Reconciliation for Realists

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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. Take, for example, the Canadian government’s recent offer of reconciliation to that country’s 1.3 million aboriginal people, and President Kim Dae Jung’s formal acceptance of Japan’s written apology for harms caused during its 35-year occupation of South Korea. In academia, so-called forgiveness studies have come into their own, most notably with the establishment of the University of Wisconsin’s International Forgiveness Institute and the disbursement of five million dollars from the Templeton Foundation for work on a spectrum of issues, from deathbed reconciliations to conciliatory behavior among nonhuman primates. But perhaps nothing has done more to subject the concepts of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation to international attention and critique than South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Of the three concepts, reconciliation can seem the most puzzling. This is not to say that apology and forgiveness do not raise difficult questions in their own right. Aurel Kolnai, for example, points to the paradoxical nature of forgiveness: on the one hand, we think we ought to forgive all and only those wrongdoers who deserve to be forgiven; on the other, the more deserving of forgiveness a person is, the less like a wrongdoer he seems, and forgiveness seems to lose its point. Still, most of us have enough experience of apology and forgiveness (at least for minor transgressions) to make these notions appear relatively straightforward.

But what is reconciliation? Is it the end-state toward which practices of apology and forgiveness aim? Is it a process of which apology and forgiveness are merely parts? Or is it something altogether independent of apology and forgive-

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ness? How is reconciliation to be achieved? And under what conditions should it be sought? Curiously, given the frequency with which the term "reconciliation" is used, no one is saying.

The notable lack of any clear account of what reconciliation is, and what it requires, justifiably alerts the cynics among us. Reconciliation is being urged upon people who have been bitter and murderous enemies, upon victims and perpetrators of terrible human rights abuses, upon groups of individuals whose very 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.

Hence, a natural worry, exacerbated by the use of explicitly therapeutic language of healing and recovery, is that talk of reconciliation is merely a ruse to disguise the fact that a "purer" type of justice cannot be realized. This is of moral and practical significance. For example, in being asked to focus on racial reconciliation rather than on punishment, are victims of apartheid having to settle for the morally second best? And, if so, how sanguine can we be about South Africa’s long-term social stability? Until we have a clearer idea of what reconciliation is, we cannot know whether it is right—or even morally desirable—to pursue it.

In the next two sections, I progressively mine our pretheoretical understanding of reconciliation to arrive at a core concept that at the same time suggests a way in which reconciliation might be pursued and grounds a response to moral qualms provoked by the use of an unanalyzed conception of reconciliation. First, however, I want to situate my current project in relation to a particular religious conception of reconciliation.

"Reconciliation" has almost exclusively positive connotations, suggesting an end to antagonisms, the graceful acceptance of disappointment or defeat, the healing and repair of valuable friendships, and so on. However, the word also has powerful religious overtones, including intimations of purification and cleansing as well as the restoration of an individual’s relationship to God. If one’s task is to give content to the concept of reconciliation in a way that displays its political and moral appropriateness, it will be tempting to ignore theological aspects of reconciliation. But this temptation should be resisted, for at least three reasons.

First, it is undeniable that Christian conceptions of reconciliation are deeply implicated in the South African context (under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu), in several South and Central American countries recovering from
violent pasts, and in the predominantly church-led discourse on racial reconciliation in the United States. Second, Christian understandings of reconciliation often conjoin the common idea that “none of us is without sin” with powerful stories of healing and transformation that provide inspiration to many individuals struggling in the aftermath of harms suffered and harms caused. Third, however, I think we must be aware of the ambitious and slightly mysterious picture of reconciliation embodied in Christianity. The ambitiousness and the mysteriousness lie in the suggestions that love and faith in God are required for reconciliation. I will eventually concede that a sort of faith—construed in broadly psychological terms—may be needed to undertake the work of reconciliation. But even granting this, the model of reconciliation I will propose is decidedly more modest than the prevailing Christian conception.

Unpacking the Concept: Familiar Cases

As a first step toward understanding what reconciliation might mean, it is helpful to examine some familiar cases in which we are apt to invoke the concept.

