DIVERSITY READING LIST PRESENTS:

IMMORAL MONUMENTS AND THE COMMEMORATION DEBATE

A DRL READING GROUP BLUEPRINT BY TEN-HERNG LAI

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LEVEL: EASY-INTERMEDIATE

INTRODUCTION

Recently, statues, monuments, and commemorations of oppressors, such as Confederate monuments, that of Cecil Rhodes, John A. Macdonald, and Chiang Kai-shek, etc., have become the targets of protests and even vandalism. Correspondingly, there is a recent boom in philosophical interest in the ethics and aesthetics of commemorations. What are we to do with these artefacts of the past that honour the immoral? What reason, if any, do we have to preserve or remove them? In this blueprint, we shall read about cases from different countries, from authors from diverse backgrounds, with the hope of coming to have a better understanding of what justice may demand of us in an imperfect world in confronting our uncomfortable past.

This blueprint will be suitable for students with some preliminary philosophical background, such as second and third-year undergraduates. It not only aims at helping the readers to properly grasp how moral principles can be applied to real-life cases, but also to understand the practical value of seemingly abstract philosophical work – such as the philosophy of language – in our everyday lives and struggles. Each paper is designed to provide one week, or session's worth of content.

CATEGORIES

- Social and Political Philosophy
- Global Justice
- Philosophy of Race
- Colonialism and Postcolonialism
- Race and Aesthetics
- Aesthetics and Culture

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TSAI, GEORGE. *THE MORALITY OF STATE SYMBOLIC POWER*

2016, *Social Theory and Practice*, 42(2): 318–342. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

Philosophical interest in state power has tended to focus on the state's coercive powers rather than its expressive powers. I consider an underexplored aspect of the state's expressive capacity: its capacity to use symbols (such as monuments, memorials, and street names) to promote political ends. In particular, I argue that the liberal state's deployment of symbols to promote its members' commitment to liberal ideals is in need of special justification. This is because the state's exercise of its capacity to use symbols may be in tension with respecting individual autonomy, particularly in cases in which the symbols exert influence without engaging citizens' rational capacities. But despite the fact that the state's deployment of symbols may circumvent citizens' rational capacities, I argue that it may nonetheless be permissible when surrounded by certain liberal institutions and brought about via democratic procedures.

COMMENT:

This paper is not about objectionable commemorations in particular, but sets out to explore how any political symbols can be justified at all in a liberal democratic state. This should be a preliminary to any discussion we have about statues and monuments. A particular point of interest is that, according to Tsai, the state ought to engage with its citizens through rational persuasion. This will be relevant to latter discussions regarding the nature of moral education, and the role emotions play in it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What, according to Tsai, are "state-sponsored symbols"? And what does the example of renaming of the "War Department" to "Department of Defense" try to show?
2. In what sense do political symbols bypass our rational scrutiny? And why is this a problem?
3. What is justice in contrast to legitimacy? And how do these two notions relate to the state's expressive power?
4. Which noncoercive modes of state influence require special justification? And which do not? (And why is "for your own good" an insufficient justification?)
5. When, if ever, according to Tsai, can nonrational political symbolism be justified? (Keywords to look for include "respecting autonomy" "democratic procedures" "transparency" "publicity" etc.)

BURCH-BROWN, JOANNA. *IS IT WRONG TO TOPPLE STATUES AND RENAME SCHOOLS?*

2017, *Journal of Political Theory and Philosophy,* 1(1): 59-88. **Difficulty:** Easy

ABSTRACT:

In recent years, campaigns across the globe have called for the removal of objects symbolic of white supremacy. This paper examines the ethics of altering or removing such objects. Do these strategies sanitize history, destroy heritage and suppress freedom of speech? Or are they important steps towards justice? Does removing monuments and renaming schools reflect a lack of parity and unfairly erase local identities? Or can it sometimes be morally required, as an expression of respect for the memories of people who endured past injustices; a recognition of this history's ongoing legacies; and a repudiation of unjust social hierarchies?

