

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Belanger, Hilbert & Goodnight

Trudy Govier
University of Lethbridge

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Govier, Trudy, "Commentary on Belanger, Hilbert & Goodnight" (2009). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 14.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA8/papersandcommentaries/14>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Commentary on Patrick Belanger, Kara Gilbert, and Tom Goodnight's "The Apologies of Australia, Canada and the United States to Historically Subjugated Peoples: On argumentation, reconciliation, and forgiveness"

TRUDY GOVIER

*Department of Philosophy
University of Lethbridge
4401 University Drive
Lethbridge, Alberta, T1K3M4
Canada
Trudy.govier@uleth.ca*

This paper offers interesting description and comments on several recent public apologies. I'm pleased to see the interest in this topic and, needless to say, the attention given to some of my work on these and related topics.

I support the authors' claims that discourse should be taken seriously; that public deliberation and argument are not 'just words,' but are ways of sharing in the construction of a future; and that in the aftermath of serious wrongs, a fresh narrative will require dialogue and acknowledgement among the involved parties. One aspect on which I partially disagree has to do with the involvement of argument in all this. When we are considering public apology, we may think of three stages of discourse as potentially including argumentation. First, there is the stage before the apology, when people are reflecting on what they did and considering relevant details about what was done, attending to issues such as victims, harms, responsibility, and wrongfulness. What was done? Who did it? Was it wrong? Why? Who were the victims? How were they harmed? What do they need now? Second, there is the presenting of the apology; in the case of public apologies, the presenter is often a spokesperson for a collective or group and his or her legitimacy in that role may be a central issue. Third, after the apology, there will be discourse about how to follow up. Is restitution possible? Redress in the form of financial compensation? Redress in some other form? I find it easy to envisage a role for argument in the first and third stages, but more difficult to envisage it as having a role at the second stage. In my experience, an apology as such would be unlikely to contain an argument in the classic sense of reasons being presented with the goal of supporting a conclusion. Checking the texts of the Australian and Canadian apologies, I found no arguments in this sense. In the Canadian case, the word "therefore" appears, but appears to play more of an explanatory role, as following explanatory material and introducing a description of the phenomenon to be explained.

Govier, T. (2009). Commentary on Patrick Belanger, Kara Gilbert, and Tom Goodnight's "The Apologies of Australia, Canada and the United States to Historically Subjugated Peoples: On argumentation, reconciliation, and forgiveness." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-4), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

Copyright © 2009, the author.

TRUDY GOVIER

Complete public apologies incorporate acknowledgement that the acts committed were wrong, and that the apologizing person or group accepts responsibility for doing them, feels remorse or sorrow about role, and will undertake practical amends to the extent that doing so is feasible. About the content of such apologies, the context and nature of their issuance, and other details there should be and likely will be much deliberation before the apology is issued. At this stage there should be a substantial role for argumentation. It may even be useful for responsible parties to negotiate with victims as to the wording of these apologies and the appropriateness of practical amends. So that is the first stage. Then, after a public apology has been issued, we can see how there might be further debate about its content, degree of impact, and other details, noteworthy among these being what the appropriate follow-up would be in the area of practical amends. That is the third stage. But argument seems much less plausible as an aspect of the middle stage—the apology itself. The apology itself articulates acknowledgement along lines resolved by earlier discussion. It will communicate a resolved position to victims and others. If we understand such an apology to be addressed primarily to victims of the wrongdoing, they are unlikely to need reasons to support claims that wrongs have been done to them and moral regret is appropriate. The apology will also be addressed to the public at large, to which acknowledgement and an implied commitment not to commit such actions again will be highly relevant.

Since this is, after all, a conference on argumentation, it seems appropriate to make one logic-focused comment about the position of the former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard. Howard made quite a point of *not* issuing an apology regarding the Australian government's role in the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families. His argument was that a state apology would imply that individual Australian citizens (white ones, presumably) should feel personal shame and guilt about the policy of removals. Howard argued that as individuals, Australians were not guilty of anything; many were too young to have been involved or had had no causal responsibility in bringing about these removals. His view was that a state apology would imply individual responsibility; that individual responsibility did not exist; therefore there should be no state apology. In its opening claim, this argument incorporates the fallacy of division. Contrary to what Howard assumed, to accept *collective state responsibility* is not to imply *individual responsibility*; the state is a collective institution with its own powers and capacities and the state level of analysis is distinct from the individual level of analysis. There were likely other reasons for Howard's resistance to a state apology but this particular one is flawed, showing the impact of the fallacy of division on a highly serious and important public debate.

