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### What is acknowledgement and why is it important?

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**Title:** What is Acknowledgement and Why is it Important?

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## 1. Introduction

In an intriguing work on intractable conflict between nations and groups, Thomas Scheff theorizes that a major underlying cause of such conflict is to be found in cycles of humiliation and rage. Toward the end of his book *Bloody Revenge*, Scheff suggests that acknowledgement of feelings may have an important role to play in the resolution of such conflicts. He mentions apologies as a form of acknowledgement and suggests that a greater acknowledgement of human interdependence and less denial would have positive effects on some ongoing conflicts. (Scheff 1994) Joseph Montville, director of a program on preventive diplomacy, also claims that acknowledgement of wrongdoing, often expressed through formal apology, is profoundly important for the healing of victims and their reconciliation with perpetrators. (Montville in Henderson 1996) Michael Ignatieff makes similar claims about apology and acknowledgement at the end of *The Warrior's Honour*, his recent book about the horrifying breakdown of moral codes characteristic of ethnic violence, especially in Yugoslavia. Ignatieff boldly claims that had President Tudjman of Croatia officially apologized to Serbs for the violence committed by fascists Ustache during World War II, the fears of Serbs living within Croatia would have been soothed and the brutal Balkan wars of the nineties would not have happened. The apology would have served to acknowledge past wrongdoing and suffering and announce a break from it. (Ignatieff 1997) In her recent work, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, Martha Minow also emphasizes the importance of acknowledgement of past wrongs, when discussing trials, truth commissions, reparations, and apologies as different ways of responding to and attempting to recover from gross human rights violations. (Minow 1998)

In the introduction to his book, *A Miracle, A Universe*, which discusses Latin American experience in dealing with torturers after democratization, Lawrence Weschler describes a conference at which participants struggled to come to terms with the concept of acknowledgement. Weschler says:

Fragile, tentative democracies time and again hurl themselves toward an abyss, struggling over this issue of truth. It's a mysteriously powerful, almost magical notion, because often everyone already knows the truth—everyone knows who the torturers were and what they did, the torturers know that everyone knows, and everyone knows that they know. Why, then, this need to risk everything to render that knowledge explicit? The participants ....worried this question around the table several times -- distinctions here seemed particularly slippery and elusive -- until Thomas Nagel, a professor of philosophy and law at New York

University, almost stumbled upon an answer. "It's the difference," Nagel said haltingly, "between knowledge and acknowledgement. It's what happens and can only happen to knowledge when it becomes officially sanctioned, when it is made part of the public cognitive scene." Yes, several of the panelists agreed. And that transformation, offered another participant, is sacramental. (Weschler 1990:4)

The *acknowledgement* of past wrongs and those who had suffered from them was a primary goal of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In his introduction to the Commission's final report, Archbishop Desmond Tutu alluded to Ariel Dorfman's well-known work *Death and the Maiden*, which deals with a torture victim's temptation to enact revenge on the man who tortured her. She has him tied up when he admits that what he did was wrong. Then "his admission restores her dignity and her identity. Her experience is confirmed as real and not illusory, and her sense of self is affirmed," Tutu says. Later in this report, in a chapter explaining the mandate of the Commission, there are further references to acknowledgement. A central purpose of the TRC was to "acknowledge the tragedy of human suffering wherever it has occurred," whether victims were black or white. It was a central purpose of the TRC to "restore the human and civil dignity of victims by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations of which they are the victims and by recommending reparation measures in respect of those violations." A fundamental assumption underlying the work of the Commission and especially that of its victim hearings, was the idea that when victims were provided with an opportunity to tell their own story before a state-authorized public body in their own language and their own words, their testimony would restore the human dignity so jeopardized by the apartheid system. Poignantly describing the fundamental lack of acknowledgement of blacks as persons of dignity under the apartheid regime, Mtutuzeli Matshoba said, "For neither am I a man in the eyes of the law, nor am I a man in the eyes of my fellow man."

The work of the TRC was based on the assumption that there is a potentially healing power in being able to tell one's story, in having the importance of that story recognized by a public body, and in being thereby publicly acknowledged as one wronged, with a credible and important story to tell. As human beings with stories to tell, many thousands of South Africans appeared before the Commission where they were respectfully listened to and treated as human beings with dignity and meriting respect. Some linked the work of the Commission to an African concept known as 'Ubuntu.' The saying 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' means that people are people only through other people. For many people, being denigrated and disrespected by others meant scarcely maintaining status as human beings. In such cases acknowledgement may be expected to have tremendous power and an impact both on the healing of human beings wounded by past abuse and on their potential reconciliation with those who have wounded them.

Though widely criticized within South Africa, the TRC has to many foreigners

seemed to be an inspiring, enormous, and sustained effort to deal with a past of overwhelming brutality. Through its efforts, South Africans were led to confront and address the feelings of victims and perpetrators in an attempt to escape from the vicious cycle of history in which those who have been oppressed seem so easily and so naturally to become oppressors in their own right. Many who supported boycotts and sanctions against apartheid South Africa during the eighties are likely to take a special interest in this Commission and its work.

But it is not necessary to look as far as South Africa to find statements about the importance of acknowledgement. They are to be found in the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, issued in 1996. I quote from the first volume.

(W)hile we assume the role of defender of human rights in the international community, we retain, in our conception of Canada's origins and make-up, the remnants of colonial attitudes of cultural superiority that do violence to the Aboriginal peoples to whom they are directed. Restoring Aboriginal nations to a place of honour in our shared history, and *recognizing* their continuing presence as collectives participating in Canadian life, are therefore fundamental to the changes we propose. (Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996: 5)

In its survey of relations between aboriginal peoples and those who came after them to settle in their territory and found the nation of Canada, the report notes that official Canadian history tends to ignore and negate aboriginal people's view of themselves and their encounter with settler society. It calls for *acknowledgement* of Aboriginal peoples and cultures, the wrongs done to them, and their contribution to Canadian history and society.

