

value. On the other hand, once we recognize the second-best nature of the comforts that the marketplace provides, we can insist that these should not be the objects of our ultimate aspirations.

Second, even when the purchase of goods and services can satisfy our needs, the fulfillment may come at an extremely high personal and social cost. Consumption requires income—which in turn, for most of us, requires labor. And labor is costly in two ways. For many people, labor beyond a certain point is unpleasant, painful, unhealthy, or boring. And even where it is not, labor takes time—time to prepare for, time to get to, time to perform, time to return from, and time to recover from. Yet the amount of time we have is relatively fixed. Time we devote to acquiring the means of consumption is time that we do not have for other aspects of life. This fact alone makes the case for simple living enormously compelling. If we have a choice between high-consumption and low-consumption ways of meeting our legitimate needs, it makes sense for us, individually and collectively, to pursue the latter course.

This leads to my final point. Once we recognize the variety of human needs, we can begin to imagine lives that partake of diverse forms of richness: material, intellectual, spiritual, aesthetic, and social. In other words, we can see that genuine wealth resides in an extraordinarily broad range of “assets,” the possession of which determines whether our abundant needs will be fulfilled.

- *social relationships*: our friendships, loves, and families

- *psychological capabilities*: our ability to build relationships, to find meaning, to take aesthetic pleasure
- *cognitive capabilities*: our ability to read, to understand, to learn, to reason
- *creative capabilities*: our ability to make something beautiful, to contribute something different
- *political rights*: our ability to be a citizen of one country rather than another, to build our own lives according to our own lights
- *historical and cultural legacy*: the riches of insight and experience that have been preserved from previous human lives and that are embodied in the great achievements of human culture
- *natural and man-made physical environments*: the beauty of great cities, of the wilderness, of the view from one's back porch

Material wealth is not irrelevant, but its role in the good life is largely to facilitate our access to these other forms of wealth. As the great philosophers have long told us, excessive concern with consumption often thwarts our efforts to realize the multiple possibilities of our nature. Advocates of simple living best advance their cause when they remind us of those possibilities, not when they ask us to believe that human beings are simple creatures.

—Jerome M. Segal

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Reconciliation for Realists

As the millennium draws to a close, there appears to be a global frenzy to balance moral ledgers. Talk of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation is everywhere. The Canadian government recently made a “solemn offer of reconciliation,” backed up by a \$250 million “healing fund,” to that country's 1.3 million Aboriginal people; Australians lined up to put their names in a “sorry book” offering personal apologies for an earlier state policy that removed Aboriginal children from their families; and President Kim Dae Jung formally accepted Japan's written apology for harms caused during its 35-year occupation of South Korea. In what may be the most familiar example, South

Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held extensive public hearings about abuses committed during the apartheid era, issued a final report, and continues to rule on petitions for amnesty from former security officials and African National Congress members who have confessed to politically motivated crimes.

While such efforts may seem laudable, it remains unclear whether they constitute a just or adequate response to the historical injuries they seek to address. The problem resists solution, in part, because as a moral and political concept, *reconciliation* raises inherently difficult questions. For example: Is reconciliation

the end-state towards which practices of apology and forgiveness aim, or is it a process of which apology and forgiveness are merely parts? Can reconciliation occur *without* apology and forgiveness? By what social or institutional means is it to be achieved, and under what conditions should it be sought? Curiously, given the frequency with which the term is used, we lack any clear account of what reconciliation is, or what it requires.

Despite this, reconciliation continues to be urged upon people who have been bitter and murderous enemies, upon victims and perpetrators of terrible human

The rhetoric of reconciliation is particularly common in situations where traditional judicial responses to wrongdoing are unavailable.

rights abuses, upon groups of individuals whose self-conceptions have been structured in terms of historical and often state-sanctioned relations of dominance and submission. The rhetoric of reconciliation is particularly common in situations where traditional judicial responses to wrongdoing are unavailable because of corruption in the legal system, staggeringly large numbers of offenders, or anxiety about the political consequences of trials and punishment.

