

Whatever

I STILL DREAM OF ORGONON

UNCATEGORIZED

Apologies: What, When and How

□ APRIL 15, 2013JUNE 2, 2014

□ JOHN SCALZI

□ 236 COMMENTS

I've apologized a fair amount for stupid and/or ignorant and/or insensitive things that I have done or said over the course of my life. This has given me the time and experience to, if not *perfect* the form of an apology, then to at least get it to a point where I am comfortable that the apology will be understood as genuine. Perhaps at some point in the near future you'll need to apologize for some stupid and/or ignorant and/or insensitive thing you have done. Here are thoughts I have for you on the subject.

First thing: What is an apology? Leaving aside classical definitions that are not directly on point to how the word is used in everyday life:

An apology is an admission that you've wronged others and that you are actually sorry for it. This is of course why it's difficult for people to apologize. No one likes to admit they are wrong or that they screwed up. No one likes the complicated, defeated feelings that come with being wrong and screwing up. No one likes having to go to *other* people, publicly or privately, and admit to them they've been wrong and have screwed up. It is, literally, humiliating, since apologizing almost always requires humility and a willingness to put the needs of those you have wronged over your own. For ego-bound creatures, and we are all ego-bound, this is a hard thing to do.

I think it becomes *less* hard, however, if you consider the following:

One, everyone's wrong at some point. Because, hello, you're a human, and humans are imperfect beings. It's okay to recognize you are not infallible. □

Two, it's better to center your ego on doing what's right rather than never being wrong. Because, per point one, you're going to be wrong at some point.

Three, it takes strength to apologize and apologize well. Any jackass can refuse to apologize when they are in the wrong; indeed, refusing to admit you're wrong, or to apologize it, is one of the hallmarks of *being* a jackass. Being willing to stand up and say "I screwed up, I've wronged you and I am sorry for it," on the other hand, means you have the strength of character to own your actions, and the consequences of them, both for others and yourself.

Okay, now we know what an apology is.

So, let's say that you've said / done something, publicly or privately, that has genuinely upset someone (or more than one someone). Should you apologize? Ask yourself the following questions:

Are you actually sorry? If the answer is "no," then you shouldn't apologize, because your apology will be totally insincere. An insincere apology is worse than no apology at all; not only is it obvious that you're not sorry for the original act, but the fake apology suggests that you think people are stupid enough to believe a fake apology. Congratulations, you've just made yourself look like an even bigger assbag.

If you are actually sorry, then ask yourself this:

Are you primarily sorry for yourself, or for others? This is the classic "are you sorry you screwed up, or that you got caught?" question. Meaning that if the nexus of your concern is *your* reputation, *your* standing, and *your* status, then your apology is likely to reflect that. In which case, I have news for you: your apology will come across as "I'm sorry the rest of you ganged up on me," and I assure you that's not going to go over very well.

If on the other hand your primary concern is that your actions have affected others negatively, then the focus of your apology will reflect that, and those you have wronged will more likely appreciate that you see the problem is not what's being done to you, but what you have done to others.

I want to be clear I think it's fine if you are concerned for your own standing; we're ego-driven creatures, and damage control is a fine thing. The point here is to understand where the balance is. Remember that an apology is about owning up to what you've done to others. Making your apology all about you, or primarily about you, is missing the point of an apology.

Another question:

Are you willing to let your apology be an apology? Meaning, once you've apologized, are you going immediately start backtracking from it, adding caveats, exclusions, conditions and defensive annotations? It's remarkable the number of perfectly good apologies that don't stick the dismount. People can't leave them alone, I suspect, because of defensiveness and ego — *yes I was wrong but you have to admit I'm not the only one who was wrong here*, or *yes I was wrong but in general you have to admit my point still stands*, or even *yes I was wrong but it was wrong of you to make a big deal out of it*. Which, again, is going to make things worse.

If you can't *just* apologize, perhaps you should not apologize.

A final point for this part, not in the form of a question but still important to know:

An apology is directed toward other people, but is something you do for yourself. Which is to say, the reason to apologize is not because other people expect it from you (although they may), but because *you expect it from yourself* — it is part of your personal character to own up to the wrongs you have done to others. If you're apologizing solely because of outside expectation, the apology is going to be hollow at its core. The best apologies are the ones where the moral actor for the apology is the one who is saying "I apologize." This can be learned, fortunately.

We're done with the preliminaries now, and you've decided that you should apologize. To my mind, an apology has three steps to it, which are pretty simple and straightforward.

- 1. Briefly, specifically and factually recount the action you're apologizing for.** You've done something wrong. Say what it is. Don't try to mitigate or defend, just get it out there.
- 2. Acknowledge that you wronged others.** Again, don't mitigate or defend. Acknowledge it and say it.
- 3. Apologize unreservedly.** Don't drag it out. Don't qualify it. Say it, own it. Let it be there.

That's the basic format.

Some style notes:

Apologies are active. Use the active voice. "I did this," is far stronger, and indicative of personal responsibility, than "this thing happened." A passive voice in an apology comes across as a denial of responsibility or accountability. Don't do that. As a subset:

The offense is yours. Own it. "I am sorry I offended you" acknowledges the screw-up is yours, "to those who were offended, I am sorry," sounds like you're suggesting the responsibility for the offense should be shared, and "I'm sorry if you feel offended," is palming off the responsibility entirely on the other person (and makes you sound like an unrepentant jackass).

Don't try to be funny or clever. The failure mode of "clever" is "asshole." An apology is an attempt to own up to what you've done wrong. It's the last place in the world you want your communication to fail, and it's not a piece of communication that needs *spicing up*. Save your funny and clever side for something else.

Be upfront and to the point. To use a journalism term, don't bury your lede. Brevity does not mean insincerity.

Don't dilute your apology. Don't add it into something else, don't sweep by it to go on to other topics. Let it be its own thing and make sure you make it clear what you're doing and why. You don't have to dwell on it, but you have to give it its moment.

Here is an example of an apology done as suggested above. Let's say I have made an ass of myself to my friend "Joe" by, say, making a joke about cancer when a loved one of his has just passed away from the disease. Here's how I would apologize.

Dear Joe:

Yesterday I made a cancer joke in front of you, and as a result I caused you pain. I didn't intend to hurt you but I did it anyway, and the responsibility for that is mine. I am genuinely sorry I hurt you. I will try very hard not to do it again. I'm here if you want to talk to me. Let me know – JS

Simple, direct and to the point. Joe doesn't have any doubt what I'm apologizing for or that I take responsibility for it.

Now that you've apologized, is everything done and over and hunky dory? Not necessarily. Some after-apology points to consider.

1. An apology is not self-administered absolution. You apologize to acknowledge a wrong you've done to others, but simply acknowledging that wrong doesn't mean you're now off the hook for it. It helps substantially if you're willing to do a little legwork on the matter, from something as simple as letting that other person know you're there to talk (see the last sentence in the apology to "Joe") to something as life-changing as making an effort to adjust your worldview. Don't be the guy who says "Hey! I *said* I was sorry!" and expects it to settle all dispute. If that guy is over the age of ten, he doesn't get as much credit for that statement as he wants.

2. You should accept that your apology may not be accepted. And that it may not be accepted for any number of reasons. Maybe it was poorly phrased and came out as defensive, even if you didn't mean it to be. Maybe those you've wronged feel an apology isn't enough and want to see what you do next. Maybe you're the third person today to apologize to them for something and are simply all out of forgiveness for the day. Maybe you don't get an explanation at all.

Point is, this is not something that's in your control, nor should you pretend it is. This is one reason why I strongly believe that while an apology is offered to others, it is what you do for yourself — because the only person whose response to the apology you have control over is you. If you apologize and the apology is not accepted, then you have still acknowledged your error, and that's not trivial.

It's all right to *hope* an apology is accepted and forgiveness given — and to ask for it if you would like to. It shouldn't be a primary reason to offer it. And you should keep in mind that its acceptance is a gift freely given, and not a requirement.

3. Apologizing and making the same mistake a second time is worse than not apologizing at all. Because it suggests that you've learned nothing and that your apology was really just an exercise in going through the motions. Which is to say apologies are not merely the end of a bad situation. They are the beginning of a promise to do (and be) better.

If you're visibly making the effort to do and be better, if (and likely when) you screw up again, you will still have credit from that previous apology. If you're not making that effort, if (and almost certainly when) you screw up again, you will not. Quite the opposite, in fact.

So: When you apologize, mean what you say. Back it up. Move forward with it. And do it for you, to the benefit of others. That's how you make an apology stick.

236 thoughts on “Apologies: What, When and How”

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:44 PM

I will note that while this is my recipe for apologies that other recipes exist for the form and can be successful. For all that, *for me* apologies that follow this basic format seem to work the best — on both the giving and receiving ends.

Also (if it needs to be said): This is the apology starter pack; additional modules are out there (i.e., these are the basics, not everything covering every specific situation).

deanfortythree says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:45 PM

John, as usual, you nail it. I’ve been kicking around a post similar to this, but your breakdown is excellent. We see far too little of this- actually owning up to the mistake, saying sorry and moving on.

The odd thing is that if you do that, most people WILL accept it. If you half-ass it, push the blame off and then delete the apology (cough cough), people will keep talking about it and hold it against you.

One mistake is not indicative of who a person is, but the inability to own up to it can be.

Beej says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:49 PM

Apologies are active. Use the active voice. “I did this,” is far stronger, and indicative of personal responsibility, than “this thing happened.” A passive voice in an apology comes across as a denial of responsibility or accountability.

More than once the CEO and the Chairman of R&D from my company have both “apologized” to their respective constituents by saying, “Mistakes were made.” They’ve done it so many times now that it’s become a running joke amongst all the worker-bees. Why are we laying off another 5k people? “Mistakes were made.”

Dan Radmacher says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:50 PM

“Jules, did you ever hear the philosophy that once a man admits that he’s wrong that he is immediately forgiven for all wrongdoings? Have you ever heard that?”

“Get the f** out my face with that s***! The motherf***** that said that s*** never had to pick up itty-bitty pieces of skull on account of your dumb ass.”

I’m with Jules on this one.

Yossi Mandel says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:51 PM

A grammar note on the style notes: You may have intended “don’t be vague as to agent” as opposed to “don’t use passive voice.” Passive voice can take responsibility by stating “This was done by me,” as opposed to the active voice, “I did this.”

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:56 PM

Yossi Mandel:

Nope, I intended to say “don’t use the passive voice.” This is because “I did this” is a much stronger phrase, rhetorically speaking, than “This was done by me.”

Jeri says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 12:57 PM

Thank you for this. I think in all my years I have heard or read maybe three apologies that met your criteria. In fact, it’s so rare that I actually admire the person extending the apology for being able to accept that they were wrong and just suck it up and admit it without placing any of the blame on anyone or anything else except their own poor judgment. I’ve only had to do this twice, and it’s really not all that complicated. Well, I probably should have apologized other times but the two times were so egregious that I just couldn’t let them slide.

I would only add that if you’ve publicly humiliated someone their apology should be offered publicly unless it would only make the apologee even more uncomfortable.

Yossi Mandel says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:01 PM

Understood, thank you. Your original paragraph on it stated that passive voice “comes across as a denial of responsibility or accountability” in addition to being a stronger phrase, which is only true if the passive voice is used in combination with omission of agent.

Evelyn Stice (@TheCheekyGinger) says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:01 PM

Well said. I only have three additions:

1. If you can in some way undo what you are apologizing about, do so. You broke something? Replace it. You lied publicly? Tell the truth publicly.
2. If on self-examination you cannot offer a good apology, don’t give up. You know you need to. Think about it until you can. Give yourself a good talking to. Then suck it up and DO IT.
3. Most people really do appreciate being on the receiving end of a genuine apology. It lessens the sting of the original offense, and it builds bridges for the future. There is nothing quite so disarming as having someone who has wronged you say simply, “I did wrong. I’m so sorry.”

Rena's Hub of Random says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:02 PM

Reblogged this on [renashub](#).

Happiness is Not a Disease says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:04 PM

First, sir you ARE an expert.

Thank you for clearing up the matter; there's a thing or two there that I haven't quite grasp until now—I think it was on the whole OWNING the apology. Agreed on all points. Yes, ultimately an apology is most beneficial to the person who has done wrong. And yet its impact on the one wronged is still very strong, and most of the time liberating indeed. Although I would not want to be receiving too many apologies. because of its obviously unpleasant implications, I must say to receive a genuine apology would be a very valuable gift (to all concerned) any day.

elouisebates says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:06 PM

Well said! My only caveat would be that I'm even hesitant on the "I'm sorry I offended you" part. Being sorry for offending someone is not the same as acknowledging you did something wrong (which would be wrong even if nobody was ever offended by said thought/speech/deed), and feeling genuine sorrow over the entire affair.

Other than that, though, I agree with pretty much this entire post.

John Barnes says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:07 PM

Maybe a side or footnote about not dismissing the importance of the thing you apologize for? "I'm sincerely sorry because I did a thing which obviously caused you great pain and upset, even though a normal person wouldn't have been a big baby about it like you, you wussy-faced loser," is another way of failing at apology.

paranoyd says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:11 PM

I don't particularly mind apologizing. I only mind apologizing to people I can't stand or are terrible people. I still do it if necessary, but I do my best not to have to.

Matt W says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:14 PM

Is there an impetus for this post? Perhaps <http://www.hughhowey.com/to-those-whom-ive-offended/> ?

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:16 PM

John Barnes:

I think that's covered under "let the apology be an apology," actually.

Elousiebates:

Dunno about that. When I say to someone that I am sorry I have offended them, the cause of the offense is still me. I think you may be saying that some people find offense where others do not, but even in that case, acknowledging you have offended someone even if you do not

believe you intended to offend is still taking responsibility for the offense. I've definitely unintentionally offended people before. When I've discovered I had, I've been sorry for the offense and make note of what has offended that person in an attempt not to replicate the error, even when I myself would not have taken the same offense.

Matt W:

In fact I had been planning to do this post for a while now. Mr. Howey's recent thing was a reminder, but not really the precipitating factor, no.

sojournerstrange says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:19 PM

@elouisebates: Cosigned.

Sarah M. says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:21 PM

This whole piece is just a giant bowl of awesome. I did want to emphasize your very last point with something my mother often said to us children when we were a bit too glib with "I'm sorry."

Part of being sorry is not doing it again.

Even a six year old can grasp the meaning of this simple admonition and yet, it has served me well as I have grown in to middle age. I never say I'm sorry now without consciously thinking, "How am I going to not do this same thing again."

The other day I heard my mother's words come out of my husband's mouth (not directed at me, thank goodness) and I had a little inner chuckle.

Matt O says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:21 PM

A style note I would add: don't self pity. Saying things like "I guess I'm just a stupid, bad, stinky loser" make the whole thing sound insincere. If your audience feels compelled to focus on your feelings, that's not an apology.

AmaryllisZ says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:21 PM

I'm going to print this out and beat people over the head with it. The sheer number of people who think that (a) "I'm sorry you feel that way" is an apology, and (b) "I apologized, you have to forgive me or you owe me an apology" is just mind boggling.

htom says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:23 PM

Passive voice in an apology I don't think ever works. "You were hurt by me." vs "I hurt you."? No.

Excellent, Scalzi, really excellent.

The only thing I think you missed (and it's probably worthy of a post by itself later) is when not to apologize and how to cope, when even the mention of the misdeeds will drag the victim through the pain again. Those cases where it is more self-serving, freeing the apologist of the proper guilt they should feel, rather than being helpful to the victim.

I'm trying to write one of those now, for something I did to someone close to me almost to a half-century ago. I started a chain of hurtful misunderstandings between us back and forth over the decades. I should just let it all go, but I know I'm going to see her at our 50th reunion, and I want to stop that chain before that, rather than trying to in a hallway, then and there, with a bustle of others wanting our attention. A score of friendship couples counseling sessions might help, but that's not practical even if she'd be interested.

kbtibbs says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:23 PM

My mother taught me an apology can never contain the word 'but'. No excuses. If you find you're going to say that forbidden word, check your attitude.

Steve Hawley says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:25 PM

Several years ago, there was a story on NPR that covered the art of the political apology:

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=885601>

and while it's not in this story, the worst and most common form of political apology starts of with an 'if you' statement because it doesn't actually apologize for the action, it apologizes for the response, making the hurt person partly responsible.

jamesworrad says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:28 PM

Good unpacking of a difficult art.

leatherneck6693 says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:32 PM

"An apology is something you do for yourself" as is forgiving the person apologizing. You don't have to excuse the actions or resume friendly relations but forgiveness with the same sincerity and forthrightness as the apology is a powerful way to prevent the injury from forming a sad ball of anger that lives in your core and extends the harm.

eviljwinter says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:36 PM

If you really want to be a dick about it, you could always substitute "You're welcome" for "I'm sorry."

I can't really recommend that course, though.

I often find the need to hide weakness the biggest weakness of all, because it means the person is more about competition than about getting things right, which makes them absolutely useless in my admittedly biased opinion.

Todd says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:38 PM

All good, but I think it is important to ask the offended party for their forgiveness. Often when an apology is given, the offended party is left with nothing to say, but mumble a, "That's ok." or "Forget about it." You may have owned up to the wrong in your apology, but what response do you expect for reconciliation to take place? What we desire is more than just "acceptance" of the apology. What does that mean? They listened to it or read it, do they have to respond to it? No, what we need is to be forgiven for the wrong. When forgiveness is requested and truly given, then the relationship can be restored. Without forgiveness, it just means there was admission of guilt.

Vania says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:41 PM

This helped clarify for me why a recent apology I received infuriated me. So thanks for that. Also, is this post inspired by Hugh Howey? I love Hugh. I love Wool. And he should read this post.

jkusters says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:44 PM

The apologies that read as non-apologies are the ones that say something like, "I'm sorry if I offended anyone..." or "I'm sorry if some people took my words offensively..." That's like giving yourself a huge escape clause, and kind of implies that those who were offended shouldn't have been.

Judy Linklater says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:46 PM

People apologize? You learn something every day.

guess says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:51 PM

This reads like it might be a speech he gave his daughter recently...

murphyjacob says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:51 PM

I've spent some years getting over my own need to be right no matter the cost and, after a lot of work and therapy and assorted moments of having my ass kicked, I've learned that it's far easier to apologise for doing something mean, boneheaded, or careless than it is to constantly justify wrong behavior. Even when I'm defending my wrong actions, I know I screwed up, and I'm holding on to that cognitive dissonance while also trying to rationalize and listening to myself sound more and more ridiculous AND risking the loss of someone who I value (well, because I rarely apologise to people I don't value. I usually MEANT to insult or hurt or otherwise drive away such a person.) Having to remember all the stupid justifications one has made is incredibly draining and inevitably leads to making more mistakes which will require covering up or justifying.

Owning to the fault, confessing it, and working not to do it again is, in my experience, a lot less work and wear. Indeed, an apology is for oneself.

Sarah M. says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 1:52 PM

@Todd: I think emphasizing what you want in return for your apology is totally the wrong approach. You don't *need* to be forgiven, you want it. It's a gift you are trying to extort out of someone who you have already wronged. Can you see how completely twisted that is? Making the apology all about your feelings and your wants is just completely negates any sincere remorse you may have tried to express.

Sometimes you don't get forgiven. That's on you, not on the person you trespassed against.

Todd says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:02 PM

Sarah,

Forgiveness is what is needed in order for the relationship to be restored. Yes, when we are wronged, we have to make a choice to forgive or not to forgive. That choice is a burden and often a heavy one. That is part of the debt created by the wrongdoer. But in asking for forgiveness, the wrongdoer is pursuing reconciliation and restoration, not just making themselves feel better by admitting guilt. By asking for forgiveness, they give the wronged person an opportunity to then restore that relationship. When we are wronged, we always make a choice to forgive or not to forgive, but we often never communicate that forgiveness or non-forgiveness in a way that allows the relationship to be reconciled or ended.

