

Sorry for Being Right: A Case Against Grounding Political Apologies on Moral Wrongness¹

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Abstract. Most political philosophers assume that political apologies are appropriate only in response to past morally wrongful acts committed by state officials. In this article, I challenge the view that moral wrongdoing is a necessary condition for the duty to issue a public apology. I argue that political apologies may be warranted even in the absence of past moral wrongs – particularly in cases where morally justified political actions nevertheless inflict harm on innocent parties. My central claim is that there exists a duty to alleviate the harm suffered by the blameless, regardless of whether such harm was morally justified or even necessary, and that political apologies represent an appropriate means of discharging this duty. I begin by examining this hypothesis at a more basic, interpersonal level – apologies between private individuals – before extending the analysis to the political realm. To support my argument, I draw on a historical example from the Second World War: the British decision to bomb German cities in late 1940. I present Winston Churchill's choice to target civilian areas, resulting in the deaths of innocent people (including infants), as both morally justified and harmful. I argue that the harm caused to innocent families created an obligation for Churchill to apologise, despite the justificatory context of war. I conclude that adopting a harm-based account prompts a revised categorisation of the necessary criteria for a proper political apology.

Keywords: political apologies, moral justification, harm, World War II, state responsibility

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1. Introduction

"For what it's worth,

I'm sorry for the hurt."

Liam Gallagher, *For What It's Worth*

An apology can be defined as "the act of declaring one's regret, remorse, or sorrow for having insulted, failed, injured, harmed or wronged another" (Mihai n.d.). In political theory, however, this multi-dimensional account of apologies is replaced by an all-absorbing focus on the latter element of the definition: moral wrongness. More to the point, political apologies have been characterised as "public moral apologies for serious wrongdoings" (Govier, Verwoerd 2002, 67). Moreover, some authors have emphasised the need for both regret and readiness to assume responsibility on the part of perpetrators for their misconduct (Griswold 2007, 188). In other words, scholars from both the liberal and communitarian traditions have grounded political apologies on the acknowledgment of the fact of wrongdoing and the acceptance of blame by the wrongdoer (Amstutz 2005, 136-137; Griswold 2007, 40; Radzik, Murphy 2023). The rationale behind these claims seems fairly simple. Put in layman's terms: if you have done nothing wrong, why should you be sorry?

However, this understanding of political apologies is only *prima facie* intuitive and common-sensical. Conversely, I suggest that it may also be a duty to utter such apologies after a morally irreprehensible (or even obligatory) act insofar as it has also been harmful to innocent parties. If anything, a morally right but harmful act may require a reparative apology more urgently than a morally wrong but harmless one.² This consideration applies to the non-political and political realms alike. Given the article's focus on public affairs, I discuss the latter in more detail. I thus advance an account of political apologies that makes them contingent on the duty to alleviate the harm inflicted to blameless parties by state officials rather than on a moral evaluation of their decisions.

² It is even possible to wonder whether it is relevant to focus on apologies that follow from harmless wrongful actions at all, since no one would bother asking for them. This issue, however, falls beyond the scope of this article.

The article is divided into three sections. In §2, I consider apologies from an interpersonal, non-political point of view. I wish to uphold two different claims: a) the infliction of harm on innocent parties, even if morally justified, grounds a duty to alleviate their suffering; b) apologies are an appropriate means of discharging this duty. In §3, I move on to test these conclusions in the political realm against a relevant historical example: Churchill's decision to bomb German civilians during World War II. On the basis of a normative analysis of Churchill's case, I conclude that the harm-based account holds. Churchill's choice was at once morally right and extremely harmful to the innocent. I maintain that Churchill ought to have given an apology to unequivocally blameless Germans (e.g., the infants' families) in order to alleviate the effects of his harmful decision and promote reconciliation between the British and German peoples.³ In §4, I note that the theoretical shift towards a harm-based account of political apologies is not a matter of purely abstract normative reasoning. Rather, it also affects the specific shape apologies ought to take in the public sphere. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider the criteria for a categorical political apology. I assess Smith's (2014) framework and suggest revising it, eliminating any unnecessary reference to moral wrongness. §5 concludes.

2. *A harm-based account of apologies*

When do we have a duty to apologise? The most obvious answer is that we have a duty to apologise when we “do or say something that violates a moral imperative [and] harms someone” (Tavuchis 1991, vii). In terms of its ends, an apology can be constructed as an attempt to reverse the meaning of a wrongful act, withdrawing one's endorsement to its wrongness and harmfulness (Schaap 2005, 77).

³ The aim of reconciliation is peculiar to interactions among parties that are likely to interact again in the future, as reconciliation constitutes an improvement in the relationship between the two parties (Radzik, Murphy 2023). Harm alleviation is more relevant in one-off encounters. Obviously, one-off encounters are less likely to occur within the boundaries of the global arena, given the ongoing relations among states and their citizens.

