

## Commemorating Public Figures – In Favour of a Fictionalist Position

ANJA BERNINGER 

**ABSTRACT** *In this article, I discuss the commemoration of public figures such as Nelson Mandela and Yitzhak Rabin. In many cases, our commemoration of such figures is based on the admiration we feel for them. However, closer inspection reveals that most (if not all) of those we currently honour do not qualify as fitting objects of admiration. Yet, we may still have the strong intuition that we ought to continue commemorating them in this way. I highlight two problems that arise here: the problem that the expressed admiration does not seem appropriate with respect to the object and the problem that continued commemorative practices lead to rationality issues. In response to these issues, I suggest taking a fictionalist position with respect to commemoration. This crucially involves sharply distinguishing between commemorative and other discourses, as well as understanding the objects of our commemorative practices as fictional objects.*

### 1. Introduction

Intuitively, it seems clear that Nelson Mandela, Yitzhak Rabin, and Martin Luther King are worthy of commemoration and admiration. They were charismatic personalities, and they achieved (or at least did everything in their power to achieve) great things that changed the societies in which they lived for the better. Yet, seen under the lens of historical studies, they were certainly not without serious flaws. What does this mean for our commemorative practices? Should they be abolished once such damaging information emerges? Or is there some way of upholding commemorative practices in the light of such criticism? These are the central issues I want to discuss in this article. More precisely, the question I want to ask is: can it ever be emotionally and rationally appropriate to uphold commemorative practices in the light of evidence of serious flaws in the character of those commemorated?

In response to this question, I will develop a position according to which we can uphold our commemorative practices only by isolating them from criticism (to some extent at least). It is my position that we can do so by engaging in an elaborate sort of pretend play and by treating the figures commemorated much as we tend to treat fictional characters. I will call this position ‘commemorative fictionalism’, because it makes use of central assumptions otherwise endorsed in various forms of philosophical fictionalism.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of this article and the approach I advocate are situated at the intersection of several debates in philosophy, history, and political science. This necessitates some

preliminary remarks about the contribution this article is supposed make to these discussions and the positions on which it is built.

First of all, starting off from discussions in the general public, there has been a philosophical debate in recent years about monuments of figures such as Cecil Rhodes and Robert E. Lee. The central question discussed here is whether these monuments ought to be recontextualized or removed from public spaces.<sup>2</sup> The current article aims at making a contribution to this debate, but not by answering the same question as discussed there. Rather, the aim is to slightly shift focus, thus gaining a new perspective on the issues. In the current philosophical debate, it is usual to use 'bad cases' as a starting point, i.e. cases in which there is a strong public presumption that the monument in question should be removed. In contrast, the current article is focussed on the 'good cases', that is, cases where there currently seems to be a relatively wide consensus in favour of upholding the commemorative practices in focus. The question I want to ask is whether such a consensus can ever be sensible once we come to see a public figure in a less favourable light or whether this must always result in the end of our commemorative practices. I think the answer should ideally be enlightening both for the 'good' and the 'bad' cases, not because it gives us a list of clear-cut criteria on how to act, but rather because it gives us some indications about how to interpret commemorative actions from a philosophical perspective.

There is a long history in political science and historical studies of seeing commemorative practices as crucially involving acts of idealisation.<sup>3</sup> These studies are written with a descriptive intention. The authors mainly focus on understanding how the commemoration of some public figures evolves through time and what role this plays within a given community.

In political philosophy, there has also been some discussion of these and related issues. Thus, Jeffrey Blustein has recently conducted an in-depth analysis of the moral issues surrounding both individual and collective memory. He claims that collective memory contains both elements of historical studies and myth-like aspects.<sup>4</sup> On a slightly different note, Ajume Wingo has stressed the importance of idealisation from a normative perspective.<sup>5</sup> Wingo focusses mainly on questions concerning the role that idealisations (both in commemoration and other contexts) should play in liberal democratic states. His intention is to show that idealisation and liberal political theory are indeed compatible with one another.

I borrow from both of these approaches in also stressing that commemoration involves a form of idealisation. Like Wingo, I also take a normative perspective on these issues. However, my interest is markedly different from his. First of all, I am not primarily interested in political philosophy. Rather, my perspective is informed by moral philosophy on the one hand and philosophy of mind on the other. My main interest is whether we can give a description of the mental state that a well-informed individual taking part in a commemorative event is in. I also want to know whether upholding commemorative practices in the face of well-grounded criticism necessarily leads to rational and emotional tensions within that individual. Furthermore, in making the connection to fictionalism, I am offering a novel perspective on these issues that goes over and above merely restating the claim that commemoration frequently involves some form of idealisation. Rather, I aim to provide a new philosophical understanding of what this idealisation actually consists in.

