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# Weapon and Shield: Apologies and the Duty to Be Vulnerable

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## **Weapon and Shield: Apologies and the Duty to Be Vulnerable<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

Apologies are an important part of moral life and a method by which someone can satisfy their reparative obligations. At the same time, apologies can be used both as a shield to protect the person apologizing and as a weapon against the person to whom the apology is owed. In this paper we unpack both claims. We defend two principles one should employ to try to avoid such bad outcomes: (1) Apologies must be one-sided and nontransactional, and (2) the wrongdoer must be willing to pay what they owe. We argue that these principles require the wrongdoer's emotional vulnerability. Furthermore, we argue that the duty to be vulnerable in issuing apologies helps to make sense of why apologizing well is so difficult and why members of privileged groups might be especially prone to apologizing badly.

**Keywords:** apologies, anger, moral repair, vulnerability, social injustice

### **1. Introduction**

When one person wrongs another they incur a reparative debt to try to make up for what they have done and fix the harm they have caused. Very often, one of the reparative obligations wrongdoers bear is to apologize: to say that they are sorry and to bear the proper configuration of beliefs, attitudes, and emotions that constitute a genuine apology. Philosophers have been interested in many questions that concern the nature and value of apologies, from the question of what an apology is to the role of apology in political reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Our aim in this article is to explore what it means to apologize well in the context of interpersonal relationships, with a focus on how wrongdoers' and victims' social identities affect the nature and value of apologizing. We are concerned with what moral repair involves in a world shot through with

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Bovens 2008; Corntassel and Holder 2008; Martin 2010; Pettigrove and Collins 2011; MacLachlan 2013, 2015, 2018; Brudholm 2020.

injustice, exploring how oppressive ideologies or social scripts come to bear on moral-reparative practices.

In particular, we adopt a social-level analysis to explore some of the ways in which apologies in our ordinary interpersonal interactions can go awry and contribute to oppressive ideologies. This can happen in our intimate personal relationships. For instance, a man might apologize for saying something sexist to a friend who is hurt by his comments. But it also happens between individuals in more public, social contexts. People of color, for example, often feel public pressure to forgive wrongdoers in the aftermath of a racist act and sometimes public apologies are presented with this pressure in mind (Gay 2015). For example, Chief Medaria Arradondo apologized to George Floyd's family after his murder by police officer Derek Chauvin. Public apologies involve apologizing to victims whom the wrongdoer might not know (as when a celebrity apologizes to their fans for being caught using a racial slur) or on behalf of an institution (as when a politician apologizes for historic wrongs committed by the nation they represent). We are not focusing here on these kinds of apologies and are instead dealing with private apologies using a social-level analysis. This means that we will think through some of the ways in which reparative efforts are affected by the social milieu in which they are made, how they draw on the conceptual resources available in the social imaginary, and how they are constrained by social scripts that often operate in the background of moral interactions. In short, we will think about the ways in which personal apologies between wrongdoers and their victims go well or badly in light of their respective social locations—most notably (but not exclusively) their gender and race.

We begin by discussing the nature of sincere apologies and the role of anger in responding to moral wrongdoing. We argue that apologies can function as both weapons and shields. Apologies can protect the wrongdoer from further criticism (as a shield) and attack the person who was wronged, silencing moral critique of the original wrongful action (as a weapon). We'll then suggest two principles one should employ to help mitigate these bad outcomes:<sup>3</sup> (1) Apologies must be one-sided and nontransactional, and (2) the wrongdoer must be willing to pay what they owe. We argue that these principles require the wrongdoer's emotional vulnerability. We suggest that the duty to be vulnerable in issuing apologies helps to make sense of why apologizing well is so difficult and why members of privileged groups might be especially prone to apologizing badly.

## **2. Sincere Apologies, the Moral Reparative Moment, and Anger**

Apologies are speech acts or communicative acts in which the wrongdoer does more than just utter the words "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." Instead, apologies are

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to a referee for helping us think about our aim in terms of mitigation.

illocutions; in saying the words, the apologizer is also performing an action. So, just like when a person who makes a promise incurs a new obligation in virtue of uttering the words, when a wrongdoer says, “I apologize,” they discharge at least one reparative obligation that they bear.

For an apology to be well formed, it has to be *sincere*. The sincerity condition has at least four parts. First, wrongdoers should feel bad for what they have done. They should experience emotions like regret, remorse, shame, or guilt. Second, they should appreciate the nature of the moral wrong and its consequences in a way that is personal. This means they should understand how the victims of their actions were harmed within the particular context, in light of their experiences and constitution. Third, wrongdoers should be properly oriented both toward the victim (as a person of value who deserved to be treated differently) and toward themselves (as a moral agent who can appropriately be held responsible for their actions). Finally, they have to intend not to recommit the wrong in the future (or, at the very least, they can’t intend to recommit the wrong in the future) (Bovens 2008, 220).