These statements refer to non-political apologies. However, there is no *prima facie* reason for believing that things should be any different at the political level. Most discussions on the uniqueness of different kinds of apologies have focused on a handful of peculiarities of political apologies vis-à-vis non-political ones, including their credibility (Smith 2008, 40), the particular criteria they must meet (Smith 2014), their relationship with public acts of forgiveness (La Caze 2006), and the re-articulation of societal norms they put on display (Villadsen 2008). Nevertheless, the view that the actions one apologises for must be both wrong and harmful has gone unchallenged. It is commonly held true in non-political and political realms alike.

I agree that non-political and political apologies share the same origin. However, as stated in the Introduction, I diverge from the mainstream view on the nature of this origin. Specifically, I claim that no wrong action needs to take place in order for an apology to be required. Conversely, the reason to apologise for an action lies not in its moral inappropriateness but in its harmful nature alone.

Tavuchis's twofold criterion can thus be rephrased: we have a duty to apologise when we do or say something that harms an innocent person, regardless of whether we have violated a moral imperative as well. Thus, the presence of harm on the blameless is a sufficient condition for an apology to be required.⁴ If this is the case, it follows that the violation of a moral imperative is not a necessary condition.

Before I proceed with a defence of my account, I shall clarify what I mean by harm. The concept of harm is frequently juxtaposed with or contraposed to those of pain, hurt, and offence. I do not wish to engage here in the ongoing debate on the specific nature of each of these entities. It suffices for me to say that I classify an action as harmful in

⁴ I am more ambivalent as to whether it is also a necessary condition. For example, we might have to apologise for wrongful actions that are harmless (see Footnote 2) or for harming a blameworthy party. In the latter case, one might argue that if the harm inflicted exceeds what is warranted by the party's blameworthiness, then the harmed party could be considered innocent insofar as they are not morally liable for the extent of the harm inflicted upon them. However, for the purposes of this essay, I will limit my discussion to morally blameless parties.

a minimal and subjective sense, insofar as the people subjected to it experience setbacks to their interests (cf. Feinberg 1987, 31-64).

I acknowledge the difficulties in defining harm subjectively, though I believe these concerns are mainly significant when attempting to establish a universal harm principle to identify harm and prevent it from obtaining (Holtug 2002). However, in the case of post-harm apologies, the duty to apologise is not intended to prevent the harm that has already occurred, as that would be patently absurd. Rather, recognising the harm that was brought about is a necessary first step towards its alleviation. How could we do something about it if we did not know it was there in the first place? Consequently, the extent to which harmed parties define their own experience as harmful is more relevant than a purportedly objective definition of harm that they do not subjectively endorse. In other words, it is the prospect of harm alleviation that serves as the motivating factor here. Therefore, the perception of harm by the harmed party takes centre stage, while the doubts shed upon the plausibility of a subjective harm principle lose urgency.

As anticipated, in order to establish my point, I first discuss a non-political scenario. I maintain that harm is sometimes unavoidable, even when one makes the morally right choice. Consider, for instance, the infamous trolley problem (first appearing in Foot 2002, 38-51) in its most modern version:

You're standing by the side of a track when you see a runaway train hurtling toward you: clearly the brakes have failed. Ahead are five people, tied to the track. If you do nothing, the five will be run over and killed. Luckily, you are next to a signal switch: turning this switch will send the out-of-control train down a side-track, a spur, just ahead of you. Alas, there's a snag: on the spur you spot one person tied to the track: changing direction will inevitably result in this person being killed. What should you do? (Edmonds 2014, 9)

Moral philosophers have quarrelled for decades over which choice is the better one. For our purposes, it is unnecessary to delve into the specifics of the various utilitarian and deontological arguments discussed in the literature. Still, I need to draw attention to an obvious fact: whether we choose to pull the lever or turn into passive by-standers and do nothing, someone – blameless by assumption – will die.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that pulling the lever, thereby causing the death of one person, is the morally right thing to do, while doing nothing is wrong.⁵ For moral philosophers engaging with Foot's thought experiment, the puzzle is solved. As soon as an action-guiding moral principle is found, the trolley problem is not really much of a problem anymore.

Contrarily, I believe this is precisely the point where the dilemma becomes compelling for our purposes. Imagine that the person who died was a young railway worker, and his grieving mother came to confront us after our decision. She knocks on our door, in tears, asking why we chose to kill her son. What would we say? Could we honestly tell her that we have nothing to apologise for because we made the morally correct choice? Would we really dismiss her as a person who does not understand the basic tenets of normative ethics, shutting the door on our way in? I am inclined to answer these questions in the negative.