(B)efore Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people can get on with the work of reconciliation, a great cleansing of the wounds of the past must take place. The government of Canada, on behalf of the Canadian people, must acknowledge and express deep regret for the spiritual, cultural, economic and physical violence visited upon Aboriginal people, as individuals and as nations, in the past. And they must make a public commitment that such violence will never again be permitted or supported. (Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996: 7-8)

Later in the context of a discussion of compulsory relocations of many native communities, the Commission called again for acknowledgement, seeing it as highly significant for the healing of native peoples and their potential reconciliation with mainstream Canadian society.

The commission is of the opinion that governments ought to *acknowledge* that the practice of relocating Aboriginal communities, where these relocations failed to adhere to the

standards we recommend, has contributed to the violation of Aboriginal people's rights as human beings . . . many Aboriginal communities continue to feel a deep sense of grievance about relocation. Healing will begin in earnest only when governments *acknowledge* that relocation practices, however, well-intentioned, contributed to a denial of human rights. *Acknowledging* responsibility assists in the necessary healing process because it creates room for dialogue about the reasons for relocation and the fact that these reasons were often based on ignorance and erroneous assumptions about Aboriginal people and their identity. Aboriginal people need to know that governments accept responsibility for relocations and recognize their effects. Recognition and responsibility are the necessary first steps to overcoming the many adverse effects of relocations. (Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996: 513)

The Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples cited the Canadian Human Rights Commission, which said in 1991 and reiterated in 1994 that the situation of aboriginal peoples is the single most important human rights issue confronting Canada. The Human Rights Commission recommended government apologies for various aspects of native/white relations including relocations, the appallingly brutal system of residential schools, the treatment of veterans, and the exploitative failure to take treaty commitments seriously. It called for these apologies *as a form of acknowledgement* and a step toward compensation for "the affront to dignity, self-respect and self-determination" implicit in many relocations. Apologies would serve a broad educative function, acknowledge serious affronts to human dignity, and express commitment and hope that the mistakes of the past would not be committed again. The report cites native veterans as desiring, more than anything else, *recognition* from the government of their contribution, through memorials in their communities.

The Commission found that in many fundamental aspects, relations with mainstream (largely white) Canadian society has been disastrous for native peoples and should be a source of outrage and shame to non-native Canadians. The system of residential schools, in particular, has done incredible damage, resulting in

loss of life, denigration of culture, destruction of self-respect and self-esteem, rupture of families, impact of these traumas on succeeding generations, and the enormity of the cultural triumphalism that lay behind the enterprise – will deeply disturb anyone who allows this story to seep into their consciousness and recognizes that these policies were perpetrated by Canadians no better or worse intentioned, no better or worse educated than we are today. (Report of Royal Commission on Aboriginal People: 602)

The Report calls for respect for native Canadians as individuals, and for

respect for their cultures and contributions to Canadian history and society. In short, the Commission calls repeatedly for *acknowledgement* of the dignity and worth of native peoples and the wrongs done to them by governments and the broader society over several centuries.

## 2. The Concept of Acknowledgement

The concept of acknowledgement strikes me as a fascinating one that merits more attention than it has received and more than I can give it here. I concentrate particularly on acknowledgement in the context of serious wrongdoing and especially on its relevance for issues of reconciliation between individuals and between groups. These are contexts in which self-deception on an individual or collective level is open to serious moral criticism because in effect we choose to ignore serious harms to other people. Lest I be taken to castigate anyone in particular, let me say that I suspect that most of us find ourselves in several roles with regard to the commission of serious wrongs. We are victims, or affiliates of victims, of some wrongs; perpetrators, or affiliates of perpetrators, of others; and bystanders with regard to others. In the Canadian situation, for instance, one might be a Holocaust survivor or child of a survivor, in this respect a victim, and nevertheless a beneficiary and, through affiliation with church or state institutions, beneficiary or perpetrator so far as Canadian wrongs against aboriginal peoples are concerned. So far as victims and perpetrators are concerned, my position is similar to that of Vaclav Havel who said (though for slightly different reasons) that inside each person there is a line between the oppressed and the oppressor. There are no absolute victims and no absolute oppressors, on Havel's account. Rather, within every person there are elements of each.

There is little written in either psychology or philosophy about acknowledgement as such, and the conception of acknowledgement seems abstract and even rather vague. We can see from the statements cited above a widely held conviction that acknowledgement is something of importance in the context of addressing wrongdoing. And yet at the conference Weschler described, participants arrived at the notion of acknowledgement only with difficulty, and were hard-pressed to articulate what it means and to differentiate it from knowledge. We have seen from key statements an expressed conviction that acknowledgement matters a great deal to wronged peoples, and that it is an important first stage in the healing of victims of wrongdoing, and a move toward their reconciliation with those who have harmed them.

I thus arrive at the questions which set the theme for this paper. What is acknowledgement? And why is it important?

Acknowledgement is not the same thing as knowledge, because we may know things that we do not acknowledge. A woman may know that she is short-tempered and prone to yell at her children without ever acknowledging to them that she has these failings. They may know it without ever expressing it to her, and so on. A man may know that he is 82 years old and people 82 years old have a short time left to live; thus in some sense he knows that he has a short

future; -- and yet he may not acknowledge this. That is to say, he may not admit it to himself, spell it out to himself, avow it as an aspect of his identity, or admit it to other people. He has chosen to ignore or deny the fact of his age and not take it into account in when planning and conducting his relationships and practical affairs. Though he has the evidence and intellectual capacity for this knowledge, he does not articulate to himself what he knows; he does not avow or admit this to himself or others. That is to say, he does not acknowledge it. Rather, he is in a state of *denial* or *avoidance* with regard to it.

At the conference described by Weschler, participants discussed a situation in which people knew that certain others had been torturers under a military regime; yet that fact was not acknowledged -- that is to say, it was not openly admitted and discussed. Acknowledging it would mean spelling it out, publicly stating that these were facts -- and by implication, taking some action in the light of those facts.

