

FALSE EXEMPLARS ADMIRATION AND THE ETHICS OF PUBLIC MONUMENTS

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AT LATEST COUNT, over one hundred symbols of the Confederacy have been removed from public spaces since the 2015 attack on African American churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina, by white supremacist Dylann Roof. However, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, more than 1,700 symbols remain, many of them protected by state laws in former Confederate states.¹ Moreover, the controversy over public monuments is not limited to Confederate symbols. In 2015, an African American civil rights group at Princeton University orchestrated a walkout to demand that the twenty-eighth U.S. President's name be expunged from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.² Nor is activism centered around monuments limited to the United States. A 2015 Twitter campaign, "Rhodes Must Fall," led to the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes from the campus of South Africa's Cape Town University, inspiring a call in 2016 for the removal of a Rhodes statue from Oxford University's campus.³ It appears that a new generation of activists is reinvigorating debate over the public commemorative landscape.

While this debate is in no way limited to statues, it frequently crystallizes around public representations of historical figures who expressed support for the oppression of certain groups or contributed to their past or present oppression. In this paper, I will consider what should be done about such representations. A number of philosophers have articulated arguments for modifying or removing public monuments. Joanna Burch-Brown grounds her argument for removal in what I call the "honorific" function of such representations—the

1 See Southern Poverty Law Center, "SPLC Report."

2 See Philpott and Weber, "Woodrow Wilson Statue Removal Prompts a Closer Look at His History with Race Relations"; Brait, "Princeton Students Demand Removal of Woodrow Wilson's Name from Buildings."

3 BBC News, "Will 'Rhodes Must Fall' Fail?"

ways in which they express and tend to cultivate admiration for their subjects.⁴ In the first two sections of the paper, I develop a novel argument for modifying these representations based on this insight. I argue that leaving such representations unmodified in the public space tends to undermine the dignity of members of oppressed groups as well as their assurance that society and government are committed to their rights and constitutional entitlements. In the paper's third section, I develop a "balancing test" for determining whether the relevant moral and pragmatic considerations favor making a particular representation inaccessible to the public, or recontextualizing it for public consumption. Unlike some of the extant philosophical treatments of honorific representations that focus on particular monuments, this balancing test is designed for general application to any honorific representation that satisfies the presumptive case for modification. To conclude, I offer some reasons why weak forms of recontextualization that do not involve altering institutional context may often be an insufficient remedy for the problems I describe.

1. HONORIFIC REPRESENTATIONS AND THEIR MEANINGS

As I mentioned, Burch-Brown's argument for removing or recontextualizing cultural objects like flags, statues, and place names associated with colonialism and slavery is grounded in their honorific function. Her crucial insight is that statues and place names confer honor and esteem on their subjects.⁵ In this section, I develop an account of the mechanisms by which some public representations convey messages of admiration for their subjects, drawing on insights from related work by Alfred Archer and Benjamin Matheson on the ethics of admiration.⁶

For our purposes, the term "honorific representation" designates *any representation of an individual in a public space that depicts that individual as an exemplar of a value or values, such as courage, integrity, or justice*. Thus, what I will say about statues applies equally to paintings, frescoes, and even bare inscriptions. I understand an exemplar as a *person who is the fitting object of admiration on account of their instantiation of a value or values*.⁷

Honorific representations often have multiple meanings, and meaning can be extracted from different features of them. So, what determines their meaning? Answers to this question fall along a spectrum bounded by two extremes. On

4 Burch-Brown, "Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?" 59–87, esp. 68–69.

5 Burch-Brown, "Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?" 68.

6 Archer and Matheson, "When Artists Fall."

7 Archer and Matheson make the point that honoring someone picks them out as a fitting target of admiration ("When Artists Fall," 248).

one end is the view that the meaning of a representation is determined solely by what those involved in its creation intended it to mean. On the other end is the view that its meaning is determined solely by whatever members of the public take it to mean.⁸ I see no reason why we ought to adopt either of these views. Instead, I propose that for our purposes we treat both the attitudes of the creators and those of the public as legitimate sources of meaning. In a recent paper on the ethics of admiring immoral artists, Archer and Matheson introduce a useful distinction among different kinds of meaning that utterances can possess. In the context of honorific representations, what they call *intended meaning* is the thoughts, attitudes, and concepts that a representation's creators intended it to convey. I will call the thoughts, attitudes, and concepts that an honorific representation's creators *express* through it without necessarily intending to do so its *implicit meaning*.⁹ Finally, I will call the thoughts, attitudes, and concepts that the public takes the representation to convey—*whether or not that interpretation is justifiable*—its *public meaning*.¹⁰ It should be clear from these definitions that the same representation may bear multiple meanings. Insofar as a representation is created by multiple people, there may be many, sometimes contradictory intended and implicit meanings. And given that the public is not a monolith, there are likely to be multiple public meanings as well. Indeed, the fact of these multiple public meanings will be important in our discussion of the factors that determine whether we ought to recontextualize or remove these representations.

It may be objected that it is illegitimate to include in our moral calculus those meanings that the public *unjustifiably* takes a representation to convey. Why ought we care about the unreasonable interpretations? The answer is that public meanings are crucial links in the causal chain whereby representations bring about morally relevant effects. Hence, we have reason to care about how the public interprets them even if those interpretations are unreasonable. We can observe a similar line of reasoning in deliberations about public health policy. Even if we think that philosophical or religious opposition to vaccination is unreasonable, a policy of blanket mandatory vaccination may be morally undesirable because of the backlash it tends to provoke and because of the duty to

8 Cf. Schedler, "Are Confederate Monuments Racist?" 287–308.

9 Archer and Matheson call the values and cares implicit in a person's utterance its *attitudinal* meaning ("When Artists Fall," 251). However, because both intended and "attitudinal" meanings express the speaker's attitudes, I think a better label for the latter is *implicit* meaning.

10 Archer and Matheson also define *public* meaning as the meaning that "others can justifiably attribute to our acts given the context in which we perform them" ("When Artists Fall," 251). But for reasons I discuss below, I do not want to limit my analysis to *reasonable* or *justifiable* public interpretations of honorific representations.

respect patient autonomy.¹¹ By the same token, if we are aware that the public is likely to unreasonably ascribe a certain meaning to a representation and that ascription has morally detrimental effects, then that is a legitimate consideration when deliberating about what to do with the representation.

It might now be objected that because knowledge of intended and implicit meanings typically requires more investigation of a representation's history than members of the public are willing to undertake, intended and implicit meanings can be ignored for our purposes. However, it is not uncommon for the intended and implicit meanings of representations to become more widely known through the efforts of journalists or historians, which in turn shapes the public's interpretations.¹² In this way, intended and implicit meanings can have indirect effects on public meaning. Furthermore, intended and implicit meanings are part of the complete analysis of the harms of these representations. The case for this claim will have to wait until the next section. So, for our purposes it is legitimate to consider the intended, implicit, and public meanings of honorific representations even if these meanings conflict, and even if the interpretations of the public are unreasonable.

A morally crucial feature of honorific representations is that they depict their subjects as *exemplars*, or fitting objects of admiration. They can do this by expressing *propositions* or thoughts about their subjects' exemplarity, or by expressing *attitudes* of admiration for their subjects; and they can express both in virtue of their *relations* to other things, by employing visual symbols and metaphors, or by accompanying inscriptions. Honorific representations depict their subjects as exemplars *relationally*: by being located in public space, by being created for certain purposes, or by being informed by certain values, they convey the message that the subjects they represent are to be admired. For example, the Jackson and Lee Monument in Baltimore, which was removed on the orders of the Baltimore City Council in August 2017, was the fruit of a one-hundred-thousand-dollar bequest by local banker J. Henry Ferguson, who intended to hold up the Confederate generals as good examples to Maryland youth.¹³ Even where the intention of their creators was not to express admiration for their subjects, that these representations' subjects are exemplars is usually a value judgment that was operative in their creation, and so part of their *implicit meaning*. For

11 See Salisbury, "Should Childhood Vaccination Be Mandatory?"; El Amin et al., "Ethical Issues Concerning Vaccination Requirements"; and Pierik, "Mandatory Vaccination."

12 For an example of journalistic work on the Confederate battle flag, see Appelbaum, "Why Is the Flag Still There?" For a recent example of revisionary historical work on Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall, see Finkelman, *Supreme Injustice*.