This post-dilemma scenario shows precisely why a wrongness-based account of apologies requires us to behave in ways that lack correspondence with socially expected behaviour. A person facing a trolley problem would be devastated by the consequences of their choice, no matter which one it were. In other words, if the grieving mother talked to us, we would probably tell her how sorry we are for how things have turned out. We voluntarily chose to do harm, even though the only reason we did that was to avoid causing more harm. It is also likely that the grieving mother would not care at first about the motives behind our choice, just as the five people who were saved would probably thank us anyway, no matter whether they were utilitarians or deontologists.

One might argue, of course, that the way we would react is heavily influenced by emotions running high in the heat of the moment. This is hardly a rational argument grounding the duty to apologise to the grieving mother. Regardless of what we would do, then, what *should* we do in such a predicament?

Leaving societal expectations and behavioural regularities aside, I argue that the mere presence of harm to the blameless, though in the

⁵ My argument is unaffected by the specific choice assumed to be correct. It is equally possible to suppose that idly standing by is obligatory.

absence of wrongdoing, is sufficient to set in motion an argument for the duty to apologise. I ground this duty indirectly through a two-step process. First, I contend that the infliction of harm on the grieving mother lies at the basis of a duty to alleviate such harm, if it is possible to do so at no unreasonable cost to oneself. Second, I maintain that an apology is an efficient way of doing so.⁶ It follows that an apology to the mother is due as an attempt at alleviating her suffering.

With regard to the first step, one might cast doubt over the very existence of a duty to alleviate the rightful harm inflicted upon an innocent party. I do not wish to suggest that I can firmly affirm the existence of an objective and/or universal duty to alleviate the harm inflicted on a blameless party. More modestly, I point to the fact that such a duty is almost universally accepted as such. Graham *et al.* (2009, 1033) illustrate how, unlike values that vary according to one's political self-identification, the value of harm avoidance is prioritised across the whole political spectrum. A plausible explanation for this major concern is that "doing harm involves the violation of negative rights [and] negative rights are intuitively stronger than positive rights" (Woollard, Howard-Snyder 2022, §6), even when violating them is morally admissible or even required.

Depending on one's metaethical outlook, the widespread recognition of a duty as such does not necessarily entail much of value for a normative theorist. But even if we merely know that most people subjectively accept this duty, I reckon this brute fact provides us with sufficient reason to explore the way it ought to be discharged. At the very least, we will come up with an instrumental theory illustrating how to better fulfil an obligation still in need of an ultimate theoretical foundation but commonly treated as if it had already got one. In other words, the

⁶ I am inclined to say that it is also *the most* efficient means of doing so. However, this is true only if we adopt a fuller understanding of apology – one that includes, for instance, an acknowledgement of the victim's moral standing and willingness to "redress" them (I place "redress" in inverted commas given the absence of a wrong to set right). I discuss the necessary criteria for a proper apology in §4. To avoid misunderstanding, however, I confine myself here to the more modest claim that apologies are *an* appropriate means of discharging the duty of harm alleviation, rather than *the most* appropriate one. I thank an anonymous reviewer for prompting this reflection.

practical relevance of this philosophical exploration is compatible with its subjectivist grounding. The majority that does accept a duty to alleviate the harm inflicted on the blameless will hopefully be enriched by a discussion on how to discharge it efficiently.

This leads us to the second step in my argument. I affirm, conditionally, that if a duty to alleviate harm inflicted on the blameless is present, then a suitable way of discharging it is through an apology. Critics may suggest instead that an unapologetic justification of one's morally right act accompanied by an expression of sorrow for the harm inflicted might be more appropriate. An apology lacking the willingness to reverse one's action would sound hypocritical. One might therefore wonder whether the duty to alleviate harm could be better expressed in a statement such as: "I am deeply sorry for your loss, though I am not apologising, as I have done the right thing."

I argue that a justification would not alleviate the grief of the harmed party, while an apology might. A justification would once again emphasise the correctness of the decision, insisting on its moral appropriateness. However, a grieving mother is unlikely to be comforted by such reasoning. What could help her is an explicit recognition of the value of her son's life. An apology, unlike a justification, acknowledges the negative rights inherent to the truck worker simply by virtue of being a person. While exceptional circumstances may have led to a temporary suspension of these rights, an apology would still affirm their existence. Thus, the apology upholds both moral rightness and the dignity of personhood.⁷ Moreover, unlike a mere justification, an apology also expresses

⁷ But what if recognising the victim's dignity is the very essence of what apologies are about? An anonymous reviewer helpfully suggests that the function of apologies may lie less in their capacity to alleviate harm or facilitate reconciliation, and more in their ability to acknowledge accountability – treating victims as moral equals who are owed an explanation and to whom one must answer. On this view, the duty to apologise is not grounded in the prospect of repairing harm, but in the normative demand to recognise others as equal moral agents. I find this insight broadly compatible with my own account. While my focus is on harm alleviation, I see the restatement of the victim's moral standing – as a person whose suffering matters and whose dignity deserves recognition – as a crucial step in this process. Acknowledging accountability and recognising moral equality can therefore

regret – not necessarily for the choice made, but for the tragic circumstances that forced the choice.

