

# *Lest We Forget: How and Why We Should Remember the Great War*

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ABSTRACT. Because commemorations of historic events say as much about the present as the past, it is important to think carefully about how and why we should remember the Great War in the centenary year of its outbreak. Commemoration must not be allowed to degenerate into mere mass entertainment, thoughtless celebration of martial valour, an occasion for chauvinism, or an advertisement for the merits of war as a means of settling international disputes. More respectable reasons for commemorating the Great War are that it provides opportunities (i) to learn from past mistakes, (ii) to reaffirm some common core values, and (iii) to pay our respects to those who died in their country's service. I argue, however, that each of these justifications raises serious problems of interpretation and application, and that careful thought and moral sensitivity are needed if our efforts at commemoration are not to send out the wrong messages.

KEYWORDS. Great War, commemoration, memorials, the dead, respect, common values

At the going down of the sun and in the morning,  
We will remember them.  
(Lawrence Binyon: *For the Fallen*)

## I. INTRODUCTION

The cataclysmic events initiated by the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz-Ferdinand in June 1914 continue, one hundred years later, to occupy a prominent place in public consciousness. The ease with which the most advanced civilisation the world had seen slipped into such a calamitous conflict still seems astonishing; but *facilis descensus Avernus* when conventional politics and diplomacy fail, as they did in the Europe of 1914, and no one is able to foresee the horrors that lie ahead. By 1918,

the war that was expected to be over by its first Christmas had killed around ten million combatants plus an unknown number of civilians, toppled emperors and kings, transformed national economies and social relationships, eroded traditional moral and religious beliefs, and ushered in a new era of existential anxiety.<sup>1</sup> It was an episode in human history that it would be very hard to forget.<sup>2</sup> But that raises the question of just how it should now be remembered. All remembering reflects a specific set of beliefs and values and acts of remembrance hold a mirror up to the present as well as the past. This is neither improper nor regrettable, since it is fair to enquire what the past means to us in terms of our contemporary concerns. But problems arise when the past is viewed through too narrow a framework of current conceptions and priorities. While history is rightly seen as a source of guidance, warning and inspiration for later generations, special interests can generate perspectives that are not merely selective (for all historical reflection is that) but also biased, partial and unjust.

In this article I shall be concerned more with the ethical than the epistemic problems associated with the commemoration of World War I, although the two cannot be wholly separated given that in contemplating one's history ignorance is *not* bliss but the basis of a distorted self-image that is potentially harmful to oneself and others. Nations as well as individuals need to heed the Socratic advice to 'know thyself'. Where a country discards objectivity in favour of a self-serving or a cavalier approach to the facts about its past, it misrepresents itself to itself and to other nations and risks damaging its relationships. 2014 provides a valuable opportunity for the former combatant nations to re-evaluate the significance of the Great War and the subsequent evolution of the European and world landscape, but it is not an opportunity without risks.

Our modern fascination with anniversaries ensures that much will be heard about the Great War over the next few years, as one by one the centenaries arrive of its most significant events. Already the flow of new books, films, plays and television documentaries about the conflict is in full spate, while thousands of religious and secular remembrance ceremonies

in many countries will keep the War in the forefront of attention. Whether any substantially new interpretations of the War will emerge from this intensification of interest remains to be seen, although there is some evidence of a fresh focus on the ‘home-front’ experience of the War and on the hitherto neglected contribution of colonial troops to the fighting armies.<sup>3</sup> While the spotlight of historical research will doubtless illuminate some previously dark corners, much of the commemorative effort seems directed less at revealing new information about the War than at bringing its reality more vividly to life for the generations whose experience has encompassed nothing remotely similar or so terrible. This is something to be welcomed. To the young especially, a hundred years is an immense span of time and events that happened so long ago may seem to hold little interest in an age when war games are computer pastimes. Centenary commemorations of the War could easily prove to be milestones on the road to disconnection. To counter this, it is not enough to emphasise that the First World War had a profound and abiding influence on the world we now live in. It is vital that the commemorations take account of the phenomenology of the War – of what it actually *felt* like to be living through that troubled time. If the young (and not-so-young) are to feel connected with the War generation, they must gain some imaginative grasp of the experience of being a soldier or a nurse on the Somme, or a sailor in an Atlantic convoy, or an anxious mother or wife waiting at home for news from the front.

Commemorating the dead of the First World War began in Britain almost as soon as the War ended, although in the early post-war years Armistice Day was “[...] a focus for reunions and drinking, for celebration as well as commemoration” (Strachan 2014, 328). The Allies, after all, had won the War, and their triumph deserved applause. Only gradually did public memory do what much private memory had done from the beginning, and emphasise instead “[...] the messages of waste and futility” (Strachan 2014, 328). The memorial ceremony to ‘The Glorious Dead’ held before the Cenotaph in London’s Whitehall on Remembrance Sunday has taken

place each November since 1921, and similar services are held at local war memorials in every town and village throughout the land.<sup>4</sup> But what precisely is the point of such acts of remembrance now that the habit of triumphalism, at least in Europe, has fallen out of favour?

