

2016

The Ethics of Historic Preservation

Erich Hatala Matthes
ematthes@wellesley.edu

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Version: Pre-print

Recommended Citation

Matthes, E. H. (2016), The ethics of historic preservation, *Philosophy Compass*, doi: 10.1111/phc3.12379

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Penultimate draft, 8/24/16. Please cite final version.

Abstract:

This article draws together research from various sub-disciplines of philosophy to offer an overview of recent philosophical work on the ethics of historic preservation. I discuss how philosophers writing about art, culture, and the environment have appealed to historical significance in crafting arguments about the preservation of objects, practices, and places. By demonstrating how it relates to core themes in moral and political philosophy, I argue that historic preservation is essentially concerned with ethical issues.

1. Introduction

Among our core commitments about the nature of value is the belief that valuable things ought to be preserved. As Sam Scheffler puts it: “It is difficult to understand how human beings could have values at all if they did not have conservative impulses. What would it mean to value things, but in general, to see no reason of any kind to sustain them or retain them or preserve them or extend them into the future?” (Scheffler, 2007, p. 106). If this is true about valuable things in general, then it is especially true for things that are valuable because they are *historically* significant. Whether it is because they are more prone to degradation, the source of emotional attachments, or thought to be irreplaceable (Matthes, 2013), there is a widespread preoccupation with historic preservation. The abundance of historic preservation societies, the prominence of encyclopedic museums, the burgeoning National Register of Historic Places in the United States (with 90,018 entries in 2014!) all speak to the prevalence of this view.

However, as ubiquitous as it may be, the belief that we ought to preserve historically valuable things is fraught with ethical complications. Given limited resources to devote to preservation efforts, which things should we preserve? Who should decide? Whose responsibility is it? Does preservation trump other values, such as access and ownership? These questions have long complicated efforts to preserve art and artifacts, and we continue to see them arise today, in contexts from repatriation claims made by indigenous communities, to the destruction of Syrian and

Iraqi antiquities by ISIL (not to mention the Syrian state). Moreover, the idea of historic preservation has entered into discussion of environmental preservation as well. As we confront the preservation of the environment in a rapidly changing world, how should the historical value of the landscape factor into our actions and decisions?

There is a sense in which the title of this piece could be misleading. The ethics *of* historic preservation suggests that historic preservation is an autonomous enterprise that may or may not be governed by some set of professional ethical norms, just as we might discuss the ethics of journalism or the ethics of business. Indeed, literature about the ethics of historic preservation outside of philosophy has typically been regarded in precisely this way: as a branch of professional ethics concerning those professions that deal with historic preservation, such as archaeology, cultural resource management, architecture, etc. Professional ethics is the study of how ethical norms constrain other goal-directed activities. For instance, if the goal of archeology is (simplistically) the scientific investigation of material traces in an effort to yield knowledge about the historic and prehistoric past, then archaeological ethics concerns the constraints that ethical norms place on the pursuit of that goal (for discussion, see (Scarre, 2014; Wylie, 1996)).¹ However, contrary to the view that the ethics of historic preservation is only a branch of professional ethics, I want to suggest here that historic preservation is *essentially* concerned with ethical issues. How we relate to the past is an important dimension of our ethical lives and relationships more broadly. Work by philosophers on historic preservation begins to point us in this direction.

This article will provide an introductory overview of recent philosophical work concerning the historic preservation of objects, practices, and places. Part of my goal will be to demonstrate that, while most philosophers may be unlikely to think of historic preservation as a field of inquiry in our discipline, recent years have seen a surprising array of contributions on the topic across philosophical sub-areas that would benefit from being unified. In highlighting the contributions that

philosophers have made to this issue, I will also show how the discussion of historic preservation relates to other central topics in moral and political philosophy, and indicate areas where further philosophical work is needed.

