

THE APOLOGY PARADOX

BY JANNA THOMPSON

An outbreak of apology has swept the globe. Bill Clinton has apologized for slavery, Tony Blair for British policy during the Irish potato famine. The Canadian government has apologized to indigenous communities for breaking up their families and to Japanese Canadians for putting their families in internment camps during World War II. The Vatican has apologized for its failure to condemn the Nazi treatment of Jews, Queen Elizabeth for the British exploitation of the Maoris. The Japanese government has apologized to Korean women who were forced into prostitution during World War II, and some former government officials in South Africa have apologized for their behaviour during the period of apartheid. Though the Australian Prime Minister has refused to apologize for past treatment of Aborigines, many Australians have taken it upon themselves to make an apology. But does it make sense to say 'Sorry'? Can it be done without hypocrisy? The following paradox suggests that there is something wrong with the exercise of apologizing for what our ancestors did, or something wrong with common assumptions about such apologies.

I. THE PARADOX

1. We should apologize for what our ancestors did to indigenous people, or the blacks, or the Jews, or the Irish, etc.
2. If we are really sorry for the deeds of our ancestors then we regret that they did what they did.

This step requires that we understand what 'Sorry' means in the way we understand it when we apologize for our own actions. We regret the bad deed; we wish that we had not done it, and our apology is taken as a sign of

remorse. If we apologize without remorse, then we are being hypocritical. Even if remorse is out of place when we are apologizing for deeds done by others, surely regret is appropriate and necessary.

3. If we regret that our ancestors did their unjust deeds, then we prefer that they had not been done.
4. But if our ancestors had not done what they did to indigenous people, to the blacks, the Jews, the Irish, then the history of our country, indeed the history of the world, would have been significantly different from what it has been, and we would probably not exist.

This step makes use of a plausible point made by Derek Parfit about the contingency of persons.¹ Our actions, and the events that influence them, determine not only the conditions of life of our offspring, but also who they are. Even minor events can bring into being individuals who would not otherwise have existed, and after a few generations the number of people whose existence depends on such contingencies becomes very large.

A major historical event or institution of the past, like slavery and the slave trade, the dispossession of indigenous people in Canada, the United States and Australia, apartheid in South Africa, the Irish potato famine or the Holocaust, had an effect on the lives of large numbers of people. It influenced where they moved, whom they met, whether they emigrated, and the overall pattern of their lives – and, as a result, what children they had. It is not unreasonable to think that almost everyone now alive in the United States, Israel, Australia, Canada, Britain and South Africa would not be here if these events had not happened or these practices had not existed. Relatively minor historical occurrences, like the Australian and Canadian practice of taking children away from indigenous families and raising or educating them in special institutions, would not have played such a large role in determining who exists. Nevertheless since even relatively minor events can have an effect on what individuals are brought into being, and this effect is magnified over several generations, it would be rash for Australians and Canadians to assume that their coming into existence did not depend upon these policies.

5. Most of us are glad to be alive. We think it a good thing that we came into existence. That is, we prefer the world's being such that we exist.
6. This means that we cannot regret that those deeds or practices happened on which our existence depended, or probably depended. For if the deeds had not been done then the world would (probably) have been such that we would not exist.

¹ D. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 352.

7. Therefore we cannot sincerely apologize for the wrongs done by our ancestors, and we should not do so.

II. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE PARADOX

Some may think that the obvious solution is to endorse the last step, and thus reject the first: we should not apologize for the deeds of our ancestors. But this suggestion is not very attractive. The fact is that many of us are sorry for the unjust deeds of our ancestors. Being sorry is a very natural moral response to learning about the harm they did. Not responding in this way, it seems to me, would demonstrate a lack of moral sensibility. Furthermore, the paradox applies to the regrets of the descendants of victims of dispossession, neglect or atrocity. Descendants of slaves, of victims of apartheid, of indigenous people who were dispossessed, or of those who emigrated because of the potato famine, or the children of Holocaust survivors, would not now be in existence if these injustices had not been done. But it seems reasonable, even inevitable, for these descendants to regret that injustices were done to their ancestors. The question is how they can do this while preferring that the world should be such that they exist.²