Much of what we know, we also acknowledge, or would be willing to acknowledge. But some of what we know or are in a position to know, we do not acknowledge and would not be willing to acknowledge. Broadly speaking the difference between knowledge and acknowledgement seems to lie in a spelling out, articulation -- an explicit verbal spelling out or other form of marked awareness. The mother who knows that she is sometimes bad-tempered to her children acknowledges this to them if she tells them so, perhaps saying something like, "I know I've been crabby this past week, and I've been yelling at you, and I'm sorry..." She recognizes her emotions and behavior, puts that recognition into words, and expresses it to others. She articulates to herself and admits to others that the irritable behavior has really been part of herself. Those who have been hurt by her behavior are likely to be reassured by her admission, or acknowledgement, that this is her failing, by implication not to be blamed solely on her children.

The example of the irritable mother may suggest why we may expect acknowledgement to make a powerful difference in certain cases of wrongdoing. Only a person who acknowledges her irritability is likely to overcome it, and the implication of saying she is sorry is that she is going to try to change. Acknowledging will surely be a necessary first step in such a case. In the treatment of alcoholics by Alcoholics Anonymous, one begins by saying "I am ....., and I am an alcoholic." To address and attempt to resolve a problem, one must first acknowledge that one has it, which in this case means admitting explicitly and publicly that this problem is attached to oneself, part of oneself, part of who one is.

It would seem that in such cases acknowledgement is knowledge with a kind of avowal which amounts to a spelling out or marking of what we know. A person who acknowledges something admits or allows that that something is attached in some way to himself or herself. Typically we acknowledge or admit things to others, but in order to do so sincerely, we must first acknowledge them to ourselves. There are many ways of failing to acknowledge something that is

wrong. We may re-describe it, seeking to prove to ourselves that it is something other than it is; we may deny it; we may emotionally detach ourselves from it; we may ignore it; or we may deceive ourselves about it. Here I concentrate on two forms of avoidance integral to the others: self-deception, and ignoring.

One opposite to acknowledgement is self-deception. A person may be an alcoholic, may have considerable evidence that he is an alcoholic, sufficient evidence that were it to apply to anyone else, he would readily conclude that that person was an alcoholic, may even experience serious family and working problems as a result of his drinking -- and yet may not be prepared to admit to himself or anyone else that he is an alcoholic. He may ignore relevant facts because 'alcoholic' is not a label he is willing to accept as describing himself. Such a man can be said to be deceiving himself about his alcoholism. He is in a position to know, and in some sense even does know, and take account of the fact, that he is an alcoholic. Yet he does not acknowledge this. He knows that he drinks before lunch, knows that he feels miserable if he does not drink. Yet he ignores the obvious implications of these facts.

In his 1969 book *Self-Deception*, Herbert Fingarette used the notions of *disavowal* and *lack of acknowledgement* as the basis for an account of self-deception. He said that the self-deceiver is engaged in the world in a way he is not prepared to accept as part of his personal identity and thus does not spell out, admit or avow. There is a gap between the way he is engaged in the world and the story he tells himself and others about himself. Fingarette said:

A person may avow or acknowledge as his an action, a feeling, an emotion, a perception, a belief, an attitude, a concern, an aim, or a reason. In avowing them as his, a person is identifying himself as one who feels, suffers, perceives, believes, etc, thus and so. ... In speaking of avowal and acknowledgement, we are concerned with an acceptance by the person which is constitutive, which is *de jure* in its force, which establishes something as *his for him*.

We might acknowledge or fail to acknowledge such aspects of ourselves or our societies as habits, traits, policies, conditions, or actions. Fingarette spoke of acknowledging, or failing to acknowledge, *engagements in the world*. Engagements that we are not prepared to acknowledge are those which we are not willing to accept as part of ourselves, personal frailties or inadequacies, or -- most pertinently for the present topic, acts of wrongdoing for which we have shared responsibility or with which we have been significantly affiliated.

In a later paper on self-deception, Fingarette takes a slightly different position. He explains that as the mind normally works, we attend to some aspects of the world while not attending to others. For example, a person who is writing a

letter by hand will attend to what he is saying, but not to the way in which his fingers are holding the pen. Yet though he is not attending to the position of his fingers, he can intelligently take account of that and adapt their position if his fingers slip.

(M)y attention is focused on my thoughts at the moment and on the task of choosing words to express them adequately. Once I have the words in mind, and have elected to write them down, the writing itself is 'automatic.'

The crux of the matter, if we generalize, is that we can take account of something without necessarily focusing our attention on it. That we, we can recognize it, and respond to it, without directing our attention to what we are doing, and our response can be intelligently adaptive rather than merely a reflect or habit automatism.(Fingarette, 1998: 291)

To function in this world, we must be able to take account of data that we do not focus our attention on. What we learn in learning to write is to write without attending to the way we hold our pen or place our paper, or the manner in which we shape the letters. We can write without paying any attention to such things, even though there is a sense in which we are aware of them, and can make appropriate adaptations if necessary. Attention is always selective; we cannot attend to everything. And self-deception is a matter of motivated selective attention. *When we deceive ourselves we turn our attention away from unwelcome information and fail to attend to it. We can nevertheless take some account of that information, which, of course, is one of things that enables us to turn our attention away from it.* We deceive ourselves when we ignore, that is, fail to attend to, information which is unwelcome to us because it is emotionally painful or traumatic. Fingarette says:

Suppose, for example, that I have done something shameful. I take account of my conduct and its significance for me. However, just because this particular shame is deeply wounding to me, given my sense of self, I avoid focusing my attention on the event, or at least on its shameful features. I thus damp down the effect on me and avoid a traumatic wound to my self-esteem. *There is a price. I lose the opportunity to appraise the conduct with the clarity and depth that are afforded by close attention.* I also have less reliable recall, and can thus more readily rationalize what happened and what I have done about it. For all these reasons, I cannot deal with the matter as effectively as I otherwise might. I shall be less creative and less subtle about handling the matter, tending to reach into my past for evasive techniques already worked out. This may not be the wisest policy in the long run, but, being all too human, we sometimes do such things because of fear in the short run. (Fingarette, 1998: 295)

We are aware that certain acts are shameful and can use that awareness to take account of the acts as we wish to, which often means turning our attention away from them, not attending either to what we did or to our feelings about it. This combination of unfocused, but nevertheless intelligent, awareness and lack of attention is not especially mysterious, Fingarette argues, because such a combination is absolutely characteristic of the way in which we function in the world. When we deceive ourselves in this way, we are doing nothing different in kind from what we do when we take account of, but do not attend to, the way in which our fingers are holding a pen. What is distinctive about self-deception is that our  *motive*  is to protect ourselves from unwelcome or painful information that we do not wish to acknowledge.

