

Objectionable Commemorations: Ethical and Political Issues

The term, "objectionable commemorations", refers to a broad category of public artefacts – such as, and especially, memorials, monuments and statues – that are regarded as morally problematic in virtue of what or whom they honour. In this regard, they are a special class of public artefacts that are subject to public contestation. In this paper, we survey the general ethical and political issues on this topic. First, we categorise the arguments on offer in the literature, concerning the objectionable nature of such commemorations. Second, we review common political responses to objectionable commemorations. Finally, we identify fruitful areas for further philosophical inquiry on this topic.

Keywords: Commemorations, statues and monuments, morality, political honours; political speech; public space; collective history; decolonisation

1. Introduction

The term 'commemorations' is standardly used to refer to the artefacts that are created or used for the process of memorialisation. We employ a broad account of the term in this paper. Thus, the subject of commemorations can be persons or events. The artefacts can be tangible (as in memorials or money) or intangible (such as national holidays or songs or other rituals). Finally, the evaluative valence accompanying commemorations can be positive (as in those that honour their subjects), negative (as in those that repudiate their subjects), or even neutral. While we focus on commemorations with positive valence, the arguments we survey can easily be extended to those beyond.

A sampling of recent controversies about objectionable commemorations provides a preliminary delineation of the topic of our focus. In 2015, the statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town was removed after sustained protests. In 2019, the remains of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco were exhumed from the Valley of the Fallen, as

a step towards reconciliation. The statue of Christopher Columbus in Mexico City was removed in 2020, and a replica of the Young Woman of Amajac is due to take its place. The statue of the British slave trader Edward Colston was defaced and thrown into the adjacent docks in 2022. In Taiwan, the black marble sarcophagus containing the unburied remains of despot Chiang Kai-shek was vandalized with red paint by protestors in 2018. Confederate statues and monuments in the United States continue to spark controversy, protests, and even violence. Around the world, activists protest the commemorations of those who are implicated in the slave trade, war crimes, repression, severe human rights violations, genocide, and so on.

These examples share an important feature – they are subject to public contestation *in virtue of* the moral inappropriateness (however that is construed) of who, what, or how they honour. Indeed, while public commemorations (such as, and especially, memorials, monuments and statues) have always been subject to contestation, the public discourse surrounding these commemorations is primarily moral in character. In this regard, these commemorations constitute a subclass of public commemorations that are subject to contestation, where the boundaries of this subclass are drawn based on moral objections to their subjects. For ease of reference, we refer to such commemorations as “objectionable commemorations”.

In recent years, philosophers have directed sustained attention to the topic of objectionable commemorations. Increasingly, philosophers recognise that contestations about such commemorations are not “merely politics” (in the pejorative, philosophically uninteresting, sense). Instead, these contestations implicate deeper philosophical disagreements about the nature of public commemorations, and the justifiability of our political decisions concerning them, among others. In this article, we survey the basic ethical and political issues on this topic. First, we categorise the arguments on offer in the budding literature, concerning the objectionable nature of such commemorations. Second, we review common political responses to objectionable commemorations. Finally, we identify fruitful areas for further philosophical inquiry on this topic.

2. The problems with objectionable commemorations

What, if anything, is morally problematic with statues and monuments that honour racists, colonialists, oppressors, or any individual or ideology deeply associated with severe human rights violations? One response is straightforward. Such commemorations are not directed at appropriate subjects. For instance, the subjects do not deserve to be honoured, or positive attitudes towards them are inapt. Many philosophers, however, go beyond concerns about the appropriateness of the subjects. In what follows, we provide a map of the available arguments.

Commemorations can be morally problematic because of the *processes* through which they are established. They can be the legacy of colonisation. They can be undemocratically imposed upon us, while purporting to represent the views and attitudes we hold (Tsai 2016). Permanent statues and monuments may constitute an objectionable control over public spaces early generations enjoy over present and future generations (Fox 2023). They can be the outcome of flawed democratic procedures, where the input of marginalised groups is completely ignored. They can also be discriminatory in the sense that members of certain groups, despite their contributions to our society, are significantly underrepresented. For example, “of the 580 statues in Melbourne’s public spaces, fewer than 2 per cent represent women” (City of Melbourne 2023).

