

Reconciliation and the Technics of Healing

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Healing from injustice, betrayal, and moral offence always involves a process of mourning and reconciliation, and sometimes forgiveness. This process may be uneven, protracted, and at times incomplete. Healing is rarely just a matter of saying sorry or being in a position to reconcile by forgiveness with those who have told the truth. Sometimes, attempts to heal, to achieve reconciliation, have the effect of exacerbating pain and renewing suffering that had become dulled by the passage of time.

The crucial dimension of healing has often been ignored in discussions about reconciliation, which have tended to emphasise the resolution of conflict, especially through legal, political, or diplomatic means. Truth and reconciliation have become entwined with healing, seen as the given outcome. This is partly a result of the work of “truth and reconciliation commissions” (TRCs) in

nearly two-dozen countries, especially South Africa, and the establishment of a high-profile international legal structure to deal with allegations of human rights abuse (Komesaroff 2008). This has led to a difficult and irresolvable debate over the relationship between truth-telling and justice, with some suggesting that long-term healing from reconciliation processes can only come when truth-telling about serious crimes does not absolve alleged criminals from being legally judged in subsequent court proceedings. Even here the question of healing turns on the narrow assumption that people feel better when the perpetrators of crimes against them are punished. This is only sometimes the case. Moreover, reconciliation encompasses a much broader field than legally-reinforced conflict resolution and modern justice alone, and can extend to the establishment of peace, customary justice, fairness, healing and forgiveness, the recovery of cultural identities, the building of trust, and the overcoming of personal enmities. It also covers a range of cultural and political goals, including human rights, social justice, and mutual coexistence.

The contemporary theory of reconciliation spans many disciplines, including theology, philosophy, social theory, law, history, and psychology. It draws on a wide variety of sources from many cultural traditions. The Western tradition itself is richly heterogeneous, extending from ancient Greek philosophy to Christianity, Marxism, and contemporary post-structuralist thought. The symposium on reconciliation contained within this

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issue of the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* not only illustrates well this complexity; it also emphasises forcefully some of the key conclusions that have emerged from recent debates within the field.

The new science and hermeneutics of reconciliation have shown that formulations relying on traditional binary conceptions of right and wrong, good and evil, or modern binary conceptions of perpetrator and victim, legal guilt and innocence, often lack healing power: indeed, they often perpetuate the cycle of hatred, bitterness, shame, retribution, and humiliation, entrapping sufferers and victims in the moral framework of the perceived perpetrators (James 2008). This fundamental insight has theoretical as well as practical challenges. It has meant that effective healing—at either the personal or the social level—is only possible in the longer-term, when the victims are able to move from being passive recipients of suffering or evil to becoming active moral subjects who enter into dialogue to set the terms and control the parameters of ethical conduct. A condition of such healing is breaking out of the vicious cycle to create a new space within which victims can develop renewed moral agency. The outcomes that are achieved go beyond the conventional—often unrealisable—goals of creating a new, singular truth or a unitary, shared understanding. Such a unitary truth tends to be the intended outcome of truth and reconciliation commissions, including those where truth is connected to questions of modern justice. The variable stories of victims are all too often swept away into a patterned explanation that uses master categories such as ethnicity, national identity, and state-affiliation to attribute proximate cause and impact. This has the effect of annulling or eliding moral or epistemological crossovers in identity, meaning, and memory. In parallel, it tends to place the understanding of the conflict in a singular and immediate temporal frame, fixing the “event” as given.

Without wanting to overturn the importance of seeking truth and justice, the task for a positive form of reconciliation is at the same time to enable a framework in which discrepant and ambiguous ethical and epistemological perspectives can enter into a productive and mutually respectful dialogue. The task is to enable a process in which new truths and new ethical insights can be generated that take us into a different future. Where these related dimensions can be achieved, such outcomes are more profound and productive of health, well-being, and security in the long-term.

The three articles presented here address key issues of reconciliation theory. The article by Lingis reflects critically on the nature, role, and status of truth in reconciliation discourses. He questions what kinds of truth can be established in criminal trials of perpetrators of injustice and the extent to which these are able to assist victims in overcoming the trauma associated with their suffering. From this perspective, he questions the familiar categories of sincerity, honesty, and confession and the moral status conventionally attached to them. He concludes—provocatively—that the notion that “truth heals” is “metaphorical and misleading,” that its ability to restore dignity and overcome the legacy of humiliation and oppression is fatally limited.

Although they approach the subject from somewhat different perspectives, the other authors also accept that truth alone is insufficient to guarantee reconciliation. They argue that, in addition, the process must address the irrational and visceral pain associated with suffering. Zembylas sees in this a potential source for a new, fecund practice, based on the shared experience of vulnerability and loss. Mourning and the struggle to forgive can become sites of personal and social learning and teaching: what he calls “reconciliation pedagogies.” Coming together over grief, and encountering the conditions of despair and hope, can generate profound and lasting changes; it can unsettle and challenge underlying hegemonic assumptions; it can allow people to let go of anger and the desire for revenge and to move away from their identities as victims; and it can help build “new affective alliances,” “new shared imaginaries,” and new senses of community and identity.

Emphasising the dynamic, and often unpredictable, motion between transgression, apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation, Gaertner shows how reconciliatory discourses cannot be adequately understood as pure exchanges of language or symbols, but always incorporate a deep personal and physical component. They evoke moving and intimate bodily experiences, from which they arise and through which they must be resolved. Apologies only acquire sense and cogency in relation to local life-contexts and social traditions. Forgiveness, “a power held by the victim,” makes possible new ways of perceiving neighbours and deeper levels of living together. All three authors recognise that any meaningful process of reconciliation must create the possibility of moving forward without forgetting the past, but also without remaining stuck in it.

The contemporary understanding of reconciliation recognises the complexity of human experience and seeks to reconstruct within a space damaged by war or moral outrage the possibility of continuing dialogue. Such dialogue is often fraught, unpredictable, ambiguous, and fragile, but the possibility of achieving it is never extinguished.

As in all active fields of investigation, there is much about reconciliation that is contested. However, among many contemporary authors there are several points of convergence, which emerge conspicuously from the three articles presented here. The first is that reconciliation is a process, not a state to be achieved or a goal to be reached. It entails a never-ending motion toward a horizon, which we are constantly seeking but which recedes inexorably as we approach it. The second is that there is, and can be, no “general method” of reconciliation, no static formula or algorithm that can generate or organise it. It always entails a dynamic, fluid, and sometimes improvised

and haphazard process or negotiation, within which occurs an exchange of information and learning, an exploration of differences, and a modification of expectations in the search for mutually satisfactory outcomes. Above all, among the many pathways to reconciliation there is a common theme: the need to discover a space outside the binaries of hatred and blame, resentment and the desire for retribution. This sets an ongoing challenge both to practice and theory.

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