

Discussing Difference and Dealing With Desolation and Despair

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The *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry (JBI)* sets out to be a respected and respectful forum for the exchange of ideas, where moral issues we encounter in health care, biology, and the broader life and social sciences can be discussed in depth and with an intention toward mutual understanding. The *JBI* attempts to serve this mission by curating (to the best of our abilities) a safe space for academic research and debate. Ground rules exist regarding academic rigor, honesty, and truth-seeking. Rules of engagement and argumentation derived from the philosophical disciplines of ethics and logic ensure we avoid contradiction, fallacious argument structures, and language mistakes or misunderstandings. A number of methodological “techniques” or “schools” of ethical analysis are

recognized—deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, casuistry—and we aim to be fair and open to each of them. It is clearly understood that racist and discriminatory material is neither acceptable nor publishable, and, fortunately, we rarely receive such submissions. We hope this dedication to both comprehensive examinations of moral issues and a tolerance and respect for others, all so central to the *raison d'être* of any ethics journal, is implicit in all that we do and in what we publish. Just as politics deals with differences in how we socially and legally govern ourselves, ethics deals with differences about how we morally conduct our lives. (That is why the term “unethical” can be seen as nonsensical, often used where one means “immoral.”)

In all cases, it is better to talk about our differences than to fight over them. The pen is not only mightier than the sword but also more magnanimous. Here at the *JBI*, we adopt a “360-degree” multidisciplinary approach and believe that, in “doing ethics,” we need diverse methodologies, voices, and scholarship traditions to best “see” a subject.

But what happens when such peaceful methods of dialogue and negotiation break down and violent conflict breaks out? Worse still, how do the communities affected (as well as the rest of the world) cope with racially, religiously, and/or politically motivated ethnocentrism, hate crimes, and genocide? Recent tragic events in Norway, for example, demonstrate that destructive and dangerous forces lurk within even

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the most peaceful and well-resourced societies, and ongoing ethnic conflicts in places such as Burma/Myanmar, Darfur, and Kashmir, to name only a few, illustrate that we as humans are all too willing to dehumanize and destroy our brethren. No doubt suicide bombers, political extremists, violent military regimes, and others who perpetuate acts of random or organized terror justify their actions as but responses to perceived injustices against them—that their concerns (whether misguided) have been disregarded and they are claiming (through force) access to political space. There is a difference between legitimate civil resistance or political will (such as the “Arab Spring” taking place as ordinary citizens in a number of Middle Eastern countries pursue democracy and freedom from tyranny) and terrorism or genocide. There also is a difference between legitimate democratic ideals and lip-service to a free society. Western democracy itself perhaps suffers from a serious case of disillusionment, especially regarding its traditional partisan politics and financial systems that seemingly no longer possess respect for or function in the democratic space. Superficially positive approaches such as “political correctness” have in a sense curtailed liberty and replaced real calls for “more and better speech” (Dershowitz 2009), while individualistic (and sometimes self-centered) emphasis on one’s legal freedoms, especially with regard to accumulating and retaining profit, masks the fact that rights do not exist in a vacuum and are only secured through placing duties on others (Hohfeld 2000). Thus, not only should we celebrate diversity, we also should extol cooperation (Craig Palmer, pers. comm.), as only through working together can we avoid lives that are “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 1982, 186). Game theory has taught us that much.

Central to all of these conflicts and political malaise is the notion of difference as often irreconcilable, that consensus and unanimity are not achievable in national or global affairs and that we have to live with this, whether we like it or not. In other words, that we may campaign against wrongs and work toward rectifying injustices, but we are ultimately forced in some way to accommodate big differences of belief and action in the world. The theme of “reconciliation” was chosen for the *JBI*’s previous issue, and recent world events (and those too horrific ever to be forgotten) remind us on a daily

basis of its importance: as a process of dialogue and communication across culture, race, and political divides. In an attempt to continue this conversation, included in this issue are two responses by Zvi Bekerman and Derick Wilson to Alphonso Lingis’ (2011) “Truth in Reconciliation” article, published in the 8(3) issue of the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, as well as a reply from Lingis himself.

