

The Rhodes Statue: honour, shame and responsibility¹

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A life-size stone statue of Cecil Rhodes stands atop an Oriel college building on Oxford High Street. The building was erected in 1911, funded by part of Rhodes' bequest to his alma mater upon his death at the age of forty-eight. While alive, Rhodes was a British businessman, mining-magnate, politician, imperialist and one of the richest men in South Africa. He set up the British South Africa Company and De Beers Consolidated Mines, and helped establish the British colony in Rhodesia whose name attested to his role. He was also for six years the Prime Minister of Cape Colony where he supported and entrenched racial segregation that reflected his extensive white-supremacist views.² Rhodes played a crucial part in the devastation the British imperial presence brought to southern Africa. His enterprises exerted lethal and widespread violence that he was aware of and encouraged. His role in suppressing the uprising in Matabeleland (part of present-day Zimbabwe) in 1896-7 is recorded by his biographer, '...Rhodes' initial and for many months predominant reaction to the rising was harsh and vindictive.'³ Of another case, Rhodes himself wrote: 'we went out and destroyed...[a] kraal, killing a good many natives'.⁴ 'Many', wrote another biographer, 'have held the same creed about the divinely appointed mission of the British race; but few, like Rhodes, have made it a direct spur to action throughout their lives and regarded themselves as the agents of the divine purpose in doing so.'⁵

There was once a bronze statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, installed in 1934. It took Chumani Maxwele and the Rhodes Must Fall movement a month to have it removed by the University in 2015.⁶ Later that year, the British chapter of the movement requested the same of Oriel. In response, the College first launched a 'listening exercise.' It was cut short. The College reported that the feedback it received was - overwhelmingly - to keep the statue.⁷ After further pressure from the Rhodes Must Fall and the Black Lives Matter campaigns, in 2020, the Governing Body of the College expressed a 'wish' to see the statue removed. It also set up an Oriel College Commission of

¹ I am grateful for comments to Duncan Bell, Daniel Butt, Richard Coggins, Sarah Fine, Ella Sinclair, Sophie Smith and Victor Tadros who bear no responsibility for any mistakes.

² 'Report of a Commission of Inquiry established by Oriel College, Oxford into issues associated with memorials to Cecil Rhodes', April 2021, [oriel_rhodes_commission_full_report.pdf (ox.ac.uk)], henceforth 'Oriel Commission', esp. p. 33 and 'Appendix A: Article on aspects of Rhodes' life and career by William Beinart', pp. 98-126. For a discussion of Rhodes's white supremacist vision in particular see Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America*, Princeton University Press, 2020, esp. pp. 129-141. See also Stanlake Samkange, *What Rhodes Really Said About Africans*, Harare Publishing House, 1982 quoted in Beinart in 'Oriel Commission...', p. 99.

³ Robert Rotberg, with Miles Shore, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power*, Oxford University Press, 1990, esp. pp. 555-9, quote p 557.

⁴ Beinart in 'Oriel Commission...', p. 116.

⁵ Basil Williams, *Cecil Rhodes*, Henry Holt, 1921, p. 51 quoted in Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds...*, p. 135.

⁶ Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, Pluto Press, 2020, p. 210.

⁷ 'Oriel Commission...', section 5.4, p. 6.

Inquiry to 'look at the key issues surrounding the legacy of Cecil Rhodes at the College'. The Commission concluded in April 2021 with a 144 page-long, careful and wide-ranging report that included the following line: 'In respect of the future of the Rhodes statue, a majority of Commission members supported the expressed wish of the Governing Body to move it.'⁸

Following the report, Oriel issued a statement in May 2021:

'The Commission backed the College's original wish (made in June 2020 and reaffirmed again by the College yesterday), to remove the statue, whilst acknowledging the complex challenges and costs presented by its removal in terms of heritage and planning consent. The Governing Body has carefully considered the regulatory and financial challenges, including the expected time frame for removal, which could run into years with no certainty of outcome, together with the total cost of removal. In light of the considerable obstacles to removal, Oriel's Governing Body has decided not to begin the legal process for relocation of the memorials. Instead, it is determined to focus its time and resources on delivering the report's recommendations around the contextualisation of the College's relationship with Rhodes, as well as improving educational equality, diversity and inclusion amongst its student cohort and academic community....Removal of the statue would be subject to legal and planning processes involving the City Council, Historic England and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.'⁹

Were the College to remove the statue from a Grade II listed building, they could be taken to court and the final decision would reside with the Secretary of State for Culture. We know where the current Secretary of State and the Government stand on this issue: they stand with Rhodes.