Thus far, I have maintained that apologies are a key means of alleviating harm, even in the absence of a wrongful act. I now wish to add that the refusal to accept blame on the part of the harming party is not merely a consequence of the absence of wrongdoing; rather, it is what enhances the credibility of the apology itself. Telling the grieving mother that we would make a different choice if we were given the opportunity would be hypocritical, creating a sharp dissonance between our words and actions. On the other hand, our apology would be far more credible if we acknowledged that we would not make a different choice. Such an apology would reflect genuine regret for the pain caused, expressing compassion without compromising the moral necessity of the action. While it may not meet all the criteria of a standard categorical apology (see §4), it would exhibit qualities such as clarity and honesty, which are central to the most effective apologies (Basford *et al.*, 2014).⁸

My analysis of *jus post trolley-um* gives rise to potential objections. To conclude this section, I briefly discuss four of them.

First, one might worry that my position assumes a controversial consequentialist theory that leaves no room for recognising moral failure, which is typically embedded in apologies. However, one could argue that moral failure is still acknowledged insofar as the harmed party, being innocent, has been *both* wronged *and* harmed, even when no one is responsible for the wrongdoing. I reject this response because it seems counterintuitive to use the language of wrongness in moral tragedies where no choice is harmless, yet the agent remains blameless. Instead, I believe one can argue that an approach emphasising the utility of apol-

be understood not as an alternative to harm alleviation, but as an essential means of enabling it.

⁸ Since the likelihood of harm alleviation depends on the perception of honesty on the part of the grieving party, displayed honesty might suffice. Given that we cannot know what is in the heart of the apologisee, we can only evaluate their acts, words, and deeds. Alleviation (or even reconciliation) is possible even if the apologisee is lying, though acting as if they were feeling remorse. In this sense, true honesty is conducive to but not necessary for the perception of honesty.

ogies – aimed at healing and reconciliation – need not conflict with a more deontological focus on apologising for wrongful actions. In other words, a consequentialist understanding of apologies for non-wrongful harms need not be at odds with a deontological approach to apologies for wrongful actions.

Second, it might be objected that my view is too broad. According to my position, whenever we justifiably harm an innocent party, we owe them an apology. Consider this case: you and I both interview for the same job, and you get it. My interests are set back because you performed better, and thus, you have harmed me. But do you owe me an apology? This seems patently absurd.

One might attempt to resolve this by distinguishing between bare harms, where no one is wronged, and situations where a person is both harmed and wronged, even if no one is responsible for wronging them. However, this solution does not work for me because I also find it absurd to claim someone can be wronged by no one. Instead, I propose that when I voluntarily enter a competition, such as a job interview, I implicitly accept the potential harm of not getting the job. In contrast, taking a job as a track worker does not imply acceptance of the harm of being run over by a trolley. Thus, only in the latter case do I fully qualify as an innocent party.

Third, even if one accepts my analysis of the trolley problem, it might still be argued that real-life encounters with such dilemmas are exceedingly rare, rendering debates about morally right yet harmful actions theoretically interesting but practically irrelevant (Bauman *et al.* 2014). Fourth, even if such situations were to occur, they would often lack a political dimension, limiting the scope to interpersonal apologies among a small number of workers or bystanders (or individuals facing rare, once-in-a-lifetime moral tragedies). In contrast, political actions that necessitate public apologies by politicians or officials typically involve some form of wrongdoing within the chain of command.

In the following section, I will address both of these final objections by considering a real-life case: the British bombing of German cities in the early 1940s during World War II. This case highlights a moral dilemma with a clear political dimension, where the morally right decision did not exempt the offenders – namely, British state officials responsible for the deaths of innocent German civilians – from the duty to offer a proper apology.

3. *The case of the British attack on German cities*

The vast majority of just war theorists maintain that the distinction between combatants and non-combatants prohibits any attack on civilians, as this would amount to the murder of innocent people. In other words, non-combatants cannot be harmed as either ends in themselves or means to an end (Arneson 2006, 664). Article 57 of Protocol I of 1977 – an amendment to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 – affirms that “in the conduct of military operations, constant care shall be taken to spare the civilian population, civilians and civilian objects”. International law and the *jus in bello* literature did not fully incorporate this principle before the end of World War II. However, the idea of non-combatant immunity can be traced back to the sixteenth-century School of Salamanca (de Vitoria 1991, 317-319).