The sincerity condition for apologies is relatively uncontroversial. But it is not immediately clear what should happen after a sincere apology is offered. In order to answer that question, it’s helpful to think of the wrongdoer who apologizes and the victim to whom they apologize as standing in relation to each other within what we will call a “moral reparative moment.” When the wrongdoer apologizes to them, the victim has many potential responses to choose from, each of which is often used interchangeably but should be kept distinct. Most notably, the victim might choose whether to accept, reject, or ignore the apology; to forgive the wrongdoer; or to reconcile.

Each of those responses are different; here, we focus mainly on the role of forgiveness (and to some extent accepting an apology) in the moral reparative moment.<sup>4</sup> The literature on forgiveness is expansive, and how forgiveness should be defined is controversial. For our purposes we accept what is a mainly conventional account that says forgiveness is, at least, a commitment to overcome anger and other hostile feelings toward the wrongdoer. Here we are interested in the role of anger in particular.

Many feminist philosophers and scholars of race have made the case that anger is an especially valuable moral emotion in the context of interpersonal wrongdoing and systemic injustice (Frye 1983; Spelman 1989; Scheman 1993; hooks 1995; Lugones 2003; MacLachlan 2010; Jaggar 2014; Emerick 2016; Cherry 2018; Stockdale 2021; Emerick and Yap 2023). Victims’ experiences and expressions of anger can communicate their self-respect and right to better treatment, as well as

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, see Emerick (2017).

their respect for wrongdoers who ought to be held accountable for their actions. The emotion also has epistemic value in helping victims connect their own lived experiences to the experiences of others (as in the case of anger about domestic violence). And anger can be politically valuable, motivating people to come together in solidarity against injustice.

But there are a variety of downsides to anger as well. For example, it can be draining to carry anger around, and the emotion can place stress on a person's health and disrupt their interpersonal relationships. Anger can divide as much as it promotes solidarity, and it can confuse as much as it clarifies epistemically. It can also be a dangerous motivator, enabling people to act in ways that are harmful or destructive to themselves or to others. So even though anger is very often a morally, epistemically, and politically valuable response to wrongdoing and injustice, the emotion tends to be burdensome for victims of injustice to bear (Norlock 2008). Apologies are thus important not only because they address the original wrong but because they may help to disrupt or undermine anger. But apologies can go wrong in various ways, and they can give victims even more reason to be angry rather than provide them with moral reasons to forgive.

### 3. Apologizing Badly

In her remarkable book *Repair*, Elizabeth Spelman considers a range of ways that people attempt to fix things that have gone wrong, from material objects to interpersonal relationships. Apologies, for Spelman, are an important reparative tool, but there are many ways that they can go awry. In apologizing, Spelman says, someone

wraps herself in a glorious mantle of rehabilitation. However vicious her actions, however morally reprehensible she has been in the past, her sincere apology entitles her to credit at the bank of moral rectitude. She's done wrong, but she knows it, accepts full responsibility for it, and regrets it. . . . [Apology] short-circuits any further criticism. (Spelman 2002, 97)

From this passage we can see how apologies can function as both *shields* and *weapons*, protecting the wrongdoer from further criticism and attacking the person who was wronged while silencing moral critique of the original action. We will unpack both in turn.

First, an apology functions as a shield when the wrongdoer uses the apology (intentionally or not) to silence further moral criticism or to silence any suggestion or expectation that the wrongdoer make additional efforts to repair the wrong. More strongly, in apologizing, the wrongdoer might even make the case that they have

undergone a personal transformation and become a different person. So, it's not just that blame is no longer warranted, but that if it were, it wouldn't appropriately be directed toward *them* (since they have shown that they are no longer the kind of person who could have committed such an act).

Imagine the following case: Two departmental colleagues are attending an academic conference where they are copresenting a paper. During their presentation, one of them (a man) makes a sexist joke about what his female colleague is wearing during the talk. After the talk, the female colleague tells him that his joke was sexist and undermined her both professionally and personally. He takes a minute to think it through and then apologizes carefully. Indeed, he seems to satisfy all four parts of the sincerity condition, in that he feels genuine remorse, demonstrates that he understands why what he said was hurtful to his colleague and sexist in general, acknowledges that he acted wrongly and that his colleague (and all women) deserved better treatment, and conveys his commitment to not behave in that way in the future.