My argument in favour of fictionalism will proceed in four steps. In a first step, I will outline the central problem around which the article is organised. My starting point is descriptive in nature. I will argue that many of our commemorative practices *prima facie* seem to express strong forms of admiration for the figure in question. I also highlight that often the admiration expressed is naïve in the sense that it is not based on an in-depth study of that person's character and deeds, but rather on some frequently repeated narration about that person. However, this is often not the end-point of our admirational practices. As time progresses, new facts about a person come to light and the naïve admiration we may have experienced at first is increasingly difficult to uphold. I suggest that two sorts of problems arise here: one concerns the appropriateness of our emotional reactions; another concerns the rationality of the beliefs we hold. If there is indeed any acceptable way to uphold our commemorative practices in the face of damning information about the figure in question, we need to find some way of resolving both of these issues.

In a second step, I analyse two ways in which one might think that these problems could be resolved. The first proposed solution consists in assuming that the admiration in question is not focussed on the person, but rather only on *specific traits* of that person. A second approach I will discuss is that it is not admiration for the *person* that is at stake in commemorative practices, but rather admiration for an *action* (i.e. something the *person did*). I suggest that these approaches do not lead to a stable position because they are liable to the same sort of criticism as our naïve commemorative practices.

In a third step, I will introduce the fictionalist approach and show why it *prima facie* resolves the two issues.<sup>6</sup> This approach crucially involves making a strong distinction between the public figure as a real-life person and the commemorated figure, which we must understand as a quasi-fictional entity.

In a fourth and final step, I discuss some remaining issues and sketch some suggestions as to what steps might be taken to solve these.

## 2. The Problems of Commemoration

Let me start off by giving an initial account of what I think many of our commemorative practices involve. Commemoration of a public figure can be motivated by different emotions. We can commemorate someone because we are grateful for what they have done. Or we can commemorate them because we (for one reason or another) feel personally connected to that person (e.g. in the sense that they shaped our life in some significant way). In yet other cases, I take our commemorative practices to be expressive of a certain type of admiration we feel for that person. I think that our relation to Mandela and Martin Luther King are good examples of this kind of admiration-based commemoration. Many of the commemorative acts people engage in with respect to these figures are *prima facie* expressive of very strong admiration for them. Thus, in this context, they seem to be conceived of as exceptional individuals.

Another feature I would like to highlight is that the admiration in question is quite often bound up with certain narratives. Thus, for instance, we see Mandela not just as an admirable person, but crucially as a great politician who was able to unify a divided nation through his personal qualities (such as his willingness to forgive and his lack of

bitterness despite the hardships he endured). Furthermore, the admiration expressed in commemorative acts is often not based on a thorough analysis of the person in question and the role he or she *really* played. Rather, frequently we just go along with the general narration about that person without any further questioning. Because it is not based on a deeper analysis, I will call this form of admiration ‘naïve admiration’ and the sort of commemoration through which it is expressed ‘naïve commemoration’.

Naïve admiration for some public figure is a natural starting point for many of our commemorative practices. However, as time progresses, it will (again, generally speaking) become more and more difficult to uphold: historians and journalists will start to pore over the commemorated person’s life. Archives will be opened, and former companions and rivals interviewed. More often than not, the findings will throw doubt on our commemorative practices by showing us that the narrative we have put together is too simplistic and our account of the figure’s life far too positive. We will end up with facts on our hands indicating that we ought to see that person in a much less favourable light.

This can take several forms. First of all, it can emerge that the person in question is perhaps less committed to the values we ascribed to him. That is, the narration, as it stands, may turn out to be less than fully correct. Secondly, facts unconnected to the narration as such may emerge. We may, for instance, come to see that the person in question displayed serious flaws of character on other occasions. Thus, we might find that Nelson Mandela fought consistently against racism and was willing to make peace and unify the nation, but we may also find that he had close and friendly ties to Gaddafi throughout much of his life.<sup>7</sup> And while this as such does not impact the fact that he fought against racism, it may change the picture we have of Mandela, prompting us to look upon him much less favourably.

We may still feel that we want to uphold our commemorative practices despite obtaining this new, damaging information. I will have more to say on the reasons for this later in the article. For now, I simply want to note that doing so comes with two problems. First of all, there is the problem of the admiration expressed not being appropriate in the sense of it not really fitting its object. Ideally, we ought to only have and express appropriate emotions. But we are now settled with an emotion that seems unfitting, and this is a position we ought to resolve. Call this the problem of appropriateness.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, we are also faced with a more far-reaching rational tension. Through taking part in commemorative practices that seem to be expressive of admiration, we seem to be asserting: ‘I take this person to be holistically admirable’. But once we are informed of the negative aspects of that person’s character, we should also be willing to assert: ‘I take this person not to be holistically admirable’. In other words, we seem to be stuck with a set of inconsistent beliefs.