COMMENT:

It is often thought that statues and monuments, even those of terrible people, are innocuous, that they cannot harm or affect us negatively. This paper helps to spell out the harms of preserving these commemorations. Among other important issues, this paper also engages with the "anachronism" problem, that we are judging people of the past with contemporary standards. This paper also gives a good introduction on the notion of "ideology" and its relation to objectionable commemorations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is an ideology? And what is the relation between ideology and social practices? (And it is worth trying to find another example of an ideology that fits the definition in this paper)
2. What, according to Burch-Brown, are the harms of colonialist, racist, or white supremacist symbols? (And do you think these harms are real? Or what would you say to someone who believes that these harms are unreal?)
3. What does it mean to say some monument of an unjust figure is "inert"? And do you think monuments central to current debates are inert?
4. What is the duty of non-erasure (or the duty to of sanitizing history)? And how can it be fulfilled?
5. What, if anything, is problematic about judging historical figures by contemporary moral standards?
6. Is it reasonable to interpret the removal of some symbols as an attack on one's identity? (And is the social tension that comes with removal bad?)

FROWE, HELEN. *THE DUTY TO REMOVE STATUES OF WRONGDOERS*

2019, *Journal of Practical Ethics*, 7(3): 1-31. **Difficulty:** Easy-Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

This paper argues that public statues of persons typically express a positive evaluative attitude towards the subject. It also argues that states have duties to repudiate their own historical wrongdoing, and to condemn other people's serious wrongdoing. Both duties are incompatible with retaining public statues of people who perpetrated serious rights violations. Hence, a person's being a serious rights violator is a sufficient condition for a state's having a duty to remove a public statue of that person. I argue that this applies no less in the case of the 'morally ambiguous' wrongdoer, who both accomplishes significant goods and perpetrates serious rights violations. The duty to remove a statue is a defeasible duty: like most duties, it can be defeated by lesser-evil considerations. If removing a statue would, for example, spark a violent riot that would risk unjust harm to lots of people, the duty to remove could be outweighed by the duty not to foreseeably cause unjust harm. This would provide a lesser-evil justification for keeping the statue. But it matters that the duty to remove is outweighed, rather than negated, by these consequences. Unlike when a duty is negated, one still owes something in cases of outweighing. And it especially matters that it is outweighed by the predicted consequences of wrongful behaviour by others.

COMMENT:

This paper highlights several important things. First, statues are blunt tools and express pro-attitudes to the persons they represent as a whole. Second, it sets out a clear standard for removal, and defends the conclusion that we should remove many or even most existing statues. Third, to the question "what if removal incites violence?" this paper provides a good answer. Fourth, a legitimate question is what we should do about statues of wrongdoers of the distant past? The discussion on this here is insightful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In what sense do public statues (normally) express positive evaluative attitude towards the figures they represent? (Contrast this to the mere historical importance view and the historical record view. Also consider the claim that statues honour someone as a whole.)
2. What is the difference between participation in a wrongful practice and committing serious rights violation? And why does this distinction matter? (Consider the implications of statue removal according to Frowe's account if we have different answers to this question.)
3. What is the difference between condemnation and repudiation? And what's the difference between a state having a duty to condemn and a duty to repudiate? Furthermore, what actions are required of the state when they have such duties?
4. Why may it be wrong to honour someone despite their wrongdoing? (In contrast to merely "because" of their wrongdoing?)
5. Should we confront statues of wrongdoers of the distant past?
6. Consider the lesser evil justification of preserving statues of wrongdoers. Do you think it is plausible?

LIM, CHONG-MING. *VANDALIZING TAINTED COMMEMORATIONS*

2020, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 48(2): 185-216. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

Lim argues that institutionalising the practice of preserving vandalised tainted commemorations can help us keep the best of both worlds: responding to the taint of bad commemorations but at the same time embedding historical lessons into our everyday consciousness. Lim also argues that we can learn to integrate statues that condemn into our common practices.

COMMENT:

Lim's paper represents one of the best attempts to charitably understand the view of those who support preservation, and furthermore constructively engages with them to the extent where a reasonable yet striking solution is proposed. Encouraged to be read with Lim, C.-M. (2020), "Transforming problematic commemorations through vandalism", *Journal of Global Ethics*, 16(3): 414–421, where Lim defends the feasibility of his radical solution.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What do "degrade" and "alienate" mean?
2. Why doesn't Lim believe that "counter commemorations" suffice?
3. What are a) the publicity requirement and b) the incorporation requirement?
4. Why does vandalism have a bad reputation? How does Lim address this?
5. Do you think vandalising and preserving is a feasible policy proposal?

LAI, TEN-HERNG. *POLITICAL VANDALISM AS COUNTER-SPEECH: A DEFENSE OF DEFACING AND DESTROYING TAINTED MONUMENTS*

2020, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 28(3): 602-616. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

Tainted political symbols ought to be confronted, removed, or at least recontextualized. Despite the best efforts to achieve this, however, official actions on tainted symbols often fail to take place. In such cases, I argue that political vandalism—the unauthorized defacement, destruction, or removal of political symbols—may be morally permissible or even obligatory. This is when, and insofar as, political vandalism serves as fitting counter-speech that undermines the authority of tainted symbols in ways that match their publicity, refuses to let them speak in our name, and challenges the derogatory messages expressed through a mechanism I call derogatory pedestalling: the glorification or honoring of certain individuals or ideologies that can only make sense when members of a targeted group are taken to be inferior.