If triumphalism offends contemporary moral consciousness, it is because we now pay more attention to the human costs of victory, for the losing as well as the winning side and for civilians as well as for combatants. It would make no sense to go to war without the aim of defeating the enemy, but it is not essential to the logic of conflict that one should stand gleefully over a fallen foe. Victory may be enjoyed but not gloated over. And if pleasure can legitimately be taken in the overthrow of an evil ideology such as Nazism, it should not be taken in the deaths of those who, whatever their motives, fought on the losing side. While the militaristic *Kultur* of Germany was popularly identified in Allied countries as the evil root of the First World War, none of the combatant nations was above using methods of extreme savagery in pursuing its war aims. Commemoration of any war needs to be careful in its allocation of moral praise and blame and recognise how much was neither black nor white but field-grey. Yet we would be wrong to abstain from moral judgement altogether, or to seek to make commemorations ‘moral-lite’. Indeed, the failure of political leaders at the time to take a hard moral look at war, and their too-ready acceptance of Clausewitz’s dictum that “war is the continuation of politics by other means”, were themselves among the causes of the Great War.

In what follows, I shall focus on three prima-facie justifications for commemorating the Great War and other conflicts in which our countries have been involved. All three, I shall argue, although plausible in some respects, face some serious difficulties. The problems I shall discuss mainly concern the more formal public ceremonies of remembrance (including addresses by political leaders) and their material equivalent, war memorials, art works (including sculpted monuments) and commemorative plaques. In general, the publication of an academic study of a past

event raises fewer difficulties than officially sponsored events of commemoration do. A historian can be expected to argue for a particular interpretation of the event in question, weighing its merits against those of rivals, but the latter tend to present a single, simplified reading of the past, informed by and reinforcing a particular set of values. Neither the reading nor the values need be bad ones, but their dependence on unchallenged assumptions and their suasive intent are problematic.

The three justificatory reasons I shall be concerned with will be discussed at length in the three following sections. Here I offer some brief introductory remarks.

### *Learning From the Past*

Santayana's well-known remark that "[...] those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (1905, 284) identifies a cogent prudential motive for reflecting carefully on the past when planning for the future. Recognising past mistakes can help in avoiding future ones, while (the positive side of the coin) studying past successes may serve to make future success more probable. Recent American and British military adventurism in the Middle East is a signal example of how things can go wrong when leaders fail to learn the lessons of history (including, one might suggest, the lesson taught by the disastrous Austrian response to the terrorist act in Sarajevo). But a contrasting view is also possible: that learning from history is both hard and risky, because circumstances that are similar in some respects may be crucially different in others. Agents can be tripped up by following old models when what is really needed is fresh thinking to meet new situations. Remembering the past can lead to entrapment by it.

### *Reaffirming Our Common Values*

'Commemoration' usually implies more than the mere bland recall of facts ('Queen Elizabeth slept here'). To commemorate a person or event

normally involves conveying, with more or less explicitness, certain value judgements ('We remember the gallant soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion who gave their lives for their country'). When the nation comes together to remember its significant history, it engages in the normative enterprise of reaffirming some core values, proclaiming them for all to hear and heed. This may at first seem unobjectionable, even laudable. It is good to be reminded of the value to be placed on freedom, democracy, loyalty, courage, honour, the fellowship of citizens and the maintenance of civilised standards of behaviour. The traditions that weld a nation together and sustain its members' sense of collective identity are underpinned by the values that men and women are willing to defend in actions that may be personally costly. But the worry is that the solemn reaffirmation of a particular set of values may set those values in aspic, protecting them against question, evolution or revision. Challenging the nation's values is then seen as tantamount to challenging the nation itself, an act of wicked disloyalty. Yet when people speak of 'national values' or 'the values that have made the nation what it is', it is pertinent to ask *whose* values these originally were, how they came to be established, and whom they now benefit. The commemoration of past wars may reinforce a conservative reading of values that is explicitly or implicitly exclusive of alternatives that ought to be considered.

### *Paying Respect to the Dead*

Many people think it morally incumbent on them to remember the suffering and sacrifices of their fellow citizens who fought and died in the Great War and more recent conflicts. This is conceived not as a duty simply to recall the facts, but to remember in a way that recognises what the living owe to the dead. The ceremonies of Remembrance Sunday pay tribute to the honoured dead; they express respectful gratitude to those who died in their prime to secure their country's freedom and prosperity. To forget or ignore their sacrifices would be like failing to acknowledge

a gift given by a living donor; it would mark us off as thankless, self-centred and discourteous. Although we cannot reciprocate the benefits conferred by those who have died for us in war, we can at least, in Lawrence Binyon's words, gratefully remember them "at the going down of the sun and in the morning".

