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A PLEA AGAINST APOLOGIES

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Apologies and forgiveness are closely related. A wrongdoer, by offering his apologies, asks for forgiveness; the victim, by accepting them, grants it. In this talk, I aim at a normative assessment of apologies: what, if anything, gives us the right to ask the victim of our wrongdoing for forgiveness? After some conceptual clarifications, I attempt to lay open a paradoxical structure inherent in apologies. Apologies are made in a spirit of humility: if the offender recognises his guilt he will see the victim's negative emotions towards him as proper and justified. Nevertheless, by begging for forgiveness, he tries to change the victim's negative feelings towards him. Thus, by apologising, the offender tries to bring about a state of affairs which, if genuinely repentant and remorseful, he has no reason to want to bring about. In what follows I examine various attempts to dissolve this paradox. These include offering reasons for apologising that are independent of our wish to alter the victim's feelings of resentment. I discuss four suggestions made in the literature on forgiveness, namely (i) that the offender wants to signal to the victim his feelings of regret, (ii) that he wants to regain his self-esteem, (iii) that he wants to regain his moral stature, and (iv) that he wants to indicate a separation between himself as a person and the act he has done. None of these suggestions, however, is persuasive. In sum, attempts to dissolve the paradox of apologies fail. An offender who recognises his own guilt and truly subjects himself to the victim's judgement has no rational reason for asking for forgiveness. In many cases, not offering one's apologies is a sign of taking guilt seriously. We should then see the refusal to ask for forgiveness as a virtue rather than as a vice.

Keywords: Apologies, forgiveness, excuses, resentment

Why do we apologise? What, if anything, gives us the right to ask the victim of our wrongdoing for forgiveness? And is it ever rational to do so? To address these questions, let me start with some preliminary conceptual clarifications. These draw on recent literature on apology and forgiveness[1].

[1] L. Allais, *Wiping the slate clean: the heart of forgiveness*, "Philosophy and Public Affairs" 2008, Vol. 36, pp. 33–68; L. Bovens, *Apologies*, "Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society" 2008, Vol. 108, pp. 219–239; L. Bovens, *Must I be forgiven?*, „Analysis" 2009,

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1. Conceptual Clarifications

In what follows, I use the term "apologising" in the sense of "asking for forgiveness". Apologies are social interactions between a wrongdoer and his victim. The wrongdoer, by offering his apologies, asks for forgiveness; the victim, by accepting them, grants forgiveness or at least commits herself to trying to forgive the offender (As a matter of convention, I use the masculine pronoun to refer to the offender and the feminine to refer to the victim). Acts of forgiveness have to be distinguished from excuses. Both have in common that they consist in the forswearing of negative emotions such as resentment, anger or contempt – retributive emotions, for short – towards a wrongdoer. Taken this way, neither must be confounded with merely forgetting a wrong or putting an offence out of one's mind. They differ from each other in the following respect. Excusing an offence means withdrawing negative emotions towards the offender in the light of reasons provided by new descriptions of the act such as "He acted unintentionally" or "He was forced to do this". These descriptions make us change our moral judgements about the nature of the offence. Typically, we come to realise that the agent was not responsible for what he did and therefore should not be exposed to moral blame. Forgiveness, by contrast, means withdrawing one's retributive emotions without changing one's judgement concerning the wrongness of the offence[2]. Forgiveness relates to an offence which is unexcused and perhaps even regarded as inexcusable. When forgiving an offence, we no longer resent the offence even though we feel we have a right to do so. We still regard the offender as morally responsible for what he did. Nevertheless, we decide to forswear our negative emotions towards him. Thus, if an act is excused, the question of forgiveness does not arise: if there are no reasons for resentment, the question of whether to withdraw justified negative emotions or not is not on the agenda[3].

This account deviates from ordinary language in two respects. First, "to apologise" is usually used in a broader sense, extending also to the offering of reasons for excuses ("He apologised by saying: 'It just

Vol. 69, pp. 227–233; C. L. Griswold, *Forgiveness – a Philosophical Exploration*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 1–17; J. G. Murphy, *Getting Even. Forgiveness and Its Limits*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, pp. 9–16; N. Smith, *I was wrong. The Meaning of Apologies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 17–27, 132–139.

