



I'm Sorry I Cared: The Relationship Between Agency and Apology

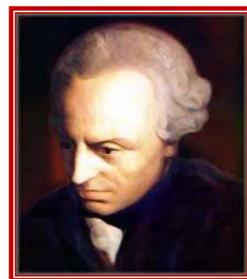
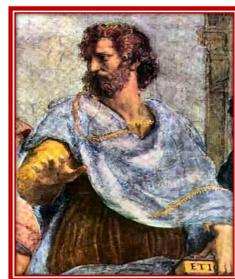


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Introduction

Apology has recently received considerable attention from philosophers. However, one topic that has not been explored to its proper depth as it relates to apology is agency. Consider that an individual can commit a transgression “on purpose” without fully exercising agency (she might be extremely fatigued, stressed, drunk, grief-stricken, depressed, afraid, lonely, etc.). Agency comes in degrees. Because this fact has largely been ignored, important questions remain unanswered. When are apologies owed? Is it ever appropriate to offer an excuse when apologizing? What counts as a good excuse? My aim is to explore the relationship between agency and apology in order to provide answers to these and related questions.



The idea that human agency is exercised via reflection and deliberation has historical origins in the work of Aristotle (384-322 BC) and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Reflectivism about agency remains a popular view among contemporary philosophers. Perhaps the most prominent defender of reflectivism is Harvard philosopher Christine Korsgaard (pictured right).

Agency: Product of Reflection?

There is a long tradition of philosophers locating the distinctiveness of human beings in their capacity for rational reflection. On the reflectivist view, agency is only possible for beings who engage in rational deliberation guided by accurate self-awareness of their desires, motivations, and the like. One problem for the reflectivist account is that it sets the bar for agency too high. Empirical psychological research suggests that we don't engage in reflection very often, and our self-awareness isn't very accurate. Unconscious processing plays a significant role in determining our behavior. Few (if any) of our actions, whether mundane or morally charged, are primarily the product of rational deliberation based on accurate self-awareness. Much of what we do is largely determined by external factors and mental processes beyond our awareness.

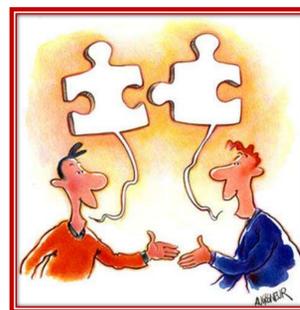


“Most of a person’s everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices but by mental processes that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance.”

-Bargh and Chartrand (1999: 462)

Agency: Expression of Values

Self-direction is certainly necessary for agency. However, the self-direction described by reflectivists is unrealistic. What we need is a way of understanding self-direction that is both psychologically plausible and compatible with our intuitive ascriptions of responsibility. The type of self-direction that meets these criteria is implementation of one's values. Valuing is a notion that is most helpful in deciding whether an action was self-directed in the way necessary for attribution of agency. The reason we do not resent the unwillingly drugged offender is that the transgression was not an expression of her values. On the other hand, the reason we feel such strong indignation towards members of the Ku Klux Klan is precisely because their transgressions are expressions of their values.



In his forthcoming book *Talking to Our Selves*, John Doris (pictured right) argues that value realization is accomplished through collaboration and dialogue. While we are often ignorant of the true causes of our behavior, we offer explanations nonetheless. Although these rationalizations are products of ignorance, the stories we tell are expressions of our values. The reasons we offer when explaining our behavior are reasons we endorse. Although we may not have acted according to those reasons before, upon asserting them we make ourselves more likely to act on them in the future.

Apologetic Warrant

In light of the above discussion of agency, I propose the following account of apologetic warrant. An apology is owed when one party causes unjustified harm to another, and in causing the harm the perpetrator was implementing her values.

One might object to my account by claiming that if a harm really was an expression of the transgressor's values, it would be disingenuous for her to apologize. If hurting you really mattered to me, it seems that the only possible motivation for apologizing is that doing so is in my best interest. But this needn't be the case. We often reject our own values only after seeing the harm they lead to. An apology offered under these circumstances needn't be disingenuous. The agent can admit that the transgression was an expression of her former values, while at the same time affirming that her values have changed.

Excuses

An important upshot of my account of apologetic warrant is the role excuses play in apology. I claim that there is in principle nothing wrong with offering excuses when apologizing. In fact, it is often better to include an excuse. The purpose of apologizing is to offer emotional compensation and mend a fractured relationship. It might seem that the best way to accomplish these goals is to simply accept full responsibility for the transgression without offering an excuse. But if the victim and transgressor are interested in repairing the relationship, the offering of an excuse can be invaluable. What is often overlooked is that mitigating excuses serve the interests of the victim. Learning of compromised agency can take away some of the emotional sting a victim feels. It also allows her to make a more informed judgement about how to move forward in the relationship.



Some excuses are better than others. If I failed to pick up the dry-cleaning as I promised because a meteor wiped out my car, I have a good excuse. An especially difficult excuse to diagnose is the notorious “I was drunk.” Intoxication seriously compromises agency. At a certain point of inebriation it is doubtful that person is implementing her values. On the other hand, allowing oneself to reach that state is itself an exercise of agency. A hard-line response would be to say that one is always fully responsible for one's drunken behavior. This approach seems too stern. While I should certainly accept responsibility for my drunken shenanigans, the fact that they were *drunken* shenanigans is not irrelevant. When apologizing for a liquor-fueled transgression I should accept responsibility. But it is worth explaining that my judgement was impaired by the alcohol, and that the victim's interests matter more to me than my behavior indicated.