



## *Monumental Questions*

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### **Abstract**

*In recent years, there has been renewed controversy about monuments to the Confederacy: these monuments, their detractors insist, are instruments of white supremacy—and, as such, ought to be lowered<sup>1</sup> immediately. The dialectic is by now familiar: though some insist that these monuments are mere sites of memory, others note the relevant memory is that of the Confederacy—and that, because of this, the monuments are inevitably racist. Worse, the monuments were raised by racist individuals for racist ends; no surprise, then, that so many experience them as racist—that is, as instruments of white supremacy. For all of these reasons, the monuments ought to be lowered.*

*And probably it is so. But what does one do when the instrument of white supremacy is a mountain? What does one do, moreover, when it is less than clear whether that mountain is an instrument of white supremacy? What does one do, in other words, when that mountain is a monument to a regime only ambiguously racist? What does one do when it was raised by a racist individual for a racist end—but has since that time come to be seen as a monument to precisely the opposite ideals? What does one do, in other words, when it is experienced by most not as a symbol of white supremacy but as a symbol—indeed, as the symbol—of freedom and equality?*

*What does one do, in short, with Mount Rushmore at this moment—that is, in the wake of the Charleston shooting and the Charlottesville rally? And can the experience of those who saw the mountain prior to its status as a monument—that is, the Lakota—illuminate this question? In this essay, I examine these monumental questions. I ask them—and try to answer them—first as a consequentialist, second as a deontologist, and third as a virtue ethicist.*

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<sup>1</sup> Some may object—not without reason—to the descriptors "raised" and "lowered." I was trying to come up with a matching set of metaphors that would apply not only to statues but also to monuments of other sorts. (The only way to "lower" Mount Rushmore would be to blow it up.) These terms are awkward, but no better pair comes to mind.

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### **Introduction**

Consider your passport. If it was issued by the United States—and if it was issued recently enough to remain valid—then it features, on every page, a photograph. In these photographs are some of our monuments—the Liberty Bell, for example, and the Statue of Liberty—as well as more generic scenes of rivers, mountains, farmers, and ranchers. Each of these is, of course, meant to represent America; any doubt on this point is removed as soon as one sees the enormous bald eagles inserted into several of the photographs.

We may complain about the tackiness of all of this. But noteworthy is what is at the heart of your passport: across two pages—and without the insertion of any bald eagles—is a photograph of Mount Rushmore. Like the other photographs in your passport, this one features no caption; those who designed your passport apparently assumed that you would recognize Mount Rushmore as easily as you recognized the Liberty Bell and the Statue of Liberty.

My guess is that those designers were right about this.<sup>2</sup> For Mount Rushmore is, in every sense, at the heart of America. One journalist, Sam Anderson, puts the point well:

Rushmore is...tattooed on the inside of every citizen's eyelids.<sup>3</sup>

Another journalist, John Taliaferro, indicates the reason for this:

To millions...Rushmore symbolizes all that is fine and noble in America, joining the Liberty Bell and the Statue of

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<sup>2</sup> As Taliaferro notes of *North by Northwest*, “Hitchcock pays Mount Rushmore the supreme compliment, for at no point during the film does he actually call it by name. He assumes that his audience knows exactly what Rushmore is, where it is, and what it means.” See John Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers: The Story of the Obsessive Quest to Create Mount Rushmore* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 337.

<sup>3</sup> Sam Anderson, “Why Does Mount Rushmore Exist?” *New York Times Magazine*, March 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/22/magazine/why-does-mount-rushmore-exist.html>.

Liberty as the nation's most luminescent beacons of democracy.<sup>4</sup>

It is plausible that Mount Rushmore has become, since it was raised, *the* representation of our liberal democracy.<sup>5</sup> It has only one real competitor, our flag—but what we call our “flag” is merely an abstraction that our various flags only imperfectly imitate. Mount Rushmore, by contrast, is one mountain. Its materiality means that it can do what our flag cannot: it can serve as our one site of commemoration.

Mount Rushmore represents freedom and equality *by* representing Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt; the community that gathers there to honor them simultaneously honors those ideals. The abstract and the concrete thereby reveal themselves as two sides of the same coin. If one wants to see this miracle occur—if one wants to see the incarnation, so to speak, of our liberal democracy—then one must travel to the northern plains.