We often 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 examples of Canada and South Africa. Thus, 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 persons, nations, or institutions, which are often mediated by proxy.

That we can speak of reconciliation between a range of different things is linked to the further fact that 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 Tutu advocates racial reconciliation in South Africa, he combines a vivid understanding of that country’s history with a sincere commitment to a better tomorrow. An important difference between the South African case and the case of estranged friends is that the idea of reconciliation as restoration of a former state is relevant only in the latter. For in South Africa there is no previous racial harmony to be restored.

Reconciliation can be motivated by a variety of factors. Friends want to continue a desirable relationship in spite of some nastiness between them. National lead-
ers and citizens in South Africa and other places hope for a peaceful and more just future. But consider a woman who longs for a child, yet discovers she cannot become pregnant. The discrepancy between her hopes and her capacities is irresolvable. She wants to become reconciled to this fact, in order to achieve psychological peace. There is no point in being miserable about something she cannot help (though regret for lost opportunities may be appropriate). A desire for psychological peace might also be what motivates the victim of a crime to meet the person who stole treasured objects from him. It is not unusual for victims of even minor crimes, such as theft, to be distressed and angry and to lose confidence in their own security. And mediators who facilitate face-to-face meetings between offenders and their victims report that such interactions do serve to assuage such feelings on the part of victims.

Crucial as these psychological motivations are, it is clear that people can also have moral reasons for pursuing reconciliation. Sometimes, the source of such reasons is immediate—as in the case of estranged friends, where we might 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, whatever moral reasons there are for reconciliation will be grounded in a more transcendent and thus more 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 nonmoral motivations for human action. But when it comes to recommendations for reconciliation, it is vital that we pay close attention to the language in which they are couched. For while features of human psychology bear directly on the desirability of reconciliation, the mere fact that reconciliation would bring psychological peace does not provide a moral justification for attempts to reconcile.

Even more important, facts about human psychology are relevant to the question of whether reconciliation is morally required, in that they determine whether reconciliation is even possible in certain circumstances. Suppose that a person is not a victim of theft, but of some more serious crime like kidnapping and torture. It is true that 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 the average person whose loved ones are either killed or made to disappear by forces of 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. Institutions and individuals would be wrong not to try it. But the obligatoriness of reconciliation—at either the micro- or the macro-level—would appear to be defeated when interpersonal reconciliation is psychologically impossible.
This raises a further matter, namely, that the evaluation of efforts to achieve macro-level reconciliation—such as those taking place in South Africa—must consider the various relations that hold between individual persons and the corporate entities they belong to. Does reconciliation between groups require that all or a majority of members work toward reconciliation? Or, is there some sense to be made of reconciliation between groups, even where micro-level reconciliation is psychologically impossible? (I briefly address these questions below.)

When we focus on commonplace examples of reconciliation, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the heterogeneity of the concept and by the complexities involved in assessing the prospects of its applications. It would be nice to articulate a more basic account of reconciliation that unifies the different cases we have discussed and suggests some ways in which reconciliation might be achieved. This requires stepping outside the socio-moral domain briefly to consider reconciliation in another light.

Unpacking the Concept: A Deeper Account

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 involves 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. Reconciliation can then take a number of forms: maybe proposition \( p \) is not 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, such efforts at reconciliation would be unjustified and unmotivated. Reconciliation is not something we seek for its own sake. And in particular, any imperative to attempt reconciliation depends upon 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 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. And we rely heavily on the tacit assumption that the lives of others 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 future; another becomes the victim of a random crime. Such events and experiences challenge deeply held beliefs, sometimes in profound ways. A woman might think 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 his past and present actions, a person may have to engage in a wholesale reevaluation of his life and priorities. Victims of crime are suddenly and sometimes violently forced to reconsider their previous assumptions about physical security and the predictability of others.

