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Justifying the Unjustifiable

Grappling with the contradiction behind justifying colonialism

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Abstract

It has long been asserted that colonialism is ethically unjustifiable. Still, the debate on colonialism has not fully settled. The continuing justification of colonialism has been described as hypocritical or even as a lie. This begs the question however, of why colonialism would continue to be justified if it is ethically unjustifiable. This thesis seeks to examine this question. It will do so by analysing why it is the case that colonialism is unjustifiable and considering what the motive would be behind justifying colonialism. This is done by giving an account of the contradictory logic of colonialism as an ideology and how justification functions to mediate this contradiction in logic. Exploring the position of justification in the modern discourse on colonialism, this thesis will conclude that the function of colonial justification is not to attempt to solve the contradiction in its logic or justify itself to either side of the contradictory thinking. Rather, colonial justification refuses the discourse on its own internal contradiction, thereby avoiding a reckoning with it.

Contents

Introduction	4
1: Colonisation, colonialism, colonial, coloniality; what are we talking about?	8
1.1 Colonisation and its effects	8
1.2 Colonialism as an ideology	9
1.3 Coloniality and the colonial	10
2: Why is colonialism unjustifiable?	13
3: On motive	16
4: Colonial Logic and the Role of Justification	18
4.1 On western civilisation	18
4.2 On the (post)colony	19
4.3 The role of justification	21
5: Approaches to justifying the unjustifiable	26
5.1 The strategic lie	26
5.2 Justifying the unjustifiable	27
6: In Media Res Justification and the Shadow of Gaza	29
6.1 Changes in public discourse	30
6.2 Gaza, social media, and In Media Res discourse	32
7: Conclusion	37
Bibliography	39

Introduction

This thesis is about colonialism and the justifications for it. Specifically, it is about the tension fundamental to the act of justifying colonialism because colonialism, by its very nature, is unjustifiable. From this tension springs the question this thesis is concerned with:

If colonialism is unjustifiable, why do people continue to justify it?

The most well-known account of colonial justification comes from Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000 (1955)). The book wastes no time giving its estimation of colonialism. Colonialism is theft and barbarism. It is the exploitation and dehumanisation of the colonised. The justifications for colonialism, that colonisation means to civilise the colonised or that it is bringing them God, are seen by Césaire as inventions originating after colonialism had already started. They are lies and hypocrisy, part of a conscious effort to mislead people about the nature and the reality of colonialism for strategic gain. Césaire's conclusions remain the dominant understanding of colonial justification within the anti-colonial field to this day and his writing is the way I, like many others, was introduced to the topic.

Césaire is explicit in his confrontation of the reality of colonialism. Part of this confrontation is stating clearly that colonialism is not just indefensible, but that this is becoming increasingly obvious. Since the publishing of *Discourse on Colonialism* seventy years ago, information about the reality of colonialism has only become more accessible. One might expect this to be detrimental to the kind of strategic lying described by Césaire and to consequently see attempts to ethically justify colonialism disappear from the discourse. Unfortunately, the justification of colonialism continues. How can this be? If colonialism is so obviously unjust, a strategically false justification for it would hardly convince people otherwise.

This thesis examines the justification of colonialism on ethical grounds beyond the view of those justifications being strategic lies. Although strategic falsehoods certainly seem to be an important aspect of the justification of colonialism, they do not fully explain the need to attempt to justify colonialism. After all, if it is known, or at least broadly knowable, that these justifications are merely made up after the fact, why even posit them instead of relying on sheer political power? Also, if the false justification is a strategic one, those expressing them must know that they are lying and that their actions are unjustified. Nevertheless, they continue both the unjustified colonial action and the spreading of knowingly false justification. My hypothesis is that colonial justification is not just a strategic effort from the colonial power aimed at the victims of colonialism and those who do not participate in it, but that it serves a deeper purpose in the logic of the ideology of colonialism itself. The very nature of Western colonialism is contradictory. In the act of colonisation, it is savage and horrific, yet it stems forth from societies that, although they are (deeply) flawed, do understand the value and rights of others, and would certainly look down on the barbarism of colonisation. A strategically fabricated justification can be used to obscure this contradiction

to those in the home society, though this is not without challenge. A contradiction that remains, however, is that experienced by the agents of colonialism. They exist both in the ethical context of the societies where they come from and in the ethically desolate context of the colony. On a fundamental level, these contexts are incommensurable. They are so contradictory that there seemingly must be some sort of confrontation between the ethical and the anti-ethical that results in either one winning out over the other. It is by means of justification that this confrontation can be avoided and that the tension between the ethically conscience home society and the ethically empty colony can be avoided. This enables colonial actors to carry out injustice, without becoming fully alienated from their 'native' pro-social context. Achieving this requires a justification that differs from one that is strategically concocted. This justification must, to some extent, be one that is earnestly believed to ethically justify the actions of colonialism. Otherwise, the contradiction cannot hold, and we would expect discourse around colonialism to abandon ethical discussion entirely. Since colonisation is incommensurable with ethics, it would instead devolve into pure power politics.

This thesis and its hypothesis are not a rebuke of Césaire and his view of colonial justification. Rather, it is an attempt to bridge the gap between the lie and hypocrisy of colonial justification and the decivilising effect of colonialism described by Césaire. Césaire poses that the barbarity of colonisation and colonialism becomes entrenched in the civilisations that colonise others. A society that fosters such violence and savagery will itself become more violent and less ethical. The ethical aspect of the society will degrade if evils such as colonialism are tolerated and justified. This account of decivilisation seems plausible, but there is a lack of clarity how the evil of colonialism arises in the first place or is able to perpetuate itself if its perpetrators are understood as stemming from a somewhat ethical civilisation. The bridging of the gap between the strategic lie and the decivilising effect of colonialism will be done by providing an overview of ethical justification for colonialism, the different functions fulfilled by different kinds of justifications, and how they fulfil that function.

The first chapter will provide an overview of what this thesis considers under the concept of colonialism and will explain the way in which different terms will be used. This conceptual framework will be built primarily on the writings of Arendt, Fanon, Quijano, and Mbembe. The chapter will provide an explication on the use of the terms colonisation, colonialism, the colonial, and coloniality in this thesis. This separation of terms is not an attempt to harshly define these terms. It is done in service of the clarity of the rest of the thesis, giving terms specific context so that the meaning of using one term over another can be properly understood.

The second chapter formulates why colonialism is ethically unjustifiable. The chapter adapts the Ethics of the Face of Emmanuel Levinas to explore the foundation of the ethical perspective and of ethical conscience. It will argue that it is through a non-instrumental recognition of the face of the other and the inherent value conveyed when encountering it that we can speak of the meaningfully ethical. Colonialism by its very nature requires the violation of the other and a rejection of their inherent value, bringing it in contradiction with

the basis of ethical viewpoints. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the essence of humanity and if the ethics of the face can be broadened to include more than just humanity.

The third chapter will establish a structure for the understanding of the motive behind actions that informs the approach this thesis takes to the evaluation of the motives behind justifying colonialism. It posits an understanding of actions and the motive behind them as arising in their particular configuration as a result of the context in which they take place. For a wilful action to be undertaken, it must seem to make sense to the actor to undertake it. What seems to make sense to an actor is dependent on their context, which encompasses a broad range of factors, from physical circumstance to social context, and the actors understanding of the context in which they find themselves. This framework of contextual 'making sense' gives allows for an articulation of colonial justification as a mean by which to avoid the ethical context playing a meaningful role in the evaluation of colonial action.

The fourth chapter considers the logic of colonisation and colonialism. Consequently, it describes two different ways in which colonial justifications avoid the ethical context. The overview of the logic of colonisation and colonialism is primarily informed by Achille Mbembe's writing on the nature of the colony, which is central to this thesis' understanding of colonialism as an ideology and its fundamental contradiction. Mbembe describes the colony as a space that any dimension of ontological value is removed from. This emptiness of value removes the ethical dimension and creates a context where the violations of others can seem to make sense. This insight is connected to Césaire's writing about civilisation to further specify the role played by justification within the logic of colonialism. This is maintaining the separation between the ethically empty colony and the ethically conscious colonising civilisation. It can do this by either furthering the ontological emptiness of the colony or by obscuring and misrepresenting the reality in the colony as somehow not being unethical. These different kinds of justification are compared to and analysed through Jason Stanley's concepts of supporting and undermining propaganda. The chapter finishes with an analysis of testimony about the massacre at Jozefow described in Christopher Browning's historical study *Ordinary Men*.

The fifth chapter analyses the logic of justifying colonialism when this is done as a strategic lie. The chapter considers what the aim of such a strategic fabrication could be and how it could manifest and utilise supportive and undermining forms of justification. This analysis shows how such false ethical justification can be used in the effort to avoid ethical blame from others, but how it is not suited for avoiding one's own guilt or ethical qualms with the ethics of colonialism. Avoiding that guilt requires that one genuinely believes in the justification they use for their actions, making it impossible to strategically come up with a reasoning one knows to be false.

The sixth and final chapter analyses justifying colonialism with the aim of avoiding one's own guilty conscience. The chapter starts with a brief comment on such justifications within *a posteriori* discourse. Following this, the chapter analyses developments in discourse surrounding colonialism. Considering development in the Vietnam War, Iraq War, and the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the emergence of a new kind of discourse is described. This discourse is not *a posteriori*, but *in media res* (in the middle of the action). Discourse of this kind challenges the ethics of colonialism in a direct manner. The result of this confrontation

is a collapse of the contradiction of colonialism, which has to resort to power politics to perpetuate itself.

1: Colonisation, colonialism, colonial, coloniality; what are we talking about?

This chapter establishes what exactly is being discussed in this thesis when it speaks of colonialism. This will be done by examining the concepts of colonisation, colonialism, the colonial, and coloniality. These core concepts allow for a clear approach to the idea as a whole. The chapter will go over each concept separately as well as discussing how the different aspects connect to one another and what they specifically are used to denote.

In service of the structure of this chapter, the concept of colonialism will be examined by going over four core aspects: Colonisation, colonialism, the colonial, and coloniality. Broadly, they are defined thusly. Colonisation relates to the historic event of the establishing of colonies and the consequences of that event. The ideology of colonisation is referred to as colonialism. Something can be defined as colonial insofar as it establishes, supports, refers to, reinforces, results from, or perpetuates colonisation or the ideology behind it. Generally, those things relating to colonisation will be written about as colonial acts or colonial actions, while those that relate to ideological colonialism will be referred to as colonial thought, colonial ideas, or, in some cases, colonial justifications. The pattern of power and domination of colonisation, colonialism as its ideology, and colonial acts and ideas is termed coloniality. These terms are used here to denote specific aspects of colonialism. This is done here in order to better explain what is being referred to, but in many cases these aspects will overlap and sometimes be used interchangeably. This chapter's theoretical framework is primarily informed by the writings of Arendt, Fanon, Quijano, and Mbembe on the subjects.