It is worth noting that self-deception is not something done by the self alone. We are enabled to deceive ourselves because others refrain from bringing unpleasant truths home to us. *Self-deception is often the result of collusion or complicity among people.* Groups may be said to deceive themselves when their members generally deny, avoid, or ignore unpleasant aspects of their histories. In a recent article on the vital art of *ignoring*, Annette Baier says:

These phenomena, of sensible selective attention, of selective recall, of imperfect record keeping or cover-up of our own past selective control, are normal human phenomenology, both for individuals and for groups. Nations attend to some calls on their attention more than to others, write selective histories, and rewrite them as establishments and ideologies change. Also, social mechanisms of many kinds assist individuals in their individual self-deceptive activities, especially when these are coordinated with the maintenance of the preferred collective memory, that is needed for a group's current self-esteem. War veterans' memories of what slaughter they participated in or witnessed may be uncomfortable memories both for them personally and for the national record. Psychiatric services help soothe and play down such memories as could be disruptive. In a free nation, the press, the film industry, and the book trade can serve as important curbs on this smoothing over of the blemishes on our shared past, can serve to revive uncomfortable memories and to stir up painful awareness of what we would understandably prefer to forget, or to continue to ignore. (Baier 1998: 55-56)

Both as individuals and as groups, we may choose to ignore certain unpleasant things that we would rather not acknowledge, because we do not welcome them as aspects of our identity.

The phenomenon of ignoring is of considerable interest. We cannot ignore something unless we have some awareness of it. Consider, for example, the case of the cobwebs above my dining room light. To ignore them, I have to know they are there. I may notice them while I am cleaning and decide to ignore them because I cannot easily reach them. *If I did not notice them at all,*

*did not see them, had no awareness of them, I could not ignore them.* By definition, we do not pay attention to what we ignore, but necessarily, we have to have some awareness of something in order to ignore it. If I continue to ignore the cobwebs, I will not notice when they grow, or attract dust or entrap small flies. Then as an effect of my ignoring them, there will be many things I will not know about them. However, in order to ignore them, I do have to know that they exist. Eventually, they may grow so large that I can no longer ignore them and have to stand on a chair to sweep them away.

There are more serious cases, as is suggested by the common expression "ignore this at your peril." Consider, for instance, the man who "decided to ignore" his doctor's diagnosis of adult-onset diabetes and the prescription of diet, exercise, and medication that went along with that diagnosis. He was told he had this problem of glucose intolerance, told what to do about it, and warned of the complications that might arise if he did nothing about it. He could be said to *know* he had this problem because he had been given this diagnosis by a reliable authority, one which he himself had been willing to regard as reliable in the past. Yet he ignored this advice and did not acknowledge that he was a diabetic, because he did not want to fundamentally alter his lifestyle and monitor his blood sugar levels. Because he ignored the advice, there was much that he did not know -- whether those levels were higher in the morning than the evening, raised by eating ice cream, dangerously high, or normal or low, for instance. He did not know that the tingling in his hands and feet and the itchiness of his skin were side-effects of his diabetes. Eventually, he experienced serious circulatory problems, developed sores which would not heal, and had to have his feet amputated. At that point, it was of course impossible to ignore the diabetes any longer. A sad story -- yet true.

If things go wrong, we can protest, "but we did not know," a protestation which will be in some sense true but at a more fundamental level deeply misleading. It is not only phenomena and conditions that we can ignore. We can ignore people: their claims, their protestations, their feelings, and their very existence. Probably we have all experienced the frustration of having our requests or appeals simply ignored. People may ignore requests rather than refusing them, hoping in this way to avoid conflict. It is a poor strategy, for to be ignored, not to be acknowledged at all, is more insulting than to be politely refused.

There are many things we quite properly fail to attend to -- the colour of a colleague's shirt, the small cobweb in the corner, the mailman's jacket, the size of the pages of a book. Such things are in most contexts not important, there is no need for us to notice them or attend to them, and we typically do not do so. Should we notice such things and decide to ignore them, no harm would be done. We cannot attend to everything. As Annette Baier points out, in order to attend to some things, we must fail to notice, or ignore, others. *What sorts of things should we attend to? What sorts of things can we properly ignore?* These are very large questions which I pose but make no pretense to answer. When we say of something that is not attended to that it is ignored, we are

already suggesting that it is the kind of thing that very well might have been attended to. What we ignore is something we notice and pay no further attention to, though we quite well might have paid further attention to it. Suppose I get a red patch on my leg; I notice it, but decide to ignore it, paying no further attention to it. If it grows, I may have trouble ignoring it. If it spreads over my entire leg and the texture of my skin changes, and my skin begins to itch, I am likely to find this condition impossible to ignore. It makes sense, and seems appropriate, to speak of my *ignoring* this condition of my body, because the domain of my own bodily condition and health is one in which I am expected to take responsibility.

We cannot pay attention to everything. To concentrate on one thing, or on some range of things, we must ignore many others. In our selective attention we implicitly distinguish between those things that matter to us and those that do not. It is most imprudent to ignore one's irritability, alcoholism, worsening skin condition or a doctor's diagnosis of diabetes. However in most circumstances, if a person chooses to ignore the fact that a pocketbook has unusually small pages, or a friend has a long nose, the matter is of little import. Sometimes it is even a duty to ignore certain information, as in situations where we occupy a role that requires impartiality. (I know a job applicant is the cousin of my brother-in-law but I ignore that relationship in judging his application.) To ignore information or phenomena can be perfectly all right, it can be neutral, it can be a duty, or it can be culpable. We speak of culpable ignorance: we might also speak of *culpable ignoring*. We are correctly said to culpably ignore things if we ignore things we *should have, and could have, paid attention to*. We may have consciously decided to ignore these things or we may just have come to ignore them. Of course, to say this is not to answer the very general question of what we should pay attention to, granting that we cannot attend to everything.

