

Plato, Socrates, and Confederate Monuments

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Abstract

What is the best way to respond to monuments in our communities if they represent people who stood for harmful ideas and/or societal structures? I start with the assumption that it would be best for everyone if all of the harmful monuments were removed from our public squares. The more interesting question is: Why would it be best? I will examine critically two different explanations as to why it would be best: one, Plato's, which rests on the harmful non-intellectual influences of images and the other, Socrates', which rests on the harmful intellectual influences of those images. In the end, I shall argue that Socrates got it right and Plato wrong due to the former's ability to explain human behaviour and the latter's surprising lack of that same ability, despite how widely it is believed. If the argument is correct, it will have deep and widespread implications for how we educate our children and ourselves about every important aspect of the human condition.

What is the best way to respond to monuments in our communities if they represent people who stood for harmful ideas and/or societal structures? On 7 June 2020, a statue of Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled, dragged through the streets, and dumped into the harbour. The citizens of Bristol had tried unsuccessfully for years to persuade the city to remove the statue. During the worldwide protests at the murder of George Floyd by some police officers in the United States, Bristolians took what they saw as the public endorsement of a person who made his money in the slave trade into their own hands. Was that the best way to go?

Interestingly, that statue was erected in 1895, around the same time that most of the monuments to Confederate leaders in the United States started to appear all across the country.

As the Southern Poverty Law Center has clearly demonstrated, it was the beginning of a thirty-year period when Jim Crow Laws were being passed in former Confederate states in order to restructure society to re-establish the segregation of blacks and whites, which was being threatened by post-Civil War Reconstruction, ultimately in order to embed inequalities that vastly favoured the white people at the expense of the black people.

Though there has been controversy around the country about whether to remove Confederate monuments, I will start with the assumption that one side in that debate is correct and will use that assumption as I examine two different theories about the nature of moral education of the young (and adults) as it relates to monuments and art. My starting point is the assumption that



it would be best for everyone if all of the Confederate monuments were removed from our public squares. Why would it be best? First, monuments are, most plausibly, public *endorsements* of the goals of the person or event represented by the monument. Confederate monuments, then, would be public endorsements of the Confederacy. Second, since the Confederacy was founded on the idea of white supremacy, that is, the idea that people with white skin are inherently superior to people with black or brown skin in terms of their cognitive abilities and moral character, which explains why the Confederate States seceded from the Union, that is, to preserve its mechanism for maintaining white supremacy, namely, slavery, to remove Confederate monuments would be to withdraw any public endorsement of white supremacy, whether it be maintained by slavery, Jim Crow, or any one of the many current mechanisms used to preserve systemic racial inequalities. Third, given that the idea of white supremacy is false, using it to organize the

functioning of society harms that society and thereby makes *all* of its members have worse lives than they would have had otherwise, whether they realize it or not. Therefore, it would be better for a society to remove all of its Confederate monuments, given that it is better for a society not to endorse ideas that are harmful to it and its people (cf. *Republic* III.397e–398b).

But how *exactly* does the public endorsement of a harmful idea harm a society? Plato and Socrates have different explanations of how this happens and because of that difference would have different answers as to why we should remove the monuments. I shall argue that Socrates gets it right and Plato does not. (*N.B.* Determining what Socrates thought as distinct from what Plato thought is a vexed scholarly issue. I'm going to sidestep that issue. Regardless of whether the Socrates of the early dialogues speaks for the historical Socrates or not, it is less controversial that the moral psychology in the early dialogues is simpler than the one in the middle and late dialogues. I'm going

to label the one in the early dialogues Socratic and the one in the middle and late dialogues Platonic just for ease of keeping them straight.)

‘... a statue of Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled, dragged through the streets, and dumped into the harbour. The citizens of Bristol had tried unsuccessfully for years to persuade the city to remove the statue.’