1.1 Colonisation and its effects

There are a number of important things key to this thesis' use of the term colonisation. First, this thesis will not make a harsh distinction between colonisation as settler colonialism and colonisation as economic exploitation (frequently referred to as imperialism). They form the same historical "project of European political domination that began in the early sixteenth century." (Kohn, 2024) Second colonisation is not something that exists only in the past. There are a number of ways in which it is ongoing. Territories all over the world are effectively controlled by colonial powers and lack control over their own government, such as in the case of United States territories Puerto Rico or Guam. Further, there are countries that trace their origin directly to settlement by colonial powers, such as the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and Israel. Third, in cases where direct colonial rule has come to an end, there are frequently remaining impacts of colonisation. Countries that have gained their independence have yet to fully recover from the damage done by colonial occupation and exploitation. These countries' relation to their former colonisers often remains lopsided, such as in the case of formerly French colonised Africa. (Ndongo Samba Sylla, 2021) Lastly, the effects of colonisation cannot be reduced to material consequences. Although displacement, exploitation, environmental destruction, and direct physical violence are a large part of the story, the violence of colonisation was also an existential/epistemic violence.

A last point to be made about colonisation concerns scale. Colonisation is often discussed in broad, sweeping terms. Even here, a concept such as a European project of domination generalises a vast amount of diverse history for the sake of academic discussion. When the topic is considered in this manner, it is easy to lose track of what actually happened. Large scale generalised colonisation only exists through small scale colonisation. A colony exists because individual persons undertook the violent actions necessary to occupy it. It persists only insofar as individual people make sure it is maintained. A person is colonised when there is another to commit that epistemic violence against them. It is ultimately individual people acting in a colonial manner that creates colonisation, colonialism and coloniality.

While it is important not to overgeneralise the history of colonisation, it is valuable to take note of larger developments. Quijano (2000) and Arendt are two authors who comment on the historical shifts caused by colonisation. Later parts of this chapter will consider Quijano's work further, but it bears mentioning here that Quijano links the development of colonisation with the emergence of modern labour distribution and race as an organising principle for distribution, which is linked to Europe's emergence as central world power. Arendt provides a thorough analysis of colonisation and its impact on historical developments in the second volume of *Origins of Totalitarianism* titled *Imperialism* (1958). Arendt considers imperialism as a part of the historical foundations for totalitarianism. The imperialism discussed by Arendt that is of interest to this thesis' discussion of colonisation concerns developments that Arendt identifies with the emancipation of the bourgeoisie in the period between 1884 and 1914. Arendt makes a distinction between the expansion of imperialism and conquest. Conquest entails exporting the laws and institutions of a nation to the taken territory. The imperialist colonisation described by Arendt is not interested in an expansion of the national government. Instead, Arendt likens the situation in the colony to the theories of Thomas Hobbes, with law being replaced by a struggle to accumulate as much power as possible. The rule of the colony described by Arendt is defined by Racism and Bureaucracy. Racism was used as an absolute category by which settlers justified imposing their superiority on the natives. Bureaucracy as a tool of colonisation is distinct from typical state bureaucracy that functions in accordance with laws. The bureaucracy of imperialism functioned through decree and only respected the law of expansion. This granted a freedom to act and rule otherwise limited by the presence of actual laws. Arendt's description and analysis gives a good insight in the type of rule that governed the colony; one defined by the leveraging of power instead of the structure of law.

1.2 Colonialism as an ideology

Colonisation cannot be separated from the ideology of colonialism that drove it. Later chapters will discuss the mutually enhancing relation between the ideology of colonialism and the event of colonisation in more detail, but the connection between the two will be briefly explored here. Colonialism as an ideology rationalises the act of colonisation and facilitates it. The clearest example of this is racialisation. The category of race classifies the victims of colonisation as inferior, which rationalises their domination. At the same time, this categorisation, backed up by the direct enforcement of violent domination, visits an existential/epistemic violence upon the racialised. Ideologically, colonised people are

conceived of as inferior, and this idea is enforced by material colonisation. Neither the event nor the ideology is in this case primary. They function in tandem, and one being discussed before the other is simply an unavoidable consequence of the written medium. The existential violence of racialisation was most prominently written about by Frantz Fanon (1952). His work approaches the topic from a phenomenological angle. He illustrates a colonisation of the mind through the racialisation of the colonised individual that displaces the colonised within themselves. The category of race essentially creates a new, artificial dimension of one's being and their relation to others that specifically disadvantages the victims of colonialism. The understanding of race presented by Fanon provides a complete picture of the role played by race in colonisation and colonialism. Fanon's approach to race goes beyond viewing it as a mere tool of oppression, instead seeing it as a structural part of the colonial worldview. Eurocentrism is a related example of ideological colonialism. Specific examples of this are orientalism as described by Edward Said (1978) in his book of the same name or the attitude of thinkers such as Hegel towards non-European thought (Kimmerle, 2014). Said's work on Orientalism underlines a core aspect of the colonial worldview. Colonialism has a warped view of the world. It considers the world outside itself as static and backwards, but also as exotic. Differences are exaggerated and complexities generalised. This warped view of Western superiority is also understood as an implicit justification for colonial action since actual ontological meaning across the world is abstracted away in favour of Western caricatures. The book *Orientalism* relates specifically to the Western view of the Middle East and Arab world. Its characterisation of Western views of the world outside itself holds true when extended beyond those regions, although there are particularities in how different regions are viewed. Later analysis of the nature of the colony in chapter four largely mirrors Said's description of how warped conceptions and caricatures can function to justify colonialism.

1.3 Coloniality and the colonial

The aspects of coloniality and the colonial are meta-concepts referring to particularities of colonisation and colonialism. Describing something as colonial often refers to the broader project of European domination, but specific uses of the term will indicate a closer relation to colonisation or colonialism. A colonial act or colonial actions refer to the acts and actions that together constituted the event of colonisation. Colonial thoughts, ideas, and justifications make up the ideology of colonialism. A colonial justification can justify a colonial act or a colonial idea, but in both cases, it is an example of colonialism. The use of colonial ideas to further colonisation, such as the colonisation of the mind described by Fanon (1952), is a colonial act. These points and their distinctions are semantic to a degree. A racist book in and of itself can be considered simply an ideological expression, but such literature being prominent in any given context does work to 'colonise' that context. During later chapters discussions of how colonisation is made possible the distinction between the two will be helpful, but it is not an overly rigid one.

The term coloniality is used to describe the particular logic, power relations, and sovereignty of colonisation and colonialism. The account of coloniality informing this thesis comes largely from the works of Aníbal Quijano and Achille Mbembe. In *Coloniality of Power*,

Eurocentrism and Latin America (2000), Quijano characterises the pattern of colonial power as resulting from a combination of a new organisation of labour under the structure of capitalism and the idea of race as a category informing the relations between different populations. Quijano argues that race determined the position of particular groups in the capitalist structure, giving Europe and Europeans specifically a privileged position. This is the pattern that has since defined world power. It should be clarified that race is not the sole organising principle of coloniality. The centrality of race has much to do with the extent to which it successfully flattens diverse ethnicity and culture into broad categories, but on the smaller scale these differences are still a factor. It also intersects with a number of other categories such as wealth, gender identity, biological sex, sexuality, ableness, language, and level of education to name a few.

An important aspect of the discourse related to Quijano's account of colonialism is the question of whether economic exploitation/greed or racism are the fundamental motivating factor behind colonialism. Overall, academic consensus on this question tends to lean towards viewing economic exploitation as the primary reason for colonialism, with racism being the mechanism justifying said exploitation. This is the view Césaire expresses in *Discourse on Colonialism*, when he describes the decisive actors of colonisation as, amongst others, “pirates”, “ship owners”, “gold diggers” and “the merchant”. (2000 (1955), p. 33) Conceptions of racial backwardness is seen as a later means to justify this economic exploitation. Quijano takes a similar approach, writing that “In America, the idea of race was a way of granting legitimacy to the relations of domination imposed by the conquest.” (Quijano, 2000, p. 534) This conception of racism, as a mechanism for regulating hierarchies of power and desert, is also prominent outside of the direct discussion of colonialism in Foucault's account of state-racism as the mechanism determining “what must live and what must die.” (1976, p. 254) I agree with these views. What ought to be noted is that these claims about the interplay between economic exploitation and racism as motivating forces for colonialism are claims about the historical motivations for colonisation and the origins of modern racism. That economic exploitation is understood as the historically primary motive does not mean that it takes precedence over racism as a motive in modern colonial efforts and does not reduce the role racism plays in shaping the identity of colonialism. This does not mean that racism is now the fundamental motive behind colonialism. It must be said though that the racism espoused by those seeking to justify colonialism is often a genuinely believed one. The idea of race has become so engrained in people's conception of the world and humanity at large that it cannot be viewed as merely a tool to excuse exploitation. Even if exploitation is understood as the fundamental reason for colonialism, racism as its justification has become so engrained in the logic of that exploitation that the two cannot be fully conceptually separated without losing an aspect of the identity of colonialism. In my view, Fanon's writing on race and his exploration of its consequences for both the colonised and colonisers, becoming core to their understandings of themselves, highlights the depth of the entanglement of colonialism with the idea of race. Whatever we consider to be the fundamental motivation at the advent of colonialism, genuine¹ racism has since become essential to its reasoning. It is for this reason that I will not be concluding that either

¹What is meant by ‘genuine’ racism is a racism that is not espoused or believed for its instrumental use in justifying greed and exploitation, but one that is earnestly believed independent from its instrumental usage.

exploitation or racism is more fundamental to the reasoning behind ongoing colonialism, as I think the two have become too intertwined to be considered apart from one another.

Mbembe's (2019) (2001) account of coloniality can be seen as a continuation of Fanon's critique and concerns colonial forms of sovereignty and the domination of life. His writing on the rationale behind colonial sovereignty will be considered in a later chapter about how colonisation is made possible. Mbembe connects the material domination of colonisation with its existential violence. He describes how the combination of existence in a colonised space and being racialised is used to reduce the colonised subject to what he calls 'living death.' Mbembe's 'living death' can be seen as an extension of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* (1998). Agamben makes a distinction between two kinds of life: Zoe and Bios. Zoe is biological life; one's body being biologically alive. Bios is political and social life; not just being technically alive, but actively living, or, as one might say, 'having' a life. Living death means being reduced to pure Zoe or 'bare life'. As a racialised other in a colonised space one is constantly under threat of arbitrary violence. This violence destroys the possibility of meaningful life within the colony and racialisation excludes the colonised from civil society outside the colony. Under these conditions the only kind of living is surviving. Living as Bios is made impossible and only persisting as Zoe remains.

An approach to coloniality that considers it as a particular pattern of power and sovereignty allows for certain comparisons to be made. In *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire (2000 (1955)) (in)famously asserts that Nazism was the attitudes and reasoning of colonisation and colonialism turned inward on Europe. Being left to fester the barbarity of colonialism gradually decivilises Europe.

