WHAT IS AN APOLOGY?

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Abstract:

In this essay I attempt to elucidate the concept of an apology. I begin by considering the way in which apologizing is characterized by Erving Goffman; and I argue that his characterization does not suffice to distinguish the apology from many other speech acts. I then offer my own analysis, according to which (roughly) a speaker is apologizing to his hearer for something if and only if in saying what he does he is 1) expressing regret about it, 2) accepting responsibility for it, 3) acknowledging it to constitute an offense to his hearer, 4) expressing regret about it as such, and 5) making a gesture of respect to his hearer as a person with a right to be spared such mistreatment.
What Is An Apology?

The act of apologizing is of interest both in ethics and in the theory of speech acts. Writers in the latter field, most notably Austin\(^1\), have often cited it as a paradigm of a performative utterance. But so far as I know, no analysis of apologizing has so far appeared in the philosophical literature. It is my aim here to offer one. An instructive characterization of the apology has recently been produced by Erving Goffman, a social psychologist, in his book, \textit{Relations In Public}\(^2\); and I shall take certain of his remarks about apologizing as my point of departure. In the first section of this paper, I shall argue that Goffman's characterization of apologizing, however true it is, and however suitable for his theoretical purposes, is too general to distinguish the apology from many other speech acts which are characteristically performed for the same social purpose. In the second section, I shall try to bring the specific conceptual features of apologizing into focus by setting out my analysis of it.

I

According to Goffman, an apology is a piece of what he calls 'remedial work'. Remedial work is a sort of social activity occasioned by a real or apparent violation of a social rule. Its function is 'to change the meaning that might otherwise be given to an act, transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable'\(^3\).


\(^3\)Goffman, p. 139.
On Goffman's view, the apology is one of three basic ritual devices by which we effect such a transformation. The other two are the 'account' and the 'request'.

To give an account is to represent oneself as not responsible, or not entirely responsible, for an offense of which one is, or is liable to be, thought guilty. As Goffman points out, this can be done in a variety of ways. Suppose, as an illustration, that Y is walking through a hall and thinks that X has bumped into him. Several defenses may be open to X. He may deny, for example, that any collision in fact occurred, that anyone really bumped into Y. Or he may acknowledge that someone bumped into Y, but deny having done so himself. Or again, he may admit that it was he who bumped into Y but argue that he did so in special exculpatory, or at least mitigating, circumstances, that, for instance, he was pushed in Y's direction by a third party. Any of these defenses would be an account.

The second of Goffman's remedial rituals, the request, 'consists of asking license of a potentially offended person to engage in what could be considered a violation of his rights'. Thus, for example, I am making a request if I ask your leave to smoke while we are traveling in the same automobile or if I ask your permission to use your telephone before proceeding to make a call on it.

Accounts and requests both serve to keep one's actions from being construed as offensive. Thus, for some actions they are not suitable remedies. In particular, if one has done something which plainly is offensive, and can plead no mitigating circumstances, the most one may be able to do is to show by what one says and does that it does not reflect one's present attitude, that one presently takes seriously one's obligations and the rights of the offended party under the rule one has infringed. As Goffman puts it, 'after an offense has occurred, the job of the offender is to show that it was not a fair expression of his attitude, or, when it evidently was, to show that he has changed his attitude to the rule that was violated. In the latter case, his job is

\[4\] Goffman, p. 139

\[5\] Goffman, pp. 144-145
to show that whatever happened before, he now has a right relationship--a pious attitude--to the rule in question...'.^6

The ritual device we use for this task is the apology, which, according to Goffman, is 'a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule'.^7

Now the conception of an individual as capable of splitting into two social selves is of central importance in Goffman's theory of remedial interchanges; and it may prove to be a useful one in understanding the general sort of remedial ritual an apology is. However, Goffman's characterization of apologies seems to apply not just to them, but also to many other speech acts which are on many occasions performed as 'splitting gestures' of the same kind and which then serve to remedy offenses in the same general way.