I would now to add some empirical comments on the Canadian case. Belanger, Gilbert, and Goodnight interestingly discuss this important example, noting the resignation of Justice Harry LaForme, who had accepted an invitation to be its first chairperson. Citing the CBC as a source, they claim that Justice LaForme resigned due to a disagreement about whether the commission was to focus primarily on documenting historical evidence with narratives of suffering and abuse in the schools (the '*truth*' aspect) or, rather, extend itself to fostering reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, the '*reconciliation*' aspect. Modeled on the South African TRC, this commission was to incorporate, as implied in its name, a relationship between *truth* and *reconciliation*. The nature of this relationship is far more complex than one might at

COMMENTARY ON BELANGER, GILBERT & GOODNIGHT

first suppose. In addition to its intrinsic importance, if there had been a fundamental dispute in this context about the relation between ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation,’ that dispute would be of considerable interest to theorists and practitioners of reconciliation. In the early days of the South African TRC, there was a widespread enlightenment assumption as in ‘the truth shall set you free.’ It was presumed that just knowing and acknowledging the truth about how victims had suffered under apartheid would have a highly positive role for reconciliation. The idea was that those who had supported apartheid would gain a fuller appreciation of the nature of its institutions and the profound suffering they had caused, and that understanding would provide empathy and shifts toward better relationships. This presumption is quite plausible and surely holds in some cases.

But this viewpoint that truth-telling will lead to reconciliation turned out to be unduly optimistic. A key problem is that individual narratives are open to question and there are often deep disputes about their correctness and representativeness. For victims to want to reconcile, it is not enough for their stories to be told and heard in an atmosphere of respect and sympathy. They need to feel that what they understand to be truths are accepted and acknowledged by perpetrators and those groups whom perpetrators thought they were defending in the struggle.

Now as to problems of the Canadian TRC, so far as I have been able to discover, they have not centered mainly on this highly interesting matter. Important underlying issues lie elsewhere. They include disagreements between LaForme and other commissioners; disputes about the hierarchy of authority in decision-making among the commissioners (LaForme had understood that in cases of disagreement he was the chief commissioner and had over-riding authority whereas the other two commissioners, both women, envisaged consensus decision-making among the three); the role of government persons in TRC processes; the role of lawyers in those processes; and disagreements within Aboriginal groups in Canada about the role of the Assembly of First Nations under the leadership of Phil Fontaine. There may even have been disagreements about the desirability of a TRC.

I would like conclude by making some comments about the relation between certain of the key concepts involved in explorations of apology and reconciliation. An apology necessarily incorporates acknowledgement of responsible wrongdoing, sorrow attached to that acknowledgement, and implied commitments not to do such things again and to make practical amends if possible. If a statement merely announces ‘regret’ or avoids acceptance of responsibility by some device such as passive language (‘we are sorry these things happened to you...’) or including excuses or justifications (‘we had to do it, we had no choice...’), that statement cannot count as a moral apology. Any moral apology must incorporate acknowledgement of responsibility for committing those actions agreed to be wrong. But the converse does not hold; not all moral acknowledgement is contained within apology. Clearly, there are other forms. A museum about slavery and its brutal practices is a way of acknowledging that slavery is wrong. An adopted textbook describing the suffering of victimized populations amounts to public acknowledgement of serious historic wrongs.

As to the relation between apology and forgiveness, an apology may include an explicit request for forgiveness; even when such a request is not explicit, it is often contextually understood. But as noted in this paper, that is not always the case. This qualification is necessary when we speak of public apologies. It is a mistake to think of

TRUDY GOVIER

these statements as requests for forgiveness, as something that would benefit perpetrators. Public moral apologies articulate and consolidate central values, acknowledge wrongdoing to victims, express sorrow, and indicate some intent to undertake practical amends. These are statements to victims and to the public at large. The point of apologies is to address victims and the general public and to state that these people were wronged and deserved better, thereby indicating respect and vindicating victims. As for reconciliation, apologies and forgiveness can power contribute powerfully to reconciliation, but they are not strictly necessary for it. What may be necessary is moral acknowledgement. One might argue that reconciliation could result from shared cooperative activity in the absence any deliberation and discussion about the nature of past wrongs. That claim merits investigation – although I am still inclined to insist on moral acknowledgement as necessary for reconciliation. One powerful way of expressing that moral acknowledgement is apology, as illustrated by the three cases discussed here.

[Link to paper](#)