

Apologizing
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It has by now surely become old hat to note that we live in an ‘Age of Apologizing’. The Pope has led the way, apologizing for almost a hundred actions perpetrated (or permitted) by the Roman Catholic church throughout the centuries—from the crusades and the inquisition, to the treatment of Galileo and women (I understand numerous further *mea culpas* will mark the millennium).¹ The Portuguese president has apologized for an episode in the fifteenth century, wherein thousands of Jewish refugees were forced to flee or convert (December, 1996). The American president has apologized to American victims of radiation tests (October, 1995), to victims of the ‘Tuskegee’ medical experiments conducted between the 1930s and 1970s (May, 1997), and to African leaders for the whole slave trade (March, 1998). On December 11, 1997, the American Secretary of State apologized to African leaders for *the international community’s* failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda. And so the list could go on, taking in apologies in South Africa over apartheid, in Australia regarding deeds of colonial racism, and from the German government concerning certain episodes of World War Two.

Yet the people who actually perform the apology—the Pope, the President, the Secretary of State—have not themselves committed the wrongs in question. This raises the first question that this paper will address: Can an individual apologize for an action he or she never performed? I will argue for the positive and simple answer: An individual may act as a representative of a group, and apologize for that group’s wrongs. For many people, I believe, a certain unease remains—how can, say, an official of the Portuguese government *today* act as representative of a group of people acting 500 years ago? President Clinton may represent the American public who voted him into office, but can he represent a government or a people of the past? That is the second, slightly more complicated question I wish to address, again answering in the positive. The final question to consider is the case where there can be no honest pretense of representation at all—nobody (I hope) will allow that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright represents ‘the international community’. Can an apology take place in such circumstances? Here I will argue ‘No’, with certain important qualifications.

Suppose my child breaks a neighbour’s window. Perhaps it would be best if the child is sent round to apologize in person, but this is not the only possibility. If, for whatever reason, my child is not available, then I may go round, *qua* parent, and say sorry. There are several interpretations of this behaviour. (1) I am expressing my regret that the event occurred—using the words ‘I’m sorry’ to mean something like ‘I have sorrow’, which is not to *apologize* at all (in the same way, I can say that I’m sorry that the Black Death occurred, but I’m hardly apologizing for it). (2) I am reporting my child’s apology, in which case I would say ‘She is sorry for what she did’; in this case *I* am not really apologizing at all. (3) I am apologizing for *my* action of not adequately supervising my children, in which case I would say ‘I am sorry for what I did’. (4) I am acting as a representative of my daughter, in which case I would say ‘I am sorry for what she did’. This is different from (2), since in this case my daughter may be utterly unrepentant and refusing to apologize, but I have the authority to act on her behalf. (5)

¹ The figure of *almost a hundred* comes from L. Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness*, J. Aumann (trans.), (Alba House, 1998).

The final possibility—the one that interests me—is that I am apologizing on behalf of my family, as family representative. This only makes sense if we admit that *my family* did something wrong (otherwise why would it need to apologize?), but I find nothing terribly troubling about this kind of collective responsibility. If my family wrongs the neighbours when my child wrongs the neighbours, then I may, *qua* family representative, apologize, and when I do so my family apologizes. In such a case I may well say ‘I apologize for what *we* did’, but since the family’s wrongful action was identical to my daughter’s wrongful action, it is also available for me sensibly to say ‘I apologize for what *she* did’.