If we cannot solve both of these issues, we are left with a situation in which our continuing to commemorate a person is both morally and rationally unacceptable. And it would seem that in such a situation, the only way out would be to do away with our commemorative practices altogether. Because I assume that we would find significant flaws in most of the public figures who are currently commemorated were we to look closely enough, it seems that we are bound to end up in a situation with little room for commemorative practices.<sup>9</sup> Because this will result in doing away with most (if not all) of our (admiration-based) commemorative practices, I will call this position *de facto eliminativism*.

In the next two sections, I will look at two ways in which we might try to avoid *de facto* eliminativism. The first consists in suggesting that there are options for upholding admiration-based commemorative practices, but that in these cases admiration has a different scope (i.e. is not the sort of holistic admiration described above).

### 3. Changing the Scope of Admiration

We could try to solve the problems outlined above by assuming that there is another change that occurs when we shift from naïve commemoration (if understood as I have described it) to informed commemoration. Thus, we could claim that informed commemoration does not express the sort of holistic admiration that I suggested is at the heart of naïve commemoration. Rather, we should assume that it expresses a much more limited sort of admiration.

The first option we might consider here is that the admiration in question is not focussed on the *person*, but rather only on *certain* traits of character that the person exhibits. So, on this view, when we commemorate Martin Luther King, we *actually* express admiration for certain traits of character he exhibited. For instance, we may say that we really admire his tenacity and courage, and this is what we want to express in our acts of commemoration.

There are clear benefits to this approach. On first glance, it seems to solve both the problems highlighted above. On the view proposed, we can say that the emotion expressed is appropriate (at least if we assume that Martin Luther King really *did* exhibit tenacity and courage). Furthermore, the position also solves the rationality problem, because we are now dealing with two different sorts of respect. We can say that we do not think that, e.g. Martin Luther King is holistically admirable, but that he exhibits some admirable traits. This is completely rational, since both forms of admiration differ in scope.

Even though the two problems we started off with are solved in this approach, the proposed solution exhibits some deeper flaws, which make it untenable in the end. Some authors in the current debate on admiration have suggested that we cannot limit the scope of admiration in this way. For the case of character traits, Kauppinen has shown that this leads to untenable results. He suggests that traits such as tenacity and courage are not admirable taken on their *own*; rather, they are only admirable as *part of a specific character*. Thus, we certainly do not admire courage in Stalin (though it is quite likely that he also displayed that trait). On the other hand, we can admire certain qualities in one character, which we would see as vices in another (such as acerbic wit). Central to the question of admiration, thus, is how the different traits work together in a given personality. But this suggests that really our admiration cannot focus solely on these individual traits but must take the character into view.<sup>10</sup>

The important point here is that focussing on specific character traits seems to neatly delimit what it is we admire (and do not admire), thereby leaving us less vulnerable to criticism in our commemorative practices. But, as Kauppinen suggests, this underestimates the level of integration between different traits of character. This integration gives us reason to think that we cannot just focus our admiration on specific traits of the person.

There is, however, a second way in which one might think one can achieve such a neat delineation between the admirable and the nonadmirable. We can claim that in informed commemoration we shift from expressing holistic admiration of a person to admiring specific *actions* of the person commemorated. Thus, one might suggest that when we commemorate Winston Churchill, we are honouring him for his fight against fascism and not for his outstanding character or for his less appealing actions (such as his role in the Bengal Famine).<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein, we might think that when we commemorate Gandhi, we commemorate his actions in the fight for Indian independence and (in his South African days) the fight for equal rights across racial divides.

Again, on first glance, this seems to solve the issues highlighted in the first section of the article. We can thus suggest that the admiration we now express is appropriate because the actions in question really were admirable (thus solving the issue of appropriateness). At the same time, as in the suggestion above, we solve the rationality problem by showing that the seemingly inconsistent assertions on closer inspection refer to different things (an action in the first case and a person in the second case) and therefore are not inconsistent.

However, reflection reveals that actually this solution is not plausible either, because we cannot isolate actions as neatly as it may seem at first. First of all, actions are often not as clearly separable from other actions as this position suggests. Thus, when we say that we honour Churchill for his tireless fight against fascism, are we not also commemorating the fact that he put this fight above all else? And does that not include the people of Bengal? If Churchill had not focussed all resources on the war, there might not have been a famine in the first place. Thus, it may well turn out, upon a historically informed analysis, that two actions we would like to keep separated are actually interlinked.

