Who and what should we remember? Public commemoration as a site of justice

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Abstract

Public commemoration is different from other goods that a state distributes or activities that states undertake, as it is a *practice of memory*, that involves *ritualization*, which focuses on *emotional connection and identity formation* rather than strict historical accuracy. It is among other things a way of enacting an emotionally resonant narrative about who 'we' are, by selecting and making special a particular interpretation of the persons or events commemorated. While public commemoration often functions to strengthen bonds of affiliation between individual citizens or between citizens and the state, it can also be a powerful source of alienation or shame, where what is selected for commemoration (and the stories told about it) reinforces a narrow, false or divisive conception of who 'we' are. As a result of these factors, public commemoration raises questions of justice that are both significant and distinctive. This paper provides an orientation for conceptualising such questions.

Introduction

This paper addresses one of the most difficult and politically contentious questions about memory and forgetting: which individuals, events and social movements should receive the spotlight of public commemoration through events such as dedicated national memorial days. I argue that we should frame public commemorative events as a matter of justice in political philosophy, in addition to how it's more often discussed in memory studies, and in ritual studies.

While enormous amounts have been written about justice in Anglo-American philosophy, public commemoration has until very recently been largely absent from these debates. There has been a small wave of very recent papers examining questions about the removal or defacement of statues, following the Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter protests.[1] However, this literature has focused on monuments, rather than, as I do, on commemorative events, and has also tended to sideline the ritual and symbolic dimensions to commemoration.

Commemorative events involve one or more individuals doing something deliberate, and at least partially ritualised, to bring to mind something (often an event or person) in an emotionally salient way. Commemoration occurs at different scales and with different expectations of publicity. Some acts of commemoration are undertaken by individuals in private: for example, a ceremony that two siblings undertake at the graveside each year to honour their father on the day of his death. Others occur on a somewhat larger scale and with greater expectations of publicity, but still fall short of

[1] This literature includes Burch-Brown (2017); Frowe (2019); Lim (2020); and Lim and Lai (2024).

being fully public activities that are undertaken by a political community, and which all citizens are expected to endorse or to participate in. Such semi-public activities would include, for example, a memorial service for a school headteacher. Finally, there are events of commemoration that are performed by or on behalf of state institutions *as* public acts. Prominent examples would include Independence Day celebrations, Remembrance Day services, or the National Famine Commemoration in the Republic of Ireland. It is public commemoration events that I focus on.[2]

It is rarely the case that we can fruitfully apply an existing theory or approach to justice to a new domain in cookie-cutter fashion. Rather, philosophers wishing to say something enlightening about justice in a particular domain need to start by attending to the features that are unusual or sui generis within that particular domain (Wilson 2023). As I'll shortly explain, public commemoration events are different from other activities that states undertake, as they are a *practice of memory*, that involves *ritualization*, and which focuses on *emotional connection and identity formation*. It is, among other things, a way of enacting an emotionally resonant narrative about who 'we' are, by selecting and making special a particular interpretation of the persons or events commemorated. While public commemoration often functions to strengthen bonds of affiliation between individual citizens or between citizens and the state, it can also be a powerful source of alienation or shame, where what is selected for commemoration (and the stories told about it) reinforces a narrow, false or divisive conception of who 'we' are. Public commemoration thus raises significant questions of justice both because it often plays a significant role in cementing what Iris Marion Young (1990) called five faces of oppression, and because public commemoration is in any case a scarce and important commodity, which needs to be distributed fairly.

My hope is that my approach to these questions may provide a way of reconceptualising some elements of culture wars that have otherwise become toxic and unfruitful. It is a commonplace that we need justice as a good *because of* conflict and scarcity, and that framing something as a problem of justice is often the first fruitful step to fairly reconciling or managing conflicting interests. Recognising public commemoration as a site of justice among stakeholders who are each others' moral equals, but have deep differences in how they understand who, what and how events and people should be publicly commemorated, may allow us to seek creative ways forward: no longer as a matter of avoiding 'losing' or caving in, but of finding a way of reaffirming shared values in a more inclusive way.

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[2] Commemoration activities can also shift along this continuum, either becoming fully public when they were previously private or semi-public, or becoming semi-public or private when they were previously public. Thus, in the UK, Anti-Slavery Day is now publicly commemorated on 18th October, but this was only a semi-public commemoration until the Anti-Slavery Day Act 2010 put it onto the statute book. The Observance of the 5th November Act 1605 required that all should attend church on the appointed day, and be read the text of the Act, to express communal gratitude that the Gunpowder Plot had been foiled. While it later fell into disuse and was finally repealed in 1859, November 5th remains a semi-public commemoration. Local authorities and communities organise bonfires and fireworks displays to commemorate it, but the anti-Catholic intent of the original commemoration has been largely forgotten (Frost and Laing 2013, 27–28).