We can never undo such disruptions; they are, literally, facts of life. But, especially when they are severe, our continued well-being—perhaps our very existence—depends upon our being able to incorporate them into our personal narratives. For persons, at least, self-understanding, understanding others, being understood by others, and achieving a degree of coherence and stability in our lives matter.4

The desires for intrapersonal and interpersonal understanding that underpin the construction of a coherent and stable life narrative are quite fundamental. To call them basic human needs would not be an overstatement. And it seems to me that any adequate account of morality must be sensitive to such facts about human psychology. I cannot argue for this claim here, but it is surely plausible that a normative theory must accommodate—it must not be in tension with—

4 See Gay Becker, Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Written from an anthropological perspective, the book contains a wealth of case studies that bear out the central point here: people experience trauma in terms of disruption and respond to it by telling new stories about themselves.
basic facts about the type of creatures whose behavior its principles purport to regulate. Given this assumption, we can understand not only why we are motivated to pursue reconciliation, but why reconciliation is of deep moral significance.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize that 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 for and sustaining force of creative efforts. The sort of tensions that rightly trigger demands 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 an erasure—of that tension. The tension 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 upon the ability to maintain (minimally) coherent individual life narratives, reconciliation as incorporation is not morally obligatory. For one thing, it is a familiar moral principle that ought implies can, and, as I have already noted, individual psychological capacities may render reconciliation impossible for some. Furthermore, not all theories of right action are welfarist.

The construal of reconciliation in terms of incorporation appears to reveal what is common across the wide range of cases in which we are inclined to speak of reconciliation at the micro-level. But how well does the account do at the macro-level?

Let us suppose, not implausibly, that groups, communities, and nations have autobiographies, too. In supposing this, we need not commit ourselves to metaphysically dubious entities; that is, nations need not be thought of as persons or agents. Neither need we assume that they are homogeneous, undifferentiated wholes. In describing the personal case, I said that individual narratives are constructed around self-understanding, hopes and fears, and the like. When it comes to communities and nations, culture, ethnic identity, national spirit, and aspirations play analogous roles. And, again paralleling the personal case, these elements form the basis for intergroup relations and expectations.

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5 See, for example, Owen Flanagan, Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
Larger-scale narratives suffer disruptions as well, although "disruption" seems obscenely inadequate as a description of the events in Bosnia and Rwanda. Nonetheless, the central idea is the same: the continued well-being, or the very survival, of a community or nation depends upon how it manages to incorporate and accommodate these disturbances and challenges to its prevailing narrative of self-understanding.

**Dealing with Positive Disruptions**

I have yet to describe how reconciliation—understood as narrative incorporation—is to be achieved. But before doing so, I need to acknowledge and rectify a potentially dangerous incompleteness in the account of reconciliation I have offered. The account appears to fare well with respect to the cases so far considered, which all involve a negative disruption to an ongoing narrative. But sometimes it seems appropriate to seek reconciliation when the relevant disruption is actually positive.

South Africa appears to be a case in point. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is devoted to the investigation of abuses during the apartheid era, 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. There are similar (but not strictly analogous) cases at the micro-level. Narratives of long-term drug addiction are disrupted—or at least interrupted—by detoxification, rehabilitation, and genuine resolutions to discontinue the problematic behavior.

These two examples have elements in common with the others discussed above, insofar as they all involve dealing with past wrongs. But in the case of South Africa and the recovering drug addict, the relevant disruptions apparently require a response more radical than the mere modification of an ongoing narrative. Reconciliation between blacks and whites in South Africa, or between an addict and his family, seems to involve the discontinuation of one story in favor of starting another. Indeed, tales of individual recovery are often couched in slightly paradoxical idioms: "I'm a new person"; "That was a former self"; and the like. Given that the very identity (self-conception) of 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 nonracialism and social equality may preclude the possibility of coherently con-
tinuing the prior narratives. If this is right, then either the narrative incorporation conception of reconciliation is incomplete, or it makes no sense to talk of reconciliation in such circumstances.