Oriel invokes complexity and costs to justify keeping the statue that they still wish to remove, while proposing other initiatives. The Rhodes Must Fall campaign is not simply or even mainly about the statue. This is well expressed by Kgotsi Chikane, one of the architects of the Cape Town Rhodes Must Fall, who explains both why the statue is just a stepping stone and why it's an important one: 'If we can see that the statue is a problem, we can start looking more deeply at the norms and values of institutionalized racism that don't physically manifest themselves, that are harder to see. ... The real issue is the broader transformation of the university.'¹⁰ The statue is a symbol of the acceptance of British imperialism despite its legacy of lethal force, harm and racism. Oriel's other initiatives are meant to address this legacy. But in not touching the symbol, when its importance is made manifest by those who oppose Rhodes's legacy, they do not address it enough.

⁸ 'Oriel Commission...', p. 3.

⁹ [Decisions Made by the College Following the Completion of the Independent Commission into Cecil Rhodes and Related Issues | Oriel College \(ox.ac.uk\)](https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2021-05-10/decisions-made-by-the-college-following-the-completion-of-the-independent-commission-into-cecil-rhodes-and-related-issues).

¹⁰ Quoted in Dan Borroughs, "Why South African students say the statue of Rhodes must fall," [https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2015/03/28/395608605/why-south-african-students-say-the-statue-of-rhodes-must-fall?t=1622668503140], 28 March 2015 [accessed 29 May 2021] who in turn is quoted in Johannes Schulz, 'Must Rhodes Fall? The Significance of Commemoration in the Struggle for Relations of Respect', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27 2019: 166–18. For a more general discussion see, Roseanne Chantiluke, Brian Kwoba and Athinangamso Nkopo (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle to Decolonise the Racist Heart of Empire*, Zed Books, 2018, including the 'Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford Founding Statement', pp. 3-5.

In what follows, I examine the main normative arguments in support of keeping the statue and argue that they all fail. Because my focus is on rebutting the arguments in favour of keeping the statue, I do not say much about the process through which a decision should be made. But a fundamental point of the Rhodes Must Fall movement is that the descendants of those previously oppressed by Rhodes and those who are currently oppressed by racism have a special insight, standing and claim to shape the environment in which they study, work and live.

To hold and to honour?

It is impossible to find a good principled argument for the Government's preference to preserve the statue in its current location and form, perhaps with some added 'contextualisation'. Rhodes built his immense fortune – the fortune that secured him the statue – through racist exploitation and violence on a scale far beyond what many others did. Racism – which he entrenched and advanced – made it possible for him to extract value from southern Africa at the expense of black people who lived there and whose oppression he welcomed and sought. This is not something to honour with a statue that towers over passers-by, many of whom would be seen as inferior by the person it depicts. The political scientist, Simukai Chigudu, one of the founders of the British Rhodes Must Fall movement, has written of what it is like to be one such passer-by who grew up in Zimbabwe and was now surrounded 'not by the ghosts of colonialism, but by its living dead'.¹¹

But, the first objection goes, we should not use our standards to assess the deeds of those whose misfortune was to live before us and understand less. Of course, if we think this, then this is our standard, but the idea can be rendered coherent. One option is to change it into the claim that the views of an average British person then and now are very different. This is true. (If they hadn't evolved, I would not be writing this as a Polish woman who is also a Fellow of an Oxford college.) But the views of the average British person are not the views by which to judge what is right or wrong; otherwise it would have had been wrong to outlaw Transatlantic slavery unless this was supported by the average British person. And why, in any case, inquire merely about the views of an average white British person? Rhodes lived in African territories on and off from the age of seventeen and this is also where he pursued his imperial dream that was a nightmare for those in his power.