Some may say that there is no paradox once we understand that the one who apologizes is a state or an institution, not particular individuals. There is no reason why an institution or community cannot regret what it did. The trouble is that individuals have to be the ones who issue these apologies, and those they represent are expected to endorse them; and the problem remains of how they can do this sincerely. Which particular individuals exist may not matter as far as the existence of a state is concerned, but it matters to those who act on behalf of the state or to its present citizens. In any case, whether leaders officially apologize or not, many individuals are apt to regret what their ancestors did or suffered.

Another response is to admit the paradoxical result of saying 'Sorry', while insisting that it does not matter. We do regret some of the deeds done by our ancestors without being sorry that we are alive. If this amounts to inconsistency, so be it. Not being sorry for the unjust deeds of our ancestors would be a worse failing. Nevertheless the existence of inconsistency leads to an uncertainty about how our apologies should be understood. It would be better if we did have a non-paradoxical interpretation of what we mean.

² Neil Thomason has suggested to me that the paradox may be more accurately understood as being about regret for bad things that have happened in the past rather than about apology.

It might be argued that no inconsistency exists when proper attention is paid to intension. I can consistently regret the happening of an action, process or practice under one description ('the practice of apartheid') and not regret it under another ('series of events on which my existence depends') – just as I can consistently believe that the Morning Star is Venus, and at the same time that the Evening Star is not Venus. However, whether my beliefs are consistent or inconsistent depends upon what I know or believe about the world. If I know that the Morning Star is the same as the Evening Star, then my beliefs *are* inconsistent. If I know, or have good reason to believe, that the practice of apartheid is identical to the series of events on which my existence depends, then my regret is paradoxical.

It could be argued that it is the sixth step that should be rejected. Utilitarians in particular might make this move. They might argue that the happiness of ourselves and our co-existents must be weighed and compared with the happiness that would now exist if the bad deeds had not been done. If it is total happiness that counts and not who has it, then we might well be forced to conclude that it would be better if history had been different in a way that would have resulted in our not being born. But the calculations required would be more than merely difficult (since, presumably, all other possible historical events that might have happened if the bad deeds had not been done would have to be weighed in the balance). In any case, the kind of utilitarianism that insists on maximizing total happiness is subject to serious objections (as Parfit also points out, pp. 387ff.).

Apart from the utilitarian position, it does seem reasonable that some people might sincerely wish that something had never happened, even though they recognize that if it had not, they (and their friends, family and associates) would not exist. They may consider that the destruction caused to their community (or by their ancestors to someone else's community) was so great that it would be better if they had never been born rather than that this destruction should have occurred. However, I suspect that most of us cannot sincerely take this position in respect to what our ancestors did.

Another alternative is to reject the second step. It might be argued that official apologies such as those made by Clinton, Blair and other leaders should not be interpreted as expressing regret about what was done by people in the past. They are forward- rather than backward-looking. They are meant to signal the beginning of a new relation with descendants of those who were harmed, or to alleviate the psychological damage suffered by members of a group with a historical grievance.³ They are a way of

³ 'Reparations may symbolize a society's undertaking not to forget or deny that a particular injustice took place, and to respect and help sustain a dignified sense of identity-in-memory for the people affected': J. Waldron, 'Superseding Historical Injustice', *Ethics*, 103 (1992), p. 6.

making a commitment to justice, of recognizing members of a disadvantaged group as equal citizens, or they are an expression of the intention to act more justly than did people of the past.