"That before they were its victims, they were its accomplices; that they tolerated that Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimised it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole edifice of Western, Christian civilisation in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack." (p. 36)

It could be said that while Nazism is not necessarily colonialism, it does follow a pattern of coloniality. Like the coloniality of power identified by Quijano (2000), Nazi ideology combines capitalistic labour relations with the category of race informing the desired hierarchy. Arendt (1958) absolutely considers there to be a connection between colonisation and Nazism. Her writing on racism and bureaucracy in the colony is meant to show the origin of these tools of totalitarianism. Her argument is convincing, especially considering the similarities between the type of rule Arendt describes in the colonies and antisemitism, racism, and rule by decree/state of exception favoured by the Nazis.

2: Why is colonialism unjustifiable?

This chapter elaborates on the core premise that this thesis' research question is built upon; that colonialism is unjustifiable. A phenomenological approach to the experience of ethics will be used to explain why it is not possible to justify colonialism while retaining an ethical conscience. The phenomenological approach of this chapter is informed and shaped by the writings of Fanon (1952), Merleau-Ponty (1967), and Scheler (1973). Its biggest influence however is Emmanuel Levinas (1969) and his 'Ethics of the Face', which informs the understanding of the experience of ethical conscience described in this chapter. This chapter will argue that it is through the encounter and recognition of the 'face' of the other that one has what we would understand as an ethical conscience of and perspective on the world. Colonialism is seen as fundamentally rejecting the recognition of the other and is therefore in its very essence incompatible with any ethical perspective and ethically unjustifiable.

Understanding why colonialism is unjustifiable requires honestly facing two things: Colonial reality and what it means to be a person. This argument begins with the latter. So, let us ask honestly, what does it mean to be a person? To start, a person merely is. Any attempt to find an essence of any person beyond their existence is necessarily arbitrary and abstracting. This is especially the case for inherent essentialization, such as race or gender. A person always has more complexity to them than can be caught in a concept. To be a human means existing and there is not much else that can be stated about all of humanity before one starts running into problems. It is possible for me to understand myself in this way. There are countless aspects to the experience of being me. These aspects are always in flux in some sense. Over time and across different circumstances they shift. Their significance increases and decreases. Old aspects disappear but can come back at a moment's notice. New ones are forming constantly, but do not always stick around. My identity is all of this at once, but in isolation none of the composite aspects that constitute that identity are truly essentially me. I am the totality, but at any given moment only a part of that totality factors into my experience of myself. As I know myself to be in this way, I can also see it in others.

Emmanuel Levinas (1969) describes this as comprehending the infinity of the other through an encounter with their 'face.' The face of the other is not merely their physical face, but also a broader notion of that by which the depth and vulnerability of the other is made apparent. The infinity of the other is the scale and complexity of their person and its radical difference to our own, though not truly different at the same time. When one glimpses the infinity of the other, they can understand the sheer breath of their experience that is alien to them, and they understand how small their own share in it is, yet how enormous their potential impact on the other is. For Levinas, the face first demands not to be killed. This point can seem odd when first encountered. It seems a weird point. Why even think about murder when faced with another person? This is exactly the point. By comprehending and recognising the other and their infinity, the annihilation or violation of that other becomes something unimaginable. Insofar as one understands and recognises the other, one has a responsibility towards them.

It should be made clear at this point that the argument being made in this chapter is not identical to the Ethics of the Face of Levinas. It is inspired by his writing, but there are a number of differences between the two accounts of ethics. First, Levinas writes about the ethics of the face primarily in the context of the face-to-face encounter. While the

significance of the 'true' face to face encounter is apparent, with there being something special in the face and voice of others that uniquely affects us, this thesis will not restrict the full recognition of others to these face-to-face encounters only. Second, this thesis will discuss ethics and morality in a different manner than Levinas. The aim of this argument is to show the origin point of (affective) ethical conscience and the effects of such a perspective. The view presented in this thesis is that it is by means of a recognition of the other of this sort that people can experience an ethics that is not simply instrumental, an ethical responsibility that is felt. When the infinity of others is recognised, they are understood as inherently valuable and a responsibility to them is comprehended. The argument is not an attempt to describe why murder or different violence is immoral. Rather, the argument posits that such a question can only be asked in a non-instrumental manner following a recognition of the other that already strongly rejects the violation of others. Understood in this way, the violation of others is not per se immoral, but anti-ethical. There is only an ethical condition when the violation of others is understood as unjustifiable.

When approached in this way it becomes obvious why colonialism is unjustifiable. At its very core, colonisation not merely requires, but is the violation of others. It is dispossession, displacement, exploitation, dehumanisation, mutilation, and murder. Nothing can justify this to the face of the other or their infinity, and the ethical conscience they inherently inform. From that point of view, one that forms the bedrock of any kind of being in community with others, colonisation is unjustifiable. This begs the question. If colonisation is unjustifiable, then why does it occur and why are there still attempts to justify it? Since the recognition of the humanity of others is the key factor in this account of ethical conscience, the dehumanisation of others would be expected to play a significant role.

The concept of humanity utilised in this chapter is a very minimal definition of what it means to be human. It might be too minimal. If the definition of humanity is only existence, what distinguishes us from other animals, plants, or inanimate objects? Coming up with a more specific definition of humanity is easier said than done. Freedom, intelligence, and consciousness are popular candidates for defining characteristics of humanity. However, it is doubtful whether or not any of these things can be seen as uniquely human, with various animals possessing at least some sort of freedom, intelligence, or consciousness. There are a number of philosophical positions on what defines humanity. It might be that it is the specific combination of these capacities that shape what it means to be human, though a full elaboration of all the composite parts is not only complicated but fails to address the actual experience of being human. Merleau-Ponty (1967) looks for the essentially human in our capacity for symbolism and symbolic activity. This symbolic capacity enables our human understanding of truth and enables artistic expression, giving us a certain freedom from natural and biological determinism. A similar description of what sets humanity apart in nature is articulated by the social ecologist Murray Bookchin (1987). Bookchin argues that human capacity for conceptual thought and the resulting possibility for the forming of societies has made it possible for humans to play a wilful and deliberate role in evolutionary development. Bookchin does not see this as separating the human and the natural sphere, but rather

considers humanity as having a unique perspective on nature and on themselves as a part of it. In society humanity finds a second nature that is distinct from our genetic and biological first nature, although still originating from it. This second nature grants the capacity for thinking, wilful and creative action. It even makes it possible to change our first nature through our influence on the process of evolution. Bookchin's ideas are reminiscent of Nietzsche's (1874) (1882) writing about the human capacity to escape fatalism and redeem nature, which is made possible by the unfounded value creation of love and the potential for the love of fate.

These accounts are less ambiguous descriptions of what it means to be human that are in my view not problematically exclusive and human centric. Alternatively, it is possible to 'bite the bullet' and expand our ethical consideration beyond only the human. A potential bridge between the two can be found in African philosophical conceptions of personhood. The use of the word person rather than human is deliberate in the case of African philosophy, since what it means to be a person and what it means to be human are not necessarily considered to be the same. Within African communitarian thought, personhood is understood as coming forth from one's being in community with others. This is most famously expressed by John Mbiti's "I am because we are" (Mbiti, 1970). It is through community with others that I am who I am, and it is within the context of being in community that I relate to the world. There is some discussion within African philosophy about whether or not it is possible to be a human without being a person, but this is not necessarily of interest to this thesis. What is more interesting is the potential to extend the understanding of personhood beyond the solely human perspective; being a person without being human. An example of this is the Bantu concept of vital force, that considers everything to be connected and in community with each other through a dynamically flowing vital force that permeates the world. Desmond Tutu also calls for a broadening of the "I am because we are" perspective beyond people to nature and eco-systems in *Eco-Ubuntu*, writing: "We are human because a lion is, because a snake is, because a mountain is, because rain and drought are." (Tutu, 1990, p. 3) An alternative ecological perspective is given by author Karen Warren (*The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism*, 1990), who argues for a 'loving perception' of nature. This loving perception sees oneself as being in relation with nature. This relation is a loving one and love is essentially nothing more than the interpretation of inherent value. To love something means to consider it valuable in and of itself while also being valuable to oneself specifically. Love commands us to act a certain way and to respect that what we love. It is this recognition of the value of the other that is ultimately key to the ethical conscience described in this chapter and I see no issue with taking this broader approach. The realisation of humanity of oneself and of the other as a part of encountering the face of the other can be a realisation of one's being in the world and being in community with the rest of the world. Colonisation and its violation of others remain unjustifiable, and the extension of recognised value makes aspects of colonial violence such as the destruction of the environment and traditional relationships with nature more apparent.

3: On motive

This chapter will provide an overview of the understanding of motive this thesis makes use of and what it can tell us about colonial acts and colonial justification. Specifically, it will establish a foundation for motive that structures how the motives of others are interpreted in this thesis and to what extent they will be. This foundation rests on the idea that actions are only undertaken by someone insofar as it seems ‘logical’ to them to do so. This logic is one dependent on the context in which an action takes place. Laying this groundwork will enable a clear formulation of how colonial acts are made possible and why there is an attempt to justify colonialism.

One of the key hurdles of discussing colonial justifications lies in the interpretation of motive. The driving question behind this thesis is why colonialism continues to be justified, despite it being unjustifiable. To ask this question as such already carries assumptions with it, with a central one being that if we all understand colonialism to be unjustifiable in an ethical sense, there must be some nefarious motive behind justifying it anyway. Furthermore, the contradiction in justifying the unjustifiable raises questions about how the unjustifiable occurs in the first place. Since the intention is to better understand the logic of colonialism, it is important to explicitly explore these questions, as to prevent preconceived notions from unknowingly influencing the view of this thesis.

People do not tend to do things they understand to be unjustifiable. This is fairly intuitive. However, unjustifiable things still happen. The trouble is that justifiability is relative to certain contexts, and not only do contexts differ, but there are numerous contexts at play in any action. Me staying up late is irresponsible towards my studies, but it is something that I want to do. Put plainly, for any one act there are often multiple dimensions to its logic. The decision one makes relates to all of these. What is foundational, and what will guide our understanding of motive going forward, is that any conscious action is undertaken because, on some level, it makes sense to the actor to do so. This ‘making sense’ is not exclusive to what is reasonable or rational. Rather, it is seeming reasonable that is important. Something ‘makes sense’ only insofar as it is understood as logically coherent within its understood context. Phrased in this way it sounds orderly, but it is not necessarily. I ‘understand’ that one plus one equals two, but I also ‘understand’ that a certain song sounds nice. The first is far more objective than the latter, but for the purposes of ‘making sense’ and our decision-making process, they can be equally valid.