Just distributions or solutions nearly always lead to some claims being prioritised over others, and hence to some perceived 'winners' and 'losers'. Nonetheless, if a procedure instantiates *justice* (rather than for example the workings of arbitrary power), it is able to provide a kind of second-order reassurance even to those whose claims are not met. This is because everyone will be in a position to see that not all claims that have some merit could be met, and some of those making claims needed to be disappointed. In such cases, someone may still be angry at the result, but it is not reasonable to be angry at the mere fact that *their* claims have not been met, given that not all claims could be met.

In the rest of this paper, I aim to make some tentative moves that will allow us to get a better sense of what a theory of justice for public commemoration would look like. As it's a broad and somewhat philosophically unexplored topic, what I will say will inevitably be programmatic, aiming to provide an orientation with which to understand what is at stake in the questions, and how to go about weighing them, rather than to provide a complete theory that could be used to answer questions as specific as what should be on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, or how we should resolve disputes about Parades in Northern Ireland.

Commemoration as a ritualized practice of memory

Individual memories—whether of lived experience, others' testimony, or learned facts—are notoriously fragile and subject to change over time. Awareness of the malleability and the fragility of memories has generated various *practices of memory*—techniques by which people aim to preserve intact the contents of memories (or at least what they take to be important about them). At an individual level, these include to-do lists, diaries and photo albums, and at an institutional level, meeting minutes and national archives.[3]

Commemoration is distinctive among memory practices in that it makes events emotionally salient through ritualisation. Whether an activity counts as commemoration is determined not by the nature of the events remembered, but how they are kept in mind. Memorising a list of concentration camps and the numbers killed in each for a history test would not count; attending a Holocaust memorial ceremony would. Commemoration converts past events into something that presents itself as the collective episodic memory of a group. In so doing it 'provides people with autobiographical narratives of their purportedly shared past as a group and induces them to feel and accept such narratives as authentic' (Saito 2018, 649).

This view of commemoration's identity-constituting role fits within the broader understanding of nations as what Benedict Anderson called 'imagined communities'—groups whose members 'will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson 2006, 6). As Anderson, and later Charles Taylor (2004) have argued, shared

[3] See Yates (1966) for a classic account of the art of memory; Foer (2012) provides an entertaining popular science account.

practices, stories, symbols, and rituals don't merely reflect pre-existing national identities but actively constitute them, making possible the forms of solidarity and mutual obligation characteristic of modern democratic states. What makes a nation the nation it is, ultimately, is a set of stories, rituals and practices allowing citizens to think of themselves and others as part of a common project.

There is something vital, but also potentially suspect, about commemoration's role in identity formation on this picture. The perspective from which a group commemorates is imagined: constructed as an identity through individuals regarding one another as part of a group. Commemoration solidifies this sense of group identity by allowing individuals to experience the group's past vividly as a 'we', even though they did not personally experience these events. Ritual plays a key role in enabling this imaginative identification.

Ritualization is a process by which something (whether an action, object or event) is *made special* and set aside from the ordinary for some group through a sequence of actions that need to be properly performed. As ritualization is a process, it is better understood as a continuum rather than a binary with sharp boundaries (Grimes 2013, 193): thus, an activity can be more or less ritualised. Commemoration (as I am using the term) always involves ritualisation, but not all rituals involve commemoration. For example, weddings, christenings, and initiation ceremonies are often highly ritualised, but are typically forward-looking, aiming to sacralise new bonds or structures of belonging, rather than to keep in mind events that have already occurred.

Activities can be made special or set aside from the ordinary in many ways. Grimes gives a list which includes the following ways actions can be ritualised:

- elevating them by associating them with sacredly held values
- repeating them—over and over, in the same way—thus inscribing them in community and/or self
- singularizing them, that is, offering them as rare or even one-time events
- prescribing their details so they are performed in the proper way
- stylizing them, so they are carried out with flare
- entering them with a nonordinary attitude or in a special state of mind, for example, contemplatively or in trance
- situating them in special places and/or times
- being performed by specially qualified person. (Grimes 2013, 194)

It should be evident that prominent commemoration events are ritualized along multiple of these dimensions: for example, they occur on a given day of the year, at a place that has been marked out, led by specially qualified persons, and undertaken in a solemn way that changes minimally from year to year.[4] Ritualization along these several dimensions makes commemorations more memorable, and emotionally resonant.

[4] It is an empirical question whether a particular stylisation of activity does reliably contribute, in a particular context, to a group coming to experience the activity as special or set aside from the ordinary. My argument does not rely on Grimes's list having more than an indicative value.