The problem, however, is not just that any action is bound up with other (potentially far less admirable) actions in such a way that they cannot always be easily separated. Moreover, how we describe and evaluate a given action at least in part depends on the *intention* that motivated the action and the reasons for which those intentions were formed. If we are to admire an action, we will need to have reason to assume that that action was done with the 'right' sort of intention and for the 'right' sorts of reasons. It would not be enough if some person merely happens to do something good merely by accident. Rather, the person must have done the action with the intention to bring this about.<sup>12</sup>

This again brings up different issues. Once we place an action under the lens of historical studies, we quickly come to see that the intentions and reasons people have are usually much more complicated than mere philosophical examples would have us believe. And from the historian's position, we will have to say that they are most often far less glamorous than originally assumed. Gandhi can serve as a good case in point here. Newer studies have suggested that in his early days, he was exclusively interested in bettering the lives of South Africans of Indian descent and actually showed disdain for other groups.<sup>13</sup> Based on these discussions, we would have to assign the intention to him to allow the Indian population to rise up to the higher rungs of the social system, while keeping all others in their place. It is quite questionable whether his actions thus described are still worthy of admiration.

Overall, this suggests that actions cannot really be isolated from a person's intentions, reasons, and (to extend the picture yet further) deeply held beliefs and values.

This indicates that the scope of admiration cannot be limited quite so easily. In a sense, we can say that we risk repeating the same process as described above. We start off with admiration for some action that a person performed, but as we come to find out more and more about the complex set of motivations, beliefs, and intentions that led up to the action, the less admirable it may seem.

We may, of course, insist that some actions may well pass the test, that is, these actions will still seem admirable no matter how hard we look or how much information we gather on them. And in these cases, we need not change our commemorative practices. If, however, it turns out that some action is not of that sort, then we ought to eliminate the related commemorations.

This is a possible view to take, but we should not be overly optimistic concerning the prospects of upholding commemoration under these circumstances. We will need to accept that, in most cases, actions will not seem all that admirable once we have put them under close enough scrutiny. In all likelihood, we will thus still end up with a position very close to *de facto* eliminativism.

#### 4. Fictionalism

Is there any alternative to this position? Indeed, should we be on the lookout for such an alternative? We might think that if all current approaches result in a *de facto eliminativism*, then that is what we *should* accept as a position, even if, from a purely descriptive perspective, people will often uphold their commemorative practices all the same. However, sometimes at least upholding commemorative practices happens for *prima facie* good reasons. As Ajume Wingo has suggested in his recent contribution to the issue, there may be political reasons to do so. Liberal societies may actually depend on there being certain commemorative practices that are kept in place over longer stretches of time.<sup>14</sup> But, apart from that, there may also be *moral reasons* why a commemorative practice might be worth upholding.

As has been discussed in the literature, admiration has an exhortative dimension. Thus, it has been suggested that when we admire a person, we are motivated to take measures to be more *like* that person.<sup>15</sup> By analogy, we can thus suggest that when we admire figures like Mandela and engage in commemorative practices expressing that admiration, we may also take efforts to be more *like* Mandela.

As long as we are engaged in the sort of naïve admiration I sketched at the beginning of this article, this seems relatively unproblematic. In these cases, we have a certain, very positive view of Mandela. Plausibly, we will see him as a tireless fighter against apartheid and racism, but also as a person who is willing to forgive and make peace despite endured hardships. Certainly, generally speaking, it would be a morally good thing to engage in the same sorts of actions where possible and to acquire the sort of virtuous character Mandela displayed and from which these actions sprang (at least according to the narration that dominates naïve commemoration).

But this also gives us some reason to think that we should not be willing to do away with our commemorative practices quite so easily as suggested by eliminativism. One might think that when we eliminate our commemorative practices, we also eliminate the connected exhortative dimension of the admiration we express. But this then gives us reason to think that we lose hold of something important.

One might object, however, that this does not follow necessarily. Thus, we might think that the suggestion that we ought to eliminate memorial practices does not indicate that we must do so *without replacement*. Thus, we might think that instead of commemorating Mandela, we could install an ‘antiracism day’ where we are asked to reflect on the evils of racism and the qualities we need to fight it. So, one might conclude, there really is no reason to hold on to our commemorations, since they can easily be replaced by something just as effective at pointing us in the required direction.