Conceding the latter option would resolve the difficulty quickly. But it would be an unhelpful concession, especially since so many contemporary pleas for reconciliation arise in contexts marked by deep animosities and justified distrust resulting from terrible human rights abuses. But at the same time, we must not underestimate the challenges of narrative revision. If reconciliation can be hard for friends who share a positive history, and where no one has died or been tortured, we can only begin to imagine the correspondingly greater difficulties confronting the people of South Africa. Indeed, I suspect that one explanation for the increased rhetoric of reconciliation is that, in contexts like South Africa, forgiveness for past wrongs is simply not possible. Other options—forgetting, trials and punishment, and so on—are ruled out by a constellation of factors. Yet some positive-sounding response is called for. Reconciliation might fit the bill. But as I said at the outset, absent an account of what reconciliation is and what it requires, proposing reconciliation will seem like a political sop aimed at masking moral defeat. So it is important to see if the model of reconciliation I have sketched is applicable to the difficult cases.

An economical way to accomplish this task is to examine the mechanisms of reconciliation as narrative incorporation, to which I now turn.

**The Process of Reconciliation**

In my account of reconciliation, 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, where only the barest of facts—who did what to whom when—are relevant. The second stage will involve 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 accommodate 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 pre-existing narrative; under pressure to make sense of a recent event, a person may come to reinterpret some much earlier experiences. In different situations, different resources will be available for carrying out the task of reconciliation, making some instances relatively easy and others profoundly difficult.
Long-standing friends have, in addition to their individual narratives, a shared story of their life together. Over time friends mutually co-construct a tale about their relationship. This mini-history will include an account of how the relationship began, recountings of shared adventures, slights, injuries, acts of generosity and love, feelings of joy and security. When a disruption occurs—say, when one friend betrays another—the two are faced with an event that is anomalous with respect to their shared story. If they choose to continue their friendship, they need to make sense of that event. Typically, friends will talk—presenting their respective sides of the story, explaining the motives and intentions behind their actions—and listen. The task is to move beyond the mere statement of agreed-upon facts about who did what to whom, and toward a mutually acceptable interpretation (or interpretations) of those events.

Arriving at an accommodation need not and perhaps should not involve the excusing of a wrong. It might, but need not, involve an apology and the offer of forgiveness. Whether an apology is called for is precisely one of the topics up for discussion, taking into account how similar disruptions have been handled in the past. Thus, reconciliation and forgiveness are conceptually independent, even if they often go together. With a common language and mutual legitimate expectations of each other, friends have considerable resources at their disposal for engaging in reconciliation. Against a background of reliable behavior, talk will often be enough to reconcile friends.

Matters are considerably harder in a case like that of the recovering drug addict, who struggles to reconcile with his parents and make amends for the pain he has caused them as a result of his addiction. If they attempt reconciliation, there is probably little or no disagreement between the addict and his mother and father: the addict has lived in the grip of a powerful addiction; he has attempted to deny and conceal that fact; he has stolen and lied; and so on. It is typical for long-term drug abusers to make false promises, especially to enter detox and go clean. According to the model of reconciliation I am proposing, the process of reconciling requires that the addict and his parents incorporate into their individual and joint narratives the belief that he really intends to give up drugs. But the addict's credibility is near zero. The idea that he is trustworthy and sincere is so radically at odds with each of the participant's existing narratives concerning him that we must wonder whether any coherent incorporation of it is possible. Thus it is an open question whether this shared familial history offers resources for reconciliation, as its analogue in the case of friends does, or whether it presents more of an obstacle. Much will depend on the emotional ties between parents and their children, and on the participants' understanding of their respective filial and
parental duties. And there is considerable anecdotal evidence to suggest that some people never give up on their loved ones. Nonetheless, the case illustrates some of the difficulties that attend attempts at reconciliation in the aftermath of even positive disruptions, and it alerts us to the potentially more serious problems that emerge in contexts like South Africa and Northern Ireland.

Reconciliation in South Africa

In assessing the applicability of my proposed model of reconciliation to the South African case, it is important to bear in mind the distinction between what I have been calling the micro- and the macro-levels and ask whether the possibility of reconciliation at the macro-level depends upon the possibility of reconciliation at the micro-level. Moreover, appealing to this distinction will help us respond to skeptical worries about whether reconciliation represents a morally second-best strategy for dealing with past wrongs.