A commemorative landscape that results from this sense of discrimination can lead to a further problem. What *is* normally honoured can often be perceived as what *ought to be* honoured (Lai 2022). When certain groups are significantly underrepresented in our commemorative landscape, we may mistakenly infer that this is because they are not the sorts of persons that should be honoured. This may lead to further barriers to acknowledging the history, suffering, and contributions of marginalised groups. For example, when the American government decided to put the abolitionist Harriet Tubman on the \$20 bill, criticisms such as “dividing the country” and “pure political correctness” immediately followed (Yglesias 2016). The discriminatory commemorative landscapes can be thus understood as “objectionable things” – objects that arise in oppressive contexts, and which at the same time function as material anchors for certain oppressive patterns of thought and action (Liao and Huebner 2021). Here, the underrepresentation of marginalised groups appears to be so normal that actual efforts of commemorating marginalised members of our society appear to be abnormal.

Commemorations can also be morally problematic because the *subject* of commemorations is morally inappropriate or objectionable. This is the more commonly cited problem with such commemorations. Concerns about the processes through which commemorations are established can be, and often are, exacerbated by the problems pertaining to the subject of commemorations. Commemorations that honour inappropriate subjects can be objectionable in the following ways. While the problems are analytically distinct, they often come together in actual cases.

First, the political entities that perform the honouring – typically the state or local governments – may violate certain duties they hold when they honour inappropriate subjects. Political entities are typically under stringent duties (or, at least, under more duties relative to individuals) related to wrongdoing. For instance, they have a duty to not engage in wrongdoing, and to repudiate and rectify wrongdoing. More generally, they also have a “second-order” duty to provide public assurance that they will meet the demands of these duties. Honouring inappropriate subjects may amount to condoning their wrongful actions (Frowe 2019; Archer and Matheson 2021), or provide expressive support for problematic ideologies such as racism (Burch-Brown 2017), among others. These violate the duties to which public entities are subject.

Second, objectionable commemorations engage in problematic speech. They may express derogatory views about the supposed inferiority of members of some groups (Schulz 2019; Lai 2020), inapt contempt for such groups (Bell 2022), or disrespectful views more generally (Archer and Matheson 2019; Frowe 2019; Lim 2020a; Hobbs 2021; Stemplowska 2021; Burch-Brown 2022). In addition, such speech can constitute problematic speech acts (Friedell and Liao 2022). For instance, they may function similarly to slurring speech acts (Shahvisi 2021), or engage in derogatory pedestalling – honourings that presuppose the inferiority of certain groups (Lai 2020).

Third, such expressions can be corrosive of important political goods. They can undermine the assurance that all members of a given society are equals. This can alienate those members and further undermine their self-respect (Schulz 2019; Lim 2020a). The persistence of such

commemorations, and their integration into civic life, can also reinforce objectionable social hierarchies (Schulz 2019; Lim 2020a; Lai 2020). The repeated exposure to commemorations that only make sense against a backdrop where some are inferior, can also contradict the aims of civic education – where such aims concern the development of the view that all are equal (Barczak & Thompson 2021).

Fourth, objectionable commemorations can obscure our relationship with history. They can outrightly obscure the truth by lying. For instance, many Confederate statues were built on the myth of the “Lost Cause” – that the Confederacy was just and heroic, and the Civil War was not centred on slavery. By presenting their subjects as admirable, objectionable commemorations can exploit people’s tendency to maintain evaluative consistency, and make it difficult for them to accept historical evidence about those subjects’ wrongdoing (Rossi 2020; Archer and Matheson 2021). These commemorations can also negatively affect our understanding of our identity in relation to our inherited past (Matthes 2018a; Mills 2007; Abrahams 2022; Abrahams 2023).