COMMENT:

This paper provides two main contributions: first, it talks about not just that but also how tainted commemorations harm; and second, it not only discusses what the state ought to do about tainted commemorations, but attempts to justify existing activism that defaces them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is derogatory pedestalling? And what does it mean to say that some harmful message is “indirect?”
2. Why, according to Lai, are state-sponsored symbols more harmful than private speech?
3. What are felicity conditions? And how can they be undermined by “counter-speech?” (And why is counter-speech sometimes difficult?)
4. What is the necessity condition? And can the vandalism of tainted symbols ever meet this condition?
5. Is the vandalism of problematic symbols intolerant?

SHAHVISI, ARIANNE. *COLONIAL MONUMENTS AS SLURRING SPEECH ACTS*

2021, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 55(3): 453-468. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

In recent years, the removal of monuments which glorify historical figures associated with racism and colonialism has become one of the most visible and contested forms of decolonisation. Yet many have objected that there is educational value in leaving such monuments standing. In this paper, I argue that public monuments can be understood as speech acts which communicate messages to those who live among them. Some of those speech acts derogate particular social groups, contributing to their marginalisation in much the way that slurs do. Comparing derogating monuments to slurs is also productive in suggesting morally appropriate responses to their harms. I explore the limits of the use-mention distinction in relation to the harmfulness of slurs and apply this to show that attempting to recontextualise harmful monuments in situ—by, for example, changing the text on an accompanying plaque in order to retain the monument for its educational value—will not solve the problem in most cases. I conclude that the removal of slurring monuments, or their relocation to museum exhibitions dedicated to presenting a more critical view of history, is a more robust and reliable way of protecting against harm, and that this consideration outweighs any purported educational value in leaving monuments in place.

COMMENT:

Speech act theory is a very good way to understand why problematic monuments are problematic. It also has some important implications concerning what we ought to do with these monuments and whether they have good educational value. Especially regarding the second thing, the analogy with slurs is an illuminating one. There are better ways to teach the objectionableness of slurs than mentioning them constantly. Similarly, there are better ways to teach historical lessons than preserving problematic monuments.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why does Shahvisi hold that removal can educate us about history better than letting monuments stand as they are?
2. In what sense can speech acts be performed by objects? (What are speech acts? And in what sense can objects communicate messages?) and what are the illocutionary and perlucutionary acts typical of monuments and statues?
3. What do slurs do? And in what sense are certain monuments similar to slurs?
4. Why may museums not be the best place to display problematic monuments? And can the problem raised regarding museums be overcome?
5. Why is *in situ* contextualisation often insufficient?

MIRANDA, DANA FRANCISCO. *CRITICAL COMMEMORATIONS*

2020, *Journal of Global Ethics*, 16(3): 422-430. **Difficulty:** Intermediate-Advanced

ABSTRACT:

Drawing on the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, this contribution will examine commemorative practices alongside critical modes of historical engagement. In *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche documents three historical methodologies—the monumental, antiquarian and critical—which purposely use history in non-objective ways. In particular, critical history desires to judge and reject historical figures rather than repeat the past or venerate the dead. For instance, in recent protests against racism there have also been calls to decolonize public space through the defacement, destruction, and removal of monuments. There is thus much potential in critical history being used to address ongoing harms.

COMMENT:

This paper brings out nicely doubts on the objectivity of history as it is presented to us. The pretence of objective history can be used as an oppressive tool to delegitimise the critical reflection of the history of the marginalised. A particular point of interest is objecting to the standards of "greatness," which could be found very plausible. It seems that we have indeed been honouring people who have done great (from a certain point of view) but terrible things.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are “cold” monuments? And what does it mean for a commemoration to become “hot?”
2. How can objectivity be “abused” regarding monuments? (And how can this abuse prevent critically examining history?)
3. What does it mean to say that “history is put into service to the living? What sorts of services can be provided?
4. Why, according to Miranda, is “greatness” not the best criterion?
5. How can political vandalism be a form of critical engagement with history?