2. *The “Historic” in Historic Preservation*

To begin, it would be helpful to clarify how precisely historic preservation is concerned with history. For in a generic sense, everything that currently exists has a history, and so one might think that all questions about the preservation of existing things are *ipso facto* questions about historic preservation (Cf. Matthes, 2013, p. 37; Raz, 2001, p. 28). However, historic preservation concerns something more specific: namely, preservation that is guided and justified by appeal to the *historical significance* of the thing to be preserved (for discussion of historical significance, see Abegg, 1972; Danto, 1965). Not all arguments about preservation, even of things that are quite old, are thus arguments about historic preservation. For instance, consider Annette Baier’s discussion of the preservation of public goods, such as her alma mater the University of Otago (Baier, 1981). Baier suggests that intervening generations that fail to preserve what was given to them by a previous generation are blameworthy for the failure “to pass on the public benefits they themselves inherited” (Baier, 1981, p. 176). Drawing on a metaphor from a Scottish hymn, she goes on to claim: “The obligation that each generation has, which is owed equally to past and future generations, is the obligation to preserve the seed crop, the obligation to regenerate what they did not themselves generate” (Baier, 1981, p. 177). We can see here that Baier is concerned with the preservation of objects and institutions from the past, but note that it is not the historical significance of the university *per se* that she appeals to as justification for preservation, nor as a guide for how it should be preserved. Rather, her argument hinges on our responsibility to leave “as much and as good” of what has been given to us to those yet to come (Baier, 1981, p. 176). This is of course not to say that

the University of Otago is not historically significant or could not be the focus of historic preservation, nor that there will not be overlap between justifications of preservation that appeal to historical significance and those that appeal to responsibilities regarding what is given and future generations (for further discussion, see (Cohen, 2011; Scheffler, 2010; Thompson, 2000)). But it should serve to highlight how arguments concerned with the preservation of historically significant things need not be arguments for historic preservation.

In contrast with Baier's concerns, G. A. Cohen offers a description of preservation that is squarely focused on an object's history, albeit in a very personal context. Discussing an eraser that he has kept throughout his academic career, he writes:

I would hate to lose this eraser. I would hate that even if I knew that it could be readily replaced, not only, if I so wished, by a pristine cubical one, but even by one of precisely the same off-round shape and the same dingy colour that my eraser has now acquired. There is no feature that stands apart from its history that makes me want to keep this eraser. I want *my* eraser, with *its* history. What could be more human than that (Cohen, 2011, p. 221)?

This passage is useful not only for offering an example of a concern with preserving an object based on its history alone, but also for illustrating the diversity of contexts in which an interest in historic preservation can arise. Though we are often inclined to think about historic preservation in the grand context of cathedrals and museums, concern with historic preservation can arise in contexts from the individual to the global, where the historical significance in question ranges from the personal to the (purportedly) universal (Matthes, 2015). The common element is appeal to the historical significance of the thing to be preserved as the reason for preserving it. Attentiveness to the range of contexts in which such an appeal can arise will help us see its ethical contours. In particular, the personal attachment that Cohen feels toward his eraser and its history is a more common force in thinking about historic preservation than it may initially seem.

One of the contexts in which philosophers have written most about historic preservation is in the philosophy of art. Carolyn Korsmeyer has done important work in recent years investigating

the complicated relationships between history, age, and genuineness, and the roles these qualities play in aesthetic experience (Korsmeyer, 2008a, 2008b, 2012; Korsmeyer, Judkins, Bicknell, & Scarbrough, 2014). Throughout this work, she draws on the art historian Alois Riegl's distinction between "historical value" and "age value." Whereas historical value is more intellectual according to this distinction, rooted in propositional knowledge based in historical research, age value is primarily concerned with sensibility and affect (Korsmeyer, 2008a, p. 122). Because age value is inextricably linked with what Yuriko Saito calls the "sensuous surface" of an object (Saito, 1985, p. 143), Korsmeyer notes "historical value and age value may come into conflict, for age value does not resist the deterioration of objects that make time's passage manifest; in contrast, interest in historical value is more preservationist in sensibility. With careful attention to historical concerns, which often require restoration, the manifest properties that signal age value are compromised" (Korsmeyer, 2008a, p. 123). Of course, even a focus on age value can prompt questions about preservation, as we see, for example, in the case of ruins (Cooper, 2013). Moreover, the distinction can feel too blunt, failing to adequately capture the affective dimension of historical value, even when this is not tied to the sensuous surface of an object in a way that is most conducive to aesthetic experience: often, *facts* about history, especially concerning historical injustices, will play an inelimenable role in prompting affective responses. Indeed, it can be difficult to situate a third type of value grounded in the past—narrative value—relative to historical and age value. We will discuss narrative value in the context of environmental preservation below. But though we have glimpsed a variety of ways in which the past can generate value (and only some, at that (Cf. Young, 2013)), my hope is that we have now adequately circumscribed the kinds of values with which historic preservation can be concerned.