While agreeing with the tenet of non-combatant immunity, Michael Walzer singles out justified exceptions to the rule. In particular, he maintains that the threat posed by Hitler in the early 1940s stands out as a unique case. In 1940, the prospect of a Nazi victory was “frightening, but also [...] close” (Walzer 2006, 259). World War II was not merely another conflict among great powers. Rather, Nazi Germany stood for radical ideas that endangered humanity as a whole. Hitler’s supremacy over Europe was “a threat to human values so radical that its imminence would surely constitute a supreme emergency” (Walzer 2006, 253). Moreover, what characterises such a case is not only the proximity of the danger but also its nature. Here, “one might be required to override the rights of innocent people and shatter the war convention” (Walzer 2006, 259). Had Britain continued to uphold the war convention while Hitler flagrantly disregarded it, the Nazis would have won the war. In such a once-in-a-lifetime scenario, “the more certain a German victory appeared to be in the absence of a bomber offensive, the more justifiable was the decision to launch the offensive” (Walzer 2006, 259).

And this is exactly what Britain did. As early as September 1940, Churchill had it clear that “the bombers alone provide[d] the means of victory” (Calder 1969, 229). More than a million Germans were either killed or injured as a direct consequence of the adoption of a policy of terror bombing by the British government. Most of them were civilians, thousands of them were innocent kids. At least in the case of infants,

no argument about their Nazi affiliation could provide good reasons to regard them as blameworthy in any meaningful sense. Nevertheless, assuming that Churchill's calculation was correct, there could be reasons warranting the bombing. Had the Royal Air Force not bombed German children, Europe would have become Hitler's playground. In a word, Walzer's deontological principles are not insurmountable side constraints when the stakes are sufficiently high. Walzer's utilitarian turn has been criticised from a general viewpoint (Lund 2011) and in reference to the British bombing case. Garrett (1997, 183), for instance, argues that the RAF Bomber Command's area bombing campaign was morally unjustifiable and violated basic ethical standards of war-making.

This example bears a striking similarity with the classic trolley problem discussed in the previous section. Walzer (2006, 262) himself points this out:

Philosophers delight in inventing such cases in order to test out our moral doctrines. But their inventions are somehow put out of our minds by the sheer scale of the calculations necessary in World War II. To kill 278,966 civilians (the number is made up) in order to avoid the deaths of an unknown but probably larger number of civilians and soldiers is surely a fantastic, godlike, frightening, and horrendous act.

Just to be clear, Walzer singles out this comparison with moral thought experiments only in order to reject it. However, no matter how disturbing it sounds, the parallel fits well. Churchill's decision could be reformulated as that of a lever-pulling moral agent who decides to kill hundreds of thousands of people tied to one track in order to save an even greater number of people tied to the other. Either way, the agent's choice will be praised by those on one track and blamed by those on the other (plus a substantial percentage of the bystanders populating the rest of the world). Either way, their choice will harm a huge number of human beings. Either way, I contend, they owe an apology to the ones they have harmed.

Walzer's justification might be quite compelling to those who can easily envision what Europe under Hitler would have been like. However, it would scarcely suffice to soothe the pain of a grieving mother whose child had been killed by a British bomb. After all, why did a German child have to forfeit their right to life to safeguard the rights and liberties of

British (or even global) citizens? Unsurprisingly, the rationale behind the bombing also failed to console some distressed RAF pilots. While they may have been willing to drop bombs on Wehrmacht military bases to save their country and the world, killing innocent civilians was an entirely different matter.

For the sake of argument, let us assume – as we did with the standard trolley problem – that Churchill's decision was morally justified.⁹ Let us also set aside the fact that the bombing continued beyond 1942, when it had become evident that the Nazis no longer posed the same level of threat, and Churchill himself (1962, 770) acknowledged that alternative strategies, which would not have involved the killing of civilians, were available to secure victory. In short, the two assumptions to keep in mind are: Churchill's decision in late 1940 was morally right, and later bombings (e.g., the bombing of Dresden in 1945) are excluded from this analysis.

While Churchill made the right call, his choice was also extremely harmful. It is this substantial harm inflicted upon the blameless that needs to be addressed. In this respect, my suggestion is that a post-war apology from the prime minister would have been an appropriate way to set the record straight, help grieving Germans with their healing process, and lay the groundwork for reconciliation between British and Germans.¹⁰

The resistance to this strategy is not without principle. A Brit might reasonably have wondered,

Why on Earth should our leader apologise to the Germans after the war? After all, the majority of them were Nazis, and Churchill had just saved the world from them. Even if they weren't Nazis, taking a risk that resulted in their deaths or the deaths of their children was the only way to save the world. Thus, we were not merely morally permitted but obligated to take that risk.

⁹ Again, we might also assume that Churchill's decision was wrong. Indeed, some scholars condemned his choice even before the end of the war (Ford 1944).

¹⁰ As explained above (see Footnote 3), reconciliation is an additional aim when it comes to political actors, given the complex web of relations among citizens of different states. However, the argument does not hinge on reconciliation being a primary aim. It remains applicable even if the sole objective is to alleviate harm.