And therein lies my worry. For Mount Rushmore is, as a monument, more problematic than it seems initially. For there is an argument to be made that, as are monuments to the Confederacy, Mount Rushmore is an instrument of white supremacy. Unfortunately, this argument is ambiguous; in what follows, I work to resolve this ambiguity.

## Deontology

According to one criterion, a monument is racist whenever it was meant to be racist by those who raised it:

A given symbol-display *d* has meaning *m* if and only if those originally responsible for *d* intended *d* to have *m*. The special case...that interests us here is this: a given symbol-display *d* is racist if and only if the communicative intentions of those originally responsible for *d* are racist.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Taliaferro notes that, just as the Statue of Liberty took this role in the First World War, so did Mount Rushmore take this role in the Second. He implies that, in war, the cynicism with which we interpret our monuments evaporates—forever, it seems. See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 238.

<sup>6</sup> Torin Alter, “Symbolic Meaning and the Confederate Battle Flag,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 7, nos. 2–3 (2000): 2.

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Torin Alter calls this the “historical-intentions principle”; he attributes it to George Schedler.<sup>7</sup> Though Alter rejects this criterion, it is nonetheless worth consideration—not only as it applies to Confederate monuments but also as it applies to Mount Rushmore.

### *Confederate Monuments*

Schedler argues that most Confederate monuments were not meant to be racist; rather, they were meant to honor the bravery and loyalty of those involved in the Confederacy—and race is irrelevant to this intention.<sup>8</sup> This is obvious, according to Schedler, when one considers a particular Confederate monument in South Carolina. This monument, raised by Samuel White in Fort Mill, honors the loyalty of many slaves to their masters—and so, Schedler argues, it cannot be racist:

By recognizing that African Americans displayed the same virtuous conduct of which they were capable, southern whites recognized a fundamental equality between the races.<sup>9</sup>

This is, to say the least, an odd interpretation of this monument.<sup>10</sup> But it is certainly not the right interpretation of most Confederate monuments—for these were, quite obviously, meant to be racist. Travis Timmerman states well the case for this conclusion:

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Schedler rejects this criterion as a caricature of his position; nonetheless, it seems that Alter is right to attribute it to him. See George Schedler, “Minorities and Racist Symbols: A Response to Torin Alter,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*, 7, nos. 2–3 (2000): 7.

<sup>8</sup> This is, of course, wildly implausible. But we need not adjudicate this issue: there are issues even more serious to come.

<sup>9</sup> George Schedler, “Are Confederate Monuments Racist?” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2001): 297.

<sup>10</sup> Insofar as one is a slave, one *cannot* be loyal; one can only be submissive—or rebellious. (This is not to say that some slaves were not loyal to the men and women who enslaved them: the relation of slavery does not exhaust the relations between one who is a master and one who is a slave. For humans are...well, complicated; perhaps some slaves even came to love those who had enslaved them. But they would have been loved as equals, not as masters—which means that, so long as they were *also* masters, the love would have been more or less inauthentic.) Insofar as the monument in question ignores this, it is a monument to white supremacy; to his credit, Schedler raises this objection—but he fails to really answer it. See Schedler, “Are Confederate Monuments Racist?” 298–299.

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What is particularly surprising (and depressing), however, is that the majority of Confederate monuments appear to have been created long after the Civil War for distinct explicitly racist reasons. The majority of Confederate monuments were erected in one of two periods: the portion of the Jim Crow era between the early 1900s and 1920s and the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

Of the former period, Timmerman notes this:

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jim Crow voting laws were passed to disenfranchise African-American voters. A number of advocates in Southern towns erected Confederate statues because the Confederate mythologies seemingly helped justify the Jim Crow laws.<sup>12</sup>

Of the latter period, Timmerman notes this:

Confederate memorials during the 1950s...were examples of the same power play tactics that were used during the Jim Crow era. The rise in Confederate monuments at this time was, at least in part, the product of a backlash among segregationists.<sup>13</sup>

Really, there is no mystery in any of this. Those who deny that most Confederate monuments were meant to be racist speak falsely.