The notion of collective responsibility has received some criticism, and the present paper assumes, rather than argues, that those criticisms may be met.² The basis of my holding that making sense of collective responsibility is far more desirable than denying it, is simply an attention to our language as it is ordinarily used. We speak constantly of groups having beliefs, intentions, and performing actions for which they are responsible. France invades Russia; *la Grande Armée* invades Russia; Napoleon invades Russia. The Nazis believed in Aryan superiority; the Nazis hoped to eliminate Jewish culture; the Nazis were guilty of atrocities. There is no need to harbour suspicions of any odd metaphysical commitments here: the actions of the group will be constituted by the actions of the members. Exactly what this constitution relation is will vary from case to case: if I say that the twins like oatmeal, I’ll be taken as saying that *all* the twins (i.e., each of them) like oatmeal; if I say that the Gods love piety, I mean (probably) that most, or nearly all, of the Gods love piety (note how vague this can be left while still making perfect sense); if I say that the English are reserved, I may just mean that a greater proportion of the English are reserved than the proportion found in other populations—this may still be a small minority. There are more interesting notions of group action available³—which, perhaps, a full and adequate story will have eventually to confront—but the least controversial will serve my purposes here. If a group acts, then the group is responsible for the action. If that action is good, then the group merits praise; if it is wrong, then it merits blame. These are natural and smooth ways of talking, and any philosophical theorizing that disallows them must be considered to have incurred a theoretical cost. (The difficult question of how that praise or blame ought to be apportioned throughout the members of that group is not my concern. In particular, this paper takes no stand on whether an individual should feel guilt or responsibility for an action performed by other members of the same group.) Before continuing, it should also be noted that although this paper deals largely with representatives of *groups*, many of my points could be made without this context: so long as a person may act on behalf of another *individual* (a perfectly familiar notion), all my major claims could be made for that case instead.

Many groups we commonly refer to may outlive any individual member. The Royal Welsh Fusiliers formed in the seventeenth century and are still going strong. If an individual

² Critics of collective responsibility include H.D. Lewis, ‘Collective Responsibility’, *Philosophy* 24 (1948), R.S. Downie, ‘Collective Responsibility’, *Philosophy* 44 (1969), M.G. Velasquez, ‘Why Corporations Are Not Morally Responsible for Anything They Do’, *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 2 (1983), M. Keeley, ‘Organizations as Non-Persons’, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 15 (1981). The first three of these papers also appear in L. May and S. Hoffman (eds.), *Collective Responsibility*, (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), wherein arguments which, in my opinion, effectively defeat the critics also appear. See also L. May, *The Morality of Groups*, (Notre Dame; University of Notre Dame Press, 1987).

³ For example, one might talk of a nation ‘wanting to go to war’ despite the fact that there is not a single individual in that nation who has this desire. For an account of this more disputable type of ascription of mental states to groups, see D.E. Cooper, ‘Collective Responsibility’, *Philosophy* 43 (1968), and M. Gilbert, ‘Modeling Collective Belief’, *Synthese* 73 (1987) and *On Social Facts*, (London: Routledge, 1989).

has the authority to act as a representative of the fusiliers, then there is simply no reason to assume that he or she represents only those members of the group still in existence. (For various reasons it may be decided that that individual represents *only* living fusiliers, but that would be a non-mandatory decision.) One might worry that the mechanism by which representative authority is bestowed must be a group vote, such that those who cannot vote cannot be represented, but this is simply incorrect. Even if not a single Welsh Fusilier approves of Lord Hoo-ha acting on their behalf, if the appropriate military and royal decrees think otherwise, then Lord Hoo-ha *is* their representative; the authorization to act as representative need not be democratic—it may come from outside the group. If an individual can act on behalf of the fusiliers, understood as a group existing since the seventeenth century, then he or she can apologize on behalf of the fusiliers (if, for example, it were deemed that they as a group performed a wrong). The representative need not be a member of the group: the English monarch might have the authority to act (apologize) on behalf of the Welsh Fusiliers, but is not, him or herself, a fusilier. Given these facts, there is nothing in principle barring the possibility of a group being represented even if that group no longer exists, in much the same way as a deceased person has legal representatives. There may be practical problems concerning how that authority is conferred, and of course there will usually be little need for ex-groups to have representation, but I find nothing incoherent in the idea. A person may leave in his will a request that the executor apologize, on his behalf, to Aunt Mabel for insulting her at the Christmas party all those years ago. Aunt Mabel may find it a sign of cowardice that the apology was postponed in this manner, but will accept that, in the end, she received her due apology.

