

feature which explains this is the narratives which attach to the old object and not the old object itself.

14. Ibid., 324.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Our claim here is not that such a standard is a necessary condition for the aesthetic appreciation of all world heritage ruins. Rather, we argue that it often has an important role to play in such appreciation.
18. Owen Hulatt's account of our aesthetic engagement with ruins includes a description of how objects may take on a "historical physiognomy" and is, in this respect, somewhat similar to the suggestion being developed here. Hulatt's focus, however, is, like Korsmeyer's, on objects about which we lack substantial knowledge. Further, Hulatt discusses objects which—like his case study of a Naqadan Vessel—are not primarily historically or culturally important individually but rather as objects of a more general type (Owen Hulatt, "On a Naqadan Vessel—Our Aesthetic Response to and Restoration of Prehistoric Artefacts," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56, no. 3 (2016).
19. Peter Lamarque, "The Value of Ruins and Depictions of Ruins," this volume Chapter 7.

21 The Physical Legacy of a Troubled Past

Jeanette Bicknell

The impulse to commemorate persons and events with large-scale public works (buildings, statues, monuments) seems to go hand in hand with the impulse of later generations to alter or destroy those commemorations. Recent calls to demolish statues of Confederate generals and to rename public buildings honoring individuals who supported slavery or donors whose fortunes derived from the slave trade are the latest manifestation of an impulse that can be traced to ancient times. Other recent examples include debates over colonial-era memorials in Africa and statues of Communist leaders in Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

In this paper I examine some of the competing values underpinning debates on the physical legacy of a troubled past. At the heart of such debates is the meaning of the past: who and what should be valorized? Some of these commemorations have aesthetic value. What weight should this be given in our deliberations? How should communities memorialize the past when there is strong disagreement about its meaning?

To keep this discussion manageable, I will focus on the controversy regarding the former Calhoun College at Yale University and the physical legacy it contains, which includes artworks in public and semi-public places. I have chosen to focus on Yale for two reasons. First, it is an educational institution and stakeholders have written thoughtfully about their reasons for supporting either change or the status quo. Second, a number of different approaches to the physical legacy have already been taken, giving us a number of concrete examples to consider.

In the first section of the paper I shall consider the controversy over the name of Calhoun College, and in the second I discuss some related artifacts. Finally, in the third section I look at the underlying approach taken so far by Yale, and argue for an alternative. In brief I defend taking an anti-theoretical, highly particularized approach to these questions.

Yale's Calhoun College was named for John Calhoun in 1931. Calhoun graduated from Yale College in 1804 and went on to hold the offices of vice president of the United States, secretary of war and of state, congressman, and senator. He was also an influential political theorist and a prominent advocate of slavery. Notoriously, in a speech to the US Senate

in 1837, he claimed that the enslavement of black people was "a positive good." He also called slavery "the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world."¹ On the death of his father, Calhoun inherited substantial land and slave holdings.

What Is in a Name? Calhoun College and Yale University

In 2015 Peter Salovey, the president of Yale, addressed the incoming freshman class. His speech (available on Yale's website) was an invitation to begin a "difficult conversation" about history, naming, symbols, and narratives. While this invitation is very general, it becomes clear that Salovey's main concern is Calhoun College. Salovey does not advocate for any particular position. Instead, he sets out parameters of a discussion about some aspects of the physical legacy of Yale's past. I will highlight and then discuss some of the themes of his speech.

Salovey's tone is cautious. He stresses that we must be "wary" regarding attempts "to alter markers of the past for the sake of present purposes." He gives two reasons for this caution. First, there are the "dangers" of judging past figures according to "views and standards that evolved and developed after their own times." His concern is a variation of the familiar injunction to judge historical figures according to the mores of their time. Second, Salovey says: "We also must consider what it means to attempt to efface or distance ourselves from our own history."

Salovey's concern with re-evaluating historical figures reflects a view of the past as monolithic and so distant from our own times that our moral compasses may not work correctly in retrospect. However, a little reflection tells us that regarding the moral status of slavery, Calhoun's views far from reflected a consensus. While Calhoun praised slavery as a "positive good" in 1837, the British Empire had already abolished slavery four years earlier in 1833. Calhoun mounted a vigorous defense of slavery precisely because some in his audience found it to be morally repugnant. Calhoun was certainly not alone in his views, and we know that he was an influential thinker. But it does not follow that the moral status of slavery was a settled matter in 1837. So the worry about judging Calhoun according to views that developed after his time seems misplaced.