In reality, the normative appropriateness of the decision did not fully dispel feelings of unease about it. Such unease does not necessarily imply blameworthiness, but it may be relevant to understand why the decision was considered, in Walzer's view, blasphemous. Even in a state of supreme emergency, "the destruction of the innocent, whatever its purposes, is a kind of blasphemy against our deepest moral commitment" (Walzer 2006, 262). This perception of blasphemy in our actions can be seen as compatible with the widely felt duty to alleviate the harm rightfully inflicted on innocent individuals.

The British government itself indirectly acknowledged that there was something horrific inherent to their morally right choice. To be clear, Churchill himself never showed any sign of remorse for the harm he had caused. However, post-war governments acknowledged the moral tension intrinsic to the bombing campaign in indirect ways. For instance, in Westminster Abbey, there is a plaque honouring all the British pilots who died during World War II with the sole exception of the bomber pilots. While suffering the most casualties, they "have no plaque; their names are unrecorded" (Walzer 2006, 324). Moreover, the RAF Bomber Command's crews were denied a separate campaign medal. Sir Arthur Harris, Chief of the Bomber Command, was the only well-known commander not rewarded with a peerage soon after the war (Calder 1969, 565). In the military context, lack of honour often equals dishonour. The controversy lives on. The only statue celebrating Harris in London was only erected in 1992 and is still under a twenty-four-hour guard due to frequent vandalism. Even though the British government has never officially apologised for bombing German cities, all subsequent events account for the moral remainder involved in their decision.

As clarified in relation to non-political apologies, my account is non-foundational in that I cannot provide an ultimate justification for the duty to alleviate harm inflicted on the blameless. Such an approach would contradict my aim to avoid positing an objective duty. I am simply observing that, in both the trolley problem and the bombing case, the relevant facts and our intuitive judgments converge: most of us recognise a duty to assist the grieving innocents in their healing. This observation, I believe, is sufficient to justify the importance of discussing how to address such a duty.

Mirroring the discussion in the previous section, I will now examine whether apologies are an appropriate means of alleviating harm in the political realm as well. To support my argument for why this is the case, I will first briefly criticise the response provided by the British government.

Walzer attempts to defend both Harris and the decision to withhold honours from him. He interprets the partial lack of recognition as a re-affirmation of “a commitment to the rules of war and the rights they protect” (Walzer 2006, 325). I diverge from this analysis. If we defend a political decision made in a situation of supreme emergency as morally right, it seems logically inconsistent – if not hypocritical – to dishonour those who carried out that decision. A more convincing argument for not rewarding Harris could be that the bombing campaign continued well after it could be justified as necessary to save humanity. Yet, no British government has made this fine-grained distinction between the pre- and post-1942 bombings.

This ambivalent attitude on the part of Britain – the quiet dishonouring of bomber pilots alongside the lack of an official apology – has compounded the harm. On one hand, it offends the memory of those bomber pilots, without whom the Nazis might have won the war. On the other hand, state officials have also failed to express sorrow for the innocent German victims. Far from resolving tensions, this approach has undermined the possibility of reconciliation between those who suffered and those responsible for their suffering. According to Walzer (2006), Churchill should have “explained to his countrymen the moral costs of their survival [and] praised the courage and endurance of the fliers of Bomber Command even while insisting that it was not possible to take pride in what they had done” (325).

In addition to this, I argue that Churchill – or Attlee, or any subsequent prime minister – should have directed an apology to the German citizens grieving for their innocent loved ones. Such an apology should have been offered even though no wrongdoing was committed. Similar to the moral dilemma in the trolley problem, the purpose of the apology would not be to express regret for wrongdoing, but rather to acknowledge the harm inflicted upon the innocent. The ultimate aim would be to aid their loved ones in the healing process.

But why should Churchill have apologised instead of merely justifying a decision that is *ex hypothesi* morally justifiable? I suggest that justify-

ing a decision purely on moral grounds, particularly in wartime, might fail to address the emotional and psychological scars left by the consequences of that decision. A morally justifiable act – such as bombing enemy territory to save millions of lives – might still cause immense harm to innocent people, and it is precisely this harm that warrants recognition. Churchill's potential apology, therefore, would not have been a statement of moral regret for the decision itself, but rather an acknowledgment of the human cost involved. Apologies in such contexts serve a different function than justifications. They are not about claiming or denying moral guilt, but about recognising the suffering inflicted upon innocent people.

In this case, the apology would have acknowledged the grief of German civilians who lost innocent loved ones during the bombing campaigns. By addressing their sorrow, Churchill (or any other British leader) could have demonstrated a commitment to the principles of humanity that transcend the binary of moral right and wrong in times of war. Such an apology would signal empathy and compassion, qualities often lacking in post-war rhetoric focused on the legitimacy of military decisions. This could have helped humanise both sides, recognising the shared losses in war, which, in turn, might have facilitated a quicker reconciliation.