A natural worry, then—one exacerbated by the use of explicitly therapeutic language—is that talk of reconciliation is merely a ruse to disguise the fact that a “purer” type of justice cannot be realized. Until we have a clearer conception of what reconciliation is, we cannot know whether it is right—or even morally desirable—to pursue it.

Familiar Cases

At first blush, reconciliation seems a heterogeneous concept. We speak of old friends wanting to be reconciled after a fight, of a person being reconciled to the onset of a chronic illness. Throughout the United States, victim-offender reconciliation programs have been developed to bring together criminals and their victims. In still other cases, reconciliation is attempted between groups of people, as in the example of South Africa. In general, we can usefully distinguish between micro-level and macro-level reconciliation, where the former typically involves local, face-to-face interactions—say between two friends—and the latter concerns more global interactions between groups of people, or nations, or institutions, which are often mediated by proxy.

Reconciliation has both forward- and backward-looking dimensions. The reconciliation of estranged

friends involves their past loyalty to each other as well as a mutual desire to repair their relationship and to maintain it into the future. When Archbishop Desmond Tutu advocates racial reconciliation in South Africa, he combines a tragic understanding of that country’s history with a sincere commitment to building a new society.

Reconciliation can be motivated by a variety of factors. Friends want to continue a desirable relationship in spite of some nastiness between them. National leaders and citizens in South Africa and other places long for a peaceful and more just future. The victim of a crime may decide to meet the person who stole precious objects from her in the hope that such an encounter will bring her psychological peace.

Crucial as such motivations are, it is clear that people can also have *moral* reasons for pursuing reconciliation. In the case of estranged friends, we may assume that one of the duties of friendship is the willingness to attempt reconciliation in the wake of upset. In other situations, most notably those like South Africa, the moral reasons for pursuing reconciliation will be grounded in a more transcendent or “distant” good—for example, respect for human dignity and human rights, or the value of a yet-to-be-realized *civic* friendship.

It is not always easy to distinguish moral from non-moral motivations for human action, and in appeals for reconciliation, the relation between them is often misconceived. For example, while features of human

People can have moral as well as psychological reasons for pursuing reconciliation.

psychology bear directly on the *desirability* of reconciliation, the mere fact that reconciliation would bring psychological peace does not provide a moral *imperative* for attempts to reconcile. On the other hand, to the extent that human psychology determines whether reconciliation is even *possible* in certain circumstances, it is relevant to the question of whether reconciliation is morally required.

Some people appear to have remarkable capacities to put the past behind them and move on. But just how much can we reasonably expect of an average person whose loved ones were killed by the state? Most recent calls for reconciliation, particularly between nations and their violent pasts and between groups of victims and victimizers, imply that seeking reconciliation is the morally right thing to do. But the obligatoriness of reconciliation—either at the micro- or the macro-level—would appear to be defeated

when interpersonal reconciliation is psychologically impossible.

An account of reconciliation, then, must capture a wide variety of cases and provide resources for making assessments about the psychological possibility and moral necessity of engaging in reconciliation. I believe such an account can be given. But seeing what it is requires stepping outside the socio-moral domain briefly to consider reconciliation in another light.

Seeking Coherence

When confronted with two apparently incompatible but attractive positions or two apparently mutually inconsistent but individually plausible propositions, we often speak of the need to reconcile them. A great deal of intellectual labor may go into the description of such tensions and attempts to alleviate them. We see that adopting position A rules out adopting position B, that p and q cannot be true together, and so on. Reconciliation can

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then take a number of forms: maybe proposition p isn't as plausible as it first appeared, and we can reject it without loss; or perhaps a more complete grasp of positions A and B will show them to be compatible after all. Presupposed in all this is a commitment to a normative ideal—usually truth, but sometimes mere logical consistency. If truth and consistency didn't matter to us, such efforts at reconciliation would be unjustified and unmotivated. Reconciliation is not something we seek for its own sake. And any *imperative* to attempt reconciliation will depend on the existence of normative ideals to which we are independently attached.