I find that the idea of context and contextual logic as a part of ‘making sense’ is best understood through examples. Imagine that you just scored a goal in a game of football. If it is an important goal or a particularly impressive one, you might celebrate and run around. Some people like celebrating at length more than others, some days one might be more inclined to celebrate. An important match for the standings or one against a rival might motivate celebration and one usually enjoys celebrating more if they like their teammates a lot and they celebrate together. Inversely, one might not really celebrate a goal scored in a match that is very uncompetitive, or a goal that is fairly unimpressive. Some people do not really like to celebrate or might just not feel like it that day. These factors together make up

the context in which one celebrates or does not. If it makes sense to us to celebrate, whether we do so out of personal enjoyment, because something significant happened, or even our misjudging of something significant happens, we do it. If it does not make sense to celebrate, whether it is because we do not feel like it or because it seems too unsportsmanlike to us, we do not. This action might lack a very clearly deliberated ‘decision,’ but nevertheless an action is taken and the motive behind that action is contextual. To really illustrate this, we can imagine a scenario where I take my opponents queen in a game of chess. In this situation it would be rare for me to celebrate, much less run around a bunch. Both scoring a goal and taking a queen are significant steps towards winning their particular match, but we react differently because the context is different. The contextual logic of a football match permits things that are invalid to the contextual logic of playing a game of chess. Additionally, the contextual logic of a game of chess is not monolithic. A game against a friend is different from one against a stranger, a casual game is different from one in a tournament, and a tournament match against a friend is different from one against a stranger. It is possible to continue in this manner near infinitely. There is an incredible depth of context behind every situation, more than we are consciously aware of, and when deciding how to act all of that in combination with the habits, patterns, preferences, and inclinations of a particular person shapes what course of action makes sense to them.

This account of motive is very broad, but it can help us begin to answer questions about colonial justification. I have already established that colonisation is unjustifiable to ethical conscience that arises from the recognition of others. In light of the nature of this recognition I described violent acts against others such as murder as not merely being immoral, but anti-ethical. The framework of contextual logic and motive as ‘making sense’ within that logic allows us to recontextualise this insight. Violent acts against others such as murder are in contradiction with the contextual logic of being in community with others and/or recognising their value. I previously argued that this would indicate that for cases such as colonisation, which are in contradiction with this logic, would require an extent of dehumanisation. We can now better understand what this entails. In order for colonial acts to be undertaken, the context wherein the act takes place cannot be a meaningfully ethical one for the actor. The logic of an ‘ethical’ context² would render such acts invalid. Asking how colonial acts occur means asking how the ethical context is avoided.

² Whereby I mean ‘a context wherein the value of the other is recognised, and an ethical conscience is thus present’

4: Colonial Logic and the Role of Justification

This chapter will analyse the logic of colonisation in order to comprehend the function of colonial justification more clearly within said logic. It will start by answering the question how the undertaking of colonial action can be made to ‘make sense.’ This will be done by examining existing literature on the topic, with a primary focus on the work of Achille Mbembe on the nature of the colony. Afterwards, the functions of colonial justifications to the broader logic of colonisation and colonialism will be considered. These functions will be considered through Jason Stanley’s framework of supporting and undermining propaganda.

The first subchapter, *on western civilisation*, clarifies the use of the term civilisation in Césaire’s writing in order to more clearly understand the hypocrisy pointed out by Césaire. This helps lay the groundwork for this thesis’ understanding of the contradiction inherent in the logic of colonialism.

The second subchapter, *on the (post)colony*, gives an overview of Achille Mbembe’s writing on the space of the colony and its character in colonial logic. Mbembe describes how the colony is understood as an ontologically empty space, which makes consideration of ethics unnecessary in it. This enables the horrific actions of colonialism. Together with the previous subchapter, this provides the groundwork for understanding the contradiction in the logic of colonialism.

The third subchapter, *the role of justification*, establishes the general role of colonial ethical justification in light of the previously explored background in this chapter. It poses that the function of colonial justification is the maintenance of the separation between the space of the colony and the colonising society, in order to mediate and mask the contradiction between them. Jason Stanley’s concepts of supporting and undermining propaganda will inform a further specification of the roles justification can play. Supporting justifications being the justifications that aim to establish the ontological emptiness of the colony, and undermining justifications being those aimed at obfuscating the reality in the colony and reframing it within ethical structures.

4.1 On western civilisation

The previous chapters on why colonialism is unjustifiable and on the workings of motive and decision have left some ambiguity as to the rational behind colonial actions. This ambiguity lies in the paradox of one civilisation colonising another, and the question of how this would be possible. This framing of ‘civilisation’ requires clarification itself. Its use here mirrors its use by Césaire (2000 (1955)), whose work on colonialism confronted this same paradox. When describing ‘European’ or ‘Western’ civilisation, Césaire writes of its hypocrisy. This hypocrisy is that of indefensible colonisation justified under the pretence of law, science, morality, and godliness. Furthermore, Césaire argues that this hypocritical colonisation and its barbarity ‘decivilises,’ ‘brutalises,’ and ‘degrades’ the coloniser and that “between colonisation and civilisation, there is an infinite distance;” (p. 34) In the modern discourse, the concept of ‘civilisation’ has long fallen out of favour. It is commonly understood that the dichotomy between civilisation and savagery is a constructed conceptualisation of the world that was, as we will see in this chapter, often central in western justification of its own colonialism. Césaire’s use of the term turns this on its head somewhat. Put in the vocabulary

of this thesis, being ‘civilised’ to Césaire can be understood as, at minimum, having a regard for the value of others and possessing the ethical conscience that results from it. This paints a picture of colonisation as one civilisation violating another, and decivilising itself by doing so. Herein lies the apparent contradiction. How can a civilisation rationalise an exploitation and brutalisation that is indefensible? How does it even happen that something civilised does such a thing?

Two things ought to be clarified at this point. First, while this chapter aims to resolve the question of how it is possible for colonisation and colonial acts to occur and how these things are rationalised, it is not looking to establish a historic event or certain rational as the historic origin point of colonialism. Rather, it is explaining how colonialism was maintained and perpetuated, with regard to both the acts constituting colonisation and their rationalisation in the colonising society. Second, the fact that Europe is described as possessing ‘civilisation’ or its people as being civilised should merely be understood as stating that, to some degree, its society, and the people in it have a regard for the value of others and possess ethical conscience. The term is used in the same way in which it is used by Césaire, not as something eliciting a view of any people or population as inferior or savage. Lastly, although there is a degree of regard for the value of others in Western society, meaning that there is at least some baseline of ethical conscience, this should not be interpreted as meaning that it ever was or now is perfect in this regard. However, the mere presence of baseline ethical conscience in the context of society is important in shaping what does and does not ‘make sense’ to the people in it.

Colonisation and colonialism are indefensible in a context where ethical conscience is present. However, flawed it might be, this kind of conscience is present in the context of being in Western society. More specifically, the kinds of acts that constitute colonisation and colonialism are indefensible in Western society. People understand the others in their community as being fully human and thus the brutalisation of those others as impermissible. To systematically exploit others, enslave them, abuse, or even murder them, is a course of action that, described in a direct and honest manner, would almost universally be understood as horrific and that would be broadly condemned on a societal level. In order to colonise, this ethical dimension must somehow be removed from the equation.

4.2 On the (post)colony

The history and present of colonialism is that of the colony. Understanding why and how colonialism functioned requires an understanding of the colony and what it means for something to be a colony. At its core, to be a colony is to be a place of otherness so profound as to be a place of ontological and epistemic emptiness. All that is within the colony, including the people, merely is, nothing more. *On the Postcolony* by historian and political theorist Achille Mbembe is the seminal work on the nature of the colony. In the book, Mbembe writes about the conceptualisation of Africa specifically through the lens of the emptiness of the colony, describing its position in discourse as: “the very expression of that nothing whose special feature is to be nothing at all.” (2001, p. 4) Later work by Mbembe, in particular *Necropolitics* (2019) have extended analysis of this kind to colonialism more broadly, although the particular case of Africa arguably remains the most extreme example of this kind of conceptualisation. What does it mean for a place and its people to be empty, to be

nothingness? Conceptually, the emptiness of the colony positions it as below the ‘imperial core’ or ‘the West,’ which is understood as having substance. The nothingness of the colony renders it devoid of law and morality. By extension, the colony is a place devoid of *value*. The only access to value it might have, can only flow to it from the West, which does possess substance. Mbembe (2001) distinguishes two different ways in which this sovereignty, which is both political and ontological in nature, has historically manifested and been conceived of. One denies the potential of the colony and its subjects, reducing them to the sphere of objects. The other sympathises with the natives to some degree, but that viewed their potential as only existing in a subservient and ultimately inferior relation to the coloniser. In both cases, the colonised person has no value in and of themselves. (pp. 26-27)

It is this absence of value of the person that enables colonial violence. Essentially, understanding the colony as a context that is ontologically empty and therefore lacks an ethical dimension. Mbembe (2001) likens the colonial understanding of the colony to the Hobbesian state of nature, existing in a war of all against all. There are no rules or laws, apart from those that a sovereign power with the will and power to do so creates by asserting itself. In such a context, anything goes. This discussion of Hobbes in relation to the dominance of power in the colony mirrors the earlier discussed link Arendt (1958, pp. 139-143) identifies between rule in the colony and the theories of Hobbes. Both view power, and the continued accumulation of it, as the ruling principles of the space of the colony. Creating a space like this, that is divorced from the concept of ethical conscience, makes it possible to escape from the context of a society and enact things unimaginable in such a context. As Mbembe points out, there is a paradox in this logic. In the context of the colony, the coloniser is not bound by anything. They can do as they please. Any action is unaccountable to morality or decency, as it is outside of its very realm. However, colonialism also understands its actions as righteous. By colonising the colony and its people they are releasing it from its emptiness. To the colonial understanding, subjecting the colony to its absolute sovereignty can be done without ethical qualms, but having done so brings the possibility of ethical living to the colony. The means of colonisation lack ethical dimension, since they exist in a state of nature, but the end, supposedly ‘civilising’ the colony, is seen as an ethical one because it is now viewed from the perspective of a place where value is present. Consequently, any action to maintain colonialism is conceptually one whose ends defend a supposed moral order, but the means to which exist on the borderline and can thus be unlimited in their brutality. Though this might seem to be a paradox, there is still a contradiction here. While colonialism conceives of itself as acting ethically through this logic, it nevertheless clashes harshly with actual ethical conscience. Considered honestly, the idea that a violent suppression of the native population would be something that civilises them and is therefore actually moral is absurd. It is as Césaire said; the space between colonisation and civilisation is infinite. It is more than infinite. Their ideologies constitute whole different realities of being. Their phenomenologies are in the very essence of their being at odds with each other. To attempt to mediate these two separate kinds of being in a single individual or as a society at large is a herculean effort. It is so deeply hypocritical that conceiving of its very possibility leads to dissociation. How can a society be so monstrous, so cruel, while at the same time continuing to *live*?

It is in fact impossible to logically try to make sense of the situation. It does not make sense. The logic of the colony and the logic of being in community with others is incommensurable, yet it is possible for a person to at different moments function within both of these contexts.