Ritualization invites us to engage in what Huizinga (1998, Chap. 1) describes as *sacred play*. Consistent with the theme that ritual works via the imagination, the making-special will usually occur only for those who are open to thinking of themselves as part of the 'we' the ritual opens up, and open also to their experiences being transvalued in the way it invites. In cases of rituals with willing and even eager participants this may go unnoticed: for example an elaborate church wedding service and reception, in which everything is done in its ritually expected ways, provides a conventionalised way of deepening and making public in a binding way a set of expectations that a couple (and their respective families) already had in respect of each other.[5]

In other cases, some (call them 'initiates') will find the ritual powerfully meaningful, while others find themselves unable to identify with or enter into the mode of valuation that the ritual invites. As Xygalatas argues, such differences in experience are a central feature of ritual:

> By their very nature, rituals are *causally opaque*: there is no obvious connection between the specific actions they involve and their purported end goal… even if the goal of a ritual is known, its content cannot be inferred or predicted on the basis of that goal. A purification ritual may require pouring water, sprinkling salt, smearing dirt, burning incense, blowing in the wind, ringing a bell, chanting or any other of a myriad of symbolic actions. To an observer it is unclear how these actions might bring about purity. This gap between behaviour, intention and outcome is why rituals often seem puzzling, pointless or even comical to outsiders. (Xygalatas 2022, 88)

In short, a ritual can allow initiates to feel powerfully in connection with a larger 'we' whom they identify with, but also seem overblown, odd or plain silly to those who are not. It is also important to note that the means by which ritualization heightens experience can be tropes of comedy, especially where there is a clear mismatch between the solemnity of the stylisation and the triviality of the theme it is applied to. Nonetheless, a ritual that is experienced as laughable when at a safe distance, may be deeply alienating or profoundly terrifying if you are in the midst of its celebrants. As in cases of fiction, rituals can be subject to imaginative resistance — where for ethical or other reasons a person finds themselves unwilling or unable to imagine what they are invited or prescribed to imagine (Tuna 2024). Given the role of commemoration within the self-definition of nations, such imaginative resistance may be a much graver matter than may appear if we focus (as the literature on imaginative resistance so far has) on private and individual responses to artworks.

[5] We can also learn something from cases where attempts at making-special succeed only partially — perhaps because the attempt at making-special is half-hearted, transparently commercially driven, or plain inept. For example, interested parties often aim to gain visibility for their product or cause by proclaiming or promoting a given day or month of the year as special to it. While ritualisation of Valentine's Day and Mother's Day has succeeded to some degree, there are a wide variety of other such days that never seem to have taken off, such as National Fish and Chip Day (Jun 06), and International Carrot Day (April 04).

Liberal Legitimacy and Public Commemoration

Before examining public commemoration's relationship to history and justice in detail, we should first address whether liberal states can legitimately engage in it at all. Public commemoration works in the realm of the imagination, achieving its effects through embodied and enacted feelings that create a sense of a 'we', rather than through evidence, deliberation and the exchange of reasons. This creates two in-principle challenges for public commemoration from the perspective of liberal egalitarian justice: first whether it is legitimate for states to shift identities via public commemoration, and second whether public commemoration is compatible with central tenets of liberal neutrality.

Many liberals take it that it is crucial that state action be explicable and justifiable to all citizens. As one early and representative statement has it:

> liberals are committed to a conception of freedom and of respect for the capacities and the agency of individual men and women, and that these commitments generate a requirement that all aspects of the social should either be made acceptable or be capable of being made acceptable to every last individual (Waldron 1987, 128).

This demand places pressure on liberal states to be able to articulate rationales for what they are doing, and why they are doing it. As we have seen, public commemoration has a powerful effect on those who take part, including changing preferences and broader outlooks. However, to the extent that it is ritualised, these changes cannot be fully explicated or justified in rational terms. Thus, irrespective of the ends to which public commemoration is put, liberals may ask whether it is legitimate for states to aim to seek to change citizens' behaviour, habits and beliefs in this non-rational way.

We can sharpen this worry by asking whether nation states that use public commemoration as a way of strengthening communal identities *manipulate* their citizens. Irrespective of the ends to which manipulation is used, there are good reasons to think that it is pro tanto wrong for liberal states to manipulate their citizens: manipulation is a form of disrespect, as it 'perverts the way that person reaches decisions, forms preference, or adopts goals' (Raz 1986, 377).

In fact, people often take part in both private and public rituals in the full knowledge that doing so is likely to have effects on their future decisions, preferences or goals that go beyond their usual rational decisionmaking processes. Thus, even though public commemoration (and ritual) changes individuals in ways they may find difficult to fully explain or justify, it does not follow that it does so by perverting rational decisionmaking. Where participation in public commemoration is genuinely voluntary, and the participants expect and accept the kind of transformation that the commemoration effects, then the resulting changes in beliefs or preferences are neither manipulative nor illegitimate.

Even though public commemoration is not inherently illegitimate in a liberal society, its symbolism and emotional power are not easy to reconcile with an ethos of public

reason liberalism. One obvious solution would be for well-ordered liberal egalitarian states to eschew public commemoration, or to confine themselves to commemorations that are guided by, and seen to support only public values that can be justified from a neutral perspective. Perhaps the risks that public commemoration — even if set up with the best of intentions — will in practice tend to undermine the goals and deliberative ideals of a liberal egalitarian state are simply too high.

