

Pacifists Are Admirable Only if They're Right

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ABSTRACT: The recent explosion of philosophical papers on Confederate and Colonialist statues centers on a central question: When, if ever, is it permissible to admire a person? This paper contends it's not just Confederates and slavers whose reputations are on the line, but also pacifists like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Daisy Bates whose commitments to pacifism meant they were unwilling to save others using defensive violence, including others they talked into endangering themselves for the sake of racial equality. Other things being equal, that's gravely immoral if pacifism is false, and we shouldn't admire people guilty of grave immorality. So, it appears that we shouldn't admire Bates or King, which is counterintuitive. To solve this problem, I explore several possibilities: that only *selective traits* of Bates and King are admirable, that Bates and King are admirable *despite* their grave immorality, and that Bates and King are admirable by virtue of their *integrity*. However, each of these proposals fails: the first because it inadequately captures our moral phenomenology (we admire *people*, not just their traits), the second because it ignores the extent to which gravely immoral commitments are constitutive of a person's moral character, and the third because we ought not to admire people for acting on their immoral beliefs. The paper concludes, first, that either pacifists like Bates and King aren't admirable or they are, and the latter presupposes the truth of pacifism. Second, I borrow from Vanessa Carbonell's ratcheting-up argument from moral sainthood to argue that pacifists like Bates and King provide epistemic defeaters to the objection that pacifism is unreasonably costly. Thus, not only are pacifists admirable only if they're right—they *are* right.

1. The Hazards of Moral Admiration

In June of 2020, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi removed eleven statues depicting Confederate leaders from the Capitol. Most of them went unreplaced. The year prior, Arkansas Governor Asa Hutchinson removed and replaced two Civil War statues with statues of Johnny Cash and civil rights leader Daisy Bates (Itkowitz 2020).

An adherent of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nonviolent resistance, Bates organized escorts for nine African American students (the "Little Rock Nine") to enter Central High in Little Rock. Despite threats of violence against her and the students, Bates persisted, and Central High was desegregated. Years later, Bates remarked:

And they [the students] remained there for the full year. And that opened a lot of doors that had been closed to Negroes, because this was the first time that this kind of revolution had succeeded without a doubt. And none of the children were really hurt physically. (Jacoway 1976)

Most of us, Arkansan and non-Arkansan alike, admire Bates. Still more of us admire King, as evidenced by the numerous streets and parks carrying his name, his statue's presence in the U.S. Capitol, his receipt of the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, and the creation of a U.S. federal holiday. King and Bates are people of *moral excellence*. By contrast, few of us admire avowed

racists like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, “Southern strategist” Lee Atwater, or former Alabama Governor George Wallace—or, at least, none of us *should*. Others, such as General William Tecumseh Sherman, have more mixed histories: a fierce opponent of slavery but the prosecutor of “a brutal war against the Plains Indians that included the deliberate mass slaughter of the buffalo, the economic basis of their existence” (Rossi 2020: 57). Setting aside mixed cases like Sherman’s, let’s start with two assertions:

Admirable: It is morally permissible to admire persons like Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., because of their profound moral excellences.

Contemptuous: It is morally impermissible to admire persons like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Lee Atwater, and George Wallace because of their grave immorality.

I shall assume Contemptuous is true and won’t further address it.¹ Admirable, by contrast, *should* be more controversial. As noted above, Bates and King were *pacifists*, committed to absolute nonviolence. Civil rights activists, whether King’s fellow marchers or Bates’ students, were frequently threatened with violence. Indeed, just prior to the admission of the Little Rock Nine, King telegrammed Bates and encouraged her to remain nonviolent despite being “terrorized, stoned, and threatened by ruthless mobs” (Kasher 1996).

Other things being equal, we ought to rescue others from unjust harm (Frowe 2021; Miller 2020; McMahan 2013). In saying “other things being equal,” I allow for the duty of rescue to be defeated in cases where, for example, the costs of rescuing others are too burdensome.² In many cases, we can accomplish this *only* by inflicting defensive harms on unjust threateners (Frowe 2018; Fabre 2009; Christopher 1998).³ Indeed, some theorists hold that failing to save others via defensive harm can render one morally liable to defensive harm (Benditt 1982). However, neither Bates nor King were willing to inflict defensive harms *even if they had been necessary*. That’s bad in part because, as Seth Lazar argues, it leaves the vulnerable unprotected:

Vulnerability leaves us open to exploitation, makes us anxious, undermines our autonomy, and reflects the fragility of our status with respect to other people. If I am extremely vulnerable, then even if right now I am doing well enough, other people are clearly not robustly disposed to protect my interest across a range of counterfactual scenarios. This too makes me worse off. We have a duty to aid the vulnerable because showing one another the respect that we each deserve as members of the moral community requires that we be robustly disposed to aid one another. If a person is vulnerable, then some of us are not discharging our duties. (Lazar 2015, 109)

Of course, Bates and King would likely say they were *morally obligated* to remain (resistantly) nonviolent, but most people think pacifism is false and no such obligation exists.⁴ So, it appears Bates and King *lacked* justification for letting others be maimed or killed. Even if we assume that killing is worse than merely not saving, not saving remains *very wrong*. In fact, it’s sufficiently wrong that it brings Admirable into question because we ought not admire gravely immoral people. As an example, consider

Passerby. Bystander, a devotee of Ayn Rand, encounters Child drowning in a pond. No one else is around to save Child, who will die unless Bystander saves them. However, Bystander recently read *The Virtue of Selfishness* and believes it's wrong to act altruistically. For that reason, Bystander lets Child drown.