What is key to this being possible is the strong separation between the colonising society and the colony. The value of others in the colony must be made completely absent. Achieving this comes through the interplay in partitioning the colony. Making sure that the material space the colony occupies is strongly physically isolated facilitates a spatialisation of a different kind of being to that space. It isolates colonial violence to that space particularly, which makes it easier to identify that violence with the very ontology of it. It also segregates the colonised from the colonisers, which enhances the understanding of them as other while also reducing opportunity for those people to even be viewed in a context where ethics plays a role, and their face can be recognised. This is the premise of Necropolitics as discussed in chapter one. The colony is made into a space where the danger of arbitrary violence is so universal that living is not allowed to meaningfully be more than simply surviving. In turn, the fact that living in the colony is only surviving informs the colonial understanding of the context of the colony, rationalising the further perpetration of said arbitrary violence. This kind of logic is described by Jasbir Puar (2017) as ‘the right to maim.’ Essentially, the violation of a group becomes a justification for further violence, by identifying the results of earlier violence with the identity of its victims, rather than with the actions of its perpetrators.

Among the most prominent aspects of the process of othering in the case of colonialism specifically is race and racialisation. This has already been covered in chapter one, but revisiting it now allows for new insight. Just as the spatial separation of the colony from European society plays a role in enabling a separation of its contexts, race embodies the separation from European society in a visible sense. The impact of this visibility is described by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). “The image of one’s body is solely negating.” (p. 90) The visibility of race enables an immediate identification. A black person is immediately seen as black and identified with it, and whatever they might do to appeal to the standards of whiteness, their complexion will always other them in the eyes of white society. Fanon describes the experience of being black in white society as ‘existing in triple.’ (p. 92) Beyond the dimension of self and other, race creates a new dimension to being regulating behaviour. This extra layer frustrates the actual recognition by the other, thus barring the racialised from a context wherein that humanity is recognised.

4.3 The role of justification

If it is by means of the creation of a new, non-ethical context that colonisation is enabled, what is the role of justification? To start, there is a distinction to be made between two core functions a justification might fulfil. The first seeks to remove the ethical context from the colonial by dehumanising the victims of colonialism, thus excluding them and acts against them from ethical consideration. The second would be to obfuscate the reality of colonialism. Colonialism is evaluated from within an ethical context, but the actual reality of colonisation, colonial acts, and colonialism as an ideology is obscured. These concepts will be analysed through the concepts of *supporting* and *undermining* propaganda as described by Jason Stanley in his book *How Propaganda Works* (2015). Stanley characterises supporting propaganda as “a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by either emotional or other nonrational means.” (p. 53) It does so by appealing to ‘affective capacities’ such as fear, hate, love, or nostalgia. From this point a reasoning for the particular ideal might be constructed, but the propaganda is not itself making an appeal to these rational

grounds. Instead, it appeals to emotions to limit the ways one might think about a situation. The ideal it supports can be worthy, unworthy, or neutral, though, in the case of colonialism, it has already been established that propaganda in support of it would be in the support of an unethical ideal. Stanley defines undermining propaganda as “*a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals.*” (p. 53) In all undermining propaganda, there is a contradiction between the ideal it purports to represent and its actual goal. It appeals to a certain ideal, but its goal runs counter to that ideal. Undermining propaganda functions by exploiting or helping create flawed ideological beliefs. These flawed ideological beliefs help mask the contradiction in undermining propaganda. Stanley describes flawed ideologies as being ‘epistemically disabling.’ They are flawed because they “prevent us from gaining knowledge about features of reality, including social reality.” (p. 198)

The traditions of colonial sovereignty described by Mbembe can be linked to these different kinds of explanation. An example of the first view, which considers the colonised to belong to the sphere of objects, can be found in the Dred Scott decision (Dred Scott v. Sandford, 1857), a US supreme court case concerning the citizenship rights of those from black African descent. The court concluded, amongst other things, “that they³ had no rights which the white man was bound to respect”. It is nakedly honest hate and contempt. Justification of this sort can be understood as a supporting justification. Its support for colonisation or colonialism is simple and straightforward. It appeals to irrational fear of the other or delusions of superiority. Undermining propaganda can be linked to the second tradition, which sympathises with the natives, but still considers them subservient. Coloniality is reframed as something other than domination, existing in an ethical context. The value of the colonised other is not completely denied, but their face is veiled behind platitudes and the actual reality of what is done to them is obfuscated. Crucially, this still renders the *actual* other completely ethically empty. What is present of them in the justification is a simulacrum. The actual colonised other is still fully isolated from the ethical context. The idea of the White Man’s Burden is an example of such an undermining justification. The justification is not fully separated from the ethical context, but the contradiction is masked by framing colonisation as something that white people must do to help the people of the world. It is this kind of justification that Césaire described as a lie and as hypocritical. This thesis will take a slightly more nuanced approach. That a justification is undermining does not necessarily mean that the person using it does not earnestly believe it. There are differences between a justification that aims to undermine and a justification that has been ‘undermined.’ Moving forward, the distinction between ‘undermining’ and ‘undermined’ will be made. In general cases or cases where the flawed ideological belief is an earnestly believed one the term ‘undermined’ will be used. ‘Undermining’ will be used to refer when specifically analysing justifications given with the aim to undermine.

An example of a flawed ideological belief used by Stanley is the view in the Antebellum Southern United States that black people were inherently fit to be slaves. This example is particularly interesting for the topic of this thesis, so it will be considered in detail. The contradiction masked by this flawed ideological belief is the contradiction between the idea of ‘doing right’ by black people while also keeping them enslaved. The purpose of this

³ “They” meaning those of black African descent, though a pejorative term is used more prominently in the opinion.

flawed ideological belief is the preservation of the institution of slavery in the interest of the wealthy land and slave owners. Anyone who spoke out against slavery was punished and people in the South were raised to believe that this flawed belief was true. If a person understood the context of their society with this belief in mind, they could avoid a confrontation with the obvious injustice of keeping other people enslaved. (pp. 199-200)

An additional example of undermined justification can be found in Christopher Browning's historical study *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and The Final Solution in Poland*. (1992) The book follows a police battalion from Hamburg and their June 1942 deployment to Poland. Two things must be clarified before continuing with this example. First, the example is rather horrible and upsetting. It is used here because it highlights both the infinite space between colonisation and civilisation and because this is accompanied by an example of how a justification attempts to bridge this infinite gap. This is eerie and unsettling, yet it is real. Answering questions about how and why colonialism is justified means having to face that reality in some way. Second, this example concerns the holocaust on the Eastern Front of the second world war. In chapter one I explicitly did not conclude that Nazism was a form of colonialism. Why then would an example about the holocaust on the Eastern Front of the second world war be one that relates to the justification of colonialism? In contrast to the occupation of Western Europe, the occupation of Eastern Europe was frequently explicitly considered a colonial occupation by the Third Reich itself. While their attitude towards Western Europe was one that conceptualised them as 'liberating' it, its conquest of Eastern Europe informed by *lebensraum* ideology was one of colonial expansion. This classification of the German occupation of Poland and broader Eastern Europe as colonial in nature is not completely uncontroversial, however. Kristin Kopp writes about this discussion in her chapter *Gray Zones: On the Inclusion of "Poland" in the Study of German Colonialism* in the book *German Colonialism and National Identity* (2010). Kopp argues that German colonialism can be linked to the conquest of Eastern Europe, but that differences brought about by its racial and spatial proximity must be accounted for. Kopp concludes that this proximity made it impossible to easily 'other' the Polish, but that they were still approached through "complex models of dangerous racial and spatial ambiguity." (p. 38)

On the 13th of July 1942, the men of reserve police battalion 101 slaughtered around 1500 Jewish inhabitants of the Polish village Jozefow. The men all had little to no military experience. They were all too old to have undergone Nazi socialisation. They were deployed as a branch of the Nazi order police to Poland less than a month before the massacre. The battalion arrived in Jozefow in the early morning. The roughly 1800 Jewish inhabitants of the village were rounded up. The men were sent to labour camps. The women, children, and elderly were to be exterminated. "Except for a midday break" (Browning, 1992, p. 61) groups were driven to a nearby forest to be executed throughout the day. Upon arrival in the forest people were forced to lay down face first on the ground. A policeman would then aim their rifle as they had been instructed to by the battalions physician, and shoot.

The descriptions of the events in Jozefow by the men of the battalion are chilling. They were only informed about their task after their arrival that morning. A small number of them took the opportunity not to participate. One of the commanding officers, a member of the Nazi party, had already had himself reassigned two days earlier when he learned about their orders.

As the day continued, more men had to be reassigned from the execution squads because they were unable to continue. The commanding officer of the battalion reportedly spent the entire day in makeshift headquarters, unable to be present for the killings, crying. Those who did participate explained this participation in a number of ways. One did not want to be seen as weak in the eyes of the others, or they were too cowardly to excuse themselves. Many denied that they had a choice at all. One testimony, that has stayed with me ever since first reading it, went thusly:

"I made the effort, and it was possible for me, to shoot only children. It so happened that the mothers led the children by the hand. My neighbour then shot the mother and I shot the child that belonged to her, because I reasoned with myself that after all without its mother the child could not live any longer. It was supposed to be, so to speak, soothing to my conscience to release children unable to live without their mothers." (p. 73)

Browning adds:

"The full weight of this statement, and the significance of the word choice of the former policeman, cannot be fully appreciated unless one knows that the German word for "release" (erlösen) also means to "redeem" or "save" when used in a religious sense. The one who "releases" is the Erlöser-the Saviour or Redeemer!" (p. 73)

The contradiction in the rationale of the men is evident. *Ordinary Men* describes that:

"What is clear is that the men's concern for their standing in the eyes of their comrades was not matched by any sense of human ties with their victims. The Jews stood outside their circle of human obligation and responsibility." (p. 73)

Writing later about why some stopped participating in the massacre, a different kind of thinking is evident. The reason for no longer participating is cited as primarily being due to "sheer physical revulsion." About the absence of a more in depth reasoning the book concludes:

"The absence of such does not mean that their revulsion did not have its origins in the humane instincts that Nazism radically opposed and sought to overcome. But the men themselves did not seem to be conscious of the contradiction between their feelings and the essence of the regime they served." (p. 74)

These rationalisations are chilling examples of undermined justification and flawed ideological beliefs. Values of comradeship or feelings of mercy towards the harsh life of an orphan are used to justify actions in complete contradiction with the actual valuing of human life and dignity. It seems clear that some of the men are at least to some degree cognisant of the fact that what they are doing is wrong. The revulsion felt by the men appears indicative of a recognition of humanity and of how wrong what they were doing was. Another sign of this recognition, although it might be a recognition long after the fact, is that the explanations given by the men for their participation mostly aim to explain their participation in the killing, rather than trying to justify the massacre itself. In fact, their justifications for their participation generally seem to inherently recognise that the massacre was an evil act. A plausible explanation for this is that the men are giving these testimonies in a context where the mass killing of Jews is understood as reprehensibly evil. They would thus be motivated to make it seem as though they never agreed with the killing in the first place, regardless of if

they did or not. Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Goldhagen, 1996), which was largely written in response to Browning and *Ordinary Men*, argues that it was deeply rooted eliminationist antisemitism that motivated participation in the massacre. If this is the case, the justifications the men give for their participation can be better understood as examples of strategic lies to avoid culpability, rather than flawed beliefs negotiating the stark contradiction between the men's actions and their understanding that it was evil. This being said, Goldhagen's thesis has been fiercely criticised by other scholars. In an essay about *Hitler's Willing Executioners* political scientist Norman Finkelstein (1997) criticises Goldhagen for outright discarding any testimony about dissent for the massacre. Finkelstein acknowledges that there were undoubtedly lies in the testimonies but sees no justification for discarding any testimony that indicates dissent. In an interview (*Is There a New Anti-Semitism? A Conversation with Raul Hilberg*, 2007), seminal Holocaust scholar, historian, and political scientist Raul Hilberg calls Goldhagen "totally wrong about everything", taking particular issue with Goldhagen's account of a unique eliminationist antisemitism and the lack of evidence for it. Although antisemitism cannot be discounted, the reasoning for the men's participation seems to be more complicated and more conflicted.

