Political Reconciliation
Andrew Schaap
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For political theory to remain a vital and relevant activity, it not only needs to find fresh ways of thinking about familiar questions but also has to reflect on novel political developments. The question of how, in deeply divided societies in which there has been sustained oppression by one sector of society of another, people might find a way to live together that both adequately acknowledges that past without repeating it is hardly a new question. However, the relatively recent emergence of phenomena such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and somewhat similar responses to historic injustices in societies as different as Chile and Australia is indicative of attempts to find new ways to come to terms with such a past. It is these developments that are a major stimulus for Andrew Schaap's reflections on political reconciliation in this engaging and thoughtful book.

For Schaap, reconciliation and politics are fundamentally at odds with each; for while, 'reconciliation tends towards closure, harmony, consensus and unity, politics tends towards openness, agonism, conflict and plurality' (p. 9). Yet, reconciliation has become an important political idea in many societies seeking to come to terms with systematic historic injustice to particular racial, religious or ethnic groups. Schaap's response to this tension is that if we are to understand reconciliation in political terms, 'we must consider not only how politics might be conciliatory but also how reconciliation might be politicised' (p. 8). As a preliminary to this discussion, he first rejects the idea of restorative justice, and two alternatives to his approach. 'Toleration' is rejected because, Schaap claims, it 'unduly limits reconciliation by grounding social harmony on the exclusion of substantive conceptions of the good from the legitimate ends of politics' (p. 5). A 'politics of recognition', by contrast, is inadequate principally because it tends to presuppose the existence of political community, 'rather than acknowledging this as the contingent outcome of interaction' (p. 55).

Schaap's own theoretical framework for his discussion of political reconciliation is shaped in fundamental ways by the work of Hannah Arendt. He sees her 'ethic of worldliness' as 'ideally suited to formulating a political concept of reconciliation' because it shows how the tension between politics and reconciliation identified earlier 'can be ethical and creative' (p. 74). Political reconciliation cannot escape 'the risks of politics', because it invokes a 'we' that is not yet: it is a possibility, but one that has to be constituted through politics, a contingent, and fragile creation, which always remains precarious

and incomplete. It also needs to be buttressed by the Arendtian notions of promising and forgiveness. Promising expresses a commitment to the future that introduces a crucial element of reliability and common expectations. Forgiveness, on the other hand, mitigates the irreversibility of action — what is done cannot literally be undone — by freeing the future from what would otherwise be an inescapable past.

This leads into discussions of, *inter alia*, the meaning of constitution, the distinctiveness of political responsibility and the significance of remembrance. These are considered in particular in the context of the historic injustices perpetrated against indigenous peoples in Australia and the work of truth commissions, especially the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Throughout, Schaap explores the inevitable tension that arises from the fact that an adequate conception of political responsibility must also 'be conditioned by an awareness of its own impossibility' (p. 149).

Unavoidably, this brief summary cannot do justice to the richness and complexity of Schaap's many interesting and provocative discussions of a whole range of issues. This is especially unfortunate because it is in the details of these discussions that in my view the real strength of the book lies. Just to mention two of these: there are particularly intelligent and perceptive discussions of political responsibility and of the role of redemptive narratives in the politics of remembrance. What one thinks of the overall argument, however, is likely to depend to a significant extent on how far one accepts the Arendtian framework. And, here, I must confess to some problems. For instance, crucial ideas, such as 'responsibility for the world' and the spatial metaphors, seem either vague or contentious, and (as has been remarked before) it is hard to relate the constrained conception of politics to much that we normally understand by that term, at least in the modern world. In consequence, I often found the implications of the argument hard to discern, and did not feel that as much illumination was shed on the various institutional efforts to come to terms with historical oppression as I had hoped.

Sometimes, too, Schaap stays so close to Arendt that he fails to see other possibilities. For instance, he does not consider how the exercise of forgiveness can also be an exercise of power, a lesson he might have learnt from Dostoyevsky (from whom Nietzsche certainly learnt it). Similarly, there is no consideration of the heretical thought that 'forgetfulness' might in some contexts be politically desirable, or even necessary. More generally, another area that could have been explored with some profit is why the idea of political reconciliation only seems possible or appropriate with respect to some forms of systematic historic injustice. Nobody, to the best of my knowledge, has a suggested anything like a Truth and Reconciliation Commission as a way of dealing with the historic oppression of women. Why is that? And what does that tell us, for example, about the circumstances of political reconciliation?

I found *Political Reconciliation* to be in roughly equal measure enjoyable, stimulating and frustrating. This last reaction in large part reflects my resistance to Arendt, and no doubt those who are more responsive to her work, are likely to be more in tune with Schaap's approach. But, even while hoping that he will break free from his current subservience to her work, this should not obscure the other two responses.

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Genealogies of Difference
Nathan Widder
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Genealogies of Difference is precisely that. Widder takes the post-Nietzschean, anti-foundational concepts of difference, excess and contingency and re-reads the history of philosophy through those terms. The object is not to make philosophy produce this *telos*, but rather to explore what those conceptions might mean for us, and do for us, in a social world where absolutes and binaries are refused. In this postmodern condition, differences are exposed and celebrated as a matter of good practice by liberal egalitarians, not just by anarchists, and philosophy needs to catch up.

Given that God is dead, Kantian transcendence deconstructed, and Hegelian resolutions overthrown, what is there for philosophy, and in particular ethics, to do? For Widder, the answer is that philosophy and ethics don't give answers, but rather pointers as to what to avoid, what not to believe, what not to expect and what not to strive for. In our latter-day world, we should expect the 'untimely', that is, the unpredictable that exposes the imposed and safety-seeking strategies of historical and logical linearity, closure and wholeness. Moreover, we should find a way of *producing* this unpredictability strategically. Widder's outlook on philosophy is thus an 'affirmation of difference' (p. 56).

In his conclusion, Widder notes that his 'ontological rethinking of difference thus comes to have ethical and political import', and that this is a 'matter not escaping games of truth but rather of playing them differently'. On his view ethics and politics require a 'sense of curiosity and care', which is perhaps rather more suggestive of Oscar Wilde ('in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing') than of philosophy as traditionally practised (p. 154).