I doubt that this is the case. It rather seems that commemorating Mandela gives us something that abstract reflection cannot. Commemoration will often come in the form of narrations of the person’s life, character, and achievements. These will be rich in narrative detail, and they are likely to motivate varied empathic and emotional reactions in the audience. In the other case at hand, we will be dealing with a relatively abstract entity: a reflection on the evils of racism and on possible actions we might take against them. Of course, such reflections might also motivate emotional and empathic reactions, but they are more purely cognitive in nature and thus plausibly less geared towards reaching that aim. If we then assume that moral motivation is closely linked to having certain emotional and empathic reactions as is frequently suggested in emotion theory,<sup>16</sup> then it seems plausible that commemorations linked to concrete persons and narratives are going to be more effective measures for installing personal and societal reform.<sup>17</sup>

This is not, of course, a full-blown argument proving that *only* commemorations might function in this way. But it does give us reason to suppose that commemorations of people such as Mandela might be particularly effective in giving us a direction for self-development. And that in turn suggests that there is at least a *pro tanto* reason for upholding these practices. But this then *again* leaves us with the question of how we can solve the rationality and the appropriateness problem.

There is a second lesson we can draw from the discussion thus far. Namely, we have seen that if we are to retain our commemorative practices to a significant extent, we will need to isolate the figures at the centre of that commemoration from far-reaching criticism. The same is also true for commemorations that centre on actions of a figure instead of that figure’s character. As we have seen, these sorts of commemorations are equally liable to be attacked as new historical facts emerge. So, in this case, we also need to ensure that there is some form of discursive isolation of the commemorative practices from newly emerging historical facts.

One way of conceptualising this isolation is by reference to the claim that the narrations at the heart of our commemorative practices were never supposed to tell the ‘true story’ of figures and their actions, but rather always encompass some form of idealisation. This claim as such is not particularly new; it is frequently invoked when describing our commemorative practices, and it has also been highlighted in the discussion on normative issues within political philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

The claim that idealisations play a central role in our commemorative practices allows us to make a significant change in how we understand commemorative discourses. *De facto* eliminativism seems to make three interrelated assumptions about these discourses:



- a), The ‘no special discourse’ assumption: The assumption here is that commemorative discourses are not special in any way. The guiding idea is that we ought to evaluate public figures in much the same way as a journalist or a historian would.
- b), The facticity assumption: Directly linked to this first assumption is the idea that any discussion of public figures within commemorative discourse must be completely factive. In other words, according to this view, we ought not to knowingly deviate from the truth in any way.
- c), The ‘full-picture’ assumption: A further connected assumption is that we need to generate a *complete picture* of the public figure in question. Thus, when we commemorate Mandela, we cannot just leave aside the less flattering aspects of his personality.

The claim that commemorative discourse involves idealisation points us away from these three assumptions. It allows us to suggest that commemorative discourse is *special* in that it is not committed to facticity or to developing a full picture.

However, pointing to this alone will not directly solve the rationality problem or the appropriateness problem. We need to know more specifically what form idealisation takes in these cases and how this solves these two issues. In other words, what makes it seem rationally acceptable to claim that ‘A is not admirable’ and through our partaking in commemorative practices to claim that ‘A is admirable’ at the same time? Merely pointing to idealisation does not give us an adequate answer to this question.

I want to propose a new solution. What we want to do, I suggest, is uphold our naïve view of the person commemorated for our commemorative practices, while also moving beyond this point of view for the sake of other discourses. We can do so, I think, by changing the assumption that the term ‘A’ needs to refer to *the same object* in both commemorative and noncommemorative discourses. Rather, we can suggest that when we, for example, commemorate Mandela, we can interpret our admiration to be directed at the Mandela that plays a central role in a grander narration about the end of apartheid. *This* Mandela is a consistent fighter against racism of any kind, a champion of human rights and someone who is characterised by the absence of bitterness and petty self-interest. Obviously, this is not the real flesh and blood Mandela, but rather simply a fictional entity, someone who is part of the larger story that we want to tell. It is this fictional Mandela to whom we refer in our commemorative practices.<sup>19</sup>

In other contexts, when we talk about Mandela as a real-life historical figure, we can be interpreted as referring to some entity that was certainly involved in the fight against apartheid and certainly countered racism. Yet, the figure in question also displayed bitterness and perhaps unfairness at some points and was a person that was sometimes driven primarily by party interests instead of the ‘greater good’.<sup>20</sup> Here, we come out with a much more mixed account of the person in question, and we may even end up concluding that this real-life person does not really merit commemoration because, under the historian’s lens at least, he proves to be far less admirable than originally thought.