[2] L. Allais, *Wiping the slate clean: the heart of forgiveness*, op. cit., pp. 33–35.

[3] J. G. Murphy, *Getting Even. Forgiveness and Its Limits*, op. cit., pp. 13–14.

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came over me'"). Second, acts of forgiveness are often conflated with excuses. We sometimes explicitly ask for forgiveness and then proceed to advance exculpatory reasons for what we did ("Please forgive me – I just couldn't help it"). To forestall confusions, we should avoid these conflations and strictly observe the distinction between forgiving and excusing.

2. The Paradox of Apologies

Apologies, if they are genuine, are made in a spirit of humility. The offender, when apologising, subjects himself to the judgement of the victim and "bows his head" to her. He offers her the power to decide whether or not he will regain his moral stature[4]. This is so because, given the above-mentioned definition of "forgiveness", the perpetrator who asks for forgiveness cannot resort to exculpatory reasons such as absence of responsibility or to mitigating factors such as provocation or duress. Due to the absence of these reasons, the offender never has a claim-right to forgiveness. Although the victim, when granting forgiveness, may of course respond to motivating reasons for forgiveness, such as sincere repentance on the part of the wrongdoer, forgiveness is a free gift which the victim may grant or withhold without being irrational. (This is often obscured as a consequence of blurring the distinction between forgiveness and excuses. The victim may have a duty to excuse the offence and may rightly be exposed to moral censure if she does not recognise exculpatory reasons as such, but she never has a duty to forgive).

On the other hand, however, apologies also have a directive aspect to them, i.e. there is an element of trying to get someone to do something – namely to grant forgiveness. By incorporating this element, they differ from a mere moral surrender. The offender does not merely "bow his head" to the victim and offer her the power to be his moral judge, but he goes beyond this in begging for forgiveness. That is, he wants the victim to forswear her feelings of resentment towards him and seeks to alter them. He offers his apologies to bring about such an alteration in the victim's feelings. If this were not the case, there would be no reason for the offender to address the victim at all. Furthermore, we could then make no sense of our talk of apologies being accepted or rejected. Accepting them amounts to granting the forgiveness we are asking for; rejecting them amounts to not doing so.

[4] L. Bovens, *Apologies*, op. cit., p. 233; L. Bovens, *Must I be forgiven?*, op. cit., p. 230.

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This is puzzling. It brings to light a tension between the attitudinal component of apologies and their directive aspect. When apologising, we want the victim to overcome her negative feelings towards us. But at the same time we regard these feelings as apt. If the offender recognises his guilt, as he has to do if the apology is to be sincere, it seems natural for him to turn away in shame. He will see the victim's negative emotions towards him as proper and justified and therefore will not try to alter them by asking for forgiveness. If the apology is genuine it will be connected with remorse: the offender will resent his own wrongdoing, perhaps even despise himself. Why, then, should he want to alter the victim's feelings of resentment? By apologising, the offender tries to bring about a state of affairs which, if genuinely repentant and remorseful, he has no reason to want to bring about. This is what I propose to call the paradox of apologies.

Two caveats should be added. First, I do not claim that there is always a contradiction between trying to get someone to do something and doing so in a spirit of humility. A beggar may ask us for ten pence in a very humble spirit, and someone threatened by immediate execution may implore the hangman to let him live. In these cases, someone tries to get someone else to do something from a position of inferiority and powerlessness. But these situations differ from the case of asking for forgiveness in that asking for forgiveness (unlike asking for excuses) implies the judgement that the victim's feelings are apt. Seeking to change them runs contrary to a judgement that is presupposed as true in the act of apologising. By contrast, the beggar would not say that it is apt that the rich man possess the ten pence he is about to give him, and the delinquent would not claim that his execution is apt. The paradox of apologies arises from a collision of the directive aspect of the speech act of apologies with the judgement concerning the aptness of the victim's emotions implied in it.

Second, things look completely different if an act of forgiveness is brought about by the victim's initiative[5]. If the victim, without being asked for forgiveness, tries to restore moral relationships with the offender by granting forgiveness, forgiving is not triggered by the offender. There is again no paradox here. The paradox I discuss is a paradox inherent in apologies, not in acts of forgiveness.