I suggest that we think of human reconciliation quite generally in terms of *tensions*—tensions between two or more beliefs; tensions between two or more differing interpretations of events; or tensions between two or more apparently incommensurable sets of values—and our responses to them. Here, the regulative ideals are not exactly truth and logical consistency. Rather, they have to do with understanding, intelligibility, and coherence. These are important features of human lives, and we care when they are threatened. My claim is that such considerations serve to ground a comprehensive notion of reconciliation.

Human lives are led narratively. A person's self-conception, along with her conception of the world around her and of her place in it, is usefully understood in terms of the relevant stories she constructs. Her past

actions and experiences, her current relationships, her hopes and fears about the future, are facts about a person that together make up the story of her life. It is against this cumulative but relatively stable background that her life is rendered intelligible, from the inside as well as from the outside. At the same time, we rely heavily on the tacit assumption that the lives of others also have narrative unity. Expectations and trust between us could not exist otherwise. You cannot depend on, let alone befriend, an individual whose life exhibits no reliable pattern.

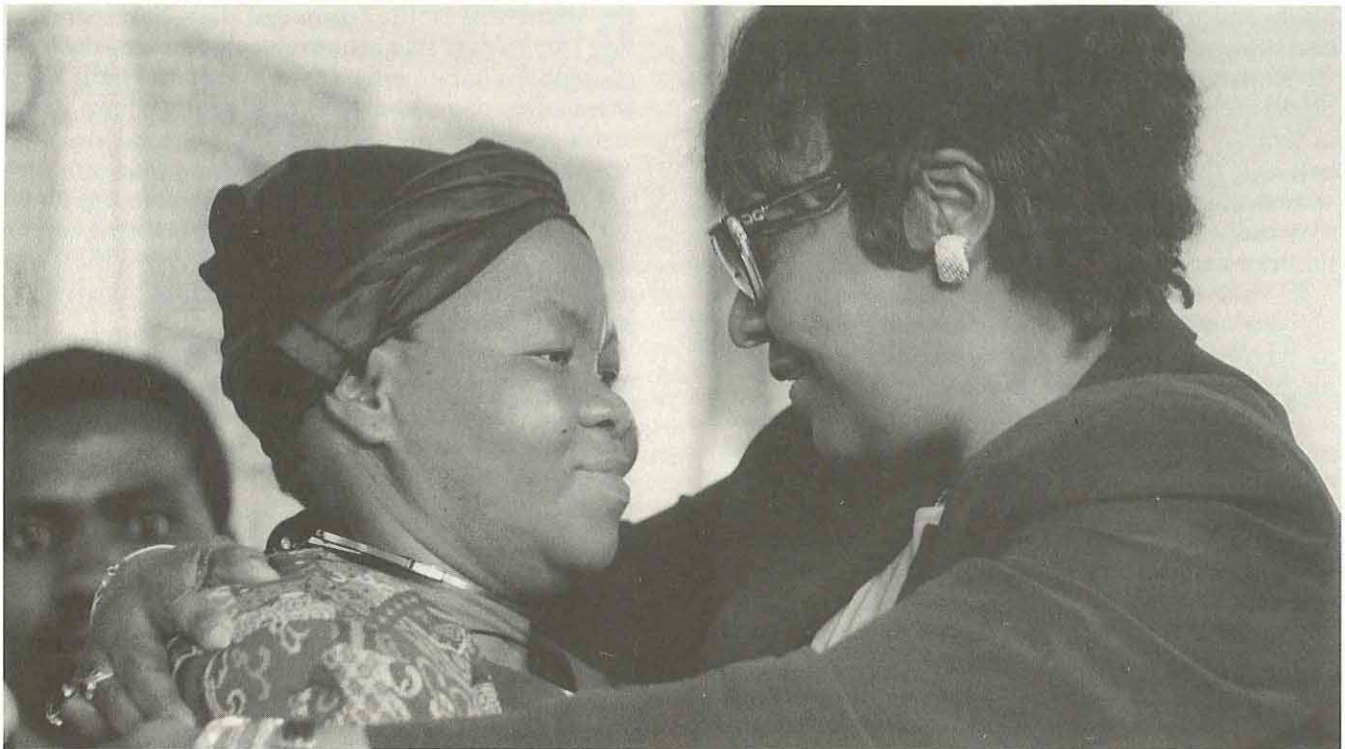
But certain things can and do disrupt this coherence. There is betrayal among friends; a person arrives at a painful realization about his career prospects; another becomes the victim of a random crime. Such events and experiences challenge deeply held beliefs, sometimes in profound ways. A woman might think that she "really knew" her lover; part of her self-understanding was tied up with being his partner. But his recent treachery throws into doubt the meaning of their past relationship, thus threatening her sense of self. The diagnosis of an illness or disability can rob a person of a particular projected future. Where the anticipation of such a future has guided and shaped her past and present actions, the person may have to engage in a wholesale reevaluation of her life and priorities.