Spelman notes that apologies often hang in the air between the wrongdoer and the victim, and in that way call out for a response in the moral reparative moment. Indeed, it's helpful to think of this in terms of a spotlight that starts out focused just on the wrongdoer—they have acted wrongly and all the attention is on them—but then shifts to fall on the victim who must choose how to respond. Imagine that the apology is delivered in a public space at the conference venue; people nearby, some of whom might have been at the talk, overhear the conversation. The focus is now on the woman's response. Whether he intends it or not, his apology carries with it a type of implicit pressure to accept and to forgive.<sup>5</sup> After all, by repudiating his actions he has demonstrated a commitment to no longer being the kind of person who tells sexist jokes about his colleagues.

This case helps to show that even if the sincerity condition is met, there is pressure to accept or forgive packed into the moral reparative moment that functions as a shield for the wrongdoer (whether they intend it that way or not). Note what might come next in that public space: one possibility is for his colleague to believe that he is sincere and yet insist on her right to be angry (and so she is not committed to forgiving him). Or, perhaps she's not angry but explains that she is no longer interested in collaborating on future work—or indeed having anything more than a civil relationship among fellow department members (and so is not interested in reconciling). Once the spotlight shifts to her, any response she gives other than to accept his apology, forgive him (i.e., commit to giving up her anger and other hostile feelings), and reconcile with him might crystallize the pressure that was in the air into

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<sup>5</sup> Something similar can be said about the pressure that is placed on the recipient of a public marriage proposal.

a type of weapon that might be used against her. When apologies are delivered in the presence of bystanders, victims might feel even more pressure to forgive—either to keep the peace or out of concern for one’s own personal or professional reputation. If the woman responds in a way that indicates she does not accept or is not ready to accept the apology, it’s easy to imagine the man turning on a dime and exclaiming, “I said I was sorry!” the minute her reply fails to accomplish what he intended.

Of course, background norms and stereotypes found in the social imaginary complicate the relationship between these colleagues. On the one hand, women are often seen as emotional, irrational, vindictive, or crazy. There is a risk that the wrongdoer in this scenario, and onlookers observing the interaction, may read into how the woman responds to the apology in such a way that she *appears* to confirm those stereotypes. She might, for example, be read as though she has overreacted to the sexist joke. This means that even if the man does not intend to use this weapon against her, the threat it poses is still present. The very circumstances under which the apology is offered weaponize it. If she does not accept it and thereby reconcile with him, she runs the risk of being forced into the role of the cold-hearted, vindictive, selfish, or hysterical woman. Thus apologies, which shift the spotlight to victims and how they will respond, can function as weapons that reinforce oppressive stereotypes and expectations about how victims should behave, shifting the normative burden to victims. The focus becomes how victims should fulfill what appears to be *their* obligations toward wrongdoers. At the same time, the woman might feel reluctant to forgive or to reconcile because she is worried about letting sexism slide (particularly in the academy). This is a classic double bind: if she forgives, she might feel complicit in her own oppression or the oppression of others; if she refuses to forgive, she might be regarded as embodying sexist stereotypes.<sup>6</sup>

This case helps to show that apologies that go wrong or are offered in the wrong way can result in further harm to victims. They can short-circuit the ability of the victim to make a moral claim that the action was wrongful and to demand further reparation. It can also leave them vulnerable to further mistreatment or undermine their ability to end the relationship. Both of those are real and serious harms of weaponized apologies. If anger involves judging or seeing some action as wrong, then pressure to accept an apology and to forgive can be pressure to paper over the claim of wrongdoing or injustice that gave rise to anger. That’s easy to see in cases of interpersonal wrongdoing like the case of the sexist story; telling someone not to be

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<sup>6</sup> As a corollary case and another classic double bind, consider the Clinton/Lewinsky affair. Hillary Clinton faced significant pressure both to forgive Bill Clinton for his affair (and to thereby be a good wife) and to not reconcile with him (and to thereby be a good feminist), with plenty of public criticism pushing in both directions. Thanks to a referee for encouraging us to think about this case.

mad at the person that wronged them might, at least some of the time, have the effect of maintaining the status quo in an abusive or toxic relationship. In fact, the dynamics of abusive relationships are often characterized by repeated apologies on the part of the abuser (Frieze, Newhill, and Fusco 2020, 111–14).<sup>7</sup> And apologies pave the way for that type of pressure to be applied by others—either by the wrongdoer themselves or by others in their moral community. It’s easy to imagine others nearby silently judging that the woman should forgive her colleague or, later, other members of their department telling her that his apology really does absolve him and that she’s being unfair or unprofessional by failing to forgive.

