

Why Saying “I’m Sorry” Isn’t Good Enough: The Ethics of Corporate Apologies

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ABSTRACT: The number of corporate apologies has increased dramatically during the past decade. This article delves into the *ethics* of apologies offered by chief executive officers (CEOs). It examines ways in which public apologies on the part of a representative (CEO) of a corporate body (the firm) differ from both private, interpersonal apologies, on the one hand, and nation-state/collective apologies, on the other. The article then seeks to ground ethically desirable elements of a corporate apology in the nature or essence of the corporate apology itself. It explores the largely ignored roles played by the speaker’s ethos and audience pathos in genuine or ethical apologies and suggests that attention needs to be paid to the problems posed by “role contamination,” context, and other overlooked factors. The reception by the actual audience of a given apology is a highly contingent matter. Ethicists should concentrate, therefore, on what makes a proffered apology, in principle, *trustworthy* and not merely efficacious for a given audience.

KEY WORDS: CEO, apologies, ethos, pathos, logos, role contamination

Apology is remarkably complex yet simple and straightforward at the same time.
(Lazare 2005: 23)

THE NUMBER OF CORPORATE APOLOGIES has increased dramatically during the past decade (Lindner 2007; Adams 2000). The trend has caught the eye of both rhetoricians and management scholars who have analyzed various corporate apologies, characterizing some as sincere and others as merely ritualistic. The classification schemes used by these analysts tend to be highly schematic—i.e., they focus on the necessary and sufficient logical elements that an apology must possess in order to qualify as effective (Bisel and Messersmith 2012). Another body of management literature overlaps with these logical analyses but focuses on which types of apologies by chief executive officers (CEOs) are most successful in repairing a firm’s image (Souder 2010; Benoit, 1995; Benoit and Czerwinski 1997). The logical and public relations analyses are not completely distinct, for an apology by its very nature aims at restoring trust among parties and that restoration may involve damage control. However, as we will see, ethical corporate apologies go beyond mere image restoration.

This article adds several important but overlooked dimensions to the debate by delving into the *ethics* of corporate apologies. First, rather than just listing traits or

features that an apology should have, I ground these desirable features in the nature or essence of a corporate public apology. Instead of simply applying general ethical theory to the apology, this paper looks for norms in the communicative act itself. I argue that corporate apologies differ in some significant ways from both private, personal apologies and collective, nation-state apologies and that these differences should be considered when evaluating the ethics of corporate apologies.

Second, I identify and briefly explored the largely ignored roles played by what I call “role contamination,” by context, and by the speaker’s ethos and audience pathos in ethically good apologies. The management, legal, and psychological literature has tended to focus on compensation to victims or acknowledgement of norm violations (Fehr and Gelfand 2010) and to overlook the important ethical dimension embedded in the full *rhetorical context* of corporate apologies. For example, although the CEO’s acceptance of his or her firm’s responsibility for harm in an apology is surely important (Kador 2009), such acceptance by itself does not suffice to make a CEO’s apology ethically good. The tone and formality of an apology matter, as does the setting for the apology. All of these factors influence what the recipients of an apology hear and thus whether they will have a good reason to treat the apology as, in principle, trustworthy. So CEOs need to consider such elements when constructing their apologies.

The paper concludes with some reasons why it may not be possible to specify all elements of an effective apology. The actual audience reception of a given apology is a highly contingent matter. Ethicists should concentrate, therefore, on what makes a proffered apology, in principle, trustworthy instead of on apology efficacy with a given audience. This issue is one on which ethicists can make significant contributions, given that much of the communications and legal literature on apologies focuses on apology efficacy.

Before setting out a framework for evaluating the ethical goodness of a corporate apology, I need to define what a corporate apology is. *A corporate apology, roughly speaking, is a verbal exchange in which a corporate leader (for the sake of simplicity, we’ll assume the CEO) speaks in a way that aims at a future reconciliation between the offending party and those whom the apologizer or the apologizer’s firm has harmed or offended. A corporate apology has two forms. The CEO may apologize for having personally caused harm or offense to another party or parties; or a CEO may apologize as the representative of a firm that is seen as a wrongdoer, even though the CEO himself or herself did not personally commit the harm.* Throughout this paper, I will treat a corporate apology as ethically good only if it aims at restoring trust between the apologizing CEO/CEO’s firm and the parties injured by the apologizer. My approach is, loosely speaking, Aristotelian. An apology by its very nature has a purpose, goal, or *telos* of “bridge-building” or trust-restoration between the perceived offender and those who see themselves as harmed (Goffman 1972; Tedeschi and Norman 1985; Lewicki and Bunker 1996; Kador 2009). An apology that is structured so as possibly to fulfill that *telos* is both a true apology and an ethically good one.

For a reconciliation between the firm and the audience to be possible, the apology must aim at healing the breach in trust perceived to have occurred (Lazare 2005).

That is why some apologizers seek to establish that the speaker and audience share values (Smith 2008) and so have a mutual basis on which to rebuild bridges and resume a common life. The purpose or *telos* of an apology is not primarily, as some communications theorists seem to believe, image restoration. You may once have thought some CEO was a jerk but now have begun to be unsure about that judgment. If the CEO offers you an apology that confirms in your mind that the CEO is a jerk, then his or her image has been restored in your eyes, but you likely will not think of the CEO's statement as a real apology. Furthermore, if and when those hearing a CEO's apology come to believe that the speaker and his or her firm are merely going through the form of issuing an apology with a view to improving their image but have no desire or plan to alter how they will operate in the future, these audience members may well dismiss the apology as inauthentic and irrelevant. As Randy Cohen has trenchantly observed, a genuine apology is not simply a public-relations exercise; apologizing "can't be merely ritual theater" (Rehm 2010).

Moreover, a corporate apology offered by a CEO does more than merely express regret.¹ Apologizing by a CEO is an activity with a specific implicit goal—trust restoration. Only to the extent that the apology is constructed and delivered in ways that support the possible fulfillment of that *telos* does the apology function as a genuine apology. Speech acts that are not so structured and delivered with the aim of fostering and restoring trust are failed apologies. Indeed, one might even say that they border on not being apologies at all, even if the speaker says to an audience, "I apologize for . . ." or "I regret that. . ." Indeed, sometimes one hears audience members who are disappointed by the content or form of a CEO's apology exclaim, "That wasn't a real apology!" I thus disagree with Hearit (2006) who argues that CEOs can offer public denials of corporate responsibility that still qualify as ethically good apologies. If the public truly feels wronged by a firm's actions, then the public has no ground for viewing the firm's CEO's public denials of any responsibility as a true apology because such a bald-faced rebuff will not be seen as doing the work of an apology—namely, aiming at repairing the tear in the social fabric (Goffman 1972).

Before beginning the detailed analysis, I need to specify several caveats. First, an ethically good apology has a chance of restoring trust, but may not actually do so. This caveat is crucial because some injured parties may never accept a particular apology, even if that apology were to contain all of the desirable elements specified in this paper. When recipients have hardened their hearts and refuse to give the speaker any chance to rebuild bridges; or when the audience members are unjust or vengeful, an apology likely will fail regardless of its logic, ethos and pathos. Whether a given corporate apology actually does restore trust is thus not determinative of whether it is ethically good.

Second, for a speech act to qualify as an apology (good or bad), it is not necessary that speakers *intend* that their speech be an apology. If the audience hearing the speech thinks he or she has been harmed; and if the speech act occurs in a context in which the audience is looking for an apology, then the speech act may still be heard as an ethically better or worse apology. Thus, if I injure a friend of mine and say to her, "I am sorry you are upset," I may not intend to be offering an apology. Perhaps I am just making a passing observation. However, my friend may interpret

my speech as a failed or unethical apology (for reasons explored below) because she was legitimately hoping for me to apologize for having harmed her. Speech acts exist in a public realm, and neither the speaker nor the listener gets to decide unilaterally what will or will not count as an apology, promise, etc.² This point is especially important given the very public nature of corporate apologies.

Third, I here consider only cases in which an apology is plausibly called for. We sometimes may take offense in cases in which no offense was actually given by the party whom we view as a wrongdoer. You may think that I spilled coffee on your silk shirt. In fact, somebody else did so. If you confront me, I might express sympathy that you have been burned and your shirt ruined. I need not, however, take responsibility for having spilled coffee on you. My murmured expression of sympathy lacks certain elements typically possessed by an ethically good or authentic apology, but my speech is not a failed apology because you have no right, as it were, to expect that that I, an innocent bystander who did you no harm, would offer you an apology. As Smith (2008) has put it, we often convey sympathy, which is not the same as apologetically expressing contrition or taking responsibility.