There is a better way to understand the objection. It holds that when judging people's actions we have to be sensitive to the evidence that was available to them. On this view, moral requirements are, in the words of the philosopher Derek Parfit, evidence-relative, that is, sensitive to the evidence that's available to people who are subject to them: Not the evidence that they already believe or that they wish to consult, but that they can reasonably be expected to access.¹² This is a good principle but it does not exonerate Rhodes. Mark Twain was available to sum Rhodes up: 'I admire Rhodes, I fully confess it and when his time comes I shall buy a piece of the rope for a keepsake.'¹³ There was plenty of evidence available to Rhodes that much of what he was doing was abhorrent: he chose to overlook

¹¹ Simkain Chigudu, 'Colonialism had never really ended: my life in the shadow of Cecil Rhodes', The Long Read series, *The Guardian*, 14 January 2021, ['Colonialism had never really ended': my life in the shadow of Cecil Rhodes | Colonialism | The Guardian], (accessed 29 May 2021).

¹² Derek Parfit, *On What Matters: Volume One*, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 150-1.

¹³ Mark Twain, *Following the Equator*, 1897, end of chapter LXIX quoted in Richard Drayton, 'Rhodes Must Not Fall? Statues, Postcolonial 'Heritage' and Temporality', *Third Text* 33 (2019): 651-666, 664.

the suffering he saw he caused. There was also evidence available to the ninety or so Oxford academics who condemned in 1899 the award of an honorary doctorate to Rhodes by their University. In the words of the historian Duncan Bell: 'While many celebrated him as an incarnation of the expansionist spirit, a paladin heroically carving out new territories for Britain to rule, others saw him as an immoral jingo. A thoroughgoing white supremacist, he was determined to keep black Africans disenfranchised and subordinated, viewing them as a pool of cheap expendable labour.'¹⁴ And it was not only those who were critical of the empire who condemned Rhodes. Even among imperialists, many saw his actions as unacceptable.¹⁵ The evidence, then, was not merely available but staring everyone in the face. Rhodes, and those who honoured him when he was alive, were endorsing the racist exploitation rather than excusably unaware of it. Indeed, Oriel's past decision to celebrate Rhodes is striking given that London was more inhospitable to him despite later attempts to honour him there too.¹⁶

There were then and there are now those who defend British colonialism. As the philosopher Amia Srinivasan put it, '[d]efenders of British colonialism often point out that it was less brutal than the Spanish or French versions, or claim that it left the colonised better off than they would otherwise have been. Both responses are, ethically speaking, non sequiturs. Presumably the violent subjugation and exploitation of people isn't OK, even if you do leave behind some railroads, or aren't as bad as the other guys.'¹⁷

But must the statue be seen to honour Rhodes's wrongdoing? Can't we just see ourselves as honouring the scholarship Rhodes funded for Oxford students without honouring the rest of what he did? It's hard to know how to do that. Not only was the scholarship, as envisaged by Rhodes '...intended to facilitate "the retention of the unity of the Empire."¹⁸ It was restricted to men from the British empire, the US and Germany. The idea was to advance a vision of a world led by the Anglo-Saxon 'race'. More to the point, 'the rest' of what Rhodes did was the racist oppression and lethal violence that made the scholarship possible. In any case, an extravagant statue of Rhodes of this type honours the man. This is also why offering the other initiatives that Oriel proposes is not enough.

What of the loss of other potential donors if the statue were removed? Oxford has always been a place that is as much about power as education. Doesn't Oriel have a decisive reason to keep the statue, perhaps through gritted teeth, as a way of soliciting donations for good causes? It is in some respects baffling if some donors wish to be associated with a symbol of racist oppression. Should it not make them feel better that they themselves will not be commemorated alongside wrongdoing on such a scale? If we think of Oriel donors – those at the cusp of leaving their legacies and those who are still students at the college – removing the statue may eventually encourage donations. How long before current donations name the removal of the statue as a condition?

¹⁴ Bell, *Dreamworlds*..., p. 130.

¹⁵ Bell, *Dreamworlds*...; Drayton, 'Rhodes Must Not Fall?', p. 664.

¹⁶ Durba Gosh, 'When Rhodes was not built' in Historical Transactions (royalhistsoc.org), accessed 18 June 2021.

¹⁷ Amia Srinivasan, 'Under Rhodes', *London Review of Books* 38, 31 March 2016.

¹⁸ Bell, *Dreamworlds*..., p. 141. For a more general discussion see Brian Kwoba, 'The Rhodes Scholarship: A Silver Lining?' in Chantiluke et al (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall*, esp. pp. 98-9.