When we adopt a social level of analysis, we can recognize that such a move has broader implications than just what is experienced by individual victims. Think about calls for Black people to forgive after an act of police violence.<sup>8</sup> Whether intentional or not, the suggestion that people should no longer be upset or protest violence shifts the normative burden to victims of injustice whose behavior is now the moral focus. This shift ends up silencing the moral critique made by the protest—and by the expression of anger itself. In the context of police violence, people are not just angry about the specific case in question. They are angry about ongoing racial injustice and the persistent threat of police violence Black people face. Pressuring people to forgive such injustice thus has the effect of maintaining the unjust status quo and reinforcing white supremacy.

Philosophers sometimes talk about “the aptness of anger” or to what extent anger is fitting or appropriate (Srinivasan 2018; Stockdale 2021; Emerick and Yap 2023). The anger of a lawyer in a courtroom drama defending their client, the soldier on the battlefield defending their comrades, or the parent defending their child against someone who would harm them—each of these are powerful, sometimes intoxicating bits of theater. It can feel good to be in the audience watching the expression of such anger, in part because we get to be on the side of the righteous. The anger makes a claim of wrongdoing or injustice, and when we are rooting for the angry protagonist, we get to join them in a bit of their heroism. And yet, we should ask whose anger is perceived or thought to be fitting in the first place and whose anger (and about what types of things) secures that type of uptake. Whose anger is commonly dismissed or ignored?

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<sup>7</sup> It might also be that, after some time, the repeated apologies should no longer be treated as well formed, or that repetition causes apologies to lose their force over time. For the purposes of this paper, we don’t want to set any particular threshold for when this happens, but we do leave open the possibility that people might sincerely apologize but then later fail to meet the forward-looking condition.

<sup>8</sup> For example, George Floyd’s (white) partner asked on his behalf for the community to give grace to the people who had harmed him (CBS News Minnesota 2020).

Answering that question requires identifying the background ideologies at play that affect what conceptual resources are available in the social imaginary. For instance, consider the stereotype that women are emotional (and so *irrational*) and how that's often used to dismiss the moral claim they make in expressing anger. (One need only be reminded of the origins of the term *hysterical* in order to feel the force of this point.) Or consider the trope of the fiery Latina or of hot-blooded LatinX folks more generally who might be thought to be *vindictive* or *vengeful*. Consider the anger of Black folks; when interpreted within a racist or white supremacist social imaginary, Black people's anger might be dismissed as a sign of not only irrationality but *animality*, or of being less than fully human. Finally, consider the anger of disabled folks who, when expressing anger, might be regarded as *pathological*.

In each case, a person's social location affects the extent to which their anger is likely to secure uptake and be regarded as apt. Those who occupy dominant social locations (e.g., straight, white, able-bodied, cis men in the US and Canada today) are those who are most likely to have their anger regarded as legitimate. That's a significant problem because it means that the moral claim being made by others from oppressed social locations will be easy to ignore and write off, and so it will be more likely to be left unaddressed, thereby maintaining or leaving unchallenged an unjust status quo.

But there's another worry we should consider, and it's about how apologies (and the process of weaponization we've been describing) can also have the effect of reinscribing oppressive ideologies by reinforcing the tropes described above. Ian Hacking talks about this in terms of looping or interactive social kinds: the way that agents' self-understanding coevolves with the ways that they are socially classified. This provides a mechanism through which stereotypes held in the social imaginary can be instantiated and made real via social interaction (Hacking 1995; Haslanger 2012). The reality of those interactions then loops back around and perpetuates the stereotype itself.<sup>9</sup>

Our suggestion is that apologies become weaponized when they function to help maintain oppressive ideologies. The moral reparative moment that is ostensibly just between two people—the wrongdoer and the victim—is affected by individuals' social identities. If a Black woman rejects an apology or refuses to forgive someone who wronged them, those choices might contribute to the stereotype in the social imaginary that says that Black women are irrational, angry, and difficult. Just as the

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<sup>9</sup> Hilde Lindemann (2001) similarly explains that oppressive master narratives produce what she calls "damaged identities" that help to reinforce the oppressive master narratives. Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 69–96) talks about this phenomenon in terms of "controlling images"—archetypes held in the social imaginary that again produce outcomes that shape people's lives which then serve to reinforce those archetypes.

woman colleague might be pressured by departmental colleagues to forgive and reconcile with her collaborator (and run the risk of confirming sexist tropes if she fails to do so), so too might any member of a social group marked as overly emotional run the risk of lending credence to the stereotype of their irrational nature. In that way the phenomenon Spelman describes is not just interpersonal but social and political as well.

