

From the Editors

When this text is written, it is December 10th, marking the 76th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This landmark document was conceived as a response to the horrors of war, genocide, and systematic injustices, aiming to establish a universal framework to protect human dignity and prevent future atrocities. Yet, the world continues to grapple with such atrocities, along with more localized but still painful injustices. In the aftermath of these, a pressing ethical challenge is how to address the demands of justice and restore trust and relationships among the parties involved. By addressing the wounds of injustices, reconciliation, and reconciliation processes are thought to be tools for restoring trust and relationships, fostering a foundation for mutual understanding and – sometimes – even healing.¹

Reconciliation as a tool for restoring broken trust and relationships implies that there once was an initial relationship and trust to rebuild. This understanding is not without problems, as it suggests that the responsibility for reconciliation is placed on all parties, including victims of injustice. Thus, the practice of reconciliation may be in tension with the pursuit of justice. Justice often demands accountability, punishment, or compensation, while reconciliation emphasizes dialogue, understanding, and, in some cases, forgiveness. This raises several questions: Can reconciliation be achieved without compromising justice? Are there certain acts that can never be morally forgivable? Thus, reconciliation is a concept and a practice that is not without difficulties, calling for a conception that prioritizes redressing harm and addressing power imbalances rather than presuming mutual responsibility.

In this context, Daniel Philpott offers a helpful definition, describing reconciliation as “a broad restoration of right relationship involving a multiplicity of practices that each redress wounds of injustice in a particular way.”² This conception captures the complex nature of reconciliation, emphasizing the role it can play in healing and building – but not necessarily rebuilding – relationships. Redressing the wounds of injustice involves not only holding perpetrators accountable but, most importantly, attending to the needs of the victims. Thus, reconciliation, as the redressing of injustice, resolves some of the tensions surrounding reconciliation and justice.

The relationship between reconciliation and justice is one main issue of ethical concern, as is the relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness. This relationship also raises difficult questions: What, if any, is the role of forgiveness in reconciliation processes? Can reconciliation truly be achieved without forgiveness, or does the absence of forgiveness render reconciliation incomplete? Can redressing injustice and (re)storing relationships be possible without it? Are there acts, such as genocide, torture, and systemic oppression, that cannot – or should not – be forgiven?

¹ Radzik, Linda and Murphy, Colleen. "Reconciliation". The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2023 Edition). Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (eds.). URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/reconciliation/>.

² Philpott, Daniel. *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*. Studies in Strategic Peacebuilding (New York, 2012; online edn, Oxford Academic. 20 Sept. 2012). <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199827565.001.0001> accessed 10 Dec. 2024. p. 50.

On the one hand, forgiveness can be seen as a profound moral act, transcending vengeance and breaking cycles of hatred. On the other hand, forgiving certain atrocities may be perceived as a treachery of the suffering of others. Some argue that forgiving the unforgivable could undermine moral accountability, while others propose that forgiveness is a supererogative act, a gift, freely given, that need not negate justice but is a complement.

This tension raises further questions concerning moral agency and moral responsibility. Should forgiveness be an individual choice, or is there a moral duty not to forgive? An alternative way, as suggested by Claudia Card in her *The Atrocity Paradigm*, is to perceive forgiveness as moral power that can play a role in reconciliation.³ She argues that atrocities fundamentally alter relationships among victims and perpetrators but also among victims and bystanders. These altered (or in some cases newly created) relationships create moral powers of the victims, such as the ability to testify, to blame, to resent, to forgive, or to punish – if they wish to do so.

This special issue is the first of two from the Societas Ethica conference on The Ethics of Reconciliation held in Sarajevo in August 2023. In this issue, the practice of reconciliation is analysed from the vantage points of truth commissions and workplace bullying, and theoretical issues of reconciliation are discussed from theological and egalitarian perspectives.

Alexandra Lebedeva's article analyzes truth commissions, an institutional response to human rights atrocities that can be understood as a means to reconciliation. However, she notes that such commissions raise significant moral and political questions. Two important upshots from the analysis are presented. First, Lebedeva points to the risk of depoliticizing human rights through their individualization. This may result in a failure to identify the same power structures that contributed to the atrocities initially taking place. Second, truth commissions may focus on allowing the victims to speak without emphasizing the obligation of the powerful to listen. She ends her article by arguing that the way we address past human rights violations should be guided by an ideal of responsibility for justice.

In the article *Equality in Reconciliation. From Theoretical to Practical Opportunities*, Heidi Jokinen and Björn Wikström take on the concept of reconciliation from the perspective of equality. Discussing two cases – the reconciliation processes involving the Sámi population in the Nordic countries and the use of restorative justice in cases of domestic violence against women – they find that a proper understanding of reconciliation also has implications for the practice of achieving reconciliation in real-life cases. They propose a model that includes considerations of understanding, truth-telling, compensation, and restoration. They find, finally, that forgiveness is not a requirement for reconciliation but that it can be an expression of a changed attitude as the outcome of the process of reconciliation.

Mikael Nilsson discusses reconciliation in the context of workplace bullying, with a focus on justice and the question of the distribution of responsibilities in reconciliatory processes. He identifies a strand of individualist thinking in the views of HR professionals, which he analyzes as problematic. In the place of a view on reconciliation that makes virtues out of efficiency and predictability, he proposes an alternative view. This approach to reconciliation starts from the social restorative processes of re-narration, responsibility, and grace. He also points out that reconciliation demands justice in the workplace bullying

³ Card, Claudia. *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (New York, 2002; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Nov. 2003). <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195145089.001.0001>, accessed 10 Dec. 2024. pp. 167f.

context, but that though this process aims toward restoration is open-ended. Reconciliation is a possibility from within a dynamic social process.

The relationship between reconciliation and forgiveness is discussed in the article by Werner Wolbert. More particularly the question is asked whether forgiveness should be understood as conditional or unconditionally. There are complicated interrelations between these concepts and considerations. Wolbert makes note of three reservations concerning unconditional forgiveness. It should not undermine justice or fairness, especially in public contexts. Forgiveness should not allow for the continuation of harmful behavior. Unconditional forgiveness should not compromise the victim's self-respect or dignity. He ends by urging a certain restraint in demands for forgiveness.

We look forward to presenting more work on reconciliation in the coming second issue from the Sarajevo conference and wish for interesting reading in this issue.

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