Of course, a donor may worry that if honours can be withdrawn then mere innocence of any wrongdoing is not sufficient to guard against false condemnations in some distant future. Could a donor stipulate that a statue or a plaque honouring the donation must remain standing no matter what others think since the risk of incorrect removal is to be avoided even at the risk of incorrect remaining? Such a donor could even, heroically, ask for this despite anticipating that in future people will throw eggs at the statue. This is not Rhodes's case. As the Oriel Commission of Inquiry writes, 'A statue of Rhodes was not a requirement of the will or of any subsequent negotiation concerning the endowment.'¹⁹ Even more to the point, no one gets a claim to have one's celebratory statue erected for posterity despite oppressing others. And when it comes to current donors, the risk of being misjudged by posterity is hardly stopping people from pursuing other goals, so why should such a risk, if that's the concern, make donations especially difficult?

This is not to dismiss that it may be disorienting and painful to come to recognise that what one once thought (or did not think) about one's country's past and present may be incorrect. I know what it is like from the unfinished reckoning of Poland with its own treatment of minorities.²⁰ Statues such as this were meant to seal a narrative of a version of history that set us up for this difficulty. But these are not good grounds to refuse to judge what Rhodes did, to not listen to those who point out the continued racist nature of the statue, or to insist that the statue no longer honours Rhodes when its location, text and form communicate, by the standards of the culture where it stands, honouring. Even 'contextualised', it elevates him.

Some have argued in response that those who have benefited from Rhodes's donation, or donations that are in some other ways objectionable, have no standing to criticise and so no standing to call for removal or even to act on such calls from those who did not benefit. But in this general form the argument also fails. Otherwise, it would mean that children of enslavers who benefited materially could not criticise what their parents did. A subtler version of the argument might be that those who encourage wrongdoing lack standing to criticise though, surely, even they are entitled to point out the way in which they themselves have erred and take steps to redress it.

Is calling for the removal of the statue tantamount to stepping onto a slippery slope? Will all statues need to be removed? Of course, the point of the opposition to the statue is that it is a symbol of the many other ways in which racism is accepted so it is true that the concerns go far beyond this issue, as they should. But slopes are only slippery if there is no non-arbitrary point of exit. And it is not arbitrary to keep statues of people who were not wrongdoers, let alone wrongdoers on Rhodes's scale. What about the buildings themselves that the wrongdoers' money built? Will they have to be not only renamed but erased too once we slip to the bottom of the slope against which only the statue of Rhodes holds the final guard? Again, it does not follow. It's less obvious that buildings, with some exceptions, are primarily monuments that honour those who funded them and oppress those who were denigrated by them. And it is also not ad hoc to take into account the costs that destroying such buildings would bring when deciding on what to do with them.

¹⁹ 'Oriel Commission...', p. 36.

²⁰ Zofia Stemplowska, 'What Did the Poles Do? Jan T. Gross and the Understanding of a Nation', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 June 2012 and 'A small town in Poland', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 April 2016.

Perhaps the slippery slope worry is simply that accepting that statues that honour wrongdoers should fall has the potential for radical transformation: how many statues will be left standing once we are done with applying less racist criteria to evaluate their acceptability than those that were used when erecting them? Well, there is also a bust of Rhodes on another Oriel edifice. After that, there are hundreds of other questionable statues and tributes to wrongdoers.²¹ That said, it is morally permissible to keep statues if removing them becomes prohibitively expensive as measured by whether it threatens more important goals.²² Among these goals cannot, of course, be the goal of ‘moving on’ and letting things ‘stay in the past’ since honouring wrongdoing is something that is done in the present to oppress those alive today. Put differently, the goals themselves have to recognise the standing of those who are at the receiving end of racism. How often, then, will there be a true dilemma? If a donor were to approach Oriel today with a donation to a worthy scholarship conditional on adding a further statue of Rhodes, maybe carved in gold so it catches the eye better, would it not be obviously wrong to accept? Would Oriel not have to take the voices of those who object as decisive? Ultimately, if it is affordable to remove the statues and plaques, and if the statues and the plaques honour people whose deeds are objectionable enough that we should not want to honour them, then the main loss of removing them all is that we find ourselves in less familiar terrain.