And yes, sometimes an apology means the end of the relationship as it had been previously, there are consequences even if there is forgiveness.

Dan Thompson says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:03 PM

A book on this subject (The Five Languages of Apology) also includes the notion of reparations. In an apology, this takes the form, "What can I do to make this right?" And it's important to let them define what the fix is, and it's important that if at all possible, you do it.

Offering your own idea of reparation often misses the mark and make it clear that you don't understand the injury you caused, while letting them define it reinforces the message that their feelings are important to you.

uldihaa says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:03 PM

A lot of people seem to think "I'm sorry" is a magical incantation that bestows instant forgiveness and become offended when that forgiveness is denied.

I'll also add that every time you apologize for the exact same offense to the same people, those apologies lose creditability exponentially.

Chrysoula Tzavelas (@chrysoula) says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:08 PM

I've discovered that apologies are much easier if you've deeply internalized the idea that you are often wrong and often screw up, but can learn from mistakes. I've always wondered how I picked this attitude up. And it has negative side effects, just as a big ego has positive side effects...

htom says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:08 PM

You offer an apology, and beg forgiveness. Your apology may be accepted, or rejected, or ignored; your request may be ignored, or denied, or granted. Nine outcomes, they decide.

ynysprydain says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:12 PM

>Are you actually sorry? If the answer is "no," then you shouldn't apologize, because your apology will be totally insincere.

You're clearly not British, John. If we adopted this tactic, the entire country would grind to a mute and unhappy halt within days.

brucefromohio says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:15 PM

A favorite scenario is when the wounded party expects an apology, but won't tell anyone for what reason. "If you don't know what you did wrong / why I'm so pissed at you, then your apology is meaningless!"

Um... yes! Agreed!

MNmom says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:16 PM

This is another great post! I taught my kids the proper apology is as follows (I think I copied it from a poster somewhere)

1. Actually say "I am sorry" (My bad doesn't count)
2. State what you did and how it was wrong (no justifying)
3. State what you are going to do to fix it / make it better (even if it is to never do it again)

also, that sometimes "I am sorry" isn't enough.

Everything you wrote about how to ruin an apology is true. I work with individuals who have made bad life choices and hurt people. I can tell just how much fun, they will be to work with, based on the amount of justifying and exaggerated "I am just an idiot" they use to explain their past mistakes.

Also, the 9th step of 12 step groups covers this in detail. Are you willing to admit your mistake and make amends?

But most of all, just because someone loves you or lives with you, that is not the excuse to wuss out on apologies. The person you spend the most time with is the person that needs the most humble apology.

Bruce Baugh says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:17 PM

John: Excellent.

Todd: Maybe this is largely a matter of terminology, but I'm skeptical about many emphases on "forgiveness". I generally use it in a very strong sense, not necessarily a religious one but with something of that vigorous wiping out of the traces. I'm not sure that that's actually appropriate at all for a lot of routine offenses that warrant apologies. *Accepting* an apology means that someone's granting me full credit for doing the right thing after doing a wrong one, and – I hope – will be expecting me to do better in the future, and perhaps to work with me on it where that's appropriate, since they have a chance to see my better intentions in action.

But as a general thing, it seems to me entirely appropriate that both the one I've apologized to (and who accepted it) and I keep in mind the earlier failure that made it necessary for me to apologize. It's a line in our shared experience marking the point I need to beat in the future. And even if I go on to reliably not make that kind of mistake anymore, it's not that the older failure disappears, so much as it just gets displaced in relevancy by more better stuff in the future.

I guess what it comes down to is that I feel like a lot of talk about forgiveness displaces what seems to me a very important emphasis on the practical demonstration of atonement via better action.

Sarah M. says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:20 PM

@Todd: While I agree that forgiveness is needed for the relationship to continue, I strongly disagree that it is something the transgressor should ask for. If it is not freely given by the offended party, it is virtually meaningless. And any gift that is requested in advance, is not freely given.

Forgiveness can be a powerful gift that heals both parties, but by requesting forgiveness in advance, you are denying the person you have offended the opportunity to give that gift of their own accord. Instead you have placed them in the uncomfortable position of either appearing churlish or petty or perhaps forcing them to insincerely mouth words that soothe you. If instead, you let them come to the point of forgiveness on their own, rather than backing them into it before they are ready, you may actually get a genuine expression that helps both of you.

However, there is another thing that you have got completely backwards, "And yes, sometimes an apology means the end of the relationship as it had been previously ..." No. No. No. It was not the apology that sundered the relationship, it was the offense. Your wording sounds like the child on the playground, "It all started when he hit me back!"

While the apology can be the first step to restoring the relationship, regardless of whether forgiveness is ever granted or the relationship is ever restored, the apology is the responsibility of the transgressor. It's just what you do because you strive to be a decent human being

David says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:22 PM

But in asking for forgiveness, the wrongdoer is pursuing reconciliation and restoration, not just making themselves feel better by admitting guilt.

I think an apology is probably the last time to ask a favor of someone.

Danny says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:26 PM

@ynysprydain which maybe explains why John's example sounds to me as if the person was forced to write and made it sound as sarcastic as possible.

leeflower says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:32 PM

I'd add that if you fail the 'are you actually sorry?' test, or the 'are you more sorry for yourself or for others?' test, there's still a way forward. If you recognize that someone's angry with you but you either don't understand why or don't think you did anything wrong, but still respect and value the person, a good way to convey that is to tell them you're listening.

"Hey, I'm not in a good place to continue this conversation right now, but I just want you to know that I have a lot of respect for you and I'm thinking about what you said" is a totally legit interim step on the road to a real apology.

Todd says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:39 PM

Sara: I stand corrected. It is absolutely the offense and not the apology that hurts the relationship. Thank you for your feedback. I think I better understand your perspective.

Bruce: Forgiveness is not dependent on any atonement from the wrongdoer. Forgiveness is not dependent on any action of anyone. It is the free gift given by the offended party. You are right, in many small offenses, this forgiveness is provided so quickly and effortlessly, that the formal process is bypassed. Great thoughts for me to consider.

DG Lewis says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:45 PM

To Evelyn Stice's point (1), another way I've heard this said is, "You can't say 'absolution' without 'solution'."

Nerds-feather (@nerds_feather) says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:51 PM

Nicely put, John. This is obviously related to certain things going on in SF/F at the moment (and specifically, to a certain blog post and consequent uproar that can't have escaped your notice), but it's good life advice as well. Sucking it up and saying you were wrong, that you did wrong and/or that you wronged someone—and to genuinely mean it—is one of the hardest things to do in life, but also one of the most necessary.

I would add another bad way of apologizing to the ones you name: "I am sorry for what I did; anyone who really knows me knows that I'm not like that." Well, the person is presumably apologizing for being like "that," so it doesn't really work, and sounds defensive.

Always best to just be straightforward. It's okay to admit that you didn't realize people would be offended, and say "I can learn from this; I can be a better person for having done so."

TheMadLibrarian says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:52 PM

OTOH, what can you do for the person who suffers from 'Offensensitivity', as Berke Breathed put it? Their goalposts frequently move, you end up tiptoeing around them for fear of involuntarily pissing them off.

BW says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 2:57 PM

TheMadLibrarian, I think that goes back to "Are you actually sorry?" Sometimes you can't do anything for that person except be true to your own values and allow the other person to have his/her own feelings. You don't have to fix them for him/her.

Cally says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:02 PM

Todd: I've been bullied by someone's demands that I forgive them. "I apologized; why won't you forgive me?" over and over. Because, you see, it was All About Them. Never mind the fact that I was the injured party; now I was apparently injuring THEM by failing to pronounce the magic words "I forgive you", when, in truth, I could not forgive them yet.

If, in my apology to someone, I say "Please forgive me" or "I hope you will forgive me someday" or anything like that, then I'm immediately putting them on the defensive. Especially if they were raised in a particular kind of evangelical Christian home, where it's literally unthinkable to NOT forgive someone, no matter what they've done. Putting a burden on someone else like that is not the way to end an apology. If they'll forgive you, they'll forgive you. And it may take some time, or forever, for the hurt to subside enough for them to feel capable of doing so. But asking them to say the words right then, when they're still feeling the hurt? That's just adding more hurt, which is not what an apology should be about.

mirlacca says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:02 PM

Personally, I draw a clear distinction between saying "I'm sorry" and saying "I apologize." I can be sorry—express regret—for a lot of things, but when I am apologizing for something, I spell it out: "I shouldn't have done that, and I apologize." It may not make a difference to someone else, but it makes it very clear to *me* exactly what I am doing, and why. Also—if I don't say the word, I am NOT apologizing for whatever I said or did!

Susan McCarthy says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:07 PM

Lovely post. "You've done something wrong. Say what it is" is so important. Often people take refuge in vagueness. "I'm sorry for what happened." WHAT PRECISELY ARE YOU SORRY ABOUT?

At SorryWatch, Marjorie Ingall and I do apology analysis — good ones, bad ones, hybrids — and this post talks about specificity: <http://www.sorrywatch.com/2012/12/11/the-parts-of-a-good-apology/>

(In a silly way, but we're serious. Apology is an amazing social tool.)

leeflower says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:11 PM

Bruce Baugh: *I'm skeptical about many emphases on "forgiveness". I generally use it in a very strong sense, not necessarily a religious one but with something of that vigorous wiping out of the traces.*

This definition of forgiveness jives better with my internal definition of 'absolution' (though not in a theological sense). I have forgiven plenty of people without forgetting/wiping out the traces of what they've done. In fact, I can think of occasions in which I've forgiven somebody as part of the process of completely cutting them out of my life—because while it's certainly easier to forgive people who've shown genuine remorse and a commitment to respecting you, it's also completely possible to forgive people who have not, and maybe never will. Letting go of anger towards someone is not the same as forgetting what they did.

I don't generally ask forgiveness when apologizing, because whether or not someone forgives me is far more their business than mine. I can't change the past, and I can't dictate how others should feel about it—all I can do, when I've messed up, is acknowledge that, and try not to make the same mistake again.

TheMadLibrarian: I think people like that are less common than they're made out to be—I see far more folks who dismiss people's real hurt as 'oversensitive/looking for reasons to be offended' than I see people who go around actually looking for reasons to be offended.

So when it comes to dealing with those people, I'd say the first step is to double-check that your empathy sub-routines are working. Try as hard as possible to see things from the other person's perspective and resist the urge to dismiss other people's hurt just because you don't understand it. If, having done that, you determine that a person really is just so emotionally immature that pretending offense is their only way to get attention/validation, then 1. pity them, and 2. take all reasonable steps to get them out of your life, because yuck, who wants to be around that?

Mike says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:17 PM

Elousiebates:

Dunno about that. When I say to someone that I am sorry I have offended them, the cause of the offense is still me. I think you may be saying that some people find offense where others do not, but even in that case, acknowledging you have offended someone even if you do not believe you intended to offend is still taking responsibility for the offense. I've definitely unintentionally offended people before. When I've discovered I had, I've been sorry for the offense and make note of what has offended that person in an attempt not to replicate the error, even when I myself would not have taken the same offense.

I often hear that "I'm sorry you were offended" is a non-apology sort of apology, but there are times when that is the case.

Consider David Howard, who used the word 'niggardly' in a press conference and the world went crazy?

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/daily/jan99/district27.htm>

It makes sense to express regret that you were unable to communicate because of misunderstanding, but how much contrition should one really feel in such a case? Some people are, as one friend puts it, kleptomaniacs of offense.

Cynical Jason says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:19 PM

Charles Baxter wrote a great essay about owning one's language in situations like these:

<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/40351345?uid=3739736&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21102144357337>

NT says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:23 PM

My take on what to do if someone tells you that you've offended or hurt their feelings, written a few months ago: Are You Civilized? (A Quiz)

[<http://www.somebeaut.com/2012/12/13/civilized-quiz/>].

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:23 PM

Leeflower: "Absolution" is certainly a word I was blanking on! Thanks. (It's a day of allergy troubles, and my vocabulary is all out for lunch or something.) I like to explain what I'm thinking of so as to get at concepts, and I very much agree with the distinctions you make.

Kay says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:40 PM

Great post. I used to do group therapy work with a population in dire need of learning how to apologize (and what should be apologized for) and I used something very similar to this. Should I do that type of work again, you've given me some additional things to think about.

On a number of occasions I've recieved: "I'm sorry you're mad." Which is a lovely combination of a non-apology and blaming the non-offending person. Not only did I feel even

more upset, it took a lot of time to get over the offense, which I hated because I didn't want to give any more time/attention/energy to someone who hurt me.

I've been the recipient of this type of apology once and I was pretty startled by it. It's just so unusual to hear real apologies. I was surprised at how easy I found it to forgive that person. It was like something inside me unclenched and I could let go of the hurt. It is my hope that something similar to this happens to the other person when I apologize. Not because my goal is for them to forgive me, but because I wish for them not to have to carry around a hurt I caused by being an offensive jerk. If they end up not feeling injured but don't forgive me, that's ok. I don't get to have anything other than the knowledge that I did the best I could and have learned how to do a little better.

brucearthurs says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:44 PM

Sometimes the only proper response to an apology is "Go fuck yourself."

Because when someone's hurt you badly enough, giving them a second chance to do it again is too big a risk. Because some things are unforgivable.

[painful anecdote pre-deleted by commenter]

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:45 PM

Here's a situation that I run into far too often: I say something that causes someone offense, and the following two conditions hold:

- 1) I had no *intention* of causing offense.
- 2) I had no reason to believe that the remark(s) would cause offense.

The most honest apology I can muster "I'm sorry that what I said caused you offense," and I'm not sure I'm being completely honest in that . If I didn't intend offense and had could not reasonably have known that what I said would cause offense, I don't see how I can be said to have *caused* the offense. I think the accurate description is that offense *was taken* at what I said.

All of which has caused numerous contretemps, usually involving a member of my wife's family. I refuse to give an insincere apology, but I sometimes wonder if I ought to, as it would often make for less family stress.

My problem here may be caused by the fact that I'm darn near impossible to offend, a fact probably owing to my natural temperament and my reading of Stoic and Buddhist philosophers. I don't think offense can be *given*; it can only be *taken*. Even if someone intends to offend me, it is up to me whether I take offense.

*Choose not to be harmed, and you won't feel harmed. Don't feel harmed, and you haven't been. –
Marcus Aurelius, Meditations Book IV*

An old Buddhist tale:

Buddha was walking into the city market one day and near the city entrance an old bitter man was sitting on a box glaring at Buddha, who carried a bright smile on his face. At the sight of him this old man started cursing Buddha up and down, left right and center, telling him how pretentious he was, how much better he thought he was and how he did nothing worthy of the air he breathed in this world. But Buddha simply smiled and kept on walking to the market to get what he needed.

The Next day Buddha returned to the market and once again that old man was there, this time his cursing intensified, screaming and yelling at Buddha as he walked by, cursing his mother, cursing his father and everyone else in his life.

This went on for the rest of the week and finally as the Buddha was leaving the market the man came up to him, as his curiosity had simply gotten the best of him. "Buddha, every day you come here smiling and every day I curse your name, I curse your family and everything you believe in" the old man says " but every day you enter this city with a smile knowing that I await you with my harsh tongue, and everyday you leave through the same entrance with that same smile. I know by speaking to you now that you are not deaf, why do you keep on smiling while I do nothing but scream the worst things I can think of to your face?"

Buddha, with the same smile still on his face looks at the old man and asks "If I were to bring you a gift tomorrow morning all wrapped up in a beautiful box would you accept it?" to which the old man replies "Absolutely not, I would take nothing from the likes of you!". "Ah ha" the Buddha replies "Well if I were to offer you this gift and you were to refuse then who would this gift belong to?". "It would still belong to you of course" answers the old man. "And so the same goes with your anger, when I choose not to accept your gift of anger.

BW says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:47 PM

Kay, I tend to say "I'm sorry I'm mad too" in a calm but firm voice, and nothing more, while continuing to look the other person in the face. This tosses the ball back to their side of the net, and if they don't pick it up and immediately give me a better serve, at least they typically get that I'm expecting more and they're not off the hook. What they do then speaks of their character, over which I have no control. If I have returned their ball instead of accepting it, I find it easier to walk away from the situation without feeling suckered if a true apology isn't forthcoming.

Marina says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:53 PM

What about expressions of regret that are not even meant to be apologies?

Before your first question (Are you actually sorry?), I would ask myself "Do I believe I did something wrong?". If the answer is no, then obviously I am not willing to apologise. But I might still be sorry that what I did, however justified in my opinion, caused someone else pain or insult, even if I think their reaction is unreasonable. In that case, should I say I 'm sorry? On the one hand, if the positions were reversed and in certain circumstances, I might appreciate knowing that the person who offended me regretted the negative effect on me, even if they did not regret the action itself. On the other hand, perhaps there is no point in such a declaration, perhaps it even makes things worse.

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 3:56 PM

Marina:

The entry is focused on apologies, so I wasn't looking at anything other. That said, Leeflower offers some good thoughts on that a little bit up the thread.

mythago says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:07 PM

@Kenneth B: your approach strikes me as less Stoic than an insistence that intent shifts the blame from the person speaking to the person hurt by what they said. I don't think this is quite what your parable was getting at. Whether the Buddha chose to be angry is irrelevant to the question of whether the scowling old man behaved badly.

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:16 PM

Kenneth B: Things like post-traumatic stress disorder exist. The fact is that we cannot always choose our responses. We have physical bodies, including our brains, and we have subconscious thought processes, and we have neurochemistries susceptible to shifts in rates and intensities of response based on fatigue, blood sugar, allergies, undiagnosed illnesses, and a whole lot more. Your ability to feel fewer anger- and humiliating-driving moments of offense is to a very large degree a matter of genetic and development luck, as much as your height or eye color.

(Not all of it, of course. We do different things with our potential. But physical realities that exist prior to our consciousness set boundaries and ease of access to that potential.)

Furthermore, we have different lives. Marcus Aurelius had fewer opportunities to take offense at assaults on his individuality and dignity than, say, the typical citizen of Rome, or a slave in some boondocks town. Here this very week we had women's suitability for technical work held up as a matter for debate and scrutiny in a way that men's fitness for the same position just isn't, for instance. Some people get a higher baseline level of respect and accountability, as our host covered so well in his lowest-difficulty-level post.

I actually think there's a lot of wisdom in cultivating inner strength and peace. But I think that it's important recognize that some people are actually angry more often because they have good reason to be angry more often, and that some of the people being oh so calm are offenders who have good reason to be ashamed but aren't.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:23 PM

@Mythago:

Your approach strikes me as less Stoic than an insistence that intent shifts the blame from the person speaking to the person hurt by what they said.

But that is exactly the Stoic position. Regardless of whether the intent to offend was present or not, whether or not offense is taken is solely and ultimately up to the person who takes offense. See the Marcus Aurelius quote I share for one example from the Stoic literature.

Whether the Buddha chose to be angry is irrelevant to the question of whether the scowling old man behaved badly.

My point in sharing that story wasn't about the old man's behavior; it was about the fact that the Buddha took sole responsibility for not taking offense, no matter what the old man did.

Yes, I believe that the blame for taking offense ultimately and always resides with the person taking offense. People are always free to not take offense, though they don't often choose to exercise that freedom. If I did not intend to cause offense and could not reasonably have known that my words or actions would cause offense, then I am not culpable for the offense. If, however I intended to cause offense, or knew that my words or action had the possibility of causing offense, then I am culpable for the offense, and I will give a sincere apology and own my actions.

mythago says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:39 PM

@Kenneth B: I understand the point you were trying to make. I also understand the point you're trying to avoid; namely, that whether our actions merit apologizing is not dependent on whether their target "chooses" to be offended. Do you seriously claim that the old man has done nothing wrong, or even meriting apology?