PART 1: PECULIARITIES OF CORPORATE APOLOGIES

Many theorists writing about corporate apologies have simply assumed that these apologies must have exactly the same features that we expect private apologies to exhibit (see, e.g., Hearit 2006; Kador 2009). Such an assumption may not be warranted. Indeed, I want to suggest that there are at least three distinct types of apologies: Private/interpersonal; corporate/CEO; and nation-state/collective apologies. (By a “collective apology,” I mean a public statement in which a representative of a nation or state acknowledges and seeks in some way to make some amends for past wrongs committed by the nation and/or the citizens of that nation, e.g., Konrad Adenauer and subsequent German leaders apologizing for the Holocaust).

These three types of apologies share some key similarities but differ in ways to which ethicists should attend.

Let me begin by noting a few major similarities and differences among the various types of apologies before focusing on several key differences between corporate apologies and the personal apologies to which they often are mistakenly analogized. Private/interpersonal and corporate apologies are similar insofar as ethically good apologies in both of these realms typically occur shortly after a harm has occurred (region #5 of overlap in Figure 1). These two types are thus unlike collective nation-state apologies that are often given years or decades after the wrongdoing (e.g., the German chancellor’s apology for the Holocaust; the American government’s apology to the Japanese-Americans interred during the second world war). On the other hand, corporate and collective apologies are quintessentially public speech acts and are akin in their lack of the interiority we expect from personal apologies (region #6). Collective and interpersonal apologies are similar (region #4) insofar as neither typically is legalistic. By contrast, corporate apologies are usually negotiated with and written by lawyers who are concerned to protect the corporation and its officers from lawsuits (former federal prosecutor H. Shea, personal communication,

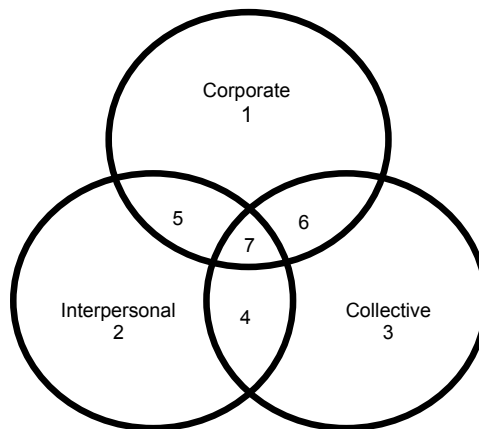


Figure 1: Typology of Apologies

December 13, 2012) (region #1 showing no overlap). Collective apologies very often involve reparations, which are not discussed in most interpersonal or corporate apologies (region #3 showing no overlap). Interpersonal apologies usually require that the apologizer show remorse, while remorse generally is out of place in corporate and/or collective apologies for reasons discussed below (region #2 showing no overlap). Corporate apologies frequently center on specific measures the firm is taking to restore trust in its brand, while individuals and nation-states don't have brands and so their apologies are not crafted with a view to brand preservation in the eyes of the public. Corporate apologies also differ from the other two types as well (region #1 showing no overlap) insofar as they sometimes are proffered at a time when the exact causes of a harm with which the firm is associated may not yet be clear (e.g., Ashland Oil CEO John Hall's apology for a polluting, ruptured oil tank that may or may not have been properly legally permitted and that may or may not have been sabotaged). In the case of personal or collective apologies, the parties typically know the circumstances of their wrongdoing.

All three types of apologies share some crucial elements (#7). In all three cases, the apologizer must, for the apology to be ethically good, assume some measure of responsibility (personal, organizational or national) for the harm the apology's recipients has suffered. In addition, the offense must be named; it does not suffice for the apologizer merely to say "mistakes were made" (Smith 2008; Hearit 2006).

A short book would be needed to explicate the many other points of similarity and difference among these three types of apologies. However, this brief overview should suffice to establish at least the possibility that there are various forms of apology differing significantly from one another. My discussion of the elements of an ethically good corporate apology will be more intelligible and persuasive if I preface those remarks by highlighting the most significant ways in which public corporate apologies differ from the private interpersonal apologies to which they are so often implicitly assimilated.

Difference #1: In the case of private, interpersonal apologies, the apologizer speaks for himself or herself and knows that he or she has been the source of harm or offense. By contrast, the CEO speaks as the representative of a firm that is per-

ceived publicly as having wronged customers, employees, stockholders or, more generally, stakeholders of the firm. CEOs may not have themselves committed, ordered, intended or in any way initiated the wrong in question (H. Shea, personal communication, December 13, 2012; Hearit 2006). In fact, an apologizing CEO may not even have been the chief leader of the firm at the time of the wrongdoing.³ Akio Toyoda apologized for Toyota's lapses in quality control after questions were raised about possibly sticking accelerators in some Toyota models. Toyoda was not, however, the CEO during the period in which these lapses occurred. In such cases, I will argue, apologizing CEOs should take responsibility for altering the firm's behavior going forward but they do not have to assume individual *personal* responsibility for the wrongdoing in question in order for their apologies to be ethical. They speak as a representative of a responsible entity but not as a personally culpable agent.⁴ In this respect, a corporate apology bears some resemblance to a national or collective apology. Apologizing presidents or prime ministers may not have been alive at the wrong was done. These leaders thus cannot be speaking as agents who can assume individual personal responsibility or culpability for the commission of the offense.

Difference #2: There is a related point: Although we expect apologizing speakers to be remorseful and genuinely regretful in the case of personal apologies (Kador 2009; Tavuchis 1991; Andrews and Baird 2005; Clampitt 2010), this expectation may be inappropriate in the case of corporate apologies. A person typically can feel remorse only for some misdeed he or she individually performed. If the CEO himself or herself personally caused the harm, then personal remorse arguably should be present (e.g., Martha Stewart should have shown remorse for her criminal obstruction of justice, a misdeed that destroyed some of the value of her firm and resulted in employee terminations). However, in many cases, CEOs apologize for some lapse in service that they did not cause and about which the CEO initially had no knowledge (and possibly could not have had any knowledge prior to the harm being done). After two Domino's Pizza employees put some of their bodily fluids on pizzas about to be delivered to customers and then uploaded a video of their actions to YouTube, Domino's CEO Patrick Doyle made a public apology containing many of the elements listed below. Although he showed anger at the wrongdoers and demonstrated a resolve to protect consumers, Doyle expressed no remorse. Nor need he have done so. For remorse is something that the wrongdoer himself or herself will feel (assuming the agent in question is not sociopathic) for a deed he or she committed. The CEO was not the wrongdoer here.

In other instances, an apologizing CEO may be a replacement brought in to "right the ship" after a prior CEO committed an injustice or in some other way botched relations with stakeholders. The replacement CEO can still issue an ethically good apology speaking as a representative of the firm without needing to feel or show remorse. On this score, corporate apologies resemble collective apologies. Given that national leaders issuing official apologies may not even have been born when the injustices for which they are apologizing occurred, to stipulate that leaders must show remorse is a category mistake (Villadsen 2008). Finally, even if we assume that the firm is a legal person, it is hard to see how a legal person as such could

experience remorse. Such a “person” has no body. Remorse is a physical feeling of uneasy, guilty regret. A non-corporeal firm can feel no remorse, and the CEO is typically apologizing as a representative of this legal entity.

Difference #3: Although a corporate apology is more than mere ritual theater in the service of projecting a public image, corporate apologies *do* address the public perception of the firm. Chief executives generally aim at persuading a typically large audience that the wrongdoing *firm* is worthy of trust in the future despite having erred in the past (Hearit 2006; Lewicki and Bunker 1996). The apology’s main work lies in seeking to persuade those injured by the firm that the firm merits trust going forward.⁵ In the case of interpersonal apologies, the victimized party usually wants to be persuaded that the apologizer has undergone a change of heart. Psychological transformation grounds the private apology. But psychological transformation would be hard to define, much less assess, in the case of a corporate entity, so these public apologies need not, I would suggest, display the same emotional depth or interiority as interpersonal private apologies. Other elements of an ethically good corporate apology work to persuade stakeholders that they have good reason to believe that firm will behave better in the future.

To date, most scholars writing about public apologies have simply *assumed* that such apologies are identical with private apologies, requiring feelings of regret and remorse (Goffman 1972; Tomlinson, Dineen, and Lewicki 2004). This view leads them to conclude that many, if not most, public apologies are somehow inadequate or abortive because they lack emotional depth associated with interpersonal apologies (Trouillot 2000). I want to contest that view and will adopt the approach taken by Tavuchis (1991) and Celermajer (2009) who analyzed the apologies of nation-states. They contend that collective public apologies have a legitimate structure different from that of personal apologies. The different but nevertheless legitimate structure of corporate apologies centers on restoring trust through the firm’s CEO’s stated commitment to having the firm behave in a more trustworthy way going forward. The ethically good corporate apology embodies mutually reinforcing elements that make the existence of such a commitment on the part of leadership, in principle, believable.