To turn and to shame?

An anxiety that is sometimes expressed about listening to those who call for removal of the statute is that in removing it we would be distorting, re-writing and whitewashing British history. The charge of distorting history can come in many forms. The first form it can take is distortion understood as change: We distort history when we refuse to honour what was left for us to honour by a group that was powerful enough to secure such honouring. Put like this, we can see the point lacks any force. Refusing to honour something that was left for us to honour is not an objectionable distortion that we must guard against but the normal course of history. People used to honour male first-borns and dishonour people born out of wedlock. We do not think that we are distorting history if we no longer do this.

This answer is decisive even before we reflect on the fact that what was left for us to honour in statues represents only some people’s vision of what was worth honouring even then.²³ Were those who disagreed with the erection of the statue at the time distorting history? Was London, which apparently resisted Rhodes’s statue-based hagiography more successfully than Oxford,²⁴ distorting history? Worse, what was left for us to honour was meant to shape, in unacceptable ways, who the ‘us’ is and, indirectly, who is more or less likely to be able to sit on Oriel’s Governing Body even today. Some of

²¹ *The Guardian* reported in January 2021 that approx. 70 memorials in the UK have been removed or renamed, Aamna Mohdi and Rhi Storer, ‘Tributes to slave traders and colonialists removed across UK’, *The Guardian*, 29 January 2021 [] (accessed 29 May 2021).

²² Drayton records the contemporary influence of British tourist income on such questions: ‘Nelson’s long tenure of his privileged place [in a central square in the capital of Barbados] was then twined again with the economic question of tourism, with the suggestion that he was key to the island’s appeal, in particular for British tourists’, Drayton, ‘Rhodes Must Not Fall?’, 662.

²³ For an analysis of this problem together with a long list of redecorations of public spaces, see Drayton, ‘Rhodes Must Not Fall?’.

²⁴ Durba Gosh, ‘When Rhodes was not built’ in *Historical Transactions* (royalhistsoc.org), accessed 18 June 2021.

the anxiety of distorting British history may simply reflect the mistaken view that British history is just the history of who had or has power. A shared history of white and black people, as Rhodes Must Fall makes clear, cannot be written in such a way that the version of it written by racism gets priority, let alone stays authoritative.²⁵

The distortion charge could be interpreted in a second and different way. For the sculptor, Ai Weiwei, ‘...public statues are like a seal, or some mark on history. We have to respect our memory, but learn from our mistakes.’²⁶ In the words of another sculptor, Antony Gormley, we risk ‘collective amnesia’ if we remove Rhodes’s statue. This is distortion as forgetting. How to avoid collective amnesia? Gormley’s suggestion is that we should keep the statue but stop honouring Rhodes through it.²⁷ We can do this, he suggests, by turning the statue to face the wall. The symbolism here could be that of the naughty corner, which would grossly understate the scale of the wrongs committed by Rhodes, but it could also be that of ostracism. The move would render the statue comical.

This solution is similar to the idea of the philosopher Chong-Ming Lim about statues in general: even if kept, they could be justifiably vandalised thereby dampening their honouring potential.²⁸ If the worry of Oriel is that the removal is too complicated, other actions seem within reach. The statue is right by some windows. An enterprising Fellow could hang a sign on it if moved by Lim’s argument perhaps with a quote from the college website: ‘Oriel is a welcoming academic community’. Oriel itself could decide to project a text onto the statue, if legal, following the example of alterations to a Fascist monument in Italy.²⁹

That said, it’s hard to accept the whole premise that such steps are needed because removing a given statue aids forgetting. A statue can always be replaced with something that prompts remembrance if remembrance on such terms is what is called for.³⁰ Altering monuments outside of a process that recognises relevant stakeholders also comes with heavy moral costs. Still, the ingenuity of some of these options is that they remove the key objection Oriel invokes against touching the statue: even if the attempt and its symbolism would be worth having, and even if Trustees of the college could use

²⁵ See Simukai Chigudu, ‘Codrington Conference: What is to be Done?’ in Chantiluke et al (eds.), *Rhodes Must Fall*, esp. pp. 57-8.