Plato’s Theory

Plato thinks that art is representational. Paintings, sculptures, music, plays, poems, stories, dances, and monuments are artistic expressions, that is, representations or imitations, of real things regardless of whether the apparent or surface content of the artistic expression is a real thing or not. For example, the *Iliad* seems to be about Achilles, but as there is no such person, the epic poem cannot be about Achilles, which is nothing at all. So, since the *Iliad*, according to Plato, must be about some real thing, what real thing is it about? Plato would say that the *Iliad* is about what war does to people and societies. That is a real thing. Likewise, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is not about Lady Macbeth, there being no such thing. Rather, *Macbeth* is about a real thing, namely, what lust for control over others does to people (cf. *Republic* II.377a together with the *Ion*).

Plato thinks, also, that there are objective moral truths. These truths are real things. As

a parallel, Plato would say, there are objective scientific truths. For example, there is an objective scientific truth concerning parabolanness. Scientists have discovered that parabolanness is a non-linear relation between two magnitudes that we can express using the mathematical equation $y = x^2$. Spatiotemporal parabolas are examples of this non-spatiotemporal nature, which is itself not a parabola. Plato thinks, contrary to some misinterpretations of Plato, that both the spatiotemporal parabolas and the non-spatiotemporal nature of parabolanness are real things. He does not think that spatiotemporal parabolas are nothing at all, because then they could not even *be* images of the non-spatiotemporal nature of parabolanness. But he also does not think, again contrary to some other misinterpretations of Plato, that spatiotemporal parabolas are less real as compared with the non-spatiotemporal nature of parabolanness. Rather, Plato thinks that the former are less good objects of knowledge as compared with the latter, that is, they are not real objects of knowledge. They are mere illusions of knowledge. Not because they are illusions (full stop). But because they are illusions of knowledge. Parabolanness is a good object of knowledge because, given that it is non-temporal, it is absolutely stable. It cannot change. Spatiotemporal parabolas are not good objects of knowledge because they can, given that they *are* temporal things, change and hence, they lack the stability required for good objects of knowledge. Nevertheless, spatiotemporal parabolas *are* real things. They are not nothing at all. They are excellent examples of parabolanness but lousy objects of knowledge. Moreover, parabolanness would be a lousy example of parabolanness. Same with redness and red things. Redness is an excellent object of knowledge, but a lousy example of itself. In order for something to be truly red, it has to reflect the longest wavelength of visible light. Redness, being non-spatiotemporal, cannot reflect any wavelengths of light, let alone the longest wavelength of visible light. Things in spacetime can reflect electromagnetic radiation, and so they can actually, that is, truly, be red.

Same with morality. The non-spatiotemporal nature of goodness is a real thing and is a good

object of knowledge. The spatiotemporal examples of goodness are also real things. And just as with every spatiotemporal example, they make bad objects of knowledge even though they are true examples of goodness. Likewise, just as parabolanness, $y = x^2$, is an abstract pattern or structure, so is goodness an abstract pattern or structure. And just as parabolas are physical patterns or structures, so good things are physical patterns or structures. In sum, the physical patterns are the manifestations of the abstract patterns. And so, Plato thinks, artistic expressions of any sort are ultimately human-made physical representations of the abstract patterns. The *Iliad* and *Macbeth* are both representations of a complex interwoven manifestation of multiple abstract patterns such as human beingness, badness, the nature of war, the nature of control, and many others. Now what about education?

Plato thinks that we should begin a person's education when they are at their youngest because their minds are at their 'most malleable' and take on 'any pattern one wishes to impress' upon them (*Republic* 377ab). Further, given that 'the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable ... we should probably take the utmost care to ensure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones to hear' (*Republic* 378de). And by 'best' he has in mind the ones that present people and the gods as being morally good and not as being morally bad. Why ought we to do this? Because artistic expressions that represent morally bad patterns 'produce in the young a strong inclination to do bad things' (*Republic* 391e–392a). Plato thinks that because he thinks that the more someone experiences a kind of pattern, the more they come to enjoy experiencing that kind of pattern. (Perhaps because it feels familiar and what is familiar is more pleasant than what is unfamiliar?) And so, if someone comes to enjoy the representation of a morally bad pattern, then they will come to enjoy the moral badness it represents. And if one does this from youth, then moral badness will become true of that person's nature as they grow up (*Republic* 395cd).