NGUYEN, C. THI. *MONUMENTS AS COMMITMENTS: HOW ART SPEAKS TO GROUPS AND HOW GROUPS THINK IN ART*

2019, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 100(4): 971-994. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

Art can be addressed, not just to individuals, but to groups. Art can even be part of how groups think to themselves – how they keep a grip on their values over time. I focus on monuments as a case study. Monuments, I claim, can function as a commitment to a group value, for the sake of long-term action guidance. Art can function here where charters and mission statements cannot, precisely because of art's powers to capture subtlety and emotion. In particular, art can serve as the vessel for group emotions, by making emotional content sufficiently public so as to be the object of a group commitment. Art enables groups to guide themselves with values too subtle to be codified.

COMMENT:

This paper highlights the role monuments can play as groups attempt to speak to itself to solidify its own commitment. As a form of art, it can publicly reinforce the commitments, especially through carrying the emotions, attitudes that cannot be easily expressed in propositions, towards certain individuals or ideals. The commitments can be something great, evil, or mediocre. Also consider the fact that art engages with our emotions rather than our rational capacity.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can a piece of art be adopted to represent a group's attitude?
2. What does it mean to say that a piece of art is addressed to a group?
3. What are robustly shared values?
4. How can art engage with, e.g. challenge or propose, joint commitments?
5. Can the persistent of street art evidence community's approval? (Please consider alternative explanations to the persistence.)
6. Consider the publicity and subtlety of art with regard to (group) emotions, and art's advantage over propositional statements.

BELL, MACALESTER. *AGAINST SIMPLE REMOVAL: A DEFENCE OF DEFACEMENT AS A RESPONSE TO RACIST MONUMENTS*

Forthcoming, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. **Difficulty:** Easy-Intermediate

ABSTRACT:

In recent years, protesters around the world have been calling for the removal of commemorations honouring those who are, by contemporary standards, generally regarded as seriously morally compromised by their racism. According to one line of thought, leaving racist memorials in place is profoundly disrespectful, and doing so tacitly condones, and perhaps even celebrates, the racism of those honoured and memorialized. The best response is to remove the monuments altogether. In this article, I first argue against a prominent offense-based account of the wrong of simply leaving memorials in place, unaltered, before offering my own account of this wrong. In at least some cases, these memorials wrong insofar as they express and exemplify a morally objectionable attitude of race-based contempt. I go on to argue that the best way of answering this disrespect is through a process of expressively "dehonouring" the subject. Removal of these commemorations is ultimately misguided, in many cases, because removal, by itself, cannot adequately dishonour, and simple removal does not fully answer the ways in which these memorials wrong. I defend a more nuanced approach to answering the wrong posed by these monuments, and I argue that public expressions of contempt through defacement have an ineliminable role to play in an apt dishonouring process.

COMMENT:

Two things should be noted in this paper. First, many have discussed the importance of stopping or blocking the harm of objectionable commemorations. This paper goes a step further and discusses the importance of "answering" the wrong done by these monuments. Second, the paper engages with a "negative" emotion, namely, contempt, that is present at both racist monuments and the effort to confront them. It allows us to see the legitimate role this negative emotion may play in the struggle for equality: contempt can be apt towards inapt contempt expressed through racist monuments. It also nicely spells out the potential practical implications of taking this negative emotion seriously.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does it mean to "answer" wrong?
2. What is wrong, according to Bell, with the "harm-based argument"?
3. What is contempt? And when is contempt "apt"? (And what are "vices of superiority"?)
4. What are the four primary reasons methods of dehonouring is super to simple removal?
5. What, if anything, is wrong with taking pleasure in confronting racism?

LAI, TEN-HERNG. *OBJECTIONABLE COMMEMORATIONS, HISTORICAL VALUE, AND REPUDIATORY HONOURING*

Forthcoming, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. **Difficulty:** Easy

ABSTRACT:

Many have argued that certain statues or monuments are objectionable, and thus ought to be removed. Even if their arguments are compelling, a major obstacle is the apparent historical value of those commemorations. Preservation in some form seems to be the best way to respect the value of commemorations as connections to the past or opportunities to learn important historical lessons. Against this, I argue that we have exaggerated the historical value of objectionable commemorations. Sometimes commemorations connect to biased or distorted versions of history, if not mere myths. We can also learn historical lessons through what I call repudiatory honouring: the honouring of certain victims or resistors that can only make sense if the oppressor(s) or target(s) of resistance are deemed unjust, where no part of the original objectionable commemorations is preserved. This type of commemorative practice can even help to overcome some of the obstacles objectionable commemorations pose against properly connecting to the past.