PART 2: IDEAL ELEMENTS OF AN ETHICALLY GOOD, AUTHENTIC CORPORATE APOLOGY

A. Logical or Content Elements for an Apology to Qualify as Authentic or Ethical

The goal of healing the breach of trust between parties imposes what Aristotle would think of as logical or content elements on what the apologizing CEO should say in order for his or her apology to qualify as a true apology. In this section, I sketch these content elements.

Element #1: Naming the Wrongdoing for Which the Apologizer Takes Responsibility

In general, apologetic CEOs need to name the exact injury or offense for which they are accepting responsibility. The aggrieved parties believe they have suffered

some specific harm or have been treated unjustly in some particular way (Greenberg 1990). Naming the wrongdoing is not merely important, as some theorists think (Hearit 2006), on the ground that the apologizer must “own” his or her wrongdoing. As noted above, the apologizing CEO sometimes is not the wrongdoer. The more compelling reason for naming the wrongdoing is that, without explicit acknowledgement of a particular harm, CEOs will find it hard to restore trust, because they and the audience will not know whether the two parties are even on the same page regarding the breach of trust. Moreover, as I argue below, an ethically good apology ideally will lay out some action steps for restoring trust by repairing the breach. So, on this score, too, the CEO needs to indicate that he or she acknowledges that the firm erred *in some particular way*. Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca’s apology for Chrysler dealers’ practice of disconnecting odometers, driving the cars, reconnecting the odometers, and then selling them as new is ethically good insofar as he named the specific wrongdoing: “Disconnecting odometers is a lousy idea. That’s a mistake we won’t make again at Chrysler. Period” (Hearit 1994: 114).

A related point: By stating specifically what they or their firm did wrong, apologizing CEOs are implicitly admitting that the action in question was voluntary. As Aristotle notes, although we pity and pardon involuntary deeds, we praise and blame those that are voluntary (Aristotle 2005). The apologizer must be willing, therefore, to accept some measure of public censure of the offending firm (or of the CEO himself or herself in the less common cases in which the wrongdoing is personal).⁶ If the apologizer were to say, “I/my firm did the horrible deed X and we accept responsibility for it, but I/my firm should not in any way be blamed for X,” we would not think that he or she has actually apologized. Accepting blame is part of what it means to be held accountable. Such acceptance is also a first step toward mending one’s ways and being perceived as doing so (Goffman 1972; Schlenker, Pontari, and Christopher 2001). As we shall see, giving evidence of a willingness to alter one’s (or the firm’s) behavior shows that the speaker has the ethos necessary for a trust restoration to proceed.

In some cases, the harm caused by a company may have been inadvertent. Still, if the leader was ignorant because he, she, or the firm was negligent, then the leader needs to admit to this lack of oversight or care (a neglect which is itself a kind of wrongdoing). In the rare case in which an unintended harm was completely unavoidable by the firm, the CEO may not really be able to offer an apology in the strict sense of the term. In these cases, leaders may want to express solidarity with those who have suffered because of something that the corporation directly or indirectly did. Let us suppose that a terrorist set off a bomb at a fertilizer plant and the subsequent explosion of the plant killed and maimed many in the surrounding community. The CEO of the plant could certainly say, “I and my co-workers are sorry for the massive damage this community has suffered as a result of a terrorist bombing that caused our factory to explode.” However, precisely because the CEO is not naming a specific, voluntary wrong committed by the firm, this sort of expression of sorrow is not an apology in the fullest sense of the term and should not be construed as such.

There have been several cases of bad CEO apologies. These speech acts express regret or sympathy but do not serve to restore trust because the speaker does not accept (on behalf of the firm) responsibility for the harm and suffering resulting from specific acts of the firm or its leader. Martha Stewart consistently denied that she was involved in insider trading or the obstruction of justice. She never apologized to her employees, customers or stockholders for the wrongdoing for which she was convicted and imprisoned, although she did express regret that their lives, like her own, had been disrupted when charges were brought against her (Kim, Ferrin, Cooper, and Dirks 2004). SAP AG co-chief executive Bill McDermott's apology to Oracle for copyright infringement by SAP was so vague that those who were unfamiliar with the case would be confused as to what the specific offense was: "They were doing things that required much closer scrutiny. . . . I am sorry for that" (Borzo 2010: 1). One wonders: What should have been scrutinized more closely? The absence of specificity concerning the wrongdoing undercuts the reparative power of the apology. The audience has no idea of whether the CEO and other leaders of the firm really understand what form the wrongdoing took and thus how it could be avoided in the future.

In many cases, CEOs say that they are sorry but then characterize what the injured parties view as wrongdoing in such a way that the CEO's responsibility is lessened. Consider the prepared statement Citigroup CEO Chuck Prince read when he testified before the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission in April 2010:

Let me start by saying I'm sorry. I'm sorry the financial crisis has had such a devastating impact for our country. I'm sorry about the millions of people, average Americans, who lost their homes. And I'm sorry that our management team, starting with me, like so many others could not see the unprecedented market collapse that lay before us. (Dash 2010: 1).

Prince hides behind talk of the "team" and conspicuously avoids mentioning the particular actions by financial institutions that so troubled thoughtful observers: the pushing of inappropriate mortgages, the use of unsafe credit default swaps to improve the bank's balance sheet, the lowering of mortgage standards that enabled non-creditworthy borrowers to get loans, etc. I would not require that, in his apology, Prince admit to possibly criminal conduct on the part of Citigroup. But he could have at least mentioned by name some of the worrisome and suspect practices widely believed to be rampant in the mortgage industry as a whole. Or he could have admitted to some specific errors in business judgment on the part of Citigroup's leadership. Courts generally do not hold executives and boards of directors legally responsible for business judgment mistakes. Instead, Prince regrets his failure to foresee that which was allegedly unprecedented and, therefore, likely unforeseeable. In other words, his apology is not an apology at all because no one needs to take responsibility for the failure to be omniscient.

Prince clearly understands that his audience is expecting an apology. He argues, in effect, that neither he nor any other bank can legitimately be held accountable by the audience because *everyone* held the same false belief that mortgage-backed securities were safe: "Everyone, including our risk managers, other banks, and CDO

structurers, all believed that these . . . securities held virtually no risk. It is hard for me to fault the traders who made the decisions to retain these positions on Citi's books" (Dash 2010: 1). Former Citigroup board member Robert Rubin provided an analogous minimization. As the *Times* put it, Citigroup board member Rubin "also showed some contrition but stopped short of accepting responsibility for the banks' woes [by citing] at least nine different causes for the financial crisis, which formed a toxic cocktail that, he claims, 'almost all of us' missed" (Dash and Chan 2010: 1). Like his fellow bankers, Rubin was conspicuously vague when it came to admitting what he and the banks did (or failed to do) to contribute to the crisis.⁷ The absence of any detailed discussion as to what these financial firms did wrong and why these actions were problematic makes it difficult for the audience to believe that these executives grasped the magnitude of their firms' wrongdoing. Such perceived cluelessness—or dishonesty—can lead audience members to conclude that they do not share certain important values with the speaker, values that could function as a basis for rebuilding trust (see Element #7).

Element #2: Taking Responsibility for the Wrongdoing

From the rough definition of an apology sketched earlier, we can conclude that the apology ought to be given by the person who has either committed the wrongdoing; who was ultimately in charge of those who did the wrong; or who now represents and speaks for the organization and is at present ultimately accountable for rectifying the harm going forward. CEOs must apologize for deeds either that they personally have initiated or that were in some sense initiated by agents who were, in principle, controllable by the apologizing CEOs (or by their predecessors). It is harm resulting from these deeds that audiences can reasonably expect apologizing CEOs to address going forward. CEOs who simply state, "Mistakes were made" or "I feel your pain" have not offered an apology because they have not indicated who at the firm has committed what is perceived as a wrong (Ferrin, Cooper, Kim, and Dirks 2007) and who will be held accountable for fixing the problem.⁸ As a result, the person hearing the CEO's words has no one in particular with whom to rebuild the bridge of trust. So no reconciliation is possible. The bridge metaphor is especially apt here. Just as there can be no bridge to nowhere because a bridge has two endpoints, so, too, an apology must link a particular responsible party to those receiving the apology.