But one may wonder, how can we then conceive of our admiring a merely fictional object? Is this really a plausible position to take? My suggestion in response to these worries is that when we take part in commemorative practices focussed on figures such

as Mandela, we are often engaging in an elaborate type of pretend play. We are pretending that Mandela (understood as a fictional entity) really exists and is worthy of our admiration. We are thus making a move that is quite similar to when we say 'I admire Sherlock Holmes' or 'I know that Sherlock Holmes lives on Baker Street'. I am, of course, fully aware that these figures do not exist, but I still engage in an act of pretence.<sup>21</sup>

The fictionalism I propose here thus solves both the rationality problem and the appropriateness problem. The rationality problem is solved, because we are assuming that we are, on closer inspection, referring to two different objects when we assert: 'I admire Mandela' and 'I do not admire Mandela'. The appropriateness problem is also solved because Mandela as a fictional entity clearly is worthy of admiration (even if it should turn out that the real-life Mandela is not).

## 5. Remaining Issues and Problems

In this final part, I want to discuss three issues that come up when we start taking the fictionalist alternative seriously. The first issue I would like to discuss is that the fictionalist alternative may seem overcomplicated. Thus, we might think that fictionalism commits us to a highly artificial point of view when it suggests that the name 'Mandela' actually refers to two different entities: a fictional and a nonfictional one. The resulting strict separation of discourses may seem terribly artificial and (because of this) implausible.

In response, it makes sense to stress, first of all, that really fictionalism, and the related sharp differentiation between different discourses, is not limited to the case of public commemorations. Another good example for split discourses is historical fiction. Thus, to give a more concrete example, we can talk of 'Thomas Cromwell' as a real historical person, and we can talk of him as a character in Hilary Mantel's novel *Wolf Hall*. As well-informed readers, we have no problem differentiating between these two figures. We know that the fictional Cromwell is no real-life entity, and yet we sometimes talk and react as if this were the case. Of course, we assume that the fictional Thomas Cromwell in Hilary Mantel's work shares some features with the real-life Cromwell. Historical fiction about famous individuals only makes sense as such if the story is not completely made up. Yet, we do not expect that everything Mantel writes really happened exactly in the way presented.

Furthermore, while at first glance fictionalism seems very artificial, on second glance there are clear benefits to keeping discourses separate in these ways. This way of looking at things prevents a problematic turn that discussions sometimes take when we fail to realise that the two discourses ought to be kept separate. Thus, in the current debate, we sometimes find a strong tendency to simply discount all historical facts that might count against a given public figure. Thus, we find people simply negating the fact that, for example, Gandhi held racist beliefs. I think that this may well result in part from the will to continue to uphold Gandhi as a figure of our public commemorations and the feeling that any negative facts we discover about him may count against us doing so. Fictionalism allows us to keep historical and commemorative discourses apart and as such it ensures that scientific results can be accepted as such.

The second issue I would like to discuss is thornier. Briefly put, it runs like this: fictionalism manages to solve both the appropriateness and the rationality problem. It also contributes to making the talk of 'idealisation' more precise. Yet, it does so at a high cost. When the fictionalist suggests that we are actually talking about two different entities in our commemorative and our noncommemorative discourses, then she is indirectly suggesting that the two discourses are completely removed from one another. And this leads to problems. Take the case of Gandhi again. Once we have moved away from naïve admiration and have come to see that the term 'Gandhi' refers to different entities in commemorative and noncommemorative contexts, it may seem that there is really nothing a historian might find out that forces us to change or even eliminate our commemorative practices. To use an extreme example: even if it were to turn out that Gandhi was a child-murdering monster, we do not (at first glance) have reason to change anything about our commemorative practices. Fictional-Gandhi seems totally unperturbed by these revelations. Just as *de facto* eliminativism will make it very difficult (perhaps even impossible) to uphold commemorative practices, fictionalism, it seems, makes it too easy to uphold these practices (even in the face of extremely serious criticism). And that simply seems too strong as a position.

Further discussion is surely needed for this problem, and I will restrict myself to offering some preliminary remarks on this issue here. First of all, as the discussed example of historical fiction indicates, we do not need to assume that even in cases where we have two different entities in play, the two are completely independent from one another. In writing her novel, Hilary Mantel can utilise a certain amount of freedom with the fictional Thomas Cromwell. But if we are still to recognise it as a piece of *historical* fiction (and not just as a work of fiction, pure and simple), we also need to be able to recognise this as being related to the real Thomas Cromwell.

It seems to me that we can make a similar argument for the case of *historical* commemoration. We are not referring to just any sort of entity here, but rather an entity within a *historically oriented commemorative practice*. Thus, we can suggest (to take an example) that while, when we commemorate Gandhi, our admiration is directed at a fictional entity, we cannot ascribe just any qualities we like to that entity. Nor can we simply ignore whole segments of the real Gandhi's life.