At the macro-level in South Africa, reconciliation is being proposed primarily between races, but people also speak of the nation becoming reconciled to its past. Immediately, there is a tension. For the mention of a nation being reconciled to its past presupposes that there is a relatively unified South Africa that can look back on its past. But that entity is surely the one that South Africans seek to bring into existence through racial reconciliation. So I want to put aside talk of the reconciliation of a nation with its past and focus instead on the prior question of reconciliation between currently living people. Of course, the past is crucial here too; individual South Africans are inescapably affected by the historical facts of apartheid.

These then are our questions: Does racial reconciliation between blacks and whites require that individual blacks and whites seek reconciliation with each other? If the obstacles to individual reconciliation are insurmountable, is it still intelligible to talk of national or group reconciliation? Would the pursuit of national reconciliation be purchased at the cost of denying justice to individuals?

The model of reconciliation I have proposed is one of narrative incorporation. Hence, reconciliation between blacks and whites 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. But is this possible? Earlier, we noted that the shared history of friends constitutes a rich resource for reconciliation. It usually provides some motivation and sometimes grounds an imperative to seek it. But the history between blacks and whites in South Africa is not a history of friendship. Rather, it is a tale of mutual hatred,
suspicion, and distrust. Far from being a resource, history can hinder attempts at reconciliation.6

Further obstacles to reconciliation suggest themselves. As I have already noted, in an all-encompassing oppressive regime like apartheid, individuals’ very identities are often constructed in terms of whether they are members of the oppressing or the oppressed class. This has implications for the psychological capacities of persons to engage in reconciliation. 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. Moreover, the sheer number of people involved, combined with deep-seated and justified distrust on both sides, diminishes the possibility of repeated and extended face-to-face encounters between victims and victimizers, of the sort involved in the mechanisms of reconciliation I outlined above.

It does not follow from these considerations, however, that the narrative incorporation view of reconciliation is incomplete. Nor do they show that talk of reconciliation is simply inappropriate in South Africa. To demonstrate why, I need to say something more about the nature of narrative revision.

First, while most fictional narratives have distinct temporal bounds, the stories of our lives are open ended. Hence, judgments of coherence are sometimes 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, whether some new belief about a person can be coherently incorporated can also be a matter of which futures are imaginable. What might seem anomalous now can make perfect sense later. The attempt by the addict’s parents to see him as having been a liar and being a sincere son is not impossible; neither is the attempt by black South Africans to see white South Africans as having been oppressors and being fellow citizens. In each instance, focusing on just one or the other of the appar-

6 Wole Soyinka argues that the entire history of the African continent, including the spiritual resources of African traditional societies and the practices and enduring legacies of colonialism and slavery, condition the possibilities for reconciliation in South Africa and other African countries. I cannot do justice to that history here, but Soyinka is surely right to remind us that talk of truth and reconciliation never takes place in an historical vacuum. See Wole Soyinka, The Burden of Memory, The Muse of Forgiveness (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), chap. 1.
ently mutually exclusive descriptions involves failing to grasp the whole truth. Here it is useful to recall that reconciliation as incorporation does not require the elimination of the tension that triggers it.

But, of course, when we are hurt and suffering, it can be exceptionally difficult for us to adopt this perspective. As Phylicia Oppelt, a black South African journalist, puts it:

I grew up in a system of apartheid that permeated every aspect of my existence. For most of my life I was taught to expect racial slurs, to accept as a fact of existence that the rights and privileges available to whites were not available to me. I was taught to be less. . . . I have white friends. But all it takes is one racial slur from an unknown person to turn those same friends into representatives of a detested race.7

Oppelt reminds us how profoundly arduous the job of reconciliation can be, when one's entire sense of self and one's understanding of others has been structured by a state-sanctioned regime of racial oppression. Trust is extraordinarily fragile. Her words also highlight the fact that effective reconciliation is rarely a solipsistic task.

This leads to a second suggestion (actually a completely familiar point). Sometimes attempts at reconciliation require management or, less contentiously, the facilitative efforts of a third party. Marriage counselors, priests and ministers, conflict mediation specialists, diplomats, and, arguably, truth commissions can and sometimes do perform this role. When we are unable to accommodate a painful event into our narrative without losing coherence, it can help to see that someone else can tell such a story. We might not believe it yet, but perhaps we can at least see it as possible.