Fifth, objectionable commemorations can evoke negative psychological or emotional impacts. People (especially from marginalised groups) can experience significant psychological distress when they know about the objectionable motivations of those commemorations, or more straightforwardly, when they witness commemorations that glorify their oppressors. Such distress is avoidable, and moreover often directed at undeserving parties (Timmerman 2020). People can also be subject to emotional imperialism – when they are pressured to engage in commemorative practices that are undergirded by emotional norms and standards that they are not committed to. For instance, those who suffered from the actions of the British military – and who may have good reason not to participate in commemorative practices (such as wearing red poppies) – may nonetheless feel pressured to do so (Archer and Matheson 2022). From a different direction, objectionable commemorations may also stir up feelings of awe for inappropriate targets (Shapshay 2021). There can also be “downstream” emotions that are not evoked by the commemorations, but by how others treat those commemorations. Consider, for instance, the feelings of racists when objectionable commemorations are defaced, or those of members of historically marginalised groups when counter-commemorations are vandalised.

3. **Responses to objectionable commemorations**

What should we do about objectionable commemorations? This section surveys the main responses to objectionable commemorations that are on offer within the literature. These include, among other things, removal, relocation, recontextualisation, destruction, and preservation. Before proceeding, several caveats on methodology are important. First, the arguments in the literature are standardly “layered” – they defend a response to objectionable commemorations, and suggest a back-up in less ideal circumstances. For example, it has been argued that we should attempt to recontextualise commemorations at the first instance, and only remove them if the former fails. We do not organise our survey around such specific arguments. Instead, we map the terrain in terms of the responses to objectionable commemorations and the goods that they purportedly secure. Second, and as we shall see, the available responses can do better or worse at securing different values relative to each other. We do not take a stance on the relative weight of those values, and thus do not engage in ranking the responses. Third, while the responses are analytically distinct, there is often significant overlap between them. For instance, responses that centre on recontextualisation often require the (minimally partial) preservation of objectionable commemorations. Lastly, and in line with much of the literature, our survey proceeds by first reconstructing different responses to objectionable commemorations, before evaluating them. Alternative manners of proceeding are available. For instance, some scholars begin by identifying the fundamental principles or values that we seek to realise, before selecting responses that best satisfy these principles or secure these values (Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming; Burch-Brown 2022; Gutbrod & Wood 2023). The differences between these methods are unlikely to be substantive. Instead, they may be meta-philosophical - concerning the relationship between ethics and political philosophy (see, for instance, Williams 2007).

The removal of objectionable commemorations appears to be the most obvious solution. Given the aforementioned problems with objectionable commemorations, there appears to be no good reason to keep them around. Conversely, removal can directly mitigate (or even eliminate) those problems. Additionally, removal appears to most clearly convey a repudiation of such commemorations, especially relative to other responses (Burch-

Brown 2017; Frowe 2019). A nearby response centres on the replacement of objectionable commemorations. Insofar as replacement presupposes removal, it similarly can directly mitigate or even eliminate the problems of objectionable commemorations. Moreover, and depending on the subject of the replacement commemoration, further valuable political goals can be secured. For instance, replacing objectionable commemorations with those that honour their victims, can be regarded as a form of repudiatory honouring – a practice that makes sense only upon the recognition of oppression (Lai 2022). However, the possibility is open that objectionable commemorations (or their preservation) secures some significant value. If so, removal would come at the cost of losing or failing to protect such value. We examine and enumerate some of these values in what follows.

Before proceeding, we set aside some bad faith arguments for preservation. While such arguments are rare within the academy, they are frequently made in public discourse. For instance, it is argued that the problems with commemorations are merely expressive and therefore insignificant, or that symbolic politics accomplish nothing real, or even that those problems do not exist in the first place. In effect, these arguments trivialise the aforementioned problems with objectionable commemorations. They are also often marshalled in support of oppressive practices or systems. Our view is that such arguments are mistaken about the role that commemorations play in shaping common values, beliefs, and even our conceptions of our identities, among other things (Matthes 2018a; Nguyen 2019; Schulz 2019).

One argument in support of preservation consists in an appeal to civic cohesion (Demetriou and Wingo 2018). The underlying concern is that the removal of objectionable commemorations may create anxieties about being replaced or eliminated, which can damage civic cohesion. However, the anxieties of those who regard the subjects of objectionable commemorations as heroes, are not clearly weightier than those belonging to disadvantaged groups. Defending social cohesion by prioritising the anxieties of the former, in effect imposes unfair burdens on the latter to maintain cohesion (Frowe 2019; Lai 2020). Moreover, it is implausible that the situation maintained by preserving objectionable commemorations, counts as genuine civic

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cohesion (Lai 2020). A related argument centres on the importance of toleration – a healthy society presumably wants its inhabitants to feel free to honour their ancestors or draw pride in their heritage (Demetriou and Wingo 2018). Appealing to tolerance (and cohesion), however, runs the risk of contributing to what Jason Stanley (2015) calls “undermining propaganda:” appealing to liberal ideals to undermine the exact same ideals. Here, the intolerance of powerful groups is enabled in the name of tolerance, and commemorations that divide the society are preserved in the name of social cohesion.