We can never undo such disruptions; they are, quite literally, facts of life. But, especially when they are severe, our continued well-being—perhaps our very existence—depends on our being able to incorporate them into our personal narratives. For persons constituted as we are, self-understanding, understanding others, being understood by others, and achieving a

We can see not only why people can be motivated to pursue reconciliation, but why reconciliation is of deep moral significance.

degree of coherence and stability in our lives are all matters of considerable importance. Our desires for understanding are fundamental; to call them basic human needs would not be an overstatement. Hence we can see not only why people can be motivated to pursue reconciliation, but why reconciliation is of deep moral significance.

However, the moral significance of reducing tensions in personal narratives does not imply that all such tensions are bad, or that reconciliation aims at the *elimination* of tensions. Some tensions—for example, those that stem from the recognition of our fallibility—help keep us honest, and others might be worth cultivating insofar as they provide the impetus and sustain-



Joyce Seipei, left, mother of slain 14-year-old activist Stompei Seipei, is hugged by Winnie Mandikizela-Mandela, right, at a Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing in Johannesburg, South Africa, December 4, 1997. During her testimony before the TRC, Mandikizela-Mandela denied charges that she had ordered Stompei Seipei's death. (Associated Press photo/Adil Bradlow)

ing force for creative efforts. The sort of tensions that rightly trigger calls for reconciliation are ones that result from severe identity-threatening disruptions to ongoing narratives. But even in these cases, I am recommending that reconciliation be understood as the incorporation—not as the erasure—of such tensions. The tensions may need to be kept in view; the objective is to find a way to live with that.

Moreover, the moral significance of reducing tensions in personal narratives does not entail that reconciliation (morally) ought to be pursued no matter what. Despite the fact that human welfare depends on the ability to maintain (minimally) coherent individual life narratives, reconciliation as incorporation is not morally obligatory. Ought implies can, and individual psychological capacities may render reconciliation impossible for some.

The Narrative of a Nation

By construing reconciliation in terms of incorporation, we seem to discover what is common across a range of cases at the micro-level. But how well does the account do at the macro-level? Can it help us evaluate projects like the TRC in South Africa?

We may suppose, not implausibly, that groups, communities, and nations have autobiographies, too. Just as individual narratives are constructed around self-understanding, hopes, fears, and the like, the narrative of a community or nation is structured around its culture, ethnic identity, national spirit and aspirations. And, again paralleling the personal case, these elements form the basis for intergroup relations and expectations.

Granting all this, we can say that larger-scale narratives suffer disruptions as well. Although “disruption” seems obscenely inadequate as a description of the events in Rwanda or Kosovo, the central idea is the same: the continued well-being, or the very survival, of a community or nation depends on how it manages to incorporate and accommodate these disturbances and challenges to its prevailing narrative self-understanding.