13 See Kelly, *Outdoor Sculpture in Baltimore*, 198–99.

example, the history of the Robert E. Lee Monument in New Orleans clearly indicates that its erection was motivated by an underlying admiration for him.¹⁴ Moreover, it can be, and often is, reasonably inferred that the mere existence of a representation of a person in a public space implies that its subject is considered an exemplar.¹⁵ Hence, that the subject is an exemplar can be part of the public meaning of its existence in public space.

Honorific representations also *visually* represent their subjects as exemplars through the use of culturally conditioned markers of exemplarity. One way of visually suggesting exemplarity is by placing subjects at a commanding height, e.g., by depicting them in larger-than-life scale. For example, the Lee monument in New Orleans featured a sixteen-and-a-half-foot bronze statue atop a sixty-foot-tall marble column. This technique exploits the metaphorical association between the relation of *being above* and the relation of *being better than*.¹⁶ In addition, honorific representations tend to depict their subjects in physically idealized terms, exploiting the human tendency to infer moral excellence from physical excellence—the “what is beautiful is good” bias.¹⁷ Art-historical references can also be used to reinforce the suggestion of exemplarity. The Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, references the Athenian Parthenon in order to suggest Lincoln’s godlike role in preserving American democracy.¹⁸

Finally, honorific representations can represent their subjects as exemplars through the use of inscriptions. The Jackson and Lee Monument had an inscription on its base that read: “They were great generals and Christian soldiers and waged war like gentlemen.”¹⁹ Similarly, the plaque under an 1895 statue of Edward Colston in the city of Bristol, United Kingdom, reads: “Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their

14 For a concise summary of this history, see Nicholson, “Robert E. Lee Monument.”

15 I invite the reader to consider the many public representations they have encountered in their lifetime. It would be very surprising to me if a large proportion of them did not, on a reasonable interpretation, depict their subjects as objects of admiration.

16 For a comprehensive examination of these metaphorical associations, see Lakoff and Johnson, *The Metaphors We Live By*. See also Moore, “What the Removal of New Orleans’s White Supremacist Monuments Means to My Students.”

17 See Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, “What Is Beautiful Is Good,” 285–90; Langlois et al., “Maxims or Myths of Beauty?”; and Eagly et al., “What Is Beautiful Is Good, but . . .”

18 For an in-depth analysis and history of the Lincoln Memorial, see Greenberg, “With Meaning for All.” Note that according to the article, the Lincoln Memorial was unusual for its time because the statue of Lincoln does not idealize his physical features.

19 For more details about this and other Baltimore Confederate monuments, see Special Commission to Review Baltimore’s Public Confederate Monuments, “Lee Jackson Monument, 1948.”

city.” Notably absent from this inscription is any mention of Colston’s role in the transatlantic slave trade.²⁰ In some cases, honorific representations are entirely constituted by inscriptions. The Heyward Shepherd Memorial at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, erected in 1931, honors an African American railroad worker who died in the early hours of John Brown’s famous 1859 raid on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry. The rectangular granite slab has no visual elements, but its inscription reads:

On the night of October 16, 1859, Heyward Shepherd, an industrious and respected colored freeman, was mortally wounded by John Brown’s raiders.... This boulder is erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the Sons of Confederate Veterans as a memorial to Heyward Shepherd, exemplifying the character and faithfulness of thousands of Negroes who under many temptations throughout subsequent years of war. So [*sic*] conducted themselves that no stain was left upon a record which is the peculiar heritage of the American people, and an everlasting tribute to the best in both races.²¹

Although Shepherd was a free man, the inscription depicts him as in some sense representative of faithful slaves who resisted the myriad “temptations” to escape bondage, choosing instead to remain faithful to their masters. Hence, while Shepherd was unlikely to have seen himself as a loyal servant of the South—and certainly not of the Confederacy—the inscription attributes to him motives of loyalty to the South that he likely lacked. Its cavalier attitude toward historical truth reflects its actual function as a piece of propaganda for the Jim Crow social order, about which more will be said shortly.²²

One may wonder whether the Heyward Shepherd Memorial ought to count as an honorific representation. Its erectors likely did not intend it to represent an exemplar of virtues proper to people *like them*, but to people properly subordinated by post-Reconstruction segregation. Furthermore, what its erectors

20 Between 1680 and 1692, Colston served as a major investor, manager, and eventually deputy governor of the Royal Africa Company (RAC), then Britain’s only official slaving company. During this time, of 84,500 slaves transported on RAC ships, nearly 20,000 died *en route* due to unhygienic conditions onboard, dehydration, scurvy, and dysentery. For an overview of the controversy surrounding Colston in Bristol, see Parks, “Edward Colston.” More information about Colston and the “Countering Colston” campaign can be found at <https://counteringcolston.wordpress.com>.

21 For a thorough account of the monument’s history, see Johnson, “An ‘Ever Present Bone of Contention.’”

22 For an accessible overview of the Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods, see Gates, *Stony the Road*.

may have understood to be virtues proper to subordinates may not be anything like what we *now* recognize as virtues.²³ However, there is good reason to frame a concept of *honorific representation* capacious enough to accommodate these cases. As will become clear in the next section, if we did not do so, we could not fully understand the ways in which such representations are objectionable. Thus, it would be unduly narrow to insist that something is an *honorific representation* only if it exemplarizes subjects for what we currently call “virtues” or “values”; it should be possible to recognize when a culture *honors* one of its members for instantiating a virtue or value we do not share.²⁴ My account of honorific representation simply requires that it represent a subject as an exemplar of a value, but not necessarily one of *our* values or “correct” values. Nor need it be a value or virtue deemed proper for the representation’s creators. Consider a statue of a Roman woman that depicts her as the embodiment of the virtue of *pudicitia*, a virtue sometimes translated as “chastity.”²⁵ Surely, we can understand this representation as *honoring* her and underscoring the value of *pudicitia*, even if the statue’s male creators did not regard *pudicitia* as a value *they* ought to instantiate.

2. WHAT IS OBJECTIONABLE ABOUT HONORIFIC REPRESENTATIONS?

A survey of the extant literature on the ethics of honorific representations yields three principal objections to them. The first is that they can express a degrading ideology. Both Burch-Brown and Johannes Schulz emphasize this point.²⁶ The second, which serves as the basis for Travis Timmerman’s argument for destroying Confederate monuments, is that they can cause psychological suffering.²⁷ Finally, Schulz also claims that they can undermine *self-respect*, a person’s self-perception as “a moral equal, with the same rights and duties that all other persons have.”²⁸ In this section, I argue that another important moral objection to some

23 Thanks to a reviewer at the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* for bringing this point to my attention.

24 This is not to say that there is no sense of the term “virtue” that is transculturally shared. It would be difficult for us to understand someone who calls a trait a “virtue,” but does not regard it as something like an appropriate disposition to act, choose, desire, and feel in a certain sphere of human experience. Cf. Nussbaum, “Non-Relative Virtues.”

25 For an examination of this concept, see Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome*. The term *pudicitia* was applied to men as well, but it seems that the “thick” specification of the virtue was different for men and women.

26 See Burch-Brown, “Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?” 68; Schulz, “Must Rhodes Fall?” 168–72.

27 Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments.”

28 Schulz, “Must Rhodes Fall?” 172–76.

honorific representations is that they undermine the dignity of members of marginalized groups and their assurance of respect for their dignity. While the other objections all carry serious moral weight, I suggest that a dignity-focused account has some explanatory advantages over the ideological account and is weightier than the psychological suffering account.

There is no question that some honorific representations express a degrading ideology. Sally Haslanger defines “ideology” as a set of social meanings that function to stabilize problematic social hierarchies through masking or illusions that make unjust social arrangements appear as if they are just.²⁹ With this in mind, consider the Heyward Shepherd Memorial. Even if the admiration memorials like Shepherd’s express for African American “loyalty” is in some sense genuine, it is part and parcel of the ideology of white supremacy. Representations of devoted African American slaves contributed to the effort in the post-Reconstruction South to morally legitimize segregation, violence, and other oppressive practices by depicting subordination as welcomed by African Americans themselves.³⁰ Indeed, “subordination” is precisely the word used in an 1894 op-ed in the *Confederate Veteran* calling for the erection of monuments to “faithful slaves”:

It seems opportune now to erect monuments to the Negro race of the war period. . . . There is not of record in history subordination and faithful devotion by any race of people comparable to the slaves of the Southern people during our great four years’ war for independence.³¹

Thus, in this context, apparently admiring representations of an African American both assert and promote white supremacy. In this way, they express a degrading ideology that is committed to the denial of basic human rights and constitutional entitlements to African Americans. However, as I will presently argue, the expression of a degrading ideology does not exhaust the problematic aspects of honorific representations, and it is not always clear that every morally problematic honorific representation expresses a degrading ideology.³²

Consider the General William Tecumseh Sherman Monument in New York City, which commemorates Sherman’s 1864 march through Georgia. If Confederate monuments are plainly expressive of white supremacist ideology, it is

29 See Haslanger, “Racism, Ideology, and Social Movements.”

30 For a detailed account of the relationship between Southern monuments, the Lost Cause myth, and white supremacy, see Leib and Webster, “On Remembering John Winberry and the Study of Confederate Monuments on the Southern Landscape”; and Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*.