Bystander's beliefs are bizarre, but that's the point: We don't think Bystander is, in fact, justified in letting Child drown, because Bystander's beliefs are *false*. But so, according to most, are the pacifist's beliefs. Moreover, there are powerful reasons to believe that pacifists like King, Bates, and Gandhi (A) in fact failed to save people they could have saved *via* defensive violence and (B) adopted principled versions of pacifism that were not strictly pragmatic:

Evidence for A:

1. Numerous Indians and Black Americans were injured while pursuing nonviolent direct action, and it's unclear whether they would have suffered these injuries had they not been encouraged to participate in nonviolent direct action by King, Gandhi, and Bates.
2. Neither Gandhi nor King was certain nonviolent resistance would prove effective, though both believed it and were ultimately proven correct. However, they thereby risked others' lives for an experiment in nonviolent social change. If Villain intends to murder you and I can prevent it with defensive violence but I prefer to give nonviolence a try (not knowing whether it will work), I thereby violate my duty to rescue you.
3. Gandhi and King fully realized nonviolent direct action would result in unjust harms to scores of protesters:
 - “Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation. The Administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation” (King 1965, 16).
 - “In almost every instance, it was the racists who committed the violence, while the nonviolent protesters provided the occasion for the racists to reveal their true nature” (Colaiaico 1986, 18).
4. King instructed Bates not to refrain from violence even if the Little Rock Nine were “terrorized, stoned, and threatened by ruthless mobs” (Kasher 1996). By instructing Bates to forego a violent defense of Black high schoolers, King thereby committed the moral equivalent of not rescuing someone himself. (It's no worse to instruct others to violate their duty of rescue than to violate it oneself.)

Evidence for B:

1. King advocated for absolute pacifism in numerous passages, such as the following:
 - “Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that. The beauty of nonviolence is that in its own way and in its own time it seeks to break the chain reaction of evil” (King 1968, 62-63).
 - “A second basic fact in this philosophy is the consistent refusal to inflict injury upon another. There are two aspects to this. There is first the external, 1. This means that you don't use aggressive or retaliatory violence” (King 1960a).
2. Gandhi advocated for absolute pacifism (Chakraborty 2002) in numerous passages, such as the following:
 - “I would risk, if necessary, a million lives so long as they are voluntary sufferers and are innocent, spotless victims” (Gandhi 1920).

- “My non-violence does not admit of running away from danger and leaving dear ones unprotected. Between violence and cowardly flight, I can only prefer violence to cowardice. I can no more preach non-violence to a coward than I can tempt a blind man to enjoy healthy scenes” (Gandhi 1924).
 - “He who meets death without striking a blow fulfills his duty cent per cent. The result is in God’s hands” (Gandhi 1965, 284).
 - “Those who die unresistingly are likely to still the fury of violence by their wholly innocent sacrifice” (Gandhi 1965, 278).
3. For King and Gandhi, nonviolent resistance was pragmatic but not contingently so.⁵ That is, both King and Gandhi believed violence was *necessarily* counterproductive:
- “Now one method is the method of violence. The sword method—this is the popular method. To this method Jesus said, ‘He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword.’ History is replete with the bleached bones of nations. So this method carries the seed of its own destruction. It is perilous. Over against this stands the method of non-violence” (King 1960b).
 - “In the final analysis, *agape* means recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated. All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers. To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself” (King 1986, 20).
 - “My faith in the saying that what is gained by the sword will also be lost by the sword is imperishable” (Gandhi 1965, 212).
 - “Democracy can only be saved through non-violence, because democracy, so long as it is sustained by violence, cannot provide for or protect the weak. My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest should have the same opportunity as the strongest. This can never happen except through non-violence” (Gandhi 1965, 269).

However, let’s assume I’m wrong about all of this and that Gandhi, King, and Bates had few opportunities to deploy defensive violence. That point notwithstanding, it remains true that each of them was unwilling to violently defend others *had opportunities arisen*. The Neo-Nazi who never mistreats Jews because he’s never met one is no less contemptible on that basis. So, nor is the pacifist. Admiration is not exclusively a function of what we do, but also of what we are *willing* (or unwilling) to do, given our commitments. Here’s one formulation of the argument against Admirable:

The Analogy Argument

1. It is morally impermissible to admire persons like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Lee Atwater, and George Wallace because of their grave immorality. [Contemptuous]
2. It is gravely immoral to allow others to be nonconsensually maimed or killed without justification. [Assumption]
3. Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., allowed others to be nonconsensually maimed or killed without justification. [Assumption]
4. So, it is morally impermissible to admire Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., because of their grave immorality. [From 1-3]

Jan Narveson developed a prototypic version of this argument. He asks whether Gandhi is saintly and, in particular, “whether we should think of total nonviolence as necessarily *indicative* of sainthood” (1978, 456). Narveson answers negatively and says that we “ought

not to rate as a saint someone who allows thousands to die merely in order to avoid any use of violence by himself” (1978, 456).