#### **4. Apologizing Well**

We hope the previous discussion makes clear that it's not enough for apologies to be sincere. Because of the latent protective and aggressive power packed in to apologies themselves, because of the type of social pressure that others in the victim's moral community might apply, and because of the way that stereotypes or tropes held in the social imaginary might leave a victim in a double bind when choosing how to respond, the person who apologizes must do more than simply mean it. In this section we argue that good apologies require not only sincerity but vulnerability. As we understand it, *vulnerability involves not expecting or demanding any particular response and being willing to pay what you owe, even if that involves serious costs and a change to your self-understanding.*

The term "vulnerability" is often used to describe marginalized groups who are vulnerable to certain forms of mistreatment and injustice. Women are vulnerable to gendered violence, the elderly and people with disabilities are vulnerable to abuse and neglect, and Black and Indigenous people are vulnerable to police violence. Vulnerability is also a central concept in bioethics (Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2013). Vulnerable groups are at risk of being harmed and, in many cases, require protection. For example, the elderly and immunocompromised are vulnerable to serious illness in a pandemic, and they require vaccine priority to protect them from this increased risk of harm. But there are other forms of vulnerability beyond vulnerability to harm that come with being a member of a marginalized group. Margaret Urban Walker introduces the concept of "moral vulnerability" in the context of reparative justice. Moral vulnerability, she argues, is "a vulnerability that inheres in our assumption that we possess a certain moral status as full participants in reciprocal accountability relations" (Walker 2013, 112). Moral vulnerability is a distinct form of vulnerability that arises from our moral practices of holding one another accountable, where the harm we are vulnerable to suffering is not being recognized as a participant in these moral relations. And we are *all* morally vulnerable, in the sense that all of us are at risk of being wronged by others as we go about our lives. Those who do find themselves in the position of being victims are vulnerable to being dismissed, denied, or ignored when they attempt to hold wrongdoers accountable—especially when victims are members of marginalized groups. Walker discusses, for example, the case of a sex worker who is met with skepticism or ridicule for pressing a formal complaint

about being assaulted, and subordinates in an employment context who are not taken seriously when they voice concern about being treated disrespectfully at work.

But as Walker points out, *wrongdoers* are *also* vulnerable. They are vulnerable to misplaced demands and sometimes accusations of fault or responsibility that may be unfair (2013, 120). While Walker is primarily focused on the moral vulnerabilities of victims, we want to take up the question of what makes wrongdoers vulnerable in relation to people they have harmed, so that we can better understand the relationship between apology and vulnerability. As we have argued, apologies can serve as both weapons and shields. But this suggests that apologies can function to make wrongdoers morally *invulnerable*—or at least less vulnerable—by protecting them from further demands for reparation. We have shown that this can happen even when wrongdoers do accept accountability and express remorse by way of apology.

We suggest that, whereas bad apologies function to protect wrongdoers from the vulnerability of being held accountable and the reparative obligations they might bear toward victims and other members of the moral community, good apologies involve embracing vulnerability of two different kinds. The first is emotional vulnerability. What unites all forms of vulnerability, as Walker (2013, 112) explains, is that to be vulnerable is “to be capable of being wounded.” But not all forms of vulnerability are bad. When we are emotionally vulnerable with other people, we do risk being wounded or harmed. We are vulnerable when we tell a romantic partner we love them for the first time, when we challenge our family members’ racism, and when we discuss our stories of rejection with colleagues and students. In all these cases we risk bearing various costs—by the partner who doesn’t reciprocate, by family members who might act defensively, and by colleagues and students who might judge us for our failures. But these worst-case outcomes need not materialize, and, often, being emotionally vulnerable results in good outcomes. The partner may reciprocate and say they love you, family members might be more receptive than you anticipated, and colleagues and students may feel supported and inspired by your courage to share. And notice that these good outcomes *depend* upon our willingness to be emotionally vulnerable with others. Emotional vulnerability is required to have the strong interpersonal relationships we find so valuable.

This form of vulnerability is no less important in the context of moral repair. In apologizing, we risk that others might respond in ways that hurt us; by admitting fault, we risk exposing ourselves to additional repercussions as well as the shame that may accompany them. But apologizing well requires embracing this form of vulnerability, leaning into the risks of apologizing, and giving up one’s sense of control over how events might unfold.<sup>10</sup> Apologizing well requires accepting the victim’s right

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<sup>10</sup> Luc Bovens (2021, 78) similarly argues that apologies should be delivered with humility, “bowing one’s head” to the victim. When we apologize, we accept that the

to respond in a variety of different ways that are uncertain, and being open to further demands for reparations. We see emotional vulnerability in the context of sincere apologies as essential to the difficult process of repair.