The key assumption of Plato's theory of education is that young people learn by the repeated exposure to patterns which impress themselves

upon the minds of the young, thereby forming those minds into those patterns. If the young are repeatedly exposed to artistic expressions of morally good patterns, then their minds will become morally good and they will thereby do morally good actions when they mature. If they are repeatedly exposed to artistic expressions of morally bad patterns, then their minds will become morally bad and they will thereby do morally bad actions when they mature. It is *simply* the repeated exposure to these representations that causes the young to become morally good or bad (*Republic* III.401b–402a). People often speak nowadays of the importance of having good role models for the young, since *all the young can do* is imitate the role models they have. For this exact same reason, Plato would say, remove the Confederate monuments from the public sphere because they will make our children morally bad given that they represent the morally bad pattern of white supremacy. Plato's theory seems quite plausible and has seemed quite plausible to many educators, parents and social reformers throughout the ages, both before and after Plato argued for it.

Socrates' Theory

Socrates would agree with Plato that it would be best for us to remove the Confederate monuments from our public squares but not *simply* because the repeated exposure to them causes our young to become morally bad people. Socrates would deny that the young, or anyone, learn *simply* from the repeated exposure to patterns. He would argue, as against Plato, that even in the young, reason is required for learning. Simply being exposed to some pattern is not sufficient for making the person become similarly patterned, even if one is exposed to a pattern many, many times.

Socrates would argue that a person, even a young person, has to reason about what their experience is in order for its pattern to become integrated into their minds. Why? First, Socrates thinks that experiences are multifaceted, that is, manifest multiple patterns. That is why examples are always bad *explanations* of what something is even if they are good *illustrations*. For example,

suppose my four-year-old daughter asks me what the colour red is, and I show her a red book and say: ‘This is what the colour red is.’ She might easily reply: ‘Ah, I see, the colour red is something that is rectangular. Got it dad, thanks!’ And she would not be wrong to have that thought given that the book is *in fact rectangular*. Suppose I respond by simply showing her the book again and saying: ‘No, no, see, *red*.’ tapping on the cover of the book. Again, she might easily reply: ‘Ah, I see, the colour red a thing that makes a noise when you tap it. Got it dad. Thanks!’ To which I respond: ‘No, no, see, *red!*’ giving it to her. And again, she says, after licking it, ‘Ah, OK, now I’ve got it! Red is something that tastes bad when you lick it.’ Clearly, I have failed to *explain* to her what the colour red is, if all I do is show her an example, even a *true* example, of red, *given that any true example of red will also be a true example of many other things*. No, I have to do more than *just* show her red things. I have to point out to her intellect what makes this book a true example of red *as opposed to* what makes this book a true example of rectangularity or a true example of hardness and so on, namely, its reflecting the longest wavelength of visible light. That is what the colour red is – reflecting the longest wavelength of visible light – and I can help her to understand that by asking her to make an *inference* about what multiple red things *have in common*, for example, by showing her a red book, a red apple, and a red leaf, *by way of contrast* with what those three things, say, do *not* have in common. In other words, in order to understand what red is, she has to use her reason to *differentiate* what the things she sees *have in common from* what the things she sees do *not* have in common. It is not simply that I keep showing her red things, but that I give her experiences to reason about. Specifically, she can use her reason to discern what these rectangular, spherical and tear-shaped things have in common *as opposed to* what they do not have in common. Only reasoning, then, can produce a *this-as-opposed-to-that* judgement, which is required for understanding, that is, learning, including moral learning, according to Socrates.

