problematic, however, because it treats the apology as a discrete act completed upon enunciation, with a clear expectation of what should follow immediately. Such an understanding ignores the apology's future or forward-looking component discussed earlier: that it demands a change in future behavior by the state, and therefore represents the beginning of a *process* rather than a singular event. To the extent that an apology only begins such a process, the expectation that forgiveness should follow an apology is misplaced, for it implies a change has occurred in social and political relations when in fact this remains to be seen. Only if the state makes good on its promise to change can some form of forgiveness be considered an appropriate response, and even this may include a set of conditions and limitations, as Charles Griswold (2008) and P. E. Digeser (2001) have noted. This change takes time and patience, but it can occur. An apology should not, however, be equated with closure. Indeed, the threat of closure means that an apology may result in displacing accountability far into the future, as the questions of justice and criminal responsibility lose some of their political immediacy when an apology is made (this occurred in the case of Aylwin's apology, in fact). Thus, an apology points toward a commitment to change, but it is not itself change.

I have noted two interrelated illocutionary pitfalls surrounding apologies: the first, that some victims will be ignored because of the theoretical inadequacy of an addressee, and the second, that an apology may be interpreted as triggering, or instantiating, forgiveness. Both of these challenges have in common the inability of survivors to address the apology in any meaningful manner. A third challenge concerns the legitimacy of the speaker giving the apology.

⁵ I thank Don Moon for raising this important point.

Numerous theoretical accounts of apologies focus on their content and formulation rather than on the authority of the speaker. Neither Goffman nor Marty devotes significant attention to the speaker's status, except to note that it should be the person responsible for the wrong who apologizes. It is often assumed that the person apologizing is authorized to do so, so the question revolves around whether the apology is properly formulated (Fraser 1981; Owen 1985). This misses the important contextual dimension of an official apology, which gives it in large part its symbolic and illocutionary power.⁶ An official apology requires more than proper content; a properly sanctioned speaker, a political leader who is vested with the power to speak in the name of the state, must give it. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted in his critique of J. L. Austin, illocutionary acts gain their symbolic power not only from the force of words but also from the status of the speaker. "The power of words is nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson, and his speech—that is, the substance of his discourse and, inseparably, his way of speaking—is no more than a testimony, and one among others, of the guarantee of delegation which is vested in him" (Bourdieu 1995, 107). An official apology does not generate its legitimacy solely from its content, it draws much of its power from the standing of the person who gives it, such as the political elite speaking in the name of the state. Tavuchis (1991, 91) has plausibly concluded that only "an authoritative deputy" can apologize for official wrongs. The challenge in transitional situations emerges when the apology is given by a successor elite who is not responsible for ordering past crimes but nevertheless now represents—and speaks for—the state. The speaker's legitimacy rests on assuming the position of representative of the state and ensuring that the population accepts this. Such a move is possible, of course, because it is the office (of the presidency, the prime minister, and the like) that is, in a certain sense, apologizing in the name of the state. The individual speaks in her official capacity, and it is therefore the state that is making symbolic amends for past crimes. Nevertheless, it is complicated by the fact that part of the population may feel either that the leader is not a legitimate spokesperson or that the acts in question do not require an apology. This latter issue of consensus (Smith 2008, 159–66)—of whether there is agreement on the applicability of apology—raises a serious challenge to the leader's authority to speak on behalf of the state (much less the nation), and appeared repeatedly in Chile. Success, then, depends not only on the apology's framing, content, and future commitments but also on whether the elite is considered a legitimate speaker and the acts are perceived as wrong.

⁶ Though see Nick Smith's excellent book *I Was Wrong: The Meaning of Apologies* (2008).

5. Official Apologies and State Legitimacy

These issues of authority have significant consequences for state legitimacy, captured well in the case of Chile. Aylwin apologized in his capacity as president, thus placing himself as the legitimate voice who could acknowledge responsibility to victims, their relatives, and the population as a whole. His official apology also provides an interesting example of the expressive ambiguities of responsibility in transitional scenarios, highlighting the difficulties successor regimes and elites face. An official apology functions in two ways simultaneously: it allows the successor regime to repudiate earlier state actions, thus distancing itself from the previous authoritarian government, *and* allows the new government to establish a link of legitimacy to the past, insofar as its privileged position as “apologizer” (to use an ungainly word and avoid the ambivalence of “apologist”) indicates its authority to speak to issues of the past and pass judgment on state actions. Aylwin went further when he stated, “I dare—as President of the Republic—to assume representation of the entire nation in begging forgiveness from the victims’ relatives” (1995, 171). In later remarks, he continued to use “nation” and “state” interchangeably, but it was clear that he was concerned about affirming the legitimacy of his government. Thus, the official apology seeks to establish a continuity of state authority and responsibility, while simultaneously stating in no uncertain terms its rejection of the previous leadership. This double movement is part of a broader effort at founding a new political order (rejection of the past) while claiming the right to do so legitimately (demanding to be recognized as the legitimate successor authority); as such, successor elites are forcefully making a claim of separation from and continuity with the past, with all of the symbolic ambivalence that this entails.⁷ In this sense, an official apology shares much with the debates over successor justice and, more broadly, constitution making in transitional settings.

Of course, apologies do not carry the weight of constitution making and successor trials, but they do highlight explicitly the tensions of both rejecting and embracing a problematic notion of legitimacy. Though they mark a break with the past, they also underscore the normative ambiguity surrounding elites’ claims to legitimacy (and thus to their elite status). In order to displace this ambiguity, apologies are given in the name of the state, and the authority to perform them is thereby secured. Whether this is successful in practice depends, of course, on whether the population as a whole—and survivors in particular—accept the displacement. In Chile, Aylwin’s apology drew public attention to past violations and helped

⁷ This ambivalence between signaling a new order and establishing continuity with the past is constitutive of any new founding moment. Some theorists have labeled it as fundamentally “violent,” that is, as representing a rupture with the past that nonetheless must create the basis of its own legitimacy *ex nihilo*. See, for example, Arendt 1990; Agamben 2000; Kalyvas 2005.

catalyze a public debate about national identity and responsibility. Nevertheless, many victim and survivor groups considered it only a first step toward additional reparations and redress (Loveman and Lira 2000).

6. Concluding Comments

This article has offered a normative account of official apologies in countries that are undergoing or have recently undergone a transition from an authoritarian or otherwise violent past to a democratic present. I have argued that official apologies should be understood as including elements of both moral and practical redress, and that because of their special context they have several important political functions. First, apologies confirm the status of victims as moral agents, and do so publicly. Second, they can catalyze public reexamination and deliberation about social norms, and generate new perspectives of desired relations between the state and society. Third, they can promote critical reinterpretations of history and undermine apologist historical accounts.

I have emphasized that apologies can only begin some of these efforts, and cannot—in themselves—guarantee a positive outcome, such as reconciliation or the development of democratic norms of mutual tolerance and respect, which are significantly more complex goals (Verdeja 2009). Furthermore, official apologies face several conceptual challenges. These challenges—the lack of an identifiable addressee, the risk that apologies are politically instrumentalized without attending to their moral aspects, and the conceptual problems surrounding the authority of the speaker—should give pause to those who would wholeheartedly endorse official apologies as a means for reconciliation. We should treat apologies as important moral-political devices that can further societal reconciliation, but we should be wary of expecting too much of them. True reconciliation will only occur over time, and cannot be achieved by shortchanging justice or failing to confront the past.

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