Intent is not magical. If I am unaware you are in line behind me, and I step on your foot, does that mean it's perfectly proper of me to refuse to say "Sorry about that", or to suggest that you should have worn heavier shoes? What if I stepped on your foot because I was not paying attention; under the "no intent, no foul" standard you propose, it's on you, right?

You own your actions even if you meant well. An apology is not a statement that you are an evil person.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:44 PM

@Baughblog:

Things like post-traumatic stress disorder exist. The fact is that we cannot always choose our responses.

I disagree that we can't always choose our responses. We can always choose our response, but many people don't know *how* to do some.. Most people don't realize that they can always choose their responses because they don't observe themselves well, if at all. Some people come by this ability to observe their thoughts naturally, and some require training. In either case, one can at least *learn* to observe one's thoughts and to pause and choose one's response, so it is not a matter of a person being *unable* to do this, full-stop.

Furthermore, we have different lives. Marcus Aurelius had fewer opportunities to take offense at assaults on his individuality and dignity than, say, the typical citizen of Rome, or a slave in some boondocks town.

I think there's a bit of ad hominem circumstantial in this response. Whether or not the statement is true does not depend on the circumstances of the person who utters it. The statement would be equally true on the lips of a "typical citizen or rome or some slave in a boondocks town." And Marcus's source for the sentiment was Epictetus, a crippled former slave.

I actually think there's a lot of wisdom in cultivating inner strength and peace. But I think that it's important recognize that some people are actually angry more often because they have good reason to be angry more often, and that some of the people being oh so calm are offenders who have good reason to be ashamed but aren't.

I agree, if said offenders either intended to give offense or knew that there was a possibility that their words or actions would give offense.

pseudony mouse says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:48 PM

oh, synchronicity! I JUST read another blogger I follow's post on an anecdote that includes a pretty good (if perhaps not perfect) spontaneous apology along the lines you describe.

<http://davehingsburger.blogspot.com/2013/04/pushing-buttons.html>

Heteromeles says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:53 PM

It's a neat idea, and good points. However, in some circumstances, I disagree that you should apologize only if you are sorry.

The specific situation I'm thinking about can be termed dojo etiquette. If you are sparring with someone, and you accidentally injure them (say because they stepped into the way of your foot, or your aim was off), you apologize immediately, period.

It may or may not be your fault, but that's immaterial. There are two critical points:

- a) Someone got hurt, and
- b) That person needs to be helped.

What you do by apologizing is to shift the focus from what an argument about you did (which can easily lead to an uncontrolled brawl) to taking care of the injury (which is what's truly important).

I've been on both ends of this. It works, and personally, I think this has applications far beyond martial arts. Accidents happen, and all too often, they look deliberate in the heat of the moment. It takes some strength to apologize after an accident, especially if you don't feel it's your fault, but it's a truly powerful way to defuse a conflict before it spirals out of control.

To me, it's far more important to act promptly to defuse an unwanted conflict and to insure that injuries get cared for than it is to "feel sorry" about causing the accident. That's why I disagree with this precondition.

As John noted, this is simply an alternative view of when and why to apologize, and I'm glad John posted on this topic.

Annalee says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:53 PM

Housekeeping note: comments from 'leeflower' above are from me; gravatar ate my display name for some reason.

Kenneth B: have to agree with mythago and Baughblog on this one. If you accidentally step on someone's foot, you still say 'sorry' and move your foot; you don't stand there insisting that because you did not mean to step on them, they are choosing to be stepped on.

Telling people that they can choose how to react is patronizing. Whether or not they can choose to be angry with you is irrelevant to whether or not you have wronged them.

If you offend someone without meaning to, that's all the more reason to just apologize and get on with your life.

Nicole J. LeBoeuf-Little says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:56 PM

Kenneth B:

The most honest apology I can muster "I'm sorry that what I said caused you offense," and I'm not sure I'm being completely honest in that . If I didn't intend offense and had could not reasonably have known that what I said would cause offense, I don't see how I can be said to have caused the offense.

If you don't know you're sick and you had no reason to believe the person you gave your dinner leftovers was to immunocompromised, your ignorance doesn't contradict that you damn well caused them to get deathly ill.

If you use a racial slur, not knowing it was a racial slur does not mean you didn't cause the offense when offense was taken. It doesn't matter if you couldn't be reasonably expected to have known it was a slur. You spoke the word that caused another pain. You caused pain. And attempting to weasel out of it responsibility by claiming that it wasn't *you* who caused the pain but rather it was *all those stupid racists* who came before you and gave that perfectly good word all sorts of awful connotations, *they* caused the pain and *you* just walked into it as though into a trap... well, you could say that kind of thing, but makes you look like an asshole who won't take responsibility for having said something that caused pain.

You are trying to conflate "knowledge and intention" with "cause," and that's a pernicious mistake. Maybe you're conflating them because you think taking responsibility for causing pain is somehow allowing others to lump you in with those assholes who cause pain *on purpose*, but that's kind of silly. You can cause all sorts of pain unknowingly. We all do. The

adult thing to do after that is to recognize that other people don't suddenly stop feeling pain the moment they're told "I didn't mean it," but rather acknowledge your responsibility and try to learn from your mistake. There is nothing wrong with "I'm sorry that what I said caused offense," even accompanied by "I had no idea it *would* cause offense," so long as it's followed with, "Now that I know, I will endeavor not to make that mistake again."

But if your favorite follow-up is "I said I didn't mean to! Why are you still offended?", well, you start looking like someone who doesn't *care* that you caused pain, and doesn't consider it your responsibility to try not to cause pain. And that kind of person I distrust more even than the person who causes pain on purpose, who at least is no threat to me so long as I'm not their conscious target.

On demanding forgiveness of the wronged party, or pressuring them into forgiveness, or speaking of forgiveness as an "opportunity for the wronged party to restore the relationship" ... Slacktivist has a useful take on that. Basically, framing forgiveness as something the wronged party has the obligation to give, or as an "opportunity" that the wronged party has the obligation to take advantage of — framing the relationship as something that the wronged party is responsible for restoring — that's abusive. That's wronging the wronged party some more. Don't do that shit.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 4:59 PM

@Kenneth B: I understand the point you were trying to make. I also understand the point you're trying to avoid; namely, that whether our actions merit apologizing is not dependent on whether their target "chooses" to be offended.

I'm not avoiding that point. I thought I made it clear, but I'll restate. Our action/words merit apologizing if and only if we either intended offense or knew that it was possible that our words/actions might cause offense.

If someone takes offense at something I say or do, and if I did not intend to cause offense, and if I could not reasonably have known that what I said or did would cause offense, then the only honest response I can give is "I'm sorry that what I said/did caused you offense," which, judging by the comments in this thread, most people don't see as a real or sincere apology.

Your stepping on someone's toes brings another element into the discussion: unintended action. The cases discussed so far involved actions or words that someone intended to do or say. In the stepping on someone's toes example, an apology is merited because I know that stepping on someone's toes causes offense even if I did not intend to step on their toes. The action was unintended, but the action itself is a priori known to cause offense, so an apology is merited.

htom says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:00 PM

@Kenneth B — ,, I disagree that we can't always choose our responses. We can always choose our response, but many people don't know how to do some.. Most people don't realize that they can always choose their responses because they don't observe themselves well, if at all. Some people come by this

ability to observe their thoughts naturally, and some require training. In either case, one can at least learn to observe one's thoughts and to pause and choose one's response, so it is not a matter of a person being unable to do this, full-stop.

We can choose responses, but that choice is not always controlled by the conscious "i" in a meaningful way. Someone deep in denial about a situation is going to make choices that make no sense to someone who has a different understanding of the situation. (And the other's recommended choices will make no sense to the person deep in denial.) As well, at times training can take over the body, and you barely know you're being attacked when you hear "There you are, monkey boy. He's down, you're all OK, gun's over there ->" from your lizard brain. The presumption that everyone is acting from the same knowledge base and with the same decision and training skill set will lead you into trouble.

Lurkertype says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:01 PM

I think that following that example of Marcus Aurelius is perfectly fine if you're the supreme ruler of the known world. I think that following that example of Buddha is perfectly fine if you're a supremely enlightened moral being who might be a reincarnation of a god.

Us mere mortals MUST realize we're judged by our actions, not our inner purity. Absent telepathy, no one knows what you intended. They only know what you did.

Annalee says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:05 PM

Nicole J. LeBoeuf-Little: re the racial slur example, I just cut something similar from my reply—I was thinking of the cases—*on this very blog!*—where people used the phrase "call a spade a spade" in reference to President Obama without knowing that 'spade' is a racial slur.

The ones who replied that they didn't realize that and were sorry were able to continue their conversations without it becoming a big thing. In contrast, the ones who instead insisted that because they didn't *know* that the word is a slur, it was magically *not* a slur when they used it, and people were just 'looking for things to be offended about,' really didn't sell the idea that their racial insensitivity was accidental.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:09 PM

@Nicole:

You are trying to conflate "knowledge and intention" with "cause," and that's a pernicious mistake.

I disagree. The cause of offense, justified or unjustified, ultimately resides in the person taking offense.

There is nothing wrong with "I'm sorry that what I said caused offense," even accompanied by "I had no idea it would cause offense," so long as it's followed with, "Now that I know, I will endeavor not to make that mistake again."

I agree completely, and this is how I usually handle these situations.

Nicole J. LeBoeuf-Little says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:14 PM

Kenneth B:

I disagree that we can't always choose our responses. We can always choose our response, but many people don't know how...

Yet more obligations heaped upon the wronged party. Not only have they been wronged, but now they are obliged to carefully control their responses to their anger, pain, PTSD triggers, etc., because the person who wronged them *didn't mean to* so it wouldn't do to hurt their feelings.

That's seriously effed up.

Cally says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:16 PM

Kenneth: does the cause of being stabbed in the gut with an umbrella, deliberately or by accident, ultimately reside in the person stabbed in the gut with the umbrella? Or maybe, you know, the person waving that umbrella around might possibly have some teensy little thing to do with it?

Nicole J. LeBoeuf-Little says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:20 PM

Kenneth B:

I disagree. The cause of offense, justified or unjustified, ultimately resides in the person taking offense.

Handy for you. Keeps you from having to take responsibility for your actions. You can act as carelessly towards others as you like, secure in your knowledge that it is never your fault should your actions result in others' pain. It's their fault for choosing to be in pain.

("Offense" is such a handy word for people who believe as you. You can say, "Jeez, they didn't need to get so offended," making the "offended" party sound merely petty and indignant, thus eliding that what they feel is *genuine pain*.)

I agree completely, and this is how I usually handle these situations.

Given how strenuously you've argued otherwise, I sincerely doubt it.

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:27 PM

Nicole, et al:

Let's keep the snippiness in check, please.

Stevie says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:31 PM

Nicole

I agree; it reminds me of the claim that a war is caused by the people defending their country against an invasion.

After all, if they didn't resist then there would be no war...

Telzyln Marie Vosbury Garcia says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:32 PM

Additional apology point.... with all John Scalzi said excellent...I am adding the following:

There are two kinds of apologies. One is accidental/oblivious. Ex.: I spill coffee on your shirt, completely accidentally. Two is purposeful but wrong (or later I determine it is wrong). Ex.: I spill coffee on your shirt, because I believe something untrue about you, which I later discover the truth of.

I believe these things take different forms of apology. For accident, that apology needs to be made as soon as you find out about it. Format is not as important as immediate response. Ex.: "oh my gosh!! How careless of me! Oh, I'm so sorry. Let me get your cleaning bill. I am so sorry."

For purposeful, but mistaken, the same behavior is insulting. Once you find out you have been completely wrong... "I regret extremely that I behaved as if you deserved revenge. You were kind, considerate, innocent, and virtuous the whole time, and I was too blind to see that. Please forgive my ugly behavior."

The 2nd requires a deliberate, careful, probably slow approach. Don't do it, unless you are really clear on the change in wishes, opinions, You did what you did on purpose...but your head was in the wrong place.

The accidental one... well, your head may have been fine or not present...but your heart was not aimed against the person you need to give an apology to.

This is important to me. I don't know if it's useful to anyone else.

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:35 PM

Kenneth B:

I disagree that we can't always choose our responses.

Then in all seriousness, you need to do some reading on PTSD, the cognitive effects of hyper- and hypoglycemia, the psychological side effects of chemotherapy, and a bunch more. Our choices are always constrained, and sometimes the constraints narrow to just one feasible choice. You are addressing us from a position of both privilege and ignorance here, and need to be heeding things people are telling you about lives not your own. \

Our action/words merit apologizing if and only if we either intended offense or knew that it was possible that our words/actions might cause offense.

I also strongly disagree with this. Indeed, I regard apologizing for offense I didn't intend and maybe couldn't have known in advance would be intended to be a crucial part of basic adult responsibility. I *am* sorry to hurt others unintentionally, and want them to know so and then act in accordance with my better intentions in the future.

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:36 PM

Telzyl: That seems like a good, useful, and important distinction, yeah. That's kind of distinction that should shape the form and context of an apology.

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:43 PM

Sorry for the flow of responses, John, I won't make a habit of it. But here is a report on the effect on students' test scores of a teacher telling them that what they're doing is hard.

Summary: the average goes up, with interesting correlations and implications. That is, a different kind of presentation measurably changes the choices students make in response. We simply don't exist in a world-proof isolation booth inside our heads.

Toby says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:46 PM

I have to just express curiosity here. I know exactly where the primer came from and about what's been out in the community this weekend. However, did a certain someone go out and offend the same groups of people all over again this weekend?

mythago says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 5:53 PM

@Kenneth B: you contradict yourself.

If offense can never be given, only taken, then your "if and only if" is irrelevant. My target can, according to you, be like the Buddha and choose not to feel anger at my intended or careless offense. Therefore, an apology is never necessary. If I deliberately say something hurtful, is not my target choosing to be hurt by it rather than smiling?

But on the other hand, if the relevant criteria are "intended or knew that it was possible", then we can dispense with whether the target chooses to be hurt. After all, in this view, the focus is on my intent to act. And if that is so, then there is no meaningful criteria to exclude "inadvertent harm". I chose to utter the words, just as I chose to step backward in line, and I am responsible for them.

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 6:14 PM

Mythago, :)

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:00 PM

@Annalee

Kenneth B: have to agree with mythago and Baughblog on this one. If you accidentally step on someone's foot, you still say 'sorry' and move your foot; you don't stand there insisting that because you did not mean to step on them, they are choosing to be stepped on.

I agree, and I always apologize in that circumstance. Stepping on someone's toes is an act I know would cause offense, even if I didn't intend to commit the act, therefore I'm culpable.

Telling people that they can choose how to react is patronizing.

I'm not sure whether it's patronizing or not, but it's a simple statement of fact. People can choose how they respond. Victor Frankl documents this ability in the most extreme circumstances – the Nazi concentration camps – in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Whether or not they can choose to be angry with you is irrelevant to whether or not you have wronged them.

I disagree. The injury is the anger, and it is in their power to choose to not be angry.

If you offend someone without meaning to, that's all the more reason to just apologize and get on with your life.

Which, as I noted in earlier comments, is exactly what I do. If I am culpable by reason of either intending offense or knowing that offense was a possibility, I will say "I am sorry that I offended you." If I am not culpable because I did not intend offense and did not know that offense was possible, I will say "I am sorry that you were offended by what I said."

Andrew says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:11 PM

Something makes me think of Cordelia Chase: "People who think their problems are so huge craze me, like this time I sort of ran over this girl on her bike. It was the most traumatizing event of my life, and she's trying to make it about her leg. Like my pain meant nothing."

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:14 PM

@htom

We can choose responses, but that choice is not always controlled by the conscious "i" in a meaningful way.

I agree that that is *sometimes* the case, but I don't believe it to be the case with words or actions that cause offense. The causal chain isn't

Stimulus —> Offense taken

but

Stimulus —> potential for offense ———> offense taken

The freedom to choose our response resides in that second gap. The conscious “I” acts in that second gap, in what some neuroscientist call the power of veto, or “free won’t”. Granted, our *ability* to choose our response can be affected by many things: what we ate, how much sleep we got, whether we suffer from mental illness, whether we’re ill or well, etc. Those factors may make the choice more difficult, but they never remove the choice entirely.

Jennifer R. Ewing says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:17 PM

I would send this link to the Maternal Unit (the creature who birthed me)...but she wouldn't get it. She learned the art of the backhanded apology from my grandmother. A great example of that is the situation, years ago, when my mother went to visit my grandmother. They got into an argument, and my grandmother asked her to leave. My mother was complaining to me that she hadn't spoken to my grandmother for nearly a week following the incident. She reconciled with my grandmother shortly thereafter. My grandmother's method of “apologizing” to my mother? “I'm sorry I was forced to throw you out of my house.”

The Maternal Unit couldn't figure out why I was laughing so hard, for so long....

: -)

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:17 PM

@Cally

Kenneth: does the cause of being stabbed in the gut with an umbrella, deliberately or by accident, ultimately reside in the person stabbed in the gut with the umbrella? Or maybe, you know, the person waving that umbrella around might possibly have some teensy little thing to do with it?

The situation you describe fits under my second criteria for culpability: knowing that the word / action would *possibly* cause offense. So yes, the umbrella wielder is culpable in this case.

mythago says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:20 PM

@Kenneth B., but you are never culpable. The person you offended deliberately had the same choice to decline anger as the person you offended innocuously. That is the point of your tale about the Buddha. You do not owe an apology; rather it is up to the person you offended to decline to be angry. If they choose not to, well, that's on them, right?

You're rather distorting Frankl's arguments, by the way. He did not claim that because he was able to cling to hope in Auschwitz that everybody therefore has nigh-Vulcan control of their emotions in lesser circumstances. He offered ways of coping with difficult circumstance, not criticism that those who feel despair ought to get a grip.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:30 PM

@baughblog

I disagree that we can't always choose our responses.

Then in all seriousness, you need to do some reading on PTSD, the cognitive effects of hyper- and hypoglycemia, the psychological side effects of chemotherapy, and a bunch more. Our choices are always constrained, and sometimes the constraints narrow to just one feasible choice. You are addressing us from a position of both privilege and ignorance here, and need to be heeding things people are telling you about lives not your own.

I don't have to read up on PTSD, since I suffered from it after a car accident. Don't have to read about the psychological side effect of chemotherapy (and radiation treatments) because my wife is a breast cancer survivor. :) And I have suffered from moderate to severe depression (including suicidal ideation), anxiety, and panic attacks on and off for over 20 years. My breakthrough in dealing with all of these came a few years ago when I discovered that, though I could not control the feelings of depression, anxiety, etc., I could control my *responses* to them. Granted, some people have worse problems than I do, but I doubt anyone has worse problems than the concentration camp inmates that Victor Frankl describes in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. If *they* can choose to respond positively to their situation, then I think it is reasonable to believe that anyone can.

Our action/words merit apologizing if and only if we either intended offense or knew that it was possible that our words/actions might cause offense.

I also strongly disagree with this. Indeed, I regard apologizing for offense I didn't intend and maybe couldn't have known in advance would be intended to be a crucial part of basic adult responsibility. I am sorry to hurt others unintentionally, and want them to know so and then act in accordance with my better intentions in the future.

I think I've failed to make clear a distinction in two things I'm arguing:

- 1) Whether I am culpable in causing offense.
- 2) Whether I would apologize when someone takes offense.

I'll expand on those in another comment.

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:33 PM

Ok, I'm done trying to explain to Kenneth B. I'd only make myself more frustrated and end up repeating things.

Cally says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:37 PM

[em]The situation you describe fits under my second criteria for culpability: knowing that the word/action would possibly cause offense. So yes, the umbrella wielder is culpable in this case.[/em]

So my mother, who had no idea that the word "Pickaninny" was offensive (truly, she honestly didn't) had nothing at all to do with the hurt felt by the mother of that baby, when she so described it? And therefore didn't need to apologize at all?