Moreover, the person offering an apology should himself or herself accept responsibility. Failure to take responsibility undermines the apology. On the other hand, as I noted earlier, strictly speaking, one agent cannot apologize for an action for which he or she is in no way either morally or legally responsible for causing or for correcting. Consequently, this point about taking responsibility becomes tricky in at least two respects. First, there is the issue of whether the CEO or the firm created the harm. When the CEO personally caused the harm, then we can fairly expect the CEO's apology to state as much. This case is relatively straightforward, and it is easy to locate examples of a CEO fessing up to a misstep. A statement made a few years back by Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix, has this "taking responsibility" element of an ethically good apology. Reed had jokingly told a Canadian audience that Netflix was charging the Canadians cheaper rates than those paid by Americans

because the Americans were too self-involved to realize that they were paying higher fees than their neighbors to the north (Yarow 2010). Hastings later apologized, saying, in effect, "I made a bad joke. This joke was offensive to my fellow Americans because I lied about them. Americans are a generous and philanthropic people." One might add that the Americans weren't so self-involved that they failed to notice that Netflix was charging differential fees based on location. Their awareness of the price variance was partly responsible for the ire with which Americans greeted this joke. In any case, this corporate apology was ethically good insofar as Hastings took direct responsibility for the perceived offense, using the active voice.⁹ His assumption of personal responsibility is especially important because he himself committed the offense.

Here is another case of an authentic apology for a wrong committed by the CEO personally. Chrysler CEO Bob Nardelli inadvertently confused the city of Kenosha (where Chrysler was closing a plant) with Trenton (which was retaining a plant). When asked about the Kenosha plant, Nardelli mistakenly told a state representative from Kenosha that Chrysler would manufacture its new line of V-6 engines there. Upon learning of his error, Nardelli promptly gave a straightforward apology, taking responsibility for his mistake using the first person pronoun:

I mistakenly conveyed the status of the Phoenix investment in Trenton, Michigan. The facts I described were accurate for Trenton and not Kenosha, Wisconsin. I recognize this has added further confusion to an already difficult situation. (Romell and Gilbert 2009: 1; emphasis added)

Nardelli not only gave a public apology but apologized in a private phone call to Representative Gwen Moore from Milwaukee who had asked the original question about the status of the Kenosha plant. This CEO's willingness to take responsibility in both the public and private spheres for having created the confusion made his apology more effective at restoring trust in Chrysler and thus ethically better.

Matters become more complex when the CEO has not personally and directly caused the harm. In this case, the CEO needs to take responsibility for setting matters aright going forward. After Mattel's suppliers were found to have been using lead paint in children's toys, Mattel's CEO Bob Eckert gave an apology in which he took responsibility for the firm's commitment to prevent similar harm in the future. However, he did not assume any personal responsibility nor admit any guilt for the problems caused by the suppliers of the firm's suppliers (Mediacurves 2009). Apparently neither Eckert nor corporate headquarters knew about or sanctioned this dangerous practice of using lead paint or of suppliers subcontracting work down a multi-party chain of suppliers. It is hard to see how assuming personal responsibility for causing the problem would make much sense in this sort of case. What makes more sense is for the CEO to own the problem going forward and to commit to the firm taking corrective measures. In his apology, Eckert did take responsibility for ordering the recalls and for improving the behavior of Mattel's suppliers, specifying exactly what suppliers had done wrong in the past and what Mattel was doing to ensure that such worrisome behaviors did not recur (Consumerist.com 2007).

The second wrinkle in CEO acceptance of responsibility stems from the fact that situations are often fluid. Firms may not know who is to blame (e.g., the gulf deep water drilling accident involved numerous firms). CEOs are understandably reluctant to make any admissions that may lead to increased legal liability for the firm. As federal prosecutor Hank Shea has said, it is rare for a firm's CEO to admit guilt (H. Shea, personal communication, December 13, 2012). A CEO may be willing to admit some wrongdoing in general but may be reluctant to say too much about the misdeed if the corporation is likely to wind up in court (Tyler 1997).¹⁰ I disagree, therefore, with the claim that ethical corporate apologies require that the CEO admit to being personally guilty of wrongdoing (Hearit 2006). Yes, it is true that some corporate mistakes involve little or no liability (Hearit 2006) and that corporate guilt frequently can readily be established regardless of whether the firm has offered an apology (Hearit and Courtright 2003). It is also true that apologies do not necessarily entail an admission of guilt under the law and sometimes create no legal liability for the firm (Patel and Reinsch 2003). Some states have now passed "apology laws" affording some protection to hospitals/health care firms who issue apologies (Widman 2010). Therefore, "the folklore about the [negative] legal consequences of [corporate] apologies is oversimplified" (Patel and Reinsch 2003: 9). Still, whether a firm's conduct rises to the level of a crime likely will turn out to be a matter for court adjudication. It would be naive, therefore, to expect that CEOs will start publicly admitting to having engaged voluntarily in *criminal* misconduct. Instead, as I have been arguing, assuming responsibility can take the form of CEOs publicly committing themselves and their firms to avoiding similar problems in the future and perhaps to ameliorating the past harms if doing so does not equate to an admission of legal guilt. By making such a commitment, the audience knows with whom they are dealing and whom they can hold accountable for fixing the harm they have suffered. To return to my earlier metaphor: such a commitment makes it possible for a bridge of trust to be built between the apologizing firm and its audience.

We can contrast ethically better apologies in which CEOs assume an appropriate degree and type of responsibility with those in which CEOs hide behind the collective. Leaders of firms involved in wrongdoing sometimes use the pronoun "we" or refer to the "team" when describing the firm's deeds or strategies. For example, the bankers at the center of the financial collapse consistently referred to their "teams" and to the practices of other bankers when alluding to the causes of the debacle. These bankers suggested that many parties were to blame for the meltdown. Yet, when everyone is responsible, no one is. Furthermore, when CEOs fail to cast themselves as responsible at least for preventing additional harm of the sort referenced in their apologies, their words can wind up damaging trust even further (Tomlinson, Dineen, and Lewicki 2004; Schlenker, Pontari, and Christopher 2001). When CEOs deny all responsibility for the problem, the audience is *more* likely to attribute to the speaker an active intention to harm (Mattila 2009).

To summarize: Simply saying "I am sorry" is not sufficient for an ethically good corporate apology. A CEO's apology qualifies as such only when the apologizer explicitly assumes responsibility for seriously addressing some particular problem for which he or she is reasonably being held accountable by the audience. Ac-

ceptance of responsibility should be the apology's dominant theme. An ethically good apology does not turn argumentative, nor does the speaker plead ignorance of wrongdoing. In the case of the financial debacle, many financial CEOs subsequently insisted that neither they or their firm were aware of any possible problems with the mortgage-backed securities at the root of the collapse. If they were genuinely ignorant; and if their ignorance was not the result of negligence but of non-culpable involuntary ignorance (Aristotle 2005), then there is absolutely no reason for these speakers to plead ignorance when offering an apology. Indeed, the CEO likely has nothing for which to apologize in the first place because we are assuming that neither the CEO nor the firm could have avoided the unintended injury and thus may bear little or no responsibility for setting matters aright. On the other hand, if the situation does call for the speaker to apologize and to assume some measure of responsibility, then for the CEO to invoke ignorance merely clouds what is at issue in an apology—namely, who can be held accountable for fixing the mess in which the firm is perceived as being involved? Pleading ignorance has only one purpose: to deny or mitigate responsibility. But an apology is not an occasion for suspected wrongdoers to plead their case. Rather an apology aims at healing a rupture in trust by having the wrongdoer assume responsibility and ask to make a new beginning.

B. Speaker Ethos and Genuine Apologies

So far I have been discussing the minimum conceptual or content elements that should be part of an authentic, ethically good apology. But speaker *ethos* matters as well. Aristotle argues that the speaker's character, as revealed through speech itself, can serve to persuade to the extent that the audience perceives that character as virtuous (or at least struggling to be virtuous) (Rap 2010). As Halloran (1982: 60) concisely explains, "In its simplest form, ethos is what we might call the argument from authority, the argument that says in effect, Believe me because I am the sort of person whose word you can believe." In the case of business communications, the audience's perception that the speaker is trustworthy makes what he or she says more credible (Higgins and Walker 2012). The perception of trustworthiness in the case of public corporate apologies draws upon shared public ideas of virtue:

In contrast to modern notions of the person or self, ethos emphasizes the conventional rather than the idiosyncratic, the public rather than the private. The most concrete meaning given for the term in the Greek lexicon is "a habitual gathering place," and . . . it is upon this image of people gathering together in a public place, sharing experiences and ideas, that its meaning as character rests. To have ethos is to manifest the virtues most valued by the culture to and for which one speaks—in Athens: justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, wisdom. (Halloran 1982: 60)

When people feel that they have been harmed, whether or not the CEO has the virtue of justice becomes especially important, for justice is typically understood as rendering to people their due. In this section on speaker ethos, I focus on elements of an apology that signal the speaker is seeking to act justly. Unlike some theorists (Sitkin and Bies 1993; Tavuchis 1991; Cohen 1999), I go beyond requiring that the

speaker be “sincere.” Unjust people can be sincere insofar as their speech exactly corresponds to their character—they are saying what they genuinely believe. Yet a sincerely unjust apology will not enable the speaker to rebuild bridges with the audience. A theory of corporate apologies thus must incorporate some notion of speaker virtue.