[5] Griswold relates such a story: C. L. Griswold, *Forgiveness – a Philosophical Exploration*, op. cit., pp. 168–170.

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3. Why apologising?

Perhaps the account given so far is too simplistic. There could be reasons for apologising that are independent of our wish to alter the victim's feelings of resentment. What reasons could they be? Let me examine four suggestions.

I. The offender may want to signal to the victim that he cares about her, that he is not indifferent to what he has done. He may want to let her know that he will do everything within his power to make amends, and he may wish to communicate to the victim his feelings of deep regret about what has happened. This may be true, but, for conceptual reasons, this does not amount to apologising[6]. In fact, the offender may successfully communicate his feelings of regret to the victim without apologising to her. He may, for example, vent his feelings of remorse through a symbolic act of self-accusation in front of the victim. Moreover, he does not even have to get in contact with the victim to let her know his feelings of remorse; a third person might function as a messenger to communicate them to her. Communicating feelings of regret and concern is not tantamount to apologising because it lacks the directive aspect that is inseparable from apologies.

II. Perhaps the perpetrator, by apologising, wants to regain his selfesteem. The awareness of having committed an act of wrongdoing is usually accompanied by a loss of self-esteem: the perpetrator can no longer see himself as the person he wants to be. He resents his own acts, perhaps even defies himself. The victim, by granting forgiveness, seems to provide evidence that the offender is justified in correcting this self-image. If the victim herself, even though her hostile feelings towards the perpetrator are undoubtedly warranted, overcomes her feelings of resentment, why should not the offender feel entitled to do the same? So the granting of forgiveness may help the offender restore his self-image as a morally decent person.

But, for two reasons, this does not provide a reason for apologies. First, why should the offender want to regain his self-image as a morally decent person? If I have committed a rape and therefore defy myself, why should I, without altering my view of the moral quality of the act, wish to change my own self-image? Of course, feeling contempt for oneself is painful, and, psychologically speaking, it is easy to understand why a wrongdoer usually has a strong desire to regain his self-respect. But if his self-contempt results from a perception of the moral quality

[6] P. Davis, *On Apologies*, „Journal of Applied Philosophy" 2002, Vol. 19, 2002, p. 169.

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of what he has done, there is simply no rational reason for this. Of course, the perpetrator may come to believe that at second sight his deed turns out not to be as bad as he initially believed – that he was provoked, that there were excusing or mitigating circumstances which had escaped his attention, etc. But this would mean that he alters his moral judgement about the act. He would then ask for an excuse rather than for forgiveness. If, by contrast, the moral judgement about the act remains unaltered, he has no reason even to wish to alter his self-image. It conforms to what he has done.

Second, if someone's loss of self-esteem is caused by what he has done, the granting of forgiveness is simply irrelevant to restoring his selfimage[7]. The past cannot be undone, and so if my selfcontempt hinges on my past deeds, it will not be affected by anybody granting or withholding forgiveness. This is not to deny that our self-image is often, at least in part, determined by how others see us (or by how we think they see us) and that we can sometimes hope to regain our self-esteem by positively influencing other people's judgements about us. (It will contribute to my self-esteem as a philosopher if somebody else whom I regard as an authority confirms to me that I am indeed a good philosopher). But the loss of self-esteem which we might hope to regain by apologising is not caused by the victim's resentment in the first place, but by the moral quality of the act we have done. Therefore, it cannot be restored by the victim forswearing her negative feelings. To restore his self-image as a morally decent person, then, the wrongdoer would do better to try to wipe out the impact of his wrongdoing on his personality by doing many good things, hoping that they might someday count as a compensation for his past offence.

III. Bovens[8] has argued that the reason why we find it upsetting when the victim of our wrongdoing refuses to grant us the forgiveness that we are asking for is that we care about our moral stature. By asking for forgiveness, we aim to restore our membership to a community of moral equals and the concomitant claims to respect. This account offers a good explanatory reason for why we are upset when a victim refuses to accept our apologies and for why we normally wish them to be accepted. But taken as a justifying reason for asking for forgiveness it gives rise to the following question: provided that a wrongdoer is fully aware of his own guilt, why should he feel entitled to rejoin the community of moral equals? Remember that asking for forgiveness comes to the fore only

[7] L. Bovens, *Must I be forgiven?*, op. cit., p. 229.
[8] Ibidem, pp. 230–232.