5: Approaches to justifying the unjustifiable

This chapter will provide a phenomenological analysis of the question of why colonialism is being justified. This will be guided by the previously established idea that in order to undertake a certain action, that action must ‘make sense’ to the one undertaking it. The analysis will consider factors such as the specific aim of justification and the position of the one justifying colonialism, and how this can shape the nature of particular justification.

The first subchapter, *the strategic lie*, analyses how justification might be used in the form of a strategic lie and what the motive behind such a use could be. It suggests that strategically falsified justification can be useful when the goal of its deployment is the avoidance of blame from others.

The second subchapter, *justifying the unjustifiable*, examines why a colonial ethical justification that aims to avoid confronting one’s own guilt cannot be a strategically falsified one. Strategic falsification requires a recognition of circumstances and a reflection on the action. This cannot be done when one wants to avoid one’s own guilt. Justification of this kind must therefore, to some extent, be a genuinely believed one.

5.1 The strategic lie

There is an easy answer to the question of why one would justify colonialism; one justifies it, in order to avoid blame for it. This reasoning will be explored first. To start, a question must be answered. When does one justify something, or more specifically, to whom do we justify ourselves? Justification, in the sense that it is considered by this thesis, belongs to the realm of ethics. If the aim of a justification is to avoid ethical blame, then that justification should be considered from an ethical point of view. This answers the question of to whom one justifies oneself. One justifies oneself to the recognised other and to the responsibility and ethical conscience they inform. This means that justification takes place outside of the space of the colony. After all, the space of the colony is a colony insofar as it is understood as ethically empty. Actions do not need to be justified to the colonised other. They are nothing if not for their colonial domination. Any action affecting them is therefore fair game, since there is no meaning to the action that is not created by it. In the case of justification to avoid moral blame, justifications can be either *a priori* or *a posteriori*. The act itself takes place outside of the consideration of ethics, when it need not be justified, so justification takes place either before or after the fact. Supporting justification primarily functions to establish the colony as an ethically empty space and the colonised other as ethically insignificant. According to its logic, colonising the colony is ethically justifiable because nothing or nobody warranting ethical consideration is affected. Undermined/undermining justification functions to obscure the reality of colonial action by reframing both it and the nature of the colonised other affected by the action. This logic conceives of colonial action as ethically justifiable because it makes use of flawed ideological beliefs that understand it as being ethical. This still practically renders the colony an ethically empty space because the face of the other is made invisible.

Though this account of the motive behind colonial justification is simple, it also lacks nuance. Specifically, it thus far lacks an explanation for why it would make sense for one to justify colonialism to avoid ethical blame. What is clear is that one wants to avoid the consequences

of blame. What needs to be answered is if they do this because they think the blame is unwarranted or not. This thesis will not answer this question conclusively. Doing so is practically an impossibility. Justifying colonialism is not done by a singular person, but by many. Understanding their motive would not definitively say anything about the motive of others. It is however possible to analyse what the consequences of either case might be on the field of justification.

In the case of the strategic lie the aim of justifying colonialism is to avoid ethical blame from others. If the person considers themselves to be ethically blameless, then they can only strategically lie in the form of undermining justification. They do not lie if they spread supporting justification; they honestly believe that there is nothing wrong with what they are doing. This is a flawed ideological belief, as it is a contradiction to recognise the ethical value of some people based on a recognition of their humanity, but to deny that value of others. Their 'lie' would be strategically using undermining justification to prevent those who would think they carry some kind of ethical blame from recognising that fact. The difficulty with an account of a strategical lie is the case of someone who wants to avoid blame from others, while thinking that blame is warranted. What does it mean to understand oneself as guilty? Someone might understand oneself as having transgressed ethical boundaries but think that this is unimportant. Meaningfully this person's case is no different from one who considers themselves blameless. An actual understanding of ethical wrongdoing in the sense that the other one has victimised is recognised cannot understand such a thing as unimportant. To have an ethical conscience and know oneself to have done wrong incurs the recognition of one's guilt and its gravity. One can only construct a strategic undermining justification if they are aware that they crossed certain boundaries. Otherwise, the thought of doing so would not occur. What must therefore be considered is someone who understands that their actions were unethical, who understands the gravity of this on a personal level, but who wants to avoid the blame of others. How can the motive of this person be understood?

5.2 Justifying the unjustifiable

What is the rationale behind justifying something one recognises as ethically unjustifiable? It is the nature of ethical conscience that insofar as someone is consciously aware of themselves as ethically unjustified, it does not make sense for them to nevertheless justify themselves in an ethical context. It is impossible to justify such things while honestly facing its ethics, because understanding something such as colonialism in the context of the recognition of the other renders it unjustifiable. There is a contradiction in logic. In this case, the aim of justification is to uphold this contradiction between the ethical conscience of European society and the perceived emptiness of the colony, and to avoid facing one's own guilt. This deeply affects the nature of this kind of justification. Most importantly, justification aimed at avoiding a confrontation with one's own guilt cannot be strategic in nature. A strategic justification requires conscious consideration, but if one understands colonialism to be unjustifiable, they cannot consciously strategize a false justification without facing its unethical nature. One must actually believe in the justification in order for it to uphold the contradiction. In other words, the justification must be based on an actual flawed ideological belief if it is to uphold the contradiction.

This case becomes more complex when it interacts with ethical challenges. Up to this point, this account on the avoidance of blame has been isolated to one's own sense of guilt. In this situation it is easy to imagine that a flawed ideological belief can mediate one's ethical conscience and one's idea that colonialism is justified or even that their own colonial actions are justifiable. This 'justification' of colonialism or colonial action is a justification to oneself and insofar as this remains isolated to one's own flawed understanding of oneself, this can work. Problems arise, however, when one has to justify oneself to others, particularly if those others are bringing the colonised other into the ethical context. As the proximity to the colony and the colonised other increases, the contradiction is put under increasing stress. Maintaining one's flawed ideological beliefs becomes difficult at this point, voicing it to the face of the other especially so. Still, a belief strong enough could well be able to mediate the opposing beliefs.

This case sketches a very precarious kind of colonial justification. It exists right at the borderline of the inherent contradiction of justifying colonialism. It is because of this precarious position at the point of contradiction that it plays a pivotal role in answering the central question of this thesis; if colonialism is unjustifiable, why is it nevertheless being justified? In a case such as this, where the unjustifiability of colonialism is almost comprehended, yet desperately avoided, this question is the most prescient it can be, and the justification as thin as it can get.

6: In Media Res Justification and the Shadow of Gaza

This chapter will pick up where the previous chapter left off and examine the justification of colonialism with the aim of evading one's own guilt. The primary focus of this examination will be the place of this kind of justification in discourse and the role played by increasing scrutiny on colonial actions and the issues that arise when justifying colonialism as the separation between the ethical context of European society and the imagined nothingness of the colony is breached. Special attention will be paid to the influence of technological development and a consequential rise in what will be termed *In Media Res* justification. This analysis will be informed by analysis of developments in public discourse around the Vietnam War, Iraq War, and the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the discourse surrounding it.

The first subchapter contains an analysis on the shifts in public discourse observed around the Vietnam War and the changes brought about by the time of the Iraq War. It identifies developments in the nature of public discourse influenced by the manner in which news is interacted with.

The second subchapter extends the analysis of changing discourse into the present day, using discourse on the ongoing genocide in Gaza to highlight the impact of changes in consumption, creation, and dissemination of information on colonial situations. It poses the argument that the decentralisation of the creation and communication of information, alongside the immediacy with which that information can be spread, can increase the role alternative narratives play in colonial discourse. The increased role of alternative narratives shifts how colonial justifications are challenged significantly, from *a posteriori* to *in media res*. This scrutiny makes colonial justifications more volatile. This volatility hurts the viability of guilt avoidant justification. When such justification is rendered ineffective, guilt avoidance is only possible by abandoning the ethical discussion altogether and resorting to pure power politics to assert the right of domination.

The previous chapter concluded with a brief analysis of what will from this point onwards be referred to as 'guilt avoidant justification.' Such justification would have as its primary aim to avoid a confrontation with one's own guilty conscience resulting from a realisation of the unjustified nature of colonialism or colonial action. This account remains as of yet incomplete. It is certainly possible to imagine a person developing a sense of unease about their own action and carrying a precariously mediated latent guilt because of it, but this is only of minor philosophical interest. Especially as far as the discourse on colonialism is concerned, an inward flawed ideological narrative about a person's own actions is hardly meaningful. It is only when colonialism is challenged that guilt avoidant justification enters into the discourse. People do not exist independently from the society around them and the discourses in those societies. Maintaining a flawed ideological belief is to a degree reliant on a lack of challenge to that belief. This is why a response is necessary when such challenges do arise.

Traditionally, discourse on colonialism and colonial action are understood as taking place *a posteriori* (after the fact). This is especially true of discourse on colonisation and colonial actions. In *a posteriori* discourse on colonialism, guilt avoidant justification fails to stand out. What the exact reason for this is cannot be confidently stated. Two explanations seem most

plausible. First, those who want to avoid guilt would be unlikely to feature prominently in the discourse. The avoidance of guilt is easiest when avoiding challenge altogether, thus participation in discourse is counterproductive. A *posteriori* discourse is far more suited to those who wholeheartedly believe supporting justifications and flawed ideological beliefs, or those spreading 'strategic lie' undermining justifications. Second, an *a posteriori* discourse facilitates a separation of colonial action from the context of ethics. An action is undertaken in an ethically empty space and processed in that context before one returns to a context that ethics does factor into. An understanding of the colonial act is formed by those responsible for it before there is an ethical discourse about the act. The presence of an already established non-ethical conception of colonial action when the ethical dimension is introduced can strengthen flawed ideological beliefs to a point where the contradiction in logic is more easily mediated. This could reduce the need for guilt avoidance overall. None of this is to say that a *posteriori* discourse is some kind of safe space for colonial ideology, be it flawed ideological beliefs or strategically false justifications. A *posteriori* discourse, be it public discourse about the colonial past or academic (historical) discourse, contain no shortage of fierce critique and confrontation of colonial ideology that by no means seeks to avoid a confrontation with the guilt associated with it. Still, the fact of it being *a posteriori* increases the distance from the (ethical) reality of colonialism, necessitating more effort and deeper discussion to regain the immediacy of that context.