Element #3: Promptly Apologizing

In the context of corporate apologies, rendering to people their due means the firm rectifying a past harm or offense and/or preventing future injury and suffering. The promptness with which Chrysler’s Nardelli and Netflix’s Hastings offered their apologies conveys the impression that they were eager to make things right going forward. This eagerness leads the audience to infer that the speaker is a just and considerate individual who does not want to be party to an ongoing harm (Lewicki and Bunker 1996). That perception, in turn, suggests the CEO in question will actually do something to rectify the offence (see Element #8). This inference gives listeners a reason to be open to reestablishing relations with the offender and his or her firm going forward.

If all the other elements sketched in this paper are present, even a belated assumption may still function as a step toward reconciliation. A prompt apology, though, is typically better than one long delayed (Seeger and Ulmer 2001). Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO)’s CEO was widely excoriated for waiting six weeks to utter an apology for the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster at the firm’s Daiichi plant following a huge tsunami (Harlan 2011). Firestone’s CEO Masatahi Ono suffered a barrage of criticism for taking weeks to speak to customers who were worried that Firestone’s radial tires (widely used on Ford’s Explorer vehicles) were defective and likely to disintegrate, resulting in deadly accidents. The delay, coupled with Ono’s failure to accept any responsibility for making sure that this sort of problem did not happen again, frustrated the firm’s customers and the general public (Hearit 2006). A long delay may lead listeners to believe that the apology had to be wrested from a non-virtuous CEO, using threats of legal action, boycotts, etc. In general, an apology must be construed as freely given. An apology made under duress (like a promise) will not inspire confidence. A prompt apology lets the intended recipients hear the apology as voluntary, an important element already covered above.

Element #4: Conveying a Settled, Just, and Prudent CEO Character

Insofar as the speaker’s ethos or character is conveyed in and through what he or she says, the distinction between logos/content and ethos/expressed character is not hard and fast. Still, I believe that management scholars and public relations specialists have erred in not sufficiently considering the issue of speaker ethos. In particular, the literature from these fields consistently considers select individual apologies, construing them as stand alone events. But apologies never occur within a vacuum. Previous comments by a firm’s executives or an earlier lack of response by a firm and its leaders may heavily influence how an apology is heard by stakeholders. Consider the following sort of case: A CEO’s firm has been held legally responsible for many wicked misdeeds, yet the CEO has never apologized in the past for any of these harmful offenses. If he now comes before the public to apologize for a new

offense, the audience likely will be very skeptical as to whether the CEO is a just human being truly willing to accept responsibility for preventing future damage. The speaker's past actions (or lack thereof) are evidence of his character, and the audience hears what is said in light of judgments it makes about the speaker's ethos. For the apology to have a chance of being perceived as authentic, the speaker might have to address explicitly why he is apologizing now even though he has not seen fit to issue an apology in prior cases.

In some cases, a particular firm's CEO role itself may be so contaminated by perceived past corporate wrongdoing that the current occupier of that role will have trouble convincing the public that he or she does have a just character. Japan's TEPCO illustrates my concern. TEPCO had a history of not disclosing problems at its nuclear plants (Shirouzu and Smith 2011). It had gone so far as to falsify plant records and to re-edit video as part of a cover-up (Mostrous and Ralph 2011). TEPCO did not transparently provide information about the steps it was taking to ensure that such ethical breaches would not occur in the future. Consequently, even prior to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, the Tokyo public doubted the honesty of TEPCO's management (Whitaker 2011). The CEO at the time of the disaster may have been trying to change the culture at the firm and prevent problems in the future, but the public's suspicion of past TEPCO pronouncements and assurances led citizens to discount his recent apology regarding the radiation leaks at Fukushima (Harlan 2011).

In other words, the past behavior of both the individual CEO and his or her immediate predecessors are part of the context in which the apology is given and in which it seeks to establish its authenticity. The past behavior of both parties is interpreted as revelatory of the CEO's character, which in turn is thought to shape his or her intention. This context of inferred character, habits, and motivations conditions how the apology is heard and, consequently, the extent to which it is meaningful as an apology—i.e., the extent to which it functions to restore trust. If the inferred character of the CEO is not thought to be just, then any acceptance of wrongdoing may fail to foster and restore trust. To be deemed trustworthy, CEOs should do what they can to address past public perceptions of the firm that may interfere with how an apology now being given likely will be heard by the audience.

Element #5: Creating a Supportive, Consistent Context

There is another important element in authentic apologies, an element that has rarely been discussed. Or, when it is discussed, the theorists (Hearit [2006]; Kador [2009]) take the context as a given, rather than as something the speaker can choose and shape. For example, CEOs almost always choose the venue in which to make their apology. The audience recognizes that fact and interprets the CEO's choice as revelatory of his or her disposition, a disposition that will guide the leader's future behavior in a direction that may or may not be virtuous. To the extent possible, the leader who wishes to apologize ought to be mindful of the context and to structure it in a way that supports (or at least does not contradict) the logos/content of the speaker's statement. If the statement's import is contradicted by the larger context, then the audience may conclude that the speaker is not especially prudent or mindful and so likely not very cognizant of the magnitude of the suffering for

which the stakeholders are holding the firm responsible. When CEOs are seen as having a deficient character, those receiving the apology may be loath to believe that these leaders are sufficiently wise or committed to justice to alter their firm's future behavior. If the audience lacks this key belief, the putative apology will fail to do its work. Through structuring the context, apologizing CEOs can send the message that they are just and practically wise and, therefore, truly are seeking to rectify the breach in trust.

After a ruptured Ashland Oil tank resulted in a significant oil spill affecting Pittsburgh's drinking water supply, the firm's CEO John Hall flew to the city, met with concerned citizens whose water supply was in danger of contamination, and took often hostile questions for several hours about the spill and about Ashland Oil's planned clean-up efforts. Hall's willingness to meet these injured individuals in their hometown testified to his desire to know exactly what was going on and to show solidarity with the victims of the spill. This choice of venue reinforced his message that the company would make things right, so it is not surprising that the apology was favorably reviewed by the local press (Associated Press 1988).

By contrast, Toyota CEO Akio Toyoda blundered when choosing the context for his apology. After discussing quality control problems with Toyota cars, the CEO left the venue in an Audi. Toyoda should have realized that choosing to exit in any car other than a Toyota would send the wrong signal. Viewers would conclude either that Toyotas were so unsafe that even the car manufacturer's CEO did not want to drive that make of car; or that the CEO was so tone-deaf to what Toyota owners were saying about their fears that he did not think it worthwhile to choose a more appropriate venue (i.e., one that did not contractually require him to drive anything but a Toyota). In the first case, the audience will doubt the CEO's veracity; in the second case, his practical wisdom and virtue will be called into question. Either way, the CEO's statement will not serve to reestablish a basis for trust between the car owners and the firm.

C. Audience Pathos and Genuine Apologies

In addition to the content of the apology and the speaker's character as conveyed in and through the apology, the apologizer needs to consider audience emotions or pathos. Both the emotions aroused in the audience by the apology itself and the passions the audience is feeling before the executive speaks matter. In the cases being considered here (i.e., cases in which an apology is truly owed), the emotions that the audience brings to the apology will typically be anger and fear. Believing that they have suffered an injustice, stakeholders feel disrespected and angry. If the harm attributed to the firm has left these individuals feeling vulnerable, they may be experiencing fear. For these feeling members to accept a CEO's statement as an apology, they must believe that the speaker respects (and in some cases, shares) their legitimate rage and fear. An ethically good apology can go some way toward diffusing such emotions and engendering a feeling, if not of friendship, at least of good will on the part of the audience toward the firm. Yet corporate communications have tended to overlook the importance of an emotional connection between the speaking executive and the listening public (Read 2007).

Element #6: Delivering the Apology in Person

When delivering an apology, CEOs typically should appear in person for several reasons related to pathos. First, by showing up in person to deliver the apology, CEOs show themselves willing to be held accountable by their victims (see Element #5), thereby implicitly acknowledging the legitimacy of the audience members' felt sense that they have been wronged by the actions of the CEO or the CEO's firm. Second, injured stakeholders want to see the demeanor of apologizing CEOs. When a CEO's bearing or attitude suggests hubris or indifference, audience members may well conclude that their suffering has not been taken sufficiently seriously by the firm. In that case, they will not be predisposed to let go of their fear and rage and to rebuild trust in and with the offending firm.