Speculatively, I suggest that political apologies offered for justified harmful acts would share some features with those offered by state officials for wrongful harm they were not personally responsible for. For example, in 1970, German Chancellor Willy Brandt knelt at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in Poland. Although he bore no personal responsibility for the atrocities of World War II, this symbolic act was widely viewed as an apology for the crimes committed by Nazi Germany against Poland and the Jewish people. Similarly, during a visit to the former Seodaemun Prison in Seoul in August 2015, former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama knelt before a memorial stone as an expression of apology for Japan's war crimes during World War II. Just as the recognition of past wrongdoing arguably strengthened relationships among these peoples and helped their healing, the acknowledgment of past harm, even if justifiable, might play a similar role.

Concluding this section, I wish to acknowledge the concern that the RAF bombing case might appear as an isolated exception rather than an instance of a broader category. If most apologies follow from wrongful

actions, is there really a point in discussing the very few stemming from rightful ones? This is a sensible worry. To counter it, I simply point here to other situations that similarly involve justified yet harmful decisions which may warrant apologies. In warfare, even when military actions are morally justified, the resulting harm to civilians can give rise to a moral expectation of apology without implying wrongdoing. Churchill's case is therefore not the only example of justified yet harmful warfare. Outside the military context, healthcare triage during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a relevant parallel: hospitals operating under fair and widely accepted procedures sometimes issued apologies to the families of patients who were denied potentially life-saving treatment due to resource scarcity and died (Merrick 2024). One might debate the morality of any war or of specific triage protocols, but these examples suggest that apologies for justified harm are not as rare as they might initially seem.

4. *A redefinition of categorical political apologies*

In recent years, the number of public apologies by state officials has increased to such an extent that scholars have referred to the current era as “the age of apology” (Gibney *et al.* 2009). This makes it all the more urgent to clarify how an apology should be delivered in the political sphere. In this final section, I aim to explore the proper way to offer an apology in situations like Churchill's. To do so, I first examine some of the most prominent conceptual understandings of political apology. Specifically, I review Smith's (2014) framework for a categorical political apology and adapt it to address cases where the duty to apologise does not stem from the violation of a normative moral principle.

Smith (2008, 28-107) identifies eleven conditions that must be present in a proper interpersonal, non-political apology: (a) a corroborated factual record; (b) acceptance of blame; (c) identification of each harm separately; (d) identification of the moral principles underlying each harm; (e) endorsement of the moral principles condemning each harm; (f) recognition of the victim as a moral interlocutor; (g) categorical regret and acknowledgment of one's own actions as a moral failure; (h) performance of the apology to the victim rather than a third party; (i) a promise of post-apology reform and redress; (j) sincere intentions; and (k) the expression of emotion.

Smith then argues that these conditions apply equally to political apologies, without significant differences (Smith 2014). His aim is to outline the features of a categorical apology, providing apologisers with a regulative ideal to follow (Smith 2014, 32). I share Smith's view that the same framework applies to both non-political and political apologies. However, I disagree on the nature of this pattern.

I have already identified the appropriate circumstances under which an offender has a duty to apologise. I will now clarify the features that the resulting apology should exhibit. To do so, I will examine in greater detail some of the conditions that, according to Smith, must be met for a categorical political apology to be warranted. More concretely, I will consider what a post-war apology by Churchill might have looked like, and how it could be situated within a revised account of categorical political apologies.

First, the offenders need to explain what they did "with an appropriate degree of specificity" (Smith 2014, 33). I therefore agree with conditions (a) and (c): a corroborated factual record with the identification of each harm separately is a necessary condition for a political apology to make sense. In our case, Churchill should have plainly admitted that he voluntarily made the decision to bomb innocent German citizens, acknowledging the harm he had caused to innocent Germans.

Second, I reject condition (b): no acceptance of blame is required. Smith (2014, 34) distinguishes between offenders who accept full responsibility for their misdeeds and those who attribute the harm to accidental causes. In other words, an apologiser may either accept the unjustifiability of the harm caused or dismiss the harm as something beyond their control. However, this presents a false dichotomy. It is entirely possible for the offender to acknowledge their responsibility while maintaining that their actions were morally justifiable. Following Walzer's reasoning, the bombing of German citizens was thoroughly justified, not because it was unintentional, but precisely because it was the result of a voluntary and morally defensible choice. Lying and admitting fault when one believes there is none would only compound the offence. It is more appropriate for morally praiseworthy apologisers to express both regret for the harm caused and a lack of regret for their choices at the same time.