3. Ethical Entanglements

Having clarified the focus of historic preservation, we are now in a position to see how it raises ethical issues. According to some, historic preservation is a component of familiar virtues. So, for instance, Simon James has recently argued that a failure to treat historically significant objects with respect (leaving open precisely what that might entail) indicates a lack of humility (James, 2013), an argument that shares an affinity with Thomas Hill Jr.'s virtue-based account of environmental preservation (Hill Jr., 1983). However, historic preservation can raise moral concerns of a more other-regarding nature as well, in particular, where historically significant objects are the legal property of an individual or institution. If historical artifacts, for instance, are a public good, than this could ground moral arguments concerning their maintenance, availability, and control that might challenge the typical rights and privileges of legal ownership (Lindsay, 2012; Warren, 1989). Of course, the question of for *what public* they are a good is complex, and the difficult concept of "cultural property" has shaped discussion about the ethics of historic preservation in important ways.

For one, the very concept of cultural property can seem unclear because the boundaries of cultural groups are so difficult to determine (Appiah, 2006; Killmister, 2011; Matthes, 2016; Patten, 2014, p. Ch. 2). Even if such boundaries can be clearly delineated, cultural groups are often discontinuous with nations or tribes, and thus lack an organizational structure with the authority to make decisions about cultural property on behalf of the group as a whole. One influential line of thinking also maintains that historical artifacts are the property of humankind as a whole, rather than that of more specifically individuated cultures that produced them (Appiah, 2006; Merryman, 1986; Warren, 1989): thus the concept of cultural property does not on its own entail answers to questions about who should control historically significant objects and places. Moreover, philosophers such as Karen J. Warren have argued that the conceptual framework of cultural property foists a Western male perspective onto heterogeneous cultural contexts: she suggests that preservation itself should take precedence over questions about ownership, and that competing perspectives should be worked

through on the model of conflict resolution (Warren, 1989). However, it should be noted that a shift in focus from ownership of the past to stewardship of the past is not without its own pitfalls; as Alison Wylie has argued, stewardship models that focus exclusively on scientific concerns, for instance, can exclude other ways of valuing the past (and the communities that relate to the past in these ways) from how we pursue preservation goals (Wylie, 2005).

But independently of how and whether we can sort out the idea of cultural property, the diverse roles that historically significant objects and places can play in cultural identity is undeniable. This therefore raises questions about how historic preservation might be guided or constrained by ethical concerns about cultural preservation more broadly. For instance, Chike Jeffers has recently argued in favor of the praiseworthiness of cultural preservation, where this might include “the perpetuation of some of its [the culture’s] historical practices” (Jeffers, 2014). He goes on to argue that cultural preservation may have an especially important political role to play in the context of securing justice today in the face of historical racism and colonialism, to the extent that it may even be obligatory for the present victims of these oppressive systems (Jeffers, 2014). Complementary to this position, Janna Thompson has argued that repatriation of historical artifacts and remains is a component of reparations for historical injustices (Thompson, 2013). It is important to note that this obligation will stand even in contexts where historical artifacts will not be preserved as a consequence; for example, because they will be reburied or left to decay, in keeping with the practices of some Native American tribes (Lackey, 2006).