The conclusion of the *Analogy Argument* contradicts Admirable. So, if the argument holds, then Admirable is false and (contrary to what most of us believe) we *ought not* admire civil rights figures like Bates and King. Nor may we admire other pacifists like Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Jesus of Nazareth, or Mahatma Gandhi. Indeed, because many religious leaders have been (or at least appeared to be) pacifists and because their followers admire them, billions of religious people are victims of this moral indictment. That’s sufficiently counterintuitive for us to rethink the *Analogy Argument*.

In what follows, I’ll consider and reject two bad solutions to the Analogy Argument. The first calls our moral phenomenology into question and says we admire don’t admire the *persons* Bates and King but rather their *traits*. The second claims that the virtues of Bates and King *swamp* their vices such that, contrary to (4), it’s permissible to admire Bates and King. After showing why each proposal fails, I’ll defend a radical solution: Bates and King are morally admirable and so possessed justification for their absolute nonviolence, which entails pacifism is true. I then anticipate and defuse several objections before concluding.

2. Two Bad Solutions

According to Admiration, we admire people like Bates and King. But what does that mean? There are two dominant views about admiration as an *attitude*:

Emulation View: S admires A iff S desires (or is disposed to desire) to emulate A.

The Value-Promotion View: S admires A iff S positively evaluates A.

The former is defended by Linda Zagzebski (2015, 209) and the latter by Alfred Archer (2019). In addition to this, there are two dominant views about the *target* of admiration:

The Traits View: We admire persons for their traits.

The Agents View: We admire persons overall.

David Shoemaker, representing the Traits View, claims that agential admiration “has as its fitting object character traits, evaluating them as excellent relative to some ideal” (2015, 56). By contrast, Antti Kauppinen claims the proper object of agential admiration “is a person, who is construed as leading a life manifesting (or approximating) an ideal of the person we endorse” (2019, 32). Applied to Bates and King, let’s apply combinations of these views beginning with:

The Emulation-Traits View: We admire Bates and King for their traits and desire (or are disposed to desire) to emulate those traits.

This seems initially plausible. After all, we *do* admire a commitment to antiracism, a commitment Bates and King both abundantly possessed, and we *do* desire to emulate their

strong commitment to antiracism. However, the Emulation-Traits View doesn't allow us to say we admire *Bates* or *King*, but only their traits. Indeed, if what we admire are the traits themselves, it's inaccurate to say we admire *Bates and King* for their traits, since we don't admire *them* (i.e., the trait-bearers) at all. But that's inconsistent with the actual phenomenology of our moral admiration: We admire *people*, not just their traits; we believe *who someone is*, morally speaking, is partially constituted by their traits. Call this the *Bad Phenomenology Argument* against the Emulation-Traits View.

As further evidence of this, consider that recent re-evaluations of King's character and legacy presuppose that King is widely admired (Miller 2019; Ransby 2019). These re-evaluations would be moot if we merely admired his traits, the goodness of which is not in dispute. But they aren't moot. So, we should reject the Emulation-Traits View. Call this the *Rational Re-Evaluation Argument* against the Emulation-Traits View. For the same reasons, we should also reject

The Value-Promotion-Traits View: We admire Bates and King for their traits and positively evaluate those traits.

Like the Emulation-Traits View, the Value-Promotion-Traits View entails that we don't admire the trait-bearers and hence don't admire Bates or King. Rather, we simply admire their properties. But that misdescribes the phenomenology of our admiration.⁶ So, the *Bad Phenomenology Argument* also cuts against the Value-Promotion-Traits View. On, then, to the other two combinations, starting with

The Emulation-Agents View: We admire Bates and King overall and desire (or are disposed to desire) to emulate them overall.

The problem with this view is that because Bates and King allowed (without justification) others to be maimed and killed, we *don't* (or at least *shouldn't*) desire to emulate them overall. That's true even if admiring someone overall is compatible with not desiring to emulate *all* the traits and behaviors of the admired person. For Bates and King, their commitment to let others be maimed or killed when violence is the only alternative is a fundamental aspect of their character. The same is true of Robert E. Lee's and George Wallace's commitments to slavery and segregation. These are not traits we can easily isolate, but rather comprise part of the deep character of these persons. To admire them overall, then, is to desire (or be disposed to desire) to emulate their defining or characteristic traits. Since we don't or shouldn't admire a willingness to allow others to (without justification) be maimed or killed, it follows that we should reject the Emulation-Agents View. Call this the *Global Traits Argument* against the Emulation-Agents View. That leaves one final possibility:

The Value-Promotion-Agents View: We admire Bates and King overall and positively evaluate them overall.

The Value-Promotion-Agents View entails that we positively evaluate Bates and King overall. Like the previous view, this can be interpreted to mean our positive appraisal *includes* or *excludes* Bates' and King's commitment to pacifism. If the former, then the Value-Promotion-Agents View is false because we don't positively evaluate such a gravely immoral trait. If the

latter, the Value-Promotion-Agents View is false because we don't positively evaluate *Bates* or *King* when we exclude traits central to their moral character. For example, it's unacceptable to say:

S1: I admire Hitler, but only for his love of animals.