Of course, not all disruptions are negative. South Africa appears to be a case in point. Though the TRC was devoted to the investigation of abuses during the apartheid regime, the complex event that precipitated its establishment was the *downfall* of apartheid. In contrast to the case of a friend's betrayal, the disrupted narrative here is one of racial separation, radical inequalities, and violence. Reconciliation between

blacks and whites in South Africa seems to involve the discontinuation of one story in favor of starting another. Given that the very identity (self-conception) of many blacks and whites in South Africa has been constructed in terms of oppressed and oppressors, the dissonance between these prior narratives and proposed post-apartheid stories of non-racialism and social equality may preclude the possibility of coherently continuing the prior narratives.

To see that the model of reconciliation as incorporation *does* apply to the South African context, it will help to sketch the mechanisms of reconciliation, as the model conceives of it.

The core notion is that of bringing apparently incompatible descriptions of events into narrative equilibrium. Hence the first thing that parties to reconciliation will require is a clear view of those events. At this stage, only the barest of facts—who did what to whom when—are relevant. The second stage involves the articulation of a range of interpretations of those events. Finally, parties to the reconciliation attempt to choose from this range of interpretations some subset that allows them each to incorporate the disruptive event into their ongoing narratives. It is not required that all parties settle on a single interpretation, only that they are mutually tolerant of a limited set of interpretations. Sometimes this process will require the revision of aspects of the preexisting narrative; under pressure to make sense of a recent event, a person may come to reinterpret some much earlier experiences. At base, the task is to move beyond the mere statement of agreed-upon facts, and toward mutually acceptable interpretations of those events.

In South Africa, then, reconciliation of the kind I have described would appear to involve the construction of a coherent narrative that encompasses both the atrocities of apartheid *and* the hope for a peaceful, respectful coexistence of political equals. Is this possible?

Arriving at such an accommodation need not and perhaps should not involve the excusing of a wrong. It might, but need not, involve an apology and an offer of forgiveness. Whether an apology is called for is precisely one of the topics up for discussion. Thus, reconciliation and forgiveness are conceptually distinct, even if they often go together.

Obstacles to Reconciliation

Many obstacles to reconciliation suggest themselves. First, as I have already noted, the history between blacks and whites in South Africa is not a history of friendship; it is a tale of mutual hatred, suspicion, and distrust. Second, in an all-encompassing oppressive regime like apartheid, individuals' identities are often constructed in terms of whether they are members of

the oppressing or the oppressed class. So, reconciliation may require that people give up fundamental self-conceptions or face some very unwelcome truths about themselves. Consider the black youth whose entire self-understanding has been built around resisting apartheid; or the white businesswoman who, although not an active oppressor, never objected to apartheid and comforted herself with the thought that the system couldn't really be that unjust. In such cases, the scope and depth of narrative revision required may be too great for some individuals.

Third, individual blacks and whites simply might not feel that, *in their own cases*, there is any tension to be resolved. The disruption of a friendship immediately gives rise to a tension; our current feelings or beliefs about the friend are at odds with those we once held. But the official dismantling of apartheid could not by

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itself cause the formerly oppressed suddenly to see their former oppressors in a fundamentally different light. Only if an individual wishes so to see another will she experience a tension of the sort toward which reconciliation is properly directed. Hence, reconciliation between individuals will be possible only in some cases: where people have particular desires about their future relationships, where actions manifest the sincerity of these desires, and where people are able to engage in face-to-face encounters that facilitate the negotiation of acceptable interpretations of events.

My claim is only that reconciliation will be *possible* in such conditions, not that it will be inevitable. And often these conditions cannot be met. But it would be precipitous to infer that talk of reconciliation between groups makes no sense. Consider, for example, a remark of the late Marius Schoon, an Afrikaner opponent of apartheid whose wife and daughter were killed by a terrorist bomb: "On the whole, I'm in favor of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I think it is going to bring about national reconciliation. In my case, it's not going to bring about personal reconciliation." It is as if Schoon could imagine the narrative of his country being revised in ways that his own personal story could not be.