Consider again X's bumping into Y in the hall and suppose that X can give no satisfactory account of the incident, that, let us say, it is obviously the result of X's culpable negligence. X may here owe it to Y to say something to him as a gesture of the general sort Goffman describes. But this is not to say that he owes Y an apology specifically. There seem to be a considerable variety of things X can say to dissociate his present self from his offense, among them:

1) 'My fault entirely.'
2) 'I beg your pardon.'
3) 'Forgive me.'
4) 'How negligent of me.'
5) 'Sorry.'

What these various utterances have in common, I submit, is not that they are all apologies. It is rather that they all serve to remedy X's offense in the same general way apologies do. Any of them will suffice to show Y the seriousness with

6Goffman, p. 149

7Goffman, p. 143
which X takes his offense and the respect he presently has both for Y's right to walk through the hall without risk of collision and for his own correlative obligation to watch where he is going. But although all these utterances frequently serve the same remedial purpose as an apology, I think they constitute distinguishable speech acts (e.g. admitting fault, asking forgiveness, etc.)\(^8\) and that it would be a conflation to assimilate all of them to the specific act of apologizing. Only the last of them, I think, would count as an apology, in the ordinary sense of the term.

II

But what, in the ordinary sense of the term, is an apology? What must an utterance be like if it is to count as one? I shall try to answer this question by setting out an analysis of apologizing, the analysis consisting of a set of five conditions which are separately necessary and conjointly sufficient for the performance of an apology. Statements of the conditions are interspersed with argumentative and explanatory comments.

Let X and Y be people, and U be an utterance. Then, in saying U to Y, X apologizes to Y for something, A, if and only if the following conditions obtain.

1) In saying U to Y, X expresses regret about A.

I think this condition distinguishes apologies from most other speech acts which are often performed in lieu of them to remedy offenses. Thus, for example, to admit being at fault or to ask forgiveness is not ipso facto to express regret. (It would be a possible, even if insolent, way of asking a person's forgiveness to say, 'I do not in the least regret having done it, but I would like and ask your forgiveness if you think I have mistreated you.')

\(^8\) In J. L. Austin's terms, they are different 'illocutionary acts'.
In claiming that to apologize for something, one must, inter alia, express regret about it, I do not, of course, mean to imply that one must actually regret it. As the term 'express' is used here, and as it seems often to be used colloquially, it is possible to express an attitude, sentiment, opinion, or what not without having it. This is indeed precisely what a person does when he expresses an attitude or feeling insincerely. Thus, in particular, people can, and frequently do, apologize, and so express regret, with no genuine regret about whatever they are apologizing for. Such apologies are insincere, but they are full-fledged apologies nonetheless.

Now although every apology is an expression of regret, clearly not every expression of regret is an apology. For one thing, we do not ordinarily apologize for matters which are beyond our control, however much we may feel and express regret about them. If, for instance, X says to Y that he is sorry that the weather is dismal, that the economy is in a slump, or that a mutual friend is in poor health, he is thereby expressing regret about these things; but he is not likely to be apologizing for them. One reason he is not, I think, is that an apology for these things, as opposed to a mere expression of regret about them, would involve accepting responsibility for them. Thus, unless X somehow feels responsible for the state of the weather, the economy, or his friend's health, or wishes to give Y the impression that he does, he will not ordinarily apologize for these things. This consideration suggests that a second necessary condition for X's performance of an apology is this:

2) In saying U to Y, X accepts responsibility for A.

Note that this condition does not imply that X must expressly accept responsibility for A. In many, perhaps most, ordinary cases a person who apologizes for something accepts responsibility for it tacitly or implicitly in saying whatever he does to express regret about it.

It is worth noting here how various are the sorts of things over which the variable A can range; its scope is much wider than just acts. In addition to them, people can apologize for habits, events, states of affairs—any kind of
thing, in fact, for which they can intelligibly accept re-
sponsibility.