Admiring *Hitler* and not admiring *mere animal-loving* is the issue here. Hitler was not just an animal lover; he was a murderous, genocidal, anti-Semitic, ableist tyrant. If anything, these latter qualities 'swamp' being an animal lover, making Hitler intensely contemptuous overall and thus not admirable. By extension, it's unacceptable to say:

S2: I admire Bates and King, but only for their antiracism (or some other virtue).

Of course, neither Bates nor King were murderous, genocidal, anti-Semitic, ableist, or tyrants. Indeed, in most respects, Bates and King were deeply good people. But their principled refusal to *save* others (*via* defensive violence) remains profoundly immoral. Like Hitler's evil traits, these are not traits we can isolate from a wholesome evaluation of persons who possess them, as they are part of their deep character, and the negative valence of an unwillingness to save others *via* defensive violence is sufficiently strong to make persons normatively unadmirable or unworthy of moral admiration. Moreover, as Rossi observes there is real danger in isolating these traits:

Once we start considering whether a *person* is exemplary or contemptible *in virtue of* those traits or deeds that warrant attitudes of admiration or contempt, we are in the realm of global assessment, and these judgments all have the whole person as their object. So, we are likely to experience some ambivalence if we are exposed to information that tends to show that a person is both exemplary in certain respects and contemptible in others. Given our aversion to such inconsistency, we are likely to seek resolution of the conflict. And if our initial attitude is one of admiration, then, as the ambivalence studies suggest, we are likely to pursue resolution of the conflict through the selective elaboration of information that favors that initial attitude or the avoidance of information inconsistent with that attitude. This means that we will come to see the subjects of representations as all-things-considered exemplars, since we will actively resist both information and emotions inconsistent with this status. (Rossi 2020, 63)

Thus, attempts to 'quarantine' deeply bad traits when making a global assessment tends to make us *ignore* their bad traits. Rossi further claims that in cases where a person's honored traits were "either *instrumental to* morally objectionable ends or *enabled by* morally objectionable practices," then "it is inappropriate to feel or express admiration for traits or deeds that stand in these relations to morally objectionable ends or practices" (2020, 59-60). The success of Bates and King is largely due to their strategy of *nonviolent* resistance. So, their success in combating antiracism was enabled by a morally objectionable practice, namely, a complete disavowal of violent other-defense.⁷ As the late David Lewis remarks, "[It] is evil to admire someone evil in full recognition of the characteristics and actions that express their evil" (2007, 239). Call this the *Swamping Traits Argument* against the Value-Promotion-Agents View.

3. A Radical Solution

The last section left us without many options. With respect to Daisy Bates, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus of Nazareth, and other pacifists, we cannot permissibly admire them with eyes wide open. Nor can we squint and admire only their good qualities, as this threatens both to “elide grave injustices” (Rossi 2020, 60; i.e., the *Swamping Traits Argument*) and modifies the target of our admiration from a *person* to a *trait* (i.e., the *Bad Phenomenology Argument*). That leaves us with three possibilities with respect to the *Analogy Argument*:

- Reject Admirable:** It is morally permissible to admire persons like Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., because of their profound moral excellences.
- Reject Premise 2:** It is gravely immoral to allow others to be nonconsensually maimed or killed without justification.
- Reject Premise 3:** Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., allowed others to be nonconsensually maimed or killed without justification.

The first option concedes the conclusion of the *Analogy Argument*. Thus far, I have assumed this option is sufficiently counterintuitive to motivate skepticism about the conclusion. However, it remains to be seen whether rejecting Admirable is *more* counterintuitive than the other two possibilities. The second possibility amounts to a denial of a duty of rescue. But that’s implausible, as cases like *Passerby* illustrate. Moreover, part of the motivation against pacifism is that it *curtails* the duty to save in implausible ways. A wholesale rejection of the duty to save, then, would partially undermine the anti-pacifist’s case.

Unlike rejecting premise 2, the rejection of premise 3 doesn’t require us to reject a duty of rescue. It requires us only to suppose that neither Bates nor King allowed others to be maimed or killed *without justification*. Having rejected all other sources of justification for Bates and King, the only remaining possibility is *the truth of pacifism*.⁸ That is, Bates and King *really were* required to refrain from violent rescues of their compatriots. At first glance, this might seem less attractive than rejecting a duty to save, but that’s unclear given that pacifism is often thought to be false *because* it curtails the duty to save. Rejecting it altogether, then, is even more implausible. Furthermore, we should be skeptical of views making fine distinctions between the general prohibition against killing, on the one hand, and the general prohibition against not saving, on the other. In a view I have defended elsewhere with Anthony Ferrucci (2021, 18-19), these prohibitions derive from a *single* right, namely, your right against others that they avoid moral responsibility to harms to you to which you neither consent nor are liable. If true, we can’t reject the duty to rescue without also rejecting the duty not to kill. So, I tentatively conclude that rejecting premise 3 is more attractive than rejecting premise 2.

By hypothesis, that leaves us with a choice between rejecting Admirable and rejecting premise 3. In other words, we must either stop admiring Bates, King, the Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi, and other pacifists, *or* concede pacifism. Your mileage may vary, and I suspect there are some who prefer the former to the latter. However, this choice is anything but obvious,

and I don't propose to resolve the conflict here. Rather, I will make two proposals: one modest and the other radical, beginning with the former:

Modest Proposal: Pacifists are admirable only if they're right. So, we should reject either Admirable or Premise (3) of the *Analogy Argument*.