Let's try another analogy. If you tap me on the arm where, unbeknownst to you, many people have already hit me, causing a very painful bruise, you've still hurt me, though you didn't mean to. If you call me a name that as far as you know is entirely innocuous, but other people have called me with intent to hurt, sensitising that word to the point where I expect someone to hit me right after calling me it, you've still put me into fight-or-flight mode, and thus hurt me, though you didn't intend to. If think you're entirely alone, and you swing your umbrella around, and poke me in the gut, you've still hurt me, though you didn't even know I was there.

Intent ISN'T MAGIC. If a person is hurt, and it was because of something I did or said, even if I had no idea that they were already bruised, or had been abused, or were in the way of my umbrella, it's still up to me to apologise. Because they can't read my mind, and I've hurt them.

Unless, of course, it's All About You, and they're merely inconsequential bit players who deserve no consideration whatsoever.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:40 PM

@Mythago:

If offense can never be given, only taken, then your "if and only if" is irrelevant. My target can, according to you, be like the Buddha and choose not to feel anger at my intended or careless offense. Therefore, an apology is never necessary. If I deliberately say something hurtful, is not my target choosing to be hurt by it rather than smiling?

I can see how you would think I'm contradicting myself, because I may not have expressed myself as clearly as I should have. There are two separate issues here:

- 1) Whether an apology is merited.
- 2) Whether I would give an apology.

As I noted in my original post, I *do* give an apology in the situation mentioned. If a person has taken offense at something that I said or did and I did not intend to give offense or could reasonably know that offense was possible, I am not culpable for the offense, therefore an apology is not merited. But, again as I noted in my original post and in subsequent replies, I will give an apology of the form "I am sorry that what I said caused you offense," because I am genuinely bothered by the fact that the person is upset or hurt, and I know that giving that apology may help assuage the offense. I don't like it when people are upset, angry, grieving, or hurting in any other way, and I always try to do whatever is in my power to help if I can.

In short, I will give an *honest* apology because it is the human and civil thing to do, even though I cannot honestly accept culpability for the offense. Thus, there is no contradiction.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:55 PM

@Mythago:

>but you are never culpable. The person you offended deliberately had the same choice to decline anger as the person you offended innocuously. That is the point of your tale about the Buddha. You do not owe an apology; rather it is up to the person you offended to decline to be angry. If they choose not to, well, that's on them, right?

No. My culpability isn't dependent on whether they chose to be offended or not. It is solely dependent on whether or not I intended offense or could reasonably know that offense was possible. I would still be culpable, and my words acts would still merit an apology even if they did not get offended by them.

>You're rather distorting Frankl's arguments, by the way. He did not claim that because he was able to cling to hope in Auschwitz that everybody therefore has nigh-Vulcan control of their emotions in lesser circumstances. He offered ways of coping with difficult circumstance, not criticism that those who feel despair ought to get a grip.

And you're distorting my arguments. :) Nothing in what I've said demands that people have "nigh-Vulcan" control over their emotions. All anyone has to do is simply pause and choose their response to the stimulus, which is exactly what Frankl describes.

Nor did I say that a person is never justified in taking offense. The offense may be, and often is, justified, but it is still within a person's control whether to choose to take offense or not.

sojournerstrange says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:56 PM

Rather counterproductive, then, considering that sorry-that-offended-you is more likely to piss someone off than "assuage the offense".

mythago says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 7:57 PM

@Kenneth B.: No, you've been quite clear. The problem is that you don't seem to perceive that you've actually argued, per the old man and the Buddha, that the answer to #1 is "never".

Re #2, as our host pointed out a ways back, "I am sorry you were offended by what I said" (as you phrased it in your 7:00 pm post) is not an apology. It is a statement that the other perspn's reaction to you is the problem.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:04 PM

I think an important distinction may have been lost in this discussion, most likely due to my not communicating it clearly. There are three propositions:

- 1) People have the ability to control their responses.
- 2) People know they have the ability to control their responses.

3) People who know they have the ability to control their responses will always exercise this ability.

The only proposition I've argued for here is 1, but people seem to be assuming that I'm arguing for 2 and 3 as well. I'm not. Again, I probably haven't been as clear as necessary.

Proposition 1 to me is uncontroversial. It's just a fact of human nature and psychology that has been recognized in eastern and western philosophy for millennia.

Re proposition 2, I don't have any empirical evidence one way or the other, but my gut feeling is that most people have experience being able to control their responses on occasion, but that generally they don't know that that ability is always available to them. Part of Victor Frankl's goal with logotherapy was to show people that they do have this ability and that it is always available. This is one of the goals of Stoic practice and one of the goals of mindfulness meditation as well.

Re proposition 3, very few people can use this ability perfectly.

Xopher Halftongue says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:07 PM

My preferred form isn't too different.

1. Write/speak words of apology. (See MNmom at 2:16)
2. Say what you did that was wrong.
3. Explain why it was wrong.
4. If appropriate, say what you'll do to prevent the same thing in the future, or fix it now.
5. Repeat words of apology.

(That last goes something like "Again, I'm profoundly sorry that..." Ideally it's better not to repeat the exact words.)

Todd: *All good, but I think it is important to ask the offended party for their forgiveness.*

I don't agree. That might be worth doing, but a good apology doesn't make requests. You give the apology because you owe it. If you're trying to get them to do something, even forgive you, you're being manipulative. If they forgive you, they'll say so; or you can ask later. But it shouldn't be part of the apology.

As I read, I see that others have mentioned this point, notably David at 2:22, and Cally at 3:02.

leeflower: YES!!! Thank you for that.

htom says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:08 PM

@Kenneth B — ... *My breakthrough in dealing with all of these came a few years ago when I discovered that, though I could not control the feelings of depression, anxiety, etc., I could control my responses to them. Granted, some people have worse problems than I do, but I doubt anyone has worse problems that*

the concentration camp inmates that Victor Frankl describes in his book Man's Search for Meaning. If they can choose to respond positively to their situation, then I think it is reasonable to believe that anyone can. ...

No, Kenneth, that's not a reasonable conclusion to draw. Man is not a reasonable animal. Man is barely, sometimes, a reasoning animal. Mostly humans are emotional, rationalizing animals; and that is anything but reasonable.

In some ways the world might be a better place if everyone would follow the principles of Albert Ellis's Rational-Emotive Behavioral Thinking (/Therapy); it is unreasonable for you to lay a "should" on the rest of humanity for them to do so. They won't.

Yes, we all have the potential to be saints. We're not. You're going to have to deal with that. Arguing that there are saints and the rest of us fail to meet that standard is probably reasonable. Claiming that anyone can be a saint is also reasonable. Expecting them to be so is not reasonable.

David says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:12 PM

Kenneth_B, when you're frozen in place, processing the level of culpability you have for your most recent action, do people tend to walk away, muttering to themselves?

I will give an honest apology

I can think of a number of words to describe an apology for an action you don't think you're to blame for, but "honest" isn't one of them.

htom says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:12 PM

@Kenneth B —

- 1) People have the ability to control their responses.
- 2) People know they have the ability to control their responses.
- 3) People who know they have the ability to control their responses will always exercise this ability.

All three are false.

Nicole J. LeBoeuf-Little says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:13 PM

Sorry about the snippiness, John and everyone – I started letting my anger get the better of me. I'll do better next time.

Meanwhile, I have said all I have to say to Kenneth B on the subject, aside from those things which I'd be better off not saying; and others are saying all I could have said with more grace. So that's enough outta me on this particular subthread, at least until the thread moves on.

Robert C Roman says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:15 PM

I struggle with apologies on a regular basis. I think, in part, that struggle is bound up in fear of disproportionate reprisal. "I'm sorry I did x." has often invited a response seemingly all out of scale with x.

The most notable one, which I still see on a regular basis, is when I apologize for passing on incorrect information. I'll apologize to those I misinformed, pass on the correct information, and frequently the response will be not "fact check in the future" or even "this casts doubt on your other information", but "everything else you've ever told me is wrong, and I am therefore right in regards to every disagreement we have ever had, including all those we checked with neutral authoritative information sources".

Yeah. I need to get over that. Just another hurdle in the path of life. (note, not intending sarcasm).

the ridger says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:17 PM

I think the confusion, such as it was, over your use of "passive voice" comes from the fact that your paragraph reads as though "this thing happened" IS the passive version of "I did this". Which it isn't, and which your comment shows you know isn't.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:19 PM

@Mythago

Re #2, as our host pointed out a ways back, "I am sorry you were offended by what I said" (as you phrased it in your 7:00 pm post) is not an apology. It is a statement that the other perspn's reaction to you is the problem.

If I did not intend offense and could not reasonably know that offense would be taken, then, yes, the other person's reaction is the problem. I don't believe I'm culpable in that case, so I can't honestly say "I'm sorry that I caused you offense" because I don't believe that I *caused* the offense.

This view doesn't appear to be very popular here, but it's not a view that I came to lightly. I've reflected on the issue of offense and blame quite a bit, and this is the conclusion I've reached. So far it has worked for me. Like on any other subject, I'm certainly open to changing my mind in light of new evidence or new argument.

I'm not even sure there is "right" answer in this matter. There may be only reasoned opinion. I respect other people's reasoned opinion in this matter, as some have very passionately expressed in this thread. I would hope that others would grant me the same courtesy.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:23 PM

@htom

No, Kenneth, that's not a reasonable conclusion to draw. Man is not a reasonable animal. Man is barely, sometimes, a reasoning animal. Mostly humans are emotional, rationalizing animals; and that is anything but reasonable.

But we all have the *potential* to be reasonable. That is all I was arguing.

Yes, we all have the potential to be saints. We're not. You're going to have to deal with that. Arguing that there are saints and the rest of us fail to meet that standard is probably reasonable. Claiming that anyone can be a saint is also reasonable. Expecting them to be so is not reasonable.

I wasn't arguing that I expected people to be so, on that they are *all* capable of being so. I think we agree on that point.

Jenny says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:26 PM

This is a wonderful description of the purpose and presentation of a proper apology. I have only one disagreement with it. I have heard all the arguments against passive construction, and concluded that there is nothing wrong with it as long as it is part of good, clear writing. Here are two passives that seem fine to me.

"Your reputation was clearly damaged by my bumbling, and I am ashamed that I said such stupid things. I know it will take a lot of work for these wrongs to be completely addressed. I intend to spend the time it will take, and I hope you will be willing to let me do so."

There is no avoidance of agency, here. Of course, if you want to make your apologies completely active, there is nothing wrong with that. I just don't think it is an inferior apology if it includes a passive construction or two.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:30 PM

It appears that some people believe that I'm arguing that everyone should behave as I do re causing offense and apologies. I haven't made that argument. All I've done is discussed how I handle these situations and the reasoning behind how I handle them. I haven't offered any prescriptions, only descriptions of how I act in these situations.

I honestly am puzzled by how personally some people have taken this matter, and by the passion of some of the responses. Going a bit meta here: I had no intention of causing offense, and I had no idea that what I said would cause offense. Obviously, given what I've said, the only "apology" I can offer is "I'm sorry if you took offense at what I've said," but I am sincere in saying that. I don't like seeing people distressed, whatever (or whoever) the cause of the distress.

Other Bill says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:35 PM

Kenneth B:

"This view doesn't appear to be very popular here, but it's not a view that I came to lightly. I've reflected on the issue of offense and blame quite a bit, and this is the conclusion I've

reached.”

I think part of the problem is that you aren't really showing your work on this. You're asserting it as a reasoned conclusion and hinging your validity on a slightly out of context piece of Buddhism. People are responding to what you're presenting here and you pushing back with "I've thought this through" is not sharing adequately with the class.

Richard says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:38 PM

Jenny:

Let's look at the passive part of your sentence: *Your reputation was clearly damaged by my stumbling...*

Right there, you seem to be backing away from your actions, and taking the opportunity to frame it as "bumbling."

As another part of the article says, **the offense is yours, own it.** The person you've offended doesn't care if you were stumbling, socially inept, having a bad day, just got laid off, stubbed your toe, or are just an asshole. The first and most direct thing they would like to hear is, "I've caused you pain." The active voice conveys that clearly, and directly. Passive voice, in this instance, detracts from the direct statement with unnecessary qualifications. Does that help?

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:39 PM

@Cally

So my mother, who had no idea that the word "Pickaninny" was offensive (truly, she honestly didn't) had nothing at all to do with the hurt felt by the mother of that baby, when she so described it? And therefore didn't need to apologize at all?

There are, in my opinion, two issues to disentangle here:

- 1) Whether your mother was culpable in the offense.
- 2) Whether she had a duty to give an apology.

My answer to 1 is no, she was not culpable since she did not intend offense and could not reasonably know that offense was possible.

2 is a little more problematic, hinging on what you mean by "need to apologize." There's a value judgement involved here. If your mother values keeping the peace or maintaining a good relationship with this person, her desire to act in accordance values create a "need to apologize" in this case. If your mother doesn't value those things, then no apology is necessary. It's another question entirely whether or not your mother *should* value those things.

Shawn T says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:45 PM

When I feel that the best thing I can say is "I regret that you were offended" I should just wander off without saying anything.

–
htom says: April 15, 2013 at 2:08 pm

>You offer an apology, and beg forgiveness. Your apology may be accepted....

-the sound of two hands clapping-

–
“My bad” doesn’t mean sorry to me. It means ‘I meant to do that, and knew you would not like it.’

–
–
I didn’t see this one:

To be real an apology must be in the same venue as the offense.

Front page lead story: “Shawn Thinks Bacon Tastes Like Wet Dog!” with seventy eleven paragraphs.

Apology on page 90, in fine print, entirety of apology: “Oops, we were wrong. He doesn’t.”
Oh, so not an apology.

Emma Anne says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:50 PM

I like Telzyl’n’s distinction between the sort of apology appropriate to an oblivious offense versus a deliberate one, in the sense that an action performed deliberately is generally worse than the same action performed by accident. But an accidental offense can still be very bad and require the careful, elaborate apology outlined by our host.

I don’t entirely agree that a person should never apologize if they aren’t actually sorry. Sometimes you know you’ve done wrong even if you don’t feel that you’ve done wrong, and it makes sense to apologize while you bring yourself into alignment. In that case I would simply say “I apologize” and leave out any exploration of my feelings or interpretation of the event.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 8:55 PM

@Other Bill

I think part of the problem is that you aren’t really showing your work on this. You’re asserting it as a reasoned conclusion and hinging your validity on a slightly out of context piece of Buddhism. People are responding to what you’re presenting here and you pushing back with “I’ve thought this through” is not sharing adequately with the class.

I’m not sure what work there is that I’m not showing. There are a couple of things I argued.

1) That people can choose their responses. I used the buddhist quote, the Marcus Aurelius quote, and Frankl as support for this. I elaborated on the fact that while people can choose their responses they may not be aware of this fact, and even if they are aware may not act on it. What further work do I need to show here?

2) That I don’t believe that I am culpable in causing offense if I did not intend to cause offense and I could not have reasonably known that my words actions would possibly cause offense. I suppose I could go into more detail about how my words could be considered a necessary but

not sufficient cause for someone taking offense, but that a person's choice to take offense is both sufficient and necessary for them to take offense, and for a cause to be a *cause* it must both be sufficient and necessary. Is that the kind of thing you're talking about?

I don't think I've been clear that I don't make any connection between 1 and 2. There really two separate but kind of related issues. My mistake was discussing them in the same responses, which could lead people to believe I saw 2 as depending on 1. If you read my post carefully, you'll see that that is not the case. As I noted in another post re 2, my culpability doesn't depend on whether someone actually chooses to take offense at what I said or did. My culpability only depends on whether or not I intended to cause offense or that could reasonably know that what I said or did *might* cause offense.

Are there any other ways you see that I can show my work or better clarify what I've said?
Thanks!

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:04 PM

@David

Kenneth_B, when you're frozen in place, processing the level of culpability you have for your most recent action, do people tend to walk away, muttering to themselves?

I don't get frozen in place. If someone takes offense after I have done or said something, I only have to process two questions. Did I intend to give offense? I can dispense with this one quickly since I almost never set out to offend someone. Could I have reasonably known, knowing what I know about this person or people in general, that this word / action had the possibility of causing offense? That one rarely takes a couple of seconds to answer. Then I can respond with "I'm sorry that I cause you offense," if I caused the offense, or "I'm sorry that you took offense at what I said," if I did not cause the offense.

I can think of a number of words to describe an apology for an action you don't think you're to blame for, but "honest" isn't one of them.

In the case where I'm not culpable for the offense, I'm not apologizing for causing the offense. I'm sharing the fact that I'm distressed that they're distressed (regardless of the distress), which is true, and therefore honest. I would say the same kind of thing if they were distressed because they got a bad medical report, they lost their job, or were victim of any distressing words or events that had nothing to do with me.

Sarah M. says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:09 PM

@Kenneth B: With regards to your point

2) *That I don't believe that I am culpable in causing offense if I did not intend to cause offense and I could not have reasonably known that my words actions would possibly cause offense.*

I don't understand how you can hold this position, while you also say *Stepping on someone's toes is an act I know would cause offense, even if I didn't intend to commit the act, therefore I'm culpable.*

If you use a slur that you don't know is a slur, and you cause offense, how is that any different than accidentally stepping on someone's foot that you didn't realize was there? While it's true that you knew ahead of time that stepping on toes (or insulting someone) would cause offense, you didn't know that at the time you put your foot down (or opened your mouth) that you were intruding on someone. So why is it you are culpable for an unintended physical offense, but not for a verbal one?

baughblog says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:16 PM

Some of us place a lot of value on ethical standards that regard the reality of other people's injury and misery as more important than our own ability to claim, moment by moment, how perfectly right we are and how much it's all others' fault that they have anything amiss.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:20 PM

Reading the comments and thinking about the responses has gotten me thinking about the concept of "being sorry." Going back to our hosts original post and his guidance re apologies:

1) Are you actually sorry?

Yes, even if I don't believe that I am culpable for the offense, i.e I did not intend to cause the offense and could not have reasonably known that my words or actions would cause offense. I can be sorry that the person is distressed regardless of the cause of the distress. It doesn't matter whether or not they are distressed in response to something I said, something someone else said or did, or some negative event in their lives, I can offer a genuine "I'm sorry" for their distress.

2) Are you primarily sorry for yourself, or for others?

I am solely sorry for the distressed party, regardless of the cause of the distress.

3) Are you willing to let your apology be an apology?

Yes, I can say "I am sorry that you are distressed because of X," with no qualifications or amendments.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:28 PM

@ Sara M

@Kenneth B: With regards to your point

2) That I don't believe that I am culpable in causing offense if I did not intend to cause offense and I could not have reasonably known that my words actions would possibly cause offense.

I don't understand how you can hold this position, while you also say Stepping on someone's toes is an act I know would cause offense, even if I didn't intend to commit the act, therefore I'm culpable.

If you use a slur that you don't know is a slur, and you cause offense, how is that any different than accidentally stepping on someone's foot that you didn't realize was there? While it's true that you knew ahead of time that stepping on toes (or insulting someone) would cause offense, you didn't know that at the time you put your foot down (or opened your mouth) that you were intruding on someone. So why is it you are culpable for an unintended physical offense, but not for a verbal one?

Here is the distinction I see here, and it's not about physical vs. verbal. In the case of stepping on someone's toes, I could reasonably be expected to know that doing so would cause offense. In fact, not only could I reasonably be expected to know it, I do know it. In the case of the slur, I neither knew nor could reasonably have been expected to know that it was a slur. It's not about physical or verbal, but about by state of knowledge about the act/word.

In the first case, stepping on a foot, I knew that the act would cause offense, but I did not intend to commit the act.

In the second case, I did not know that the act would cause offense, but I did intend to commit the act.