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when we regard our act of wrongdoing as unexcused. This is tantamount to saying that, when we ask for forgiveness, we think that we have forfeited some of our claims to respect – not all of them of course (even as a wrongdoer, I may still expect the victim to respect my physical integrity) but those which extend to the realm of social interactions directly connected with our wrongdoing. If I have abused your confidence by betraying confidential information you gave to me to a third person whom you detest, realising this as an instance of moral wrongdoing implies realising that I have, by my own wrongdoing, forfeited (not all, but) certain rights, for example the right to be treated as a trustworthy person – not necessarily for eternity, but at least until I have proven myself as a person worthy to be trusted again. I cannot reasonably complain about not being treated as a trustworthy person if prior to this I have abused your confidence in me. So as an offender I simply do not have the standing to ask you to treat me as your moral equal in every respect. In particular, I have no reason to ask you to treat me as your moral equal in the respect which pertains to my wrongdoing. Wishing to join the membership of moral equals is the aim of asking for forgiveness, but it does not justify it.

IV. Another suggestion is that by asking for forgiveness the offender wants to indicate a separation between himself as a person and the act that he has done. The message conveyed to the victim by a sincere apology would then be that the offender is not such a morally bad person as his actions make him appear. The offender, by apologising, appeals to the victim's willingness not to see his personality solely in the light of his evil acts[9]. This idea undoubtedly captures a core element of forgiveness. Forgiveness indeed incorporates a separation between the act and the agent. The forgiver, while holding on to her moral judgement about the culpability of the offence, must be willing to see the offender as a better person than his acts indicate – not only as a perpetrator, but also as a decent human being and a person worthy of respect in the same manner as everyone else. But the problem remains that, if apologies consist in asking the victim not to see the offender merely in the light of his acts, this amounts to reminding the victim of something which she may have accepted as true from the start. The victim need not doubt, or ever have doubted, that the perpetrator is to be seen not only in the light of his offence. She may be well aware of the fact that he, like everyone else, is a person with many facets and that he ought not

[9] See: L. Allais, *Wiping the slate clean: the heart of forgiveness*, op. cit., pp. 50–63.

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to be regarded merely in the light of his wrongdoing. Neither granting nor withholding forgiveness requires having seen the offender as a moral monster. This, however, does not alter the fact that the quality of the act may make it either psychologically impossible or morally undesirable to forgive. If I have been unfaithful to my wife, the feelings of anger and contempt this arises in her need not hinder her from recognising that I am also a kind and gentle person in many respects, but the hurt may be to great for it to be possible for her to forgive me. If you have killed my daughter, I may still admit that you have some likeable traits, but I will normally not forgive you due to moral reasons – what you have done is too abominable. It is true that forgiveness rests on a separation between act and agent, but we should also be aware of the fact that we can never completely dissociate our view of a person from what he or she has done. "To forgive" is a three-place predicate: someone forgives someone for having done something. If what he has done turns out to be too serious an offence to be forgiven, we cannot simply ignore the moral quality of the act by having resort to the act/agent dichotomy. Appealing to the act/agent distinction rightly reminds us of a necessary condition for forgiveness to take place, but it does not constitute a reason for asking for forgiveness.

4. Apologies as Expressive Speech Acts

If the paradox of apologies derives from a collision between the directive and the attitudinal component of apologies, can it perhaps be dissolved by not construing apologies as directive speech acts? For Searle, apologies belong to the class of expressive speech acts and "the illocutionary point of this class is to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content"[10]. In the case of apologies, this psychological state, Searle says, is regret.