Another argument in support of preservation centres on the importance of preserving history – this argument often comes from those who accuse others of erasing history. According to this argument, commemorations are important records of historical facts. Such facts can concern the features and contributions of the subjects of commemorations. They can also concern the context of commemoration – including the reasons why people from a certain time thought it was appropriate to commemorate any given subject. Our concerns with these types of facts are distinct. Suppose that we recognise that a majority of objectionable commemorations present falsehoods – and therefore do not present us with accurate history records that we should preserve. Even so, we can defend preserving such commemorations, on the basis of appealing to the salience of the latter type of facts (Abrahams 2022; Lim 2020a). However, this argument may not hold much weight in the face of a plurality of better alternatives to keeping records (Frowe 2019; Lai 2022).

A related argument centres on the merits of commemorations, relative to other alternatives of recording and presenting history. Compared to textbooks, museums or archives, commemorations present history in a more public and accessible way. Thus, they have the potential to be more closely or deeply integrated into public life – including our common understandings of our nation and our identity. This can be marshalled in service of progressive goals – such as those which help to create a more meritorious or expansive conception of an existing group, or creating collective identities in contrast to the nation (Abrahams 2022; Lim 2020a). These opportunities are removed when we remove objectionable commemorations.

The recontextualisation of objectionable commemorations is a broad church of responses. The central goal of recontextualising responses is to situate or frame the objectionable commemorations differently, so as to mitigate or even eliminate the problems that they pose.

Recontextualisation can sometimes be indirect – as in the case of establishing counter-commemorations. Counter-commemorations are commemorations that focus on the darker parts of our collective past, rather than on supposed heroes. For instance, counter-commemorations can be established to remind people of past injustices or the victims of those injustices. Typical aims of counter-commemorations include presenting marginalised people or narratives, or to disrupt or challenge dominant narratives. Counter-commemorations can help to diversify the commemorative landscape, both in terms of the numbers of people (belonging to different groups) who are represented, and the kinds of narratives that are presented. For instance, honouring the heroes of oppressed groups allows members of those groups to draw pride in their heritage and, more generally, build a more tolerant society (Demetriou and Wingo 2018). However, the establishment of counter-commemorations leaves objectionable commemorations untouched. Specifically, they do not repudiate the latter’s problematic speech, nor do they mitigate the problems that such speech contributes to (Lim 2020a). Thus, the problems of objectionable commemorations persist upon the establishment of counter-commemorations. Moreover, counter-commemorations can facilitate the development of a convoluted ideology of “dual heritage”, according to which members of oppressive and oppressed groups simply took different – yet equally honourable paths – to their current status as equals (Upton 2015). This ideology can exacerbate the problems created by objectionable commemorations. These difficulties are not intractable. It is possible for counter-commemorative artwork to bear witness and respond to injustice (Bacharach 2023).

One direct form of recontextualisation consists in providing information that sheds new light on the subject of commemoration, or frames it differently. In the case of public monuments, this can mean adding plaques that correct the falsehoods presented, or even repudiate the inappropriate subject of commemoration. However, such plaques are

typically less prominent than monuments, and may be easily missed. Their impact on mitigating the problems of objectionable commemorations are thus limited (Lim 2020a). Other commemorative artefacts – such as bank notes, coins or stamps, but also even monuments – can be recontextualised by relocating them in museums. There are several benefits of doing so. Relocating objectionable commemorations to museums curtails their objectionable expressions, and thus mitigates the accompanying harms (Frowe 2019). Museums can also provide detailed explanations and information, and even embed objectionable commemorations in critical or more educative views of history (Schulz 2019; Shahvisi 2021; Lai 2022). However, museums are far from “objective” spaces. They have historically been, and still typically are, used in service of imperialism (Alcoff 2022). The problems that plague our treatment of objectionable commemorations are thus likely to recur even when we relocate the latter to museums – this time, at the level of how to present those commemorations (Marstine 2011). Similar problems arise when we think about how we teach about such commemorations (Davis 2021; Merry & Schinkel 2021; Sypnowich 2021).