If Confederate monuments were *meant* to be racist, then, by the historical-intentions principle, they *are* racist. Because of this—all else equal—they ought to be lowered.

### *Mount Rushmore*

There is a deontological tone to this argument: it is the intention of the raising of the monuments that matters, not the consequences thereof. But what were the intentions of the man who raised Mount Rushmore, Gutzon Borglum? Unfortunately, this is ambiguous.

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<sup>11</sup> Travis Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” forthcoming in *Ethics Left and Right: The Moral Issues that Divide Us*, ed. Bob Fischer (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2.

<sup>13</sup> Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2.

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On the one hand, it seems that Borglum was a racist. Consider his work on Stone Mountain, a monument in Georgia. Near Atlanta, Stone Mountain is *the* monument to the Confederacy; it features Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson—enormous men carved into an enormous mountain. If any monument to the Confederacy was meant as an instrument of white supremacy, certainly this one was.

Worse, it was at Stone Mountain—and at this time—that the Ku Klux Klan was reborn; though Borglum did not technically become a Klansman, he nonetheless welcomed the rebirth of the Klan and its involvement with Stone Mountain. For he had been at least somewhat racist for many years:

Borglum's biases were not born of convenience and delivered simply to win favor from his friends in the Klan. He labeled immigrants "slippered assassins," and well before his arrival in Atlanta, he had warned that America was becoming an alien "scrap heap." If the Klan is to be blamed for anything, it is guilty of hardening Borglum's already active prejudices. Careful review of his personal papers reveals that the shrillness and frequency of his long-festered anti-"isms" increased markedly once he embraced the Klan in 1923. It is also worth noting...that the animosities Borglum gave rein to in Georgia did not subside once he left the South and moved to the West.<sup>14</sup>

Borglum did not complete his work at Stone Mountain; in a fight with his employers, he was fired, and the monument was completed only in 1972. But it seems clear that Stone Mountain was a dry run for Mount Rushmore. For, materially speaking, it was at Stone Mountain that Borglum invented the methods whereby Mount Rushmore was raised.<sup>15</sup> And, formally speaking, it seems that Borglum intended Mount Rushmore, at least at first, to be no less racist than Stone Mountain. For both were meant to be, at least in some sense, monuments to white supremacy:

The message of Mount Rushmore...would be...the triumph of manifest destiny; the unity of east and west, of north and

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<sup>14</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 192–193.

<sup>15</sup> Whatever else they are, Stone Mountain and Mount Rushmore are astonishing technical achievements. For more on this point, see Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 178–180, 229–231.

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south; and of course the glory of Anglo-Saxon achievement.<sup>16</sup>

At least initially, what mattered to Borglum as he raised Mount Rushmore was not only that America had been tamed but also that *whites* had done this. Indeed, it is plausible that Borglum was obsessed with raising a monument that would last millennia precisely because he was afraid that, with the arrival of millions of immigrants, white supremacy was coming to an end.

On the other hand, it may be that Borglum had a change of heart. Certainly it seems that, in his years raising Mount Rushmore, he started to speak of it in a new way—less as a monument to white supremacy and more as a monument to freedom and equality:

More and more, he chose to downplay the image of the Rushmore presidents as conquerors. They remained Great Mean, to be sure, but now he stressed the principles they embodied over their cult of personality. America's "Puritan chrysalis," he told a radio audience, had given birth to an immaculate, inalienable truth: "Man has a right to be free and to be happy." With this in mind, he concluded, "We are not creating a monument to Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, but to the meaning of these eleven words."<sup>17</sup>

If we take him at his word, then it seems that Borglum was altered by his work on the mountain—that, over time, he came to see it more and more as most of us see it today. No more was it meant to honor a relation of exploitation; indeed, no more was it meant to honor anything concrete at all. Rather, it was now meant to honor freedom and equality; indeed, it honored Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt only insofar as they had made these abstractions concrete in our own community.

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<sup>16</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 127. Prior to his work on either Stone Mountain or Mount Rushmore, Borglum expressed his desire to raise a monument—enormous men carved into enormous rocks—at the Panama Canal; in his letter to the Interstate Commerce Committee, Borglum was explicit that this was to be a monument to white supremacy. See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 126. Also worth mention is his odd preoccupation with his Scandinavian heritage; Borglum insisted that the Greeks—not coincidentally, the best sculptors in history—must have been partially Scandinavian. See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 72–73.