These discussions indicate that whether or not historic preservation is permissible will often be entangled with the *kind* of historical significance a place or object has, and in particular will be bound up with histories of injustice and continuing efforts to redress them in the present. For instance, consider recent debates over the preservation or removal of monuments to racist figures (Rini, 2015), as seen in the Rhodes Must Fall movement, or conflicts over display of the Confederate

Battle Flag. This requires that we consider the *meaning* of a given history in our thinking about preservation. One potential route to thinking about how the specific history of a place or object should guide our treatment of it will thus be to think about its story or narrative: the way in which its history produces meaning in the present. The narrative value of places has recently become a focus in the literature on environmental preservation, a topic we turn to now.²

4. Narrative Value and the Historic Preservation of Places

Appeal to the historical value of nature in discussions of environmental preservation and restoration appears at least as early as Robert Elliot's influential article "Faking Nature" (Elliot, 1982). Elliot feared the consequences of what he called "the restoration thesis," the idea that we can simply replace whatever parts of the natural environment we destroy. The worry stems from his contention that part of what is valuable about nature (however nature is ultimately to be defined) is that it has a certain kind of origin or history that is independent from human intervention (Cf. Goodin, 1992). Thus it follows that any human effort to restore nature will be unable to restore it at least in this respect: its value stems in part from having a certain kind of history, and that history cannot be replicated. Thus, Elliot favors preservation policies over restoration policies: policies, that is, that will preserve the natural history of a place, and thus preserve the particular kind of value that it has in virtue of that history (Cf. Scoville, 2013, p. 11).

Elliot appeals to analogies with artworks to drive home this intuition: discovering that your Vermeer is a fake would affect your evaluative attitudes towards it, even if it was otherwise indistinguishable from the original. Explaining whether and why such a reaction would be justified is a separate task beyond the scope of this article.³ Elliot's point is simply that *given* such a reaction would be justified, we can use it to motivate a similar evaluative differentiation on the basis of origin and history in the case of nature. It is worth noting, as a general observation, that philosophers have,

like Elliot, often appealed to the role of history in artistic and cultural preservation in order to explain the role that history plays in environmental preservation (e.g. Hammon, 1985; Heyd, 2005; Thompson, 2000), whereas scholars in law, anthropology, and other fields concerned with the protection of cultural heritage have mined the environmental literature for resources to bolster arguments in favor of heritage preservation (e.g. Harding, 1999; for concerns, see Meskell, 2011). This raises the interesting philosophical question of what should be the *explanans* and what the *explanandum* in analogies between environmental preservation and cultural heritage preservation, or whether both are best explained by a common appeal to the value of the past.

Janna Thompson provides a rich discussion of how recognizing that the environment is part of our cultural heritage might ground an obligation in favor of environmental preservation (Thompson, 2000). Appealing to an intergenerational social contract, she argues that we have a (defeasible) obligation to understand and appreciate the values of our predecessors, including the ways in which their cultural practices were intertwined with nature, and that this will involve preserving the very objects and places that they valued (Thompson, 2000, p. 251). She goes on to claim that this is an instance of “a more general case for respecting the legacy of past people,” even where this involves valuing and preserving what our ancestors did not value, such as historical wilderness (Thompson, 2000, p. 255). Thompson ultimately understands this connection to the past in terms of “regarding ourselves as part of a historical narrative: being able to understand our lives as a continuation of a story that relates the aspirations, points of view, and deeds of our predecessors to our own aspirations, beliefs and deeds... Preservation in this and many other cases is a way of respecting something whose existence and meaning binds people together in a diverse intergenerational society” (Thompson, 2000, pp. 255-257).

