
The Moral Imperative to Preserve

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the concept of *monumental preservation*, which the author defines as the preservation of all cultural phenomena, because from the smallest item to the greatest monument all things emanate from and reflect culture. The imperative to preserve monuments is the imperative to preserve our cultural heritage. Whether there is a moral responsibility to preserve cultural heritage may be considered from philosophical, political, and legal perspectives.

The preservation of cultural heritage¹ has been around for millennia, as illustrated by the biblical passage “take these evidences . . . and put them in an earthen vessel, that they may continue for many days” (Jeremiah 32:14).² Many similar references to the preservation or safe-keeping of artifacts exist in literature. One recent author has gone so far as to say that “[t]he Human Being is a repairing animal. Repair is ubiquitous, something we engage in every day and in almost every dimension of our lives. *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo reparans*” (Spelman, 2002, p. 1).

But equally forceful as the impulse to *preserve* is the impulse to *destroy*. History is strewn with countless examples—as the destruction of the Alexandrian Library in the fourth century AD or the destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 vividly and poignantly demonstrate. Sometimes destruction occurs in the name of preservation. Perhaps the most cited example is the Elgin Marbles, the Phidian sculptures from the Parthenon. In the process of supposedly liberating the marbles from Greece, Lord Elgin’s workers broke or destroyed a number of them. They had to destroy the original edifice to “preserve” some of its parts.³

Preservation and destruction do not necessarily constitute a dualism: one may wish to preserve one's own heritage while destroying someone else's. War is the best example of these opposing impulses. However, as some historians have observed, sometimes destruction is part of the cycle by which societies rebuild themselves (Lowenthal, 2002). The issue, however, is not what the rebuilding yields but what is lost in the destruction. What role do curators, librarians, archivists, and other citizens play in protecting cultural heritage when—and if—it should be protected? In an international context, do we *all* have a moral imperative to preserve?

I have coined the term *monumental preservation* to encompass the preservation of everything that defines culture. It is preservation writ large, and it intentionally covers everything: records, works of art, natural habitats, and national living treasures, to name a few. Preservation tries to assure the survival of the human record. It is not just a technical or managerial activity; it is a social, political, and cultural activity as well (Cloonan, 2001). In this article it will refer to everything that can, theoretically, be preserved.

If preservation assures cultural survival, is there a concomitant moral imperative to preserve? To try to establish whether there exists such an imperative, we need a working definition of *moral*. The dictionary offers several. The two most germane to this discussion are “of or concerned with the judgment of the goodness or badness of human action and character; *a moral quandary*; and, conforming to standards of what is right or just in behavior.” *Moral obligation* is defined as “arising from conscience or the sense of right or wrong.”⁴ These definitions introduce minefields: whose standards of right or wrong, bad or good? Whose conscience? And whose convictions? And on what is the judgment based? Religious, economic, nationalistic, or other precepts?

The writings of the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant concerning morals and morality have been a touchstone and a flashpoint for philosophers.⁵ Kant believed that there was a duty to be moral, which he discussed within his framework of “the categorical imperative.” Inherent in his principle of morality is the idea that it “involves its own universal validity for every rational being” (Frankena & Granrose, 1974, p. 112). In other words, moral obligation derives from *reason* and not from God, humans, or communities. Since Kant, philosophers have focused on either an ethics of *duty* (action, principles, and laws) or an ethics of *virtue* (being, character, and ideals) (Frankena & Granrose, 1974, p. 224). Kant's writings remain the most influential attempt to justify universal moral principles without a theological framework.

R. M. Hare, a twentieth-century philosopher, focused on the role of rational moral judgments to prescribe courses of action. He described morality as

the endeavor of a free agent to find for himself principles which he can accept as binding on all alike. . . . it is safe to say that by far the greatest

number of people slip up in their moral thinking through ignorance or neglect of the facts. But secondly, they have to give as much weight to the interests of these other people as to their own interests; for unless they do, they will not be universalizing their prescriptions. (Frankena & Granrose, 1974, pp. 420–21)⁶

“Universalizing prescriptions” is an idea that I will return to later in the context of political theory.