Questions of denial, ignoring, self-deception or, by contrast, acknowledgement gain special importance when it is *wounded or damaged other people, in our own society or community, who are the objects of our attention or inattention*. When an issue is one of the suffering, pain, or need of another human being, then, we should *not* generally ignore it. Yet we are very often inclined to do so, because knowledge of the pain and suffering of others is not pleasant, especially not in case where we bear some responsibility for it and may have some responsibility to respond. We may ignore the appeals and protestations of those who have been deeply hurt and wronged. We may fail to listen and thus fail to hear and understand. We may become so oblivious to cries and protestations that we treat people as if they barely existed at all. If so, we are by our lack of acknowledgement negating them as people. Many South African whites did this with regard to the black people who were their workers and servants. Many Canadians non-natives have done this with regard to the situation of aboriginal peoples in our country. We have chosen to ignore many facts, problems, and cries of pain. As a result of our ignoring we know little. Then, if we are charged with responsibility, we protest that we do not know. But we did know something – enough to ignore the situation in the first place, to

avoid paying attention to it. We knew enough to know we did not want to know more. We did not know because we did not want to know. We did not want to know because the truths we would face would be unpleasant and incompatible with our favoured pictures of ourselves, and they imply a need for restitution and redress, threatening our rather comfortable way of life.

I make no pretense here to offer a general theory of what we should pay attention to and what it would be culpable to ignore. But I maintain that we should pay attention to the sorry condition of native peoples in our country, the wrongs that have been done to them in the past, our collective responsibility for those wrongs, the appeals of native peoples for justice, restitution, and redress, and the practicalities and politics of policies that could offer redress.

Why? Why do I believe that these are things we should attend to, that our habit of ignoring them is culpable ignoring, leading us to a condition of culpable ignorance? Because these are human beings in pain and in need – human beings in our society and nation. Because, through patterns of colonization, land use, racism, disregard for treaties, and the residential school system, we are linked significantly to the institutions that are responsible for their pain and need. Because we are in many significant ways beneficiaries of the injustices done against them. Because collectively, we have the power to improve their situation. In these circumstances, we should *acknowledge* the relevant facts and the feelings of native peoples. We cannot help but notice injured peoples, poverty, imprisonment, and court cases about treaties, land claims, and residential schools. Having noticed such phenomena, we should not proceed to ignore them. To do so would be imprudent: if unacknowledged and unaddressed, the pain, anger, and frustration of native peoples are likely to worsen and culminate in violence. To do so would also be immoral: we have morally significant bonds with all other human beings, but to these, our countrymen and women, unjustly injured and deprived, most especially.

In cases of past wrongs, there is much to be acknowledged. That those wronged are human beings with human dignity and moral worth. That these things did happen and were wrong. That the people in question deserved better. That their feelings of hurt, anger, or resentment are natural and legitimate. That those who harmed them or who have been complicit in these harms should feel guilt and shame about such things. And, very significantly, such acknowledgement carries with it an implied commitment that these and similar wrongs should not be perpetrated again.

The 1996 report on aboriginal issues recommended that Canadian governments and the non-native public grant acknowledgement of past wrongs to native Canadians, who would then receive that acknowledgement. It is useful to distinguish between *granted acknowledgement* and *received acknowledgement*. Before granting acknowledgement to others, one must admit or acknowledge the aspect in question to oneself. In many cases this is the crucial step. It is acknowledgement to oneself that is missing in the case of self-deception. It is unwillingness to acknowledge to oneself that is implicit in

the decision to ignore. And it is acknowledgement to oneself that is presupposed by acknowledgement to others. Received acknowledgement presupposes granted acknowledgement, and granted acknowledgement presupposes self-acknowledgement. Self-acknowledgement is often painful and is by no means to be taken for granted. We human beings are often unwilling to acknowledge various things about ourselves – our age, state of health, failures, emotions, and wrongdoing. On a personal level, acknowledgement can be difficult and self-deception profoundly tempting. It is hard, and unpleasant, to acknowledge that one is a diabetic or an alcoholic, or an unsuccessful author or parent. The same may be said on a collective level. It is not pleasant to acknowledge that our country is founded on an unjust and manipulative expropriation of land or that our previous governments were committed to a policy of assimilation founded on a deeply entrenched sense of European superiority. Nor is it pleasant to acknowledge that officials of those very governments ignored reports of brutality, malnutrition, beating, and sexual abuse in native residential schools under their jurisdictions because they were racists who deemed native children to be of little value. We would rather deny, avoid, or ignore such unpleasant aspects of our national history, turning our attention away from studies, reports, and living victims and descendants that point us to them. We would rather not acknowledge such things. The facts are appalling and depressing and we would prefer not to publicize them, not to dwell on them, not to think about them. We would rather ignore these unpleasant facts and not come to know more. And generally, that is what we do.

Collective diversions of attention and memory may fairly be said to amount to collective self-deception. It would be an understatement to say that this phenomenon is significant in politics and the aftermath of war, genocide, colonialism, and abuse. After World War II, few Germans were willing to acknowledge having supported Nazism in any way and the effects of this general failure to acknowledge are still being debated. After the unification of Germany, few of the many thousands of East Germans who had been spies for the secret police were willing to acknowledge any wrongdoing in having done so. After apartheid, most white South Africans were unwilling to acknowledge that they had played some role in supporting a regime that was profoundly and fundamentally unjust and brought great harm to black South Africans. In Canada, relatively few non-aboriginal Canadians have been willing to acknowledge that we have condoned and thereby helped to sustain a society in which most native Canadians are victims of past and present ill-treatment, injustice and poverty.