Although Elliot does not frame the historical value of nature in terms of narrative, there is also a certain narrative meaning implicit in his account. After all, Elliot is not just concerned with

any kind of history a place might have, but that which tell a certain story. As he puts it “We value the forest and river in part because they are representative of the world outside our domain” (Elliot, 1982). This provides at least one answer to questions that one might raise about why “naturalness” might be normatively significant (Scoville, 2013, p. 12). The idea is not that having a history independent from human intervention is *better full stop*, but rather, that it has a significance that is meaningfully *different* from a history of human engagement.⁴ The distinction serves to emphasize how the historical significance of the environment need not be understood in terms of cultural significance. This is not to deny that places can also tell stories about an often difficult history of human presence, as Thompson discusses, and recent work on historical value and environmental preservation has moved away from an exclusive focus on preserving nature’s independence to take up the complicated cases presented by histories of human interaction with the land.

John O’Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light’s book *Environmental Values* is oriented around presenting the narrative value of the environment as an essential corrective to both an obsession with cost-benefit analysis in the environmental literature and the responses to this utilitarian approach that environmental ethics has yielded (O’Neill, Holland, & Light, 2008). They argue that “time and history must enter our environmental valuations as constraints on future decisions,” and suggest the significance of narrative to our environmental decision-making is operationalized by the question: “What would make the most appropriate trajectory from what has gone before?” (O’Neill et al., 2008, p. 156).

One way to interpret the idea of continuing a narrative is as a form of historic preservation. Recall that historic preservation is essentially concerned with preserving historical *significance*: whether or not this will involve the preservation of physical objects and places in their current state will be a matter for argument, as we saw in this discussion of age value and historical value above. O’Neill, Holland, and Light are sensitive to this point, noting that, on the narrative model, “problems of

nature conservation are not problems about change as such...Some attempts at conservation can be disruptive precisely by virtue of stifling change and transforming the lived world into a museum piece” (O'Neill et al., 2008, p. 157) (again, we see the analogy between environmental preservation and art preservation, though here in a less flattering light). The idea of continuing a narrative attempts to flesh out one way in which historical significance might be preserved: by keeping the meaning of the past alive and available in the present and future, even if this itself requires change in the physical landscape (Cf. Arntzen, 2009).

This is an important task because, as the authors observe throughout the book, “Particular places matter to both individuals and communities in virtue of embodying their history and cultural identities” (O'Neill et al., 2008, pp. 2-3, 66, 163). Building on the book in a later article, Holland writes: “It is a place, that is a particular space at a particular time, that provides the spatio-temporal bedrock for any sequence of events, while history is precisely our attempt to make sense of that sequence of events” (Holland, 2011). We thus have reason to preserve both cultural landscapes and nature because of the (differing) meaningful relationships that they make available to us.

While there is certainly something appealing and intuitive about the idea that our lives are bound up in spatio-temporal narratives that link history and place in meaningful ways, it is less clear how to employ this observation as a guide to preservation. For one, as O'Neill, Holland, and Light acknowledge, narratives are selective and contested, and thus dominant narratives are liable to drown out those that have been historically marginalized (McShane, 2012, p. 60; Palmer, 2011). This makes it difficult to see how best to operationalize the narrative significance of place as a guide to preservation, a problem that echoes Wylie's hesitations about stewardship models for archaeology mentioned above (Wylie, 2005). For instance, does preserving a National Park like Yosemite as a space free of human residential communities capture the story of the displacement of Native Americans? How do we best preserve places so that the significance of *that* kind of history is

preserved and remembered? Historical narratives tell stories of trauma and violence in addition to stories of cultural achievement (Cf. Sandis, 2014), and we can encounter practical conflicts between preserving the heritage of different communities. On the more theoretical side, Katie McShane has recently challenged whether narrative accounts of value provide any evaluative standard at all: she worries that narratives offer a compelling picture of our valuing behavior, but no resources for understanding whether (and which) narratives are in fact valuable (i.e. worth valuing) (McShane, 2012). For instance, David Velleman has pointed out that narratives can mislead us because of the way in which they can provide emotional closure, even at the expense of adherence to the truth (Velleman, 2003). What standards can we appeal to in order to explain whether a narrative is a source of value or merely a psychological mollifier (McShane, 2012, pp. 58-59)?