It is, of course, easy to see reconciliation as an outcome, but—however desirable that might be—it is the process that matters. How do individuals, groups, and larger societies understand and process trauma? Is it possible to heal, not just bodies and geographies but also psyches and relationships, after violence and loss? Must we settle for entrenched hatred and inerasable battle lines, or can atrocities be atoned, damages repaired, and better and safer futures created? Can racial, religious, and/or political hatred be “reconciled”? Brave examples around the world offer some hope that, albeit difficult (and with judicial, political, psychological, and social dimensions to explore), reconciliation is both possible and necessary.

It is not, however, easy. How, for example, do we know the difference between forbidding intolerance and encouraging clemency? If we conclude that we will not tolerate behaviors and views that violate bottom lines of morality—violence, cruelty, and discrimination—then we effectively outlaw certain groups and individuals. We say they have “no place” in our world (see, for example, Foucault’s discussion of how the “modern” criminal “falls outside the pact, disqualifies himself as a citizen and emerges ... a wild fragment of nature” [1995, 101]). Does this, though, encourage the creation of those conditions necessary for extreme and violent action? Does disallowing certain forms of speech foment the very intolerance and violence we are trying to prevent? Does the outlaw see no other path but that of the outlaw and disengagement or dys-engagement? On the other hand, if we try to study and explain “extremist” views and actions, whether they arise from insanity, supernatural forces of evil, or a perverse sense of political righteousness, do we risk confusing explanation with excuse or discussion with permissibility?

Margaret Thatcher famously held the line that Britain did not negotiate with terrorists, but the retort would have to be that, in fact, there was no group of “terrorists” with whom the United Kingdom did not

negotiate in the deconstruction of the British Empire. Moreover, one person's or yesterday's terrorist may be another person's or tomorrow's freedom fighter.

At the end of the day, as Churchill said, “[t]o jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war” (Shapiro 2006, 154). Keeping channels open is nearly always preferable to isolation, exclusion, and standoff. The trick is to do so without compromising the fundamentals of human justice and equality.

It is also worth remembering that reconciliation has to address injury, torture, and often death. As such, it inhabits the world of human grief, a field with which modern sciences and societies have been hesitant to acknowledge, experience, or confront. Grief is not “linear.” We often move backward and forward from mourning to normal living, an “oscillatory” model that suggests the process is neither “straightforward” nor short-lived (Parkes and Prigerson 2010). “Closure,” moreover, is a flawed concept. We do not “get over” our losses; rather, we tend to integrate loss into a new, altered understanding and narrative of the world. We are formed by our losses as much as our gains and successes. All hope is not lost, though; as philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote and physician and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl often reiterated, “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*” (Frankl 1984, 84, *emphasis Frankl's*).

Similar to but less optimistic than Frankl and his *Man's Search for Meaning*, conservative English philosopher Roger Scruton, arguing against what he sees as “irrational exuberance,” ends his recent book *The Uses of Pessimism* with this homily: “Rather than lose ourselves in these unreal hopes, therefore, we should reflect again on our nature as settled, negotiating creatures, and return to the task in hand, which is to look with irony and detachment on our actual condition, and to study how to live at peace with what we find” (2010, 232). Reconciliation addresses a painful “is”: completed events that cannot be undone, that also have the capacity to fuel continuing disharmony and violence. Notions of the perfectibility of the human condition perhaps have no place here.

At individual, community, and (inter)national levels, we must face up to difference, loss, and death

and sometimes even intolerance, torture, and horror. Failing to do so necessarily prevents a healthier future. As philosopher Immanuel Kant suggested: “out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made” (Berlin 1991, 19). We can no more anaesthetize ourselves from the pain of living than we can order the world and align all in it in agreement. Reconciliation challenges us to square our shoulders with both of these realities. It also gives us at least the hope of a better tomorrow. Here at the *JBI* we aspire to make a small contribution to these processes.

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