

## IN SEARCH OF A MORALLY ACCEPTABLE NATIONALISM

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### PRECIS

**The author argues that nationalism based on culture or ethnicity is morally problematic but can be morally acceptable if certain conditions are met. These requirements include, but go beyond, respecting the political rights of minorities. A crucial requirement of a morally acceptable nationalism is the promotion of cosmopolitan education and historic truth. This requires nations to nurture the ideal of world citizenship and to teach the shameful as well as the glorious parts of their own histories. The author applies these requirements to the competing nationalisms in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.**

Nationalism, in particular ethnic nationalism, has been responsible for some of the world's greatest atrocities in the last hundred years. Though we shrink from the extremist passions of nationalism, nineteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder offered a different view. He considered the national community to be the necessary medium between humankind and the individual. For Herder, nationality was a living organism, something sacred. He taught that each person "could fulfill his human destiny only within and through his nationality."<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-five years ago—after Hitler but before the catastrophic events in Bosnia and Rwanda—philosopher Isaiah Berlin warned that we still were not appreciating the powerful force of nationalism. As Berlin described it, nationalism holds that "the essential human unit in which [human] nature is fully realised is not the individual, or a voluntary association . . . but the nation" and that, for the nationalist, "one of the most compelling reasons, perhaps the most compelling, for holding a particular belief, pursuing a particular policy, serving a particular end, living a particular life, is that these ends, beliefs, policies, lives, are *ours*."<sup>2</sup>

What should moral philosophers of today say about nationalism and national identity? It would be tempting to argue that the tribal force of nationalism is something the human community must overcome. The most ambitious global

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in Its Origins and Background* (Toronto: Collier Books, 1944), p. 431. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernard Suphan, et al., vol. 18 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1872–1913), pp. 283–284.

<sup>2</sup>Isaiah Berlin, "Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power," in his *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (London: Hogarth Press, 1979), p. 342; emphasis in original. Berlin was not endorsing this view.

ethic would hold that every person on earth has an equal claim to our attention and concern and would demand that every belief be subject to the scrutiny only of pure, impartial human reason. This was the dream of the Enlightenment in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

One cannot, however, ignore that nationalist passions have been liberating as well as oppressive or, what is worse, genocidal. Nor can we ignore the reality that nationalism expresses something deep in human nature. So, I would like to do something more modest but perhaps less dreamlike than urging the transcendence of nationalism. I would like to explore whether there can be a morally defensible nationalism and to suggest what it might entail.

Let me first place nationalism in a larger philosophical and cultural context. Nationalism is a challenge to the traditional moral ideal of impartiality. As stated by nineteenth-century philosopher Henry Sidgwick, the standard approach to ethics requires that one adopt “the point of view of the universe,”<sup>3</sup> the requirement of viewing the world as a god-like “benevolent spectator”—counting oneself and each member of one’s family as one but no more than one. Present-day philosopher Peter Singer restated this ideal clearly and related it to our larger cultural heritage:

Consistently with the idea of taking the point of view of the universe, the major ethical traditions all accept, in some form or other, a version of the Golden Rule that encourages equal consideration of interests. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’, said Jesus. ‘What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbour’, says Rabbi Hillel. Confucius summed up his teaching in very similar terms: ‘What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others’. The *Mahabharata*, the great Indian epic, says: ‘Let no man do to another that which would be repugnant to himself’. The parallels are striking.<sup>4</sup>

Much recent philosophical literature challenges the traditional moral ideal of pure impartiality.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that we have given only lip service to imperatives such as “love thy neighbor as thyself” without ever taking them seriously. Not only is it psychologically impossible to “love” so universally, but few think we should even strive to *act* with the same concern for all people. We buy things for our children that are not really needed, and few suffer moral anguish or guilt for not using the money so spent to save lives of children in developing countries. Contrary to the rhetoric of pure impartiality, in our lives we take some forms of partiality for granted, not just as a human weakness. We do not just grudgingly accept partiality; we embrace it as an important part of living a full life, a life lived among people with whom we have a special connection and an appropriate special concern. If we accept that partiality toward “our own” is not only inevitable but also ethically justifiable, then we

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<sup>3</sup>Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1907; Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981 [1st ed.: London: Macmillan, 1874]), p. 382.

<sup>4</sup>Peter Singer, *How Are We to Live? Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995), p. 230.

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., John Cottingham, “Ethics and Impartiality,” *Philosophical Studies* 43 (January, 1983): 83–99; and idem, “Partiality, Favouritism, and Morality,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (July, 1986): 357–373.

must ask two questions: To what degree is partiality acceptable, and what forms of partiality are acceptable?

I will focus here on the second question. Most of us who accept partiality would concede that partiality toward members of our family is acceptable, not only to our children and parents but also to siblings and maybe even to our cousins and to close friends who are “like family.” Most of us would claim, at the other extreme, that partiality toward members of our own race is morally problematic.