<sup>17</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 239–240.

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Did Borglum undergo a sort of conversion? Or did he see freedom and equality as somehow *white*—in other words, as abstractions that only whites could render concrete?<sup>18</sup> Even were Borglum to have asked this question of himself, it may be that the answer would have been less than obvious to him; with us asking it of him—and with him rather less than alive—the answer is far less than obvious.

Perhaps Borglum was merely trying to make Mount Rushmore less controversial—so that he could, in the midst of the Great Depression, secure the money to raise it. In any case, it seems that the historical-intentions principle implies that Mount Rushmore is *probably* racist—even if, for empirical reasons, we cannot obtain certainty about this. Of course, we may not care *what* the historical-intentions principle implies:

There is no such thing as the symbol's "true meaning" as distinct from its actual meaning. And its actual meaning is determined by what people generally associate with it.<sup>19</sup>

Alter is speaking here of flags, but it seems that his point applies no less well to other symbols: at least most of the time, the meaning of a symbol is established by the relevant interpretive practice—and this practice is inevitably that of a particular community. More colloquially, the meaning of a symbol is, at least most of the time, the way that a particular community uses it—and therefore its meaning is not established by the *intention* of anyone in particular. Certainly this seems to be so of words: the word "plus" means what it does, for example, because of how the relevant community does addition—even if, on some occasion, someone somehow *intends* for it to mean something else.<sup>20</sup> But monuments are symbols no less than words—and so the intention of one who raises a monument may be irrelevant to its meaning.

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<sup>18</sup> Though this is an absurd doctrine—and an odious one—many have seen it as obvious; perhaps most of those alive in the time of Borglum—most of those who called themselves "whites," anyway—assumed that it was true. By the way, this seems to me to absolve Borglum not at all—but we need not adjudicate this issue.

<sup>19</sup> Alter, "Symbolic Meaning and the Confederate Battle Flag," 4.

<sup>20</sup> This doctrine is, of course, that of Ludwig Wittgenstein—and this example is, of course, that of Saul A. Kripke. (By the way, I doubt that this doctrine has the relativistic, or even the reductive, implications that it is sometimes assumed to have.) See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. and trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), and Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).



Perhaps what we need is another criterion.

### Consequentialism

Fortunately, Alter states another criterion. According to this criterion, a monument is racist whenever it is perceived as racist by those who experience it:

If the association of a symbol *s* with a connotative meaning *m* is strong, widespread, and long-standing, then *s* has *m*...Most relevant to our concerns is the special case...regarding racist connotative meaning: if the association of a symbol *s* with a racist connotative meaning *m* is strong, widespread, and long-standing, then *s* has *m*.<sup>21</sup>

Alter calls this the “public-association principle”; certainly it is worth consideration—not only as it applies to Confederate monuments but also as it applies to Mount Rushmore.

### *Confederate Monuments*

In his “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” Timmerman states...well, a case for removing such monuments:

1. If the existence of a monument *M* unavoidably harms an undeserving group, then there’s strong moral reason to end the existence of *M*.
2. Public Confederate monuments unavoidably harm an undeserving group, which include *at least* those who suffer...as a result of (*I*) knowing the racist motivation behind the existence of most Confederate monuments or as a result of (*II*) having the horrors of the Civil War and the United States’ racist history made salient when they see public Confederate monuments.
3. Therefore, there’s strong moral reason to remove public Confederate monuments.<sup>22</sup>

Note that, though Timmerman states that one can be harmed by knowing the intentions of those who raised the relevant monuments, he states also

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<sup>21</sup> Alter, “Symbolic Meaning and the Confederate Battle Flag,” 3. Though Alter speaks of connotative meaning, it seems plausible that denotative meaning also works in this way.

<sup>22</sup> Timmerman, “A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments,” 2–3.