One important question pertains to the identity criteria for groups; another pertains to the criteria whereby an individual may be considered a representative for that group. On both counts the Welsh Fusiliers is an easy example: formed on March 16, 1689, and having (I assume) quite defined and inflexible rules concerning who is a member, and who may have the appropriate authority to represent. Few groups, however, will have such easy guidelines. I consider my grandfather as in the same family as my daughter, but what about an ancestor of a dozen generations back? When did the group we call ‘The French’ come into existence? It would be a mistake to think that such questions are difficult to answer simply due to epistemological haze—there is no answer to the question of precisely when The French came into existence, or where my family ends and my non-family begins.⁴ Questions of group membership, even for a period when the group is clearly in existence, can be equally vague. We tighten up such criteria when we need to, and more often than not we don’t need to.

A liberal understanding of ‘group’ will mean nothing more than ‘*set* of individuals’. Thus a person belongs to staggeringly many groups, and only a very few of them are of any practical interest. The fact that an individual is a member of a certain group may be of interest to one person but not to another. My being of white European heritage being raised in an ex-British colony may seem very uninteresting and irrelevant to some people, including myself, but there would be no sense in arguing that it *is* ‘really’ uninteresting and unimportant: if some people find it interesting and important then it *is* interesting and important *to them*. (It would make perfect sense for me to argue that they *ought not* find it interesting and important, but that would be a different kind of argument, requiring a different kind of

⁴ Attempts by old-fashioned historians to stipulate when The French came into existence—say, at the Treaty of Verdun in 843—are just that: *stipulations*. They might serve as pedagogical devices for the novice student, or, if they contrive to be taken seriously, are a form of ‘persuasive definition’, and thus we are free to reject them.

supportive reason.) My membership of some groups may be under my control (if I shave my head then I won't be a member of the group *the non-bald*), whereas for other groups this will not be the case (there is nothing I can now do about my membership of *persons who have eaten sushi*). Thus I may find myself a member of a group such that there is nothing I can do about it, and, although I have little interest in the fact of my membership, others find it very important.

Suppose back in the nineteenth century an individual white colonial settler drove a non-white indigenous family from their land. First, and most naturally, we describe an action involving *individuals*. But the action between individuals may also be part of an action between groups. It is tempting to say that if the white settler were, say, bald and buck-toothed, and each member of the family left-handed and lanky, then the offense is, trivially, an action perpetrated by the bald and buck-toothed group upon the left-handed and lanky group. But this does not seem correct to me. The white settler did not act *as* a bald person in the way he acted *as* a white settler. The act was, let's assume, a manifestation of a broad movement of political oppression and physical violence between groups; those groups were the white settlers and the non-white indigenous peoples. Even if *all* the settlers happened to be bald and buck-toothed, they still did not act *as* bald and buck-toothed, in the sense that their membership of this group would not *explain* any of their invasive and violent actions in the way their being white settlers is explanatory.⁵

If we consider this bald, buck-toothed, rapacious white settler, then there will be groupings such that any person is in the same group as him. Trivially, we are all in the group *humans*. But most of these groups (e.g., being buck-toothed) will be of little interest. The fact that he was a white settler, however, is, as a matter of fact, likely to continue to be of interest to many people. It is interesting (A) because he acted *as* a white person, in the sense that his action was part of a wider political movement which may be of historical importance; and/or (B) because the relation of violence and oppression between these groups may continue to this day, or at least have harmful consequences to this day.