Socrates, then, would agree that artistic expressions that represent morally bad things

like white supremacy should be removed from our public square. But, unlike Plato, Socrates would suggest that they be placed into a museum, and not destroyed, where the relevant context and explanation could be offered so that people seeing them could come to understand *why* what these monuments represent, namely, white supremacy, is morally bad. Since explanations always require, according to Socrates, starting from where the student is coming, it will be necessary to figure out from where each student is coming and then explain why white supremacy is bad from that angle. Socrates thinks that to know something is to be able to recognize it no matter how it appears. And so, to the extent one knows anything, to that extent one will be able to recognize that thing no matter how it appears. One will not be fooled, then, by the different ways the thing one knows can appear. For example, if one knows the theory of refraction, one will not respond to seeing a stick in water with ‘Wow, did you see how the water bent that stick!’ Someone who responds that way clearly does not know the theory of refraction, even if they can recite the theory from having memorized it.

‘Socrates thinks that every human being wants *whatever* is in fact *ultimately* best for themselves.’

In Socrates’ day, the public square might have been a place where people engaged in critical discussion and so Socrates might not have supported the removal of monuments that represent morally bad things. If there were people in public squares who engaged critically about what monuments represented and did likewise with why certain ideas are bad for society, then perhaps such things could be kept in public. But since our public squares are not places where such discussions occur, we need specially designated areas in which to have these discussions.

Therefore, Socrates would argue that we need museums to house the Confederate monuments and the museums need to be able to explain the moral badness of white supremacy from many different perspectives, including that of a child. And since doing so always involves reasoning, just more or less complex reasoning, depending upon how complex the learner can reason, Socrates would advocate that these museums have not what museums typically have, namely, small labels that just give a sentence or paragraph about the work, but instead should have philosophers on the staff to engage the visitor in a Socratic *elenchus*, that is, a holistic cross-examination of the visitor. Interestingly, the statue of Colston was in fact placed in the M Shed Museum in Bristol for that very purpose.

Socrates' Theory is Better Than Plato's

As I said at the outset, I think that Socrates' explanation of learning is better than Plato's. I think that the issue between them concerns the nature of actions and what is required in order to explain how human beings succeed in doing them. But in order to see that issue, we need to start with the nature of desire.

Socrates thinks that the psychological states that cause all of our actions are thought-dependent desires and not thought-independent desires. What is a thought-dependent desire? A thought-dependent desire is a desire that fluctuates in strength depending upon how good or bad the agent *thinks or knows* the object will be for them. So, the more good I think or know an object will be for me, the stronger my desire for that object will be. The less good I think or know an object will be for me, the weaker my desire for that object will be. Socrates thinks that every action has this sort of desire, and only this sort, for its cause. How does he think this works, exactly?

Socrates thinks that every human being wants *whatever* is in fact *ultimately* best for themselves. This generalized desire for *whatever* is in fact ultimately best for me causes my intellect, at

every moment, to reason about the perceptions I am having, at that moment, in order to calculate what is in fact best for me to do, all things considered. And because this is an all-things-considered judgement, it is thereby a judgement concerning what is *not* best for me to do, specifically, every other option open to me given the way the world is. Once I come to a conclusion about which specific course of action is in fact best for me, that conclusion, namely, that course of action, gets substituted into my previously general desire for whatever is best and my desire becomes a particular desire to do that action (and also *not* any other action). That particular desire is the cause of my doing whatever it is that I do (and also whatever it is that I do *not* do). Socrates thinks that this intellectualist explanation explains all human actions.