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that one can be harmed without this knowledge. Later, Timmerman explains this:

Seeing the monument can non-voluntarily make salient America's racist past and the horrors of one of the darkest periods in American history. Having these facts made salient can clearly cause one to suffer *even if we grant that the monument itself... was not created for racist reasons.*<sup>23</sup>

One can be harmed by a monument to the Confederacy even without knowledge of the intention of those who raised the relevant monument because, according to Timmerman, *it does not matter* what was the intention of those who raised the relevant monument. The implication is that the relevant monument means what it does because of *how it is experienced*; in other words, Timmerman implicitly assumes the public-association principle. But perhaps he does so too quickly:

Suppose there arose a racist group which began terrorizing Arab-Americans. They always scrawled a Star of David wherever they committed their crimes, and they conducted parades in which they carried the Israeli flag. Suppose further that most Americans, but not a small group of American Jews, developed a strong, widespread, and long-standing association between the Star of David and racism.<sup>24</sup>

Schedler means this counterfactual scenario as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the public-association principle. Surely, he implies, the Star of David would not become racist just because the public came to associate it with racism! But if the Star of David could be perceived as racist without becoming racist, then the public-association principle is false.

I admit that, where Schedler is tempted into a *modus tollens*, I am tempted into a *modus ponens*: since the public-association principle is true, the Star of David *would* become racist just as soon as it came to be perceived as racist. Indeed, my suspicion is that any intuition otherwise is the product

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<sup>23</sup> Timmerman, "A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments," 3–4.

<sup>24</sup> Schedler, "Minorities and Racist Symbols," 5. Of course, the harshest critics of the Israeli treatment of Palestinians may say that the Star of David, or at least the Israeli flag, *has* come to represent racism. As a matter of public perception, this seems likely to be false; however, we need not adjudicate this issue.

of the counterfactuality of this scenario. But we need not adjudicate this issue, for monuments to the Confederacy have *always* been perceived as racist—not only when they were raised but also now. Again, there is no mystery in any of this. Those who deny that Confederate monuments have always been perceived as racist speak falsely.

If Confederate monuments are *perceived* as racist, then, by the public-association principle, they *are* racist. Because of this—all else equal—they ought to be lowered.

### *Mount Rushmore*

There is a consequentialist tone to this argument: it is the consequences of the raising of the monuments that matters, not the intention that led to their raising. But what are the consequences of the raising of Mount Rushmore? In other words, how is the monument experienced? Unfortunately, this is no less ambiguous than is the intention of the man who raised it.

On the one hand, it may seem obvious that Mount Rushmore is not *experienced* as racist. Consider again a point made earlier in this essay: Mount Rushmore is, it seems, *the* representation of our liberal democracy. But if most of those who go to Mount Rushmore go in order to honor freedom and equality, then most of those who go to Mount Rushmore do *not* go in order to honor a relation of exploitation. On the other hand, at least some *do* experience Mount Rushmore as racist:

Over the past thirty years, Rushmore has continued to be a major sore point among many Native Americans—because it is built on land that Indians claim still belongs to them and because the Great White Fathers who watch over the Black Hills personify a government that has betrayed and injured Indian people repeatedly.<sup>25</sup>

For many Lakota, Mount Rushmore is—in both its essence and existence—a racist monument. The reason is not mysterious: the United States has treated the Lakota with extraordinarily injustice. Though no doubt this is true of every tribe, the story of the Lakota is particularly sinister: the United States violated the Treaty of Fort Laramie, which stated that the Black Hills were owned by the Lakota. Motivated by his sympathy for the Northern Pacific Railroad—and perhaps by rumors that the Black Hills contained

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<sup>25</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 344–345.

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gold—General George Armstrong Custer led an invasion of the territory. Though his army was beaten and Custer killed at the Battle of Little Bighorn, this proved only a temporary setback; soon, the Lakota were made to sign a new treaty surrendering the Black Hills. Technically, this treaty was illegal—which, at this point, even the United States admits: in *United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians*, the Supreme Court instructed that the Lakota be paid millions of dollars for their land. The Lakota, for their part, have refused to take this money: their land, they insist, is not for sale.<sup>26</sup>

This story indicates two reasons that many Lakota experience Mount Rushmore as a monument to white supremacy. First, for many Lakota, Mount Rushmore is in its essence a racist monument: what could be more insulting than a monument featuring Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt—chosen by Borglum as the four presidents most responsible for the territorial expansion of the United States? That Borglum seems not to have *intended* to offend the Lakota is irrelevant. Second, for many Lakota, Mount Rushmore is in its existence a racist monument: the Black Hills are sacred to the Lakota, so the carving of *anyone* into Mount Rushmore was arguably a desecration. Again, that Borglum seems not to have *intended* to offend the Lakota is irrelevant. Either reason by itself would be problematic; together, they are rather more than problematic.