At this point, we might recall the religious resonances of reconciliation. In particularly difficult situations, reconciliation does require faith. Bono (of U2 fame) recently described David Trimble (the head of the Ulster Unionist Party) and John Hume (the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour party) as men who "had taken a leap of faith out of the past and into the future."8 But this need not be faith in a divine being. It can be as commonplace as our already implicit belief that the future is nothing if not full of possibility, where the import of this belief is not the old (and false) canard that anything is possible if one puts one's

mind to it. Rather, it is expressed in the fact that each of us manages to go on—often quite successfully—despite gross uncertainty about the future. Our experience with unforeseen opportunities and adversity grounds and increasingly contributes to our faith that we have the resources to cope with the twists and turns of our futures.

I do not mean for a moment to suggest that people who were tortured under apartheid or whose loved ones were murdered simply be consoled with the fact that they have survived after all and will probably continue to do so. That would be morally outrageous. Rather I want to highlight the fact that our attempts at narrative construction and revision are often fueled by an acquired psychological disposition that might be likened to faith.

It is worth stressing, too, that in difficult cases a person’s word will rarely be enough to secure reconciliation, and reconciliation is unlikely to be instantaneous or even quick. Given his history, the drug addict cannot merely say that he is clean, report his intention to remain so, and leave it at that. He must act accordingly. An extended, reliable pattern of reformed behavior can begin to restore a person’s credibility where no amount of words can. Similarly in South Africa, we can imagine any number of state-sponsored programs (actions) that might serve to show that the new South Africa is genuinely committed to racial equality: education subsidies, health care reform, appointment of blacks to positions of political and social power, and the like.9

I began this section by posing three questions: Does racial reconciliation between blacks and whites require that individual blacks and whites seek reconciliation with each other? If the obstacles to individual reconciliation are insurmountable, is it still intelligible to talk of national or group reconciliation? Would the pursuit of national reconciliation be purchased at the cost of denying justice to individuals? I believe that the preceding considerations deliver the following answers to the first two questions; I reserve my response to the third until the next section.

There are real and significant obstacles in the paths of individual South Africans seeking reconciliation. For example, the scope and depth of narrative revision required in the case of the white businesswoman who must now try to see her past self as a passive accomplice in a grossly unjust social and political sys-

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9 Similar considerations are advanced in the advocacy of racial reconciliation in the United States. Spencer Perkins, a prominent reconciliation activist, put it this way: “If white Christians . . . are not willing to back up their reconciliation talk with sacrificial acts, then the majority of blacks and Native Americans are going to continue in their skepticism about all the reconciliation talk.” Quoted in Aaron McCarron Gallegos, “Following the Path of Grace,” Sojourners, November–December 1998, pp. 24–28.
tem may be too great. Similarly, there are obstacles to reconciliation between individuals, and not just because some crimes strike us as unforgivable. (Recall, I have stressed that reconciliation does not require apology or forgiveness.) Rather, it might be that individual blacks and whites simply do 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. But the official dismantling of apartheid could not by itself cause the formerly oppressed to suddenly 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 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. Nonetheless, it would be precipitous to infer from this that talk of reconciliation between groups makes no sense. Consider, for example, a remark of the late Marius Schoon: “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.” Schoon was speaking in the context of the amnesty hearing for Craig Williamson, who confessed to sending the bomb that killed Schoon’s wife, Jeanette, and daughter, Katryn, in 1984. It is as if Schoon, an Afrikaner opponent of apartheid, is able to see how the narrative of his country can be revised in ways that his own personal story cannot be. But, as I have stressed, reconciliation at the macro-level requires the credibility that can be established only by implementation of social and economic programs that concretely address the substantive injustices of apartheid.

**Is Reconciliation Morally Second Best?**

With a summary of the main features of the proposed account of reconciliation before us, we can render a preliminary judgment on the skeptical worries I mentioned at the beginning of the paper—that reconciliation is a kind of moral “second best,” disguised by considerable rhetoric.

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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. That reconciliation is an epistemological task also makes the involvement of third parties, or some kinds of management or facilitation, both legitimate and potentially fruitful.