That no existing society in fact takes such an approach to commemoration should give us pause. If nations are imagined communities, then it may be a mistake to think rituals, collective memories, and narratives can simply be pushed aside as irrelevant or inessential once a well-ordered liberal egalitarian state is up and running. Perhaps the kinds of deep and open solidarities required for a society to commit to reproduce itself in a way that avoids perpetuating existing advantage (Goodin 2023), cannot be sustained by abstract ideas such as that of fair cooperation, and respect for the two moral powers alone, but require the imagination.[6] If so, abjuring symbolism and ritual in favour of an apparently more rationally defensible conception of citizenship and political reasoning may merely place liberals at a decided disadvantage as others push more resonant narratives.[7]

Commemoration and history

The goals of commemoration diverge significantly from those of history. A remembrance ceremony succeeds as commemoration in so far as it creates a resonant, memorable and persuasive experience that cements a particular interpretation of the past that deepens or solidifies a sense of who 'we' are. Commemoration can be effective without being either accurate or representative: for example, it may celebrate the victories of a country in a war while overlooking the concurrent atrocities the country's soldiers committed. Conversely, historical scholarship aims at an accurate interpretation of past events. It is always a legitimate criticism of a piece of historical scholarship if it gets the facts wrong, or does not take relevant information into account in its explanations of what happened and why.

The tension between commemoration and history is thus a deep one. History as an academic discipline tends towards accounts of past events that are complex, rich,

[6] I make some initial arguments for this conclusion in Wilson (2026).

[7] We can see similar arguments being played out in debates between liberal nationalists and others about the *national identity thesis*. Constitutional patriots (Habermas 1998; Müller and Scheppele 2008) assume that adherence to the constitution, and the rights adumbrated in it, will be a sufficient basis for solidarity. Liberal nationalists such as Miller (2019) assume that a thin conception of national identity may not be able to generate a sufficiently strong sense of belonging to make possible an integrated and egalitarian society. Of course, too thick a conception of national identity may make it sclerotic and exclusivist: its conception of who 'we' are may be highly unwelcoming to those with a non-mainstream cultural background. Lenard (2019) presents cultural identity as a middle ground between civic and ethnic identities, arguing that there are ways in which liberal states can promote a cultural identity that is thick enough to provide cohesion and a sense of belonging without becoming exclusivist.

nuanced and through which the pastness of the past may often emerge as strange and unfamiliar, rather than providing easy parallels or lessons. Commemoration tends towards smooth and clean stories, which can be made resonant through ritualisation. While commemoration is ostensibly directed towards the past, its focus on a temporally extended 'we' means that in practice it may be shaped much more heavily by the perceived needs of the present than in historical accuracy.

The relationship between commemoration and historical scholarship is complicated by the fact that commemoration practices themselves unfold over time, and so can be studied historically. The perspective that the historian takes in reconstructing the way a commemoration or other ritual has changed over time may be difficult to reconcile with the perspective that participants in the practice are invited or required to adopt and identify with imaginatively.[8] Historical scholarship may reveal, for example that what began as a simple and fairly spontaneous ceremony to remember some initial event became institutionalised and more tightly managed over time as levels of ritualisation within it increased. Commemoration may increasingly depart from both experiential and testimonial memory of the events or persons commemorated to become an expression of a collective memory of a constructed 'we'. As connections to experiential memory or to first-hand knowledge become weaker, remembrance may become unmoored from what it is (or was) ostensibly aiming to bring to mind. As a result, just as the events that are commemorated tend to become simplified into a smooth and clean story that mainly serves the needs of the present, so the story of the history of that commemoration (as presented to its participants) will also tend to become smoother and cleaner than what actually happened.

One interesting implication of this is that where there has been significant inflation in what is prescribed by a particular public commemoration, this may be obscured by the story that is embedded in the commemoration practice. (Of course, the combination of the emotional importance that participants of the ritual place on performing it correctly, and an unwillingness of individuals to risk being viewed as outside the 'we' implied by the ritual, may raise emotional and practical challenges for making such inflation a matter of public debate.) To take an example from the UK, the past twenty years have seen a very decided inflation in the ritualisation and enforcement of poppy wearing in the lead-up to Remembrance Sunday:

> Remembrance poppies have been worn in Britain since 1921, to commemorate soldiers killed in action. Originally worn on shirt lapels for a single day, 11 November, Armistice Day, they're now typically worn for more than a fortnight and they appear everywhere – not just pinned on clothing but wrapped around buses and trains, projected on monuments and power stations, even sprayed on to grass verges and knitted on postboxes.(Shackle 2024)

The first time football teams wore a poppy badge was the match between Leicester City and Blackburn Rovers in 2003. The practice then spread, encouraged by parts of the press: 'Within a few years, as the presence of poppies on football shirts was enforced

[8] See for example the essays in Hobsbawm (2012).