In my opinion my culpability is determined by my intent to offend or my *knowledge* of the possibility of offense. In the case of stepping on the foot, I had knowledge of the possibility of offense; in the case of the slur, I did not.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:44 PM

I think an analogy from law might help clarify my ideas about culpability. Two scenarios:

1) Person A is driving on a busy city road. Person A sees Person B standing on the curb. Person A has a vendetta against person A, so person A drives up on the curb, striking Person B with the car and injuring or killing them.

2) Persona A is driving a car on a busy city road. They are paying full attention to the road and their surroundings. A pedestrian is standing on the curb. Without warning, the pedestrian steps out into the road and person A's car hits the pedestrian, injuring or killing them.

3) Person a is driving on a busy city road. Person A is texting on their cell phone or Persona A has been drinking and is impaired. A pedestrian is standing on the curb. Without warning, the pedestrian steps out into the road and person A's car hits the pedestrian, injuring or killing them.

In situation 1, person A is culpable because they intended to kill person B.

In situation 2, person A is culpable because, though they did not intend to kill person B, they engaged in activities that they knew were likely to impair their driving ability and therefore injure or kill someone.

In situation 3, person A is not culpable because they neither intended to kill person B, nor did they engage in any activity that they knew was likely to impair their driving.

In situations 1 or 2, Person A owes person B (or person B's family) an apology because of intent or negligence. In situation 3, person A does not owe anyone an apology because person B neither intended to cause the injury, nor engaged in behavior that they should have reasonably know would possibly lead to injury.

sorcharei says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:46 PM

I'm not seeing how "I know that stepping on feet hurts them, but I did not know your foot was there" is different from "I know that words can be racist slurs, but I did not know that 'gyp' is a racist slur". In the first case, you are willing to be culpable, but in the second, you are not.

In both cases, your lack of specific knowledge (where the foot is or that X is a racist term) should either trump your general knowledge (about stepping on feet or using racist slurs), or it should not. To acknowledge that you are culpable in the accidental foot-stepping but not in the accidental slur-using seems inconsistent to me.

Is your argument that you cannot reasonably be expected to know which words are racial slurs, but you can be reasonably expected to know where feet are?

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 9:51 PM

I'm not going to stop this discussion centering on Kenneth B's formulation, but I have to note that I suspect at this point no one's going to do a whole lot of convincing of the other, and if that's the goal (and it may not be!) it might be worth it to let it go.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:18 PM

I'm not seeing how "I know that stepping on feet hurts them, but I did not know your foot was there" is different from "I know that words can be racist slurs, but I did not know that 'gyp' is a racist slur". In the first case, you are willing to be culpable, but in the second, you are not.

In both cases, your lack of specific knowledge (where the foot is or that X is a racist term) should either trump your general knowledge (about stepping on feet or using racist slurs), or it should not. To acknowledge that you are culpable in the accidental foot-stepping but not in the accidental slur-using seems inconsistent to me.

Is your argument that you cannot reasonably be expected to know which words are racial slurs, but you can be reasonably expected to know where feet are?

I see your point. Yes, I think I would say that I can't be expected to know which words are racial slurs but that I can reasonably be expected to know where feet are. Here's why: If I step

on someone's foot by accident, it it because of my failure to be aware of my surroundings. I *shouldn't*, for instance, step backwards in a store or movie queue. I should turn around and see if anyone is behind me before I head in that direction. If I step on someone's foot or bump into them, it's because of my negligence. I can reasonably be expected to be aware of my surroundings.

On the other hand, I can't be reasonably expected to know every word that could be considered a slur. I'd have to find and memorize a list of all of the slur words, something I don't think anyone could reasonably be expected to do. People usually learn that words are offensive or slurs on a one by one basis.

Shawn T says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:29 PM

Vis JS above

Just from skimming a bit (nothing worth reading in my drunken opinion.)

I get two ideas.

The reason for a cease-fire is to get more ammo to the front and the reason people answer a q. is so that the only person who matters will have time to come up with a totes awesome soliloquy*.

Really. I've said what I thought was the exact thing that someone had said to me on the subject of abortion. Best I can figure out is I didn't use the right keywords.

I was trying to do the babies stop crying when you record and play back on person.

(Baby apparently says WTF!?!? and stops crying, (more to that but drunk now)).

(And I don't mean the time when I said condoms cost less than an abortion. That was such an ouch.)

—

* Thank you spell check.

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:33 PM

@Cally

Intent ISN'T MAGIC. If a person is hurt, and it was because of something I did or said, even if I had no idea that they were already bruised, or had been abused, or were in the way of my umbrella, it's still up to me to apologise. Because they can't read my mind, and I've hurt them.

Actually, in law, intent is kind of magic, and it is used to determine culpability all the time. See my comment [here](#) for further explanation.

David says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:43 PM

I don't get frozen in place.

Mm. This entire thread has been you, frozen in place, processing. I know you don't understand what I'm talking about, but perhaps you will at some point.

Jenny says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:43 PM

@Richard, you only objected to one of my passives. I do see your point and agree that maybe it wasn't the greatest example, though I still say it doesn't avoid agency. If the reputation was damaged by rudeness instead of bumbling, perhaps that would own the wrong better.

Was the other passive okay in your opinion, or were you leaving it out to keep your message focused on just the one?

Kenneth B says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:45 PM

Time to pack it in for the night. This has been fun, and I want to thank everyone that took the time to read and respond to my thoughts, especially if you didn't agree with me. I really enjoy thinking out loud, bouncing ideas off people, and thinking about their responses. For me, writing like this is how I clarify my thinking, and the feedback from others really helps in that regard. As always, I've learned a few new things and have revised or clarified some of my thoughts on the topics discussed here. Always a good thing. And many thanks to our gracious host for letting me ramble on and think out loud. I think this conversation has reached its natural ending, but if there are more comments tomorrow I'll try to follow up.

And for those of you who expressed a passionate concern that you apologize when your words offend someone, let me assure you that your harsh words toward me did not offend me in the least. No apologies necessary. :)

Sarah M. says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:47 PM

I think some people here keep getting too caught up on whether someone is "owed" an apology or whether someone "deserves" an apology. IMNSHO, that's all kind of beside the point. If you are in a situation and your actions cause someone else distress, no matter how inadvertent or unintended, the stand up thing to do, the right thing to do, the *moral* thing to do is to offer an apology to the injured party. To let them know that you genuinely regret their distress and that you regret your part, however inadvertent, in causing that distress.

If my house gets picked up by a tornado and lands on your sister squashing her to death, I'm going to damn well apologize. Not because I built the house or because I made the tornado or even because your sister was such a nice person (because from what I hear, she really wasn't). It's because I was there and your sister is now dead under my house. It's just the decent thing to do.

The fact that anyone can honestly argue against this is just mind boggling to me.

Cally says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:50 PM

We're not talking about law here, are we? If you touch George's shoulder to get his attention, and you didn't know that he's got a burn on that shoulder under his clothes, and you cause him agonizing pain, should you, or shouldn't you apologize?

I say you should apologise. You should say something like, "I'm sorry I hurt you. Can I get you a chair or a glass of water or something while you recover? I'll be very careful not to touch you again until or unless you tell me I can."

You seem to say that because you couldn't reasonably know about that burn under his shirt, you should say "I'm sorry my touching you made you scream."

Well guess what? Some emotional scars are just as painful as burns. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can destroy my life, if applied just right.

Other Bill says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 10:53 PM

Kenneth B:

"On the other hand, I can't be reasonably expected to know every word that could be considered a slur. I'd have to find and memorize a list of all of the slur words, something I don't think anyone could reasonably be expected to do."

I think this is what I'm driving at in terms of not sharing your homework. There isn't a very deep exploration here of your responsibility, for example. Once a word is pointed out to you. On the face of it, this puts the responsibility on the person being slurred to educate you on your lack of understanding or allow it to pass them by because that's their responsibility as a human. This is problematic.

None of the issues with this philosophy are really going to come from the instances where you do share a genuine apology. They're going to come up in the instances in which you find yourself indicating that you bear no personal responsibility because you can't know.

At the very least, you recognize that this is a common tactic for people to obfuscate their culpability, yes? And what I've seen you share in this discussion is that once you hit that point where you determine you can't reasonably have been expected to know you might cause offense you drop it. This leaves you the judge of yourself in terms of responsibility to others. I don't necessarily think this is wrong, but it is certainly ripe for conflicts of interest. Particularly subconsciously.

Meaning, it seems incredibly difficult to reliably assert one's self an unbiased judge of one's culpability. I mean, people lie to their diaries, you know?

I tend to see the instances where I have *unintentionally* caused offense as the low hanging fruit of relationship management. If I didn't mean to offend my friend or partner or conversational partner, and they alert me to their offense it's a superb opportunity for me to demonstrate my care for them. By listening to the concern, making myself aware of the mistake, apologizing and then by demonstrating in the future that I am willing to amend my behavior. Because, I am absolutely sorry that any action I took caused someone offense. Particularly if it was careless or unwitting.

If I engage in a relationship – even something as small as a short interaction – with a person, I see part of the responsibility of that engagement to be respectful and mindful of the impact my

actions have on them. Just because I don't know something doesn't really invalidate my responsibility to not be offensive in human discourse. I can see where what you're offering isn't entirely mutually exclusive to my thoughts on the subject. But, I also some disconcerting blurriness.

GemGirl says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 11:23 PM

In response to: "Us mere mortals MUST realize we're judged by our actions, not our inner purity. Absent telepathy, no one knows what you intended. They only know what you did."

Intent is important, even though people cannot read each other's minds. That's why allowing people to provide an explanation is a better approach before letting anger take hold based on our view of a potential offense.

My view is that we'd be better off to chill-out about the routine kinds of misunderstandings that come up simply because people are different in their approaches. Not everything that looks offensive is meant to offend. Sometimes it just reflects our human ignorance, not knowing. I'm comfortable giving others benefit of doubt if they are willing to communicate about an issue, and there is no pattern of ongoing negative behaviors involved

A lot of people violate others in some way and cannot handle it when that same person does something they feel offended by. But Person A feels Person B should apologize, when in fact Person B had overlooked previous minor issues done by person A that might have been offensive.

Sometimes people do things in response to what we may have previously done, even if we were oblivious to what we previously did.

The need for apologies is often two-sided. Someone may take offense and respond as if they were the only wounded person, but later learn their reason for being offended was more about them and not strictly based on the action of someone else.

Gulliver says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 11:40 PM

I'm sorry you feel that way, John.

Just joshing, mostly agree, but a few dissenting opinions:

Leaving aside classical definitions that are not directly on point to how the word is used in everyday life:

Sssh! As long as people don't know the word's descent, they'll think you're really sorry!
notices unwanted attention I mean...heh...because you *are* really sorry...did someone turn off the AC in here?

Don't try to mitigate or defend, just get it out there.

What grinds my gears is when the object of an apology receives it by making excuses for the action or inaction for which I'm apologizing. I can't even be righteously irritated, because they're *trying* to be nice. But really, having your heartfelt apology defanged is even more humiliating than the apology itself. No one is obligated to accept an apology, but undermining it is unintentionally contemptuous.

"I'm sorry if you feel offended," is palming off the responsibility entirely on the other person (and makes you sound like an unrepentant jackass).

I'm not sure I totally agree with that. I can be sorry something I say or do is something someone else finds inappropriate, while still believing I'm not wrong to say or do it. For example, I can empathize with pacifist even if I fight for my country. A doctor can say and mean *I'm sorry I had to choose which patient had the better chance, and your loved one died as a result.* I can acknowledge someone's view that something I say is immaterial to the topic, while still believing that it is in fact relevant. In short, *I'm sorry does not always mean I'm penitent,* nor do I agree that it should, because words can have nuanced meanings which it's reasonable to expect to be inferred from context. I don't accept that saying *I'm sorry you feel X* or *I'm sorry you disagree* is always putting it on the other party, though I agree that it *can* function as a false-apology.

I'm sorry I didn't read the whole comments thread before posting. I'm also sorry that I'm a born smarty-pants...even when the advice is entirely sage.

speakertoanimals says:

APRIL 15, 2013 AT 11:42 PM

My least favorite "apology" : "I'm sorry what I did hurt you" with the complete omission of being sorry for actually doing it! Infuriates me.....

Gulliver says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:03 AM

@ Kenneth B

2) Persona A is driving a car on a busy city road. They are paying full attention to the road and their surroundings. A pedestrian is standing on the curb. Without warning, the pedestrian steps out into the road and person A's car hits the pedestrian, injuring or killing them.

In this case there is neither culpability nor *anything* for which to apologize. The actions leading to injury or death were entirely that of the pedestrian. If anyone is owed an apology in that circumstance, it's the driver, any passengers and perhaps other drivers and pedestrians who were placed in mortal jeopardy by the carelessness of pedestrian. In other words, this analogy is nothing at all like being offended by a word unless the circumstances of offense were something like the offended person barged into someone else's bathroom stall and overheard them say something to another person on their cellphone.

@ speakertoanimals

My least favorite "apology" : "I'm sorry what I did hurt you" with the complete omission of being sorry for actually doing it! Infuriates me.....

For me it would depend on whether the apologist was sorry what they did caused me harm or whether the apologist is sorry I was the sort of person who would be harmed by it. If someone is sorry that something they did, and for which they are not sorry, had the effect of hurting someone, that's just empathy. If what they're sorry about is that the someone they hurt was hurtable, that's sociopathic. Big difference.

MWT says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:43 AM

I think that there are two kinds of "I'm sorry" being discussed here. The "I'm sorry that you're distressed [by the thing that I said]" is more like an "I'm sorry for your loss." Sympathy for the other's feelings but not an acknowledgement of having caused the distress, and therefore not an apology.

Richard says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:57 AM

Jenny: Again, the cause of your transgression (rudeness vs. carelessness) is entirely secondary, and bordering on the defensive. When people talk of the passive voice 'avoiding agency', it's not meant in toto. It isn't all-or-nothing. It's about addressing something directly, versus dancing around the issue. "I hurt you, I'm sorry" versus, "I understand you're hurt by my actions, that's regrettable."

Look at your second passive: *I know it will take a lot of work for these wrongs to be completely addressed.* That sentence, by itself, completely manages to avoid acknowledging *who* should have to address the problem. It takes an entire additional sentence, *I intend to spend the time it will take...* and by that point, it sounds pretty diluted. The longer the passive voice takes to get to the point, the weaker the apology sounds.

Bruce Diamond says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:58 AM

Culpable or not, what does it cost you to just say, "I'm sorry"? Nothing. It costs you NOTHING.

Jenny says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 1:11 AM

@Richard, okay, I don't agree with you, but then we probably won't ever have to apologize to each other, so that's fine. Truthfully, when I do have to make an apology, I am not usually thinking about grammatical choices anyway. I tend to focus more on being abject.

Gulliver says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 1:22 AM

@ Bruce Diamond

If you're insincere, it costs you your integrity. Words are only cheap when you don't mean them.

The Werewolf says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 1:38 AM

This is where I say something I will probably have to either apologise for, or at the very least, look like an ass.. but...

You've kind of made something simple, very complicated. I get why – and I agree with pretty much all your points – but by the time I got about 2/3s through, I found myself thinking 'wow – I think I'll just not apologise for anything – it's just so much damn work.'

And it isn't. In the end, it's just doing the right thing. As always.

The short version? "Be responsible for your actions. Be considerate of how those actions affect others. Be contrite when you harm others, even if accidentally. Be respectful of others, because then they'll respect you back."

Bruce Diamond says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 1:42 AM

@Gulliver: Well, of COURSE they should be sincere. You don't have to be culpable to be sincere.

mythago says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 2:00 AM

@Kenneth B, the reason I keep coming back to this is that I think it illustrates, as Other Bill suggested, that you've reached a conclusion with perhaps less actual reasoning than you would like to think – hence 'show your work'. And I believe it illustrates one of the problems Scalzi raised: we hate apologizing because it's humiliating and it's no fun to say "I hurt somebody else", particularly when we didn't mean to.

So the steps in your "I'm sorry you were offended by me" argument are:

- 1) People are, or should be, in control of their reactions and can choose those reactions.
- 2) When I say something hurtful, the injury I cause another person is their anger.
- 3) It is in the other person's power to choose to not be angry.
- 4) Therefore, if my words injure another person, the injury is their fault, because they chose to be angry.

Nowhere do you explain why this argument suddenly changes or becomes invalid "if and only if we either intended offense or knew that it was possible that our words/ actions might cause offense". The logic is still the same, regardless of whether my speech at #2 intended offense or whether I had the slightest idea that my words would cause offense. Yet you continue to repeat – again, without showing your work – that if somebody was malicious or negligent in their speech, *that's different* and an apology is appropriate.

When you make an internally inconsistent argument and cannot or will not explain the inconsistencies, it does not come across as "my beliefs are based on irrefutable, sound logic". It comes across as "I want to reach a particular conclusion, but I want to convince myself that I arrived at it through logic rather than working my way backwards."

Gulliver says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 2:23 AM

An insincere apology is worse than no apology at all; not only is it obvious that you're not sorry for the original act, but the fake apology suggests that you think people are stupid enough to believe a fake apology. Congratulations, you've just made yourself look like an even bigger assbag.

John, I would be interested in your thoughts on using a transparently insincere apology as a direct insult. For example: someone who happens to be gay comes out of the closet, a homophobe tells him his open homosexuality offends him, and the outed person replies to the effect of "I'm *so* sorry my existence is a problem for you!" Have you ever yourself used a sarcastic "apology" as an intentionally withering affront? Does it only make *you* look like the assbag if you try to hide the insincerity?

@ The Werewolf

This is where I say something I will probably have to either apologise for, or at the very least, look like an asshat.. but...

Given that the entirely reasonable comment following that preface rather clearly neither merited an apology nor made you look like an asshat, the preface itself makes it sound as if you are assuming that your audience will be offended regardless, which is sort of passive-aggressively insulting. It's some next-level irony that, while your comment wasn't realistically even conceivably offensive, your caveat probably was.

Unless I totally misread the meaning of the preface, in which case, my mistake. But it's hard to see how it could be taken any other way than...*I know all you wilting lilies will be offended by any contrarian opinion, but it's got to be said anyway so I'll just be over here nobly sacrificing myself to you philistines.*

Be contrite when you harm others, even if accidentally.

If it's *your* accident, certainly. If it's theirs, they should watch where they're going. If the fault lies with someone or something else (force of nature, say), then contrition would be non sequitur, but a *I'm sorry that happened to you* would make sense as a demonstration of empathy and compassion.

@ Bruce Diamond

No, but you do need to be at least partly responsible to be sincerely sorry for the consequences of your own actions, even if you stand by them as the right decision.

O 3 says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 4:05 AM

Thanks to Kenneth B. for a well-thought out and interesting perspective, and persevering in face of some rather contemptuous responses and arguments by false analogy. The dog-whistles of "stepping on feet" and "intent not being magical" are curiously shopworn for such recent

creations; the posts they stem from were refreshing new critiques of specific phenomena, and now already they've become lazy, overbroad cliches, Perhaps the Internet meme-cycle shortens the life-span of useful metaphor.

Anyway, I wonder how universal this post is. Maybe the reason that we now sneer at quotations from Marcus Aurelius is that the parameters of apology, culpability, and contrition are far more culture-bound than we give them credit for. But even if quotations from Scalzi are to supplant Aurelius as a better fit for these modern times, surely there's still more room for nuance and improvement in the face of our multivariate and heterogeneous cultural rhizome.

