

WHAT IS (FUNDAMENTALLY OR PER SE) WRONG WITH COLONIALISM

A REPLY TO AGRAWAL AND BUCHANAN

Daniel Weltman

WHAT is wrong with colonialism? Too much to mention. Much recent discussion of colonialism's wrongness focuses on a narrower question: Is there something per se wrong with colonialism, such that even colonialism absent all of the killing, enslaving, genocide, and so on would be wrong? Some argue that colonialism is per se wrong.¹ Others argue that colonialism is not per se wrong but is rather (as Margaret Moore puts it) only "contingently unjust."² Although in practice, it has always been wrong, in principle, we can imagine instances of colonialism that are not wrong.³ This is an important question because (for instance) some wish to defend "civilizing" colonialism (either in principle or in practice) because it could promote justice.⁴

One recent analysis of colonialism by Ritwik Agrawal and Allen Buchanan bypasses discussion of colonialism's per se wrongness.⁵ Agrawal and Buchanan instead raise a new topic: the "fundamental" wrong of colonialism. They argue that existing accounts of colonialism's wrongness do not accurately illuminate the fundamental wrong. The fundamental wrong is the assumption that those who are colonized are unequal because incapable: whereas most adults are

1 E.g., Altman and Wellman, *A Liberal Theory of International Justice*, 12–16; Ypi, "What's Wrong with Colonialism"; Stilz, "Decolonization and Self-Determination" and *Territorial Sovereignty*, 131–33; Bufacchi, "Colonialism, Injustice, and Arbitrariness"; van Wietmarschen, "The Colonized and the Wrong of Colonialism"; Renzo, "Why Colonialism Is Wrong"; Ferguson and Veneziani, "Territorial Rights and Colonial Wrongs"; and Nine, "Colonialism, Territory and Pre-Existing Obligations."

2 Moore, "Justice and Colonialism."

3 Valentini, "On the Distinctive Procedural Wrong of Colonialism"; and Weltman, "Colonialism, Injustices of the Past, and the Hole in Nine," "Colonialism Is Per Se Wrong Only if Colonialism Is Not Per Se Wrong," and "Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism."

4 Weltman, "Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism," 25.

5 Agrawal and Buchanan, "The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism" (hereafter cited parenthetically).

regarded as autonomous, colonizers regard the colonized as similar to “children or the mentally deficient” (186).

We should reject Agrawal and Buchanan’s arguments. They are wrong to charge their opponents with giving an incorrect account of the fundamental wrongness of colonialism. Their opponents are focused on the *per se* wrong of colonialism, and Agrawal and Buchanan change the topic. Moreover, their account of the fundamental wrong is not compelling because some instances of obviously wrongful colonialism do not instantiate the ostensibly fundamental wrong they propose.

1. FUNDAMENTAL VERSUS PER SE WRONG

Agrawal and Buchanan note earlier discussions of colonialism’s *per se* wrongness (193), including Ypi’s, Stilz’s, and Renzo’s discussions, which focus respectively on the form of association instantiated by colonialism, the inability of colonized peoples to affirm the colonial regime, and the violation of the self-determining agency of the colonized. But Agrawal and Buchanan change the terms of the debate and ask what the fundamental wrong of colonialism is, regardless of whether that fundamental wrong is essential to colonialism (and thus regardless of whether it renders colonialism *per se* wrong). The fundamental wrong is the “wrong from which the other serious wrongs derive and/or that is a violation of a more basic moral principle than is the case with other wrongs” (185).

Changing the debate is not necessarily objectionable. Where Agrawal and Buchanan err is in finding opponents among those who defend the *per se* wrongness of colonialism. They argue that Ypi, Stilz, and Renzo are charitably read as talking not about the *per se* wrong of colonialism but about “either the fundamental wrong of colonialism or . . . the most serious wrong among the wrongs that are grounded in or derivative upon the fundamental wrong” (189). Applying this ostensibly charitable gloss, they conclude that Ypi, Stilz, and Renzo all have bad accounts of the fundamental wrong of colonialism (190–92). But Ypi, Stilz, and Renzo have *no* account of the fundamental wrong of colonialism because they are not interested in the question, and it is not charitable to read them as being interested in this question. Ypi, Stilz, and Renzo are interested in the *per se* wrongness of colonialism. This means Agrawal and Buchanan’s objections to Ypi, Stilz, and Renzo fail.