This is the principal conclusion I hoped to reach in this paper. I've set out to establish is that pacifists are admirable *only if* they're right. By robbing us of our ability to admire pacifist (apparent) heroes like Bates and King, anti-pacifism loses some of its plausibility whereas pacifism is parasitic on this loss. Thus, pacifism comes out looking less implausible than before. That's a radical conclusion that should invite a slew of anti-pacifist responses. Now consider a more radical proposal:

Radical Proposal: Pacifists are admirable only if they're right, and they're right. So, we should reject Premise (3).

Let's assume for argument's sake, and as most people believe, that Admirable is true. We then have reason to believe that people like Bates and King were moral saints of a certain stripe. Given the expected costs of their promotion of civil rights, it's surprising to learn that Bates and King viewed risking their lives as *obligatory* and not *supererogatory*. Following Vanessa Carbonell, call this

Puzzling Data: Moral saints habitually perform actions that are, intuitively, beyond moral obligation. Yet the moral saints sometimes consider these actions to be obligatory, not supererogatory. There is a *persistent agent-observer disparity*. (2012, 231)

What's the best explanation for this disparity? Carbonell says we could view moral saints like Bates and King as mistaken, but condemns this move as too quick:

While it may be true that the saints are mistaken about what morality demands of them, they are not *simply* mistaken. They have a perspective on the action that is not readily available to observers, and we should take their perspective seriously. One of the reasons for the agent-observer disparity is that agents and observers have asymmetric access to facts about *sacrifice*, and moral obligation depends partly on what we can reasonably believe about sacrifice. (Carbonell 2012, 231)

She continues:

The agents, on the other hand, have a different vantage point. They know exactly what it *feels* like to give up what they are giving up, and perhaps it doesn't feel as bad as we imagine it would. Moreover, they also know what it feels like to reap the *rewards* generated by their good deeds. From an impartial perspective, we may judge that these rewards do not compensate for or mitigate the sacrifices. But experiencing these rewards from the first-person perspective no doubt influences how the moral saints think about their own lifestyles. Perhaps one way to think about it is that the moral saints have calibrated their scales

differently; first-hand knowledge of sacrifice has caused them to think that we would all be justified in demanding more of each other morally. (Carbonell 2012, 238)

When saints, given their unique epistemic positioning (Werner 2016), modify what we can reasonably believe about which actions are obligatory and which are supererogatory, this in turn modifies what we can reasonably demand of each other. Referring to this as the *Ratcheting-Up Effect*, Carbonell claims we should conceive of moral obligations “as flexible over time and influenced by precedent” and of moral saints as setting “precedents and landmarks that affect the rest of us” (2012, 248). She presents her argument as follows:

The Basic Ratcheting-Up Argument

1. Moral obligation is at its core about what we can reasonably demand of each other.
2. We cannot reasonably demand that someone do something that it would be reasonable for her to believe to be too much of a sacrifice (the K-S Condition).
3. Exposure to moral saints can change what it would be reasonable to believe about how much of a sacrifice it would be to take on certain actions or patterns of behavior.
4. So, exposure to moral saints could change what a person is obligated to do by way of removing a defeater of obligations.

Space prohibits an extended defense of Carbonell’s argument. Instead, I will sketch a brief argument about how Carbonell’s argument might apply to the current case of admiring pacifist saints. She defends premise (3) by comparing the transformative effects of noncompliance/undercompliance to overcompliance on moral obligation:

Philosophers have traditionally approached these questions from the perspective of noncompliance or partial compliance—that is, situations where most people, or at least a significant number of people, are *not* discharging a particular moral obligation. My argument, however, focuses not on *noncompliance* but on *overcompliance*—the overcompliance of moral saints. For we are no longer talking about people failing or succeeding in doing their duty, but rather about people *exceeding* their duties. (Carbonell 2012, 240)

Just as noncompliance or undercompliance can *weaken or remove* our obligations, so overcompliance can *strengthen or introduce* them. Applied to pacifist moral saints, we have the following argument:

The Pacifist Ratcheting-Up Argument

1. Moral obligation is at its core about what we can reasonably demand of each other.
2. We cannot reasonably demand that someone do something that it would be reasonable for them to believe to be too much of a sacrifice.
3. Exposure to pacifist moral saints can change what it would be reasonable to believe about how much of a sacrifice it would be to refrain from self-defensive harming.
4. So, exposure to pacifist moral saints could change a person’s obligation to refrain from self-defensive harming by way of removing a defeater of obligations.

The *Pacifist Ratcheting-Up Argument* doesn’t entail that pacifist moral saints *cause* pacifism to be true. Rather, it entails that such saints *reveal* it to be true by providing epistemic defeaters for the dominant view that pacifism is too costly.⁹ The epistemic privilege of moral saints, including pacifist ones, means their testimony counts for more than ours

(Vasanthakumar 2018). They knew better than most the costs of their actions but bore them regardless and informed us that such long-suffering nonviolence was also within our power.

If the argument succeeds, it also (morally) defeats the *pro tanto* obligation to engage in *other*-defensive harming: If all of us are obligated to refrain from self-defensive harming, and if the permission to engage in other-defensive harming *derives from* a permission to engage in self-defensive harming, then (absent some other grounds for other-defense) the permission to engage in other-defensive harming is defeated. Thus, the *Pacifist Ratcheting-Up Argument*, if successful, vindicates the Radical Proposal.