How then should we look at partiality toward our nation? On the one hand, people sometimes speak of their nation as their “motherland” or “fatherland,” suggesting that their loyalty is a natural extension of their special concern for members of their family. The phrase “blood and belonging,” the title of a recent work on nationalism,<sup>6</sup> captures some of the power of this connection. However, Paul Gomberg has claimed that nationalism and even patriotism have more in common with racism.<sup>7</sup> If one were in charge of scarce, life-saving resources and had to decide whom to save based not on the likelihood of success but, rather, only on the person’s being a “fellow Serb” or “fellow Palestinian” or “fellow Jew,” it is not clear how such partiality is any more justifiable than a preference based on race.

If we are troubled by nationalistic partiality and yet recognize that a world government is unrealistic (at least in the short term), we might be tempted to defend nation-states, but only as purely administrative units, such as counties, purged of the emotional and ethnic content associated with the most troubling forms of nationalism in recent history. Such a state would be based on what I call “administrative nationalism,” in contrast to the cultural or ethnic nationalism of most contemporary states such as Serbia or Japan or Armenia. Administrative nationalism could be justified impartially: A country can show preference to its own citizens but only as a realistic and efficient means of meeting larger global needs. It would still share an ultimate commitment to universal values, but it would use partiality only as a means to achieve the larger goal of insuring human welfare.<sup>8</sup>

Nonetheless, I would like to offer a moderate defense not of this kind of neutral administrative nationalism but of cultural nationalism, and I will then indicate some of the requirements that must be met to make such cultural nationalism acceptable.

First, cultural nationalism responds to some basic human needs, and there are good reasons to want to see these needs satisfied for many people even if they cannot be satisfied to the same degree for all. Many authors, such as Michael Walzer,<sup>9</sup> Yael Tamir,<sup>10</sup> and Muhammad Khalidi,<sup>11</sup> have argued that indi-

<sup>6</sup>Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging* (London: BBC Books, 1993).

<sup>7</sup>Paul Gomberg, “Patriotism Is Like Racism,” *Ethics* 101 (October, 1990): 144–150.

<sup>8</sup>See, e.g., Robert Goodin, “What Is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?” *Ethics* 98 (July, 1988): 663–686; and Elias Baumgarten, “Zionism, Nationalism, and Morality,” in Nenad Mišćević, ed., *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Philosophical Perspectives* (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2000), pp. 76ff.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 53–74, 86–108.

<sup>10</sup>Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*, Studies in Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy (Prince-

viduals need and have a right to the “common life” (Walzer), “shared public space” (Tamir), and national self-expression (Khalidi) afforded by being a member of a self-determining nation. For Tamir,

. . . Membership in a nation is a constitutive factor of personal identity. The self-image of individuals is highly affected by the status of their national community. The ability of individuals to lead a satisfying life and to attain the respect of others is contingent on, although not assured by, their ability to view themselves as active members of a worthy community. A safe, dignified, and flourishing national existence thus significantly contributes to their well-being.  
 . . . Given the essential interest of individuals in preserving their national identity, . . . the right to national self-determination should be seen as an individual right.<sup>12</sup>

A second argument for cultural nationalism is that it helps to create the bonds that are needed for mutual self-sacrifice within a community. Humans are not angels, and they need to move beyond pure self-interest in order to live in stable communities. Communities are more likely to be able to encourage a degree of self-sacrifice if people feel a bond with one another based on a shared history, a common purpose, or something equivalent to an extended family. The bond may be, and often is, based on myth; the community and shared history are often only imagined.<sup>13</sup> This points to one of the most difficult challenges for a nation or for “nation-building”: to teach and celebrate a shared history that may be partly constructed and yet meets some standards of historic truth. I will return to this point later.

A third justification for cultural nationalism is the desirability of preserving a diversity of “ways of life.” We regret the loss of an indigenous culture just as we regret the loss of a species or ecosystem, and one might attempt to argue that cultures or ecosystems themselves have interests and can be bearers of rights. But, even if cultures themselves do not have rights, individuals benefit from the preservation of a diversity of cultures. Each disparate culture makes actual some of the possibilities of human consciousness through distinctive forms of expression. It is reasonable to view the loss of an indigenous culture’s language and way of life as a loss for humanity in general. It is also reasonable to think that cultures have a better chance of surviving if they enjoy the protection of national self-determination or, if that is not possible, if they come under the protection of a state that is committed to an enlightened form of cultural nationalism.

One might be forgiven for being skeptical about that possibility. Many of the most passionate recent forms of cultural nationalism have been anything but

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ton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup>Muhammad Ali Khalidi, “Formulating the Right of National Self-Determination,” in Tomis Kapitan, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Armonk, NY, and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 71–72.

<sup>12</sup>Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism*, p. 73. Khalidi cites Tamir and calls her version of the right of self-determination “roughly coincident with what I have been calling the right of national self-expression” (Khalidi, “Formulating,” p. 72).

<sup>13</sup>The idea of nations as “imagined communities” is developed in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

enlightened. Yet, it is possible to outline requirements of a morally defensible and achievable nationalism that are not, such as a call to abolish all nation-states, merely idealistic dreams.