Plato, on the other hand, argues in Book IV of the *Republic* (at 436a–441c) that not all desire is for the good. Some desires are for external objects regardless of whether or not they are good. So, hunger is a desire that is just for food. Not good food or hot food, but just for food. Thirst is a desire that is just for drink. Lust is a desire that is just for sex. And Plato thinks that these desires, these thought-independent desires, which he calls 'appetites', fluctuate in strength *just* based upon hormones, that is, completely independent of what one thinks or knows, and that these desires can in fact *also* be the causes of our actions. So, my thought-dependent desire can be for what I think is best for myself but since I also have thought-independent desires, which vary in strength independently of how good or bad I think that the object or action is for me, I could act contrary to what I think or know to be best for me if my thought-independent desire is stronger than my thought-dependent desire. The assumption here is that humans always do whatever their strongest desire at the moment is. It just depends upon which desire, thought-dependent or thought-independent, is strongest at that moment. Let me give an example.

I claim to know that I should not eat a $\frac{3}{4}$ -pound bag of Nacho cheese flavoured Doritos in one sitting. I claim this because I have done it countless times and every time I regret doing

so. I say that the pleasure of doing so was not worth the pain I got later. So, when I go to the grocery store, I avoid the chip aisle. This action is explained by the fact that my thought-dependent desire that I not buy and then eat any $\frac{3}{4}$ -pound bags of Nacho cheese flavoured Doritos is stronger than my thought-independent desire, my appetite or craving, to eat Doritos. So far so good. But then, while I'm reaching down to get my milk in the milk department, I notice an attractive Doritos display (in the milk department!) containing several $\frac{3}{4}$ -pound bags of Nacho cheese flavoured Doritos. I then notice a craving, that is, a thought-independent desire, in my body for them. It gets stronger. I tell myself, no, I do not want to eat those Doritos. But then my hands start to get sweaty. I start to tremble. My heart leaps. I then find myself uncontrollably moving over to where the Doritos are and I grab one of the bags and start eating. This is supposed to be a typical example of someone having knowledge of what is best being overcome by a passion, or thought-independent desire, to do the opposite. I knew that I should not do the action but my thought-independent desire to eat the Doritos got stronger and stronger until it was stronger than my thought-dependent desire not to eat the Doritos, at which time it caused me to move over to the attractive Doritos display and make me eat the entire $\frac{3}{4}$ -pound bag of Nacho cheese flavoured Doritos.

Here's the question: *how* did this craving, this thought-independent desire, for Doritos *make* my legs and arms and hands perform the action which brought the bag to my shopping cart wherein I could eat its intensely pleasant contents in their entirety? It is not enough of an explanation to say that the thought-independent desire occurred *simultaneously* with a belief concerning the location of the Doritos. Pointing to those two psychological states is explanatorily insufficient because it does not tell you why *just those* two states get acted on *and no other* belief-desire pairs which also occur simultaneously with that first pair of states. Furthermore, it is explanatorily insufficient to say that a craving for Doritos is the cause of the behaviour. Why? Because pointing to that craving has to explain

this complex set of behaviours for *this* bag of Doritos and not just any bag of Doritos. If not, then why do I reach over to just *this* bag of Doritos instead of some *other* bag of Doritos further away in the chip aisle? The answer is that (1) I think that *the best way* to satisfy this craving for Doritos is to eat *these Doritos right here in front of me and not those farther away* and (2) this belief is then *integrated* into an initially indefinite thought-dependent desire to do whatever is best. The result of this integration is the thought-dependent desire to *eat these Doritos and not those other Doritos farther away*. And this desire is what explains my eating *these* Doritos *rather than those*. In other words, any desire which is capable of bringing me all the way to action will have to be *integrated* with my beliefs, and so have to be a thought-dependent desire. The problem with thought-independent desires, then, is that they cannot be *integrated* with my beliefs at all. If they could, they would not be thought-independent. But since they cannot, they could never function as the causes of *particular actions*, that is, a doing of *this rather than that*. And that is what we are trying to explain: not the desire to eat Doritos in general, but the eating of *these* Doritos and not *those* in the chip aisle.