31 Confederate Southern Memorial Association, *Confederate Veteran*.

32 As Schulz himself notes (“Must Rhodes Fall?” 172).

less clear in this case. Such an expression was not in the latter case any part of the intended or implicit meaning of the monument.³³ And unlike Schulz's case of Black South African prisoners forced to wear boys' shorts under apartheid, the creators of the monument may not have knowingly erected it in a cultural context in which it would be understood by oppressor and oppressed alike as an expression of a disrespectful ideology.³⁴ Yet, as overall commander of the US Army after the Civil War, Sherman prosecuted a brutal war against the Plains Indians that included the deliberate mass slaughter of the buffalo, the economic basis of their existence.³⁵ His justification for the policy of displacing Native Americans in favor of white settlers echoes a narrative of the European settler as the "culturally and morally superior savior who brought civilization to the 'wild' Indians," a narrative that "portrays Indigenous people as lacking the very ability to rationally choose and act on a plan of life."³⁶ Given this, it would be reasonable for Native Americans to object to expressions of unqualified admiration for such a figure.³⁷ This suggests that even if the Sherman Monument does not express an ideology of white supremacy, it is not morally unproblematic. The account I articulate presently can explain why.

Honorific representations can undermine both the dignity of members of currently or historically disadvantaged groups and their assurance of respect for their rights. Here I use the word "dignity," following Jeremy Waldron, to denote the "basic social standing" of members of such groups, "the basis of their recognition as social equals and as bearers of human rights and constitutional entitlements."³⁸ Waldron asks us to consider the effects of "speech" in the broad

33 Compare this to what Johannes Schulz says about Confederate monuments: "The monuments were not erected simply to commemorate military leaders . . . but were *intended* as political statements in defense of the white supremacist ideology of the Confederacy" ("Must Rhodes Fall?" 168, emphasis added).

34 Cf. Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 169.

35 See Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy"; Smits, "The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo."

36 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 175–76.

37 Similarly, Schulz points out that a monument to Abraham Lincoln may be offensive to Native Americans because, *inter alia*, he signed the Homestead Act into law ("Must Rhodes Fall?" 175). But to say that the Lincoln Memorial and a statue of Robert E. Lee erected during the civil rights era are equally *expressive* of white supremacy seems to elide some important differences.

38 See Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 59. See also Waldron and Dan-Cohen, *Dignity, Rank, and Rights*.

sense—encompassing public imagery, signage, audible speech, and so on—on members of marginalized groups.³⁹ His primary argument is that

the look of a society is one of its primary ways of conveying assurances to its members about how they are likely to be treated, for example, by the hundreds or thousands of strangers they encounter or are exposed to in everyday life. . . . The point of the visible self-presentation of a well-ordered society, then, is not just aesthetic; it is the conveying of an assurance that they can count on being treated justly.⁴⁰

Drawing on Rawls's conception of a well-ordered society as one in which "citizens accept and know that others likewise accept [basic principles of justice], and this knowledge in turn is publicly recognized," Waldron argues that members of currently or historically oppressed groups require a general and diffuse assurance that other citizens are committed to dealing with them on the basis of the recognition of their rights.⁴¹ Without this assurance, the social world they inhabit is hostile, insecure, and unpredictable; uncountable possible interactions with members of society and government actors become the scene of potential rights violations. This unpredictability could lead to their withdrawal from the public space, making it harder to secure their individual and group interests and eroding democratic legitimacy. Building on these insights, I propose that where honorific representations express a degrading ideology, endorse or express disregard for grave wrongs done to members of a marginalized group, or encourage unqualified admiration for the group's oppressors, they can contribute to the undermining of confidence that society is committed to treating the group's members "with dignity"—with due recognition of their basic rights and constitutional entitlements. The message conveyed by society's omitting to modify these representations to reflect their subjects' roles in the oppression of these groups—or worse, its *defense* of them as elements of a morally unobjectionable "heritage"—is that there is widespread societal approval of their morally objectionable intended, implicit, and public meanings. Since those meanings are inconsistent with respect for the rights and entitlements of members of these groups, leaving these representations unmodified will tend to contribute to the undermining of their assurance that others are committed to treating these groups in ways consistent with their rights-bearing status.

Furthermore, sometimes this lack of confidence will be *accurate* because of the effects of honorific representations: in particular, their endorsement of an

39 Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 75.

40 Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 82–85.

41 Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, ch. 4.

inherently degrading ideology or promotion of unqualified admiration of their subjects, which may make it more difficult for the public to acknowledge the injustices in which they were involved. Waldron argues that “one holds a certain status [dignity] not just when one happens to have a given set of entitlements, but when the recognition of those rights or entitlements is basic to how one is in fact dealt with.”⁴² Dignity is a social status, and requires not just the possession of human rights and constitutional entitlements but the widespread recognition *that* one bears these entitlements. If this is the case, and if honorific representations can contribute to a general failure of such recognition, then we can say that these representations can undermine dignity itself. These effects are particularly acute when the representations are the responsibility of the state. As the principal guarantor of rights, the state must strongly communicate assurances that it is committed to upholding these rights, and these assurances can be diluted if the state allows representations that elide or endorse oppression to remain unmodified in the public space.

The deleterious effects on oppressed groups’ assurances of just treatment and dignity are also compounded when honorific representations are used as rallying points for further public expressions of hatred and bigotry. For example, at the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, a statue of Robert E. Lee served as a rallying point for the alt-right protestors. The purpose of such demonstrations is not only to spew hateful speech; it is also, as Waldron points out, “to indicate to others that they are not alone in their racism or bigotry.”⁴³ In other words, the public show of hatred is aimed at undermining the assurances that are critical to the basic social standing of members of oppressed groups and encouraging the erosion of their dignity.

I mentioned three ways in which honorific representations can undermine dignity and the assurance of dignified treatment: expressing a degrading ideology, endorsing or expressing disregard for grave wrongs done to members of a historically or currently oppressed group, or encouraging unqualified admiration for their oppressors. In what follows, I will explain how honorific representations do this *through* their honorific function. I have already described the way in which they can express degrading ideologies. But in addition, the implicit or public meanings of an honorific representation may be endorsements or elisions of grave historical injustices because the “valuable” traits or deeds for which the representation’s subject are honored were often either *instrumental to* morally objectionable ends or *enabled by* morally objectionable practices. For example, Robert E. Lee may have manifested genuine virtues in his prosecution

42 Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 85. See also Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 66.

43 Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 95.

of the war, but the aim of the Confederate war effort was primarily to preserve the institution of slavery. Edward Colston may have manifested benevolence in his philanthropic work for Bristol, but this work was directly enabled by the exploitation of African slaves. Since we tend to think that it is inappropriate to feel or express admiration for traits or deeds that stand in these relations to morally objectionable ends or practices, we can reasonably infer that those involved in these representations' creation either did not see these ends or practices as morally objectionable, or did not see their subjects' traits or deeds as relevantly related to these morally objectionable ends and practices. If the former, then the implicit meaning of the representation is the endorsement of morally objectionable values or the unjustified downplaying of past injustices; if the latter, then the implicit meaning is, in part, historical falsehoods that also function to downplay past injustices. In either case, the public can reasonably infer that the representations either endorse morally objectionable values or elide grave injustices. Moreover, as Archer and Matheson point out, when both attitudes of admiration and of contempt are fitting, the choice to express only attitudes of admiration may, in certain contexts, convey the message that the immoral behavior is condoned.⁴⁴ For example, when the Jackson and Lee Monument highlights their "gentlemanly" prosecution of the war while the aims for which they fought pass without comment, this conveys the message that their personal virtue is more important than the fact that had their efforts ultimately borne fruit, slavery might have existed in America well into the twentieth century. Similarly, Burch-Brown quite plausibly claims that publicly honoring those who committed injustices against people of African or indigenous descent "inferiorizes [them] by signaling that the deep injustices suffered by their ancestors are not important enough to the community to cause it to repudiate their actions publicly."⁴⁵ For members of historically or currently oppressed groups, these messages can undermine their assurance that society and government are committed to their basic rights and entitlements.