²⁶ Tim Adams, ‘Interview. Ai Weiwei on colonialism and statues, Churchill, China and Covid’, *The Guardian*, 29 May 2021 (accessed 29 May 2021).

²⁷ Alex Barker, ‘Turn Rhodes statue to face wall in shame, says Antony Gormley’, *Financial Times*, 28 May 2021 [Turn Rhodes statue to face wall in shame, says Antony Gormley | *Financial Times* (ft.com)] (accessed 29 May 2021).

²⁸ Chong-Ming Lim, ‘Vandalizing Tainted Commemorations’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 48 (2020): 185-216.

²⁹ Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti, ‘A small Italian town can teach the world how to defuse controversial monuments’, *The Guardian* 6 December 2017, [[A small Italian town can teach the world how to defuse controversial monuments | Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti | The Guardian](#)]. Such super-imposing of projected images onto statues have since been taken up elsewhere.

³⁰ Such a decision cannot be made without recognising the standing of those for whom this would prompt remembrance of injustice directed at them or with the assumption that everyone will speak with one voice. For a discussion of what might replace unacceptable statues and how to decide, see Johannes Schulz, ‘Must Rhodes Fall? The Significance of Commemoration in the Struggle for Relations of Respect’, *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27 (2019): 166–18. See also Joanna Burch-Brown, ‘Should slavery’s statues be removed? On transitional justice and contested heritage’, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, online early 20 November 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12485>.

funds for such a purpose, it would still all come to nothing in the end, since in the final reckoning the government will decide that the statue must stay. Maybe some on the Governing Body who voted against an attempt to remove the statue even did so in order to deny the Government the incendiary electoral fuel they would get from any legal case that might arise if the statue is removed. I wonder if some of them don't wish that their predecessors at least had the vision to erect the statue in a place similar to that of the Colston statue in Bristol rather than so high up.³¹

To remove from view

Keep and dishonour might be better than keep honouring. Is it the best option? Is there still an objection if the statue stays but no longer honours Rhodes? After all, no one is denying his existence and we do not normally think that information about wrongdoers must glorify them.

And yet even a wall-facing Rhodes is not the right answer to give to those who object to the statue's presence. There may be nothing 'in this world as invisible as a monument'³² but, sometimes, like with signs in a foreign language, only until we learn what they express. Once we know, it matters too that the statue is on a building that in the words of its architect is 'in the most conspicuous place in Oxford'.³³ If the statute stays, it will still call for passers-by attention to be directed to the man. Why should Cecil Rhodes get so much of it? Our attention is a precious and scarce resource better directed towards those at the receiving end of his oppression. In effect, one problem with the statue is that it honours Rhodes, but another problem is that it grabs our attention and directs it to someone who does not merit it. Perpetrators of serious wrongdoing have no claim on us for remembrance, let alone a claim on the attention of those they saw fit for racist exploitation.

There is a foundational point at stake. How should we think about who should decide on what to do about the statue? Contextualising plaques and moves to alter the statue while keeping it in place need not amount to denials of the wrongs of colonialism; they can be offered as genuine attempts to keep the wrongdoing in view and even as expressions of remorse. But such proposals make most sense if we think that those who decide here are the descendants of colonialists. What if the group that should be deciding is composed of such descendants but also of the descendants of those who were wronged by Rhodes and British colonialism? Thinking that such a group must express remorse by keeping the statue implicitly suggests that the descendants of colonialism speak for the group. Keeping the wrongs in view by retaining the statue when this is opposed in such a profound way by many of those at the receiving end of colonial wrongs might express misrecognition of who the 'us' is who should decide.³⁴

³¹ I am grateful for discussion to the historian and theorist Sophie Smith and the thought that it is interesting that the Bristol solution to the Rhodes problem has not arisen.

³² Robert Musil, "Monuments," trans. B. Pike, in *Selected Writings*, ed. B. Pike (New York, 1986), 320 quoted in Joseph Leo Koerner, 'On monuments', *Res: Anthropology and aesthetics* 67-8 (2016/17): 5-20.

³³ Brian Escott Cox, '100 years of the Rhodes building: its creation and re-appraisal', *The Oriel Record*, (Oxford 2011) cited in Blue Weiss, 'The Rhodes Statue - and the Rhodes Building', *Oxford and Empire Network* [The Rhodes Statue - and the Rhodes Building | Oxford and Empire Network] (accessed 29 May 2021). See also THE RHODES BUILDING (NORTH RANGE), ORIEL COLLEGE, Oxford - 1046662 | Historic England (accessed 29 May 2021).