Suppose, for the moment, that (B) were not in the equation. Change the example to the Norman conquest of England. An individual act of violence between a buck-toothed Norman and a left-handed Englishman is part of an action between groups: the Normans and English (not the buck-toothed and the left-handed). There are plenty of individuals around today who are members of each group, who find their membership interesting, who find this historical action between the groups interesting, and, moreover, both groups (presumably) actually have legitimate representatives. The question, then, is: Could the Normans (via representative) apologize to the English (via representative), for the violent and, let's assume, unwarranted invasion? And I believe the answer is 'Yes'. 'Could', of course, is a million miles from 'should'. Although, as I said, people are very interested in the Norman conquest, they are not 'hurt' by it. The English, as a group, *were* hurt by it (though in the long-term it was almost

⁵ There are various ways one can act *as* a member of a group. One is if there are accepted norms whereby one represents the group in the sense of *being an example of*, rather than *having authority to act for* (see below). For example, if a group of Welsh Fusiliers go out on the town, then they are acting *as* Welsh Fusiliers, especially if they are in uniform. When they are out of uniform in their home villages, then they no longer act as fusiliers. Their location, and what they are wearing, may make all the difference; such standards are stipulated regulations. (The earlier example of my child acting *as* family member is a softer example of much the same kind of thing.) There are no such ordinances governing when a violently racist Afrikaner landowner acts *as* an Afrikaner. He acts as an Afrikaner either because he sees his action in black and white terms (thus his intention is to act as part of that group), or because the action is one of many similar actions perpetrated by Afrikaners on the black population.

certainly to their advantage), but the English, as a group, have gotten over it. An apology, therefore, is not called for, any more than I ought to apologize to my brother for pinching him when we were children (if either of us remembers, he does not care).

This deals with a certain sort of popular critic of the ‘Age of Apologies’, who tries to grease the slope to absurdity. ‘Where will it all end?’ the rhetoric goes: ‘With the Romans apologizing to the Carthaginians?’ But this is just silly. If I apologize to my brother for some significant wrong I did him as a child—one that still bothers him—it doesn’t follow that I am on a slippery slope to apologizing for every tiny misdemeanour I ever committed at his expense—ones that bother neither of us. The question of whether an apology *should* take place depends partly on whether anyone *cares*. Usually it is the wronged party that cares, though sometimes it is the (repentant) guilty party, and occasionally an interested third party. The social function of apologies is primarily one of reconciliation, and so if all parties are perfectly content with each other—regardless of what harms they have inflicted on each other in the past—then no act of reconciliation is called for.

We can imagine circumstances in which the English have not have gotten over the Norman invasion. It might still be a thorn, a source of anger and biting rancour.⁶ In such a possible world, one would hope that the Normans, if they were considerate and decent, would put forward a representative to apologize. What is silly about imagining smouldering resentment for 1066 is that it is all so far in the past and there is no reason for us to be emotionally involved. But if it were not so far in the past—if it happened to the grandfathers of today’s Normans and English—then resentment would be understandable. It is perfectly natural that I *care* about my grandfather (even if he were dead, I would care about what *had* happened to him) in a way I don’t care about a much more distant ancestor.

This brings us back to the case of the white settler above. It is not the same as the Norman invasion, in that it is temporally close, and therefore understandably more engaging of emotions. But even if it were not temporally close, it might still arouse emotions. Let me note three salient ways in which this could occur. First, the wronged individuals may have been wronged *as* members of a group, and that group may still exist, and many members of that group might find group membership important (self-defining, even), and therefore the existing members might quite understandably feel hurt by the past wrong. Second, the existing members of the group may feel that they are still suffering harmful effects of those actions, or feel that harmful actions by the oppressing group are still being performed. Third, the group that was harmed may have no members remaining, but present individuals may feel emotionally connected to those individuals or to that group—the usual reason will be ties of kinship. Any of these three circumstances may underlie the kind of social fracture that an apology may help to heal.

In the case where wrongs of a certain type are still being inflicted upon a group, an apology to that group for a past instance of that wrong might be considered a rather hollow one. I wish to argue, however, that it is no less an apology. Consider the case on an individual level: if I break my neighbour’s window through negligent ball play, and I have every intention of continuing to play in this risky manner, then my going round to apologize for the single broken window would be odd or even pernicious; what is really called for is that I stop acting in a way that is likely to break his windows. An interesting question is whether it

⁶ In a Maupassant story, a nineteenth century Norman patriot continues to fume at the English over the Hundred Years War; in a Saki story, a certain English schoolboy is furious at all things French when he first learns of England’s loss of Calais. (‘Madame Husson’s May King’ and ‘Hyacinth’, respectively.)