In addition, honorific representations can undermine dignity and the assurance of dignified treatment by cultivating admiration for their subjects, which makes it more difficult to prevent swaths of the public from seeing them as moral exemplars. Relevant here is the distinction between *all-things-considered* exemplars and *qualified* exemplars.⁴⁶ Qualified exemplars are fitting objects of admiration on account of *some*, but not the majority, of their traits or deeds, while all-things-considered exemplars are fitting objects of admiration for most of

44 Archer and Matheson, "When Artists Fall," 9–13.

45 Burch-Brown, "Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?" 70.

46 Cf. Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*.

their traits or deeds. Many of the subjects of honorific representations *are* qualified exemplars, and so are *fitting* objects of *qualified* admiration. But honorific representations themselves rarely do much to indicate the appropriate *limits* of our admiration for their subjects. In many cases, this lack of qualification is clearly deliberate. For example, in presenting the principal players of the Confederacy as morally unimpeachable characters, Southern whites morally laundered the war itself and the restoration of the antebellum racial status quo. As a result of this failure to explicitly delineate the proper bounds of admiration, it will likely overspill these bounds. The failure to explicitly qualify the scope of admiration compounds the natural spreading tendency of admiration highlighted by Archer and Matheson—the way in which admiration for one trait or action tends to influence our evaluations of other traits or actions.⁴⁷ In certain contexts, this may help cause the public to see these figures as all-things-considered rather than qualified exemplars, and thus to believe and feel incorrectly about these figures. In a cultural context such as the United States of 2020, in which the meanings of many historical figures and events are still hotly contested, these failures to provide context can help perpetuate degrading ideological narratives that are very much alive.

Yet it might be objected that so long as the prevalent cultural understandings of these representations undergo enlightened change, people will naturally come to acquire the proper attitudes toward their subjects despite public depictions of them as all-things-considered exemplars. It should be emphasized that there is no particular reason to think this will happen with respect to a host of problematic historical figures in the United States, such as Christopher Columbus, Woodrow Wilson, or Thomas Jefferson. Nevertheless, even when these cultural understandings begin to change, the existence of exemplarizing representations may hinder progress owing to the well-documented human aversion to moral ambivalence. Researchers in ambivalence studies distinguish between *attitudinal* ambivalence, which involves conflicting evaluations of an object, and *felt* ambivalence, the experience of being “torn” or having mixed emotions about an object.⁴⁸ They have consistently documented the following phenomena: (a) a substantial, if mediated, correlation between attitudinal ambivalence and felt ambivalence; (b) a strong aversion to felt ambivalence; and (c) because of (b), a

47 See Archer and Matheson, “When Artists Fall,” 14–16. For an account of a psychological mechanism possibly at work in this spreading tendency, see Gräf and Unkelbach, “Halo Effects in Trait Assessment Depend on Information Valence.”

48 See Newby-Clark, MacGregor, and Zanna, “Thinking and Caring about Cognitive Inconsistency.”

preference for evaluative consistency.⁴⁹ In addition, they have shown that those who experience felt ambivalence often seek to resolve the underlying attitudinal conflict by using biased information processing, such as the selective elaboration of one-sided information *consistent* with their initial attitude about the object or avoidance of information potentially *inconsistent* with their initial attitude about the object.⁵⁰ The upshot of this research is that people who have conflicting evaluations of an object tend to experience this conflict aversively and seek to resolve the conflict even at the expense of failing to meet their epistemic duties, such as the duty to gather evidence or think certain things through.⁵¹

One type of attitudinal ambivalence involves attitudes of opposing moral evaluation, such as admiration and contempt, toward the same person. One might wonder how such judgments are inconsistent, since there is a sense in which they have different objects. For example, Lee's insistence that he not be publicly memorialized after the war might be the object of someone's positive evaluation, while his actions in the service of a slave state might be the object of the same person's negative evaluation. While attitudinal ambivalence need not involve any *logical* inconsistency, it must involve conflicting assessments of the *same object*.⁵² The worry is valid as far as it goes, but whether or not evaluative attitudes have the same object is sometimes not easy to determine, since the conception of the object may be more or less fine-grained. For example, if the object is something as coarse-grained as "Woodrow Wilson's presidency," then someone's positive evaluation (say, because of his advocacy for the liberal democratic world order) and negative evaluation (say, for his promotion of racism) have the same object. Moreover, the move from local judgments about particu-

49 See Newby-Clark, MacGregor, and Zanna, "Thinking and Caring about Cognitive Inconsistency"; Nordgren, Van Harreveld, and Van der Pligt, "Ambivalence, Discomfort, and Motivated Information Processing"; Tesser and Conlee, "Some Effects of Time and Thought on Attitude Polarization"; Elliot and Devine, "On the Motivational Nature of Cognitive Dissonance"; Harmon-Jones, "Cognitive Dissonance and Experienced Negative Affect"; and Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*.

50 See Van Harreveld et al., "The Dynamics of Ambivalence"; Nordgren, Van Harreveld, and Van der Pligt, "Ambivalence, Discomfort, and Motivated Information Processing"; Newby-Clark, MacGregor, and Zanna, "Thinking and Caring about Cognitive Inconsistency"; and Erlich et al., "Postdecision Exposure to Relevant Information."

51 For an account of such duties, see Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility."

52 Indeed, psychologists distinguish attitudinal ambivalence and cognitive dissonance in terms of whether the attitudes involved are logically inconsistent. While dissonance is a feeling of aversion arising from logically inconsistent cognitions, attitudinal ambivalence is best understood as the possession of "positive" and "negative" attitudes toward the same object. See Brannon and Gawronski, "Cognitive Consistency in Social Cognition." Thanks to an anonymous referee at the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* for raising this worry.

lar traits and actions to the global assessment of the whole person seems almost unavoidable. Once we start considering whether a *person* is exemplary or contemptible *in virtue of* those traits or deeds that warrant attitudes of admiration or contempt, we are in the realm of global assessment, and these judgments all have the whole person as their object. So, we are likely to experience some ambivalence if we are exposed to information that tends to show that a person is both exemplary in certain respects and contemptible in others. Given our aversion to such inconsistency, we are likely to seek resolution of the conflict. And if our initial attitude is one of admiration, then, as the ambivalence studies suggest, we are likely to pursue resolution of the conflict through the selective elaboration of information that favors that initial attitude or the avoidance of information inconsistent with that attitude. This means that we will come to see the subjects of representations as all-things-considered exemplars, since we will actively resist both information and emotions inconsistent with this status. This is particularly likely to happen in cultural contexts in which a process of “working through” the injustices of the past is only in its nascent stages.⁵³ Thus, if some historical representation successfully helps to cultivate admiration for its subject, it will tend to make it harder for people to *subsequently* acquire important information about that figure or to feel the proper negative moral attitudes toward them.

This is surely a bad thing in its own right, but I propose that it can contribute to a broader elision or downplaying of ongoing, historically rooted injustices. As I have already noted, the case of Confederate monuments illustrates how honorific representations can be connected to, and promote, ideologies that mask unjust social arrangements. In the cases of Robert E. Lee and other Confederate figures, *part of* this ideology was the partial and misleading account of their characters, their actions, the ends for which they acted, and the unjust practices in which they were involved. If acknowledging such injustices requires acknowledging the roles of various historical figures in their genesis and perpetuation, then acceptance of the admiration expressed by these representations will make it difficult for the public to acknowledge the related injustices. This failure of acknowledgment can, for reasons already discussed, undermine the assurances of historically or currently oppressed groups that their dignity will be respected. Furthermore, if these representations tend to encourage people to see their subjects as all-things-considered exemplars, and given admiration’s natural spreading tendency, we have reason to worry that such representations will encourage the formation of positive, or at least forgiving, attitudes toward their morally objectionable traits and deeds. This could, in turn, *actually* undermine society’s commitment to the basic rights and constitutional entitlements of members of

53 See Schulz, “Must Rhodes Fall?” 177–83.

oppressed groups by making the public more receptive to degrading ideological narratives that play on their admiration for these historical figures.