6.1 Changes in public discourse

However, the past decades have seen a gradual shift in the nature of discourse on colonialism. Increasingly, the way in which people encounter colonialism and colonial reality has become more immediate and more widespread. This has potential consequences for the opinions people form, but also for how colonialism is confronted. The origin of this change is visible in the coverage of the Vietnam war. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) is broadly considered to be the first television war. That the war was mainly encountered through the medium of television has a number of consequences. Information from audio-visual television reports was easier for people to comprehend than written information. There was also footage of the war and its violence. Being able to see images enabled people to form opinions without needing to visualise the situation. Professor of American studies Michael Barchet (2011) writes about how the way in which combat footage was shot made it especially transgressive and gave it a deep sense of authenticity. Reporters were themselves close to the violence, they had to hold their cameras by hand and did not have time to line up careful shots. Images and footage of the war could also undermine the government narrative of the war. People were shocked by images of the Tet offensive, which was a stark contrast with the government narratives of the war. The media portrayal of the Tet-offensive is not entirely without controversy. Peter Braestrup (1983) highlights how the offensive has portrayed as a military defeat for the Americans, although this was not necessarily the case. The offensive did communicate that, contrary to what the American government was saying, the war was far from over. Another significant development was the fact that the decision making around the war could increasingly be questioned in live interviews. Lastly, there were many interviews with soldiers on the ground, who were free to share their personal opinions of the war.

The Vietnam War was a first step, but it was far from a perfect confrontation of the colonial violence and history inherent to the war. Reporting tended to focus on American soldiers and their activities, not on the violence visited upon the Vietnamese people. Michael

Mandelbaum's article *Vietnam: the television war* (1982) goes in depth in its examination of the effects television and media had on public perception of the war. He concludes that there is insufficient evidence for the idea that the televised nature of the war significantly impacted support for the war. He argues that the constant broadcasting of violence might have in fact alienated the American public from what was happening thousands of miles away. Comparing the popularity of the war to public support for the Korean war he finds that there is a strong correlation in both cases between the amount of American casualties and declining popularity of the wars. Still, one thing is striking according to Mandelbaum. The opposition to the war in Vietnam was more vocal and more active than it had been for the Korean war. The television might not necessarily have swayed people's opinion, but it did change the way people expressed their opinion. Television showed people who opposed the war that there were others like them. Opposition also focused its efforts on making itself visible through television, in order to spread their message further. Mandelbaum points out that although the unpopularity of the war over the whole population might have been unremarkable, the intensity of that opposition and its visibility could have increased its political significance. He also suggests that the war was a prominent part of public political debate and occupied a prominent place in political conversations. What Mandelbaum does point out is that there is a chance that the vocal anti-war movement actually prolonged the war. The war might have been unpopular, but the movement against it was even less popular. Those in the anti-war movement tended to see the war as an overreach by the United States and were against the destruction and loss of life on the Vietnamese as well as the American side. The public tended to oppose the war not because they disagreed with its aim, but because too many Americans were getting killed or injured. As Mandelbaum puts it: To the anti-war movement, the Vietnam War seemed a crime; to the American public it was a blunder. (1982, p. 166)

The next significant development in this reorientation of parts of the discourse about colonialism occurs around the start of the 2003 Iraq war. An article by Tony Maniaty (2008) on the developments in television reporting between the two wars presents significant change in the nature of the media coverage of the wars. By the time the Iraq War started, the limits television had experienced in Vietnam had disappeared. In Vietnam, film technology had been fairly limited. A crew filming a story only got one shot to get it right. Afterwards the physical film had to be sent to be developed. Only after it was developed, could it make its way to the United States or anywhere else in the world. This footage did not just take long to arrive. It was not easily copied or shared, meaning that getting your hands on footage made it exclusive to you. All of this was different around the time of the Iraq War. The Gulf War of 1991 had already shifted focus towards live correspondence on location, though not necessarily with actual footage of what was happening. During the Iraq War the amount of live footage was near endless. Footage was available 24 hours a day and become a twisted form of entertainment. People could watch the war happen in real time. Maniaty emphasises the dark side of this development. In Vietnam footage had been scarce and journalists on the ground had a lot of discretion in what to film. The footage they shot was often visceral and gruesome, highlighting the horrors of the war. The complete lack of scarcity of footage during the Iraq War shifted power from journalists and film crews to the networks. There was constant live footage, but an effort was made to avoid showing active combat. Coverage became more controlled, narratives more homogenous.

Despite this increasing homogeneity, television did not entirely lose its ability to influence the public. The Iraq War is not associated with a level of prominent resistance similar to the opposition to the war in Vietnam. The relative homogeneity and the sanitation of footage might reasonably explain this difference. Support for the war did drop over time, but this does not seem to be because of people encountering footage depicting the horrors of the war. Still, some research did find that people who interacted with reporting on the war alongside footage of combat felt more involved with the conflict than those who did not (Michael Pfau, 2008). Regardless of the effects televised coverage had on overall support of the war, the war and the justifications for it featured frequently in public debate. A study by Kevin Coe (2013) into the effects media coverage of rationales for the war had on public opinion found that 348 of the 364 days of news considered in the study featured at least one story about the war (p. 495).

Since the start of the Iraq War, there have been a number of changes in the news media landscape. The most significant change that has taken place since then is a shift away from television news media to other digital news media. Increasingly, people tend to get their news online, mostly through news websites or through social media (News Platform Fact Sheet, 2024). This shift away from television does not indicate a shift away from audio-visual news sources, which are still widely available on both news sites and on social media. In the move to digital news media lies a degree of rectification of the problems present during the Iraq War. Starting a news website, writing a blog, but especially posting on social media are relatively accessible. The agency in the production of news is more decentralised, which makes it more difficult to homogenise coverage and gives room to broader narratives. This is not a wholly positive or wholly negative development. Non-digital news remains prominent and many of the digitally accessed news sites or apps are owned by entities that were already significant outside of the digital news space. There is also the rise of right-wing populist ‘alternative’ media and its increasing prominence in our society (André Haller, 2019). A more positive example, and one at the forefront of the development in discourse surrounding colonialism, is the impact social media communication has had in the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

6.2 Gaza, social media, and In Media Res discourse

Within colonial discourses, no topic has been bigger over the past two years than the ongoing genocide in Gaza. The case of Gaza and Palestine as a whole are not new in the study of colonialism. Mbembe (Necropolitics, 2019, pp. 93-116) writes about Gaza specifically in detail as paradigmatic example of living death in the colony. Puar too uses the example of Gaza and Palestine (2017). It is also not a new topic in public discourse about colonialism, with it being prominently in the news at several points in the past decades. Over the last two years, something has changed. While Palestine was a subject of interest in the past, it has been one of if not the biggest political subjects of the past two years. Whereas the subject was previously niche and broadly understood as ‘very complex’, it is now an increasingly involved debate. What has changed? The change cannot fully be explained by the particular scale of the current violence and human rights abuses, though they doubtlessly play a role. A significant part of the visibility of what is going on in Gaza and its continual relevance in public discourse is related to the ways in which it is discussed and communicated about. There is a building consensus that social media communication has played a large part in

public discourse on the ongoing genocide in Gaza. A study by Sara Nasereddin (2023) into the impact of social media on public opinion about the conflict indicates that social media plays a significant role in shaping the public conversation around Gaza. An article by Sema Üstün Külünk (2025) on the role of translation in Palestinian social media presence also highlights the how social media is used by Palestinians to communicate with the rest of the world. Üstün Külünk emphasises the way in which translation has made messaging more impactful. This translation is not merely a translation of stories into English, but also a translation of stories into visual media. Both Üstün Külünk and Nasereddin pay particular attention to the importance of grassroots stories and citizen journalism in shaping the public conversation about Gaza. This factor is all the more vital given the precarious situation of traditional journalism in Gaza. Traditional media outlets tend to have a bias against Palestinian interests (Hall, 2024) (Gilboa & Sigan, 2024). Add to this the fact that no journalists are allowed to enter Gaza, and that Israeli forces are specifically targeting the journalists that are present in the Gaza Strip, and it becomes more evident that non-traditional reporting and journalism are crucial in telling the Palestinian story.

Where the ease of production of footage during the Iraq War took power away from journalists towards bigger media conglomerates, the decentralisation of global communication platforms and the increased accessibility of materials for the production of footage has given some power back to particular individuals. Challenges of homogenised media and social media censorship remain. Still, the past few years has seen a pronounced presence of alternative perspectives on the genocide in Gaza, that are able to be expressed with a transgressiveness and authenticity similar to footage of the Vietnam War. Like opposition to the war in Vietnam, the opposition to the genocide in Gaza is vocal, with a large visible presence in public discourse. Unlike reporting and discourse around the Vietnam War, there is no scarcity of footage or reporting about Gaza, and virtually no time between events unfolding and it being visible to the world. Üstün Külünk argues that the translation of the Palestinian narrative into multimedia communication has made it easier for that narrative to connect to people. The abundance of footage of events in Gaza, made possible by citizen journalists, has also made it easier for the established story about the Israel/Palestine conflict to be challenged and undermined. (Külünk, 2025) That this reporting and footage is present immediately, including raw footage, is crucial. The colonised are able to frame and disseminate a narrative of their own that can cross the border between the space of the colony into the colonising society. In doing so, the very existence of that separation becomes muddled, especially when the colonised are explicitly calling for their humanity, their ‘face’, to be recognised.

This presence of a perspective running counter to the mainstream colonial narrative is undoubtably valuable, but its presence alone does not mean that people will abandon the colonial narrative en masse. It is uncertain what the exact impact on public opinion alternative narratives about Gaza are having. Support for Israel has been dropping since October 7th and Israel’s subsequent invasion of Gaza, and sympathy for Palestinians has been on the rise (Henley, 2025) (Brenan, 2025). If this is due to alternative perspectives or some other factor is not known at this point. What is clear is that the alternative perspectives broadcast by people in Gaza are being seen and that they are relevant to the discourse. The combination of the visibility of the Palestinian story and the immediacy with which the conversation about the situation can take place shapes the nature of public discourse away

from a concretely *a posteriori* discourse on colonialism. The colonial discourse about Gaza that is taking place right now is not one happening *a posteriori*, but one occurring *in media res* (in the middle of the action). The ability for mainstream narratives to precede and/or dominate alternative narratives has been hampered. Increasingly, both narratives enter the discourse and are developed simultaneously. The immediacy of modern communication technology makes it possible for the debate between different perspectives to be in constant progression, with barely any time separating events, the forming of narratives about those events, and those narratives being challenged.