This account is flawed for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, the mere expression of regret does not amount to apologies, for the offender might express his regret without apologising. Second, apologies are targeted at forgiveness in some way, and any adequate analysis of apologies must capture this. Searle's account fails to do this by dissociating apologies from forgiveness. On this account, our talk of apologies

[10] J. Searle, *A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts, in his Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1979, p. 15; see also: N. Smith's, *I was wrong. The Meaning of Apologies*, op. cit., p. 18.

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being accepted or rejected would be nonsensical, for we could no more "accept" or "reject" apologies than a cry of pain. Taken as directive speech acts, apologies can be rejected, as indeed they can if the victim refuses to grant forgiveness; taken as expressive speech acts, this would be impossible.

Let us try to refine Searle's analysis in the following manner: apologies are expressive speech acts, whose point is to express the hope for forgiveness. This account preserves the tie between apologies and forgiveness, but it avoids the collision between the attitudinal and the directive component of apologies. To illustrate this, a glance at medieval theology might be helpful. From a medieval Christian perspective, the sinner, to gain God's grace, has to steer between two extremes, both of which are regarded as deadly sins, namely between desperatio, i.e. despair, and praesumptio, i.e. anticipation of God's grace. He must neither deem it impossible that the mercy of God will be bestowed upon him and that he will be redeemed of all his sins nor must he anticipate this[11]. The truly repentant sinner will not ask for God's grace, though he may hope to gain it. Analogously, if a wrongdoer sincerely utters the words "Please forgive me", this might be construed as simply meaning that he hopes that he will be forgiven.

On this account, the paradox of apologies seems to vanish, for an offender can without contradiction express his hope that the victim will forswear her negative feelings towards him while still regarding these feelings as apt. However, it remains obscure why, in order simply to express his hope for forgiveness, he should address the victim. He may entertain this hope in private and leave it to the victim to grant or withhold forgiveness. Restricting apologies to expressions of hope that forgiveness might be granted falls short of explaining the personal character of apologies; it does not do justice to the specific personal relationship between the offender and the victim. As long as the offender, by offering his apologies, does not try to actively pave the way for forgiveness, the social interaction between offender and victim would simply be inappropriately described as "apologising". Hoping for forgiveness may be an integral part of apologising, but it can hardly be the whole of the story. The directive aspect cannot be eliminated from apologies, and so the paradox of apologies, deriving from the clash of the directive aspect with the attitude of humility that is required for apologies, cannot be dissolved either.

[11] For details see: F. Ohly, *The Damned and the Elect. Guilt in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1976, pp. 1–102.

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5. Conclusion

In sum, attempts to dissolve the paradox of apologies fail. An offender who recognises his own guilt and truly subjects himself to the victim's judgement has no rational reason for asking for forgiveness, though he may of course entertain the hope that he will be forgiven. Thus, there may sometimes be good reasons for a wrongdoer not to offer his apologies. Of course, not offering one's apologies as a wrongdoer may be traced back to various motives and accordingly, our moral evaluation of a person who, in full awareness of his guilt, refuses to offer his apologies, may vary from case to case. Not offering apologies may be a sign of arrogance, selfish pride or the unwillingness to demean oneself in front of the victim. In these cases, it rightly incurs our moral disapprobation. But it may also be a sign of taking guilt and wrongdoing seriously. In these cases, we should be ready to see the refusal to ask for forgiveness as a virtue rather than as a vice. It has been argued that there is some truth to P. G. Wodehouse's dictum that "the right sort of people do not want apologies"[12]. But there is also some truth to the view that the right sort of people, when having committed an act of wrongdoing, will not offer their apologies. They will simply be ashamed.

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[12] L. Bovens, *Apologies*, op. cit., pp. 235–237.