COMMENT:

Many scholars in this debate have been too charitable to racists, colonialists, oppressors, and their sympathisers. While admirable, I think it is important to expose the flaws of preservationism: there is simply not much value in preservation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is simple preservationism and why is it implausible? (Consider the strengths recontextualised preservationism has over simple preservationism.)
2. In what sense do some objectionable commemorations totally fail to connect to the past? And why, according to Lai, do those that seem to connect to the past also sometimes hinder connecting to the past?
3. Consider when and why vandalised or defaced commemorations may present better opportunities to than learning in schools, museums, through documentaries etc.
4. What is repudiatory honouring? And how does it help to connect to the past or contribute to learning historical lessons?
5. Do you think repudiatory honouring captures all the purported historical values of vandalised or defaced objectionable commemorations?

BERNINGER, ANJA. *COMMEMORATING PUBLIC FIGURES–IN FAVOUR OF A FICTIONALIST POSITION*

2020, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. **Difficulty:** Intermediate-Advanced

ABSTRACT:

In this article, I discuss the commemoration of public figures such as Nelson Mandela and Yitzhak Rabin. In many cases, our commemoration of such figures is based on the admiration we feel for them. However, closer inspection reveals that most (if not all) of those we currently honour do not qualify as fitting objects of admiration. Yet, we may still have the strong intuition that we ought to continue commemorating them in this way. I highlight two problems that arise here: the problem that the expressed admiration does not seem appropriate with respect to the object and the problem that continued commemorative practices lead to rationality issues. In response to these issues, I suggest taking a fictionalist position with respect to commemoration. This crucially involves sharply distinguishing between commemorative and other discourses, as well as understanding the objects of our commemorative practices as fictional objects.

COMMENT:

This is a persuasive article arguing for a somewhat counter-intutive conclusion. The fictionalist approach, that what we honour is not the historical figure, but some idealised version of them, seems to capture what we actually do in the real world, even if we think we are not doing this. Do compare the position on eliminativism with Frowe's paper.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why does the author think that talking about “good cases” is (also) important? (Note that questions of this sort lead us to understand why a paper makes a contribution to the literature.
2. What is “naïve admiration” and why is it difficult to uphold through time?
3. Action cannot be easily separated from a person’s intention, reasons, and motivations. What problem does this create for our admiration practices? (Please consider in light of the appropriateness problem and the rationality problem.)
4. What is *de facto* eliminativism and why isn’t it something we should accept according to Berninger? (Reflecting upon Helen Frowe’s paper would be interesting.)
5. Try to iterate with your own words what the fictionalism Berninger proposes is. Try also to consider whether some form of fictionalism is something we really do when engaging in commemorative practices. And before moving onto section 5, try to think why it avoids the appropriateness problem and rationality problem, and consider why some may find this position unacceptable.
6. If fictionalism is correct, can we still discover historical facts that lead us to stop commemorating certain figures.

FABRE, CÉCILE. *COSMOPOLITAN PEACE*

2016, Oxford University Press UK. **Difficulty:** Intermediate

Fragment: Chapter 10 "Remembrance."

SUMMARY:

This chapter explores why, from a cosmopolitan point of view, we should remember some wars, and furthermore how we should remember them. It contrasts itself with remembering war for partial and/or nationalist purposes, and also deals with the particularity problem, on why people of certain countries should remember their past wars.

COMMENT:

There are several articles on why some commemorations are unacceptable. Remembering war appropriately could shed some light on what good commemorations consist in. Moreover, this paper also discusses why some of our war remembrances are suboptimal.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why does Fabre believe that collective shame and pride don't constitute sufficient reason to commemorate wars of the community's past?
2. When, if ever, should we be grateful to those who have participated in wars that benefited us and/or contributed to our existence?
3. How can commemorating wars be exclusionary? (i.e., further marginalises the marginalised)
4. Fabre holds that "as a participant in a political relationship" one may have reasons to commemorate certain wars. How different is this from the collective shame/pride consideration?
5. What are the appropriate emotions felt towards war (and the specific events that happened during war)?

FINAL NOTE

This Blueprint addressed the issue of problematic remembrance. It would be fitting to also engage with problematic forgetting, including issues such as genocide denialism. For those of you interested in the topic, the following texts will offer a good place to start:

Oranlı, I. (2021). Epistemic Injustice from Afar: Rethinking the Denial of Armenian Genocide. *Social Epistemology*, 35(2): 120-132.

Altanian, M. (2021). Remembrance and Denial of Genocide: On the Interrelations of Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 1-18.