A full treatment of the role of third parties, which I cannot provide here, would give a richer account of how group reconciliation can be achieved where individual reconciliation might not be so easy. It would also speak to the concern that the stability of reconciliation might, in some cases, depend upon face-to-face encounters. Expressing skepticism about the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Gertrude Muyana, a victim of random violence during the apartheid era, asks: “How can you reconcile with someone you don’t see? You don’t know who they are.”11 Archbishop Tutu’s commission was highly sensitive to people’s need to see each other. But it was not always possible for victims to confront victimizers.

Facts like this are precisely the sorts of things that provoke deep moral concerns about reconciliation. It is very tempting to think that Ms. Muyana deserved better, deserved to see the person who left her partially paralyzed brought to trial and duly punished for the harm he or she caused. More so, in cases where victims have witnessed their torturers demonstrating to the world the techniques they employed to extract confessions, it is natural to recoil at the idea that such people may be granted amnesty. Yes, it is good to know the truth. But

how, in all good conscience, can victims be asked to bear the further burden of undertaking the hard work of reconciliation? And what about justice?

If a case could be made for the obligatoriness of reconciliation, then the questions above would have an answer. But I have argued that, while reconciliation is morally significant, facts about human psychology undermine any general claim to the effect that reconciliation is morally obligatory for individuals. It does not follow from this, however, that fixing on reconciliation as the macro-level preferred response to past wrongs amounts to settling for the morally second best.

To see why, consider what makes something a morally second-best option. Grant that there is some action I ought to perform—say, volunteer at the local homeless shelter. But I know myself well enough to know that were I to agree to do so, I would not show up. Now I am asked to help out at Thanksgiving. Ideally, I ought to volunteer and show up. But since I know I won’t show up, I ought not to volunteer, since it is morally worse to agree and not show up. In this case, what I opt for, failing to volunteer, is the morally second best. I could show up; I just know that it is highly unlikely that I will.

Reconciliation, then, will be a morally second-best option only if there is some other strategy a nation could undertake that would be better. For example, if justice, in the sense of fair and comprehensive trials and punishment, could be effected, reconciliation would rightly be judged morally inferior. But the availability of realistic alternatives is precisely what is in question in most of the situations in which reconciliation is being recommended. Whether the establishment of truth commissions and efforts at reconciliation are morally inferior responses to violent pasts depends on the availability of other morally acceptable options. Where no such options exist, calls for reconciliation need not be impugned.12

Two points must be stressed, however. First, reconciliation should not be touted as aiming at the happy and harmonious coexistence of former enemies. It is one thing to achieve some measure of narrative coherence in the face of atrocity; it is quite another to come to love one’s torturer. Although my model of reconciliation does not rule out the operation of a sort of faith in the process of reconciliation, and to that extent resonates with Christian understandings, it paints a decidedly modest picture of reconciliation. Complexities are, of course, involved in attempting reconciliation; but it is not a grand or mysterious undertaking. It seems to me that any conception of reconciliation—at either the micro- or macro-level—that makes reconciliation dependent on forgiveness, or that emphasizes interpersonal harmony and positive fellow-feeling, will fail to be a

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12 Martha Minow, Between Vengeance and Forgiveness (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), hints at this line of thought.
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. (This is one reason I have scrupulously avoided the language of healing in this essay.)

Second, when calls for reconciliation 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; and these initiatives must not be developed as compensation for past wrongs, but rather as explicit demonstrations of the new government's commitment to the processes of racial and social reconciliation. Nevertheless, reconciliation conscientiously pursued and faithfully supported is no guarantee of justice, unless we distort our conception of justice to conform to contingent practical limitations. Reconciliation may often fall short of justice. This point bears emphasis. Political leaders should not pretend that reconciliation is the same as justice. But, again, this does not mean that reconciliation is a second-best option. Justice is not the only thing we value. And in many cases, reconciliation may be our sole morally significant option.

Of course, nothing I have said rules out the misappropriation of the concept of reconciliation by politicians and others. Governments will always be tempted 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 it in abstraction from the kind of reconciliation we humans can and do engage in.