For example, in some contexts, declarations of apology and "being sorry" need not or cannot be sincere, and yet *cannot* be simply done without as our gracious host suggests in his post; they are phatic expressions[+], lubricant for social situations. Refusing to utter an apology one is not 100% invested out of some principle of being fully authentic can cause an even greater offence and attach more social stigma to an already unpleasant interaction, rendering it intractable. And so, perhaps my cultural background leads me to pepper my conversations with more perfunctory apologies followed by a conjunction and some sort of unpleasant negativity than an American might like; I don't think that means that Slavs are somehow generally incapable of genuine regret, only that we reserve it for special occasions. "I'm sorry, but for such and such reasons what you said is bogus" is to my ear, in fact, a completely well-formed apology — it signals that I am about to disagree with something, thus likely to give (more) offence, and regret it coming to such a pass because I'd rather we agreed. Without that allegedly useless apology, I would sound like I am correcting a social inferior and want to be done with it; with it, I mark the exchange as being between equals and wishing it continues. The local NA standard, however, seems to be that it is better to bite one's tongue and compromise because everyone is entitled to their own opinion and a correction might hurt somebody's feelings; and if the feelings are hurt, one better hurry to apologize, make amends, and yield, regardless of intent or truth. Now this post tries (as, to be fair, I have seen many others do before) to also insist our contrition better be full and genuine, without apologetics (in their original definition), nor asking that the blame be more fairly apportioned — or else we might as well not even bother, our two moral choices being these extremes of enlightenment and villainy. And yet somehow it's Kenneth B who's accused of expecting saintliness from common people?

Sure, I try to take these vagaries of American apology into account in my rhetoric and pragmatic praxis, but I certainly don't concede it is some deeper, more significant take on saying/being/feeling sorry than my native one. I remain skeptical. I have not been convinced of the social utility of this style of apology in every context.

Likewise, the idea that relative social standing marked by class or age or rank play no role in determining who apologizes to whom and using what words is a fairly new one, privileging individualistic over communitarian concerns. Much as my Old World peasant grandmas may offend me with their various prejudices and critical advice, I will be the one apologizing to them every time I fail to politely conceal my hurt and disagreement. I'm the ill-fitting grandson, so I suck it up. I've been corrupted by the West, though, so I don't extend quite as much courtesy to other elderly people. Many would.

[+] for another example of phatic lubricant unrelated to apology: when someone English asks me "How are you?" or "How do you do?", I have to stifle my natural urge to give a full and truthful response focussed on the negative (otherwise I might be perceived to be bragging) — because I've learned that English speakers don't actually *mean* it when they say it, and if they do they prefer to hear an optimistic response; the first few times one encounters the blank stare at that kind of phatic question being answered in too much detail a Slav might think English-speakers are rude, shallow, and insincere, but I now realize they simply don't mean their speech-act as a question regarding my welfare.

Nostromo says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 4:23 AM

I'm sorry you feel this way John ;-p

Society, especially the corporate world, is full of egomaniacs, narcissists & "corporate psychopaths" these days unfortunately. They pull the political strings & run the world which is fast becoming a plutocratic, neo-fascist regime in our western world anyway. Having said that, getting an admission of guilt/wrong, much less a *real* apology, from most people these days is pie-in-the-sky. The old adage that doing the right thing for it's own sake or reward is largely lost on people, certainly in the corporate world.

So what does this tell us about ourselves as a society & species? Not entirely sure, but I doubt any other species in the animal kingdom use apologies or feel sorrow / guilt / contrition on any level, so we don't have any higher-order sentient species to compare to as yet, terrestrial or alien. What I do know is that love & forgiveness are perhaps inextricably intertwined & "love is always having to say you're sorry" is probably the more correct form of the old perversion of that saying.

So, as a species, if we are going to claim we love each other, in any way, shape or form, we had better be willing to back that up with many, many, apologies & acts of contrition / restitution along the way. Certainly where intimate relationships are concerned – happy wife happy life I say! :)

Nostromo says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 4:34 AM

@Kenneth B

"Yes, I believe that the blame for taking offense ultimately and always resides with the person taking offense. People are always free to not take offense, though they don't often choose to exercise that freedom. If I did not intend to cause offense and could not reasonably have known that my words or actions would cause offense, then I am not culpable for the offense. If, however I intended to cause offense, or knew that my words or action had the possibility of causing offense, then I am culpable for the offense, and I will give a sincere apology and own my actions."

But what if I try & give offense to someone & they are simply not getting offended / taking the bait? Do I then have the right to be offended myself & take issue with that person...? ;)

Taking offense/being offended is usually far simpler & more obvious than most philosophy I would suggest. Tales of Buddha's teachings are all fine & well...if you subscribe to the teachings of Buddhism. But don't be surprised if people who do not subscribe are offended when you wave them in their faces. I, for one, am outraged at the general levels of overblown offense/outrage in the media today, for things that are completely benign, or not intended as such in the first place – world gone mad I say! Here endeth the lesson.

Gulliver says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 5:17 AM

Teenage child of a devout Buddhist: "Mom, you are *so* underreacting!"

Also, apologizing, in the modern non-classical sense, isn't about accepting culpability, it's about taking responsibility. Saying your sorry may or may not serve as an apology depending on the context and manner it's said. I will note that if someone expresses angst over the consequences of a choice I'm not sorry I've made (usually an omission to provide them with free help, or their dissatisfaction with how I deal with them), I do usually say *you have my condolences* instead of *I'm sorry*...where the degree of sarcasm vs. sincerity varies from situation to situation. Also, there are times when I choose to simply apologize on behalf of the whole rest of the human race for all of us failing someone because we should never have let it come to that.

RN Williams says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 6:59 AM

Considering the background to this post ie Hugh Howey [The rest of this comment deleted because this (erroneous, see my comment below) assumption on the part of Mr. Williams is used as a springboard to try to launch a discussion subject that is not on point to the entry and thus is likely to derail the thread — JS]

PrivateIron says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:09 AM

I think a lot of the confusion here comes from conflating 1) I did something wrong with 2) I caused someone injury. If I make a joke about walrus eating people and I then find out someone in my audience was savaged by a walrus, I have caused someone injury, but arguably I have not done anything wrong. I can honestly apologize for having unwittingly caused an injury without feeling like I am "wrong." If you want to argue that I was "wrong," well, you must have trouble even leaving the house in the morning. If you want to argue that I am not apologizing, but doing something else, then I think we are getting into semantics here. It is perfectly possible to apologize sincerely for things where you were not "wrong." It is also perfectly cromulent to apologize "insincerely" for socially responsible reasons: to end conflict over a mostly pointless issue, etc.

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:42 AM

RN Williams:

In fact I had been planning this piece for a while, so Hughes recent events, while timely, were not the genesis.

More generally, in the future, try not to derail comment threads into another subject entirely. It's not nice.

Zoe Ellen Brain says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:51 AM

Restitution is part of a good apology. Not all crimes can be ameliorated, but some can. Unless whatever restitution that can be made has been at least attempted, the apology is insincere.

Yes, this sometimes will mean requesting a favour of the person you've wronged.

"I screwed up. I hurt you. I'm sorry. I have to ask a favour – please tell me any way I can lessen the hurt I'm responsible for."

Eric Picholle says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:57 AM

Thank you John for a very interesting view into the art of North-American apology writing. (no irony intended here ; while the moral points are, if not universal, at least also relevant in European cultures, the literary part strikes me as quite American). On the moral and philosophical aspects, I mostly agree both with you and with Kenneth B., so no need to elaborate.

What intrigues me as a bystander is the (apparent ?) double standard. While some hurt feelings, some angers, "given" or "taken", call for quite a lot of introspection from the person who caused them, even unwillingly, other apparently don't. For example, feeling hurt by a "slur" one considers as potentially sexist, or racist, etc., seems to entitle the self-defined victim to hurt back, quite deliberately, its offender, without much consideration for his own feelings about being pointed out as a racist, etc., even if he's not, or doesn't consider himself to be. Where's the symmetry ?

John Scalzi says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:04 AM

Eric Picholle:

Why should there be symmetry? An apology is about what you do, not what is done to you. It's possible in an argument, etc, both parties wrong each other. But I don't see an apology being a quid-pro-quo thing; you don't give one with an expectation of getting one in return.

isabelcooper says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:04 AM

Not being a particularly public figure, I've encountered basically four situations re: apologies.

1) I actually am sorry, in which case I generally apologize copiously and sincerely. (And I do not get the over-analysis of exact percent of blame. You made a 'your mom' joke to someone whose mom just died, but you didn't know that, but you couldn't be expected to know that, but...for fuck's sake, this isn't a jury trial. Say "Oh, God, I'm so sorry," and everyone can get on with their lives.)

2) I'm not really sorry, but the person I'm talking to is close to me, such that both their

emotions and honesty are important. At that point, I either try and use a phrase like “I wish things could be different,” or I figure we both hear “I’m sorry” as the above, and don’t feel any need to clarify it. Sometimes I also try and find something I am sorry about, even if it’s not the main point of our issues, and apologize for that. “I should have called and let you know ahead of time that I was going to quit,” or whatever.

3) I’m not really sorry, but the person I’m talking to is an employer / friend’s boyfriend / etc. At that point I lie, because fuck it, nobody here is a telepath.

4) I’m not really sorry and there’s no authority or social weirdness to worry about. Obvious.

isabelcooper says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:06 AM

Also, on afterthought, 5) The Big City Transit Apology, which is basically code for “I need to get through this crowd, and if you don’t move in the next five seconds, you will get a shoulder to the throat.”

“Sorry, sorry, ‘scuse me, SORRY, EXCUSE ME” and so forth.

Tony Noland (@TonyNoland) says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:32 AM

Well said. The ability to acknowledge that you did wrong is a huge step in becoming a better person.

David says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:35 AM

@O 3 Your entire comment boils down to “different cultures have different standards for offense given and apologies required.” You do win a prize for having swallowed the largest thesaurus, though.

BW says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 9:28 AM

Jenny, maybe more direct and less abject would align with John’s suggestions. In your first passive construction, a more direct and more “owning” apology would start with “I damaged your reputation” instead of tucking yourself unobtrusively farther back in the statement. It’s hard to start by putting yourself front and center saying “I did this bad thing,” and I think that’s why people tend to avoid it. It’s hard and it’s uncomfortable—and it’s also honest and forthright and leaves you nakedly accountable (which is probably why it’s so tempting to avoid expressing it that way). That’s one of the important lessons I got from what John wrote. Do the hard thing and it will be good for you and for the person you’re apologizing to. Starting with “Your reputation was clearly damaged” makes “reputation” the subject of the sentence, where the main focus goes. You might feel that’s where the focus should be, since the reputation was what was damaged. But it seem to me that in an apology, the focus should be on you (or me or whoever), the person apologizing and taking responsibility. I can’t speak for others, but someone saying, “I damaged your reputation” would have far more positive impact than the most abject stance. Definitions of “abject” tend to be about being in a low position, servile, or degraded. Ideally, in an apology, you step up, take a strong position, and say “I did this, I damaged you, I’m sorry, and this is what I plan to do to make amends.” The

focus is on me and my actions—past, present, and future—not on what was damaged or what the amends will be, with me in the background of the sentences, taking responsibility but from behind, as it were.

htom says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 10:33 AM

Only by having the strength to accept that you've done wrong can you securely lower yourself to offer an abject apology. Take a knee, and give yourself to the wounded one for judgement.

These mealy-mouthed approximations are delivered by weak people in defiant insecurity.

mythago says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 10:43 AM

@Eric Picholle: so if I behave badly toward someone such that an apology from me is appropriate, and that someone actually *points out* that I have behaved badly, 'symmetry' demands that *they* now owe *me* an apology for making me feel bad about myself? I think if you take that example outside of the you-called-me-a-racist setting its absurdity becomes apparent.

(Of course, I would hope we all agree that having been wronged or being owed an apology does not mean "yay, I get to be a complete jackwagon to the other person and pile on about anything I please and they're not allowed to object in any way." But I don't see "hey, that joke you just told was SUPER racist" as quite falling into that category.)

@PrivateIron, while I'd agree with you, the problem seems to be in the belief that if I hurt someone without (in my opinion) having done something wrong, my apology must be structured in such a way so as to clearly announce my innocence. i.e., "I am sorry that you were hurt by what I said" vs. "I am sorry that I hurt you."

@O 3, the trope of the Weary Philosopher is itself rather shopworn, and when you throw in misunderstandings of terms like 'dogwhistle'* and nigh-parodic complaining about how the modern age has passed by the wisdom of Aurelius, the effect you get is not *gravitas* but pretension.

htom says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 11:08 AM

mythago — thank you. You've clarified something in my mind. I was wrong in saying *Only by having the strength to accept that you've done wrong can you securely lower yourself to offer an abject apology. Take a knee, and give yourself to the wounded one for judgement.*

It is not accepting that you've done wrong. It is accepting that the other is hurt, even if you did not do a wrong.

Rephrasing:

Only by having the strength to accept that the other is hurt, whether you've done wrong or not, can you securely lower yourself to offer an abject apology. Take a knee, and give yourself to the wounded one for judgement.

These mealy-mouthed approximations are delivered by weak people in defiant insecurity.

Eric Picholle says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 11:53 AM

@Mythago : Of course not. I think everybody here agrees that having actually “behaved badly” call for a sincere apology as soon as one realizes it. I certainly don’t see an apology as, as John puts it, a *quid pro quo* ; if an apology is in order, I fully agree with him that’s it’s intrinsically one-way, at least for the persone who feels he should apologize ; and if it’s not in order — well, it’s not, whatever other people may expect or demand.

My point was about “hurt feelings”, and 1/ the fact that having someone consider that I behaved badly isn’t necessarily the same thing as having actually done so, as Kenneth B. already discussed at lenght; and 2/ the fact that having this person calling me a sexist, or a racist, or a generally a wrongdoer is also likely to hurt *my* feelings.

But it has been repeatedly suggested that the sole existence of hurt feelings might be sufficient to justify an apology ; so I guess my question is : if so, why not both ways ?

(I guess this isn’t “*taking the example outside the you-called-me-a-racist setting*” ... But my understanding that, precisely, this tends to become a problem mostly when political correctness is involved — about race and even more, lately, about gender).

@David : It is indeed quite obvious that *different cultures have different standards for offense given and apologies required*. It only becomes problematic when one culture tries to impose its own latest standards of political correctness on the rest of the civilized world, or in inter-cultural contexts, such as a WorldCon.

BW says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:04 PM

Eric Picholle, maybe it will go both ways, maybe not. That’s not something the apologizer can or should control or try to control. If you are the apologizer, your responsibility to the other person *and yourself* (duty to self is central to John’s post) is to make the best apology you can and have no expectations about the other person’s response. You are apologizing because it’s the right thing to do, in accord with your personal values. If the other person feels moved to apologize for hurting you, in accord with his/her own personal values, then great But that part isn’t necessary for your own apology to be a good apology and to be in accord with your values. That part is about the other person and is between that person and his/her conscience.

Sarah M. says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:47 PM

@Zoe: While I agree that restitution should be a part of apology, I disagree that it’s a good idea to ask anyone a favor when you have already intruded on their good graces. Just as I don’t think it’s a good idea to request forgiveness as part of the apology.

My personal reaction when presented with a request such as yours is a stone cold, “You figure it out.” If I am already using up mental energy dealing with the wound you’ve inflicted, I’m not going to devote any more to figuring out an appropriate way for you to relieve your guilt. If you are truly sorry for what you did, figure out what you might do to improve the situation yourself. Don’t ask me for help.

Mapleson says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:56 PM

I agree with all the principles that John stated, but I'm not so sure about the example with Joe and the cancer joke. It sounds like you are sorry about Joe's reaction, not the actual telling of the joke. There is no mention of either that it shouldn't have been done or won't be done again in the future, only that you want to make it up to Joe for telling the joke in front of him.

htom says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 12:58 PM

This is getting into "the five languages of apology". People tend to not accept apologies, or explicitly reject them, in languages they don't use. If you don't know the languages the person you're apologizing to, your apology may be rejected because of what you've included ... or excluded.

Expressing Regret: "I am sorry." "I feel badly that my behavior has hurt you so deeply." This language identifies with the emotions of the offended party.

Accepting Responsibility: "I was wrong." Name your mistake and accept fault. "I should not have done that. There's no excuse. What I did was wrong."

Making Restitution: "What could I do to make this right? How can I make amends to you? How could I restore your confidence in me?"

Genuine Repentance: "I'll try not to do that again." Repentance doesn't make rash promises, such as "I promise I'll never do it again if you'll forgive me." However, repentance does express the desire to change one's behavior. "I don't want this to continue happening. Help me think of ways I can change my behavior."

Requesting Forgiveness: "Will you please forgive me?" This language expresses humility. "I realize I can't restore this relationship alone. It will require mercy on your part, but my sincere desire is that you will forgive me and we can continue our relationship."

— The Fastest Road to Forgiveness

It's not always easy, this communication thing.

Mythago says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 1:03 PM

@Eric Picholle: I understand what you're saying, but it's not a double standard. Inadvertently hurting someone, even if one is well-intentioned, is not the same as upsetting someone by drawing attention to the fact that they have hurt someone else.

Turn it around for a minute. We agree, I think, that if you step on my foot on purpose that you should apologize, right? But what if you step on my foot because you are trying to stop me from stealing your wallet? If I said "but you agreed hurting people on purpose is wrong, DOUBLE STANDARD" I think you would point out I was oversimplifying and wrong.

The issue, I think, is that you are reading this as "always apologize even if you had no choice but to hurt someone or the hurt is a natural consequence of their behavior or if you behaved correctly in all respects." Really, it is "apologize for hurting people even if you did so inadvertently; malice or carelessness are not required."

baughblog says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 2:50 PM

Long ago I formed a rule of thumb to the effect that anyone objecting to requests (or requirements) for courtesy and mutual good behavior as “political correctness” was going to turn out to be making excuses for rudeness, intolerance, and injustice. The rule remains good.

Laura says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 4:32 PM

May I ask a question somewhat related to this? I offended a patron in the library I work in today over something I said (or rather omitted), and while I was sorry that they had the reaction they had, my motivation for what I said is not something I feel a great deal of remorse over and I am concerned that this is the wrong reaction to have. I was wondering if you might offer advice or a suggestion for when it occurs again.

My job at the library is at the circulation desk, and as you might imagine is largely customer service based. In any customer service profession there’s always an exchange of small talk that precedes the business part and might consist of something along the lines of “Hello, can I help you?” Some people say, “Hello, how are you?” but this particular version is a pet peeve of mine because I think it’s insincere. When I get asked this at a sales desk, I know that the person asking is only fulfilling the demands of courtesy and is not really asking because they genuinely want to know, and if I respond “Fine, how are you?” in return (even if I’m not really fine) I know that their response of “Fine,” may or may not be factually true either. I’m also a really introverted person in real life, and I’m sensitive to people asking me personal questions or being too familiar in their behavior with me.

This became an issue today when the person approached the desk. They said, “Hello,” so I responded in turn, “Hello, can I help you?” The person then asked me, “How are you?” and left it at that. To me, this indicated that they were either genuinely asking me how I was or were doing it to passive aggressively ‘correct’ my greeting. My defenses flared either way, and I repeated, “May I help you?” which naturally pissed them off and it all went downhill from there. I know that my verbal response was the wrong one to make, but should I feel bad about feeling the way I do about this particular question? Is there something else I can say to people who ask this to acknowledge their question without having to answer it and avoid offending them at the same time?

BW says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 5:24 PM

Laura, how about a response such as “I’m good [or fine or some other puff word]. What can I do for you today?”

I wouldn’t have thought the person was either genuinely asking or passive-aggressively correcting. I’d have thought the person was primed for “How are you?” and was simply completing a preliminary social exchange.

I like your reason for asking “Can I help you?” rather than “How are you?” and as I like words to have meaning, it grates on me that we mostly use the phrase without meaning it. But it is a social convention now, and since you understand that and have probably observed that people

say it all the time without meaning anything by it, can you reframe the person's response as just that: a meaningless social formality that wasn't about you and but about participating in a ritual preliminary exchange? Similarly, when you say, "Fine," what you're really saying is "I hear you and acknowledge you." That fulfills the unspoken requirement of the exchange.