would even *be* an apology in these circumstances. Just uttering the words associated with apologizing is insufficient for an apology: if a Greek says to a Mexican ‘I apologize for the Norman invasion in 1066’ then she has not succeeded in apologizing at all. Apologizing is best thought of as an illocutionary act, like asserting and promising—indeed, apologizing was one of J.L. Austin’s paradigms of an illocutionary act.⁷ If I say to a stranger in the street ‘I promise to bring you a dinosaur in my pocket tomorrow’ then, arguably, I have not promised anything. But this is not to say that I promise only if I sincerely mean it—a lying promise is still a promise, a deceitful assertion is still an assertion, and an insincere apology (that is, an apology for an action the type of which I intend to continue performing) is still an apology. (A fake Rembrandt, however, is not a Rembrandt.)

Let me call uttering the words ‘I apologize’ *locutionary apologizing* or *saying sorry*, which doesn’t seem to be all we typically mean by ‘apologizing’ at all. I cannot apologize for the Norman invasion, though I can certainly *utter* ‘I’m sorry for 1066 and all that’. Generally, I do not think a person can apologize (*qua* individual) for something she never did, nor a person (*qua* group representative) apologize for an action that the group never did. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to insist on criteria too strict for *illocutionary apologizing*. I can apologize for something that I do not sincerely believe was wrong. If I think my neighbour is just over-reacting, and has not really been harmed at all by my actions, I can still, in the interests of calming stormy waters, go round, swallow my pride and apologize. This is one way in which an apology may be ‘insincere’, but it is no less an apology for that. I can apologize without caring about what I did (even if I accept that it was wrong)—without feeling any guilt or shame. Again, we might call it ‘insincere’, but it at least succeeds in being an apology, in the same way as one may succeed in *thanking* even if one doesn’t appreciate the gift. Similarly, even if I have every intention of continuing to wrong my neighbour, I might still insincerely apologize for past wrongs of the same type, though this would usually be not merely insincere but malicious, in the same way as falsely promising is usually a malicious action.

In Austin’s terms, an attempted apology is ‘void’ or ‘misfires’ if certain criteria are unfulfilled, such as the speaker not having committed anything that anybody thinks of as wrongful. An apology uttered with no intention of stopping actions of the type in question (or without actually stopping actions of that sort) does not misfire; rather, it suffers the infelicity of ‘insincerity’—a kind of unhappiness, to be sure, but not one that prevents the speech act from occurring. For this reason I disagree with J. Harvey’s view that ‘[i]n a person-to-person apology, simply saying the right words may deceive the victim and bring comfort, but it does not constitute a genuine apology if sincerity is lacking.’⁸

In the case of group apologies, the question of (in)sincerity is more complicated, but there is still a place for it. I have already stated my acceptance of ascribing mental states to groups, though details haven’t been filled in. It makes perfect sense to speak of a group feeling remorse—there is, for example, a growing remorse in American people over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and if it were to grow much more one could speak plainly of ‘the Americans feeling remorse’ (of course, there is no claim that there is a particular ‘threshold’ number—we wield such notions with aplomb while leaving them thoroughly imprecise).

⁷ J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁸ J. Harvey, ‘The Emerging Practice of Institutional Apologies’, *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* (1995), p. 63. If Harvey’s ‘genuine’ means something close to ‘sincere’ (which it occasionally does), then I’ll retract my disagreement, but then, of course, the claim would be merely tautologous.

