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Here's my reply to those who condemn my project on ethics and empire

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On Wednesday some members of Oxford University's history faculty published an open letter condemning the project on Ethics & Empire that I lead. Here is my reply.

The signatories deny that there is a prevailing orthodoxy that empire is always and everywhere wicked, and that any historian subscribes to it. I am delighted to hear it. Unfortunately, judging by *Guardian* readers, members of the Scottish National Party, Hindu nationalists, and other anti-colonialist ideologues, millions of others do subscribe.

The critics then proceed to undermine their own claim to innocence. They complain that my views are "complacent, even celebratory". Since I fully acknowledge that empire has sometimes been grievously oppressive, and since they have read me saying

it, they can only mean that it is complacent to celebrate empire at all. But that implies either that we shouldn't celebrate what is good in empire, or that there is nothing good in it to celebrate. Since the first implication is plainly false, they must mean the second. But how does that differ from saying that, all things considered, empire is wicked?

The historians worry that any celebration of Britain's imperial past reinforces among Oxford's students a pervasive sense of "contemporary inequalities in access to and experience at our university". The logic here is not easy to unearth, but perhaps the objection is that any acknowledgement of the benefits of empire necessarily degrades black and ethnic minority students. The falsity of this claim is made plain by the contents of my email inbox, which include numerous messages from correspondents with names of Indian and African origin who evidently have no trouble at all celebrating the good that the British empire achieved. It is possible to acknowledge a debt without losing one's dignity.

Next up is criticism of my "absurd" argument that the abolition of the slave trade "stands simply in a balance-book against the Amritsar massacre or the Tasmanian genocide. Abolition does not somehow erase the British empire's own practice of slavery". A sure sign of a weak argument is the erection of a straw-man, since the only reason for setting up a false target is that you can't hit the real one. This criticism hits only straw. Nowhere have I argued that the sins of empire are outweighed by its benefits; I have merely made the point that empire is morally complex and ambiguous. On the whole I don't believe in crude, utilitarian analyses: the goods and evils involved are far too various in kind to be "weighed" or "balanced" in any truly rational way. Most cost-benefit analysis is merely prejudice masquerading as mathematics. That's why we need a far more intelligent and sophisticated way of evaluating empire morally — which is precisely what the Ethics & Empire project aims to achieve.

Still on the subject of the benefits of empire, the historians say that they cannot accept "the simple claim that imperialism 'brought order' without examining what it actually meant for those subject to it". Up springs yet another straw man. I nowhere claim that the basic good of order is a sufficient justification of any political system. Sometimes order is indeed bought at too high a price. Iraqis enjoyed oodles of order under Saddam Hussein, but at the price of having his goons squeeze the heads of political dissidents between steel vices until their brains came out of their noses. I can't share our historians' confidence that this was a price worth paying.

Nevertheless, it remains true that without sufficient political order, almost nothing human can flourish. Therefore it is also true, as Bruce Gilley has quite rightly pointed out, that there have been many occasions when indigenous peoples have chosen to seek refuge in European colonies. In the article on colonialism that I [published in the Times](#), I gave as an example the millions of Chinese who far preferred the reliable, legal order of undemocratic, colonial Hong-Kong to the bloody anarchy of indigenous Communist China during the Cultural Revolution. The reason that I chose that example was that it had been given me the previous week by a Chinese guest, whose parents had been among the refugees. To that former colonial subject, then, the benefits of British empire were patent.

Finally, the historians' open letter declares that "good and evil may be meaningful terms of analysis for theologians; they are useless to historians". That is both confusing and confused. The signatories could be repudiating a Manichaean reading of empire in terms of simple good and evil. But then they recognise that this moral theologian doesn't operate in such terms. So they must be saying that historians don't do ethics at all. Yet that is manifestly false. Historiography, like their open letter itself, is rife with moral assumptions and judgments. But because historians usually don't know much about ethics, their moral evaluations are typically covert, unreflective, and unaccountable.

The Ethics & Empire project at the McDonald Centre for Theology, Ethics, and Public Life seeks to build a unique intellectual partnership between historians and ethicists, so that we can compensate for each other's weaknesses and amount to more than the sum of our parts. That a minority of Oxford's history faculty have chosen to withhold their collaboration is a great shame. That they do so on such spurious grounds is a waste.

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