Whether you're actually fine or not doesn't matter. When you shake hands with someone, you're almost certainly not really intending to let them know that you have no weapon (as the practice is popular supposed to have originated). Shaking hands is a ritual social exchange in which two people acknowledge each other and can then move on to whatever comes next. It's a gesture that once had meaning; now it's just a formality. These days, we don't shake hands in situations like yours as often as was once common, but people still have the expectation of an acknowledgment exchange, however meaningless and ritualized the words we tend to use.

I wouldn't worry too much about remorse. Just maybe come up with a couple of alternatives you can use more or less automatically when such occasions arise.

A.Beth says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 6:10 PM

When I get asked how I'm doing, I usually say, "I'm vertical." (Another response could be, "Eh, it's a day. Can I help you with something?") But I do have a tendency to take the "how are you?" literally — and be at least somewhat sincere if I ask it.

Gulliver says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 6:18 PM

@ Laura

Echoing what BW said, words sometimes have non-literal meanings. When I say *bless you*, I'm not literally imprecating supernatural forces; I'm deploying it as a shorthand for *I'd care if you lived or died either because your someone I like or even simply a fellow human being*. The shorthand is simply more expedient. And since words carry no inherent meaning beyond what the interlocutors understand them to mean, I don't see this as insincere.

However, I have to ask, how do you know the person wasn't simply annoyed that her or his sincere attempt to demonstrate concern for a fellow human as a human being before asking something of you as a worker was blatantly ignored? This is the problem with mind-reading. We know what *we* think something means, but not everyone subscribes to the same etiquette conventions. It's equally possible that they were either, as BW suggested, trying to complete a conditioned exchange, or that they were actively trying to inject a modicum of cordiality into a routine they saw as dehumanizing.

As fascinating as it is to analyze such behavior, I do think it's possible to over-think such exchanges in the moment. My rule of thumb in personal interactions is to simply take people at face value. I'll reply truthfully, but not in depth unless it's someone I really know. If I'm not fine, I won't pretend I am. But in professional client/server interactions such as the one you recounted, I'd just say "I'm fine, thank you, how can I help you," merrily lying if that's what it is. I regard that as justifiable dishonesty because the truth could unjustly be used against me as

punishment, client/server relationships almost always operating on a power-imbalance. The master who blithely expects total honesty from a servant, especially a servant they don't personally know, is a fool.

Beyond all that, I take pride in my work, as I suspect you do to, and if a white lie is what a client requires to lubricate the social gears so I can do my job, why should I sabotage both my opportunity to do good work and my job security simply to disabuse other people of their willful naïveté?

I get the whole "pet peeve" thing, but sometimes the best thing for your blood pressure is to simply let stupid slide.

Jack Lint says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 6:34 PM

The proper response to "How are you?" was once just "How are you?" Think of it as a newer version of "How do you do?" (And "How do you do?" is just a newer version of "How do you?") Depending on the age and familiarity of the person asking, they probably don't want a response detailing your state, but just expect you to respond in kind.

htom says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 6:57 PM

Sometimes it's just confusion, the client (or clerk, or both) not paying much attention at all, and each thinks he's in a different stage of the "How are you? — Fine, and you? — Fine" verbal handshake process, and it takes a bump to sync up. Reader approaches someone else also reading. (Reading while walking, I'm guilty.)

How are you?

I'm fine, how are you?

Fine, how are you?

Fine, how ... OK.

Both looked up from their books, startled.

Other Bill says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:01 PM

Laura – FWIW (I know that in any kind of customer service the general idea is that you satisfy the customer BUT) It seems to me your customer ignored you as a person, as well as your input for the conversation, and proceeded in whatever direction they liked. Which happened to be entirely unrelated to the place of business. I'm going to rule that rude and inappropriate and you absolve of any feeling of responsibility in the negative outcome.

Your obligation is to provide quality service in relation to the procurement of books. It sounds like you already generally take precautions to mitigate any uncomfortable moments certain social exchanges generate for you. You have no obligation beyond that to provide customer

service by engaging in forced conversation with chatty, self involved customers. Least of the reasons being it's a place of business and at a minimum you have other responsibilities.

Besides, a self involved person who refuses to take conversational cues from someone they're about to ask for service is pretty much going to be unsatisfied with anything outside of their exact dictates for the conversation. As a person that also engages in regular interaction with customers, I think of these customers as magnetized sea mines and I'm just trying to get my ship into the harbor for the day, man.

Eric Picholle says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:03 PM

@Mythago : *Inadvertently hurting someone, even if one is well-intentioned, is not the same as upsetting someone by drawing attention to the fact that they have hurt someone else.*

Granted, of course. But "drawing attention to the fact" isn't the same as "coming back full force against what could have be an honest mistake, or even a misunderstanding," either.

I'm not sure the comparison with stepping on one's foot, or stealing a wallet, stands. These are objective facts, which leave little room to interpretation, so clearly cut rules can apply, including a rather simple appreciation of proportionate response. On the other hand, supposedly racist and sexist behaviours can be quite subjective (or at least, their appreciation can) ; moreover, they are also a lot more likely to trigger emotion- and ideology-driven, thus disproportionate, responses. And I may be mistaken here (that's quite subjective too), but I seem to recall much more echoes of sincere apologies from people having hurt other's feelings by an inadvertantly offensive remark than from those who did the same thing by grossly overreacting to an innocent one.

Bert Wells says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:21 PM

My sense of my own general reluctance to sincere apology is not aversion to humility, but of the reluctance to asymmetrically offer up my own portion of responsibility for a bad situation where I fear the other party will not reciprocate.

I guess what I am saying is that I find genuine and sincere apology easy when I am the one in the wrong, but very difficult when things are complicated.

I am not proud of this fact, but there it is.

Laura says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:47 PM

@BW

I think I'll try your response next time. The reason I thought she was being passive aggressive was because I had clearly stated "Can I help you?", verbally indicating my transition to the business end of the conversation when she dragged it back to the beginning again with "How are you?" and then stopped completely, pointedly waiting for me to respond. It's possible that I'm over-thinking it as Gulliver suggested, but it just made me feel like this was one of those people who are told "Be personal with every person you meet!!!!" and really believed it. I'm

not always sure with those people that telling them "I'm good," will be enough because they might get pissed off if I don't ask the damn question in return, but I realize that I have to at least try and as you said, it could be that she was just expecting the conclusion of a formality. As a side note though, I was fantasizing all the way home about responding to the next person who asked me that question with "I had a raging case of herpes but I'm much better now, thanks so much for asking!" Unfortunately, this would probably cause more problems than solve them. :D

jenfullmoon says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 7:49 PM

Hah, this is how my day has gone. At work, there are two different people (a guy and a girl) who keep shipping us paperwork full of errors. Like, to the point where we're keeping a file on the guy of all the problematic work he's sent us in the last few weeks. My supervisor had to write them "Please actually proofread your work" e-mails. One of them (the woman) is new at her job and wrote back and apologized and is already improving. The guy, on the other hand, has been doing his job for awhile...and while he's nice in person, tends to come off as super arrogant in e-mails. And his response was along the lines of "Well, we just spot check things, mostly we're concerned with something else on here." I also asked him for clarification on one of his various error-prone reports and he just sent it back again with no response, and upon my supervisor asking him, he was all, "no, it's correct." Guess who's getting reported up the chain in the future? Hm, can't imagine.

I like this post. People apparently need it.

Laura says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:28 PM

@ Gulliver

However, I have to ask, how do you know the person wasn't simply annoyed that her or his sincere attempt to demonstrate concern for a fellow human as a human being before asking something of you as a worker was blatantly ignored? This is the problem with mind-reading. We know what we think something means, but not everyone subscribes to the same etiquette conventions. It's equally possible that they were either, as BW suggested, trying to complete a conditioned exchange, or that they were actively trying to inject a modicum of cordiality into a routine they saw as dehumanizing."

I see what you're getting at Gulliver, and I do want to do a good job in what I do, but what you might view as an act that is trying to reduce the 'dehumanizing' aspect of customer service I view as a request for information about my personal affairs (however slight and superficial) that I simply have no desire to share. As I said before, I'm sensitive about this sort of thing. As you suggest, however, I should probably just grit my teeth and endure it, but it just irritates me, this imbalance of power in customer service, and the act of forcing me to put on a happy face and lie is dehumanizing regardless.

Greg says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:30 PM

Laura: *I know that my verbal response was the wrong one to make, but should I feel bad about feeling the way I do about this particular question? Is there something else I can say to people who ask this to acknowledge their question without having to answer it and avoid offending them at the same time?*

You basically have two options: alter how you relate to the question or find a way to answer the question in a way that works for you, which you captured quite nicely with your two questions above.

Should you feel bad? No. But if you want to find a way to relate to the question “How are you?” such that it doesn’t bother you as it does now, then you might have to investigate alternative interpretations as to why they are asking you. You have a specific interpretation right now, as you said, you “*know that the person asking is only fulfilling the demands of courtesy and is not really asking because they genuinely want to know*”. And if that’s your interpretation, then you won’t have a lot of freedom in how it lands on you when someone asks you the question.

I would offer the possibility that they might actually genuinely want to know how you’re doing. I try to make a point to NOT treat people in the service industry as automatons. I try to make a point to engage my waiter or waitress, for example. When approach the table, I might say “rough day?” if they seem frazzled. I might not ever see them again, but that doesn’t mean I have to treat them as machines.

Sure, not everyone who says “how are you?” wants to hear your life story compressed into a sixty minute standup monologue. But most people wouldn’t begrudge you a little authenticity if you said “i’m having a rough day” if that were true for you. If they’re like me, they might even try to empathize a bit with you. “I’m sorry.” then deal with business, and leave with a “Hope the rest of your day is better”.

It might be that the genuineness of their “How are you?” might not actually be the source of your consternation. You also said: “*I’m also a really introverted person in real life, and I’m sensitive to people asking me personal questions or being too familiar*”. I’m on the introverted end of the spectrum. I know someone who is way, way over on the extroverted end of the spectrum. They don’t see anyone as a stranger, really, and will strike up conversations with a person in front of them at the grocery store. They love it when someone asks them “How are you?”

It’s not that you shouldn’t be introverted, but it could be that part of your upset with the question has nothing to do with possible insincerity on the part of the asker, and much more to do with your discomfort with, to use your words, “personal questions” or someone being “too familiar” with you. And the thing with that would be to get they’re not doing anything “wrong” in asking you, they might not actually be “insincere”, but really what’s coming up is it makes you uncomfortable.

If that’s the case, then even if you alter your relationship to the question, even if you “get” that the question is sincere, that won’t make your discomfort go away. So then the thing to do would be look for ways to manage your discomfort, come up with something, at the very least,

that you could say or do, that would help you manage the discomfort. It might be as simple as finding a “canned” reply that acknowledges the possibility that the question is authentic and also allows you to give an authentic reply. And then you commit that response to rote.

Maybe every time someone asks “How are you?” you could honestly consistently answer with “Fine, thanks”, knowing that the word “fine” has a rather wide range.

The thing is, you’d have to find the words that would generally work for you in most situations and just practice, practice, practice, saying them. At some point, it will become a second nature response, and the discomfort of someone asking you a “personal question” or being “too familiar” by asking “how are you?” will dissipate because you will have the experience of managing the question with whatever phrase that would be authentic for you.

Other Bill says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 8:34 PM

Eric Picholle:

Breaking offensive remarks into an “innocent” category is too squishy for my taste. It’s too easy to exclaim, “Oh, I didn’t know” to escape any personal responsibility. Or, as the second part of your question leads to, push the responsibility of offense back onto the person who was first offended.

More than that, I see apologies as part of a learning process. If one accepts no responsibility for “innocent” remarks, one is also indicating no intention of changing the use of those remarks.

In those instances, one has decided the remarks are innocent and so the responsibility lies with everyone else to accept that. Essentially, in that case one is dictating the terms of another’s offense. I think that’s an incredibly difficult position to reasonably defend.

If someone insists on twisting your words into the worst possible interpretation, it’s their right to hear them that way. And, in general it’s probably worth listening to if they choose to explain why they aren’t actually twisting your words. Communication is an engaged process. If you fail to take into account the impact of your words, there isn’t any real interest in communication.

They’ve lived their lives and you’ve lived yours. However, you’re under no obligation to continue to interact with them. If the mutual interaction is so abrasive, accept your part and move on. The onus of an apology is about your failings. And who you choose to continue to interact with has little to do with any responsibility for apologies.

As far as people not being good apologizers when it comes to declaring their offense, well. People who are offended have a right to get upset. In general, losing one’s temper doesn’t help. But, you know. It’s kind of dick move to chastise someone for losing their temper over something you ultimately acknowledge was offensive.

Greg says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 9:22 PM

Bill: one has decided the remarks are innocent and so the responsibility lies with everyone else to accept

that

Someone's remarks could be innocent, they could still cause upset, and the person could apologize for causing upset. They could even apologize still holding that their intent was innocent.

Picholle: the fact that having this person calling me a sexist, or a racist, or a generally a wrongdoer is also likely to hurt my feelings.

Where's the symmetry ?

An apology is on some level an act of generosity. Alice could innocently say something that offended Bob. Bob may or may not toss a fit and call Alice all manner of names. Alice could realize that her original statement offended Bob, and apologize for the offense, hurt, etc that she unintentionally caused.

If Alice wants *symmetry*, then Alice is in fact, looking for quid pro quo as Scalzi pointed out. If Alice won't apologize for hurting Bob's feelings without an expectation that Bob apologize for hurting hers, then it's not a real apology because it has no generosity, it's keeping count.

If you're keeping count, then you could look at Alice hurting Bob's feelings and Bob hurting Alice's feelings in response, and decide, the math works out, they're even, all's done.

An apology is to take responsibility for your actions regardless of any response they generated. It is to acknowledge that your words had an effect, a cost, that you did not intend, or at the very least, that you intended at the time, but looking back, you wish you could undo. And you're willing to undo this even if no one else un-does their responses, even if no one apologizes for the harm they caused you in response.

An apology is, ultimately, an act of generosity specifically because it rises above keeping count, it rises above an eye for an eye.

Other Bill says:

APRIL 16, 2013 AT 9:34 PM

Greg –

“Someone's remarks could be innocent, they could still cause upset, and the person could apologize for causing upset. They could even apologize still holding that their intent was innocent.”

I agree. And in certain cases, world views are never going to match up. But, I allow for that by noting that the person does not have to continue the association. Or, in starker circumstances, to subject themselves to a person unfairly characterizing their statements. And, that's totally a real thing that people do. Take words out of context, or twist words.

But, in the scope of a reference to the era of political correctness and not receiving a sufficient apology when one's unfairly outmoded down home innocent expressions cause offense, well. My skeptical meter skews the conversation a different way. And even then, apologize for the

offense while maintaining the belief it was a misunderstanding. But, discontinue the association. Often, the choice is made to insist on continuing the engagement, but that the initially offended party be made to correct their world view. Which is problematic.

Because, we're talking about unintentional offense here. If someone makes you aware something you say means something else to them, apologize and choose to refrain saying that to them, or discontinue the association if it is too intrinsic to your understanding of yourself to be able to remove from your lexicon of phraseology, right?

Gulliver says:

APRIL 17, 2013 AT 1:03 AM

@ Laura

I see what you're getting at Gulliver, and I do want to do a good job in what I do, but what you might view as an act that is trying to reduce the 'dehumanizing' aspect of customer service I view as a request for information about my personal affairs (however slight and superficial) that I simply have no desire to share.

Not I, the person who was asking how you are *may* have intended it that way. I meant it only as an alternative interpretation of their possible motives to demonstrate that there was no way of really knowing. That said, I fully understand your reluctance to exchange how you're doing with a near-total stranger. That's why I recommend offering a canned response, irrespective of truth, if it's a situation where honesty is bad for business. In situations outside a client/server interaction, I personally would have no problem telling someone it was none of their business, were I so inclined.

As you suggest, however, I should probably just grit my teeth and endure it, but it just irritates me, this imbalance of power in customer service, and the act of forcing me to put on a happy face and lie is dehumanizing regardless.

Entirely agree. That's why, if I'm customer who wants to treat someone as a person, not an automaton, I do it by simply being polite, appreciative and considerate, rather than asking even vague personal questions. On the flip side, when a service rep asks me how I'm doing, I reply with a simple okay, for values of okay that equal not experiencing a crisis, and make sure to ask them how *they* are doing (but only if they ask me first), so that they're either appreciate of the reciprocity, if they really meant it, or have to deal with the same question, if they were just going through the motions. If I'm experiencing a crisis, I'm going to be dealing with that crisis, and if that crisis concerns the organization that rep is repping, my reply will be to present that crisis. Okay, in that context, does not equal fine.

Sure there are times I'd like to tell people off for being obtuse. But if I'm not going to do it, or I can't do it, then I'm left with the choice to either steam or move on. I choose to move on so that my state of mind isn't dictated by their behavior. This is not for everyone, nor is it for me in situations where the person is being actively hostile, creepy or otherwise taking advantage of my inability to walk away. But for mere stupidity, I find the only solution with an acceptable outcome is to ignore it.

In my ideal world, it wouldn't be socially acceptable for someone with the upper-hand to use honesty against you, and society wouldn't help them do it. I don't live in that world so I make do with the one I do live in, while being careful to never use someone's honesty against them and promulgating my view that doing so is wrong. If there is anything other recourse, I'm open to suggestions, but that's all I got.

Adrian Smith says:

APRIL 17, 2013 AT 3:35 AM

I remember seeing a distinction somewhere between "I'm sorry I offended you (and perhaps only you)" and "I'm sorry what I said was offensive (to some larger group, not just you)". OTOH, it loses the active voice in all its power and glory, so it's probably a bit swings-and-roundabouts in the end.

mythago says:

APRIL 17, 2013 AT 4:39 PM

These are objective facts, which leave little room to interpretation, so clearly cut rules can apply, including a rather simple appreciation of proportionate response.

On the contrary, like most disagreements, this can be quite subjective. Perhaps, in my view, I didn't step on you that hard and anyway I moved as soon as you squawked, so you're making a federal case out of a tiny mistake. Perhaps, in your view, I really did hurt you with my pointy heels, and am making it worse with my attitude that you should get over it already and that I am the real victim here.

Are there people who are quick to take offense and react disproportionately to any slight? Sure, just as there are people who are so thoughtless and obnoxious that they seem to be LARPing Cards Against Humanity.

Jack Lint says:

APRIL 17, 2013 AT 5:32 PM

LARPing Cards Against Humanity? Why isn't that a thing?

Shawn T says:

APRIL 17, 2013 AT 8:45 PM

"phatic"

Awesome word. Now that I know it exists it's so obvious that it would.

–

–

I happen to be guilty* of being a little bit hard of hearing.

I hear the TV lots better when I can see the subtitles, and though I can't lip read at all I hear people better when I can see their faces.

I interpreted some of what I skimmed through above as being similar to when some – usually younger than thirty – somebody gets ticked off at me for my not hearing them when they looked at the floor and mumble.

SDT

*Said for cause.

Xtifr says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 2:51 AM

A beautiful piece, except for the mind-bogglingly misguided misunderstanding of the passive voice. I mean, “this thing happened” isn’t even *slightly* an example. The passive voice, in fact, allows you to *emphasize* the subject by moving it to the end of the sentence—the strongest position: “I am very sorry that you were hurt by my contemptible lapse of manners”. Rephrasing that in the active voice (“I’m very sorry that my contemptible lapse of manners hurt you”) is weaker, bordering on awkward.

I’ve been forced to report this post to Language Log, where some of the world’s best linguists love to make fun of people’s misunderstandings of language and grammar, especially people who *should* know better (and I think President of SFWA falls into that category). Professor Geoffrey Pullum, co-author of the *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, is a particularly staunch defender of the passive, and is particularly fond of calling out misguided criticism. I don’t know if this thread post will make the LL front page, but I wouldn’t be surprised.