These ideas about how to understand what official apologies mean, or ought to mean, are plausible, but they cannot tell the full story. If the intention to act justly in the future is signalled by saying 'Sorry', then the ability of the words uttered to convey this message surely depends upon their being interpreted as an apology – as an expression of regret for what was done in the past. To use the distinction made by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*, making an apology can be a perlocutionary act intended to have a certain effect in a particular situation. But its ability to have that effect depends upon it being the kind of illocutionary act that it is – in this case, having the force of an apology. In any case, many of those who have apologized for wrongs of the past, for example, those Australians who offered their private apologies, were not signalling a new era of justice for wronged people. As ordinary citizens they were not in a position to do this. But they did intend to say that they were sorry.

Nevertheless it might be argued that the meaning of saying 'Sorry' is not properly described in the second and/or third steps of the paradox. Perhaps what we mean to convey is not regret but simply our recognition that certain acts performed in the past were wrong. But this idea is not appealing. What we want is a way of understanding our action as an apology, and surely anything that counts as apologizing has to be understood as expressing regret. More promising is the suggestion that regretting that something occurred does not mean that we prefer that it had not happened. It merely means that we wish it had not.⁴ People can wish for something incompatible with their preferences, for something impossible or even nonsensical. I can wish that I could fly like a bird, that daylight in winter lasted as long as daylight in summer, or that I could marry Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. So why can I not wish that my ancestors had not done their evil deed, even though I think it likely that my existence depends upon it?

There are wishes and wishes. Some wishes are fanciful, acts of imagination that do not commit the wisher to a desire that the wish may come true or to a regret that the event wished for did not happen, or even to a belief that it is (or was) possible for it to happen. I am struck by how exhilarating it would be to soar above the treetops, or how pleasant to ski after tea. Or I express an opinion about what I would like to do or be in an imagined world (not necessarily a possible one). It would be inappropriate for my friends to suggest that I take hang-gliding lessons, to give me a lecture on astronomy, or tell me that I cannot marry a fictional character. It would be

⁴ Tim Oakley made this suggestion.

inappropriate for them to point out that the wish is inconsistent with some of my beliefs and preferences. However, some wishes do express preferences. If in a conversation about politics I say that I wish that there were greater equality in our society, or that NATO had not bombed Belgrade, I shall be understood as expressing a preference – saying what I would like to be the case or what I would have preferred. If I have said something on another occasion that seems to contradict my utterance, or if I am ignorant about relevant facts, then it is appropriate for others to accuse me of inconsistency or ignorance. A wish of preference, unlike a wish of fancy, commits the wisher to preferring that the wish should come true, or to preferring that the world had been such that it had come true, and thus to the logical implications of these preferences. It is hard to interpret the wish that my ancestors had not committed an injustice as anything other than a wish of preference. In having this wish I am not engaging in an act of fancy or expressing a view about an imaginary world in which they did not do the deed. I prefer that they had not done it in this world.

It is not plausible to interpret our regrets concerning the deeds of our ancestors as a wish of fancy. But there is another way of arguing that apologizing does not commit us to preferring that a deed had not been done, at least as this is usually understood. Many people feel uncomfortable or even apologetic about benefiting from an injustice even when they had no responsibility for it. They are sorry that the good things that they now possess came to them because of a past injustice. They do not regret that they have these things, but that they came to have them in the way they did. An apology could be interpreted as an expression of this kind of regret. So interpreted it is not, strictly speaking, an apology *for* the deeds of our ancestors or an expression of regret that they happened. Rather it is an apology *concerning* deeds of the past, and the regret expressed is that we owe our existence and other things we enjoy to the injustices of our ancestors. Our preference is for a possible world in which our existence did not depend on these deeds.

It seems to me that this is the best solution. Nevertheless it requires that we must reinterpret what we are doing when we apologize or regret past injustices. It implies that we are not doing what many of us thought we were doing – apologizing for the deeds themselves and preferring that they had not happened. For this reason, many will find it implausible. However, the paradox requires us to reinterpret what we are doing when we apologize for deeds of the past, and the reinterpretation I am recommending seems not so drastic or counter-intuitive as those I have rejected.

La Trobe University