Unlike Austin (1962: 14–15), I would not require that the speaker *intend* to restore trust with his or her audience. The speaker's actual intention is not something that can be easily determined by the audience who rarely has any personal knowledge whatsoever of the apologizing CEO.¹¹ However, apologizing executives must at least be seen and heard to be experiencing the correct, relevant emotions and commitments—e.g., some degree of concern and a soberness of purpose. These things manifest themselves physically in the face and bearing of the speaker, so the audience naturally wants to see the CEO apologizing in person.¹² Merely sending an apologetic letter or text message will be less persuasive because these contexts are not sufficiently rich to restore trust. In those cases, stakeholders may be inclined to infer that a law or public relations firm has drafted the CEO's comments and that the CEO and her firm are unwilling to face up directly to the stakeholders. That unwillingness may make an already angry or fearful audience more so.

Element #7: Exhibiting Empathy

Engendering trust with a view to remedying injuries and preventing future harm is easier when the audience perceives the apologizer as exhibiting empathy. (I say “perceived” because, again, we cannot know for sure what someone's internal state or intentions are.¹³) Rather than minimizing the damage their corporations have done, authentically apologizing CEOs demonstrate an awareness of the array of stakeholders whom they may have injured and of the painfulness and extent of the injuries attributed to actions of the firm. Chrysler CEO Nardelli's apology discussed earlier reflected his knowledge that his incorrect response concerning plant closings had raised false hopes that would soon be dashed. By explicitly stating as much, Nardelli showed that he had given some thought to the extent of harm his error had produced. His apology also implicitly acknowledged that his Kenosha listeners might legitimately feel irritated and betrayed by his retraction of the earlier mistaken promise that Chrysler would be keeping the Kenosha plant open. Nardelli could not change Chrysler's decision but, by speaking empathetically and respectfully to his audience, Nardelli gave his listeners a reason for them to view both the CEO and Chrysler in a more favorable light.

I am not here positing some mysterious inner state or feeling of empathy but rather speaking of an awareness expressed in speech itself. In Aristotelian terms,

CEOs who show empathy and give evidence that they understand the magnitude of suffering caused by their firms *reveal through speech* that they possess some measure of fellow feelings for the injured parties. By recognizing the extent and magnitude of these parties' suffering, the apologizer induces the audience to think that the firm will, in fact, appropriately act to remedy the harm. That belief *in itself* facilitates an opening up, a step toward bridge-building with the offending firm, and an invitation for the audience to let go of some of its rage or fear.

Expressing empathy not only reflects the presumed emotions of the speaker while addressing the anger or fear of the audience. It also serves to create an identity of feeling between the speaker and audience, an identity that encourages the audience to believe that "Yes, this speaker really understands why we are so angry/resentful/afraid and is therefore more likely to do something to help us." The apologizer's expressed empathy, especially when paired with an explicit statement of how the firm erred, stirs the audience's memory of the offense and evokes the constellation of feelings they originally experienced in connection with the corporation's damaging behavior. If those receiving the putative apology perceive that the speaker shares *at that very moment* the audience's feelings (e.g., anger at the injustice), both parties are more likely to arrive at a mutual understanding, repair the breach of trust in their relationship, and move on. Their shared humanity is brought to the fore. Although the past cannot be undone, the speaker and the audience have a basis for cooperating in the future. They are sufficiently alike that they may reasonably hope to share common ideals and goals.

Domino's Pizza CEO Patrick Doyle gave an in-person apology that illustrates this point. Customers who thought that they had eaten or might in the future buy a pizza that Domino's employees had contaminated with bodily fluids were understandably outraged and repelled. Doyle demonstrated empathy with these customers by visibly expressing the rage he himself was feeling at what these Domino employees had done. A detailed study by Mediacurves of a sample audience's unfolding reactions to Doyle's apology revealed that the audience's trust in the CEO shot way up when he talked about how the actions of these two employees "sickened" him. At the moment when Doyle's disgust mirrored the feelings of the audience, the audience found him still more worthy of their trust (Mediacurves 2009).

On the other hand, should the CEO appear to lack empathy, the intended audience likely will infer that the speaker is not trustworthy. Former residents of Fukushima gave low marks to the apology they received from the TEPCO CEO when he finally did come to speak with them in person. According to press reports, the residents felt that the CEO merely bowed, trotted out stock phrases of regret and failed to show any true empathy toward them (Harlan 2011). When British Petroleum's CEO Tony Hayward after the BP oil spill that badly polluted the Gulf of Mexico whined that he would "like to have his life back," the relatives of the eleven men who were killed on the oil rigs were incensed by Hayward's apparent callousness (Simon and Muskal 2010). Hayward eventually would get his life back, but these victims would forever be dead. Hayward's earlier expression of regret (which arguably was not a genuine or ethically good apology—see endnote 5), followed by this inappropriate lament, suggested that his character was insensitive and petty. Instead of allaying the

audience's anger, Hayward fanned the flames. To take another case: Bernie Madoff's investment securities firm was unmasked as a giant Ponzi scheme. Madoff was arrested and convicted for securities fraud. His courtroom apology talked more about the harm he had caused to his immediate family than to the thousands of investors whom he had swindled. Given that his family gained and retained millions from his wrongdoing, Madoff's unempathetic expression of contrition left many listeners (including the judge) feeling that Madoff still did not appreciate how unjustly he had behaved (Weiser 2011). Again, the apology intensified the anger of those hearing the apology rather than working to rebuild any sense that Madoff's firm (which continued to operate) could be trusted in the future.

Apologizing CEOs should be self-effacing when acknowledging their personal error or committing the firm to ameliorating future harm. Those who have been harmed typically feel quite vulnerable, so apologizers, by themselves assuming a position of humble vulnerability, equalize relations and thereby make it easier to restore trust. The tone of voice in which the CEOs deliver their apologies matters crucially as well. An empathetic speaker does not speak in a hectoring or harsh way. Compassion coupled with sorrowful humility softens the speaker's heart, making the voice gentle. An angry or fearful audience hears a speaker who has perceived the audience's vulnerable emotion state and who is seeking to make amends in a gentle way that does not further provoke or harm his or her listeners. Coupling an apology with a joke cartoon renders it less effective, because the jocular tone suggests that the speaker is not truly repentant and "does not get it." When Dreamhost CEO Josh Jones included a picture of Homer Simpson in his emailed statement expressing his regret for the firm's over-billing of its customers, the disturbed customers were understandably not amused (Jones 2008). They didn't feel that being cheated was in the least bit funny, so Jones's cartoonish apology struck them as wildly inappropriate and perhaps a bit cruel.

Formal language is generally better than informal speech or text for conveying empathy and establishing a common emotional bond with the audience. This point needs to be emphasized, especially given the rise of social media. Consider the following apology issued as part of a major marketing campaign presumably approved by the CEO. After Pepsi released an iPhone app making it easy for men to boast about their sexual conquests, the firm sent out the following tweet: "Our app tried 2 show the humorous lengths guys go 2 pick up women. We apologize if it's in bad taste & appreciate your feedback. #pepsifail" (Liebelt 2009). The flippancy of this sloppily crafted text message and argumentative tone (*if* our ad was in bad taste) make it hard for the angered audience to take the expressed regret seriously. The apology gave these individuals no reason to place trust in the firm or its brand. Hashtagging the apology cheapened it further.¹⁴ It looked as though Pepsi was using the tweet to generate publicity and to create a following among the same men whom they initially targeted with this offensive ad. Indeed, Pepsi did not pull the app before or immediately after this apology. Ethical or authentic apologies foreground the feelings of those harmed. Self-referential meta-tags put the speaker's ego at the forefront and substitute cunning for fellow feeling.

Element #8: Following Through on the Apology

As the word “emotions” suggests, emotions set us in motion. Two sorts of emotions are relevant when it comes to CEO public apologies. The emotions of the audience move them to listen to the speaker and perhaps to take action—e.g., if the CEO’s apology intensified the anger of the audience members, they may be more inclined to sue or to sell the CEO’s firm’s stock than to reconcile with the firm. In more general terms, the audience is often looking to move on, to rebuild their lives in the future. They want the CEO’s word to help them do so.