Third, I also partially concur with conditions (d) and (e), emphasising the importance of correctly identifying the moral principles underlying

and condemning each harm. However, I disagree with Smith's (2014, 38-39) notion that these principles must be shared by both the harming and the harmed parties. In particular, the offender does not need to share the same values as the harmed party. To illustrate this, consider the bombing of German cities once again. Some German citizens, far from being innocent, were adults who endorsed Nazism and saw no issue with the Wehrmacht bombing the homes of Londoners. The apologiser's values might be more respectable than those of the victim. Nevertheless, it may be better to apologise even if merely to reaffirm our own values and, perhaps, instil moral change in the receiver of the apology. An apologising British official might have said that the British people do not condone the murder of innocents, regardless of the views of a grieving mother who had lost her child to Nazi bombings. Furthermore, an apology from a stronger party to a weaker one may be perceived as non-opportunistic and, thus, more sincere, enhancing the prospects of moving forward.

Fourth, if reconciliation (or even mere healing) is valued, then condition (f) must hold as well: the apologising party needs to recognise the harmed party as a moral interlocutor.

Fifth, I disagree with Smith's (2014, 41) condition (g), which posits that the offender should wish to reverse their deeds. While this is true in most cases, it does not hold in every scenario, as repeatedly argued throughout this article. Political apologies need not necessarily include regretful statements to be deemed appropriate.¹¹

Sixth, I also share condition (h) without reservation: the apology needs to be offered to the victim rather than kept to oneself or referred to a third party (Smith 2008, 141-142).¹²

Seventh, the lack of blame acceptance or regret does not mean that redress, as outlined in condition (i), is irrelevant. Even if the harm was

¹¹ As discussed above, apologisers could express regret for ending up in a situation where rightfully harming the victim was unavoidable, but they should refrain from falsely claiming that they would now make a different (wrongful *and* harmful) choice. If they did, they would risk sounding insincere, thus compounding the harm.

¹² In the case of deadly harm, such as the bombing scenario, my conceptual understanding of victims also includes all the agents affected by the death of a loved one.

unavoidable, some form of compensation could still aid both the offender and the victim on their journey towards healing and reconciliation. This does not entail that the harming party *owes* compensation to the harmed one. If anything, the party creating the conditions under which another party was forced to bring about rightful harm is under a duty to redress the harm (e.g., the Nazis in the British bombers case). For the blameless harming party, compensation is not a duty but rather an option among many to further healing and reconciliation. In any case, I will not delve further into the appropriate currency of redress here. On the other hand, the second element specified under condition (i) – reform – would not be necessary, since the action the harming party is apologising for, in the cases considered, is the correct one.

Finally, I want to emphasise the importance of expressing one's own intentions and emotions when giving an apology, as suggested by conditions (j) and (k). In the context of political apologies that do not stem from a perceived moral wrong – such as the hypothetical apology from Churchill – the emotional focus should be on acknowledging the harm inflicted.

Churchill – or more likely, subsequent prime ministers – should have clearly stated that the British government did not regret its decision. At the same time, he ought to have conveyed his sincere feelings about the harm and suffering caused by his decisions. Such a heartfelt apology may be modest compared to Smith's self-critical one. However, its clarity and honesty could have provided a new opportunity for the victims to understand the morality of the situation and move forward.

5. Conclusion

Smith's categorical political apologies run the "risk of becoming well-rehearsed rituals that claim to express regret but, in fact, avoid doing so" (Cuypers *et al.* 2013, 3). The revised political apology I propose avoids this risk. While refusing to accept blame may generate controversy, the ongoing contestability of such apologies contrasts with the danger of their becoming empty formulas. Admittedly, my account includes all types of apologies but is not specifically tailored to those addressing morally repugnant acts, such as apologies from war criminals who are

undeniably responsible for grave wrongdoings. Although most apologies stem from harm, many are rendered all the more urgent by the existence of radical evil, “about whose nature so little is known” (Arendt 1998, 241).

While I argue that harm can be sufficient to ground a duty to apologise, this does not mean that apologies for wrongful harm are indistinguishable from traditional, wrongness-based ones. In such cases, Smith’s framework remains highly instructive. Conditions such as the acknowledgment of wrongdoing, the endorsement of violated moral principles, and a sincere commitment to redress are essential. My account does not displace this more demanding ideal; rather, it broadens the scope of political apology to include cases in which harm, even in the absence of clear moral culpability, generates a normative expectation to apologise.

In other words, importance does not equate to completeness. Some apologies are unrelated to moral wickedness, yet the harmful nature of the acts they address justifies their relevance. This latter category of apologies has not been extensively analysed in academic debates. While many scholars have called for a theoretical re-conceptualisation of political apologies (Villadsen 2014), this has largely excluded apologies issued by state officials who are not at fault. In this discussion, I have only tentatively provided guidelines for offering a proper political apology of this kind. More importantly, I have sought to lay the groundwork for a better appraisal of political apologies in the context of harmful but justified actions. I hope these insights will contribute to developing a more comprehensive set of criteria for appropriately saying sorry for being right.

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