Can moral philosophy guide us in the realm of preservation? Since the mid-twentieth century some philosophers have focused on public morality. In 1971 a group of philosophers—precipitated by the starvation taking place in Bangladesh (then, Bengali East Pakistan)—considered moral obligation as it applied to world hunger (Aiken & La Follette, 1977).⁷ As far as I know, this is as close as philosophical debate on the moral imperative of preservation comes. The essays these philosophers wrote are closely related to the current discussion. Peter Singer, in particular, holds the moral principle that if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything of moral comparable value, we ought, morally, to do so.

The moral obligation to preserve cultural heritage can perhaps be viewed as an extension of helping the starving. Besides needing food, “people crave knowledge of their past and the certainty that there will be a continuity of their cultural-individual selves after they die. If they lose their . . . cultural heritage, they lose their past and the possibility of a connection to the time beyond them.”⁸

The perspectives I have described reflect Western thought. There are many distinct moral and ethical precepts that help to inform the decisions we make as caretakers of objects from cultures with different intellectual and cultural traditions. At the same time, different cultures do have ethical precepts in common. If they did not, cooperation among cultures would be impossible. Still, sensitivity to differences is critical to the underpinning of an international preservation community. I introduce these Western definitions with the idea of presenting a framework that will help focus some of our thinking about the moral obligation to preserve. It follows that we must always be open to diverse cultural norms. For example, David Lowenthal (2002, p. 21) quotes a Zuni spokesman who says that “Everything for ceremonial, religious, and ritual purposes that my culture makes, is meant to disintegrate. . . . to go back into the ground. Conservation is a disservice to my culture,” while Sherelyn Ogden (2004) describes working with tribal curators and conservators to develop preservation strategies.

The twentieth century, a time of maturation for the fields of preservation and conservation, was also perhaps one of the bloodiest centuries on record. It is ironic that the period that fostered new technologies to aid conservation for paper records in danger of deterioration or damage was also the century that hosted two world wars and many other world con-

flicts. The number of items destroyed over the last hundred years probably exceeds the number saved.

It is no coincidence that the terms *genocide* and *libricide* were coined in the twentieth century. A number of writers, including Rebecca Knuth (2003) and András Riedlmayer (1995), have chronicled instances in which libricide facilitated genocide: to exterminate races or tribes, so as to leave no trace, you must obliterate all material expressions of their cultures. While libricide has probably accompanied genocide for centuries, Knuth points out that “modern communication systems now convey images and texts that give unflinching testimony to violence that might otherwise be hidden from the world” (Knuth, 2003, p. 6).⁹

In the nineteenth century “the concept of cultural, historic and architectural heritage, viewed as the common heritage of a group or community came into existence” (Lopez, 2002, p. 6),¹⁰ though as far back as the Crusades jurists were already considering the obligation to protect cultural monuments in times of war (Boylan, 2001). Yet the rise of nationalism (Sieyès, 1789) —the belief that nations benefit from acting independently rather than collectively¹¹—over the past two centuries has simultaneously helped and hindered preservation. When sovereign states rose from former empires and kingdoms, national identity and self-determination followed. Since the self-interests of individual nations often dictate that national rather than international goals take priority, cultural monuments might be expropriated or intentionally destroyed for national interests. Nationalism, ideally, embraces pluralism—a condition in which distinct religious, ethnic, and cultural groups can coexist. When nations do not embrace pluralism, the result can lead to xenophobia or ethnic cleansing, which undermine monumental preservation. (One need look no further than to American history and our treatment of Native Americans, their sacred sites, and even their bones.) Since pluralism, at present, is under attack all over the world, cultural heritage continues to be vulnerable.