Imaginable Futures

Nonetheless, reconciliation, even at the macro-level, should not be touted as aiming at the happy and harmonious coexistence of former enemies. It's one thing

to achieve some measure of narrative coherence in the face of atrocity; it's quite another to come to love one's torturer. Any conception of reconciliation that makes reconciliation dependent on forgiveness, or that emphasizes interpersonal harmony and positive fellow-feeling, will fail to be a realistic model of reconciliation for most creatures like us. If we care about reconciliation, let us advocate it in terms that make it credible to the relevant parties.

It is worth stressing, too, that in difficult cases a person's word is unlikely to be enough to secure reconciliation. When calls to reconcile issue from national or international political leaders, they must be backed up by concrete plans for a variety of supporting measures—for example, economic, health, and educational initiatives. Such measures are to be developed not as *compensation* for past wrongs, but rather as explicit demonstrations that a different future is now imaginable.

Unlike fictional narratives, which usually have distinct temporal bounds, the stories of our lives are open-ended. Hence, judgments of coherence are indeterminate. A person's (or a nation's) past is done. Some revision of interpretation is possible, but only so much can be altered without destroying the narrative in question. (One might say that too much revision is tantamount to writing the history of a different person or nation.) Attempts to coherently incorporate new beliefs and attitudes will be limited in this way. Nonetheless, what might seem anomalous now can make perfect sense later. The attempt by black South Africans to see white South Africans as *having been* oppressors and *being* fellow citizens is not impossible. As that society achieves greater justice and equality, those who focus on one or the other of the apparently mutually exclusive descriptions will be failing to grasp the whole truth. Here it is useful to recall that reconciliation as incorporation does not require elimination of the tension that triggers it.

Conclusion

I have suggested that reconciliation is fundamentally a process whose aim is to lessen the sting of a tension: to make sense of injuries, new beliefs, and attitudes in the overall narrative context of a personal or national life. Reconciliation is guided by normative ideals of

intelligibility, coherence, and understanding; and the mechanisms of reconciliation I have described are, broadly speaking, epistemological, in the sense that they are strategies of narrative revision.

This understanding of reconciliation applies at the micro- and macro-levels. It makes the application of the concept appropriate, even in circumstances where there is no prior positive relationship to be restored. In this sense, reconciliation does not pretentiously masquerade as *wiedergutmachung*—making things good again. Coherent incorporation of an unpleasant fact, or a new belief about an enemy, into the story of one's life might involve the issuance of an apology and an offer of forgiveness. But it need not. Reconciliation, as I have presented it, is conceptually independent of forgiveness. This is a good thing. For it means that reconciliation might be psychologically possible where forgiveness is not.

Of course, nothing I have said rules out the misappropriation of the concept of reconciliation by politicians and others. Governments will always attempt to hide their inactivity behind positive-sounding therapeutic language. But I hope to have shown that reconciliation need not be a mere consolation prize for individuals and nations in the aftermath of violence and oppression. If this is less than some advocates of reconciliation would like, perhaps that is because of their tendency to talk of reconciliation in abstraction from the kind of reconciliation we humans can and do engage in.

—Susan Dwyer

Susan Dwyer, associate professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, is the editor of *The Problem of Pornography* (Wadsworth, 1995) and the author of papers in moral psychology, epistemology, and feminist theory. A longer version of this essay has appeared in *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 13 (1999). Sources: Suzanne Daley, "South Africa Commission Grants Amnesty for Two Apartheid Cases," *New York Times* (August 6, 1999); Gay Becker, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (University of California Press, 1997); Donald J. McNeil, Jr., "Marius Schoon, 61, is Dead; Foe of Apartheid Lost Family," *New York Times* (February 9, 1999).