There is another form of vulnerability that we might think of as more existential. This is the kind of vulnerability involved when we acknowledge that humans are profoundly social beings—that who we are and what we become is not entirely up to us. Not only are the opportunities we have not entirely under our control, but we are coconstituted alongside others who help us to become who we are (and who we in turn help to shape as well). Recognizing that we are coconstituted in that way can be threatening since it involves a loss of a sense of control. It can also force us to rewrite our own self-narrative, much of which has to do with our own (mostly good) moral character. Well-formed apologies for serious wrongs often give rise to this type of existential vulnerability. The man who apologizes for his sexist joke at the conference must seriously entertain the possibility that he is not the good feminist colleague that he thought he was.

All of us are vulnerable in this way, in that others can challenge our pictures of ourselves. But just as material vulnerabilities often track social location, so too does this kind of existential vulnerability. People from marginalized social locations are often interpellated into limiting social roles, like what Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 69–96) identifies as controlling images. By providing easy scripts into which, say, a Black woman correctly identifying racist injustice can be read as being merely irrationally angry, the social imaginary limits people’s possibilities. This means that even if she does the best she can to communicate effectively, a racist audience may simply not give her an appropriate response. Despite her best efforts, misogyny and racial injustice restrict her social identity so that that part of who she is in the world will be an angry Black woman. Of course there are ways she can resist this, and a supportive community less under the sway of these kinds of social scripts will be more likely to respond to her appropriately. But the point is that part of who we are is determined by our place in the world and how others respond to our actions.

So what does it mean to apologize vulnerably? We can interpret what this means via two principles.

**Principle 1:** Good apologies are one-sided; they are not transactional.

We contend that when someone apologizes well, they issue the apology and expect nothing for having done so. The wrongdoer does not assume or expect that they will

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victim has the authority to determine what happens now. We prefer the term “emotional vulnerability” to capture the emotional risk that apologizing involves, but we see Bovens’s insights as complementary to our own.

be forgiven, that they will reconcile with their victim, that others will welcome them back into the moral community, or even that their apology will be accepted. Instead, the wrongdoer apologizes because they owe it to the victim to do so—that and nothing more. The victim is then in a position to make a choice about what to do next, free of pressure from the wrongdoer. And since others might follow the lead of the wrongdoer, they thereby set an example for others in the moral community to follow.

Thus, making good on principle 1 means having no expectation or sense of entitlement to any particular response from the victim in the moral reparative moment. That does not mean that the wrongdoer should not *hope* that their apology will lead to various desirable outcomes. Indeed, it seems appropriate that the man who undermined his colleague *does* hope that she will accept his apology, that she will forgive him for his sexist behavior, and that they will be able to reconcile with each other. Hope involves, at least, the desire for an outcome and the belief that the outcome is possible; and forgiveness is certainly a desirable and possible response to apology. Hope also involves the recognition that one is vulnerable to external factors that can affect whether the desired outcome will come about (Meirav 2009; Stockdale 2021). Hoping for an outcome involves vulnerability, whereas expecting or anticipating outcomes involves a sense of control over the outcome. Furthermore, principle 1 is consistent with the wrongdoer believing that the victim has decisive moral reasons to forgive them. But there is a significant difference between holding such beliefs, desires, or hopes and feeling *entitled* to those things, and an even more significant difference between feeling that entitlement and communicating it. So, regardless of the wrongdoer's beliefs about what victims owe wrongdoers who apologize, either generally or in their own case, apologizing well involves opening oneself up to a variety of responses from the victim and the risks that come with accepting accountability.

**Principle 2:** Good apologies involve the willingness to pay what you owe.

We suggest that paying what you owe, as a wrongdoer, involves accepting the existential, material, and relational costs of your actions. One existential cost is the obligation to engage in deep introspection, to reconsider who you are and how you have lived. Almost everyone wants to believe that they are morally good and decent, and it's often all too easy to rationalize or excuse our own behavior as an isolated action and not reflective of more deep-seated defects of character. Many of us are reluctant to think of ourselves as the kind of people who are capable of causing significant, unjustified harm to others. And notice that apologies often reflect this resistance to viewing ourselves as the villain in someone else's story. We often apologize in a way that distances ourselves from the wrongful act, assuring the person we harmed that we would never do the same thing again—that we have learned our

lesson and have changed. But when the wrongdoer makes good on principle 2 they are willing to pay the existential costs of allowing some of their own self-narrative to be rewritten, such that they come to understand differently what story they have told about their life in order to change their ways moving forward.