4. Objections and Replies

In this section, I review potential objections to the paper's main argument. I argue all of them fail. Each objection is stated and followed by a reply.

Objection 1: If we accept such a high standard for morally permissible admiration, we'd be prohibited from admiring anyone, as everyone has done something gravely immoral.

I'm skeptical of the underlying empirical assumption that *everyone*, or even *almost everyone*, has done something gravely immoral. For example, few of us have murdered others, allowed others to die without good reason, or committed hate crimes. Minimally, then, this objection requires much more motivation.

Objection 2: We shouldn't admire people at all. Rather, we should just admire traits.

I'm skeptical that we *can* admire traits, as admiration seems to involve *praiseworthiness* and traits can't be praiseworthy. Even so, this conclusion seems too radical. Surely we are permitted to admire *some* people. As I noted in my reply to the previous objection, it's more likely than not that our world contains deeply virtuous people who have never acted in gravely immoral ways. Despite having done some bad things, those actions are neither strongly negatively valenced nor in-character for them, and thus we can permissibly admire them *despite* their mild immorality. We can do this without endorsing "morally objectionable values" or eliding "grave injustices" (Rossi 2020, 60).

Objection 3: Pacifists like Bates and King are only "accidentally" admirable: They were rarely positioned to rescue others with defensive violence, and thus their nonviolence was (in practice) exclusively prudential.

Earlier in the paper, I offered reasons to think the principled nonviolence of Bates, King, and Gandhi were such that they *had* opportunities to violently rescue others but declined. However, let's assume the objector's empirical claim is true. Still, this is rather like saying that veganism is morally obligatory and that non-vegans are admirable between meals. Or consider this example from David Lewis:

Consider Fritz. Fritz is a neo-Nazi. He admires Hitler. Fritz's admiration of an evil man suffices, we might think, to make Fritz evil. But perhaps this is too quick. Fritz's evil character, we

might say, arises not from his admiration for Hitler but from his willingness to behave in the same way. Simply admiring Hitler isn't enough. One must also be disposed to emulate Hitler's deeds; and if this disposition is present, one is evil, whether or not the admiration remains. (Lewis 2007, 238)

Similarly, although Bates and King never *in fact* refuse to rescue anyone with defensive violence, that's merely because they lacked opportunities.¹⁰ They are 'disposed' not to engage in violent rescue should an opportunity arise. A mere lack of opportunities, then, is insufficient to exculpate our admiration of persons in full view of their immoral dispositions.

Objection 4: We are permitted to admire Bates and King for their moral integrity, that is, for their commitment to acting on their convictions.

This objection fails for familiar reasons. Acting or being disposed to act on immoral convictions can't be grounds for moral admiration. Otherwise, we would have reasons to admire white supremacists who act on their beliefs and burn Black churches, join the Ku Klux Klan, and the like.

Objection 5: Both King and Gandhi sexually exploited women. So, either we shouldn't admire them at all or (like with pacifism) we should conclude sexual exploitation isn't wrong.¹¹

Let's concede that we shouldn't admire King or Gandhi by virtue of their sexual exploitation of women. Still, there are admired pacifists who have never been accused of grave wrongdoing, including Daisy Bates, Jesus of Nazareth, and Siddhartha Gautama. So, even if we shouldn't admire King or Gandhi, we *should* (or at least *may*) admire Bates, Jesus, and the Buddha. But then Admiration is true and, by implication, so is pacifism.

Objection 6: The pacifisms of King and Gandhi were effective and are justified under a lesser evil principle. Thus, we can permissibly admire them.

As an example, Gandhi himself believed that dying while pursuing nonviolent resistance would shift responsibility for his innocent death from his hands to his *oppressor's* hands. Given his popularity, this would raise the stakes for colonial oppressors and thus disincentivize their use of violence (Klitgaard 1971, 146).¹² The short-term effectiveness of King's and Gandhi's nonviolent movements aren't in question. However, we should be skeptical of their approach. First, at the time, nonviolent resistance was a *highly risky* endeavor, yet King and Gandhi recruited hundreds of thousands of innocent people to undertake the risks. Moreover, at least for King, the most recent and effective precedent for ending (some) racist practices was the American Civil War, a war that was obviously violent and arguably necessary (if ultimately insufficient) to end slavery in the American South. Thus, even if King and Gandhi were ultimately vindicated, such hindsight evaluations exclude consideration of *what they were morally justified in risking at the time, given their evidence.*¹³ Second, the successes of King and Gandhi were severely curtailed by subsequent developments like the New Jim Crow (Alexander 2010). Thus, Civil Rights heroes who were injured or killed while following King sadly achieved very little, and thus King sacrificed their health and lives without securing sufficiently high or enduring goods.