However, there is an obvious difference between expressing gratitude towards living benefactors and dead ones: only the former can be conscious recipients of our thanks. Of course we can acknowledge what we owe to those who have now died, and voice our gratitude for the sacrifices they made. And it is reasonable to think that we ought to do this, given that we cannot now communicate our thanks to the dead. Yet the conventional discourse of respect for the war-dead goes beyond positing free-floating duties to be grateful and to express our gratitude for their sacrifices; rather, these are seen as duties that we owe *to the dead themselves*. But this conception of them is problematic. It is not very clear how there can be any moral obligations *to* the dead if death marks – as in this contribution I shall assume it does – the end of the personal subject. Plausibly, one first has to exist before one can be an object of moral obligations. It is hard to make sense of the claim that X is owed to Y if there is no Y to whom X can be paid. The philosophical task (to be taken up in section IV) is to investigate whether there can be a genuine obligation to the War-dead to feel and to voice our respectful gratitude for the sacrifices they made. Could it be that our commemorative practices reflect a deep-seated illusion that the dead are somehow aware of our tributes, prayers and wreath-layings, an illusion born of our deep-seated reluctance to sunder our connections with them and recognise the absolute finality of death?

## II. LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Increasing our own generation's ability to make wise policy decisions I shall term the 'pragmatic reason' for keeping the past in view. This reason

is not ethically neutral. Reflecting on the acts of our forebears is plausibly seen as morally, as well as epistemically, virtuous. It is good not only to look before one leaps, but also look at what happened to others who leaped earlier. Neglecting to do so may lead to a disaster that could and should have been prevented. Where that disaster occurs to other people, one may be highly culpable for not taking greater care. Guesswork, conjecture and a disposition to take gambles with others' safety are morally unacceptable where relevant practical information is available but ignored.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, not only good leaders are capable of learning from the mistakes of the past; evil ones, or those whose expertise is exploited to serve an evil cause, may be so too. Thus the German tactic of *Blitzkrieg* in World War II was devised in the inter-war period by General Heinz Guderian as a way of avoiding in any future conflict the colossal German casualties incurred in the trench warfare of 1914-18 (Guderian 1937). And where those bent on evil learn from their previous failures, it is essential that those who oppose them are equally adept at drawing lessons from the past.

The difficulties that beset the pragmatic reason are more concerned with its practice than its principle. It can be hard in given circumstances to determine precisely what the past teaches the present, or whether any relevant morals can be drawn. In considering the pragmatic reason, one senses the tang of the ideal. The inductive strategies that guide us in everyday life focus on a much smaller range of variables than confront those who steer the lives of nations. Even when decision-makers are aware of potential pitfalls and take care to avoid them, mistakes may occur. Among the more obvious grounds of going wrong, the following are noteworthy.

### *False Analogies*

Because human affairs are intricately contextualised, two situations are never entirely alike. Hence the broad categorisations and interpretations

that we impose may badly oversimplify the reality. Wrong lessons are readily drawn when significant dissimilarities between different historical circumstances are overlooked, or when expectations of uniformity or continuity prove ill-founded. Albert Speer records Hitler's astonishment at Britain and France's declarations of war following the invasion of Poland in September 1939; the Führer had wrongly inferred from their leaders' previous efforts at appeasement that they would once again stand aside in the event of further German aggression (Speer 1995, 238).

### *Fixation in the Past*

Errors can also occur when out-of-date categorisations are employed that represent the present as being more like the past than it is. A painful example is the reluctance of many modern British politicians to relinquish older images of Britain as an imperial power and arbiter of other countries' destinies. Memories of Britain's days as a first-rate power, combined with a desire to imitate the triumphs of the past, have encouraged military belligerence in Britain as late as the twenty-first century. While looking to history for models and precedents can yield useful insights, it needs to be accompanied by a careful appraisal of relevant changed circumstances and a willingness to adapt to new conditions. Where replication has become a habit, innovation can seem needless. To avoid the illusion that history will always show us how to do things and that novel thinking is superfluous, Nietzsche recommended the practice of 'creative forgetting', putting the past out of mind and considering all options *de novo*. In this way history should function always as a servant and never as a master. In the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche proposed that "The study of history is salutary and fruitful for the future only as the attendant of a mighty new current of life, of an evolving culture for example, that is to say when it is dominated and directed by a higher force and does not itself dominate and direct" (1997, 67).