For instance, Agrawal and Buchanan argue that “views like that of Stilz, Renzo, and Ypi, so far as they focus [on] only the political dimension of colonialism, do not convey the full extent of colonial humiliation and the resulting, lasting damage to the self-conception of the (formerly) colonized” (191). The proper response is that the goal is not to convey this but rather to account for

colonialism's per se wrongness, which relies on a feature that may be only incidentally (or even not at all) related to these horrific results.

Ypi, for instance, agrees that "colonialism is wrong for many reasons," including the fact that it involves, among many other things, "burning native settlements, torturing innocents, slaughtering children, enslaving entire populations, exploiting the soil and natural resources available to them, and discriminating on grounds of ethnicity and race."⁶ But she says that her goal is "to clarify what is wrong with colonialism, over and above these familiar outrages. Although an account focusing on the brutality of this practice would capture most of the wrong of colonialism . . . it would leave unchallenged more subtle forms of it."⁷ She is "interested in what makes colonialism, even benign colonialism, wrong as such."⁸ Thus, she is *very* explicit about *not* aiming to characterize any contingent wrong-making features of colonialism, no matter how bad those are and no matter how fundamental they are. She wants to focus on *only* what is per se wrong with colonialism, and this wrongness attaches even to benign colonialism.

Stilz, similarly, is concerned to give an account of colonialism's wrongness that would "rule out a *benign* colonial regime if it did a reasonable job at providing good governance."⁹ Renzo too is explicit about looking for a wrong of colonialism "that cannot be reduced to the systemic perpetration of . . . more familiar crimes."¹⁰ Renzo asks us to imagine "the benign form of government described by the apologists of colonialism" and suggests that "no matter how benevolent we imagine a particular master to be," we will still want to explain what is wrong with it by finding the per se wrong of colonialism.¹¹

It should therefore be clear why Agrawal and Buchanan's focus on the fundamental wrong of colonialism is misplaced insofar as it is characterized as an argument against those who endorse the view that colonialism is per se wrong. The question of per se wrongness is separate from the question of fundamental wrongness. Thus, the objections that Agrawal and Buchanan level against Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz—like the claim that the wrong they identify is not more serious or more fundamental than the wrong Agrawal and Buchanan point to—fail (190–92). The objections target arguments that Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz do not make. Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz are not interested in the fundamental

6 Ypi, "What's Wrong with Colonialism," 162.

7 Ypi, "What's Wrong with Colonialism," 162.

8 Ypi, "What's Wrong with Colonialism," 161. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for suggesting that I cite these statements Ypi makes.

9 Stilz, *Territorial Sovereignty*, 91.

10 Renzo, "Why Colonialism Is Wrong," 348.

11 Renzo, "Why Colonialism Is Wrong," 348.

wrong of colonialism, and their accounts cannot be fairly accused of giving a bad description of the fundamental wrong. Indeed, they all explicitly aim to adduce a wrong of colonialism that applies even in cases of benign colonialism, which would presumably not instantiate the fundamental wrong.

Agrawal and Buchanan consider something like this point and attempt to preclude it. They say that “we will proceed on the charitable assumption that by ‘the wrong’ of colonialism these authors do not mean a wrong unique to colonialism, since it is obvious that many non-colonial regimes fail to satisfy the criteria they advance” (189). Whatever the merits of this argument, we cannot therefore conclude that these authors must therefore be talking about the fundamental wrong of colonialism in the sense Agrawal and Buchanan have in mind. Agrawal and Buchanan present a false dichotomy. As they frame it, either we discuss the unique wrong of colonialism, or we discuss the fundamental wrong of colonialism. But there is a third option: we discuss the *per se* wrong of colonialism, whether or not that wrong is unique. Agrawal and Buchanan might be right that the wrong is not unique. But this does not mean that it is not a *per se* wrong or that it is a fundamental wrong.

Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz may or may not believe that the *per se* wrong of colonialism is also unique to colonialism, but this is a separate issue. Certainly it is not charitable to Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz to read them as addressing the fundamentality question if what they say about fundamentality is not convincing, as Agrawal and Buchanan claim. We should read Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz as doing what they *explicitly* say they are doing: we should read them as talking about the *per se* wrong of colonialism (and as not looking at all for what is fundamentally wrong with colonialism). If the *only* options were to read Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz as looking for the unique wrong *or* the fundamental wrong, Agrawal and Buchanan would have a point. But Ypi, Renzo, and Stilz may wrongly think that the *per se* wrong is a unique wrong, and thus we can reject what they say about whether the *per se* wrong of colonialism is unique but accept that they are describing a *per se* wrong, not a fundamental wrong.¹²

Agrawal and Buchanan might then respond that although it is true that their objections miss the mark, we should admit that because these opposing theories aim to answer a different question about *per se* wrongness rather than the question about fundamentality, these theories do not give a good

12 I think Ypi incorrectly thinks that the *per se* wrong of colonialism is a unique wrong, that Renzo probably thinks this given his discussion of the wrong as “distinctively wrong” (“Why Colonialism Is Wrong,” 348), and that Stilz does not make this mistake. Valentini agrees with this reading of Ypi (“On the Distinctive Procedural Wrong of Colonialism”). My argument does not rely on the claim that Ypi, Renzo, or Stilz think that the *per se* wrong of colonialism is unique or on the claim that if any of them think it is unique, they are wrong to think this.

description of the fundamental wrong. This would give us a reason to prefer Agrawal and Buchanan's account of the fundamental wrong. We therefore turn to the more central point, which is what the fundamental wrong of colonialism is and whether Agrawal and Buchanan have accurately characterized it.

2. FUNDAMENTALITY

The fundamental wrong of colonialism, according to Agrawal and Buchanan, is "the non-autonomy assumption" (186). It is "the belief that colonized peoples were in effect not competent adults, that they were inferiors incapable of managing their own lives and therefore were suitable objects of control by superiors" (186).

As noted above, Agrawal and Buchanan characterize fundamentality as a property of a wrong such that it is the "wrong from which the other serious wrongs derive and/or that is a violation of a more basic moral principle than is the case with other wrongs" (185). It is hard to parse the definition because "and" and "or" mean different things, and conjoining them with a slash does not adequately elucidate the role that each word plays in the definition. I take the most charitable reading of Agrawal and Buchanan to be one according to which fundamentality consists of purported legitimation of other wrongs. The fundamental wrong of colonialism is the one that purportedly legitimates the most serious wrongs of colonialism—namely, economic exploitation and humiliation. This reading makes sense of almost all of the claims that Agrawal and Buchanan make about fundamentality and avoids issues with other possible interpretations of the idea.

Substantiating this reading of Agrawal and Buchanan is unnecessary for two reasons. First, Agrawal and Buchanan do not adequately elucidate what it means for a wrong to be fundamental so it is hard to say anything conclusive. Second and more importantly for the purposes of evaluating their account, we do not need to resolve the confusion. Any plausible reading of fundamentality is still subject to the objection raised below.

This objection is that there are many terrible instances of colonialism that do not instantiate the so-called fundamental wrong (or did so only some time after the colonization began). This is true whether we understand fundamentality in the way I have glossed it or in any other plausible way (like being a violation of a more basic moral principle). Whatever a fundamental wrong of colonialism is, we should expect to find it in typical and terrible instances of colonialism. This should make us suspect that Agrawal and Buchanan have not identified the fundamental wrong of colonialism. The objection can be illustrated with representative cases.

3. PROBLEM CASES FOR AGRAWAL AND BUCHANAN'S ACCOUNT

If the fundamental wrong of colonialism is an attitude that the colonized are not autonomous, this implies that none of the following cases instantiate the fundamental wrong of colonialism (at least in the initial stages of the colonization):

England and America: King James I of England grants a charter to various English citizens, giving them the right to establish colonies in Virginia, specifying that the colonists must send one-fifth of the gold and silver and one-fifteenth of the copper they mine back to the king. The purposes of the colony include enriching the king and exerting British control over the Americas against competing European powers like Spain. The charter claims that colonization involves the “propagating of Christian religion to such People, as yet live in Darkness and miserable Ignorance of the true Knowledge and Worship of God” and characterizes the native inhabitants as “Infidels and Savages.”¹³ But the Indigenous Americans are not characterized as inferiors in the sense of being akin to children and unable to govern themselves at all, and indeed, the charter gives the colonists power to “establish and cause to be made a Coin . . . for the more Ease of Traffick and Bargaining between and amongst them and the Natives there.”¹⁴ The expectation is that the native inhabitants are rational actors capable of engaging in economic activity.