In the light of such virtually ubiquitous phenomena, the clarification of acknowledgement seems to me to be a matter of considerable political and ethical importance. Calls for acknowledgement have a certain misleading vagueness and suggestion of passivity which encourage us to gloss over a basic logical fact that *in order for acknowledgement to be received, it must be granted*. In the context of victims of wrongdoing this means that perpetrators or significantly affiliated groups will have to acknowledge wrongdoing and their

responsibility or complicity in it. They – and this often means we – will have to admit and avow past wrongdoing and accept that it is part of their or our own past. They or we accept some responsibility for it. Doing so is likely to involve entail painful self-analysis. We will have to overcome our refusal to reflect on unpleasant truths. Both as individuals and as a society, we may have to struggle to overcome collective denial, avoidance, ignoring, ignorance, and self-deception. Being irritable, or a diabetic, or an alcoholic, or hard of hearing, or a participant in a system or regime of discrimination, racism, abuse, apartheid, or genocide are negative things. We would rather not accept such things as aspects of ourselves or of groups with which we identify. We are seriously tempted to ignore them, to disavow them. It is in such cases that the question of acknowledging or avowing arises.

As human beings with an intense emotional investment in our ‘face’ and public image, we may think of acknowledging as something that will benefit others at a cost to ourselves, in image, status, and reputation. To looking at acknowledgement in this way is likely to strengthen our sense that we do not want to acknowledge. It is likely to heighten the temptations of ignoring, denial and self-deception, especially in cases where we have been responsible for wrongdoing and a moral apology would be an appropriate form of acknowledgement.

I would argue that self-acknowledgement and granting acknowledgement are at a deeper level beneficial to us – even when what we admit is something we would rather not identify with ourselves. The man who chose to ignore his diabetes and eventually lost his feet would have benefited by acknowledging that he had this disorder and altering his lifestyle accordingly. I believe that we who have shared responsibility for wrongdoing will benefit if we acknowledge that wrongdoing and our shared responsibility for it. In the final analysis, we ourselves will be better off morally and politically if we acknowledge that there has been injustice, that we bear some responsibility for it, and that efforts in the direction of restitution are required. Only if we acknowledge can we properly manage respond to the hurts and needs of victims and deal with our feelings of guilt and shame.

The expectation of the 1996 report is that native Canadians would benefit in fundamental ways if federal and provincial governments and the broader Canadian public were to acknowledge a great range of wrongdoing and a deep injustice at the very foundation of our society. For that acknowledgement to be received by native Canadians it must be granted by some person or persons. For it to be granted, we must grant it. We must to ourselves and each other acknowledge that *people who were and are in some important sense our people, in some sense WE*, were responsible for serious wrongdoing and injustice. The effects of that injustice persist to this day. They are reflected in the attitudes and the conditions of marginalized and traumatized people. To grant acknowledgement to native peoples, we will have to admit to ourselves (and publicly) some unwelcome truths. One example is the absurdity of the still often-cited idea that Canada has two founding nations, French and English. In

the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Canada was not a *terra nullius*, an empty land awaiting settlement by European peoples. Native peoples were already here and at great sacrifice and under some unfair pressure and manipulation signed treaties that made available the land on which our present country was built.

### 3. Further Points.

Acknowledgement is knowledge plus a kind of marking or spelling out or admitting as significantly related to oneself, of something that is known. Thus acknowledgement requires truth. When we acknowledge, we attend to some reality. To say that we should acknowledge native history and culture is to imply that there exist native history and culture to attend to. The connection between acknowledgement and truth means that some calls for acknowledgement are contestable. Consider, for example, the case of white supremacists who demand *acknowledgement* of their 'victimization' by brown and black interlopers who should not be living in North America and fail to *acknowledge* the superiority of the white race. Few would accept their claims as legitimate. The possibility of contestable claims to acknowledgement is by no means trivial in the context of wrongdoing. A man may call for his acknowledgement as a wounded victim, a freedom fighter who was in the course of his just struggle against apartheid, wrongly tortured by the state police. At the same time his torturer may insist that he was interrogated as part of a necessary campaign against terrorist forces paid by international communist groups.

Acknowledgement may be complete or partial. One may acknowledge that victims received less than they deserved, but insist that what happened was not wrongdoing, rather an honest error, or well-intended attempt to act under principles of another time. In this case one would partially acknowledge wrongdoing. We may also distinguish between implicit and explicit acknowledgement. All acknowledgement is a marking or spelling out, a noting. Yet not all acknowledgement is verbally explicit. A person may explicitly acknowledge one thing, thereby suggesting or strongly implying that he has noted something else. In this sense, he may be said to implicitly acknowledge the second thing. For example, if a truth commission in its proceedings explicitly acknowledges that a group was adversely affected, both economically and culturally, by an unjust and compelled relocation, it will have implicitly acknowledged that the surviving members that group have at least a *prima facie* claim to compensation for costs imposed on them.

Many cases of partial or implicit acknowledgement are in effect cases of *compromised acknowledgement*. In compromised acknowledgement, the one who offers acknowledgement expresses a mixed message in which there are both elements of acknowledgement and elements of denial. The contradictions and denials of systems such as anti-Semitism, racism, colonialism, and sexism are legendary. In eighteenth century Europe, women were widely regarded as silly, irresponsible, and irrational; yet they were also the life partners for allegedly rational and responsible men, and the hurturers of

children. Slaves were regarded as sub-human, and yet owners took care to convert them to Christianity. South African blacks were supposed primitive peoples who did not share the feelings and capacity for education that whites had. Yet they were charged with responsible tasks such as caring for children. Human beings deemed scum or vermin were used for medical experimentation that presupposed their relevant similarity to those other human beings who had denied them human status. Compromised acknowledgement is both common and hurtful. It is common because in many situations of lack of acknowledgement there is, after all, knowledge which will come to the fore. Yet there are disincentives to publicly admitting or avowing that knowledge, so contrary factors are also likely to come to the fore. Thus, a mixed message is given. To someone who has been unjustly treated and is seeking acknowledgement, the mixed message is likely to be confusing and hurtful.

In many cases of compromised acknowledgement, hopes are raised and then dashed. Speaking of the wounds from historical wrongs, some have alluded to the "second wound of silence." The second wound is the hurt to victims of ignoring what was done to them; to ignore the wrong is to imply that it, and the resulting suffering, do not really matter. Truly this is adding the wound of insult to the wound of injury. Acknowledgement by relevant individuals and institutions can heal the second wound of silence. Following on the metaphor of the second wound, we may think of the third wound as a kind of insincerity. This is the wound of an insincere or partial apology, or some other form of compromised acknowledgement.