*The Desire to Emulate*

Recalling what our forebears did provides us with models to imitate or avoid. Their experience can be encouraging or dismaying. It can also provoke a desire of emulation that may have either good or bad consequences. When the living use the past as a touchstone by which to assess their own comparative achievements, failures, virtues and vices, they naturally wish to prove that they are at least as good as their ancestors. Even where past models are not taken as ideals, they may still appear to set the rules of the game. “The Great War was horrible,” a veteran of that conflict said to me many years ago, “but it made men out of milk-sops.” When today’s young men hear the praises sung of the soldiers of 1914-18, should they feel inferior to their ancestors because they are not wallowing in the mud and blood of Flanders fields? Do we constantly need to find new wars to fight in order to prove the mettle of our manhood?

*Romanticisation, Sanitisation*

Just as individuals may be tempted to put the best gloss they can on the less honourable episodes of their personal narratives, so those who identify with their national narrative may choose to view its more shameful features through rose-tinted spectacles. The sense of pride that prompts this sanitising tendency is not in itself reprehensible, but it is harmful when it leads to the deception of self or others. Romanticised or expurgated versions of a nation’s history sin against truth, masking from both citizens and strangers the nation’s qualities and faults. Commemorations of the dead of the Great War should recall the evils that the combatants inflicted as well as those they suffered. It is conventional to pay much more attention to the gallantry and sacrifices of the country’s forces in World War I than to the terrible casualties they caused to the other side. For instance, British infantry training

included drilling in the practice of the bayonet, learning how to stab the enemy in the stomach, twist and withdraw the weapon so that his guts came away with it. The British soldiers who machine-gunned, shot, bayoneted, or gassed the enemy, or blew him to bits with heavy artillery, were mostly not bad or morally irresponsible men; subject to orders and hoping to survive in a hellish environment in which one either killed or was killed, their power of personal choice was limited (though sometimes a choice was available, for example, whether to kill an enemy or take him prisoner). Much that was done by ‘the glorious dead’ was very far from glorious.

### *Misleading Simplifications*

It is uncertain how many British soldiers of the Great War regarded the ends for which they were fighting as worth the sacrifices and suffering that were demanded from them. In a retrospect written in the 1970s, Ronald Skirth (who narrowly escaped death at Passchendaele) emphatically contended that no Great War soldier gave his life for freedom; rather, he had it taken from him against his will (2011, 348-349). Although this probably underestimates the patriotic idealism of many of the combatants, Skirth’s comment is a reminder that all manner of men and women go, or are sent, to war. The armed forces of any land contain, besides the genuine heroes and self-sacrificing individuals, a host of thieves, cowards, sadists, cheats, liars and others ‘indifferently honest’. Unless glory or heroic status can be acquired simply by dying in one’s country’s war (a popular but implausible notion), the truth is that not all the soldiers of Britain or of any other country displayed spectacular virtue, either on or off the battlefield. As the British soldiers marched they sang “We’re here because we’re here because we’re here...” (endlessly reiterated). Commemoration that represents all the combatants as patriotic heroes, inspired by the love of God, King and Country, peddles a romantic myth.<sup>6</sup>

## III. REAFFIRMING OUR COMMON VALUES

Pacifists believe that even wars fought for high-minded purposes are invariably worse than the ills they attempt to cure (and many wars, of course, are fought for no high-minded purpose). It is obviously possible to celebrate the values or principles for which a nation went to war without believing that it was wise, or right, to take up arms on that occasion. Commemorations of the Great War that seek to reaffirm values for which the War was fought should not be assumed, therefore, to be ‘pro-war’. And although these are often presented as alternatives, it is possible to see World War I as *both* a great patriotic war for freedom and national security *and* as an unnecessary tragedy in which the “lions led by donkeys” were steered to a premature death because stubborn generals and politicians preferred the stalemate of the western front to any compromise peace. But if the centenary of the Great War provides an opportunity, as many think it does, to reassert fundamental values, the question arises just which values should be asserted. This can be hard to say, for several reasons.

*Old Values, New Values*

That the allied nations went to war to defend freedom against the threat of German tyranny, and that allied soldiers were personally committed to this war aim and willing to give their lives for it, has been the official British view of the War since August 1914. Public outrage in Britain at the brutal invasion of Belgium by the German army certainly led many men to volunteer to fight for the liberation of ‘brave little Belgium’. Yet the bullying of a small country by a large one, and Germany’s disrespect for international borders, rankled with a British public that complacently accepted its own right to dominate many less powerful countries in the world. It is consequently not easy to see exactly what concept of ‘freedom’ from the 1914-18 conflict we might appropriately reaffirm today.