³⁴ I am grateful to the philosopher Victor Tadros for discussion that helped me phrase this.

Recognising that the statue should go does not mean erasing the record of what Rhodes did to black Africans. If this were inevitable, we would need to start erecting statues to even worse figures of history. Merely altering or contextualising the statue still denies people the decision of how, when and whether to think about Rhodes. With the statue gone, people can reclaim for themselves the decision of how much attention to give to him and on what terms.

This is not to say that there may never be anything to regret if a statue that is removed from view has some independently valuable features. The statue was sculpted by Henry Alfred Pegram, a London sculptor whose work is recognised by inclusion in Tate Britain. He sculpted six other stone statues that stand beneath Rhodes on the Oriel building: two kings and four Oriel heads of house with various pasts.³⁵ Rhodes's statue is partly arresting on account of him appearing in a neo-medieval setting but wearing a simple suit and holding a hat in his hand. The artistic or historical value of a statue may be a decisive reason against destroying it, depending on what it costs to keep it preserved, and in favour of choosing carefully where to move it.

There is, however, a third and a very different version of the distortion objection. What this version means to capture is not, as in distortion as change, any resistance to shifting our understanding of our past ('We will keep honouring the chap as our forebears did!' or 'We have decided what to think and don't have time for this!'). Nor is it, as in distortion as forgetting, that we are at risk of amnesia ('We need him up there to remind us of what he did!'). It is rather the charge of distortion as escape from responsibility: in associating racist imperialism with a particular symbol and calling for its removal, we risk denying our position in the chain of racism. It is a complicated question who is the 'we' who carries the risk here. It might be those who live in Britain and who are not themselves belittled by the statue. 'Look', they could try to say, 'there was racism here but we listened and removed the statue and put an end to it. Since we did it, we can now innocently benefit from the many advantages Britain has to offer – universities, the NHS, political power – and we can do it without becoming implicated in the racist imperial project that helped secure them.' Put differently, the risk is not recognising how many of us remain beneficiaries of injustice.³⁶

This version of the distortion objection to the statue removal is perhaps not what the Government has in mind. But the objection is right: there is a risk of escape from responsibility. Just consider the story Britain repeats of its role in the Transatlantic slavery: how incredible that Britain ended it! But recognising the risk does not call for retaining the statue. It calls for better education about imperialism and better recognition of those who were denigrated, dismissed, harmed, and exploited. This will be easier to achieve if our statues do not show that it is acceptable to honour widescale wrongdoing and if they are kept despite opposition from those they were erected against.

It does strain credulity somewhat that an Oxford college finds it beyond its capacity to even take the initial steps to apply for regulatory permission to remove the statue. In light of this response we can

³⁵ Historic England, 'The Rhodes Building (North Range), Oriel College, Oxford – 1046662', *Historic England* [Historic England] (accessed 29 May 2021).

³⁶ Daniel Butt, 'The ethical implications of benefiting from injustice', in Hugh LaFollette (ed.), *Ethics in Practice: An Anthology* (5th edition) (Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

count ourselves lucky that the buildings do not carry any symbols that came to telegraph racial superiority in the years to follow. Would we be facing the same set of objections if they did?

If Oriel is too worried to remove the statue on account of the costs and complexity, it can always see if it can board it up behind a drab fence, removing it from our view. If, having boarded up the statue, Oriel is still taken up to court for altering the appearance of a listed building, they need not pay for any lawyers and, if they cannot afford the final bill, call on the University and the other colleges to help. Once shared, the costs will be negligible and the other institutions, in any case, may wish for a collective effort to help examine their own role in imperial wrongdoing.

If the government wants to force on everyone a celebratory statue of Rhodes, they will. The fuel the cultural right gets from the division that arises when some recognise and others minimise the racism of British imperialism, keeps it warm. Whatever happens to the statue, they will seek other sources for it: immigrants, diversity, identities. If Oriel does nothing in anticipation of a ruling that keeps the statue in place, they are not depriving the government of opportunities to display its accommodating attitude to racism but accommodating it themselves.