Of course, the Lakota are a minority within our society. But the public-association principle leaves ambiguous how many must associate a certain meaning with a certain symbol for that symbol to have that meaning. On the one hand, surely not *everyone* in a society need associate the two; if this were required, then probably no symbol would have any meaning. On the other hand, it seems implausible that a certain symbol would have a certain meaning when only a *few* associated the two; if this were required, then far too many symbols would have opposite meanings simultaneously. Either way, language would probably never have gotten off the ground.

Is it enough for a majority to associate a certain meaning with a certain symbol? For example, if most of us associate Mount Rushmore with freedom and equality, then are the Lakota wrong to associate it with white supremacy? This seems not only implausible but also sadistic. To his credit, Schedler sees this:

In any society in which racist oppressors outnumber their victims, the general principle of association would dictate

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<sup>26</sup> See Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 5–11, 23–43, 365–367.

the symbol of oppression could never be racist, so long as the oppressors themselves do not make the association.<sup>27</sup>

But how many Lakota need to experience Mount Rushmore as racist in order for it to *be* racist? It seems absurd to try to answer this question in a way that is not arbitrary. Perhaps the best answer, therefore, is “some”—an answer as honest as it is unsatisfying.

In any case, it seems that the public-association principle implies that Mount Rushmore is *probably* racist—even if, for conceptual reasons, we cannot obtain certainty about this. For now, let us say only this: so long as some Lakota continue to experience Mount Rushmore as racist—whether in its essence, in its existence, or both—we ought to worry that it is.<sup>28</sup>

### Virtue Ethics

I do not mean to imply that the historical-intentions principle and the public-association principle are the only two worthy of consideration; no doubt there are others. Perhaps the most obvious is what we may call the “combined principle”: a monument is racist whenever *either* it was meant to be racist by those who raised it *or* it is perceived as racist by those who experience it. But, whatever principle we adopt, the racism of monuments to the Confederacy seems more obvious than does the soundness of any argument to the contrary.

But what about Mount Rushmore? Whether we adopt the historical-intentions principle, the public-association principle, or the combined principle, it seems that the monument is *probably* racist, even if—for empirical reasons, conceptual reasons, or both—we cannot be certain. Yet this conclusion seems to miss something: if Mount Rushmore—the representation of our liberal democracy, *the* site where we honor freedom and equality—is racist, then can *any* monument fail to be racist?

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<sup>27</sup> Schedler, “Minorities and Racist Symbols,” 7.

<sup>28</sup> Though less than satisfying, this conclusion does resolve an interesting objection. It seems plausible that the monuments of Rome—the Arches of Titus, Septimus Severus, and Constantine, for example, and the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius—were monuments to the supremacy of a particular race; should these, all else equal, be lowered? For better or worse, it seems to me that they should not; it seems relevant that anyone who *experienced* the oppression of Rome is gone—so there is no one to associate the monuments with racism. In any case, for this objection, I am grateful to those who attended the Northern Plains Philosophy Conference, which was hosted by North Dakota State University and Concordia College in Fargo on 15 September 2018.

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Unlike consequentialism and deontology, virtue ethics is not a decision procedure; this is a point in its favor only if virtue ethics allows us to think outside the box. In what remains, let us try to do that.

When we go to Mount Rushmore, we tell ourselves that we are honoring freedom and justice—and not, therefore, any relation of exploitation. But, as Anderson notes, it is not so easy in reality to disentangle the two. Why, he asks, was it so important to us that these enormous men be carved into this enormous mountain? He worries that there is in this something sinister:

There is something childish about this fantasy—the way it tends to conflate virtue and size. Why does goodness have to be huge? It is a dangerous belief, and one that inevitably causes stress and confusion when—as it must—it runs up against reality. Inevitably, there will be a shift in scale; the dominant thing (nation, culture, religion, demographic) will begin to shrink. Does it lose its virtue with its dominance? If we truly believe that, then what virtue will we not be willing to sacrifice to make ourselves feel big again?<sup>29</sup>

It is tempting to confuse the justice of our community with its power: our power is obvious—whereas we aspire to, but never entirely achieve, justice. The only issue is that, sooner or later, power inevitably fails; at that point, we have either our aspirations to justice or we have nothing.