As in the case of historical fiction, the break between the historical facts and our commemorative practices should not be seen as complete. The fictional entity we are creating in upholding our commemorative practices should be understood as an idealised version of Gandhi, not a completely new character to whom we can simply ascribe any properties we want. On this view, then, new revelations about figures such as Gandhi can emerge that will make it impossible for us to uphold our commemorative practices. That is, we can, to some extent, abstract away from details. For instance, we can simplify motivations, but we cannot just fabricate a motivation that the real-life figure *never* had.

These remarks remain sketchy. Much more would need to be said on the issue and clear criteria developed that tell us what sort of idealisation is permissible and when idealisation is unacceptable. To develop this further, we would need to reflect to a greater extent on the type of fictional entity we are creating in these cases. But I hope to have at least made clear that fictionalism does not commit us to a position where our imagination is given free rein.

A third issue that I want to briefly mention at least (and that is connected to the second problem discussed) is that fictionalism might bring up certain issues concerning respect (and disrespect). This concerns, first of all, the person commemorated. There may be cases where a person becomes the hero of a narration who never planned on doing so and who would find the thought of playing such a role abhorrent.<sup>22</sup> Here, it seems sensible to suggest that we cannot just ‘objectify’ the person in question by turning him into this heroic figure (even if only as a form of pretend play).

However, this does not mean that we can only commemorate those who have explicitly consented to our doing so (that would lead to a return of *de facto* eliminativism). We also need to be aware that apart from the explicitly expressed motives, there might also be implicit motives. And, indeed, one could suggest that someone who puts himself in a leadership position within a political movement thereby implicitly accepts the fact that he will be seen as a symbol of that very movement. So, it does seem that, in most cases, we can assume by default that the person in question has tacitly accepted the fact that he or she might be posthumously seen as a symbol of the cause for which he or she fought. And this may involve turning them into the sort of fictional entity described above. As such, it seems acceptable to assume that, in many cases, a person can be integrated into a fictionalist commemorative practice without being disrespectful towards them.

There may be other limits imposed on fictionalism through issues concerning respect. Take the case of a publicly commemorated figure who (it subsequently turns out) was involved in extensive human rights abuses. The victims of these abuses may well demand that we stop commemorating the figure in question. And, in these cases, merely pointing out that we are just engaging in a sort of pretend play may not be enough to persuade critics that the practice is unproblematic. ‘Pretend play or not’, they may insist, ‘however you wish to describe it, it is disrespectful of the victims of the person commemorated’.

Commemorative fictionalism thus does not hold a clear-cut answer as to when a practice is acceptable and when it is not. It does not as such tell us when an act of pretend play is acceptable and when it is disrespectful in one of the discussed forms. To discover this, we need to think more about when engaging in an act of pretend play is a sign of disrespect and when it is acceptable to do so. What fictionalism does suggest, however, is that we need to make reference to these forms of pretend play so as to make sense of the case where we seem to hold on to our commemorative practices in the face of new, unfavourable information about the person commemorated.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, I have been concerned with what I have called the ‘good cases’ of commemoration, that is, cases where there is intuitively a relatively widely shared assumption that the person in question is worthy of being commemorated. I have suggested that these forms of commemoration are often based on *admiration* for the person in question. I have also suggested that this brings some problems with it because closer inspection often reveals that the person is not admirable in the strong sense needed to ground commemorative practices. I have highlighted two key issues here: the problem

of appropriateness and the problem of rationality. I then suggested that some form of fictionalism is the most plausible way of solving both these issues. Consequently, I highlighted that following this train of thought involves understanding commemorative acts as an elaborate sort of pretend play. I also discussed how this changes our perspective on commemorative acts and drew attention to various new issues that emerge here. More work would need to be done to generate a full understanding of the fictionalist approach to commemoration. But I hope to have at least made a start by drawing attention to this line of thinking and to show how it might be integrated into the philosophical discussion.