To conclude, I would like to contrast my case against honorific representations with two other criticisms I mentioned at the opening of this section: that they can cause psychological harm and can undermine self-respect. Travis Timmerman argues that because public Confederate monuments cause “unavoidable suffering”—at least for those who know the racist history that the monuments make salient—there is a strong moral reason to remove them.⁵⁴ He compares the harm caused by making salient the racist history of the United States to the harms done to survivors of World War II by punk musicians who wore swastika armbands in the 1970s.⁵⁵ While I do not deny the existence of these harms, it seems to me that the kind of harm highlighted by my account—the erosion of the dignity of members of oppressed groups and of the assurances that their moral rights and civic entitlements will be recognized by society and government—may be more important to well-being than the kind of psychological distress that Timmerman makes the centerpiece of his argument. A survivor of World War II could feel psychologically distressed by swastika armbands without having her dignity undermined or losing confidence that her dignity will be recognized by society and government officials, and this seems preferable to the loss of dignity and confidence *without* this sort of psychological distress.⁵⁶

Johannes Schulz objects to honorific representations on the grounds that

54 Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2–3.

55 Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 4.

56 Since I find that the unavoidable harms of certain honorific representations provide a strong moral reason for their modification, but not necessarily their destruction, it may seem that my view denies a key premise of Timmerman’s argument: that if the existence of monument *M* unavoidably harms an undeserving group, then there is a strong moral reason to end the existence of *M* (“A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2). However, this disagreement is merely verbal. Timmerman claims that what I call strong *recontextualization* of a monument, such as placing it in a museum in its proper historical context, causes it to cease to be a monument. Timmerman’s quick argument is that monuments are “reverential in nature,” but if placed in their proper historical context, they may no longer express reverence (“A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 5). Notice that ordinary linguistic usage provides *prima facie* evidence against this claim: a museum may still refer to a statue as a “monument” even if the museum has properly contextualized it. Furthermore, if what makes a monument reverential are its implicit, intended, and public meanings, then recontextualization cannot alter the reverential *nature* of a monument but can only comment on it (see section 3 below). Thus, I would deny Timmerman’s premise on the semantic grounds that what is properly understood as *recontextualization* may be capable of preventing harm without destroying an honorific representation as such. However, we agree about the substantive point that the harms of honorific representations provide a strong moral reason either to recontextualize or remove them.

they can undermine people's self-respect.⁵⁷ This seems quite plausible, but it does not fully describe the nature of the harms they can cause.⁵⁸ As I have already mentioned, for Schulz self-respect is the sense that one is "a moral equal, with the same rights and duties that all other persons have"; crucially, it is a certain kind of perception of *self*, rather than of others.⁵⁹ This contrasts with the key concept in my account, *dignity*. As we have seen, dignity is a social status requiring not merely *possession* of rights and entitlements, but others' *recognition* of one's rights-bearing status. Accordingly, part of my case against honorific representations is that they can undermine this recognition: they can erode the commitment of members of society and government actors to the rights and entitlements of the disadvantaged. In this sense, my account focuses not on the *self-perception* of members of oppressed groups, but on the attitudes of *others* toward them. I have also argued that honorific representations not only undermine dignity, but the *confidence* of members of oppressed groups that they will be treated "with dignity." This line of argument, like Schulz's, focuses on the attitudes of members of oppressed groups; but whereas Schulz's account calls our attention to the effects on their *self-perceptions*, my account underscores their perceptions of *others*, and in particular their perceptions of society and government's commitment to their rights and entitlements. In short, my point is that honorific representations may affect not only how disadvantaged people view themselves but how others view them, in terms of recognizing their dignity; how they view others, in terms of their confidence of this recognition; and how these effects may impair their ability to operate in the social world. Finally, Schulz's emphasis on *equality* in his definition of self-respect leads him to argue that the failure of society to create conditions of self-respect can wrong not only the members of oppressed groups, but former and current oppressors. For example, he argues that statues of Confederate generals, while perhaps a source of *self-esteem* for neo-Confederates, are not a source of self-respect, since they prevent neo-Confederates from seeing themselves as *equals* in the moral community.⁶⁰ Similarly, Burch-Brown focuses on honorific infrastructure's effect on the self-perceptions of both the marginalizers and the marginalized: "Living in cities

57 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 172.

58 Schulz plausibly argues that the duty to provide the conditions of self-respect may entail a duty *not only* to remove or recontextualize existing honorific representations, but to *add* new representations aimed at promoting self-respect ("Must Rhodes Fall?" 174–76). While this point goes beyond the scope of this paper, the importance of promoting the public good of assurance described by Waldron provides additional support for this positive duty.

59 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 172–76.

60 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 173–74.

with innumerable landmarks named after people who kept enslaved laborers has the effect of leading people to internalize racially hierarchical social images.”⁶¹ By contrast, since my account concerns honorific representations’ effects on the dignity and assurances of members of oppressed groups, I do not claim that they have similar negative effects on members of socially dominant groups.⁶²

I have argued that honorific representations are morally objectionable because they undermine historically or currently oppressed group members’ dignity and assurances of respect for their rights. Along with the harms identified by Schulz, Timmerman, and Burch-Brown—psychological distress, degradation, and harms to self-respect—these reasons seem to provide very strong moral support for not leaving such representations unmodified. Thus, there is a strong presumption in favor of modifying an honorific representation if (a) the subject of the representation endorsed the subordination of groups that are presently or were recently subject to oppression, discrimination, or systematic disadvantage; (b) the subject committed acts that contributed to or helped constitute the past or present oppression of such groups; or (c) the representation conveys a degrading ideology. However, I have not argued that singly or taken together, these reasons always ground an all-things-considered duty to modify these representations. Moreover, even when the *presumption* in favor of modification grounds an all-things-considered duty to modify, we can modify a representation in at least two ways: by removing an honorific representation from public view, or by recontextualizing it in some way. In the next section, I discuss the considerations that ought to guide deliberation about these options.

3. RECONTEXTUALIZATION OR REMOVAL: A BALANCING TEST

I have argued that honorific representations can be morally objectionable for a host of reasons, creating a strong presumption in favor of their modification. But modification can take at least two forms: making them inaccessible to the public, or recontextualizing them. I argue in this section that whether we ought to opt for one or the other option is a function of at least ten moral and pragmatic factors. I develop an account of how these factors ought to be weighed, and I defend this “balancing” approach against a number of objections.

61 Burch-Brown, “Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?” 70.

62 All of that said, I do not deny that the notions of moral equality and rights are deeply connected. James Griffin argues that equal respect is “a value the content of which is itself best expressed in terms of” rights (*Well-Being*, 234). It follows from this that a plausible substantive theory of moral rights will assign the same rights, and rights of the same strength, to most human beings (with some exceptions at the margins). Cf. Griffin, *Well-Being*, ch. 11.

First, let me say a bit more about how I define the two options. “Removing a representation from public view” means making it inaccessible to the public, and it is “inaccessible” if it is either destroyed or turned over to the care of private individuals who do not hold it open for members of the public to view *as* members of the public. If an honorific representation is in a private collection that is not intended by its owner to be viewed by the public *as* members of the public—as opposed to, say, *as* friends—then it is inaccessible to the public in my sense. But if it is in a private museum, then it is accessible to the public whether or not the museum charges admission.

“Recontextualization” refers to the act of *commenting upon* a semantic object by changing its context. Such commentary interacts with the meanings of the object in two primary ways: foregrounding and generating. To *foreground* a meaning is to *take note* of one of the object’s meanings with the aim of making that meaning another person’s *primary interpretation* of the object. To *generate* a meaning is to produce an interpretation of the object that was not heretofore part of its public meaning. It seems clear that recontextualization can only directly influence public meaning, since intended and implicit meanings are determined by the attitudes of the representations’ creators. However, we have also seen that public meaning can be influenced in various ways by intended and implicit meanings. The latter, then, are some of the contextual factors that contribute to public meaning, and recontextualization can alter the quality and degree of their contribution to public meaning. Another contextual factor that helps determine public meaning is what I will call *semantic* context, the set of semantic entities that is presented or juxtaposed with the original object. These semantic entities can be texts, but they can also be other representations or symbols. A third contextual factor is *institutional* context. This refers to the institutional setting of a semantic object, where an “institution” is a complex of positions, roles, norms, and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity.⁶³ Unlike in the case of intended and implicit meaning, recontextualization can directly alter the semantic and institutional contexts of honorific representations.⁶⁴

Hence, recontextualization can be targeted at different contextual factors, including implicit and intended meaning, semantic context, and institutional context. In general, we can say that some act of recontextualization will vary in “strength” with the number of contextual factors it targets and the degree to which it alters them. A form of recontextualization could slightly alter only the

63 For a defense of this definition, see Turner, *The Institutional Order*, 6.

64 The question of the *degree* of public access to institutions is among the factors relevant to determining the kind of recontextualization that ought to be adopted.

representation's semantic context with the addition of some text. For example, in 2018 the Bristol City Council proposed adding a plaque to the Colston statue describing Colston's role in the Atlantic slave trade.⁶⁵ This act of recontextualization would foreground a certain public interpretation of the monument according to which it symbolizes both the role of the slave trade in Bristol's history and the obscuring of that role by means of honorific representations like the statue itself. A stronger form of recontextualization can aim at deeper alterations of the representation's semantic context, including the use of multiple types of semantic objects. For example, in Pretoria, South Africa, there is an equestrian statue of South Africa's first prime minister, Louis Botha, that is now paired with a monumental statue of Nelson Mandela, erected in 2013.⁶⁶ To the extent that the two statues are intended to semantically interact, this act of recontextualization seems to be a form of foregrounding aimed at making a certain interpretation of the original object salient.