The conveyed emotions of the speaker are relevant as well when it comes to moving matters along. The more empathy and compassion speakers appear to feel, the more they will be viewed as likely to take remedial action quickly. Such follow through is crucial if audience members are ever again to see the firm as trustworthy. Consequently, apologies should specify what CEOs are doing *right now* to make things right and what future measures they will adopt to restore trust (Austin 1962). Such clarity enables audience members to begin to let go of some of their rage or fear. Netflix CEO Hastings not only said he was sorry for joking about the fact that the firm was charging Americans more than Canadians for the firm’s video service. He wisely went on to state that Netflix was planning to offer the same lower cost pricing in the US in the near future (Yarow 2010).

We may usefully contrast Hastings’s apology and its promise to rectify matters in a very specific fashion, on the one hand, with the apology attempted by Lloyd Blankfein, the CEO of Goldman Sachs, after the near meltdown of the financial sector. Blankfein stumbled about when offering a vague apology for his firms’ involvement in “things”: “There’s also people who feel—and who are right—that there’s some meaningful things where we may have—not may have, certainly our industry is responsible for things. And we’re a leader in our industry, and we participated in things that were clearly wrong, and we have reasons to regret and apologize for” (Gordon 2009: 1). When pressed, Blankfein would not admit any specific wrongdoing connected with Goldman Sachs’s sales or even with some of the practices of the mortgage industry as a whole. Goldman had packaged and sold more than \$40 billion worth of bonds backed by sub-prime mortgages in 2006 and 2007. At the same time, Goldman was laying huge bets that the housing market would experience a sharp downturn, thereby dramatically reducing the value of these same bonds (Morgenstern and Story 2009). Goldman did not disclose these bets to investors. Blankfein refused to admit that analysts at Goldman had ever doubted the value of these bonds, responding that Goldman was simply “in the world of risk management, not in the world of guessing where things were going” (Morgenstern and Story 2009: 24). This answer would be a lot more believable if there were any evidence that Goldman was also buying large amounts of mortgage-backed securities for its own portfolios at the same time as it was offloading billions of dollars’ worth of these securities onto unwary investors. No such evidence has emerged. Equally troubling, Blankfein would not specify any particular steps Goldman Sachs was taking to deal with the “things” that the firm and the industry did. When he was specifically asked about lessons he had learned, he replied:

Listen, there was a lot of negligent behavior, improper bad behavior, behavior that has to be fixed and sorted through. There's no doubt about it, everybody succumbed to it, some more or less. We don't take ourselves out of that. I include ourselves in that. (Gordon 2009: 1)

Is the CEO going to initiate corrective measures? Blankfein doesn't say. What specifically are Blankfein and Goldman Sachs doing to prevent future negligent behavior? Again, no answer.

DDB Worldwide CEO Chuck Brymer's apology for an ill-considered advertisement was more authentic because he and members of this firm went on to discuss what DDB Worldwide was doing to avoid offensive ads in the future. DDB Brazil had produced an ad for the World Wildlife Fund that appeared to minimize the horror of the 9/11 attacks. The ad stated that the loss of human life in the 2001 episodes was of little significance compared to the ongoing damage to wildlife around the world (Patel 2009).¹⁵ The ad was roundly protested in the US and abroad, and Brymer apologized in print. Using the first person pronoun, he named the offense he and others at his firm had committed: "I find the advertisement offensive and insensitive and I humbly apologize on behalf of myself and the employees of DDB Worldwide" (Patel 2009: 1). In the same article, DDB Worldwide elaborated what the CEO and firm were doing to avoid this kind of debacle in the future: "We are taking corrective actions to ensure that future *pro bono* work from our offices undergoes a more rigorous review" (Patel 2009: 1). By printing the apology in the industry's flagship magazine *Advertising Age*, DDB Worldwide helped educate competitors about the need to monitor rigorously all work, including work for not-for-profits. In a similar vein, CEO Toyoda's apology, while falling short in some respects, was ethically good insofar as he began his talk by making Toyota's plans to improve their cars a central part of his apology (Montopoli 2010). Not surprisingly, the media and the larger public generally gave Toyoda pretty high marks for his willingness to discuss candidly how Toyota had lost its way and what measures it was pursuing to restore the quality consumers had come to expect from the Toyota brand.

Speaker regret manifesting itself in *changed behavior* is a crucial factor when making an apology. If the speaker can specify future plans to act in a more responsible and caring way, the audience will interpret the speaker's emotions as more authentic because the expressed emotions are more moving—their effect is extending from the present into the future. This continuity of emotions reinforces a perception that the speaker's character is changing for the better. The recipients of the apology are witnessing the emergence of a new and more virtuous set of habits or ethos on the part of the firm and its CEO. The audience can thus legitimately hope for an altered and better future for themselves as well. That hope, in turn, curtails any feelings of rage and fear, thereby predisposing them to repose more trust in the firm and its brand.

Of course, the CEO and firm will need to embark upon a concrete plan to realize the stated corrective steps. That is why some audience members take a "wait and see" attitude before accepting an apology as such. If a CEO promises reparations and then does not make the specified payments, or if the CEO commits to putting a more rigorous review process in place and fails to do so, those who initially accepted the CEO at his or her word and began to reconcile with the firm may subsequently

come to doubt the validity and value of CEO's apology. In that case, a CEO's comments may wind up doing more harm than good to a firm's brand.

CONCLUSION

The above account attempts to specify some elements a corporate apology should possess in order to be perceived as ethically good—i.e., as aiming at healing the breach of trust that has occurred as the result of wrongdoing by the corporation and/or by the CEO. Not every apology will have every element. But the more of these elements an apology possesses and/or the more meaningful each element is, the more a corporate apology will be received as trustworthy, authentic, and ethically good (even if some members of the audience still refuse to accept the apology as such).

As I made clear at the beginning of the article, I would not claim that these elements will suffice to persuade every audience. Apologies are extremely complex speech acts. Whether a given apology *in fact* persuades a particular audience depends on factors outside of the CEO's control. In this closing section, I will present some reasons why I am suspicious of the body of research that claims one can lay out a set of rules for crafting effective apologies that will actually be persuasive (Bisel and Messersmith 2012; Scher and Darley 1997; Tavuchis 1991).

Some audience members may have no interest in rebuilding bridges with a firm. Their attitudes may be hardened and not subject to change, regardless of what a CEO says. Or an audience may have expectations that cannot be met. For example, in the early days after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, the Japanese people clearly wanted TEPCO executives to specify precisely what they were going to do to get the radiation under control. Even if the apology by TEPCO's CEO had been textbook perfect in other respects, it might still have failed to restore trust with many recipients because it simply was not clear after the fact how and whether the effects of the disaster could be lessened, much less reversed. Trust needs to be restored because harm has been done by the firm; some of that harm can be viewed as voluntary (e.g., TEPCO executives' early choice to defer some containment measures because they wanted to preserve the economic value of the plants).¹⁶ However, no one knows exactly how to remedy the primary ongoing harm—continuing emissions of radiation into the atmosphere and sea. At this juncture, making an ethically good apology containing all of the elements specified above may be close to impossible.

We must also remember that CEOs do not get to choose their audience. How a given audience construes itself will affect how the apology is heard and how persuasive it ultimately turns out to be. Fehr and Gelfand's (2010) experiments suggest that listeners who are especially relationship-centered want to hear ample evidence of the speaker's empathy with those harmed; apology recipients who are more individualistic want to hear more from the apologizer about compensation. So, although I would argue that ethically good apologies tend to possess many or all of the above elements, some elements of the apology may need to be stronger or more developed for certain audience members.

Cultural differences affect what an audience will accept as a genuine apology: "Japanese apologies are more apt to communicate submissiveness, humility, and

meekness whereas Americas are more apt to communicate sincerity” (Lazare 2005: 33). Placing tremendous value on social harmony, Japanese audience members may be more willing than Westerners to accept a somewhat indirect apology as genuine (Kelts 2010).¹⁷ To the extent that being more indirect facilitates social harmony, Japanese CEOs understandably may opt for opacity rather than transparency. Emotions get read differently as well: “What Asians consider over-the-top [pathos], southern Europeans may consider emotionally repressed” (Clegg, 2013: 2). Even a single country (e.g., the US) may contain many cultures. As Martin Marty observed four decades ago, “We no longer have a way of convoking [more than] two hundred million Americans into the single kind of moral community that will [unequivocally] respond to one set of signals” (Marty 1973: 192). Such cultural variation does not vitiate the above analysis, but it does mean that the way speakers set about incorporating desired elements will vary from culture to culture and perhaps even within a single nation. An apologetic statement may be efficacious in some respects and in some contexts and less so under other conditions (Fehr and Gelfand 2010).