Objection 7: We are permitted to admire King and Gandhi because their pacifisms were subjectively justified (i.e., they reasonably believed that their actions were permissible), or at least morally excused, even if they were objectively unjustified.¹⁴

In response, consider that neither subjective justification nor moral excuse is typically sufficient to render moral admiration morally permissible. To see why, suppose I shoot you dead because I mistakenly believe you pose an unjust threat to my friend's life. Objectively speaking, I have murdered you. The latter fact is more salient than the former with respect to permissible moral admiration and undercuts the permissibility of admiring me for my action. We should distinguish between the claim that *blaming you is morally permissible* and *admiring you is morally impermissible*. When subjectively justified or excused, the standard view excludes agents from blameworthiness while notably not allowing them to be admired for their gravely immoral actions. When we admire King or Gandhi for *what they tried to do* rather than *what they did*, we don't admire them but rather their successful (i.e., non-mistaken, objectively justified) counterparts in other possible worlds.

Objection 8: Neither King, nor Gandhi, nor Bates could have used other-defensive violence without undermining the broader successes of their nonviolent campaigns, and thus could not have rescued people from unjust harm.

The objection's target is my claim that King, Gandhi, and Bates *could* have rescued others from unjust harm had they resorted to other-defensive violence. The idea, in short, is that for high-profile leaders of nonviolent resistance to utilize violence would have undermined their credibility and undone many of the goods their nonviolent movements achieved.¹⁵ But all that's needed for the truth of my counterfactual is that *some* tokens of unjust harm would have been averted had King, Gandhi, or Bates violently defended nonliable others—a feat most of us are able to accomplish with little difficulty.¹⁶

As to the secondary worry that high-profile civil rights activists prevented more unjust harm by *not* engaging in defensive violence, I reply that irrespective of whether (for example) *King himself* could have engaged in defensive violence without thereby undermining the successes of his nonviolent movement, *others (including many of his followers) could have*. Thus, his requirement that those within his movement never engage in defensive violence is not exculpated (Frowe 2014, 159). As an analogy, suppose I believe defensive violence is generally counterproductive to important causes and thus recommend that everyone everywhere refrain from defensive violence. If everyone follows my advice, then defensive violence would never be used against rapists or murderers and then far fewer persons would be rescued from unjust harm (cf. Davis 2007). The same holds for King (and, by extension, Gandhi, Jesus, and others): By advising those in his movement never to deploy defensive violence against racists, he thereby exerts his considerable influence in a way that minimizes violent rescues—including in cases where violence was necessary for rescue. Finally, as my defense of claim (B) in section 1 of this paper shows, neither King nor Gandhi preached an exclusively *contingent* pacifism; that is, they believed violence was impermissible *even if* it were broadly more effective than nonviolence. Thus, upon closer examination of their convictions, our admiring them cannot be exculpated under the false

supposition that they held to nonviolent resistance only because they viewed it as the most effective means of social change.

5. Conclusion

This paper begins with two simple claims: good people are admirable and bad people aren't, and we know who some of those people are:

Admirable: It is morally permissible to admire persons like Daisy Bates and Martin Luther King, Jr., because of their profound moral excellences.

Contemptuous: It is morally impermissible to admire persons like Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis, Lee Atwater, and George Wallace because of their grave immorality.

But there's a problem: Bates' and King's commitments to pacifism meant they were unwilling to save others using defensive violence, including others they talked into endangering themselves for the sake of racial equality. Other things being equal, that's gravely immoral if pacifism is false, and we shouldn't admire people guilty of grave immorality. Nor should we admire people *for* their grave immorality, yet many of us do precisely that with famous pacifists. Thus, it appears that we shouldn't admire Bates or King, which is counterintuitive.

Next, I explored a fistful of solutions to this problem. First, we could say that we don't admire Bates or King but instead admire only their traits. But that misjudges the phenomenology of our admiration, which clearly has the persons Bates and King as its target (*Bad Phenomenology Argument*). Second, we could say that we admire Bates and King despite their unwillingness to save others *via* defensive violence. But it's immoral to admire persons in a way that isolates their gravely immoral behaviors (whether merely dispositional or implemented), since this 'whitewashes' their characters, ignores the extent to which consistent and gravely immoral behaviors are constitutive of a person's moral character (*Global Traits Argument*), and elides grave injustices (*Swamping Traits Argument*). Third, we could admire the integrity of Bates and King, their willingness to act on their beliefs. But we shouldn't admire people for a willingness to act on gravely immoral beliefs. Fourth, we could reject the duty to rescue and thereby exculpate Bates and King for their refusal to save others. But the duty to save is quite plausible and not independent of the duty not to kill, so we should reject this solution to the problem.

My tentative conclusion is that the Moderate Proposal is true: We must either reject Admirable or concede pacifism. Whichever way we go, the truth of this paper's title is manifest: *Pacifists like Bates, Gandhi, and King are admirable only if they're right*. But we can go further. Borrowing an argument from Vanessa Carbonell, I argued that the saintly/exemplar status of pacifist figures like Bates, Jesus, the Buddha, and King can cause a ratcheting-up effect by providing epistemic defeaters for our belief that pacifism is too costly (*Pacifist Ratcheting-Up Argument*). The fact that we tend to admire and emulate these saints—in short, that we *trust* their moral guidance—already furnishes grounds for deferring to their moral advice over our own. And their advice is that we be pacifists.

Notes

My thanks to Jason Brennan and an anonymous reviewer at this journal for helpful comments. Thanks also to Michelle Panchuk for lively discussion on King's and Gandhi's mistreatment of women.