To be universalizing, nationalism must be more moderate; it must embrace the concept that nations are part of a global community. This raises other issues: what is the obligation of an individual nation to all other nations? And is any given nation a voluntary or involuntary member of a larger group of nations?¹²

Cosmopolitanism takes the broader view that “one’s primary moral obligations are directed to all human beings (regardless of geographical or cultural distance) and, political arrangements should faithfully reflect this universal moral obligation (in the form of international organizations that take precedence over nation-states).”¹³ That is, the greatest good for the greatest number trumps the greatest good for any one state. It would be utopian indeed if all nations operated on this “law.” But, as with individual people, individual nations have always taken the stance “Is it good for me? How can I benefit the most?” and most nations have behaved this way, de-

spite the fact that they are signatories to international conventions—and despite the fact that, in so operating, other countries are hurt. This will not work if we are to preserve the cultures of all.

Here it is useful to consider two theoretical views of international relations: realism and interdependence. Realism generally aligns itself with nationalism: an extreme example of this thinking is that the morals you adhere to in your own country may not apply to other countries.¹⁴ In other words, realists hold that “moral norms do not apply to the conduct of states, which should instead be guided exclusively by a concern for national interest” (McMahan, 1993, p. 384). Interdependence, on the other hand, recognizes “contemporary world politics . . . not [as] a seamless web; [but as] a tapestry of diverse relationships” (Keohane & Nye, 2001, p. 4). In this view, averting war or man-made ecological disasters requires collective action, and interdependence is not limited to situations of mutual benefit.

The cosmopolitan or interdependence perspectives make possible the work of international organizations like the United Nations (UN). The purpose of the UN is to “preserve peace through international cooperation and collective security.”¹⁵ For the most part, the UN respects the sovereignty of individual regimes without necessarily monitoring their policies. Its cultural agency, UNESCO, is the world body with oversight for the protection of world heritage. Cosmopolitanism also spawns nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which do much on-the-ground preservation work.

This takes us back to Hare’s universal prescriptivism that accounts for collective as well as individual moral authority. It also gives credence to the idea of the “wisdom of the ages” because such wisdom is “the result of the thought of a great many people in diverse situations” (Hare, 1991). If Hare’s ideas are applied to the UN or UNESCO—forums that allow for the diverse perspectives of diverse constituencies—then protection of human lives or cultural objects *can* conceivably be accomplished. This is an important concept: if universal principles are rejected, then the human rights movement or the protection of cultural heritage will languish because it will be impossible to move beyond the interests of particular societies.

Monumental preservation is contingent upon the ongoing, though at times precarious, balance of international relations. Cultural heritage is protected through conventions, laws, and treaties, as well as documents that have moral rather than legal authority such as charters, principles, and codes of ethics. But, as history has shown repeatedly, even agreements among countries that carry legal authority—such as the Hague Convention—are violated over and over again.

The preservation of cultural heritage has long depended on legal documents, for example, the nineteenth-century Lieber Code (1863)¹⁶ and the original Hague Convention. Dozens, if not hundreds, of relevant documents were created in the twentieth century.¹⁷ One pre-nineteenth-century influence on later conventions and charters was Emmerich de Vattel’s *Law of*

Nations (1758). Although not written explicitly to address cultural property issues, de Vattel sets forth propositions that underlie such later documents as the Hague Convention—namely, that nations unite for the purpose of “promoting their mutual safety,” that nations are “susceptible of obligations and rules,” and that there are rights among nations (de Vattel, 1789). Vattel stressed that, in the interests of mankind, when possible, cultural property should be spared in time of war. An early example of de Vattel’s principles at work was the 1815 Congress of Vienna. Under the terms of the Congress, France was compelled to return to the Venetians the gilded bronze statues seized by Napoleon.

The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict originated with the Hague Peace Conference of 1899. Although other conventions superseded parts of the original treaty, the Hague Convention, modified several times, continues in force. The recently added 1999 protocol provides for “exceptional protection” of significant sites, monuments, and institutions. Significantly, extradition for some crimes against cultural property is now possible. Although the United States is not a signatory,¹⁸ it remains bound by the earlier Hague Conventions. The Convention requires that combatants safeguard and respect cultural property. UNESCO maintains a list of monuments that are under special immunity from attack.