France and Algeria: France invades Algeria “on the pretense of a diplomatic dispute revolving around French debts owed to the Bacri family and the Ottoman *dey* (head) of the Regency of Algiers that had resulted in the *dey* hitting the French consul in the face” but in fact for a variety of reasons, including King Charles x’s desire to “present the French monarchy as the Christian defender of civilization against Muslim tyranny.”¹⁵ The assumption that the Algerians are childlike and not fully autonomous would, if anything, undercut the force of the insult that the blow represents and so cannot reasonably be adverted to as the fundamental wrong grounding other things France did.

Japan and Korea: Japan colonizes Korea for a variety of reasons, including a desire to protect Japanese sovereignty by controlling surrounding areas and the expansion of Japan’s role on the international stage. The view that the Koreans are incapable of ruling themselves is not a driving

13 Thorpe, *The Federal and State Constitutions*, 7:3784.

14 Thorpe, *The Federal and State Constitutions*, 7:3786.

15 Rabinovitch, “The Quality of Being French Versus the Quality of Being Jewish,” 817.

factor, and indeed, the Japanese colonial government clashes with existing Japanese settlers who disapprove of the colonial government's treatment of Koreans as potential Japanese citizens rather than as uncivilized barbarians.¹⁶

Similar cases, real or imagined, can be adduced. What they have in common is that they are awful (and paradigmatic) cases of colonialism yet are missing what Agrawal and Buchanan label the fundamental wrong of colonialism. Moreover, they all include economic exploitation, practices of humiliation, or both. Thus, they cannot be accused of missing Agrawal and Buchanan's point that any account of the fundamental wrong of colonialism should engage with the economic injustices and the humiliation involved in colonialism (186–89), which are indeed terrible. So Agrawal and Buchanan's account should be rejected.¹⁷

Ashoka University
danny.weltman@ashoka.edu.in

REFERENCES

- Agrawal, Ritwik, and Allen Buchanan. "The Fundamental Wrong of Colonialism." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 53, no. 2 (2025): 184–96.
- Altman, Andrew, and Christopher Heath Wellman. *A Liberal Theory of International Justice*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Bufacchi, Vittorio. "Colonialism, Injustice, and Arbitrariness." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 48, no. 2 (2017): 197–211.
- Ferguson, Benjamin, and Roberto Veneziani. "Territorial Rights and Colonial Wrongs." *European Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 2 (2021): 425–46.
- Moore, Margaret. "Justice and Colonialism." *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 8 (2016): 447–61.
- Nine, Cara. "Colonialism, Territory and Pre-Existing Obligations." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2023): 277–87.
- Rabinovitch, Simon. "The Quality of Being French Versus the Quality of Being Jewish: Defining the Israelite in French Courts in Algeria and the Metropole." *Law and History Review* 36, no. 4 (2018): 811–46.
- Renzo, Massimo. "Why Colonialism Is Wrong." *Current Legal Problems* 72, no. 1 (2019): 347–73.

16 Uchida, *Brokers of Empire*, 21.

17 For feedback on this discussion note, I thank two anonymous reviewers for this journal.

- Stilz, Anna. "Decolonization and Self-Determination." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 32, no. 1 (2015): 1–24.
- . *Territorial Sovereignty: A Philosophical Exploration*. Oxford University Press, 2019.
- Thorpe, Francis Newton, ed. *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and Colonies Now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America*. 7 vols. Government Printing Office, 1909.
- Uchida, Jun. *Brokers of Empire: Japanese Settler Colonialism in Korea, 1876–1945*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2011.
- Valentini, Laura. "On the Distinctive Procedural Wrong of Colonialism." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 43, no. 4 (2015): 312–31.
- Van Wietmarschen, Han. "The Colonized and the Wrong of Colonialism." *Thought* 7, no. 3 (2018): 170–78.
- Weltman, Daniel. "Colonialism, Injustices of the Past, and the Hole in Nine." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2023): 288–300.
- . "Colonialism Is *Per Se* Wrong Only if Colonialism Is Not *Per Se* Wrong: Supersession and the Bourgeois Predicament." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2024): 239–66.
- . "Saving Cosmopolitanism from Colonialism." *Ethics and Global Politics* 17, no. 4 (2024): 25–44.
- Ypi, Lea. "What's Wrong with Colonialism." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2013): 158–91.