In media res discourse presents a number of challenges for the ethical justification of colonialism. Alternative narratives displace the separation between the ethically empty colony and the ethically conscious colonising society in public discourse. The evaluation of colonial actions and the challenging of them therefore is considered within the context of ethics. A 'strategic lie' form of justification becomes difficult under such circumstances. It has to be formulated quickly and it has to be convincing to those already questioning colonialism. This is further complicated by the fact that evidence contradicting any particular lie is overall quite available and documented. It is difficult to mislead people about the actual event because conflicting stories are readily available. There is therefore a strong reliance on already existing flawed ideological beliefs, but even this is precarious if people are already questioning the ethics of colonialism or colonial action. Lastly, controlling such a narrative is made even more complicated by the fact that every person involved in an action is able to communicate about it to the rest of the world through personal social media. Successfully reframing the event as ethical and maintaining that framing becomes impossible at a certain level of scrutiny.

Guilt avoidant justification faces an even steeper challenge. If one is called upon to justify themselves, their options are limited. Reflection on the act itself becomes a risk because there is no ethical justification for the act. This is true both in the sense that the action is ethically unjustifiable and that before being challenged on ethical grounds, the action did not have an ethical motive since it existed in a place of understood ethical emptiness. If one fully grasps that their action is unjustifiable, guilt is unavoidable. An undermined justification based on one's own flawed ideological beliefs is also insufficient because the challenge to justify oneself ethically establishes the ethical value of the colonised other as core to the question. This establishment of the value of the colonised other directly challenges veiled or bastardised images of that other. Colonialism is ethically indefensible. The only option that remains is a supporting form of justification. One asserts the justness of an action not by justifying it to ethical conscience, but by defining it as just. The only viable guilt avoidant colonial justification in the face of scrutiny is one that avoids the context of ethics altogether. This is essentially a collapse of ethical discourse into power politics and propaganda for it.

This collapse of ethical justification can be seen in the development of discourse around Gaza. One of the major frameworks of justification for the genocidal violence in Gaza is what then UN special rapporteur on the Palestinian territories Francesca Albanese's (2024) report *Anatomy of a Genocide* terms 'humanitarian camouflage.' Israeli officials would, for example, claim that Palestinian civilians were being used as 'human shields' by Palestinian

militants to justify excessive civilian casualties. Albane's description is clearly one of a 'strategic lie' undermining justification, one that appeals to humanitarian principles but with the aim to justify the killing of innocents. The specific framing of human shields has since fallen out of favour, but this kind of 'humanitarian camouflage' persists in other forms. A current example of this is the claim that Hamas is stealing humanitarian aid and that Hamas is responsible for firing at people trying to receive aid, not Israeli forces. (Emanuel Fabian, 2025) While such justifications are similar, there is a noticeable shift. In the case of the 'human shields' justification, civilian casualties were framed as an unfortunate collateral damage, killed only because Hamas hid behind them. Similarly, a significant justification for continuing military action in Gaza was the return of Israeli's taken hostage on October 7th. (Return of Hostages: Statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, 2023) The humanitarian aspect of the justifications was significant, with Hamas being positioned as those making those humanitarian goals impossible. Over time the focus has shifted to emphasise Hamas as the absolute enemy that needs to be destroyed at all costs. Recently, the Israeli government admitted to arming criminal gangs in Gaza so that they might fight Hamas. (Press-tv, 2025) Although there are constant negotiations for a ceasefire, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has stated that they will not end the war until Hamas is defeated, even if there is a deal for the release of hostages. (Melanie Lidman, 2025) When the UK, France, and Canada called for an end to the restriction on humanitarian aid to Gaza, he stated that they were "emboldening Hamas". (Grierson, 2025)

This is illustrative of the shift in tone of Israeli justification. As their actions continue to be challenged and as it becomes increasingly obvious that they have no real humanitarian concern, they fall back on the image of Hamas as absolute enemy. Things are at a point where nations allied with Israel are increasingly shifting their tone away from full throated support, some threatening to take action if the humanitarian situation in Gaza does not improve. (Grierson, 2025) It is outside the scope of this thesis to say if the motivation behind initial Israeli justification is one befitting the avoidance of blame of the 'strategic lie' or the avoidance of guilt. Motivation will vary between all the people involved and for most the motivation is probably not entirely one or the other but a combination of both. Nevertheless, the result is the same. The pressure of continual ethical scrutiny makes undermining/undermined justification less viable over time. The justification that remains is supporting justification. To justify that one's actions are permissible by simply asserting that they are. Such a justification does not engage with the ethical challenge to colonialism at all. The contradiction of colonialism is exposed and to at that point continue to justify it by simply asserting its righteousness is not a mediation of the contradiction, but a denial of its existence. At a certain point, to justify colonialism in the face of its unjustifiability is not discourse, but a refusal of discourse. It is an abandonment of the perspective of ethics. The denial of the unethical nature of the colonial action is replaced by denying that the question of its ethics matter at all. What is important is the desire to do things and the ability to impress that will onto others.

The abandonment of the ethical dimension signals the collapse of discourse into pure power politics. Having given an account of the role of colonial justification and what might happen when it cannot be sustained, it is necessary to revisit Césaire's concepts of the strategic lie, hypocrisy, and decivilisation that motivated this account in the first place. The estimation of colonial moral justification as strategic falsehoods is a core concept in the study of colonial

justification, but by itself it does not fully explain the phenomenon. Through examining the inward function of justification, which is mediating and masking the incoherence of colonial logic, there is a clearer view of the hypocrisy described by Césaire. Ultimately, the ethical justifications for colonialism were irrelevant not purely because they were conscious lies, but more fundamentally because when push comes to shove ethics are abandoned for power politics. The hypocrisy inherent in this is not just lying about valuing ethics, but valuing it, only to abandon it when doing so becomes more useful. The decivilising effect of colonialism can be understood as resulting from the continual undermining of ethical and social norms. Another aspect of decivilisation highlighted by the inwards role of colonial justification is the inability to reckon with colonialism and the decivilising effect it has.

7: Conclusion

This thesis has provided an analysis of ethical justification for colonialism in an attempt to answer the question of why colonialism continues to be justified, despite it by its very nature being unjustifiable. This was done in an effort to expand on the traditional understanding of colonial justification that views ethical justifications for colonialism as strategic lies. The hypothesis of this thesis was that colonial ethical justification mediates and masks the inherent contradiction of colonial logic which both stems from societies that have some sense of ethical conscience, while also in its actions being a form of domination and exploitation antithetical to any ethical evaluation. The first chapter established a theoretical framework for the use of terms relating to colonialism and the understanding of those terms in this thesis. The second chapter posited an argument for why colonialism is antithetical to ethical conscience, based on the idea that ethical conscience arises from a recognition of the value of the other that colonialism is in contradiction with. The third chapter presents a framework for the interpretation of motive, which poses that actions are undertaken insofar as they make contextual sense to the actor. The fourth chapter examined the logic of colonisation and colonialism. It identified the use of colonial justification as separating the constructed non-ethical space of the colony from the ethical home society. A distinction was made between two different roles justifications might play in creating and maintaining this separation. Those justifications that functioned to enforce an understanding of the colony as ethically empty, termed supporting justifications, and those justifications that functioned to obscure the actual brutality of events in the colony reframing them as ethical or ethically permissible, termed undermining or undermined justifications. The fifth chapter analysed how these forms of justification could be utilised in the context of strategic lie forms of colonial justification. It concluded that it was not possible to employ strategically falsified justifications if the aim of those justifications were not to deceive others, but to avoid recognising and confronting one's own ethical culpability in colonial action. The sixth chapter focused on the analysis of this kind of justification by examining public discourse and how such justifications might be challenged. The chapter outlined an arising mode of public discourse that challenged colonialism on ethical grounds in real time from its own established narrative. This *in media res* discourse was demonstrated in an overview of the currently ongoing discourse about the genocide in Gaza and its characteristics. This demonstration attempts to show how alternative narratives in combination with continuous direct confrontation of colonialism affected guilt avoidant justification. It argued that if these justifications are challenged to the point where they cannot effectively deflect the ethical confrontation, the contradiction in the nature of colonialism cannot be mediated. This results in an abandonment of ethical consideration altogether in favour of a pure power politics wherein colonialism asserts itself instead of attempting justification.

There lies a contradiction at the core of colonialism; one society dominating another. To be in community with others, to meaningfully be a society, requires the recognition of the inherent value of the other people one is in community with. The recognition of value is what makes others more to us than means to an end. It is through this recognition that we have an ethical conscience of our context that is more than simply instrumental. Part of this conscience is a consciousness of responsibility towards others, not to violate them, not to exploit them, and to respect their dignity. The domination of others consists of violation and exploitation. It fundamentally does not respect the value and dignity of those who are dominated. It is

through the means of supporting and undermining/undermined justification that colonialism is enabled and maintained. Supporting justification functions to dehumanise the colonised other so that their domination is permissible. Undermining/undermined justification reframes domination and the true humanity of the colonised other as to seem in accordance with ethics. This mediates the contradiction between the ethical position and colonial domination.

Fundamentally, colonial domination and ethics are incommensurable. There is no harmony to be found between the two positions. When it comes down to it, there is the choice between one or the other. The purpose of justifying colonialism is to not have to make this choice. The question this thesis asks is why colonialism is still being justified, despite the fact that it is unjustifiable. The contradiction of these two positions is clear in this question. It presents a choice of sort, one between ethics and domination. If colonialism is ethically unjustifiable, justifying it is contradictory. If the ethical unjustifiability of colonialism is unimportant, there is no reason to justify it either. To justify colonialism despite it being unjustifiable represents the decision not to choose. It is the choice to deny that there is a contradiction to be on either side of. It is a choice not for ethics or domination, but for colonialism. It is the choice for a logic that is contradictory, but that is in necessary denial of that fact. It is a position holds ethical regard for some based on a recognition of their humanity but denies this to others regardless of their humanity. If it were faced with the fact that this ethical position does not make sense, it can only blindly be asserted that it does. This represents a collapse of the contradiction of colonialism of sorts. The only option remaining if colonialism is to be perpetuated, is an abandonment of ethics altogether. What is left is the power politics of domination that does not just try to justify itself, but rather asserts itself. The logic of colonialism is one of constant repeated suspension of logic and rationality in favour of a flawed understanding of the world. It makes no sense because it does not. It needs to continue to justify itself anyway, due to the fact that it understands itself to be justified, so it makes sense to do so. From the view of discourse, this is not a contribution to discourse at all, but a refusal to engage in it.

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