Apologizing vulnerably in the existential sense thus involves accepting that one was, and is, the sort of person who can cause significant harm to others. It involves seeing oneself as a fallible human being, alongside everyone else, in a world in which all of us are morally imperfect and prone to making significant moral mistakes. It also often requires acknowledgement that one's social identity has shaped who one is as a person and how one's social location affects one's experiences, knowledge, and actions. Think, for example, of the cis man who apologizes to a woman friend for centering his own voice in their discussion about abortion, or the white woman who apologizes to her women of color colleagues for treating her own experiences of sexism as universal. In these cases, apologizing vulnerably in the existential sense involves acknowledging that one's privileged social location has shaped who one is and the wrongful acts one is prone to perform. Doing so can be a difficult and often painful experience, but it is a cost we owe to victims of our wrongful acts—and to ourselves. Making good on that obligation and bearing that existential cost is part of what it means to take full responsibility for our actions.

Wrongdoers must also be willing to pay material costs. Most obviously, sometimes apologies must be accompanied by a redistribution of material wealth. For example, if someone borrows your favorite book and loses it, they might owe you an apology and a new copy of the book. Such economic costs are often easy and clear cut in many relationships; but as cases get more complicated, the wrongdoer might owe more than material or economic debts. Note that in both simple and more complicated cases of reparation there is a shift in power in the relationship. The wronged party gets to partially determine what the wrongdoer owes in order for their reparative duties to be discharged. Being listened to and heard, rather than dismissed, and having the right and opportunity to help to determine what the wrongdoer owes can go a considerable way toward fixing the damage that the wrongdoer caused.

Finally, in addition to these existential and material costs, there are often relational costs wrongdoers must be willing to bear. Principle 2 requires that the wrongdoer accept costs to the relationship that have resulted from the wrongdoing, such as a change in the nature of the relationship or the norms governing it. In the conference case, the man who apologizes must be willing to accept that one cost of his sexist behavior is damaged trust. Perhaps his colleague wonders whether the comment was really reflective of deep-seated, sexist beliefs. Rebuilding lost trust can take time and patience. In some cases, wrongdoers must even accept the victim's choice to end the relationship. Even if this is the first time that he has treated her in a sexist fashion, the woman academic is likely to have experienced plenty of academic

sexism, as well as sexism in other relationships. Considering the way that such things accumulate over time, and the risk to her professional standing, it might well be that she simply needs to walk away from the collaboration for the sake of her own well-being. It is also the case that these costs must be borne whether or not the victim accepts the apology. Part of the requisite vulnerability here is that the apology must be offered with no expectation of forgiveness or reconciliation in return. This means that even wrongdoers who have paid what they owe might nevertheless run the risk of never gaining closure or regaining moral stature.<sup>11</sup>

It's important at this point also to acknowledge that principle 1 is still in play. Since apologies are not transactions, a wrongdoer does not pay what they owe in the same way that a customer pays for an item they purchased.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is possible for the wronged party to be mistaken about what the wrongdoer owes, such as when victims ask for too much. For example, the neighbor who demands that your teenager who egged their house on Halloween buys them a new house is, obviously, asking for too much. In these cases, reparation has not been made but through no fault of the wrongdoer. We are not saying that the victim necessarily acts immorally in such a case (though it's possible they do). The point is that by balancing power in the relationship this way, by recognizing the power of the victim to determine partially what the wrongdoer's reparative obligations are, you open up the possibility that they will err in doing so, either by way of some moral or epistemic vice. That's just one of the implications of fallible beings engaging with each other in the moral reparative moment.

But there are also reasons to worry about the possibility of victims asking for too little—even more so when they are members of oppressed social groups. For example, a victim of abuse might underestimate how much their abuser harmed them, and they might not demand the kind of deep self-reflection that is genuinely warranted. They might even blame themselves, explaining away the wrongdoer's action as somehow their fault. There is thus a further question of whether repair has taken place in cases where the wrongdoer offers a sincere and appropriately vulnerable apology that is accepted by the victim too readily or is even dismissed as unnecessary in the context of the relationship. There is much more to say about how these kinds of issues should be addressed. There might, for example, be a role for third parties in helping to provide additional perspective and clarity about the

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<sup>11</sup> For more discussion of the restoration of moral stature, see Bovens (2009).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Helmreich (2015) has an important discussion of this point about apology. While the stance he takes is more radical than the one we argue for here, in which an apology involves the recognition that one can never truly make up for what was done, merely restore respect, we think that his treatment of what apology involves is complementary to ours.

wrongful harm, including loved ones, therapists, or colleagues. Third parties who care for and about victims might help to mitigate the potential influence of victims' psychological or internalized oppression in how they respond to wrongdoers' apologies, and they might help victims think through whether they are demanding too much from wrongdoers as well. What these reflections suggest is that apologizing well, sincerely and vulnerably, is essential to moral repair—but it doesn't guarantee it. There is no perfect formula for repairing interpersonal relationships that are affected by persistent social injustice.