In a post-imperialist age, the idea that freedom is a right only of those countries or individuals who ‘deserve’ it, or who ‘know how to exercise’ it, is no longer acceptable. So could the centenary commemorations instead reaffirm the commitment to democracy and citizen rights that the allied nations were fighting for in 1914? That too would be difficult. The German Constitution established under Bismarck’s leadership in 1871 extended the right to vote for members of the Reichstag to all men of voting age.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the Third Reform Act of 1884 allowed the right to vote in parliamentary elections to less than two-thirds of British men, including those of artisan level and above, but excluding labourers and the unskilled (Smith 2004, 170; women had the right to vote in parliamentary elections in neither country before 1918). Meanwhile Britain and France’s eastern ally, Russia, was an autocracy wholly opposed to democracy in any form. Memoirs of soldiers written after the War suggest that the ideals uppermost in most combatants’ minds, as the conflict dragged on, were not the saving of democracy or defence of ‘the right’, but personal survival and loyalty to comrades. In time, many likewise came to believe with the poet Siegfried Sassoon that the War was an utterly evil thing, sustained not by moral ideals, but by the hubris and intransigence of politicians and generals (Sassoon 1917).

It may be objected that we do not, in 2014, have to reaffirm exactly the same values as those of the War generation, or to spell out those values in just the same way. The centenary can be regarded as providing a chance to reconsider our value judgements and reflect on how these have altered in a hundred years. Yet are we even now so clear what to think about war? Which of the following views should we take in 2014? That it is sweet and fitting to die on the battlefield for one’s country – called the ‘old lie’ by war-poet Wilfred Owen (Owen 1918) but still sometimes heard when the body-bags return from Iraq and Afghanistan? That ‘freedom’ is a good worth dying for? That courage and heroism in war are ennobling? Or that war is a dehumanising form of activity that usually produces far more evil than it prevents? Many wish to honour the

self-sacrifice of the soldiers of the Great War while also paying tribute to the conscientious objectors and pacifists who opposed the war. But it is scarcely possible to reaffirm in the same breath the values that drove both the patriotic soldiers and the conscientious objectors. How the official and unofficial centenary commemorations will cope with this fundamental tension is not yet apparent.

One constraint on the forms that remembrance can take is that the war memorials that are the sites of much of the commemorative activity are traditionally associated, as Jay Winter has observed, with “the cult of the fallen”. Originally intended as places where people could mourn and be seen to mourn, “[...] their ritual significance has often been obscured by their political symbolism which, now that the moment of mourning had passed, is all that we can see.” Thus war memorials tend to be ‘conservative expressions’ of a cult of manly self-sacrifice, in which the nation worships itself (Winter 1995, 93). Furthermore, as Jon Davies has pointed out, the wording on memorials typically valorises the sacrifice of the dead by comparing it to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ: “They died that we might live’ just as Christ himself laid down his life for sinners (Davies 1995, 137). War memorials may therefore be unsuitable sites at which to praise the virtues of conscientious objectors and other critics of war.<sup>8</sup>

### *National Identity in Flux*

The ethnic make-up of Britain and most western countries has changed over the last century to a degree scarcely imaginable in 1914. Now that the United Kingdom is a multi-cultural and multi-faith society, many of its citizens have little sense of identity with the British Great War generation. Some undoubtedly remember the British Empire primarily as the oppressor of weaker peoples in Africa and Asia. The colonial troops who were enlisted on the allied side fought for a cause that was their masters’ rather than their own, and they had no effective voice on policy or strategy. At the centenary, consideration must be shown for the sensibilities

of those citizens who, while they may join in sorrowing for the War dead, may feel little fondness for the values and aims of the Empire they served. Commemorations that slur over the different historical relationships in which communities stand to the events of 1914-18 risk alienating sectors of the population and enhancing social and ethnic divisions.

### *Reopening Old Wounds*

Commemorating the Great War can also reinvigorate historic divisions between nations. In 2014 as in 1914, Germany is the most powerful country in continental Europe, with the ability to call the shots in weaker Eurozone countries. The dominance of Germany has understandably bred resentment in parts of Europe and suspicion of German intentions has again become a factor in European politics. In this context of mistrust, it is doubtful whether the commemoration of the 1914-18 war will do much to smooth out relations. Recalling the fears, jealousies and rivalries of 1914 may strengthen the tendency to think about the present in terms of conflict rather than cooperation, national self-assertion rather than European sodality. Perhaps this outlook is too pessimistic. On a more hopeful scenario, recalling the disaster of the Great War may remind Europeans why nations need to do their best to get on with one another. However, this message is in danger of getting lost if commemorations of the War focus too narrowly on the national dead and their patriotic sacrifice.

### *Confusion of Jus ad Bellum with Jus in Bello*

An ancient tradition distinguishes between the justice of the cause for which a war is fought and the justice of the means by which it is fought. A country may go justly *ad bellum* while adopting unacceptable means *in bello*; perhaps less commonly, a war without a just cause may be fought in a relatively chivalrous manner (Napoleon's campaigns are sometimes thought to merit this description). What counts as an 'unjust means' of

prosecuting a war can be controversial, although the deliberate targeting of civilians is widely regarded as unacceptable and was formally condemned by the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. Thus the deliberate starving of German women and children caused by the allied naval blockade of German ports may have brought World War I to a swifter end, but was dubiously legitimate on both moral and legal grounds.