Moreover, some groups are institutions with more or less formal rules: regulations concerning the group's ends and means to those ends. An apology for a past group action of a certain type will be insincere if the institution's rulebook continues to sanction or even encourage more actions of that type.⁹ Lastly, there is the question of the feelings of the apologizer himself—we would generally hope that he has *some* degree of emotional engagement with the actions: a flippant 'Well, I *guess* we're sorry', will certainly undermine the act of apology. Yet I think this is only a trivial sort of 'sincerity', since I doubt we really require the formal apologizer to feel particular emotions—all we want of him is an adequately convincing affectation. That his inner life is a certain way is neither necessary nor sufficient for us to consider the apology to be a sincere one: if the institution continues to encourage criminal actions of the sort being apologized for, then regardless of the representative's personal feelings, we will think any apology insincere; if the institution makes the required amendments to its policy, then, so long as the representative plays his public role properly, a later confession that he did not personally care in the least will not cause us to retract our judgment that a sincere apology has occurred (though we may find it a rather disappointing admission).

Sincerity is not a necessary component of an apology, though it is certainly usually a desirable feature, for both individual and group apologies. Allowing the existence of insincere apologies is not to deny, however, that the act of apologizing is necessarily an act of expressing regret or remorse. Simply, one can 'express regret' without actually having regret, just as one can 'express gratitude' without feeling grateful. An apology, as I understand it, has several components: the expression of regret, the admission of responsibility, and an acknowledgment of a wrong committed to the addressee. (This last is to distinguish apologizing from various other expressions of regret, such as my regretting—and admitting responsibility for—having drunk too much last night.)¹⁰ Thus when the President makes a speech in which he expresses regret for an action of a past government, admits responsibility, and acknowledges the wrong done to his addressee (or whomever the addressee represents)—all without using the word 'sorry' or 'apologize'—the media are correct to take it, as they usually do, as an act of apologizing.

So far I have been running together the case of an extant group putting forward a representative to apologize for a past wrong committed by the group, and the case of a defunct group having a representative externally selected to speak for that group. In *practical* terms, the latter poses more problems than the former, but I have considered them equally conceivable. The extreme case is where both the wrongful group and the wronged group are extinct—even here I have argued that an act of apology is possible.¹¹ The issue of *sincerity*, however, seems to mark a division between the cases. When a representative speaks for the group, then she is authorized to express regret, acknowledge responsibility, etc. Whether the expression of regret is *sincere* depends not on what *she* feels, but on what the group feels and

⁹ I owe this point to J. Harvey, *op cit*.

¹⁰ Louis F. Kort, in his paper 'What is an Apology?' (*Philosophy Research Archives* (1975)), adds a couple more criteria: that the speaker is expressing regret for the offense *as such*, and that the speaker is performing an act of respect to his hearer as a person worthy of being spared mistreatment. Kort's reasoning, which I shan't reproduce here, seems completely plausible, and I leave these extra criteria out merely to avoid distraction.

¹¹ A teacher might make Jill apologize to Fred, not because either child cares in the least, but because the teacher cares. In the same way, even if no members of *G* and *H* exist—and *ipso facto* no members of *G* or *H* care (and *ipso facto* *G* and *H* don't care)—we, by which I mean an extant third party, might deem it desirable that one group apologize to the other, because *we* care.

what the group intends. With an extant group, it is possible that the group now feels remorse for its past actions, or has changed its policies of action such that the crimes are no longer supported. But a deceased group cannot do this. If a group had a policy of, say, racial oppression (or merely as a group condoned it), and expired with that policy intact, then a later representative cannot go back and alter that fact. It is open to the representative—if she has been granted authority to speak for that group—to express regret on behalf of the group, and to acknowledge the group’s responsibility. That will constitute an apology from the group (ignoring a few caveats already noted), but it cannot be sincere. The only sincerity available is the rather trivial kind that pertains to the apologizer’s emotions.

In recent years the American President has apologized for actions for which American governments of decades or even centuries ago were responsible. When a head of state apologizes in such a manner, there are two readings of what’s going on.¹² One is that she is acting as a representative of a group that continues through time. The present government is apologizing for an action that the same government performed in the past. In such a case the group in question may be labeled: ‘the government of country *C*’. The other reading is that the present government isn’t really involved at all, and is not apologizing. Rather, a representative has been selected to speak on behalf of another group which has since passed on. In this case the group that is apologizing might be labeled ‘the so-and-so government of country *C* at time *t*’. I noted earlier that the authority that grants the power to represent need not be democratic, and need not be internal to the group in question. (One might think that it *ought* to be, but that’s another matter.) A variety of decision-making arrangements *external* to the group may confer the right to represent.¹³ Given the obvious continuities that exist in a nation’s successive governments (that is, most nations, most of the time), the legitimate leader and representative of the present government will be the obvious choice to speak on behalf of the country’s past government.