Perhaps the meaning of Mount Rushmore is ambiguous because the meaning of America is ambiguous. Is our story one of freedom and equality or of exploitation? The only real answer—as honest as it is unsatisfying—is “both”: our story seems to be one of perpetual, and traumatic, acknowledgement of our failures. Indeed, it is this that makes membership in our community so exhausting: it would be easier were America to reveal itself, once and for all, as good—or, for that matter, as evil. But every time we suppose that it has, it proves us wrong.

Perhaps the question we ought to be asking is not whether Mount Rushmore is racist but rather how we can use it to acknowledge two aspects of our heritage: on the one hand, our heritage is racist—but, on the other hand, it is that heritage that allows us to see and work to overcome that

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, “Why Does Mount Rushmore Exist?”

racism. It would be foolish to expect that we'll ever entirely do this—just as it would be foolish to expect that we'll ever stop trying.<sup>30</sup>

Mount Rushmore merely renders this point particular. Consider Thomas Jefferson, a slaveowner—and a philosopher whose work allows us to see just how wrong it was for him to own slaves. Condemnation and celebration reveal themselves, in this example, as two sides of the same coin.

## Conclusion

I saw Mount Rushmore only this year. I had been expecting tackiness—but, whatever else it is, Mount Rushmore is not tacky. As usual, Taliaferro puts the point well:

Mount Rushmore...is a true piece of sculpture, not a building, not in the least architectural...Like all great figurative sculpture...and unlike more mediocre sculpture, such as the Statue of Liberty...the faces of Rushmore have expressions: Washington is stern, Jefferson is bemused, Roosevelt is avuncular, and Lincoln is resolute.<sup>31</sup>

Mount Rushmore is, like America, better than one would have guessed. And, like America, it deserves better than unreflective patriotism.

Of course, Mount Rushmore also deserves better than destruction. And, even if it did deserve destruction, this would not mean that we should destroy it:

Deciding which monuments should be removed by appeal to rational principles...is unlikely to mollify enough disgruntled citizens to matter...Every people needs its heroes, and any people with a developed material culture will remember them with monuments. This is why...efforts to cleanse the landscape of racist monuments are unacceptably damaging to civic cohesion and will ultimately frustrate antiracist goals.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Really, *this* is what separates the United States of America from the Confederacy; *this* is the reason that, all else equal, we ought to raise monuments to George Washington and lower monuments to Jefferson Davis.

<sup>31</sup> Taliaferro, *Great White Fathers*, 17, 20.

<sup>32</sup> Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo, "The Ethics of Racist Monuments," forthcoming in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Public Policy*, ed. David Boonin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 12–13, 15.

## Monumental Questions

In this essay, I have repeatedly stated that, *all else equal*, monuments to the Confederacy ought to be lowered. Of course, all else is *not* equal: as Dan Demetriou and Ajume Wingo note, the backlash to the removal of monuments to the Confederacy has been traumatic. And even if we did conclude that monuments to the Confederacy—most of which are obviously racist—ought to be lowered, this does not answer the question of what to do with Mount Rushmore: not only would it be harder to lower, it also seems that, in lowering it, we would lose something that cannot be replaced.

So what *does* Mount Rushmore deserve? What does one do, in other words, with that monument at this moment—that is, in the wake of the Charleston shooting and the Charlottesville rally? My tentative suggestion is this: Mount Rushmore ought to become the site where we commemorate the tension at the heart of America. For example, rather than two rows of flags—reminders merely of the breadth of our power—we could install two rows of exhibits. On the one side would be our injustices—slavery, genocide, internment, torture, and so on—while on the other side would be our attempts to correct those injustices. Jim Crow would be countered by the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and Fair Housing Acts; Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be countered by the United Nations.

Whatever we do, though, let Mount Rushmore become a site of education. It deserves as much from us.

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