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Zusammenfassung

B Ein Plädoyer gegen Entschuldigungen

Wer „sich bei jemandem entschuldigt“, der bittet ihn um Verzeihung. Dieser Bitte kann durch Gewährung der Verzeihung entsprochen werden, und sie kann durch Nichtgewährung der Verzeihung abgelehnt werden. In diesem Beitrag wird nach dem normativen Status des Bittens um Verzeihung gefragt: Was, wenn überhaupt etwas, gibt uns das Recht, das Opfer eines von uns begangenen Unrechts um Verzeihung zu bitten? Nach einigen begrifflichen Klärungen wird ein Paradox offengelegt, das dem Bitten um Verzeihung inhärent ist. Wer um Verzeihung bittet, tut dies in einem Geist der Demut: Wenn der Täter seine Schuld anerkennt, wird er die gegen ihn gerichteten negativen Gefühle des Opfers als angemessen und gerechtfertigt ansehen. Indem er aber um Verzeihung bittet, versucht er, diese gegen ihn gerichteten negativen Gefühle zu ändern. Indem also der Täter um Verzeihung bittet, versucht er, einen Zustand herbeizuführen, den herbeizuführen zu wollen er keinen Grund hat, wenn er aufrichtig reuig ist. Im Folgenden werden verschiedene Versuche, dieses Paradox aufzulösen, untersucht. Sie beruhen auf der Angabe von Gründen für das Bitten um Verzeihung, die unabhängig von dem Versuch sind, die negativen Gefühle des Opfers zu ändern. Vier in der einschlägigen Literatur unterbreitete Vorschläge werden diskutiert, nämlich 1) dass der Täter dem Opfer, indem er um Verzeihung bittet, seine Reue signalisieren will, 2) dass der Täter seine Selbstachtung wiedererlangen möchte, 3) dass der Täter seinen moralischen Status wiedererlangen möchte, 4) dass er eine Trennung zwischen sich als Person und der von ihm begangenen Tat deutlich machen möchte. Keiner dieser Vorschläge ist jedoch überzeugend, und die Versuche, das Paradox des Bittens um Verzeihung aufzulösen, scheitern. Ein Täter, der seine eigene Schuld anerkennt und sich aufrichtig dem Urteil des Opfers unterwirft, hat häufig keinen rationalen Grund, um Verzeihung zu bitten. In vielen Fällen ist der Verzicht auf das Bitten um Verzeihung ein Zeichen dafür, dass man Schuld ernst nimmt.

Schlüsselworte: Entschuldigung, Verzeihung, Entschuldigen, Reue

Streszczenie

Mowa przeciwko przepraszaniu

Przeprosiny ściśle łączą się z wybaczeniem. Składając przeprosiny, winowajca prosi o wybaczenie, a ofiara, udzielając wybaczenia, przeprosiny te przyjmuje. W niniejszych rozważaniach zajmuje się normatywnym wymiarem przepraszania. Co w ogóle daje

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nam prawo, by prosić ofiarę naszego występku o wybaczenie? Po przeprowadzeniu rozjaśnień pojęciowych prezentuje paradoks, który jest nieusuwalnie obecny w przepraszaniu. Przeprosin dokonuje się w duchu upokorzenia: jeśli sprawca uznaje swą winę, to dostrzega płynące ku niemu negatywne emocje ze strony ofiary. Zatem przepraszający sprawca stara się spowodować stan rzeczy, którego zaistnienia nie miałby powodów pragnąć będąc naprawdę skruszonym. Próbuję na różne sposoby rozwikłać ten paradoks. Między innymi ukazuję różne przesłanki, które uzasadniają przepraszanie, a są niezależne od naszego pragnienia, by zniwelowań u ofiary uczucie urazu. Rozważam cztery propozycje, obecne w literaturze traktującej o wybaczeniu, a mianowicie: 1) sprawca pragnie ukazać ofierze swoje uczucie żalu; 2) sprawca chce poprawić swą samoocenę; 3) sprawca pragnie uratować swoją pozycję moralną; 4) sprawca chce wskazać na oddzielenie pomiędzy nim, jako osobą, a aktem, którego się dopuścił. Jednak żadna z tych propozycji nie jest przekonująca. Podsumowując, można powiedzieć, że próby rozwikłania paradoksu przepraszania zawodzą. Sprawca, uznający własną winę i naprawdę poddający się pod osąd ofiary, nie ma racjonalnych przesłanek, by prosić o wybaczenie. W wielu przypadkach właśnie brak przeprosin jest znakiem autentycznego wzięcia na siebie winy. Będziemy wówczas mogli postrzegać odmowę proszenia o wybaczenie jako cnotę, a nie jako występek.

Słowa kluczowe: przeprosiny, wybaczenie, przepraszanie, żal

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