Commemorations of a conflict ought to distinguish between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* and avoid any automatic assumption that where the cause was right, the means adopted to achieve it must also have been legitimate. To believe that anything that one's country does must be right because one's country does it is to show oneself a blinkered patriot. Commemorations of a nation's wars should hold the nation up to critical scrutiny and eschew echoing without questioning the value judgements that were current at the time. Criticism should be made where it is due, and it should not be inhibited by a false moral delicacy that dislikes offering any censure of the dead.

#### IV. PAYING RESPECT TO THE DEAD

In a sensitive discussion of why people erect gravestones, Sarah Tarlow writes that “To erect a monument is a way of showing how much an individual has meant to you, and showing that to the rest of the community” (1999, 131). A gravestone provides a focus for “[...] meditation and prayer, essential activities of the man or woman of feeling”. Further, “The stone is a memorial to the deceased, but also, crucially, a memorial to a relationship” (1999, 131). War memorials are public rather than private monuments, but they are similarly intended as points of connection with the dead – not only poignant markers of people who died by violence, but reminders of our relationship to them as the beneficiaries of their sacrifices. The ceremonies of Remembrance Sunday make this relationship explicit: we are enjoined to pay tribute to the fallen of past conflicts who gave their lives unselfishly and who are entitled to have that sacrifice

acknowledged. But two rather different difficulties arise here. The first is that it is puzzling how the dead, being now out of the world, can be the objects of any moral duties or responsibilities within it. The second is that probably very few of those who fought in World War I had any thought of benefiting people beyond the next generation or two. But if they did not do and suffer what they did for the sake of people of the twenty-first century, should we still be expected to pay a tribute of gratitude to them? I shall take these difficulties in turn.

*The Non-Existence of the Dead*

It is commonly held that we owe it to the war dead themselves to remember them in a spirit of respect and gratitude. But if death marks the extinction of the personal self, then to whom or what is this obligation owed? One attempt at an answer has been given by Antoon de Baets who observes in an article on the responsibilities of present generations to past generations:

The dead are less than human beings, but still *reminiscent* of them, and they are more than bodies or objects. This invites us to speak about the dead in a language of posthumous dignity and respect, and about the living, therefore, as having some definable core responsibilities to the dead (2004, 130).

This is unsatisfactorily vague as it stands, but de Baets attempts to put some flesh on the dry bones. Arguing that where bodies remain, it is wrong to speak of the dead as ‘non-existent’, he suggests that the best way to think of the dead is as “former human beings” (2004, 134). Waiving the obvious objection that physical traces of people do *not* always remain, de Baets’ conception of the dead as former human beings (or persons) does not contradict the assumption that, after death, the *personal subject* (or *self*) exists no more. But this leaves the problem that there appears to be no *present* object of any putative obligations to the dead except in the case where there are physical remains to which duties of respectful treatment

may be owed. De Baets himself accepts that his definition of the dead as “former human beings” does not wholly remove the ‘paradoxes’ involved in thinking about our duties to them (2004, 134-135).

A different line has been taken by Bob Brecher, who argues that what we have received from those who have gone before us – including, crucially, not only existence but our identity as individual persons – makes it seemly to acknowledge a debt to them. Even if not everything that we inherit from our forebears is beneficial (e.g. we may have inherited some faulty genes that have adverse health effects), we owe a debt at least in respect of our identity. According to Brecher, this is “[...] a debt I have incurred inasmuch as it has helped to make me a person at all – and being a person, having a moral identity, cannot but be one sort of benefit” (2002, 116). I agree with Jeremy Wisnewski that Brecher fails to prove what he purports to prove, namely that our indebtedness for our identity grounds some genuine obligations to the dead. Our genetic and our social identity are both inheritances, but, as Wisnewski remarks, “[...] it does not follow that there are any particular obligations to the dead who have enabled agents to be what they are” (2009, 58). For the link between our forebears and ourselves is a purely causal one that reflects no particular intentions on the part of the now-deceased to make us into the persons we are. In Wisnewski’s view, Brecher establishes that we should *value* the dead to whom we are so indebted, but nothing further. Even if Brecher’s argument worked, it could establish only that we have obligations towards those of the dead who have contributed towards the formation of our identity. Since most of the dead have contributed little or nothing to this, our obligations to them would consequently be slight at best. Moreover, there is nothing to feel grateful for in regard to those things done or undergone by our forebears that have contributed *negatively* to our identities. Into this category fall wars that, however nobly intentioned, have left a legacy of lessened peace, prosperity or national respect.