Another recent document, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, sponsored by the International Institute for the Unification of Private Law, is intended to protect stolen objects in times of peace as well as in war.¹⁹ This document complements the Hague Convention—and it is equally challenging to enforce given the robustness of illegal trafficking in stolen art.

Although conventions, charters, treaties, and the like are documents that carry moral and legal weight, some cultural heritage professionals have worried that the rapid proliferation of such documents has led to confusion and even to contradictions. In some cases, documents are so general they can be interpreted differently by various parties. Further, these documents are not always well disseminated, which minimizes their chance for broad implementation (Luxen, 2004, p. 4).

In 1996 a group of cultural heritage professionals representing the International Council on Archives, the International Council of Museums, the International Council on Monuments and Sites, and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions started the International Community of the Blue Shield (ICBS). The Blue Shield is the symbol specified in the 1954 Hague Convention for marking cultural sites, and it was envisioned as a Red Cross for the protection of cultural heritage.

However, a point of contention is whether or not to mark cultural sites with the blue shield logo to signal their protected status in the event of armed conflict. Some fear that marking monuments identifies them as

ready targets for hostile forces (Luxen, 2004, p. 4). ICBS argues that the risk is worth taking because otherwise they might not receive full protection (MacKenzie, 2002 and 2003, p. 17). The Blue Shield defenders also point out that the Red Cross itself is sometimes targeted but that the benefits of having these organizations outweigh the risks. The critics of the Blue Shield initiative have a point. The very act of labeling something as heritage distinguishes it from other objects and can therefore enhance its value. On the other hand, we privilege objects all the time by placing them in museums or exhibits. As long as we recognize the significance of an object or place value on it, it is at risk. Those out to destroy another's heritage will have marked targets. Adherents of the Blue Shield approach wager that more good than harm will come of identifying the value and significance of certain monuments.

Thus far the forces of good and the forces of malfeasance or terrorism are in play, and the terrorists have not always been adequately kept in check. One need only draw on the example of the destruction of the Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, in 2001. Yet, even if international intervention was not successful in that instance, if we are to preserve monuments we must do so through a coalition of all peoples and through local, as well as global, action. Philosopher John Rawls (1971) would probably assert that principles of "right action" are justifiable for their own sake, independent of the amount of good that the just actions result in.

International law, professional practice, and the concern of the general public seem to point to the existence of a moral imperative to preserve. After a natural disaster such as the 2004 tsunamis or Hurricane Katrina, governments, NGOs, and individual citizens mobilized quickly to try to mitigate the long-term damage to libraries, archives, and museums, as well as dealing with the immediate needs of people and communities for shelter, food, and communications. When victims of disasters are interviewed they often lament the loss of their family photos more than the loss of their dwellings because their dwellings are replaceable. There seems to be an almost instinctive need for individuals to preserve their own personal histories. Today there is a growing emphasis on community-based preservation. In Chile they have a term for this: *mingaco*, an Indian word that signifies collective preservation.²⁰ Put another way, it is the notion of cultural stewardship. In the words of a political scientist who has written extensively on human rights,

Culture is a very deep part of individuality. To assure the dignity and well-being of future generations we need to safeguard culture. Monuments are a visual library of our human as well as our spiritual passage in all of its fullness—good and evil. It is always cultural monuments that are under attack in political conflicts—and for a very good reason; [to destroy cultural objects creates] a blow to society and to peoples' sense of security and identity.²¹

However we choose to define *morality*, it has an important role to play in monumental preservation. Contemporary philosophers are addressing the functioning of morality in the context of such global concerns as the environment and the prevention of nuclear war. The preservation of cultural heritage—monumental preservation—is a concern that fits alongside these others for the reasons that I suggest. But as forceful as a moral stance may sometimes be, it is still subject to war, terrorism, natural disasters, technological obsolescence, and the innate human desire to empower oneself at the expense of others. It is perhaps this last vulnerability that is most difficult to overcome.