Which reading we prefer, in so far as we feel pressed to select one rather than the other, depends partly on the lines of continuity we feel exist between the then-government and the now-government. In some senses they are the same group, in others they are not. Which is ‘the correct’ grouping to alight upon depends entirely on our interests and purposes, which change between contexts and persons. However, given my above point about sincerity, we can expect that the former reading, wherein the head of state acknowledges the continuity between the then-government and the now-government, will be preferable. Only on this reading can it make sense for the group who performed the wrong now to feel regret or remorse about that wrong (and change its policies accordingly), so only on this reading may we refer plainly to a ‘sincere apology’. This is not to deny that the alternative kind of apology may have social merit: by apologizing on behalf of a deceased government, despite the

¹² ‘Performed by the government’ here is an umbrella phrase. If a wrongful action was performed under a government’s rule, in circumstances such that the government turned a blind eye, or through negligence allowed it to occur, or, in general, had responsibility for preventing that action, then an apology may be forthcoming. On collective responsibility for *inaction*, see L. May, ‘Collective Inaction and Shared Responsibility’ *Noûs* 24 (1990).

¹³ Two quick examples: (1) Group *G* = the staff of restaurant that is one of a chain. The owner company can step in and decide who’s going to run the place—there’s no need to think that the staff have a say in the matter. (2) *G* = the siblings of a troubled and abusive family. The court can step in and decide that the children are better off being cared for elsewhere. That the children want to stay with their parents, and that the parents want to keep them, need not be a factor. In both cases the structures that authorize representation of the group are external to the group.

inevitability of a certain sort of insincerity, many of the same important truths may be adverted to: that the present government finds actions of that sort repugnant, that they recognize the wrongs done to possibly still living victims (or their families), that compensatory measures may be taken, and, generally, that the present government will do nothing of that sort itself. These kind of undertakings, along with an apology, may go a long way to overcoming resentment and alienation. If these self-descriptions and promises accurately reflect the present government's attitudes and policies, then we may reintroduce talk of a kind of 'sincerity'—but, speaking carefully, the sincerity should not be assigned to the apology itself, but to the undertakings and self-portrayals that accompany the act of apologizing.

If it is possible for a defunct group to apologize via representative—and that act consists largely of the representative expressing the group's regret and acknowledging the group's responsibility—then what is to prevent, say, *me* from apologizing for 1066? The simple answer is that I have not been granted any authority to speak on behalf of the Normans. It cannot be emphasized enough that the warrant to speak on behalf of a group may only be granted by accepted structures of authorization. For very many groups there simply are no such structures, and in particular they will rarely be encountered for extinct groups. (Perhaps they are never actually encountered for extinct groups—I am content to argue for the mere possibility.) But, of course, even groups without the capacity to put forward a legitimate representative may commit, as a group, dreadful crimes. Is there, then, no possibility of the group apologizing? Suppose that I am a member of such a group—call it '*G*'—though I personally was not involved in any action relating to that wrong at all. Since the individuals in question acted *as* members of *G*, their being *G*-members is part of an explanation of their behaviour. This reflects badly on me: someone might be tempted to link *my* membership of *G* with wrongful behaviour. The perpetrators have given the group 'a bad name', so I feel personally involved. Moreover, as a decent and sympathetic person, I ought simply to feel sorry for the victims, who have suffered some (let's say *serious*) harm. In such a circumstance, I may well want the victims, or the victimized group, to receive an apology. (Of course, I don't necessarily think this will make everything alright, and it may not be the most obvious reparative action at all; but it is, as they say, 'the least we can do'.) If, as we are stipulating, *G* has no internal mechanisms by which a representative may be selected, and, further, there exist no legitimate *external* authority-bestowing arrangements, then might not I take it upon myself to apologize?