One option at this point is to abandon the idea that there are any genuine obligations *to the dead*. Adopting this would not mean abandoning

the thought that it is right and proper to feel, and arguably also to express publicly, a sense of the benefits we have received from our forebears. So if we were to fail to remember with respectful gratitude the suffering of the Great War combatants from which we have benefited, we would demonstrate blameworthy negligence and moral insensitivity. But we could not be blamed for failing to fulfil an obligation to the dead themselves.

This line, however, is unnecessarily austere. Obligations to the non-existent dead may be impossible, but it does not follow that there can be no obligations to the *living people* the now-deceased once were. The dead, as ‘former people’ (to cite de Baets’ formula) no longer exist but they *once* existed. The best way to think about putative ‘duties to the dead’ may therefore be to reconceptualise them as duties owed retrospectively to formerly living people. A present obligation does not have to be directed at a present object. If, for example, I made a promise to a dying friend to scatter her ashes in a certain spot, I am not released from my promise at the moment she dies. Although her personal existence is at an end, I retain an obligation towards the living woman to whom I made the promise. Or suppose that after my friend’s death I ungraciously deny or make light of various benefits I had previously received from her. This wrongs not the *dead* woman but the *living* woman who supplied the benefits, and who would doubtless have expected me to make a better return for them. My graceless behaviour renders her former generosity misplaced, a virtuous misadventure. If she could have foreseen how I would respond to her gifts, she might well have chosen a worthier beneficiary. These examples show how retrospective obligations or duties arise when the future has been, so to speak, morally ‘hooked’ by a present occurrence such as the making of a promise or the bestowing of a benefit.

### *The Appropriateness of Gratitude*

While thinking about moral obligations to now-deceased people in terms of retrospective obligations to the living persons they once were relieves

the perplexity aroused by the idea of obligations to the non-existent, it still leaves questions about the character of those obligations. I have suggested that it would retrospectively wrong a living benefactor if, after her death, the beneficiary denied the benefits received from her. But what would be one's moral obligations if one had been an unintended beneficiary of a now-deceased person? It is very unlikely that many of the soldiers, sailors or airmen who fought in the Great War did so in the hope or expectation that people several generations later would remember their sacrifices with gratitude or honour their memory with ceremonies. But it does not follow that current expressions of gratitude or respect are out of place. It is gracious to feel thankful for benefits received even when the benefactors did not specifically intend to benefit us. Knowing that someone has deliberately done you a service warrants your acknowledging the personal thought involved. But gratitude can also be in order when you are the fortunate recipient of benefits that were not originally intended for you (unless, perhaps, the 'benefactor' would not have wished you to have them.) So, if we believe that we have benefited from the sacrifices of the combatants of the Great War, it is right to feel gratitude to them and to find ways of expressing it. Families may like to remember especially the sacrifices of their own former members, lovingly preserving their photographs, medals and other memorabilia. But because the War was a great national struggle, commemorations of a more public and communal type are also required, in order to acknowledge the country's debt.<sup>9</sup>

But how should we think and feel about the *bad* effects that the First World War had on millions of human beings? What if our gains have been acquired at the unfair expense of others? If A gives to you an item of value he has stolen from B, you have neither a duty nor a right to be thankful to A; rather, you ought to reprimand the donor and return the item to its rightful owner. The nineteenth-century imperialist wars that put the 'Great' into Britain brought the country riches and power, but they did this at a high cost in lives, property and freedom to the subjugated peoples of Africa and Asia. For a Briton of a century ago to feel

grateful for the empire-building efforts of the country's soldiers and sailors seems nowadays more than a little indecent, if pardonable given the values of the time. It is hard to specify and evaluate with precision the goods and ills that flowed from the Great War. In Britain the conflict, while bankrupting the country and laying the ground for the economic slump of the 1920s, stimulated profound social change, speeded up democratisation and the decline of the class system, improved the social and political position of women, and laid the ground for the abandonment of empire. These are welcome legacies that we can feel thankful for today. What the Great War certainly was *not*, despite the hopes of the victors, was the 'war to end wars', the conflict that made future mass conflicts unthinkable. In so far as the later wars, both hot and cold, of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had their origins in the 1914-18 struggle, there is less reason for us now to feel grateful to those who participated in it.