Sure, thought-independent desires, that is, cravings or passions, could make someone sweat, tremble, flail about, but they could never get someone to do *this-rather-than-that*. Being able to do *this-and-not-that*, requires a calculation that *this* is *better* than *that*, and so, to do this and to not do that. Thought-independent desires cannot be sensitive to any calculations because they are thought-independent. They are desires just for the thing itself, regardless of any calculation. Just to make the point in another way, if you think, like Plato and Aristotle do, that children are similar to non-human animals in that neither are capable of reasoning, then neither can do any calculating as to what is worth trading for what. Socrates' problem with Plato and Aristotle and most thinkers on this issue since then is that since thought-independent, that is, non-rational, desires cannot bring an agent all the way to action, where actions are

understood to be complex means/ends hierarchies and not simple doings, we cannot appeal to such desires in explaining anyone's behaviour. And if we cannot appeal to thought-independent desires in explaining anyone's behaviour, then if we want to help people behave better, the *only* way to do so is to engage people, at any age, in intellectual discussion about why some things are in fact better for a person than other things.

Simply *showing*, or *not* showing, representations of moral goodness or badness is not going to be an effective way to educate anyone with the hope of influencing their later behaviours. Moreover, since children are going to see both kinds of examples in their lives at some point, they will be better off in dealing with those experiences in the future if they understand *why* those ways of interacting with other human beings are in fact good or are in fact bad. If we do not help them to understand, intellectually understand, why white supremacy is bad for everyone, including white people, then it is quite likely that the child or the uneducated adult will make the wrong inference from what they see and hear, whether it be from some artistic expression, or from the White House, or from their so-called community leaders, or from their parents, or from their so-called friends, or from Hollywood, or from their so-called religious leaders, or from their so-called teachers or professors. And if they make the wrong inference about what is in fact good or bad to do, then they will act incorrectly when the situation arises.

So, can artistic expressions of morally good or bad patterns affect the moral goodness or badness of a person? Plato thought that they could if young people were repeatedly exposed to them and thereby became similarly patterned. Socrates would have disagreed that anyone's mind could become imprinted like that without an intellectual component. And so, according to Socrates, he would not have thought that artistic expressions could, all by themselves, make someone morally good or bad. However, Socrates would have nonetheless supported the removal of the Confederate monuments. Why? Socrates

would have agreed with Plato that artistic expressions can provide us with representations of moral goodness or badness. However, since a monument is a public *endorsement* of what it represents, a Confederate monument misleads someone into *thinking* that white supremacy is a good idea. Just as when a parent does something over and over again, their child is *inferring* that because *someone they trust* is recommending the thing they do over and over again that it is in fact a good thing to do. People, likewise, tend to trust the communities they grow up and live in and when those communities memorialize something, the members of those communities *infer* that the thing being memorialized is *worthy* of being memorialized. People *infer* that from those monuments. So, Socrates would say, if you do not want to destroy a representation of moral badness, then put it into a context where no one will wrongly make that inference but will instead, due to the intellectual education happening while looking at it, make the correct inference that these monuments represent something harmful to any human society because they will understand why white supremacy is harmful to everyone. According to Socrates, it is only in conjunction with intellectual discourse and education that any artistic expression of an example of moral goodness or badness could be formative in anyone's moral development. Artistic expressions are only, at best, illustrations or examples of the true natures of things. Examples can be helpful in learning, but only when integrated with an intellectual education, and never all by themselves.

I have argued that I think Socrates may have got it right, at least as compared with Plato's non-intellectual explanation and with all those who agree with Plato, such as, for example, Aristotle, and many others throughout history including many thinkers of today. Socrates' explanation gives us a more laborious path as it requires fine-grained intellectual engagement between teachers and students and between parents and their children and between citizen and citizen. A non-intellectual so-called education in terms of habituation is too coarse-grained to do any of

us any good. We must engage with our children, help our children, or any of us, become morally
and with each other, intellectually if we are to better people.

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