



## New Book Investigates The Art Of The Apology

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DURHAM, N.H. – There was Eliot Spitzer’s public act of contrition about his involvement with a high-priced prostitute. And Hillary Clinton’s repudiation of one of her advisors for comments about her opponent’s ethnicity. Finally, there was Barack Obama’s apology for a consultant’s characterization of Clinton as a “monster.”

In the last week or so, the American public has witnessed several public apologies. But are these sincere or just hollow acts prompted by a media firestorm?

Nick Smith, assistant professor of philosophy at the University of New Hampshire and a former Manhattan attorney, provides a provocative look at the art of the apology in his new book, “I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies” (2008, Cambridge University Press).

Apologies pervade our news headlines and our private affairs, but how should we evaluate these often vague and deceptive rituals? Discussing numerous examples from ancient and recent history, Smith argues that we suffer from considerable confusion about the moral meanings and social functions of these complex interactions.

Rather than asking whether an apology is genuine, Smith offers a theory of apologetic meaning. He argues that apologies have evolved from diverse cultural and religious practices that do not translate easily into pluralistic secular discourse.

After describing several varieties of apologies between individuals, Smith turns to collectives. Although apologies from corporations, governments, and other groups can be profoundly significant, Smith warns of the dangers of collective acts of contrition that allow individual wrongdoers to obscure their personal blame.

Smith is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of New Hampshire. A graduate of Vassar College, he earned a law degree from SUNY at Buffalo and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Vanderbilt University. Before coming to UNH, he worked as a litigator for LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene, and MacRae, and as a judicial clerk for the Honorable R.L. Nygaard of the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