Because what is ignored in such cases are *obvious facts*, we are likely to imply some recognition or acknowledgement of those facts in what we say and do. But because complete acknowledgement of those obvious facts would be unpleasant and imply the need for unwelcome change, we are likely to give only partial acknowledgement and in fact to implicitly deny recognition of those facts. Thus we offer compromised acknowledgement.

Having noted these distinctions, I shall not deal further here with partial, implicit, or compromised acknowledgement. Rather, I shall discuss the importance of acknowledgement on the assumption that what is in question is explicit and complete acknowledgement. What makes explicit and complete acknowledgement important argues especially against compromised acknowledgement, which conveys a conflicting and hurtful message.

#### 4. Exploring Claims about Acknowledgement

In the reports of the South African TRC and the 1996 Commission on Aboriginal Issues, there is a commitment to the idea that acknowledgment has an important role to play in the healing of victims of wrongdoing and in prospects for their peaceful and productive coexistence with perpetrators, perpetrator groups, bystanders, and beneficiaries. Both reports endorse acknowledgement as fundamental for healing and a step towards any deep reconciliation between groups. Given the logical relationships between received acknowledgement, granted acknowledgement, and self-

acknowledgement, it is reasonable to interpret both reports as claiming that perpetrators and beneficiaries should grant acknowledgement so that those wronged can receive it. One form of acknowledging wrongdoing is through moral apologies, in which perpetrators or those institutionally allied to them admit responsibility for doing something wrong.

The implicit theory here seems to be that wrongs of the past should be acknowledged by perpetrators and their affiliates, because *acknowledging those wrongs will assist victims to heal*, will mark a *separation from the wrongdoing of the past and a commitment to reform*, and may constitute a *first step towards reconciliation*. Perpetrators, or the state, or both will grant acknowledgement to victims, who will then receive acknowledgement of their human dignity and worth and the wrongfulness of what was done to them. Acknowledgement articulates a recognition that certain sorts of acts were wrong and a commitment not to do such things again. As such it is not only beneficial to victims, but has a role in the reform of perpetrators and the moral advance of society. Acknowledgement may be expressed in various ways: through criminal trials, truth commissions, public inquiries, apologies, reparations, or memorials.

First, let us consider the phenomenon of acknowledgement from the point of view of victims of serious wrongdoing. I would like to appeal to a view articulated by Jean Hampton, who said that wrongdoing of this sort *expresses a message of lack of moral worth, because the victims is treated as though they simply do not count*. To forcibly evict a community from its land without obtaining its informed consent and making reasonable arrangements for its wellbeing, so that other people can live there or develop resources there, or test their planes there, is to imply that that community, and the people who constitute it, simply *do not matter*, that their needs and wishes, indeed their very moral dignity and status as human beings, *need not be taken into account*. Such treatment might be said to negate them as human beings. To treat them with such cruelty is to treat them as negligible, to assume and imply that they have no dignity or moral worth, which is an especially radical and fundamental way of denying their human rights. In cases when wrongdoing has implied such radical denial of moral status, *acknowledgement* that what was done was wrong and these people deserved better is powerful and important because it negates that wrongful message of moral insignificance. Instead, the acknowledgement of wrongdoing communicates a recognition of the human dignity and worth of the victim.

Those who have been victims of wrongdoing are likely to know it, to be painfully aware of it, and to still suffer after-effects. When perpetrators or their affiliates, or society at large, fail to acknowledge that wrongdoing, the initial wound develops into "the second wound of silence" because there is further evidence that people do not care. Silent and unrepentant perpetrators or perpetrator groups give no evidence of renouncing their actions or the message of worthlessness that went with it. Friends and associates, society at large, neglect even to discuss the wrong, conveying the message that it is of slight

importance and by implication, those hurt do not matter. To receive acknowledgement that these things did happen, that they were wrong and should not have happened, and that those to whom they happened were human beings with human rights, persons possessing the same dignity and worth that belong to other human beings, is to receive confirmation, validation, of one's dignity and status as a human being, and a moral being of equal worth. For profound wrongs, that is the primary and basic reason that acknowledgement is important to victims. It should be obvious that any human being is a human being, that a woman or black or native is a human being just as much as a white middle class man, and that whatever grounds rights, responsibilities and privileges for white men grounds them for other human beings too. I believe that such things are "obvious." *But although they are obvious, we have often acted as though they were false.* We have ignored this fundamental metaphysical and moral truth about human beings. And in situations where that fundamental truth has been ignored, often with the result of tremendous suffering and pain, we should, in effect, acknowledge it, marking it, indicating our commitment to it.

At the Truth Commission in South Africa, thousands of people who had been deemed of little worth under the apartheid system were respectfully heard as they told their own stories of suffering before a respectful state commission. Their stories were written into the history of the nation that had under apartheid sought to undermine their human dignity and denied their status as citizens. Such acknowledgement matters to victims because it is a recognition of their status as full-fledged persons and citizens, and a rejection of past practice founded on the contrary view. The 1996 Canadian report suggested a similar commission at which native Canadians could appear and tell their stories so that their full moral status, suffering, and role in our history would be acknowledged.

Of course not all wrongdoing is so fundamental that the very moral status of the victim is cast in question. Sometimes the issue is a much less fundamental, but still real, failure of recognition of activities and attainments. People unacknowledged in such ways may feel humiliated not because they feel that they are rejected as less-than-human but because they feel that in ignoring their attainments and activities, others are implicitly ignoring what they have done with their lives, what is for them an utterly central feature of their lives. When someone is persistently treated as second-class and used for the convenience of others, when many of her activities, achievements, and attainments are ignored or acknowledged only in a partial or compromised way, she is likely to be harmed by this lack of acknowledgement. It would be an exaggeration to say that her moral dignity or personhood has thereby been denied. But something fundamental to her, what she has done with much of her life, how she has thought and deliberated and directed and focused her energies, is treated as though it is nothing. This may be said of much household work, to which so many millions of women have devoted large parts of their lives.