As McShane goes on to explain: “one of the ways we rightly criticize narratives is by the way they represent values. If that’s right, then ‘getting the values right’ (or at least not getting them horribly wrong) needs to be part of our evaluative standard. But now we’ve got a problem. On this view, values will have to be both constituted by our narratives *and* that by which we judge the adequacy of our narratives” (McShane, 2012, p. 62). These concerns suggest that, while narratives might play a role in determining what is valuable, they cannot be the sole source of value: they must be supplemented by a value theory that provides a standard for evaluative adjudication within narratives themselves. Because we are often faced with competing narratives when it comes to questions of historic preservation, this insight is crucial. We will not be able to simply proceed by appeal to what would make “the most appropriate trajectory from what has gone before” absent a robust standard of appropriateness for the value of narratives and how to continue them.

As noted by both McShane and O’Neill et. al., the emphasis on narrative is part of a general push towards more pluralist conceptions of value. One finds many examples of this drive in both the environmental and anthropological literature on historic preservation, often taking the form of

acknowledgment of historically marginalized “stakeholders” in discussions about the management of both nature and the past (Cf. Warren, 1989; Wylie, 2005). While I think this is an important step in the right direction, once we have acknowledged the plurality of values and voices at play in historic preservation, we need to turn our attention to developing tools for how to take action from within this plurality, where merely seeking compromise will often be untenable due to irreconcilable values and perspectives.

5. Future Directions

This brings us, oddly enough, back to Cohen and his eraser. As we have seen in the discussion of narrative value and environmental preservation, history can give rise to meanings that in turn generate personal attachments to objects and places. But these attachments can be shared among people in ways that engage broader moral and political issues concerning our relationship with the past and each other: issues of identity, of a meaningful life, and of injustices in both the past and the present. So although we each have our “erasers,” the objects and places whose meaning or value have been shaped by history, we need to find ways to navigate these attachments without erasing those of others. The foregoing discussion suggests that further attention needs to be paid to, at least, the following issues.

First, how precisely does history shape our sense of identity? Should it? Do we merely favor existing psychological biases by giving normative weight to the value of the past? Second, given the plurality of ways in which history contributes to the value or significance of objects, practices, and places, how do we use those histories as a guide to practical action? What moral obligations or prohibitions apply to our responses to historically significant things? In particular, when and how is preservation the right response to historically significant things? Finally, how do we balance our positive attitudes towards the past with facts about historical injustice, and how might our response

to the past be constrained by matters of justice today? How do we adjudicate among competing historical narratives in our historic preservation efforts?

Although scientific inquiry about the past (archaeology, etc.) has an important role to play in historic preservation, we cannot lose sight of the ways in which historic preservation is fundamentally concerned with our sense of self and our relationships with others. Historic preservation is not merely subject to ethical constraints, but is at its heart concerned with ethical issues. When we put together the disparate threads in the philosophical literature discussed above, we see that philosophers have done important work beginning to explain the moral significance and complexities of historical value, and how the past gives shape and meaning to our lives. It is therefore not so surprising that when it comes to questions of historic preservation, the moral stakes will be higher than they otherwise might have seemed. The works discussed here offer an initial framework for investigating the remaining questions suggested above. Philosophers can play an important role in addressing these difficult moral and political puzzles, and if historical value is as central to core moral and political issues as the foregoing discussion suggests, then we can hardly afford not to.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Alison Wylie, Sarah Stroud, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

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Note: Readers new to this topic might begin with those texts marked with an *.

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¹ In what follows, use of the term “historic” is not meant to exclude the prehistoric past, assuming that is a viable distinction.

² There is a large philosophical literature on narrative that there is not room to address here; my discussion will thus be confined to the relationship between narrative and preservation.

³ For some discussion, see (Dutton, 1979; Irvin, 2007; Korsmeyer, 2012).

⁴ Though we should be wary of how a focus on independence from humans might lead us to erase or ignore human histories (such as indigenous histories) in places that might appear as wilderness to the untrained eye. For discussion, see (O'Neill, 2002).