Arguably, we cannot do otherwise than judge Calhoun according to the views and standards that we currently hold. The alternative, to somehow inhabit the worldviews of Calhoun's contemporaries, is a very daunting prospect. Kant famously said that "ought" implies "can." I do not mean to suggest that to do this would be in principle impossible. We admire authors who seem able to adopt the perspectives of people different from themselves in historical position and outlook. But the very rarity of their success, and the hard work it entails, means that the injunction to judge historical figures according to their own time must be one possibility among several, rather than a moral duty.

Turning now to Salovey's concern about distancing ourselves from or even "effacing" our history: two things are of note here. First, the rhetorical slippage between "distance ourselves" from our own history and "efface" it. Salovey puts them in the same sentence and equates them rhetorically. However changing the name of Calhoun College would not "efface" history. His name will continue to be memorialized in the names of streets and buildings throughout the United States. Calhoun is not just memorialized; he is *honored* by having a college at Yale named after him. To decide to rescind that honor is not equivalent to effacing him or his memory.

The second point to make here is an obvious one: "our own history." Who owns the past?² The incoming class whom Salovey addresses may contain descendants of slaveowners, descendants of slaves, and descendants of those who played no role in these controversies. The rhetorical move of endowing (or perhaps burdening) them with a shared history serves to unite them as heirs to a common problem. But any shared history is aspirational rather than factual. In effect, Salovey is saying that by coming together today, his listeners are heirs to Yale's past and have a legitimate claim to fashion its future.

Salovey is correct that renaming Calhoun College is an act of "distancing" the institution from its history. But the history that the reformers want to leave behind is not the antebellum South that produced Calhoun. The past they distance themselves from is the institutionalized racism of the 1930s, when Calhoun College was dedicated. This period, because it is much more recent than Calhoun's time, is more like the present day and for that reason, possibly more troubling.

Salovey makes one more cautious point against reform and in favor of the status quo. The presence of Calhoun, "may serve to remind us not only of Yale's complicated and occasionally painful associations with the past, but to enforce in us a sense of our own moral fallibility as we ourselves face questions about the future."

Again, this is a familiar trope in discussions about memorials and public artworks that commemorate a troubled past. Reminders of the moral errors of the past (in this case, Calhoun and those who decided to honor him) keep us from being self-righteous.³ Indeed we should not presume that we in the present are so morally developed as to have all of the answers. Future generations may wonder at the choices we made, just as we wonder at some of the choices made by earlier generations. Salovey implies that if we rescind the honors given to Calhoun, we risk smug self-congratulation which is at odds with proper moral humility. And we need this humility as we face new moral dilemmas, some we cannot yet imagine.

However awareness of our own fallibility can go hand-in-hand with moral certainty about specific issues. I feel fairly confident that one can say "We should not honor someone who promoted slavery" without

being complacent about all of the rest of one's moral intuitions. So again, Salovey's worry here seems misplaced.

As a university administrator, Salovey's concerns are intellectual and philosophical, but also pragmatic. He tells the class:

I am suggesting, rather, that we give careful consideration to what criteria we could and should use to change the institutional names and associations we have with some particular historical figure, while in the process avoiding renaming exercises to alleviate an entire range of historical grievances or current discomforts. That is, I am not suggesting that we should reconsider just any name or the use of any symbol that some find offensive; there would be no end to that process.

Salovey asks his audience for a set of criteria—a theory, if you will. The community is not to reconsider “any name” or “any symbol” that some find offensive. He offers a pragmatic rationale for why not—“there would be no end to that process.” His challenge to the class is the following: on what basis do we, as a community, decide which parts of our physical legacy to repudiate and which parts to retain? How do we start to make these decisions?

Now is an appropriate point to point out the “elephant in the room.” Namely, Elihu Yale—an early benefactor to the institution that became Yale University. Yale was an official of the Honourable East India Company who participated in and profited from the eighteenth-century slave trade. I would argue that that lurking beneath the surface of what Salovey asks the community to do is the assurance (or perhaps the challenge) that removing Elihu Yale's name from the institution is beyond consideration. Indeed, a more cynical person than myself might see the present emphasis on John Calhoun as a way to deflect attention from Elihu Yale. (Indeed, Brown University, another Ivy League institution, has also wrestled with the troubled legacy embodied in its name. The Brown family, early supporters of the university, made some of their fortune in the transatlantic slave trade.)⁴

Physical Reminders of a Troubled Past

In this section, I consider the actions already taken at Yale with respect to its troubled legacy. Together with buildings and institutions, Yale possesses a number of physical reminders that evoke a troubled past, including artworks. There are several possible ways to respond when confronted with artifacts that cause offense or that embody a worldview that a community no longer endorses. First, we can destroy those objects, either in a spontaneous or in a systematic fashion. Second, we might alter the artifacts to make them less problematic. Finally, we can

re-contextualize or mothball the objects, removing them to different or less prominent locations or taking them from public view altogether. Each of these responses has been tried at Yale.