Anja Berninger, University of Stuttgart, Stuttgart, Germany. [anja.berninger@philo.uni-stuttgart.de](mailto:anja.berninger@philo.uni-stuttgart.de)

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## NOTES

- 1 For an overview of fictionalist positions in different areas of philosophy, see Matti Eklund, 'Fictionalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2016), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/fictionalism/>.
- 2 Joanna Burch-Brown, 'Is it Wrong to Topple Statues and Rename Schools?' *Journal of Political Theory and Philosophy*, 1 (2017): 59–87; T. Timmerman, 'A Case for Removing Confederate Monuments', in B. Fischer (ed.) *Ethics, Left and Right: The Moral Issues that Divide Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 513–22; D. Demetriou, 'Ashes of Our Fathers: Racist Monuments and the Tribal Right', in Fischer, op. cit., pp. 523–45; Benjamin Cohen Rossi, 'False Exemplars: Admiration and the Ethics of Public Monuments', *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 18, 1 (2020): 49–84.
- 3 The question of how strong this idealisation is and what this means for the relation between collective memory and historical studies has been much debated. For a brief overview of these issues, see Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, 'Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Studies', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998): 105–40. For a relatively recent publication exemplifying this approach with respect to concrete individuals, see, e.g. Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994). For a concrete analysis of the idealisation of Mandela as one of the figures under discussion here, see D. Hook, 'In the Name of Mandela', in A. Allo, E. Christodoulidis, and S. Cowan (eds) *The Courtroom as a Space of Resistance: Reflections on the Legacy of the Rivonia Trial* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 4 Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- 5 Ajume H. Wingo, *Veil Politics in Liberal Democratic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- 6 I have gestured towards fictionalism in a blog post, yet without going into much detail. Anja Berninger, 'Commemorating Nelson Mandela as a Person and as a Symbol', (2019), <http://stockholmcentre.org/commemorating-nelson-mandela-as-a-person-and-as-a-symbol/#more-3247>.
- 7 For this allegation, see, e.g. Max Fisher, 2013, "'The Last Great Liberator': Why Mandela Made and Stayed Friends with Dictators', *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/12/10/the-last-great-liberator-why-mandela-made-and-stayed-friends-with-dictators/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.1e19f346d5c1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/12/10/the-last-great-liberator-why-mandela-made-and-stayed-friends-with-dictators/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1e19f346d5c1).
- 8 For an in-depth discussion of the fittingness of admiration and problems associated with it, see Macalaster Bell, 'Globalist Attitudes and the Fittingness Objection', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 61, 244 (2011): 449–72.
- 9 This has led some authors to suggest that holistic admiration is too demanding. See Alfred Archer and Benjamin Matheson, 'When Artists Fall: Honoring and Admiring the Immoral', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 5 (2019): 246–65.

- 10 A. Kauppinen, 'Ideals and Idols: On the Nature of Appropriateness of Agential Admiration', in A. Archer and A. Grahle (eds) *The Moral Psychology of Admiration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
- 11 Thanks are owed to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me and for providing me with the example discussed.
- 12 For an argument along similar lines, see Kauppinen, op. cit. He aims at making the more general point that admiration can never be targeted exclusively at actions.
- 13 Ashwin Desai and Goolam H. Vahed, *The South African Gandhi: Stretcher-bearer of Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).
- 14 Wingo, op. cit.
- 15 Kauppinen, op. cit.
- 16 See, e.g. Linda Zagzebski, 'Emotion and Moral Judgment', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66 (2003): 104–24.
- 17 One might wonder why we do not make use of fictional characters, instead of real-life people in our commemorative practices. I think this is partly because we cannot always neatly divide admiration-based commemoration from other forms, such as gratitude-based commemoration. And, for these other forms, we need to refer to real people, not fictions.
- 18 Wingo, op. cit.
- 19 My thinking here again owes much to Jeffrey Blustein's account of collective memory; see Blustein, op. cit. Drawing on Nietzsche, Blustein suggests that there are several different forms in which we (as a group) relate to our history. Very briefly summarised, we can see the past of our group in a highly idealised way or we can do so much more objectively (and much more critically). Blustein also suggests that these modes of relating to the past need to control and restrain one another, so that none becomes overbearing.
- 20 For assessments of Mandela that point in this direction, see e.g. Bill Keller, 2013, 'Nelson Mandela. A great man, with flaws', *The New York Times Magazine*, December 21, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/news/the-lives-they-lived/2013/12/21/nelson-mandela/>; Michael Holman, 2013, 'Nelson Mandela. A life rich in drama, tragedy, triumph and reconciliation', *The Telegraph*, December 7, 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/nelsonmandela/10503342/Nelson-Mandela-A-life-rich-in-drama-tragedy-triumph-and-reconciliation.html>.
- 21 There has been a discussion of the role of pretence in fictionalism and various theories have been suggested. Here, due to the limited space available, I try to steer clear of these complications. For the classical position on these questions, see Kendall L. Walton, *Mimesis as Make-believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- 22 For a real-life case along these lines, see Feige's analysis of the Israeli peace movement; Michael Feige, 'Rescuing the Person from the Symbol: 'Peace Now' and the Ironies of Modern Myth', *History & Memory*, 11 (1999): 141–68.