Often, the classic form of recontextualization through alteration of institutional context—removal of the representation to a museum—also involves alteration of semantic context and making explicit the implicit and intended meanings of the representation. The Jefferson Davis statue that the University of Texas at Austin removed from its campus in 2015 is now housed in the university's Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, where a permanent exhibit tells the story of how the statue came to be and why it was eventually removed.⁶⁷ The curator of the exhibit stated that the presence of the statue in an educational exhibit, as opposed to a place of honor, underlines that Davis's ideas and actions are no longer commemorated by the university. This example clearly shows how recontextualization can perform multiple functions: both *commenting* on the meaning of the object by *foregrounding* its intended and implicit meanings, and discursively *generating* moral distance between the object's implicit or intended values and those of the institution. Indeed, the general ethical aims of recontextualization are the generation of this moral distance between society and government, on the one hand, and the representation's objectionable meanings on the other; and the *obstruction* of the representation's tendency to promote all-things-considered admiration for its subject. Hence, strategies of recontextualization must be morally evaluated principally on the basis of how well they achieve these aims.

There are at least ten factors that must be considered when deliberating about

65 See BBC News, "Bristol Slave Trader Edward Colston Proposed Plaque 'Not Impartial.'"

66 This example comes from Demetriou and Wingo, "The Ethics of Racist Monuments," 350.

67 See Crowe, "What Happened When One University Moved a Confederate Statue to a Museum."

whether a particular honorific representation morally ought to be recontextualized or removed, as well as the form such recontextualization should take. These are: (1) whether or not the representation expresses a degrading ideology; (2) the degree to which the representation tends to undermine the dignity of members of oppressed groups; (3) the degree to which the representation tends to undermine their assurances that society and government are committed to the groups' moral rights and constitutional entitlements; (4) the degree to which the representation tends to undermine the *self-respect* of members of oppressed groups; (5) the degree to which the representation supports the dignity of members of oppressed groups; (6) the degree to which the representation *provides* the same kinds of assurances referenced in (3); (7) the degree to which the representation tends to *promote* the self-respect of members of oppressed groups; (8) the extent to which people care, for weighty and morally unobjectionable reasons, about the representation itself or its subject(s); (9) any other morally relevant consequences that might plausibly result from either recontextualization or removal; and (10) the practical feasibility of recontextualization. Of the consequences referenced under criterion 9, I include the psychological distress highlighted by Timmerman, and I would like to examine three in particular: first, the pedagogical benefits that may accrue from proper recontextualization; second, the likelihood that removal will lead to productive or unproductive political or social tension; and third, the contributions that a representation makes to public commitment to important moral values. I will discuss these points in turn. First, I will make a few remarks about how these criteria ought to be used.

With respect to the decision about whether to recontextualize or remove, the criterion of practical feasibility (criterion 10) controls the weighting of the other criteria. There will be any number of cases in which recontextualization is not practically feasible: recontextualization is relatively resource intensive, especially when it involves alteration of institutional context; many public representations have little artistic or art-historical value; and there is little historical reason for a museum to acquire multiple examples of the same type of representation—for example, a hundred Robert E. Lee statues. Nevertheless, if a particular representation can be properly recontextualized within practical constraints, then my proposal is as follows. Since criteria 1–8 are grounded in the fundamental civic values of justice and respect, they are at least much weightier than the sorts of consequences referenced under criterion 9. Indeed, some might claim that the sorts of considerations underlying the former criteria trump or exclude considerations of overall benefit or harm.⁶⁸ I will not commit to this stronger position,

68 For the notion of “exclusionary norms,” see Raz, *Practical Reasons and Norms*, 39–40, 73–84, 90–97.

but I will propose that criteria 1–8 are weighted such that only *very substantial* negative or positive consequences (criterion 9) can affect the verdict issuing from consideration of the former criteria. Next, 1–7 should be given roughly equal weight, while less weight should be assigned to 8. The reason for this is that the positive duty to respect others' cares and concerns seems to be less morally weighty than the duty *not* to undermine their self-respect, dignity, or assurances of respect for their rights and constitutional entitlements. In general, and setting aside 8 and 9, if the negative effects referenced in 1–4 significantly exceed the positive referenced in 5–7, then strong forms of recontextualization or removal are morally mandatory. If the reverse is true, then generally speaking moderate recontextualization is morally mandatory. Again, this weighting is for when the particular representation can be feasibly recontextualized. If it cannot, then the case against leaving public representations unmodified will tend to decisively support removal from public view. That is to say, if a representation cannot be feasibly recontextualized, thus “failing” criterion 10, then this means that criteria 1–4 will usually have decisive priority over criteria 5–9: barring extraordinary circumstances, the representation *must be removed* if it tends to undermine the dignity, self-respect, and assurance of respect of members of oppressed groups.

This system is only proposed as a rough set of guidelines for deliberation. Moreover, my balancing test is intended as a guide to determining the moral rightness of removing or recontextualizing a given honorific representation, but it does not take into account that determining what to do with honorific representations is often a *political* exercise, and thus subject to various additional moral requirements on the *procedures* of democratic decision-making. In this respect, I have nothing to add to Schulz's plausible remark that such decision-making must “actively include the voices and perspectives of those who constitute a marginalized group.”⁶⁹ In addition, it seems desirable that such public procedures be informed by historically grounded interpretations of the representation's intended and implicit meanings. Finally, it may be *presumptively* desirable that public actions proceed legally and in ways calculated to maximize their perceived legitimacy, but I am not convinced that this is always all-things-considered required.⁷⁰

I have already argued that there is a presumptive moral case against leaving a representation unaltered to the extent that it tends to undermine the dignity of members of oppressed groups and their assurances that society and government are committed to their rights and entitlements. Schulz adds that representations can undermine self-respect. But these tendencies are not all or nothing: they

69 Schulz, “Must Rhodes Fall?” 174.

70 Cf. Demetriou and Wingo, “The Ethics of Racist Monuments,” 349.

come in degrees, and there is clearly no easy way to measure them. It is clear, for example, that many African Americans object strongly to Confederate monuments; this much can be gleaned from popular culture, journalism, political activism, and the behavior of politicians and other leaders who represent significant African American constituencies. Referenda, public forums, polls, and the like might also be used to get a more accurate picture of the attitudes of members of oppressed groups. One important point is that these attitudes can change over time, particularly as information about the subjects of honorific representations becomes more widely known. In turn, this ought to prompt a reassessment of the appropriateness of the representation's existence in public space.

Complicating matters further, the *same* honorific representation may *promote* dignity and self-respect or *provide* assurances to one oppressed group that society and government will respect their rights while *undermining* the dignity, self-respect, or assurances of another group. Consider a statue of the feminist Margaret Sanger to which disabled rights activists object on the grounds that she endorsed wrongful eugenic practices, but which is viewed by many women as a public affirmation of their rights. These countervailing tendencies must be weighed in our deliberation about what to do with such representations. If possible, it may be morally preferable to *replace* an objectionable statue that has these countervailing tendencies with one that is less objectionable but equally affirming; for example, a statue of Margaret Sanger might be replaced with a statue of a non-eugenicist feminist.⁷¹

In the South, calls to remove Confederate monuments from the public space have provoked fierce opposition from large segments of the public, who perceive these demands as an implicit rejection of a morally unobjectionable Southern heritage and culture.⁷² Whether or not this is true in the case of Confederate monuments, there is a more general point to be made.⁷³ That the fate of these honorific representations can become entangled with people's sense of self, history, and place raises an important ethical concern about destroying them. We have a duty to respect every person, and this plausibly entails that we have a duty not to express disrespect for the objects they care about provided that their reasons for caring about them are not themselves morally objectionable. Therefore, to the extent that people care about honorific representations because of their

71 Thanks to a reviewer at the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* for alerting me to this point.

72 For an argument that the notion of "Southern honor" can be disentangled from racial oppression and racism in this way, see Schedler, "Are Confederate Monuments Racist?"