The destruction of art for ideological reasons (religious or political) has a long history.⁵ In July 2016—nearly a year after Salovey launched the “difficult conversation” about Yale's troubled past—an African American cafeteria worker smashed a stained glass window in the dining hall of Calhoun College. The window depicted slaves carrying bales of cotton.⁶ Corey Menafee, the cafeteria worker, said that he was tired of looking at the “racist, very degrading” image. He also said, “It's 2016, I shouldn't have to come to work and see things like that.” Menafee faced felony charges and resigned. The charges were dropped and he was later hired back by Yale, on the condition that he not discuss the incident.

The advantage of destruction is clear. It carries a strong symbolic value and sends a very obvious message. Also, the artwork is no longer around to offend anyone. The disadvantage is likewise clear. We no longer have direct access to the work. This consequence would be especially troubling if the work were a significant work of art, a work with high aesthetic value or a work of historical importance.

A less radical strategy is alteration. When it was dedicated in the 1930s, the common room of Calhoun College contained a stained glass portrait of John Calhoun, together with a black man in tattered clothing kneeling before him. The panel was quietly altered in 1992 to remove the kneeling slave.

The advantage of alteration over destruction is that we retain access to the work, albeit in an altered state. (Alterations may or may not be reversible.) One disadvantage is that alterations may compromise a work and violate artists' moral rights, if not their copyright. Alteration lacks the strong symbolic value of destruction. It is a piecemeal solution, at best. At its worst, alteration perpetuates the erasure of marginalized people, such as slaves, from the historical record, while their oppressors continue to be depicted.

Finally, artifacts can be mothballed or recontextualized. Portraits of Calhoun have been removed from public display. A portrait of Elihu Yale with a slave boy (indicated by metal collar around his neck) was removed from a prominent place and replaced with one of Yale standing alone. (I assume that some of these removed works have been relocated to Yale's art gallery, but it has been difficult to obtain this information.)

The advantage of this approach is that we retain access to the work in its original state. Removing problematic works from public view also carries symbolic value, in that it shows that the community has heard and responded to the concerns of those whom the work troubled. Another advantage of this approach is that it is reversible. We can change our minds about works and put them back on display, or display them in

different contexts at a later date. The disadvantage is that the symbolic value of removal is not as strong as that of destruction.

I would argue that the third strategy—recontextualizing or moving the artifact from prominent display—is the most satisfactory. Altering or destroying the work would mean that we no longer have the opportunity to experience it as the original audience did, possibly resulting in a loss of aesthetic value. More importantly, if we destroy or alter works we risk losing historical insight. When we cannot have an experience similar enough to that of the work's original audience, we lose a significant opportunity to understand the past and the worldview of those who came before us.

An Alternative to Theory

I said earlier that Salovey's problem was philosophical but also pragmatic: how to support racial equality and assuage the concerns of those offended by the physical legacy of Yale's troubled past, and yet resist the impulse to overturn every aspect of that legacy. In particular, how to distance the institution from Calhoun without also condemning Elihu Yale. His approach was to ask for a set of rational criteria. The way I understand his remarks, Salovey is doing something more than asking for an argument for or against repudiating particular associations. That people on either side of a controversy—especially a controversy in an educational institution—need to provide reasoned arguments in support of their positions should go without saying. So Salovey must be asking for something more than reasoned and reasonable dialogue. I understand him as asking for a theory that can be applied to associations with Calhoun now and to other figures in the future. Rather than consider the particulars of Calhoun's legacy, he challenges his audience to think very generally about Yale's troubled legacies. Rather than a piecemeal approach that would consider this specific artwork, this building, or this association, Salovey demands a general set of criteria for the whole of Yale's troubled legacy.

This move from the specific to the general, and from action to contemplation is understandable in an educational institution. Yet I will argue that this strategy is misguided and that a piecemeal, highly particularized, case-by-case approach is preferable.

In science, theories are meant to generalize across cases and to serve as the basis for predictions about as yet untested cases. The discussion between theoretical and anti-theoretical approaches to ethics takes place in the realm of meta-ethics. The debates rarely descend to the level of actions in the world;⁷ indeed theorists and anti-theorists might agree substantially about the rightness or wrongness of particular actions, although they would come to their conclusions in different ways. The

crucial difference between these two approaches is the role of philosophy in ethical deliberation. Theorists claim that a unitary informative principle (whether simple or complex) grounds ethical thought, and anti-theorists deny this.⁸ According to Bernard Williams, one of the main advocates of an anti-theoretical approach, ethical theory implies a general test for the correctness of basic ethical beliefs.⁹

Rather than continue the discussion on the meta-ethical level, or defend one meta-ethical perspective over another, I would like to consider the limits of theory for Yale's challenges. As I see it there are three problems with adopting a theoretical approach at Yale.