ever-more hawkishly by the press and politicians, it would be hard to remember that for 82 years, no football team had played with poppies on their shirts and absolutely no one had suggested that there was any problem with this.' (Shackle 2024) Those footballers who refuse to participate in the ritual by wearing a poppy (even those who have conscientious reasons for doing so) now often find themselves targeted with abuse or even death threats (Archer and Matheson 2022).[9]

Public commemoration as site of justice

The fact that the focus of public commemoration is on the emotionally resonant rather than the historically accurate, and on building or reinforcing a sense of 'we', makes it a kind of activity that is inherently likely to reshape or redistribute goods such as belonging and solidarity. This reshaping may be experienced as negative as well as positive. The poppy inflation case suggests a number of ways that public commemoration can humiliate or harm — including self-righteousness, symbolic marginalisation, and enforced participation in activities that's experienced as alienating or even unconscionable. My main aim in the rest of this paper is to explore how we should frame public commemoration as a site of *justice*.

Public commemoration is also somewhat different from the kinds of cases political philosophers usually examine, where there is a good that exists in a known and limited quantity, and which needs to be distributed fairly. What is made possible via public commemoration is a good that is relational and symbolic. Through public commemoration, events or individuals are *made special* in contradistinction from other individuals or events which are *not* special in this way. This both focuses attention on certain individuals and events, but also tends to downgrade in relative terms the importance of other events and individuals that are neglected by it. As a result, public commemoration can enable broader, deeper and more generous solidarities, but it can also, by the same token, make such bonds narrower and more exclusive, and thereby weaken the sense of belonging to a common project. To put this worry more sharply: public commemoration can involve the unjust domination of marginalised groups by more powerful ones within a society.

Public commemoration, by its nature, is directed to the past. Even where a key part of the intention is to affect present or future behaviour (for example to ensure that a particular atrocity is never repeated), the events commemorated belong to the past, and very often some or all of the people commemorated are longer alive. Thus, there are at least three sets of interests in play in commemoration, which may be in conflict: willing participants in the public commemoration, those commemorated, and those

[9] Archer and Matheson relate the case of the James McClean, who is Northern Irish, and 'chooses not to wear a poppy because of the British Army's behaviour in Northern Ireland. McClean cites the Bloody Sunday massacre as a key reason for his decision… Despite providing several public explanations for his decision not to wear a poppy, McClean has repeatedly received abuse, including hate mail and occasional death threats' (Archer and Matheson 2022, 762).

who are not participants (or at least not willing participants), but whose lives are nonetheless affected by the commemoration.

In working out what's at stake in particular commemorations, it's helpful to distinguish two different questions. First, what different kinds of ethical complaints can be made about a public commemoration taking place at all, the manner in which it takes place, or the fact that an event or person isn't publicly commemorated? Second, who has standing to make such complaints?

First, as public commemoration is an activity of setting something apart as worthy of public attention, there are normative standards of fittingness that apply to it. If a public commemoration significantly misrepresents what actually happened, then it could be argued that the public commemoration is not apt. For example, if it celebrates someone as a hero if he was, in fact, a self-serving, cruel and manipulative figure, or if evidence emerges that the event commemorated in fact never happened. In more complex cases a public commemoration may be inapt because it is problematically selective in its focus — for example, if an individual both brought significant benefits to a community and also was responsible for significant harm to some other groups, but only the positive side is commemorated.

Public commemorators thus face a challenge that Stephen John (2013) described in a different context as one of *apt categorisation*: what is the right description or category under which to publicly commemorate a given event or person? Categories of commemoration can misfire in various kinds of ways: they can be too narrow, if for example a victory or other result was achieved by many groups but only some of them are memorialised. It can be too broad if groups or individuals are given credit when they either did nothing or disproportionately less than others. Commemorations can be inapt by being disproportionate, if those memorialised are no more notable than others.

What are the kinds of complaint that can be made? We can distinguish *harm* from *offence*, and both from *domination*. Joel Feinberg (1984) argues that harm should be defined in terms of setbacks to interests, and argues that the force of the criminal law should be used only where harms involve not only setbacks to interests, but also the violation of rights. He defines offence in a broad sense, 'to cover the whole miscellany of universally disliked mental states', including '[p]assing annoyance, disappointment, disgust, embarrassment, and various other disliked conditions such as fear, anxiety, and minor ("harmless") aches and pains'. (Feinberg 1987, 1) He claims that these disliked mental states are 'not in themselves necessarily harmful' (p. 1), and that 'offence is surely a less serious thing than harm' (Feinberg 1987, 2).

Feinberg further distinguishes between ordinary offence, such as a neighbour playing loud music, and *profound* offence, which is 'an offence to one's moral sensibilities', and 'offensive even when it is unwitnessed' (J. O. Young 2005, 135). The kind of offence caused in some cases of inappropriate commemoration would be considered profound offence, as it not only touches on moral sensibilities, but also is often experienced as offensive even without seeing the offensive commemoration. Even if a particular public commemoration event does cause profound offence, it would be too hasty to assume that it would therefore be unfair or unjust to allow it to go ahead. There are other contexts in which liberal societies are willing to allow profound offence to occur, such

as allowing the display of artworks that some groups consider to be obscene or blasphemous.