73 For another discussion of this point, see Burch-Brown, "Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?" 84–85.

connection to their history, identity, and (non-objectionable) values, we have reason to treat these representations as objects worthy of care. Minimally, treating an object as worthy of care requires refraining from destroying it or making it inaccessible to those who care about it. Therefore, we have a duty not to wholly remove these objects from public view. This defeasible duty constitutes the eighth factor in our balancing test. As I already mentioned, since this is a merely *pro tanto* duty of respect, it may be outweighed by the wrongs or injustices that recontextualization or removal are aimed at correcting. As Burch-Brown writes,

in cases where there are deep and legitimate (i.e. not inherently unjust) attachments to the cultural objects in question, it is important to ask searchingly whether the injustice in question can be redressed in ways that protect and affirm the legitimate parts of people's positive attachments and identities. . . . The political risks involved, the expenditure of energy, and the costs to others (for instance, the cultural losses or threats to personal identity and so on) should be proportional to the injustice that is correctable through the measures proposed.⁷⁴

Another argument sometimes made in favor of leaving honorific representations unmodified is that removal of these monuments amounts to "erasing history."⁷⁵ This argument can be cashed out in a number of ways. One version says that honorific representations educate the public about important individuals and events in the community's past, so removing them contributes to the public's historical ignorance.⁷⁶ However, cases such as the Heyward Shepherd Memorial, which grossly distorts the historical record, suggest that many of these representations are more likely to mislead the public than to educate it. This is a natural consequence of the fact that the primary function of these representations is to express and cultivate admiration, rather than to educate. Nevertheless, these representations may have significant pedagogical value *if properly recontextualized*: the distortions, elisions, and implicit evaluative claims that proper recontextualization can reveal help teach us about the political, economic, social, and moral struggles that continue to roil society, while at the same time bringing to the public's awareness the varied experiences of diverse historical actors. This is particularly important if, as some philosophers claim, society has a collective responsibility to preserve the memory of past atrocities to reduce the likelihood

74 Burch-Brown, "Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?" 85.

75 This argument is also addressed by Timmerman, "A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments"; Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?"; and Burch-Brown, "Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?"

76 Cf. Demetriou and Wingo, "The Ethics of Racist Monuments," 348.

of their repetition and to help promote relations of respect in the present.⁷⁷ The pedagogical argument, then, actually favors recontextualizing honorific representations for the purpose of preserving the historical record—in particular, the record of society’s failures to uphold the dignity of some of its members. Crucially, this pedagogical value would be lost if we opted to make the representations inaccessible to the public. Hence, the pedagogical value of honorific representations primarily weighs in favor of some kind of recontextualization and against *either* leaving them unmodified or removing them from public view.

Partly because honorific representations can become bound up with people’s sense of identity, history, and culture, and partly because they embody values and ideals with which at least a portion of the population strongly identifies at any given time, campaigns for their removal or strong forms of recontextualization can be politically polarizing. For example, in response to moves by Memphis officials to remove statues of Nathan Bedford Forrest and Jefferson Davis from public parks, Tennessee passed legislation in 2018 that would allow any group or individual with an interest in a memorial to seek an injunction against the public entity involved in the memorial’s removal.⁷⁸ More dramatically, and as noted previously, the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville that ultimately led to deadly rioting was organized specifically to protest the proposed removal of a Robert E. Lee statue.⁷⁹ That political or social tension is a likely outcome of efforts to reshape the public space is itself a fact of ethical significance, since it may lead to an intensification of social tensions and ultimately serve to perpetuate the very kinds of ongoing historical injustice that campaigners wish to combat.

Burch-Brown argues that the fact that social tensions are likely to result from removal campaigns does not necessarily weigh against them:

This is because, as Frederick Douglass and many others have observed, power never gives up power willingly. Shifts in power will only take place when the discomfort of maintaining the status quo becomes greater than its benefits. Indeed, the purpose of the 1960s direct action campaigns was to generate enough social tension as to open the door to negotiation.⁸⁰

77 For a discussion of the nature, justification, and orientation of such responsibility, see Radzik, “Historical Memory as Forward- and Backward-Looking Collective Responsibility”; see also Adorno, “The Meaning of Working through the Past.”

78 See Ebert, “Legislation in Response to Memphis’s Confederate Statue Removal Signed by Gov. Haslam.”

79 See Morlin, “Bickering Galore Precedes ‘Unite the Right’ Rally.”

80 Burch-Brown, “Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?” 83.

Burch-Brown's point is that by challenging the social practices and meanings connected to monuments and other symbols that undergird unjust social arrangements, campaigns for their removal can generate social tension, which can in turn be productive of progressive social change under the right circumstances. Similarly, Johannes Schulz argues that campaigns for removal may be particularly effective when a wider social process of working through the unjust past to which the honorific representation is connected does not yet exist.⁸¹ Schulz writes, for example, that in the context of South Africa's post-apartheid "amnesia" concerning that system's lingering effects, the campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes from the University of Cape Town's campus "triggered one of the most vivid and visible debates about its own past that South Africa has engaged in since the apartheid regime fell."⁸² I agree with Burch-Brown and Schulz that the raising of social tension that may attend removal or strong recontextualization campaigns is not invariably a mark against them. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish here between the ethics of campaigning for removal and the ethics of removal. Schulz may be right that publicly campaigning for removal can sometimes trigger politically productive discussion, since it means pushing our unjust past out into the "open arena of the public sphere, where [it] become[s] a matter of public debate and political struggle."⁸³ It does not follow from this that the *actual* removal of a representation is the most politically productive outcome.

Whether or not strong recontextualization or removal are likely to lead to productive or unproductive tension is clearly an empirical question, and writers on this topic seem not to agree on what the available evidence tells us. For example, Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo object to the removal of racist monuments primarily on the grounds that it will lead to politically unproductive tension, undermining what they call "civic sustainability":

Efforts to cleanse the landscape of racist monuments are unacceptably damaging to civic cohesion and ultimately frustrate antiracist goals. Widespread removalism will tend to "resurrect" forgotten monuments, confirm the suspicions of white separatists and nationalists [e.g., that they are being culturally "replaced" by non-whites], and lend credence to [some radical removalists'] belief that the national identity of these lands is inextricably based on white hegemony.⁸⁴

81 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 177–83.

82 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 183.

83 Schulz, "Must Rhodes Fall?" 179.

84 Demetriou and Wingo, "The Ethics of Racist Monuments," 352.

In addition to these worries, recall the Margaret Sanger example discussed earlier. If removal violates a defeasible duty of respect, and if many people care about the Sanger statue for non-objectionable reasons, then the removal of the statue may be unlikely to win the kind of broad-based support of those whose votes must be won in order to bring about change in the existing legal and political order. Hence, it is difficult to see how this instance of removal could contribute to the broader amelioration of social injustices. Along with Demetriou and Wingo, I believe removal will often be unhelpful in furthering larger political and social goals. But two points need to be emphasized. First, even Demetriou and Wingo do not support leaving racist monuments unmodified; instead, they seem to favor moderate recontextualization that leaves these monuments *in situ*.⁸⁵ Second, I break with them by insisting that considerations of justice and respect are *not* on a moral par with “civic sustainability.”⁸⁶ Cleansing our public spaces of representations that degrade or undermine dignity, self-respect, and assurances of respect for rights might be worth the cost of some short-to-medium-term damage to civic cohesion. That does not mean that *any* degree of the former kind of disvalue can outweigh even the most extreme threats to the latter value; but the claim that we should tolerate monuments that to some degree strike at the heart of innocent people’s self-respect, dignity, and assurance of rights because removal might validate white supremacist narratives seems like a moral miscalculation. Moreover, when the public landscape is littered with such representations, it is likely that civic cohesion is *already* relatively weak. This is why Demetriou and Wingo’s analogy of an interracial couple decorating their home misses the mark.⁸⁷ A person might tolerate her partner’s hanging a picture of a racist ancestor for the sake of domestic tranquility, but that is *because* the couple already enjoys a relationship of trust and respect, a sort of well-ordered society in microcosm. The citizens of a flawed democracy such as the United States are in a very different position, still unsure of other citizens’ basic commitment to their rights and constitutional entitlements. In this far-from-ideal political order, members of oppressed groups are not necessarily obliged to tolerate others’ veneration for racist figures in the name of their “heritage.”