First, any theory developed for Yale's current situation is bound to contain arbitrary elements. For example, one principle that might inform such a theory is the conviction that "we ought not to give great public honor to individuals who are morally reprehensible." Let's assume that all participants in the debate come to agree with this principle. What happens when we apply this principle to Calhoun as well as to Yale? Was one man more of a "villain" than the other, such that we can continue to honor one but not the other? Hard to say; both knowingly benefited from a set of practices we now find morally repugnant. While Calhoun may have been more vocal in his support of slavery, we can attribute this to his more public and political career. A theory that would end up with Yale disassociating itself from Calhoun but not Elihu Yale would likely then contain arbitrary elements. A theory that recommends disassociation from both might have the benefit of consistency. The worry is that it might recommend Yale take actions that do not yet have broad support and that could end up being highly divisive and potentially damaging to the institution.

Second, a theory such as Salovey envisions would apply to associations that are troubling the community now, as well as serve as a guide for future controversies. However social change does not happen at a fixed pace, and our evolving sense of who and what should be honored may well race ahead of the theories we construct to guide us in the application of revised moral commitments. The task of anticipating future controversies will likely lead to the formulation of a theory that is vague, overly general, and therefore unhelpful.

Finally, the call for a theory posits an ending or completion to something that should rather be an ongoing process. Indeed, one of the reasons that Salovey asked for a theory was to avoid a process to which "there would be no end." Communities (especially educational institutions) can and should treat their legacy as subject to scrutiny and their embodied moral judgments of honor and memorial as subject to discussion and revision.

Rather than attempt to twist our intuitions, our settled convictions, and our vague, evolving thoughts into a coherent theory, the better approach

is anti-theoretical. To put it crudely, where does the shoe pinch right now? Which artifacts and associations bother people the most? When people protest, which names and artifacts do they condemn? Where are the voices the loudest and the emotion strongest? That is where the work begins.

I suspect that when we have done the work of listening and we find those associations and objects that evoke the strongest feelings and arguments, they are likely to share some of these features: (1) they are displayed in prominent or highly symbolic places—places that give honor by their association; (2) as a result, they are hard to avoid—such as the stained glass windows in the cafeteria; and (3) they lack subtlety and are not open to multiple interpretations (such as the images of kneeling and shackled slaves.)

As a point of clarification, I am not suggesting that institutions simply respond to the pressure of the moment, nor am I advocating a rush to judgment. Moving an artwork that people have lived with for a long time, or disassociating an institution from an historical figure, may not seem like radical changes. Indeed, some will argue that such changes do not go far enough. But any change, large or small, symbolic or practical, can be jarring. The voices of those resisting change must also be heard, even if they do not win the day.

Once we have considered the issues in all of their complexity and difficulty we can begin the work of assessment and evaluation on a case-by-case basis. However the goal of this work is not a theory; the goal is reasoned argument in support of particular actions.¹⁰

Notes

1. Facts about Calhoun and quotations from President Salovey are all taken from accessed January 23, 2017, <http://president.yale.edu/speeches-writings/speeches/launching-difficult-conversation> and www.historynet.com/john-calhoun-he-started-the-civil-war.htm.
2. On the difficult question of what it means to “own” or “own up” to the past, see Erich Hatala Matthes, “Who Owns Up to the Past: Heritage and Historical Injustice,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (2018): 87–104.
3. See my “The Moral Problem of Self-Righteousness,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* (2010): 477–87.
4. See *Slavery and Justice: Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice*, accessed October 26, 2018, www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/documents/SlaveryAndJustice.pdf.
5. See Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).
6. Daniela Brighenti, Qi Xu, & David Yaffe-Bellany, *Worker Smashes ‘Racist’ Panel, Loses Job*, accessed January 23, 2017, www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/corey_menafee.
7. For example, Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 2, writes that the reader will find “very little” of “subtle and delicate descriptions of complex moral situations” in his book.

8. Brad Hooker, “Theory versus Anti-Theory in Ethics,” in *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*, eds. Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19–40.
9. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge Classics, 2001), 80. I have ignored the complication that an ethical theorist might argue for the impossibility of such a general test (on theoretical grounds) or the impossibility of a foundational principle for ethics (again on theoretical grounds).
10. In February 2017 President Salovey announced that the name of Calhoun College would be changed to Hopper College, to honor Grace Murray Hopper, a computer pioneer, naval officer, and graduate. See accessed October 26, 2018, <https://president.yale.edu/speeches-writings/statements/decision-name-calhoun-college>. For discussion and comments on earlier versions, I am grateful to the Canadian Society for Aesthetics, Ian Jarvie, Jennifer Judkins, and Carolyn Korsmeyer.