The most direct – and perhaps striking – form of recontextualisation is the defacement of, or alterations to, objectionable commemorations. Defacement can make it clear that the current members of society no longer endorse, or actively repudiate, the problematic speech of objectionable commemorations. It can also convey apt contempt towards the subject of commemorations. Moreover, defacement can highlight – in a public and accessible way – the relevant history surrounding the objectionable commemorations. In doing so, it can address the problems arising from those objectionable commemorations’ distorted presentation of history (Lai 2020; Lim 2020a; Yun 2021; Bell 2022). Furthermore, defacement can constitute a form of artistic counterspeech. It transforms the original commemoration by altering its meaning, while physically preserving it (Dixon 2022; Lim 2020b). Some alterations to commemorations – such as taking monuments down from their pedestal – can remove their “monumentality”, and potentially change the views that they express (Shapshay 2021). However, the defacement of, or alterations to, objectionable commemorations may not always or entirely succeed in their goals. As is the case with slurs, it is possible for the problematic speech of the objectionable commemorations to “leak” through the defacement or

alterations. In these circumstances, the problems with objectionable commemorations persist (Lai 2020).

4. Gaps and future directions

In this section, we identify some gaps in the budding literature on objectionable commemorations, and point to potential future directions.

First, much of the existing discussions of objectionable commemorations centre narrowly on public monuments. However, and as we have earlier indicated, public monuments are members of a broader class. Objectionable commemorations can also include other artefacts (such as money, stamps, or named buildings and streets) and social practices (such as national holidays or songs). How do the aforementioned responses play out in the context of these commemorations? Broadening our sights beyond public monuments can engender a broader reflection on our commemorative landscape in general. Moreover, and relatedly, the attention on commemorations is accompanied by a relative neglect of the social practices and common institutions in which those commemorations are created and maintained. How viable are responses which tackle these broader practices and institutions, compared to those which are directed at the commemorations? Conversely, how effective can our responses to objectionable commemorations be, if they are not accompanied by attempts at reforming the broader system?

Second, discussions of responses to objectionable commemorations have tended to neglect the issue of process. What is the relationship between the ruminations of philosophers, and the lived experiences of people whose lives revolve around these commemorations? Who gets to be at the table, to decide on the fate of objectionable commemorations? What are the payoffs and costs of relying on informal or official representatives during these processes (Lim 2020a; Stephenson et al. 2021)? What happens when the decisions of the relevant parties (whoever they may be), are ignored by the owners or stewards of the objectionable commemorations? Oriel College, Oxford,

for example, infamously disregarded an independent committee's recommendation to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes. Finally, when does the duty to use these processes give way to the duty of direct resistance? In some cases, we may even find that our disagreements about the processes to tackle objectionable commemorations, may mirror disagreements about the objectionability of those commemorations to begin with.

Third, while it is standardly recognised that objectionable commemorations convey problematic views or engage in problematic speech, the mechanisms of such speech have been under-explored. Some studies of the mechanisms of commemorative speech have been conducted, from the perspective of speech act theory (Scarre 2020; Shavisi 2021; Dixon 2022; Friedell and Liao 2022; Lai 2020). However, more questions remain. For instance, how exactly do physical objects or even social practices speak? To what extent does the content of such speech depend on the intentions and motivations of the creators, as opposed to the interpretations of the audience? The worry, here, is that by taking the speech of objectionable commemorations as being fixed primarily by their creators, philosophers may take on a crude or even implausible view of communication and meaning.