¹ For arguments favoring the removal of Confederate statues, see Timmerman ("Case for Removing Confederate Monuments"), Lai ("Political Vandalism as Counter-Speech"), and Frowe ("Duty to Remove Statues of Wrongdoers"). For outright and qualified arguments against their removal, see Demetriou ("Ashes of Our Fathers") and Schulz ("Must Rhodes Fall?"), respectively. For an argument for defacing but not removing tainted monuments, see Lim ("Vandalizing Tainted Monuments").

² Throughout the paper, my endorsement of a *pro tanto* duty of rescue entails only the weak conditional claim: *If other things are equal, then we ought to rescue others from unjust harm.*

³ An anonymous reviewer observes that even if violent other-defense is sometimes obligatory, it doesn't follow that it's often obligatory. That's true, but irrelevant to my case. All that's required to motivate the problem is that other-defense is generally obligatory, effective other-defense sometimes requires violence, and thus violent other-defense is sometimes obligatory. The fact that other-defensive violence may not often be obligatory is therefore not an exculpatory fact for King's ceaseless and unconditional refusal to defend innocent others with violence.

⁴ Neither King nor Gandhi viewed nonviolent *nonresistance* as morally permissible. In their minds, resistance was indeed obligatory. Thus, their advocacy of nonviolence should not be misinterpreted as advocacy for nonresistance. For a general overview of strategies for nonviolent resistance, see Sharp, [Politics of Nonviolent Action](#).

⁵ For more on the tactic/philosophy distinction, see Slate, "A Dangerous Idea."

⁶ One might object that we don't admire people *baselessly* but rather *for* their traits, and thus we indirectly but exclusively admire traits. First, this objection inadequately accounts for our linguistic practices: It's true that we admire people *for* their traits, but it's also true that we admire *people* for their traits. Second, the objection again gets the moral phenomenology wrong: We admire *the virtuous* and not merely *their virtues*. It's an agent's *possession* of virtues that motivates our admiration of them. Third, the objection hints that because we don't admire King and others *per se*, we don't admire them at all. But that falsely assumes our evaluations of persons are restricted to their *essential* (as opposed to accidental) properties when, in fact, we frequently praise or blame people for their accidental (i.e., modally contingent) behavior.

⁷ For the same reason, admiring Bates or King *exclusively* for their willingness to *self-sacrifice* is unavailable: They self-sacrifice *because* they accept a principle that requires them to both self-sacrifice *and* other-sacrifice. Thus, their willingness to self-sacrifice reflects their commitment to a broader principle the consistent satisfaction of which is gravely immoral.

⁸ Might pacifists have an interest in not being an agent of death? Not according to Helen Frowe:

I doubt that there is a moral interest in not being an agent of death. Killing is sometimes permissible and, plausibly, sometimes morally required. I may kill someone in self-defense, or euthanize a terminally ill patient. Someone who refuses to lethally defend a child—especially their own child—against a culpable murderous attacker, or to divert a trolley from a thousand people to one, does something seriously morally wrong. ("Lesser-Evil Justifications for Harming," 470)

⁹ Carbonell's argument is ambiguous on this point. In some passages, she appears to think moral saints change the *moral* landscape, whereas in others she writes as if they merely change the *epistemic* landscape. As the latter interpretation is philosophically more plausible, I'll accept it as my interpretation of Carbonell.

¹⁰ It's worth noting that many famous pacifists (such as King) have been religious and appear to have held some of the same conservative religious beliefs to which Lewis objects ("Divine Evil," 239). In Lewis's example, Ralph never acts on his Neo-Nazi beliefs, but he's positively disposed to act on them with Hitler's permission.

¹¹ My thanks to Michelle Panchuk for raising this objection in conversation. For details on the accusations against King, see Miller ("I'm an MLK Scholar"). For a skeptical take on the accusations against King, see Ransby ("Black Feminist's Response"). For details on Gandhi's misogyny, see Frayer ("Gandhi is Deeply Revered") and Jack ("How Would Gandhi's Celibacy Tests").

¹² For other cases, see Gerrit Huizer’s (“Land Invasion as a Non-Violent Strategy”) depiction of Latin American peasants who used land invasion as a form of nonviolent resistance and Mubarak Awad’s (“Non-Violent Resistance”) nonviolent strategies for Palestinian resistance.

¹³ According to Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, the available evidence speaks more in favor of nonviolent mass resistance than violent mass resistance. For example, they claim that “major nonviolent campaigns have achieved success 53 percent of the time, compared with 26 percent for violent resistance campaigns” (“Why Civil Resistance Works,” 8).

¹⁴ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising both this objection and Objection 8. For a recent defense of subjective moral justification, see Uniacke, “Criminalizing Unknowing Defense.”

¹⁵ However, as Frowe (Defensive Killing, 126-128) observes, the long-term side effects of nonviolent resistance must be factored into proportionality calculations. This can render nonviolent resistance impermissible in cases where the (reasonably) expected blowback to nonviolent resistance is worse than to violent resistance. Among the long-term, reasonably expected side effects of King’s nonviolent resistance are subtler forms of racism as well as violent blowback. For details, see Alexander, New Jim Crow.

¹⁶ Interestingly, there’s some evidence that the nonviolent resistance movements of King and Gandhi were aided by an armed citizenry. See Crummett, “Freedom, Firearms, and Civil Resistance,” for details.

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