Now it seems clear that if an expression of regret about
something is to count as an apology, more is necessary than
merely that one accept responsibility for it. We do, after
all, express regret and take responsibility for many matters
which are no one's business but our own and for which,
therefore, we should not ordinarily apologize. X is unlike-
ly to be apologizing to Y, for example, if he expresses re-
gret about having spent last summer working instead of vaca-
tioning or about having purchased his present car. I think
the reason X would not be apologizing to Y in expressing re-
gret about such things is simply that, in doing so, X would
not be acknowledging that he has treated Y in any way which
constitutes an offense to him. And it is partly definitive
of an apology, surely, that it is a way of acknowledging
that one has offended one's hearer. A third condition is
thus required.

3) In saying U to Y, X acknowledges that by virtue
of his having been responsible for A, he has
treated Y in a way which constitutes an offense
to him.

A further condition must now be added to those on hand to
take proper account of the intentionality of the concept of
'regret', in particular, of the fact that it is possible to
regret something under one description while not regretting
it under another.

To see the necessity of this, consider the following case.
Suppose X has swindled Y by charging him twice as much money
for some item as it is worth. Now if X is hard-boiled
eough, he may later brazenly say to Y, 'You know, I'm awfully
sorry about that swindle. You were so gullible I could
easily have got waay with charging you twice as much as I
did.'

This utterance would, of course, be no apology, though it
would satisfy the three conditions so far given. X is not
apologizing here, I think, because he is expressing regret
about the swindle, not as an offense to Y, but only as a less
grand feat of larceny than he might have pulled off. To rule out counter-instances of this sort, we need the following as a fourth necessary condition:

4) In saying U to Y, X expresses regret about A as something, being responsible for which, he has offended Y.

So far, the analysis has focused primarily on the attitude which the speaker, X, must express about his offense in order to apologize to Y. He must express regret about it, as an offense to Y. A final necessary condition is now required to specify a second attitude X must express, one toward Y himself, for it seems that in certain social contexts, a speaker can say something to his hearer in such a way as to satisfy the four conditions so far considered and yet fail to apologize precisely because in doing so he does not express an appropriate attitude toward his hearer.

Here is such a context. Suppose that X offends Y in some way and later comes to regret it. Suppose, further that several years afterward Y is employed as a journalist and is commissioned to write a biographical article about X, his erstwhile malefactor. In the course of interviewing X about his life, Y asks him if he has any regrets. X says that he does and goes on, at tedious length, to express regret about his many misdeeds and mistakes. Now suppose that as Y is recording these various expressions of regret, X expresses regret about the very wrong he earlier did Y. Is X, in doing so, apologizing to Y?

The possibility seems undeniable that he is not. And this possibility cannot be accounted for in terms of the necessary conditions for apologizing so far adduced, for all of them are satisfied here. X is expressing regret about his misconduct toward Y, accepting responsibility for it, and so on. How, then, is it possible that he is nevertheless not apologizing to Y?

The answer, I think, is that X may here be saying to Y what he does only to show Y the way in which he regards his offense, and not, in addition, the way in which he regards
Y himself. I suggest that in order for X to be apologizing to Y and not merely expressing regret about his offense, he must, in saying what he does, be making a gesture to Y, one whereby he presents himself as taking seriously Y's right not to be treated as he is acknowledging having treated him. In a word, in saying what he does, X must be making a gesture of respect to Y as a person with such a right. In this situation it seems likely that however profusely X is expressing regret about his offense, he is not thereby making a gesture of respect to Y, and hence that he is not apologizing to him. To take this aspect of apologizing into account, a fifth necessary condition must be added to the others.

5) In saying U to Y, X makes a gesture of respect for Y as a person having a right not to be treated as X is acknowledging having treated him.

The analysis now seems to be complete. To sum it up roughly, I have argued that a speaker is apologizing to his hearer for something, if and only if in saying what he does, he is 1) expressing regret about it, 2) accepting responsibility for it, 3) acknowledging it to constitute an offense to his hearer, 4) expressing regret about it as such, and 5) making a gesture of respect to his hearer as a person with a right to be spared such mistreatment.

I think that this analysis in compatible with Goffman's characterization of the apology, and indeed that it complements it. It may, in addition, suggest certain refinements which ought to be made in his explanation of the function of the apology in social life. But that is another matter.

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