Fourth, little attention has been paid to the aesthetic qualities of objectionable commemorations. One issue relates to the earlier gap, and concerns the connection between the aesthetic features of objectionable commemorations, and the experiences of their audience. For instance, how exactly do certain aesthetic features convey messages? What effects are invoked in the audience, and by what features? How do the aesthetic qualities of commemorations relate to other aesthetic types (such as paintings) or categories (such as the sublime)? We can build on some recent work (Young 2020; Di Paolantonio 2021; Shapshay 2021; Yun 2021; Dixon 2022) when answering these questions. In so doing, we may need to attend to the specifics of individual commemorations (or types of them), and potentially eschew generalising across the entire category (Bicknell, Judkins & Korsmeyer 2020; Di Paolantonio 2021). Another gap concerns the relationship between aesthetics on the one hand, and ethics or politics on the other. An implicit, though standard, view appears to be that the aesthetic qualities of such commemorations are irrelevant to our decisions about how to respond to them, or

else easily outweighed by our need to address the problems they pose (Timmerman 2020). It is unclear that this is always the case. Here, we can consider artistic masterpieces with problematic content (Lim 2020), or commemorative artefacts that fail to express the right forms of respect to their targets because of their aesthetic features (such as *A Sculpture for Mary Wollstonecraft* in London, or *The Embrace* – dedicated to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Coretta Scott King – in Boston).

Fifth, the discussions of our responses to objectionable commemorations are typically limited to identifying reasons or justifications for them. Relatively little sustained attention is directed at the costs of, or objections to, those responses. The majority of papers within the literature do not directly focus on these questions. Nonetheless, they are significant. For instance, how should we evaluate and address foreseeable risks of confrontation and social unrest pursuant to any response? The decision to remove the infamous Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville sparked far-right protests, where one participant resorted to terrorist activities and killed one person while injuring several others. There is a question of whether these foreseeable risks amount to constraints on the responses that we take (Frowe 2019; Lai 2020). In the context of defacements of, or alterations to, objectionable commemorations, there are further questions concerning the illegality or civility of those responses. Might the illegal or uncivil character of defacing such commemorations, outweigh the benefits of doing so? We welcome more work focusing on the costs of, or objections to, any candidate response to objectionable commemorations. Such work could, moreover, clarify our views about constraints on controversial political decisions in general.

Sixth, discussions of objectionable commemorations do not typically address the question of their importance, relative to other injustices. Some may worry that our concerns with objectionable commemorations are outweighed by (or constitute a distraction from) more important concerns such as police brutality, the biased prison system, the climate crisis, the military-industrial complex, or various geopolitical conflicts, and so on. More detailed discussions of the importance of addressing objectionable commemorations, and how doing so relates to these purportedly more important issues, would be welcome. One potential strategy consists in showing the role

that such commemorations play in systems of oppression, and how tackling the material bases of oppression can be as important as tackling their more severe effects (Liao and Huebner 2021; Sypnowich 2021).

Seventh, while a minority of scholars have started to explore commemorations and solutions in non-Western countries – e.g. Korea (Yun 2021) and Taiwan (Lai 2020, 2022) – very little engagement with non-Western philosophical traditions has taken place (one noticeable example is Harris 2023). We believe that more engagement with examples, solutions, and traditions outside the dominant philosophical literature and western politics will enrich our theorisation, and even help us come up with better solutions.

Eight, the ethics and politics of commemorations appear to have clear connections to adjacent literature within philosophy. These connections are worth further exploration. They include connections to discussions in epistemic injustice (Pantazatos 2017), heritage (Matthes 2016, 2018a; 2018b), evaluating the past and the relativism of distance (Williams 1985; Moody-Adams 1997; Archer and Matheson 2024), cultural genocide (Altanian 2021a, 2021b; Oranli 2018, 2021), or political representation (Dovi 2018), just to name a few. Similarly, it also may benefit from interacting more with other disciplines such as cultural studies, Black studies, education studies, architecture, geography, or urban studies.

Finally, considerations of objectionable commemorations invite broader questions about the criteria that should undergird our evaluations of who is deserving of commemoration in general, and especially honouring in particular (Archer and Matheson 2019; 2021). Are public commemorations most plausibly construed as commitments of a collective (Nili 2020; Ngyuen 2019), or even as fictional representations (Berninger 2022)? More generally, even if we settle on such criteria, how do we choose from the many people who are likely to meet them (Stemplowska 2022)? More attention can be directed at these broader issues, and others which concern our political decisions about commemorations.

An additional note. We are aware that several papers on relevant topics are currently in the review process. We can only engage with those that have appeared publicly. But we encourage readers to pay attention to further development in the literature.

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