A final consideration for our balancing test is an honorific representation’s contribution to the public’s commitment to important moral values. Consider the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, which features a bronze statue of Thomas Jefferson along with a number of passages from Jefferson’s letters and the Declaration of Independence. These passages emphasize his commitment to

85 Demetriou and Wingo, “The Ethics of Racist Monuments,” 350–52.

86 Demetriou and Wingo, “The Ethics of Racist Monuments,” 349.

87 Demetriou and Wingo, “The Ethics of Racist Monuments,” 351–52.

equality, freedom from tyranny, and freedom of religion, as well as his opposition to slavery. This last quotation comes from a 1786 letter to George Washington that reads: “Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than these people are to be free.” However—and this part is left off of the monument—Jefferson continued, “nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government.” Jefferson’s treatment of Sally Hemings is now well known, as is the fact that he owned slaves and did not free many of them during his lifetime. Nonetheless, one will not find any reference to Jefferson’s ownership and treatment of slaves or his views about African Americans on the National Park Service’s web page for the monument.⁸⁸ In encouraging *unqualified admiration* for a person who, indeed, did support a white supremacist ideology, and by eliding his involvement in the subordination of African Americans, the monument makes it more difficult for citizens to recognize the ways in which white supremacy was conjoined to the American project. And that could undermine African Americans’ assurance that government and society are committed to their basic rights and undermine their dignity. Hence, this representation meets my presumptive standard for modification. However, many people see Jefferson as a symbol of the highest American ideals of freedom, equality, and democracy, and the Jefferson Memorial clearly presents him as the philosophical wellspring from which America’s articulation of and commitment to these ideals flowed. Martha Nussbaum has argued for the indispensable importance of powerful and positive emotions, and particularly love, in cementing citizens’ attachments to moral and political ideals.⁸⁹ It is conceivable that by eliciting powerful emotional responses, monumental representations of figures like Jefferson can help foster such attachments. And this may, in turn, constitute a reason *not* to remove such representations from public view.

There are, then, many factors to weigh when deciding what is to be done with a given honorific representation. This conclusion is more cautious than some other philosophers’ claims. For example, Joanna Burch-Brown’s inference from the claim that it is inappropriate to honor and esteem people who have carried out grave injustices to the conclusion that statues of those people should be removed—in the sense of “removal” meaning “not left *in situ*”—suggests that she intends “inappropriate” as an all-things-considered prohibition.⁹⁰ But given the many factors that may weigh in favor of recontextualization *in situ*, it seems plausible that sometimes the moral reasons not to honor and esteem the subject of an honorific representation *do not* all things considered require removal, even

88 See National Park Service, “Thomas Jefferson.”

89 Nussbaum, *Political Emotions*.

90 Burch-Brown, “Is It Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?” 68.

if not removing the representation means retaining some of its honorific function. For example, even if the subject of an honorific representation committed a grave injustice, it is possible that this representation does not *currently* cause much harm, and it is also possible that the moral good the subject did counterbalances the evil. It is even conceivable, though exceedingly unlikely, that we ought all things considered to leave the statue unmodified.⁹¹

To illustrate this point, and how my balancing test might be implemented in a particular case, let us consider the Jefferson Memorial in light of all the factors highlighted above. This exercise will also help explain *why* the Jefferson Memorial seems like a “hard case.” As mentioned, the memorial easily meets my presumptive case for modification. However, unlike Confederate monuments, the Jefferson monument may not *express* a degrading ideology, and it may be the case that it undermines African Americans’ self-respect, dignity, and assurance of respect for their rights to a lesser degree. In addition, there are clear pedagogical benefits of proper recontextualization, there is the potential to inculcate positive emotional support for important moral values, and there is a high likelihood that removal will lead to politically or socially unproductive tension. That is at least partly because Jefferson himself is a morally mixed character. His ringing denunciations of slavery, for example in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, were morally compromised by his personal behavior, failure to take more practical steps toward the elimination of slavery, and racist views. In the *Notes*, he echoed the common view that Blacks possessed qualities that make human beings worthy of “esteem-respect” to a much lesser degree than whites.⁹² Yet he denied that this undermined their basic moral equality.⁹³ Ambivalence, rather than unalloyed condemnation, might be the proper response to him.⁹⁴ Thus, it seems to me that at this time, the morally right course of action is to recontextualize the monument to a moderate degree. An effective solution might be to add a substantial piece of public art adjacent to or within the monument that

91 I am thinking here of a standard evil demon case; e.g., an evil demon threatens to kill every African American unless a Lee statue remains unmodified.

92 By “esteem-respect” I mean what Darwall calls “appraisal respect”: an attitude of positive appraisal for a person’s achievements or traits. See Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” 36–49.

93 The historiography on Jefferson’s views about slavery and race is enormous. For three strikingly divergent views, see Magnis, “Thomas Jefferson and Slavery”; Dawidoff, “The Jeffersonian Option”; and Holowchak, *Framing a Legend*.

94 This point once again raises the issue of our aversion to ambivalence. If the ambivalence research is correct, then the public will likely not *enjoy* an ambivalent Jefferson Memorial as much as the current unqualifiedly admiring version. Nevertheless, this loss of satisfaction is morally preferable to allowing the monument *itself* to contribute to unqualified admiration for a morally ambivalent figure.

acknowledges Jefferson's contradictions, along with descriptions of these problematic aspects on the National Park Service's website.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have considered whether we ought to leave honorific representations unmodified, remove them from public view, or recontextualize them in various ways. I argued that in many cases honorific representations should not be left unmodified in the public space because they can undermine oppressed group members' dignity and assurance of respect for their rights and civic entitlements. I argued that a balancing test is the appropriate way to think about whether a particular representation ought to be removed or recontextualized. As we have seen, the term "recontextualization" captures a wide variety of strategies of differing "strength" aimed at commenting on a representation by changing its context. I doubt that a single strategy is appropriate for all cases. Nevertheless, in what follows I want to suggest reasons why strategies of minimal recontextualization may be an insufficient remedy for the problems I have described.

One problem with recontextualization strategies involving only small changes in semantic context, such as the addition of signage, is that they will not necessarily prevent people intent on rallying the forces of hatred and bigotry from using these representations as focal points for their demonstrations. I have argued that such demonstrations serve to undermine the dignity of members of oppressed groups and deprive them of the assurance that others will recognize their rights. In addition, there is at least a potential that such strategies will merely convey to the public a sense of moral ambivalence rather than solid condemnation. The juxtaposition of a clearly exemplarizing honorific representation with signage that emphasizes the morally problematic aspects of the subject's traits, deeds, and beliefs may prompt members of the public to infer that society and government are evenly divided between admiration and condemnation of the figure, or that society and government consider both attitudes of admiration and contempt equally legitimate.⁹⁵ Sometimes, as in the case of the Jefferson Memorial, ambivalence might be the all-things-considered appropriate response to the subject, and might be the response we should encourage the public to experience when considering him or her. In other cases, such as some Confederate monuments, we probably ought to encourage a more negative overall response.

These considerations suggest that in many cases, alteration of honorific representations' institutional contexts will be required. Of course, such moves do

95 For a discussion of "dual heritage" strategies in the American South, see Upton, *What Can and Can't Be Said*; and Labode, "Reconsideration of Memorials and Monuments."

not guarantee the amelioration of their morally problematic effects. As Janeen Bryant et al. note, “statues remain powerful—and physically imposing—visual forms that will keep speaking even when they are in new settings. They can and certainly will shape social experiences in ways that [museum] curators may not be able to anticipate.”⁹⁶ The broader point is we ought to be cautious about educational institutions’ ability or willingness to address the disturbing meanings of these representations; “just put it in a museum” is not a strategy. Nevertheless, these legitimate worries should not deter museums and other educational institutions from taking up the challenge. As I have argued, sometimes much rides on their success.

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- 96 Janeen Bryant et al., “Are Museums the Right Home for Confederate Monuments?” Illustrative of this problem is the newly opened American Civil War Museum’s handling of a twelve-by-eight-foot painting depicting Lee and Jackson, one of the largest items in the museum’s collection. The museum displays the painting alongside the text of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments; and on the wall immediately facing the painting is a large, colorized photograph of African American legislators dating to the Reconstruction period. See Connelly, Ayers, and Freeman, “The Civil War in the 21st Century.”

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