Acknowledgement of an implicit, but unarticulated wrong, offers the hope of ending an awkward separation and alienation between people. It soothes the injured one, ends his or her frustration, putting him or her at ease and terminating a fundamental lack of ease, discomfort, hurt, and misery. When an aspect of a person that she considers to be fundamental to her life and identity is unacknowledged by others, that person will feel frustrated, confused in her identity, and in central regards alienated from those others. She cannot be to them what she takes herself to be, because they ignore or deny those aspects of herself. Acknowledgement will bring relief and a soothing, a relaxation and ease within herself. It is as though a barrier between herself and these others has been removed.

Are there not counter-examples to the claim that human beings will thrive only if, and only when, their moral status and significant accomplishments are acknowledged by others? During his many years in prison, Nelson Mandela never lost his dignity, his capacity for leadership, his style of respectful interaction with others, or his sense of himself as a human being with human rights. When he was treated badly, he was not undermined. When he worked long hours in a quarry, when he had been beaten and had to labor under an uncomfortable sun, he retained the sense that he and his country had a better future. Stories of such courage and conviction show that it is possible to maintain one's sense of self under very severe conditions. Clearly we must allow that such people can manage in this world without acknowledgement. And many do, of course. There are the heroes, the brave ones, like Nelson Mandela and political prisoners around the world. But still, acknowledgement is important as recognition, as an acceptance of who we are, as we think we are, by others. A precious few among us can preserve that fundamental of self-worth, self-trust, and self-respect in the face of external denial and obliviousness. But that is not to deny the general importance of acknowledgement. Most of us do not do well preserving a sense of who we are and what we do in a context that denies or ignores the value of these things. Where they have been denied or ignored, acknowledgement removes a barrier between self and others, a confirmation of who one is and what one has lived through.

The self is not an entirely individual thing. It is often said that the self is socially constructed. I take this to mean that we do not establish our personal identity and sense of meaning and purpose in life by ourselves. We acquire language, beliefs, knowledge, and skills from other people. We gain much of our knowledge from the testimony of other people, either verbally or in print or other media. Our memories, beliefs, attitudes, interpretations, emotions, motivations, and goals emerge from our experience interacting with other people and are strongly affected by the cultural context in which we live. We speak to and with other people, who may choose whether to listen to us or not, and interpret what we say in various ways, as they will. The roles we occupy in life – mother, volunteer, teacher, author, philosopher, activist – are social roles that deeply affect us but are clearly established apart from our own individual efforts. Those roles affect the very structure of our time and our lives, and our

capacity to act. From the theory that the self is in such ways socially constructed, we can derive an explanation of why acknowledgement is important to the one who receives it. We are not able to establish alone our sense of who we are, what defines us, and what we have done and are doing in this world by ourselves. Others establish that sense of self with us. If those others deny or ignore what we find crucial to ourselves, we will experience serious tension, affecting our fundamental sense of who we are. If others treat us as morally negligible or as people whose activities and attainments are to be ignored or denied, our own sense of self and meaning will be contradicted, resulting in tension, alienation, and suspicion. Acknowledgement offers soothing, relief, and a basis for open, comfortable, and more trusting relationships. This is part of the story as to why acknowledgement is important.

For victims of serious wrongdoing, to receive acknowledgement is soothing, healing and supportive. It contributes to their restoration and healing which are necessary for their full functioning in society. That in itself is a reason for others – especially perpetrators and affiliated groups – to acknowledge them. If we accept some moral responsibility for the wellbeing of other people, we should accept an obligation to acknowledge them with regard to their claim to decent moral treatment (relevant to the case of serious wrongdoing) and their worthy and purposeful activities in life. Thus, there are reasons to grant acknowledgement that come from the needs of people who have been wronged to receive acknowledgement.

But this is by no means the end of the story. In the case of wrongdoing, those who have been complicit in, or agents of, serious wrongdoing are likely to know that they have done so and to feel guilt and shame about the matter. In failing to acknowledge the wrongdoing and their individual or shared responsibility for it, they are almost certainly denying or ignoring those feelings in themselves. Those feelings exist, as is evidenced by the fact that they are felt on certain occasions. For example, many Canadians who ignore the situation of aboriginal people most of the time and would acknowledge little or no complicity in the exploitation and abuse that have caused it feel deeply uneasy if approached by native persons asking for food or money. That circumstance elicits the guilt, shame, and embarrassment that we feel "deep down," even while we are far too often content to deny or ignore many claims of native peoples. To acknowledge the humanity and dignity of these people, the wrongs that have been done to them through Canadian history, and our own complicity in tolerating the persistent marginalization that has resulted from those wrongs is at the same time to acknowledge feelings of guilt and shame in ourselves. Only if we acknowledge those feelings and the facts about our own history and circumstances can we begin to address and resolve this guilt and shame. To feel guilt and shame is quite appropriate, because these negative emotions should inspire reflection and commitment to further knowledge and action. Our acknowledgement is the first step toward moral reform.

We know that most natives live in extremely poor socio-economic conditions.

We know that alcoholism, substance abuse, family violence, and suicide are rampant on native reserves. We know that native concerns are easily lost in Canada's political agenda, where Quebec demands tend to predominate. But we tend in our daily lives and even in our political life to deny or ignore them or to deceive ourselves about their significance. The 1996 Report calls for us to do *more* than know these things. It calls for us to *acknowledge* them, to accept them as part of who we are as a people and a country. Why should we do this? Why would this be important? Because we owe it to these people who are our brothers and sisters and from whom we received our land. Because in so doing, we can address and deal with our own feelings of guilt and shame. And fundamentally, because such acknowledgement is a necessary first step in the direction of moral and political reform. If we are not willing to publicly mark these facts, to publicly acknowledge the exploitation and injustice that have characterized native-government and native-white relations in this country for the last two centuries, we will have no hope of improving from our past. That is why acknowledgement is important.

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Note: In reflecting on this topic, I have been greatly assisted by correspondence and extensive conversations with Wilhelm Verwoerd of the Philosophy Department of Stellenbosch University, South Africa.