“The rules of the game include some national rules, some international rules, some private rules—and large areas of no rules at all.” This observation by Susan Strange in “Economic Power and Who Has It?” (1975) applies aptly to preservation. The protection of cultural heritage has been attended to in international conventions, laws, and treaties, but it is the “large areas of no rules at all” that continue to challenge us.

NOTES

1. The title refers to a talk by Librarian of Congress James H. Billington titled “The Moral Imperative of Conservation,” which was first delivered at the Art Institute of Chicago on June 16, 1987, and was again presented to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) October 22, 1987, meeting. It was published in Merrill-Oldham (1988, pp. 5–12). Despite the title of this article, it is a meditation on cultural memory and the role of conservation and preservation in sustaining cultural heritage. He discusses cultural values and preservation, but does not consider “moral issues.”
2. In some other versions of the Bible, “many days” is translated as “for a long time.”
3. In *Innocents Abroad* Mark Twain talks about a practice of pilgrims to the Holy Land who chopped off pieces of famous buildings for their records of their travel. In a way, like Lord Elgin with the marbles, they were taking home artifacts to preserve memory. But in so doing, they were destroying that which needed preservation from *them*. On one side, the original is deteriorating in order to preserve memories of the excursion, of the experience. On the other side, this “preservation” of memory creates an urgency to preserve that which they are trying to remember. It is two kinds of preservation.
4. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (4th ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
5. See in particular Kant (1964). Contemporary philosophers, including W. D. Ross (1974), have been highly critical of Kant’s logic. Frankena and Granrose (1974) have reprinted an excerpt from Ross’s *Foundations of Ethics* and titled the excerpt “Criticism of Kant.” Bernard Mayo wrote, “It has been said that the whole of Western philosophy is a set of footnotes to Plato. . . . And modern ethics is a set of footnotes, not to Plato, but to Kant, and, more remotely, to the Old Testament and Roman Law” (Frankena & Granrose, 1974, p. 231).
6. I am also drawing on Hare (1972).
7. Thanks to Diane Raymond for making these essays known to me.
8. M. G. Bouvard, in an e-mail to the author, October 17, 2005.
9. According to Knuth, Raphael Lemkin coined *genocide* in the 1930s to refer to the murder of whole races and tribes; the term was adopted by the United Nations in 1946. *Libricide* is “the regime-sponsored, ideologically driven destruction of books and libraries” (Knuth, 2003 p. 5).
10. Though this publication is intended for young adults, the author has presented the material in sufficient detail that it is useful for a general audience.
11. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 1171.
12. There are also many other factors, including religious ones, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

13. "Nationalism," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 13 (retrieved October 5, 2005, from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nationalism>).
14. Adherents to this view include Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. For the perspective of interdependence see Keohane and Nye (2001). Under the George W. Bush administration, realism has dominated the U.S. approach to international "diplomacy."
15. See the United Nations home page: <http://www.un.org> (retrieved on October 5, 2005).
16. Francis Lieber's *Code* was issued as *Instructions for the Governance of Armies of the United States in the Field*, General Orders No. 100 on April 24, 1863; later it was simply called the *Lieber Code*. The text is available at <http://www.civilwarhome.com/libercode.htm> (retrieved on October 10, 2005).
17. For a comprehensive list, see Boylan (2001).
18. According to Arlene Krimgold Fleming (1996), "The United States is not a party to the Hague Convention, reportedly because, during the Cold War, the government was unwilling to promise not to bomb the Kremlin, a listed cultural monument."
19. International Institute for the Unification of Private Law, ratified on June 25, 1995. See <http://www.unidroit.or/english/conventions/c-main.htm> (retrieved on October 10, 2005).
20. I was introduced to this concept at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, which was held in Buenos Aires in 2004. At panel no. 107 (August 25), "Preservation and Conservation with Audiovisual and Multimedia," Antonieta Palma discussed this concept in her talk, "Los Archivos Sonoros y Audiovisuales de Chile."
21. M. G. Bouvard in e-mail correspondence with the author, April 21, 2005, and October 17, 2005.

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