Both harm and offence operate in the first instance at an individual level: it is individuals who are harmed or offended. Domination is a structural feature, which applies in the first instance in virtue of power relations that apply to groups or social positions rather than individuals. Public commemoration, by presenting particular stories about who 'we' are that citizens are encouraged or prescribed to participate in, also prescribe (whether implicitly or explicitly) particular emotional responses. Thus, not to be sad (or to be sad in the wrong way) at a remembrance event can be a cause for criticism. Archer and Matheson have recently introduced the concept of *emotional imperialism* as a way of understanding what is going on in cases where emotional regimes and forms of expression that are enforced by a powerful group are experienced by less powerful minorities as oppressive.

On their account, emotional imperialism is a species of *cultural imperialism*, and is characterised by 'a powerful group imposing aspects of its culture's emotional norms and standards on another less powerful group whilst at the same time marking out the other culture's emotional norms and standards as deviant and inferior' (Archer and Matheson 2022, 771). The causal opacity of ritual makes it difficult to unpack, and to discuss lucidly, what kinds of emotional responses are called for through public commemoration, and the extent to which these reactions are enforced (and if so, officially, or unofficially via pressure within civil society). As a result, whether any particular activity of public commemoration instantiates emotional imperialism is likely to be subject to disagreement between those who celebrate the ritual and those who feel oppressed by it. All this is of course complicated by the fact that disrupting or forcing the alteration of a commemoration ritual may itself cause profound offence (or even harm) to those who participate in it.

Who gets to decide whether a public commemoration is apt?

Who gets to decide whether a particular public commemoration (or decision not to publicly commemorate) is ethically justified? I'll begin with the relationship between commemorators and commemorated, before widening to also consider non-participants. It is not difficult to think of cases where public commemoration is used to enforce or encourage actions that most of the individuals commemorated would not have wanted. Sometimes (as in the case of poppy inflation) it may be a matter of enforcing a behaviour in the name of respect for a particular group rather more zealously than the vast majority of members of that group would have felt necessary. In other cases, the disjuncture may be more severe, as when the memory of those who fell fighting for a specific defensive cause is invoked to justify an aggressive expansionist war.

Where the interests of the commemorators seem to come apart from the interests or wishes of the commemorated, there are several ways in which those currently living can protest — whether or not they are members of the group that is being

commemorated — for example, pointing out the inaccuracy, hypocrisy, or the self-serving nature of the commemoration. While the dead cannot speak, it might be thought that they can nonetheless be wronged by either not being commemorated at all, or being commemorated in the wrong way.[10] In response, I'll argue that even if we do think that posthumous harms, wrongs and benefits can occur, avoiding such harms should play only a minor role in public decisions about who and what to commemorate. What and how to commemorate publicly is primarily a decision about who 'we' are as a political community. Thus, it is properly a decision that should be taken by the living and about who they, as a deliberative community want to be. The responsibility of choosing what to commemorate and what to allow to go silent is continuous, and should not be assumed to have been settled by the decisions of prior generations.

The limited role of posthumous interests

Martin Wilkinson (2011) provides probably the best account of how individuals could be harmed or benefited after their deaths. On Wilkinson's view, even though dead people cannot experience things *now*, they can still be harmed or benefited now in so far as events in the world further or undermine their interests, or projects. Thus, if someone campaigned tirelessly for a new park to be built in their neighbourhood during their lifetime, they could be benefited by the council's decision after their death to build the park, even though the individual themselves will never be in a position to physically enjoy it. Similarly, someone could be harmed long after death, if for example, their body is recovered from a bog and put on public display, and this display goes against their wishes.[11]

Wilkinson argues that the strength of the claims of the dead does not decline over time (and there is no obvious mechanism by which such a decline could be added to his account). As a result, if we used Wilkinson's account of posthumous harm (in a way that he does not) as the basis of an account of justice in commemoration, it would have implications that might well seem highly counterintuitive. People who lived a very long time ago (for example, Queen Boudicaa, or the architects of Stonehenge, or even Cheddar Man) would then seemingly have as strong a claim to be wronged by not being commemorated as those who fought in the Battle of Britain. Moreover, a wide range of

[10] This view is compatible with there *also* being ways in which wrongs that may occur to living persons through inappropriate commemoration. As I'll go on to argue later, doing justice to the living will involve doing justice to them *as* individuals with identities that connect them deeply to past events. As a result, there are ways in which individuals can be wronged by failures to commemorate dead individuals, even if those individuals who are now dead cannot themselves be harmed or wronged.

