Paper Proposal: Psychology for the Other, 2017

Author(s) name(s): Eric Severson

Working title: Levinas and the Paradox of Apology

250-word abstract (below)

Institutional affiliation: Seattle University (Philosophy)

Contact information including phone number and email address

Eric Severson, seversoe@seattleu.edu, 617 842-6261

In recent decades we have seen the dynamics of apology in global politics; apologies are issued to native peoples, to people who suffer from environmental degradation, to groups offended by careless rhetoric. Apologies are demanded, as a kind of public statement of responsibility, for offensive language, damaging corporate behavior and late-night tweets. Apologies are WD-40, grease to ease the cataclysms of history, a function of progress. Interpersonally, too, apologies are issued for the sake of moving forward and burying hatchets. But for Levinas, these are not true apologies at all, they simply a feature of the violent progress of history.

The act of apology is a unique movement in the dynamics of human relations. In a verbalized apology, the perceived suffering of another person must be articulated in some fashion, conformed to words and symbols and language. This is tricky business, for the suffering of another person, according to Levinas, clearly lies outside of the realm of articulation. And yet, some form of apologize is often precisely what people long for, when offended. Since apologies are necessarily linguistic, this conundrum is directly related to the problem of language that becomes an increasingly central concern across the span of Levinas’s work. All language, Levinas claims, is forced into an interplay between what happens in the event of *saying* and what becomes visible and ossified in the form of a *said*. The event in which the suffering of the other appears in language is fleeting, ephemeral, and irreproducible, and yet an apology is constrained to represent it nonetheless. Instead of genuine apologies, what often appears is a hurtful caricature of both the other person and her suffering. This paper will explore the dynamics of apology, and point toward the disposition of responsibility that must inform both history and language for anything like a genuine apology to ever appear.