In addition, circumstantial factors lying beyond a CEO’s purview also influence how effective his or her apology may prove to be for restoring trust. Let us assume that BP CEO Tony Hayward had given an apology with all of the above desirable elements. If the following day another firm’s rig in the Gulf of Mexico had blown out and caused a massive spill, many Gulf residents likely would have raged against all oil companies and dismissed Hayward’s apology. In these sorts of cases, I would argue that the CEO’s apology still qualifies as ethically good insofar as it contained the logical, ethical, and emotional elements needed to be worthy of listener trust even if it fails to realize its implicit goal of trust restoration under these particular circumstances.¹⁸ The point is analogous to one Aristotle makes in his *Rhetoric*. Someone who can find the available means of persuasion in every given case is a good rhetorician. But it does not follow that

the rhetorician will be able to convince under all circumstances. Rather he is in a situation similar to that of the physician: the latter has a complete grasp of his art only if he neglects nothing that might heal his patient, though he is not able to heal *every* patient. Similarly, the rhetorician has a complete grasp of his method, if he discovers the available means of persuasion, though he is not able to convince *everybody*. (Rap 2010: 1)

The recent explosion in corporate apologies poses its own challenges for executives trying to make amends. As Adams (2000) observed more than a decade ago, CEOs now love to say “I’m sorry.” If audiences begin to perceive corporate apologies as *pro forma*, these listeners may dismiss *all* executive apologies as mere ritual theater, regardless of how well crafted and ethically good they are.

Lastly, there are a host of factors whose impact on perceived trustworthiness has only begun to be researched and whose impact on audience reception of an apology may or may not be significant when combined with all of the other elements discussed above. For example, women who wear light makeup designed to make their lips and eyes stand out relative to their skin may be deemed more competent and trustworthy than women who wear either no makeup or heavy makeup (Louis 2011). Executives with “baby faces” are apparently spontaneously judged to be

more trustworthy (Gorn, Jiang, and Johar 2008). The appearance of the apologizing CEO likely does matter, but would having a baby face suffice to make this corporate apology believable if he or she did not show any empathy or failed to specify how the company would attempt to lessen the harm it has caused going forward? I could find no research that situated appearance effects within the larger rhetorical context so it is hard to know how to assess the importance of such effects on actual apology efficacy. Furthermore, the audience's actual reception of a particular corporate apology may tell us little about how ethical that apology is. A racially biased audience, for example, might find Asian faces less trustworthy than white European faces, but this has to be irrelevant to the question of whether the apology by an Asian CEO is, in fact, *worthy* of less trust than that of a Caucasian counterpart.

For all of these reasons, actual audience reception of any given apology is a highly contingent and problematic business. Fortunately, the ethical goodness of the apology does not depend entirely on its actual reception but on whether the apology's logos, ethos and pathos are such as to make the apology, in principle, trustworthy. CEOs can and do offer ethically better and worse apologies. This article has outlined ways in which corporate apologies can be delivered in a more authentic fashion. I have sought to move the discussion of corporate apologies beyond the current emphasis, which we find in much of the communications and management literature, on *apology efficacy* or on *audience reception* of CEOs' statements. Scholars need also to explore the factors that make for *ethically good* apologies. In particular, I hope that other scholars will join and extend this attempt to examine how organizational complexity and the public context of corporate apologies give rise to ethical criteria for apologizing well that are distinct from the criteria we use for evaluating personal apologies in our private lives.

NOTES

1. In his discussion of speech acts, Austin seems to think that an apology is primarily an expression of regret. The speaker could regret all kinds of things without saying anything that functioned to restore trust. So my desiderata for an authentic or ethically good apology are more extensive than Austin's.

2. A lot more could be said about how speech acts are not defined by the speaker's intention, but I do not want to lose the focus on the ethics of corporate apologies. The general point I am making is, I think, clear enough. For a discussion of the public nature of speech acts, see Austin 1962.

3. I would estimate that in my database of around 120 corporate apologies, in roughly 25 percent of the cases, the apologizing CEO is not the person who was running the firm when the event for which the current CEO is apologizing occurred.

4. In cases where CEOs have been personally responsible for committing or initiating the wrongdoing for which they are apologizing, their apologies will have to reflect that fact (see Element #2 below).

5. Nobles (2008) has argued that the main focus of collective apologies should be less on the past and more on ways that the nation can provide for a better future for all of its citizens. Whether that claim is true could be debated but it is striking that many corporate apologies are forward-looking in tone, even if the speaker acknowledges the firm's role in past injuries.

6. The apologizer and/or his or her firm may not be legally culpable for the wrongdoing, but, if the CEO is apologizing, he or she must be willing to accept some measure of censure or what we might consider ethical blame.

7. Some statements fall into a gray area because the audience's desire to hear an apology perhaps cannot be met by the CEO because the circumstances concerning the alleged wrongdoing are very unclear at the time the statement is being made. Thus, when British Petroleum CEO Tony Hayward said that he was sorry

that the Gulf of Mexico “incident” happened and that he “deeply regretted the impact that the spill has had on the environment,” he was not offering a genuine apology (Hayward quoted in MSNBC 2010). Given that, at the time of this writing, we still do not know exactly what caused the blowout, Hayward perhaps could not say much more than he did about why the incident occurred. On the other hand, we can equally understand why the Gulf residents who were hoping for an apology were completely unmoved by Hayward’s words (Simon and Muskal 2010). Since he did not name any specific misdeed for which he was taking personal responsibility, his comments about this tragedy did not function in their eyes as an authentic apology.

8. I do not here want to be drawn into the vexed question of whether or in what sense the corporation is a legal person with agency. The literature on this subject is vast. Let me just say that my idea that the CEO speaks as a representative of the firm would seem to be compatible with an array of views of the firm as a moral agent. To take just two examples: Peter French construes the firm as a moral person that exists separately from the individuals who make up the firm at any given moment (French 1979). However, he also acknowledges that individuals can be responsible and thus can presumably assume responsibility on behalf of the firm when these individuals are in a responsibility relationship with the firm. So French would presumably allow a CEO who is held accountable by the firm itself to be viewed as a legitimate representative of the firm capable of offering an apology on behalf of the firm. Larry May rejects French’s view, arguing that corporations do not exist apart from individual biological agents but rather always operate vicariously through them (May, 1983). He, too, would allow a firm to apologize vicariously through a CEO who is understood as a morally sanctioned representative of the firm.

9. However, the apology may still not be fully authentic if it fails to contain other relevant elements.

10. However, apologies do not necessarily equate to an admission of guilt under the law. See Patel and Reinsch 2003.

11. I do agree, however, with Austin’s (1962, *passim*) stress on the performative and essentially public nature of apologies as well as promises.

12. Of course, when the speaker is genuinely remorseful, the underlying truth of his or her expressed emotions will tend to make the executive’s apology more credible. In that case, the CEO’s projected persona, audience-imputed intentions, and actual character of the apologizing CEO are mutually supportive.

13. As J. L. Austin (1962) observes, speakers who use the correct form of words for a promise and use them in the right circumstance and in the right way *have promised* even if they do not have the intention of following through on the promise. I would argue that a similar point applies to an apology—the form is public, so CEOs do not get to decide unilaterally whether they have apologized or not.

14. A tag is a keyword attached to information in order to make the information more easily found by browsing or searching with an online search engine. Hashtagging is a form of tagging used on Twitter.

15. The television ad can be viewed at <http://adland.tv/content/ddb-worlwide-ceo-apologizes-one-show-banned-scams-wwf-911-ad-still-bad>.

16. Even sorting out what aspects of this disaster were voluntary and which not is challenging. In retrospect, the nuclear power plant disaster at Fukushima in Japan appears preventable. Yet, at the time that TEPCO constructed its plant, the firm used the best science available (Chang 2011), opting for a site it considered to be at less risk of a major earthquake. It did consider the possibility of the region being hit by a tsunami. But neither the firm nor other experts foresaw that a level 9 earthquake would generate a tsunami so great that the waves would overwhelm the reactors. In general, experts have tremendous difficulty assessing the risk of nuclear accidents because they cannot quantify the likelihood of catastrophic events occurring (Broder, Wald, and Zeller 2011).

17. Some of the text of the apology in English is in Justin McCurry, “Japan Airlines Files for Bankruptcy,” McCurry 2010.

18. As Aristotle himself notes in Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, individual happiness (which is the ethical good or goal of life) depends to some extent on circumstances beyond the individual’s control. If the person has cultivated virtue but has had unrelentingly bad luck (the agent’s children have died young; the agent’s friends have all been murdered, etc.), then happiness may not be actualized or realized even though ethical goodness was potentially present in the individual. Aristotle’s point does not make him an ethical relativist but does show that realizing one’s ethical goodness is objectively dependent upon some conditions that may be out of the agent’s control.

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