[11] Being benefited or harmed in this sense involves a Cambridge change rather than a real change to the ante-mortem person: 'Thus while I am alive, I am not harmed by anything after my death because it has not yet happened. After my death, a harmful event occurs. Only from that time am I harmed. The "I" who is harmed is the ante-mortem person… To say that the ante-mortem person is harmed is not to say that the living person was harmed at the time he was living; 'ante-mortem' is, as was said earlier, the term to describe living people from a vantage point after their deaths, and the harm occurs at the point in time at which the interests are set back' (Wilkinson 2011, 40).

other dead people beyond those singled out in a particular commemoration would be harmed or benefited by it; such interests would need to be weighed against those of the living, but it is very far from clear how we would do this (Scarre 2003).[12]

Earlier I argued that public commemoration reaffirms or reworks who a community is now and what it stands for through a ritualisation of past events, rather than aiming at strict historical accuracy. Understood in this way, even if we are tempted by the thought that it is possible to harm the dead by frustrating their interests, it would not follow that we should make serving the interests of the dead central in our commemorative practices. A democracy's goals must, as a matter of principle, remain open-ended and subject to public debate (Dewey [1939] 2021). The freedom and responsibility that comes with democracy is to build upon and to learn from those who came before in the context of what's important now. It is we now living who must decide what to publicly celebrate and commemorate and what to allow to go silent, out of the very many potentially worthy candidates, on the basis of *our* interpretation of how best to take forward our community's story.[13] Going back to past views may alert us to values that we have missed or allowed to become covered over, and might be helpful for our current situation. But that is just a way of saying that it is the cogency of the values or worldview we are responding to, rather than the fact that some or many individuals once held these values.

Insiders, outsiders and the contingency of identities

Given the purpose of public commemoration, the makeup of the community doing the commemorating makes a difference to who and what should be commemorated. It would be very implausible to think that public commemoration should track some objective list or objective ranking of how worthy of commemoration particular individuals or events are, and that public resources should be devoted only to those at the top of the list. Commemoration plays a partly constitutive role within communities, and so depriving communities of substantive choices about what and how to commemorate would be to fetter their powers of self-definition. However, given that public commemoration has, to a significant degree, the effect of defining a 'we', and solidifying the boundaries of political community, it is important that public

[12] Even if we agree with Wilkinson's account of posthumous harm, and know that a particular individual would, while alive have dearly liked to have been remembered forever, it's hard to see how that preference could put others under a duty to ensure the flame of their memory is never extinguished. It's the fate of each of us to be forgotten eventually. After enough time, there simply won't any more be anyone alive who remembers us or who cared about us, however much we may find this regrettable. Given this inevitability, it seems implausible to think that those whose deeds have simply been forgotten through the passage of time are thereby wronged (even if we can make sense of them being harmed on Wilkinson's account by such forgetting). There are duties to commemorate past lives only in so far as those currently alive *now* see something worth commemorating.

[13] This may include a community deciding to give great weight to preserving the memory and deeds of ancestors. My point is only that it would be a mistake to think that there is a duty to preserve such memory irrespective of what, after due deliberation, citizens in fact want to preserve.

commemoration (a) not function *de facto* to exclude or marginalise groups within the society who are *de jure* members of it, and (b) give due regard to the ways in which it may directly or indirectly negatively impact the lives of those outside of the community.

The crucial question is what counts as giving 'due regard' in this context. Here is a schematic fictional example that helps to highlight some of the challenges:

> Barton Bendish was a charismatic 19th century adventurer, who generated a vast fortune in several different colonial territories through a combination of skilful deal-making and ruthless and often violent exploitation. Later in life, he returned to his home town in the South East of England, and used his wealth to do good deeds in his local community. A charitable foundation set up from money Bendish bequeathed still operates, and among other activities supports a local school and a hospice, which are named after him. Bendish Day is celebrated with a town parade each year. A campaign is growing to stop the publicly commemoration, and to dename the hospice and school.

There are a number of real-world cases we could point to that are similar to that of Bendish, but given the complexity and the extent of factual disagreement about such real-life cases, for our purposes it will be helpful to keep it schematic and fictional. In Bendish's case, we can readily envisage that the question of how Bendish should be publicly commemorated will receive very different answers depending on who we ask, how they are situated in relation to the harms he caused while alive, and the benefits that have been brought to others after his death. Some — especially those who have been benefited in life-altering ways — may be profoundly offended at altering the commemoration, or even contextualising it in a way that allows a different interpretation to become more visible. Others may be profoundly offended that such an individual is being publicly celebrated. Others may feel harmed, dominated by the symbolic marginalisation of their identity, or that they have been subjected to the wrong of emotional imperialism — especially for example if they have ties of kinship or identity to the places Bendish pillaged.

How these kinds of factors are weighed against one another in real-world cases is often highly contextual. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 made campaigns around symbolic harms and marginalisation in public commemoration hugely salient — providing an impetus that led to dozens of statues being removed or recontextualised in the UK (Mohdin and Storer 2021) and streets or buildings renamed — changes that in many cases, campaigners had been pushing for unsuccessfully for many years. Such changes were shortly afterwards countered by a backlash, with the then UK government then taking a strong line that statues should not be removed (Dowden 2020), and questions about public commemoration often subsequently being subsumed within a wider and polarising Culture War narrative.