## V. CONCLUSION

In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah remarks that "There are identities [...] that are constituted by profoundly unappetizing commitments" (2005, 190). To identify oneself as a member of the Nazi Party or the Ku Klux Klan is to commit oneself to vicious courses that not only harm others but are harmful to oneself. To devalue others is to devalue the humanity that one shares with them, and so implicitly to devalue one's own. Identifying oneself with one's nation or one's state (and Appiah points out that these are not always coterminous [2005, 244-245]) generally means taking on commitments that are morally a mixed bag. From these, reflective agents ought to pick and choose. A nation or state that demands unquestioning performance of the acts it commands or adherence to the values it proclaims will be no comfortable home for the morally responsible. "My country right or wrong" is not a noble principle of action but the watchword of an unthinking patriotism. In contrast,

morally alert patriotism maintains a right to criticise, seeking to make the state or nation worthy of the commitment that is brought to it. It avoids any false glamorising of its past or attempts to sanitise its history. It recalls crimes and mistakes as well as achievements and triumphs. And when it commemorates the dead of its wars it remembers the suffering inflicted by its soldiers, sailors and airmen as well as that endured by them.

One may hope that it is patriotism of *this* kind that will be fostered by the centenary commemorations of the Great War.<sup>10</sup> In this article I have argued that there are potential moral pitfalls facing those who organise or participate in the commemorations, as well as conceptual difficulties calling for reflection if we are to know just what we are doing when we pay tribute to ‘the glorious dead’. I have not meant to cast doubt on the conceptual or moral propriety of commemorating the Great War and the men and women who served and died in it. Rather, I have tried to highlight some of the issues that need to be considered if the commemoration is to be worthy of its subject and not descend into mere mass entertainment, thoughtless celebration of martial valour, excessive glorification of countries and their histories, or a series of opportunities for the more bullish breed of politician to trumpet war as the primary means for settling international disputes or asserting national pride. Remembering is a morally significant act – something that can be done rightly or wrongly, wisely or imprudently. ‘Misremembering’ can mean something other than merely getting the facts wrong. At the going down of the sun and in the morning, we need to reflect carefully on *how* we should remember the slaughtered millions of the Great War.<sup>11</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Attempts to explain the outbreak of World War I (first referred to as the 'Great War' as early as 1915) are legion. For good recent studies see Strachan (2014), McMeekin (2014), Clark (2013), MacMillan (2013).

2. Interest in the First World War was, however, overshadowed for several decades in the late twentieth century by concern with the even more catastrophic Second World War. Two factors that may have affected the recent increase in the relative level of interest in the earlier

conflict may be the gradual passing of the later war from living memory, and the end of the Cold War that was its most significant legacy

3. Hitherto the main issue of contention among historians has been the degree of German responsibility for causing the War. There is no space here to survey the complex history of the *Kriegsschuldfrage*, but it may be noted that most recent historians tend towards a view of shared responsibility by the chief belligerent nations. See McMeekin (2014, Chapter 7: “The Question of Responsibility”).

4. Jon Davies has estimated that there are between 40,000 and 100,000 war memorials in Britain alone – an impressive total even if the lower figure were to be nearer the truth (1995, 131).

5. See Clifford (1999/1877, section I) for a classic defence of this claim

6. There might also be reckoned something implicitly dehumanising in the laudation of soldiers in the mass, as if each were interchangeable with every other. But if individuality can be a casualty of the commemoration of war as well as of war itself, it should not be forgotten that many combatants took great pride in belonging to a specific regiment or company and valued the sense of comradeship that came with service in the armed forces

7. Article 20 of the 1871 German Constitution laid down that “The Reichstag is elected by universal and direct election with a secret ballot.”

8. Charles Griswold notes that “[...] normally war memorials honor those who died, not all those who fought, and normally they honor the cause as well’ (2007, 204). But a memorial can be more neutral than this, and Griswold singles out the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington DC as an example. Here there are no images of fighting soldiers, texts praising the dead and the cause they fought for, or images of victory. Instead, the monument – which is explicitly a Memorial to the Veterans of the War rather than to the War itself – consists of two walls of polished black granite, meeting at an angle, inscribed with the names of the 58,000 Americans who died or went missing in the course of the War. It is neither heroic nor intended to inspire praise or emulation, and it says nothing about the moral legitimacy of the Vietnam conflict or its conduct. Rather, “[t]he focus throughout is on individuals” (2007, 205). Yet if the Memorial conveys no explicit moral messages, the sheer quantity of names that confronts the viewer draws appalled attention to the horror of a war that consumed so many lives (though it does not mention the much greater number of Vietnamese dead). The Memorial, as Griswold remarks, forces the visitor to reflect on the nature of war and the values for which wars are fought (2007, 204). As such, it may be regarded as a model to be followed more widely.

9. On this line of reasoning it might appear that Brecher is right, and that we do have an obligation to remember thankfully those forebears to whom we are indebted for our genetic or social identity. But there seems too little relevant intentionality on our forebears’ part to ground any significant obligation here. Whether or not we should feel grateful to our parents for bringing us into being, we need scarcely express our thanks towards our more distant ancestors for their part in our genesis.

10. In this connection, it will be interesting to see whether any element of triumphalism appears in the victorious countries in 2018.

11. I am grateful to two anonymous referees for *Ethical Perspectives* for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.