Thus, being vulnerable helps to mitigate but does not eliminate potential harm. Because apologies carry both types of pressure we have been describing, and because they are affected by the social context in which they are offered, there are limits to how exhaustively a wrongdoer can avoid causing any additional harm. The fact that apologies can become weaponized is an example of the more general fact that the meaning of our actions can often run contrary to our intentions. The social context within which one acts helps to determine what an action means, as well as what effects it produces, often independent of what the actor intends.<sup>13</sup> That fact does not absolve the wrongdoer of responsibility, however. Instead, it means that the wrongdoer has an obligation to be mindful of such potential unintended meanings and outcomes, and that they should act in ways to accommodate both. Consider as a corollary a man who wants to be friends with a woman at work but doesn't want to come off as creepy or as if he is hitting on her. In suggesting that they get lunch, he might say something like, "Want to be friends and grab lunch some time?" thereby making explicit his intention. While she might still suspect he is hitting on her, such an effort can go at least some way to successfully navigating the larger social context by conveying that she doesn't need to be on guard against sexual advances and that he isn't a creep—an extra step that would not be necessary in a world where workplace sexual harassment didn't happen. In the same way, attempting to be vulnerable when apologizing by way of principles 1 and 2 can help to navigate the moral reparative moment within a background context that affects the meaning and impact of the apology, as well as the victim's response. It involves recognizing that an apology to someone to whom one set of stereotypes apply will require different execution than in cases where such stereotypes do not apply.

Being sensitive to such background conditions doesn't entail only paying attention to social stereotypes but entails being sensitive to ways in which an apology might affect the victim in other ways as well. For instance, an especially empathetic victim might find themselves drawn in to the wrongdoer's perspective and find it difficult to act in ways that are good for them, a problem that might be all the more

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<sup>13</sup> Thanks to a referee for pressing us to think through the ways in which our project is focused on the mitigation of potential harm within oppressive circumstances.

likely to occur precisely when the wrongdoer has issued a well-formed, vulnerable apology.<sup>14</sup> As a result of empathizing with the vulnerable wrongdoer the empathetic victim might forgive too easily when holding on to anger would be beneficial to them, or they might reconcile with the wrongdoer when it would be best for them to leave the relationship altogether. An even more fundamental worry is that the victim might lose a sense of their own agency; by taking on the perspective of the vulnerable and repentant wrongdoer, they might lose focus on what they want altogether and focus instead on the wrongdoer's admittedly well-intentioned ends.

Given that worry, it seems there are perhaps times when someone shouldn't apologize at all. Even when making good on principle 1 and leaving plenty of space for the victim to choose how to respond, free of expectation or social pressure, it might still be best for the victim not to be placed in the position of having to consider an apology. In such a situation, the wrongdoer might communicate via a third party that if the victim ever wants to receive an apology, then they will be happy to communicate it in a way that the victim finds most helpful. It might also be appropriate not to try to make amends to the victim, knowing that avoiding such harm is impossible. Doing so is itself a way of making good on principle 2, since it means recognizing that the wrongdoer has a reparative obligation that cannot be satisfied in the actual world, that they have a moral debt that they cannot pay.<sup>15</sup> Accepting that mark against their character given the context and constitution of the person they wronged is part of what comes with being vulnerable and paying the associated existential costs to their own self-conception.

## **5. Conclusion**

We have argued that when apologizing well, sincerity is not enough. Good apologies are vulnerable, in the sense that they satisfy two principles: (1) Apologies must be one-sided and nontransactional, and (2) they require a willingness to pay what one owes. These principles mitigate the potential harm that often follows in the wake of even well-meaning apologies. In being vulnerable via principles 1 and 2, the wrongdoer attempts to lay down both their shield and their weapon, and helps to create space for the possibility of genuine repair. Though we have argued that good apologies are necessary for repair in the context of significant interpersonal harms, we acknowledge that they are not sufficient. We see moral repair as a difficult social process that requires more than one party's "good" or even ideal efforts. It is even

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<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Alice MacLachlan for raising this important objection. For an insightful discussion of how victims experience social pressure to empathize with wrongdoers even in the absence of apology, as in the case of victims of gendered violence, see Hirji (2022).

<sup>15</sup> For more on whether the wrongdoer has a right to make amends, see Radzik (2003).

possible that accepting an apology and subsequent moral repair may be out of reach for many of us, as long as systemic injustice continues.

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