This contextual variability creates challenges for philosophical analysis. There are circumstances in which it would be clearly inapt to commemorate a particular event in a given way. However, it would be a mistake to assume that for any given contested commemoration event, there is a fact of the matter about how much weight should be given to different features such as profound offence, or reasonable expectations, or emotional imperialism, and that philosophical reasoning can determine this

independently of the contingent histories of the place and identities of the communities involved. Public commemoration's identity-constituting and imaginative features place limits on the extent to which we should expect judgements about it to be fully accessible and intelligible to those who are outside the community's social imaginary.

The balance of opinion about who 'we' are and what is important to preserve about a community is not something fixed externally to how people live their lives. It shifts as individuals come to rethink their ideas about what should be publicly celebrated in the light of their perceptions of others' views, especially when the makeup of communities itself changes, for example through migration. As communities become more diverse, and encompass members with a wider range of identities, heritages and ethnicities, the boundaries between what is taken to count as a harm or wrong to citizens, what is harm or wrong only to others will shift.

Such understandings will also be mediated by the ties of identity that citizens feel to different groups outside the community (where these ties will often themselves have been deepened by ritual). Kinship, ethnicity, religion and race may act as such mediators: if a commemoration is harmful or profoundly offensive to someone a citizen cares about, then they are likely to object to it too. Thus, if a person being publicly commemorated treated others less favourably in virtue of a feature such as their race, then what they did *is* a harm or insult to you in so far as you identify with this aspect of your identity, even if the harms they committed occurred far away and are otherwise unconnected to you. All this is to say that contingency and path-dependence are inherent to discussions of public commemoration, and philosophical work is not strengthened by ignoring this. As Bernard Williams argued, 'in seeking to understand ourselves we need concepts and explanations which are rooted in our more local practices, our culture, and our history, and these cannot be replaced by concepts which we might share with very different investigators of the world' (Williams 2006, 185; Wilson 2026).

Conclusion

Public commemoration events shine a light onto some individuals, groups, or events, excluding others which are outside the spotlight. The making-special that public commemoration events accomplish not only gives a prominence to particular events or people that may or may not be apt, but also reinforces a sense of who 'we' are, which may be contentious or divisive. As a result, there are multiple ways in which public commemoration events can plausibly be claimed to be unjust. But despite this, commemoration events have received little philosophical attention.

This paper has made a start in analysing public commemoration events as a site of justice. First, by framing public commemoration as a ritualised practice of memory, which has as its purpose identity formation. While public commemoration can be critiqued as inapt if it is historically inaccurate in material ways, or unduly selective or narrow in the interpretations it presents, its purpose goes beyond historical accuracy. Second, I distinguished three different complaints that can be made about public commemorations: that they harm individuals, that they are profoundly offensive, and instantiate structural domination through emotional imperialism. These complaints are

of different moral weights — for example, it is much easier to see how a public commemoration could be all things considered justified if it is acknowledged to cause profound offence to some groups than if it is acknowledged to instantiate structural domination.

Third, I argued that even though there are reasons to think that posthumous harms can occur, avoiding them should play only a minor role in public decisions about who and what to commemorate. What to commemorate publicly and what to allow to go silent is a political decision that should be made on the basis of a shared understanding of what matters us now as a community. The fact that an event (or its commemoration) mattered in the past should not be taken to be a decisive reason for us to continue to value it in the same way. Fourth, as public commemoration is at its heart a way in which communities shape and define themselves, communities may legitimately be selective in what they choose to commemorate and how they do so. However, this discretion is limited: it must not function to exclude or marginalise groups who are in fact members of the political community, and must give due weight to the interests of those outside the community (especially where citizens of the community are connected by ties of identity to those outside).

Providing greater structure to our understanding of the ways in which public commemoration raises questions of justice will go some way towards making disputes that look intractable seem less so. However, it is important not to be unrealistically optimistic: disagreements about both how to define who 'we' are, and the values that are most important to preserve within a political community, run deep. Even if all parties are careful, accurate and nuanced in their claims, it may still be the case that there are groups of stakeholders who sincerely take a particular figure to be a hero who is worthy of public commemoration, while others find such a proposal wrong-headed, either because they do not think this person is in the relevant sense 'one of us', or take this person to be the architect of such grave wrongs that it is morally tainting to celebrate them. In such cases, there may be genuine and profound offence (perhaps even harm) posed to different groups among the direct stakeholders both by the decisions to continue publicly commemorating such a figure, and to stop doing so. Where this happens, perhaps the best we can do is to recognise that public commemoration within a multicultural liberal society is a problem of justice among stakeholders who are each others' moral equals but have deep differences in how they see the world. Working through these differences in a way that is mutually respectful, and seeking creative ways of reconciling different narratives in a more inclusive way is what democratic deliberation is for. As Dewey put it, 'Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it' (Dewey [1934] 2018, 80).[14]

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