I believe, with qualifications, that the answer is 'No'. There are certain things that I *can* legitimately say. I can assert that I believe that *G* ought to apologize. I can assert that I believe that if *G* did have the appropriate hierarchical structures, then its representative *would* apologize. I can express my emotion of 'sorrow' that the event took place at all, via the utterance 'I am sorry that it happened'. I can even 'make believe' that I am the representative of *G*, and present a kind of fictive apology. None of these things, however, would be apologizing, though some may masquerade as such. If I am not a legitimate representative of the group, then I cannot speak for the group, and even if I can 'say sorry', I do not thereby succeed in apologizing. I think of this failure in much the same terms as I think of my failure to name ships just by wandering through the marina saying 'I hereby name this ship the *Beagle*'.

In certain circumstances, however, 'saying sorry', even if it fails to be an apology, may be the correct course of action. Failure to accomplish one's illocutionary act is not in itself a

moral misdemeanour. (Indeed, if I say ‘I promise to give all readers a million dollars’, it is much better that the circumstances of utterance yield a failed promissory act than a successful promise that I cannot keep.) If there were a group (or individual) who felt wronged by another group of which I am a member, then they may well, in certain circumstances, choose to consider me as representative of my group. There are two types of representation here that might get confused. If an ordinary Tahitian traveled to Europe in the nineteenth century, then we might well speak of him as ‘representing his people’, even if no authority had been bestowed upon him. This is representation in the sense of *being a (typical) example of*—perhaps better described as ‘being representative of’ rather than ‘being *the* (or *a*) representative of’. In the same way, if, say, at a dinner party, Françoise finds herself the only French person present, then she may well be taken, relative to that context, as ‘representative of the French’. When an American Secretary of State travels to a relatively remote African nation, she exemplifies both sorts of representation: she is authorized to speak on behalf of the American government (on certain matters, assuming she’s there in official capacity), and in addition it is perfectly natural that she be considered representative of ‘the international community’.

The slide from being treated, and acting, as representative of *G*, to being treated, and acting, as *the* representative of *G*, as if one had been granted some special mandate to speak for the group, is a natural and well-oiled one. Françoise may find herself jokingly apologizing for the Norman conquest. But perhaps there is in the air the knowledge of a group action that continues to be a significant harm to certain individuals, that has tangible emotional consequences. Perhaps there are present some members of that wronged group who feel strongly that an apology is called for from the transgressing group, who believe that, until their suffering has been acknowledged, they do not receive societal respect. And let’s assume these feelings and beliefs are justified and true. Perhaps they look to an individual who is representative of *G* to act as a *the* representative of *G*. After all, *G* may not be putting forward any legitimate representative—it may not even be capable of putting forward a representative—despite the fact that *G* has performed a wrong which warrants an apology.

For my money, if there are important beneficial consequences that can be attained if that individual ‘says sorry’, and little in the way of costs, then I would prefer to see him do so—even if the utterance is a failed illocutionary apology—rather than see him retreat behind a defensive wall of ‘I didn’t do it’. If my neighbour’s window has been broken through an unlikely act of God, and everybody, quite understandably, thinks that I did it (I was found standing among the shards, cricket ball in hand), and there is nothing I can say to convince them of the truth—indeed, my denying it would only serve to deepen the resentment—then, if the happiness of the neighbourhood depended on my public repentance, I would hope to have the self-assurance to perform a failed illocutionary act, rather than live, pedantically correct, in an embittered community.

The function of an apology is to reconcile discordant parties—in other words, although the content of an apology is oriented towards the past, the whole purpose of the act lies in its future consequences. And there can be no overestimating the importance of the gains that may be secured: the contentedness of a family, the well-being of a community, the political stability of a nation. I see no reason to doubt that sometimes such welcome ends may be served by an utterance that might be taken to be an apology, but which, upon careful consideration, falls short of being one.