For those who are interested in learning something about the *actual* pros and cons of the passive, as opposed to the normal superstitious BS commonly found in newsrooms around the country, I highly recommend Dr. Pullum’s brief summary at <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2922>

Adrian Smith says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 9:09 AM

“This thing happened” is close enough in meaning to “this thing was done” that most of us here, thinking more about apologies in which the agent responsible somehow disappears from view than reporting people to higher authorities for misusing grammatical terms, probably just skipped over it, thinking, yeah, not technically a passive but so what, on with the show.

Jack Lint says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 9:34 AM

“I’ve been forced to report this post to Language Log”

Are they holding your books hostage? Was there a gun to your head? Do they have evidence of a time when you were young and experimenting with slang? What fiendish pressure did they bring to bear that made you do this?

Wait! Are they listening now? Make a grammatical error if you can’t speak freely and we’ll send help.

htom says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 11:38 AM

The problem I see with the various forms of “*I am very sorry that you were hurt by my contemptible lapse of manners.*” is that they are too complicated.

I am very sorry you were hurt. My lapse of manners is contemptible.

This is a time for plain speaking, leave the complex and complicated constructions for other things.

Chrisv says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 2:48 PM

Good post. I am going to print it and put it on my fridge. In a family as big as mine, this is something we all need to learn. Plenty of opportunity to practice apologies with all the whacking and smacking of toys and words in a family this size.

Reading the comments is just as enlightening about our responses to people as well as our responses to ourselves. It's interesting the way we justify things.

Xtifr says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 5:29 PM

Htom, how is that in any way complicated? It's a very simple sentence. And furthermore, it ties cause and effect together, admitting guilt, in a way that your rephrasing seems designed to avoid. Your avoidance of the passive has actually had the opposite effect of the one you desire. By avoiding the passive in that way, you've actually done exactly what John told us to avoid when he said don't use the passive. Which has to be some sort of irony. :)

htom says:

APRIL 18, 2013 AT 8:40 PM

Xtifr, you're right.

I am very sorry I hurt you. My lapse of manners is contemptible.

is what I meant. I forgot to "activate voice" the first sentence.

Xopher Halftongue says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 12:23 AM

By the way, if a tornado picks up my house and drops it on your sister, *do not* expect an apology from me. Unless some kind of neglect on my part made it not stormworthy by some objective standard, I have nothing to apologize for.

You may expect condolences, expressions of sympathy and even guilt, many other things—but not an apology. I apologize when I've done wrong and (generally) not when I haven't.

Adrian Smith says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 5:42 AM

You should *thank* my sister for cushioning the blow and reducing the damage to your house. OTOH, tornadoes are surely God's way of suggesting that one dwell elsewhere, but OTOOH I live in Japan, so what do I know.

Greg says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 8:14 AM

Xtifr: *I've been forced to report this post to Language Log, where some of the world's best linguists love to make fun of people's misunderstandings of language and grammar, especially people who should know better*

sideways Im not drinking Merlot



mistakes were made.

BW says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 9:40 AM

Xtifr, I agree that the passive voice can be useful and that “this thing happened” is not in the passive voice. I disagree that an apology is the place for passive voice. I think ““I’m very sorry that my contemptible lapse of manners hurt you” is more honest and forthright than your passive example. It is also often personally difficult, because it requires me, as the apologizer to express what I’ve done very clearly, and people don’t like to say “I did this contemptible thing.” They would rather say, “You were hurt by what I did, and I’m sorry,” keeping themselves more in the background.

“I’ve been forced to report this post to Language Log.” That right there? Poor use of passive voice. More honest active voice: “I felt that it was important to report ...” or “I forced myself to report ...” The passive voice can be very useful. Don’t use it when it isn’t necessary.

Gulliver says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 4:05 PM

And...Xopher says in two brief paragraphs what took me two long posts to explain. From now on, WXS = What Xopher Said.

Xtifr says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 5:07 PM

BW says ‘I think ““I’m very sorry that my contemptible lapse of manners hurt you” is more honest and forthright than your passive example.’

And I find it awkwardly phrased; the end is almost dangling. The verb is out there in the middle of nowhere. It gets even worse if the list of my crimes is longer. Furthermore, using the passive allows you to move the crimes to the end, which is the *strongest place in the sentence*. It may depend on what you want to emphasize. If you want a true *mea culpa*, I think the passive is more effective. If you just want to express sympathy and gloss over your guilt, the active voice works better.

In *fact*, one of the real strengths of the passive is in an accusation, as with Prof. Pullman's excellent example of "Don't you see? The patient was murdered by his own doctor!."

For those who are still operating under the delusion that there's *anything* wrong with the passive voice, try rephrasing Paul Butterfield's immortal line, "I was born in Chicago," in the active voice! :)

htom says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 5:30 PM

"I'm very sorry that my contemptible lapse of manners hurt you."

Diagram the sentence. Looks to me like the verb is "am".

I hurt you. I am very sorry. My lapse of manners is contemptible.

What is needed in an apology is confession, not accusation (self-accusation is not confession.).

Adrian Smith says:

APRIL 19, 2013 AT 7:48 PM

For those who are still operating under the delusion that there's anything wrong with the passive voice, try rephrasing Paul Butterfield's immortal line, "I was born in Chicago," in the active voice! :)

Yeah, "my mother bore me in Chicago" clearly moves the focus away from where it belongs, she could at least have tried to make it to New York. The passive has a bad rep because people think of it as the way bureaucrats cast a Kafkaesque veil of obfuscation over who was actually responsible for something or other, probably heinous, in a world in which process reigns supreme and its agents skulk furtively behind the arras. There's an amusing bit by Richard Mitchell about it [here](#).

jldob says:

APRIL 20, 2013 AT 6:43 PM

I'm Sorry,

That I got here so late that it digressed to grammar lessons.

Sometimes people don't want to hear that you are sorry.

They just want you to go away.

Sometime people don't want to apologize.

They just want you to go away.

When you find yourself apologizing too many times to the same people it might be time to assess the possibility of this.

More specifically I find if you say I'm Sorry, and they need more information than that; it might be too late to apologize.

Greg says:

APRIL 20, 2013 AT 10:58 PM

Xtifr: For those who are still operating under the delusion that there's anything wrong with the passive voice, try rephrasing Paul Butterfield's immortal line, "I was born in Chicago," in the active voice!

Do you also criticize people for (for not) ending sentences with a preposition?

Grammar is not an apology.

Congratulations for entirely ignoring the point. There are good apologies and there are things that people like to dress up as apologies: "I'm sorry I snapped at you, but you kept interrupting me." is a bad apology. The famous passive voice apology isn't even an apology, it's a dodge: "Mistakes were made". Passive voice can be useful. But to jump into a discussion about apologies, to ignore all the ways that wrong-doers abuse passive voice to give non-apologies, and to try and make it some argument about the *rules* of grammar say passive voice is *legal* is entirely ignoring the point.

Tony Parker says:

MAY 13, 2013 AT 12:28 PM

Then there is the apology in advance: "I apologize if this offends you, but ." And I am sorry if this derails the discussion (see what I just did there).

anonymous this time says:

MAY 20, 2013 AT 10:55 PM

So I'm in a position where I may need to make an apology, and I came back to this post for reference material. But the post is making me reconsider whether I actually feel sorry about what I did. And it's a tough thing to face about myself. First, the expression of offense is not entirely fair, which makes an unqualified apology a little bit difficult... but it is mostly fair, i.e. probably fair enough that it's best to let the unfair part slide. Second, and more disturbing, is that I'm not sure I'm all that sorry about what I admit I did do wrong. In particular, I'm not sure that I actually value the friendship enough to do the work that is, as John very justly points out, a necessary sequel to an apology. And this is a friendship that used to be very close, and one I thought was still really valuable. But I'm not sure that I want to change the way I face this relationship in the ways that a really sincere apology would require. If I don't respond with an apology, I probably lose the friendship.

(I will say — sort of in my defense, which I can do, since I'm not apologizing to you people — that the matter at hand is considerably more situation-specific than "made tasteless joke in front of obviously vulnerable person." It's more about expectations for what we bring to the friendship, and I'd be apologizing for inaction, not a particular action. So the defensive part of this is that, when I say "I'm not sure that I want to change...", I don't mean "I'm not sure I

want to stop being crass and hurting people.” It’s more “I’m not sure this friendship is worth the resources required to sustain it.” Which is, of course, arguably a crass and hurtful way to approach a friendship. Especially since the friend in question is going through at least two separate traumas, either of which on its own would probably destroy me emotionally for months if not years.)

... wow, I obviously have a lot of feeeeeeels about this. Ideas welcome, especially any that expose how I’m courting jerkhood in ways I have not already acknowledged. And thanks, John, for your insights. I don’t know whether I’ll use them well or not, but they’ve sparked thoughts I probably needed to have.

rh says:

SEPTEMBER 6, 2013 AT 11:50 AM

I was struck by “I think an apology is probably the last time to ask a favor of someone.”

as I am in that exact situation right now. I asked for something from a colleague in a different department at work – a department that deals with scheduling so they are very stressed out. Problem is I messed up the dates, after I thought I double-checked them. My admin was pretty mad about it, because *her* dealings with this colleague will now be worse for asking on my behalf. But I need to ask for the correct dates now.

I am going with the “I am sorry and it was wrong of me not to double-check the dates” but have to say “here are the right dates”. It would be great if I could do without scheduling the new dates, but I am stuck. And there is a chance they will turn me down or delay it, and then I’ll really be in trouble. I am really sorry I bothered them, but I can’t be sorry that I have to ask for the right dates.

{And of course, if I was dealing with a direct colleague in my department, they’d say “you sure about those dates” as opposed to the BOLDDED email response from the other department’s employee that was forwarded on to me. And I would have said “yeah, you’re right, I screwed up,” and I wouldn’t have thought about it twice and neither would they. I think that’s the difficult part, I am sorry that I messed up the dates, BUT I am sorry that they made a 4-12 out of it. Kind of like if you step on your spouse’s toe, no biggie, but stepping on Grandma’s toe could be a big deal. And yes, I guess you should feel worse even though the act is identical, the response is not. Like with the cancer joke, it might be off-color to some, but very hurtful to others. }

Sheila (Fletcher) Jeffery says:

SEPTEMBER 15, 2013 AT 5:03 PM

A very Jealous Woman Lied soooooo Horribly On both my Deceased Husband and me. We both went to Jail and our 2 Youngest Children got Taken away we were so lucky we did get them back but why did th State of Kansas believe all those lies. She really needs to apologize to me for that Horrible mess she made.

Sheila Jeffery says:

SEPTEMBER 15, 2013 AT 5:05 PM

It would make me feel better if she would at say she is sorry

gins says:

SEPTEMBER 15, 2013 AT 8:34 PM

What if you don't think your wrong but want to rereconcile with th our daughter how to start after two years of daughter going to couseli and not seeing her

B says:

SEPTEMBER 26, 2013 AT 8:44 AM

I sincerely apologised to my friends for being an ass, they accepted my apology but then excluded me out of everything, to be really honest they never included me anyway I think they have used this as an excuse as they just wanted to get rid of me anyway. I am a sincere, genuine, helpful and loyal person, they have all just used and abused my good nature and threw me to the side of the road like road kill, I have never felt so down.

Cally says:

SEPTEMBER 26, 2013 AT 12:02 PM

B: Is it possible that they excluded you out of everything because, as you say, were were being an ass? They can't see the sincere, genuine, helpful and loyal person that you know yourself to be, because they're not mind readers. They can only see what you showed them. And what you showed them, you tell us, was an ass.

I've forgiven people for being hurtful to me, but that doesn't mean that I need to give them another chance to do the same thing. It's self-protective to remove yourself from the company of someone who's hurt you in the past, after all.

Over time, if you continue to refrain from ass-like behavior, they might grow closer again. But always remember, they can't see inside your mind. All they can see is what you do.

quaid says:

SEPTEMBER 30, 2013 AT 6:27 PM

NO HELP AT ALL

theinfinitebattle8 says:

JANUARY 3, 2014 AT 11:16 PM

Reblogged this on [The Infinite Battle](#).

SomeGuy says:

JANUARY 21, 2014 AT 4:52 PM

This is a great article and very similar to the approach used in non-violent communication (or NVC, by which I'm referring to the specific communication process developed by Marshall Rosenberg, not just the general meaning of those terms). What [eloisebates](#) and [Kenneth B](#) pick up on as problematic in the statement "I'm sorry I offended you" is made explicit in NVC work, which spends a lot of effort to help people articulate the distinction between observations/facts/actions and feelings/reactions (which are subjective or situational responses to a stimulus). So, *you hit me and I felt pain* rather than *you hurt me*. Or something more complicated like *when you called me fat, I felt humiliated* rather than *you humiliated me*.

So, we are accustomed to saying things like *you hurt me* or *I offended you* but NVC talks about the value of separating those in conflict resolution (which I would say apologies fall into). Why? A statement like "I'm sorry I offended you" does a number of things. First, it subtly

shifts the focus/blame by implying that what I did was only wrong because you took offense (i.e., the problem is you, not me – or at least you're partly to blame). It also glosses over the facts by omitting the details of what I did to concentrate on the feelings it caused in you. Finally, it robs the recipient of agency with regard to their feelings by implying that I can inflict specific feelings on you.

A good apology should start with a clear and direct acknowledgment of my wrongdoing as a statement of fact, separate from the effect it had. *Regardless of whether or not you were offended, what I did was wrong, and I'm very sorry for what I did.* And being specific about your actions here would be better. This doesn't mean you shouldn't acknowledge the other person's feelings, but sticking to observations is a good approach. *When I saw how you reacted to what I said, you seemed deeply offended... or When you told me you were offended ... and that helped me to recognize that what I did was wrong.*

Frances says:

JANUARY 23, 2014 AT 4:31 PM

Excellent summary of apologies, and interesting comments. I wrote a couple blog posts on this a few years ago that I think complement yours:

<http://alameda.patch.com/groups/frances-montells-blog/p/bp-no-woman-is-an-island-apologies-part-i>

and

http://alameda.patch.com/blog_posts/no-woman-is-an-island-apologies-part-ii

Also, @ the Anonymous poster above: The question isn't how much you value the friendship. That shouldn't be the purpose of the apology. Even if you don't want to be friends any more, if your actions (or inaction) caused pain or harm to someone else then you should apologize. While I obviously don't know the specifics of your situation, I'm going to take a stab at an apology you could sincerely make, based on what I gleaned from your post:
"I am sorry that I have been distant lately and haven't called you or reached out to you. I know you are going through some difficult times and I'm sorry I haven't been there for you. I sincerely regret adding to your burden and that I am not able to be a good friend to you at this time."

Alison Morel says:

JANUARY 28, 2014 AT 12:32 PM

In any type of relationship, be that healthy or not, we have obligations to meet. If I have wronged someone, I will think before I act, but I will always act.

Too many people think that not apologizing is OK, and expect relationship to just move forward—it doesn't work, I cannot forget that you just killed my cat because YOU believed I loved him more. You: hey honey, what are we doing today? Me: Fake Smile, whatever you want, as her mind moves quickly thinking of his demise. Maybe understanding his insecurities and an apology would have removed my vengeful thoughts & actions, but w/o the sorry or admission of his own sickness, that relationship ended, the hatred grew.

A normal apology as mentioned in article is what many people cannot do or do not know how. Conflict Management & Communication is a short class that can help ones life in all areas. We

cannot do what we were not taught or because of our own ignorance-ignorance is not a negative word, nor is the definition.

So yes people, as the writer stated we apologize because we need to, and we are genuine, thoughtful beings. I conclude with an example of another apology. Dear Landlord, First off thank you for renting me an apartment, as I was in a complex & difficult situation. I need to apologize to you, but this is difficult for me, because I am not great at it, bear with me. I am sorry for causing you stress, money, and time because I was unable to maintain a respectful and thoughtful home to my neighbors, thus causing you unfair & unnecessary negative emotion & energy.

In no way, did I seek out to hurt you which may have brought out anger, that miserable secondary emotion causing you potential physical, emotional, & spiritual conflict because of anger. I hope for forgiveness as I need to make some positive change to be a better person. Thank you for reading, and let it go—do not allow my actions to control your time.

Cally says:

JANUARY 28, 2014 AT 12:41 PM

If someone kills your cat because he believes you loved the cat more, you have bigger problems than just a bad apology. Get out. Get out NOW. That person is abusive and dangerous and you should cut and run IMMEDIATELY and leave no forwarding address.

She says:

FEBRUARY 7, 2014 AT 5:59 PM

Any thoughts on how (or if/when) one should apologise for something the other person doesn't know has happened, but that really was just dishonest and inappropriate? There's the "what they don't know can't hurt them" approach, and then there is the "be honest, apologise, and let it rest" approach. I'm really torn as to whether or not it is appropriate to apologise, and how to approach it if I do. Obviously you can't just apologise because you have to explain what happened, so there is the addition of the lead-in. I know it would be situation specific, but I am curious if there are any guides to this that people are aware of.

mplo says:

MARCH 21, 2014 AT 7:08 PM

There are times when apologies are actually necessary, because they can be a step towards mending a relationship that was damaged by slights, abuse, etc., and yet, there are times when apologies just simply don't cut it—they will not even go towards undoing the hurt.

When I ended up filing a grievance against an overzealous supervisor at my last job, I recall being asked if I just simply wanted an apology. I answered no, because I believed that an apology would not suffice, it would be insincere, and that a more drastic response (i. e. filing a grievance) to the situation at my last workplace was necessary.

Martyn says:

MARCH 28, 2014 AT 11:31 PM

So What do you do after you've apologized and the person doesn't respond for over a month?

BW says:

MARCH 29, 2014 AT 10:18 AM

Martyn, see point 2 in the original post. If you apologized fully and honestly to acknowledge your wrongdoing, you don't have to do anything further. The point is to take responsibility for what you said or did. The other person isn't required to respond for your apology to be sincere and complete.

Harley says:

APRIL 14, 2014 AT 9:32 PM

Hey, thank you so much for this because I've really screwed up really bad lately and tomorrow morning I'm going to have to apologize. I'm a freshman in high school and just this morning I called a teacher fat and that she looks like Jabba from star wars. I did this on a school teacher review survey and looking back on it now I'm really thinking how stupid that was. I have effed up ways of dealing with anger and depression and I honestly hate to say it but I think I accidentally take that out on others sometimes. I hate that I did that, I mean it didn't even sound smart. Ugh it really sucks. But I mean I just have to stand up and take responsibility for it now. So thank you again for posting this because it really helps me out on what to say tomorrow.

Sean says:

JULY 3, 2014 AT 10:35 PM

John: minor typos that I caught when going through this very helpful post again. (and again)

“what you're doing and way.” = “what you're doing and why.”

“if you're willing do do” = “if you're willing to do”

Mille says:

AUGUST 15, 2014 AT 1:08 AM

Regarding the previous dialogue, I also think that asking for forgiveness as the final step is important. However, just to clarify, it should not be a pestering for forgiveness or a demand for forgiveness, it should instead be a humble request asked only once. By asking for forgiveness you are giving the person wronged an opportunity to meaningfully respond to the apology, rather than slipping into the unhelpful, automatic response, 'that's okay' (because it's really NOT okay). Furthermore, it places the onus and the power into the hands of the person wronged, they are given the choice of how the relationship will then proceed. There is no obligation for them to accept the apology. They may simply choose to think about it, maybe in their current state they are unable to forgive. It is their own choice.

There is a point that not all offences require asking for forgiveness. If I bump into someone in the street and hastily call a 'sorry!' over my shoulder (which I do mean). I don't expect that that is an offence that I would need to seek forgiveness for. But if you are going so far as to undertake the steps outlined above (which are excellent) I think it probably calls for a request for forgiveness as well.

I recently came across this post <http://www.cuppacocoa.com/a-better-way-to-say-sorry/> which, while relating to school children, translates well.

Comments are closed.