The first requirement for cultural nationalism is that a nation-state must respect the political rights of minority cultures. An obvious feature of globalization and migration is that the boundaries of states do not coincide with the boundaries of cultures or nations. Most states are not multicultural to the same extent that the United States is, but almost every state includes national minorities: for example, Turks in Germany, Kurds in Turkey, native Berbers in Algeria and Morocco, or Palestinian Arabs in Israel. Although minority cultures cannot expect to achieve the same kind of national self-expression as majority cultures—even in the U.S., Christmas is a national holiday, but Ramadan and Passover are not—minorities must be granted equal citizenship and the right to full participation in the political process.

Citizenship rights are not enough. A second requirement of an ethically defensible nationalism is that it not merely tolerate but actually encourage and celebrate the diversity of cultures within its borders. This principle has often been violated; for example, Turkey once restricted the teaching of Kurdish, Morocco discouraged use of the Berber language, and France recently prohibited the wearing of Islamic head scarves in public schools. Instead of taking such exclusivist measures, an enlightened nationalism must work toward creative ways to reconcile two potentially conflicting goals, fostering a unified political community and promoting cultural diversity. For example, if English were made the official language of the U.S., it would be as part of a larger effort to fund, encourage, and celebrate Hispanic and other cultures and Spanish and other immigrant languages, rather than being tied to an anti-immigrant, English-only agenda.

A third requirement of a morally acceptable cultural nationalism goes a step further. It is perhaps the most difficult requirement, but it is arguably the most important. It calls for what Martha Nussbaum has called “cosmopolitan education.”<sup>14</sup> In Nussbaum’s view, education should nurture the ideal of world citizenship, remind us of “the interdependence of all human beings and communities,”<sup>15</sup> and help us “recognize moral obligations to the rest of the world that are real and that otherwise would go unrecognized,”<sup>16</sup> particularly the obligation of wealthy countries such as the U.S. toward the developing world. I want to focus on just one aspect of this education, the one most important for tempering the extremist passions often associated with nationalism. That aspect is historic truth.

Far from being obvious, historic truth is both controversial and rarely achieved. In probably the most famous article on nationalism, Ernest Renan wrote:

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<sup>14</sup>Martha C. Nussbaum, “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” in Martha C. Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations.<sup>17</sup>

Renan further claims that a heroic past and the memory of past glory are “the social capital upon which one bases a national idea.”<sup>18</sup>

An insistence on historic truth means that nations may celebrate their past glories only if they also acknowledge their past shames. It has taken a long time, but some nations have made progress in doing exactly this: The Nazi past is taught in German schools; South Africa had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission; and Americans have to some degree confronted the legacy of slavery and what was arguably genocide against Native Americans. Nevertheless, forgetting and denial are still the norm in many countries.

A key problem for any nation is to teach and share a narrative that is worthy of some degree of attachment and loyalty without asserting the superiority of that nation’s way of life or claiming for the nation a divine sanction. It is especially important that land claims be based rationally on the need for a livable, sustainable space in which one’s distinctive culture can flourish, not on a notion of borders that are absolute and unalterable, because the land is believed to be a gift from God or because a nation must retain the exact soil on which its ancestors shed their blood.

Israel/Palestine is an area of especially intense conflict and serves as a good test case. When one explores the views of Jews and Palestinians, it becomes clear that each side has difficulty seeing the other as victims, even historic victims.<sup>19</sup> Some educated Palestinians consider the Holocaust an “exaggeration,” and a disturbing number do not consider Israeli children innocent victims when killed by suicide bombers. Israeli Jews are not taught about the sins of their fathers in establishing the state of Israel, and many Jewish students at Hebrew University do not know about Deir Yassin, the site of the most famous massacre of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, or about the destruction of Palestinian villages after the War of Independence.<sup>20</sup>

A morally acceptable nationalism, for both Israelis and Palestinians, would aim for the kind of historic truth that Renan thought to be incompatible with a strong national identity. Neither the Israeli government nor the Palestinian Authority has shown a desire to make historic truth an educational priority. Israel did briefly change its school curriculum to include a less narrowly nationalistic

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<sup>17</sup>Ernest Renan, “What Is a Nation?” tr. Martin Thom (from Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* [London: Routledge, 1990, pp. 8–22], originally delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11, 1882), in Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Becoming National: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>19</sup>Many of my claims here have been well documented, but I also rely on my interviews with a broad spectrum of Jews and Palestinians in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza in 1987, 1988, and 1996.

<sup>20</sup>See, e.g., Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

perspective, but the change was reversed by the Sharon government. The new curriculum was vigorously attacked precisely on the grounds that presenting a more universal perspective would lessen the identification of students with the idea of a Jewish state.<sup>21</sup>

The challenge is immense. Fostering a sense of community and national loyalty is a reasonable goal, and, to the extent that national communities and shared histories are to some degree “imaginary,” there can be no one purely objective and impartial narrative. Yet, it is also reasonable to require patriots to confront facts and to aim for a perspective that does not obscure the dark sides of their nations’ pasts. The parallel between individual and national narratives is not exact, but, for both persons and nations, coming to terms with, rather than ignoring, past sins may be a step toward wholeness and health. Engaging scholars from nations in conflict to formulate the basic elements of a shared narrative is a concrete step toward a morally acceptable nationalism.<sup>22</sup> A move in precisely this direction is being taken by some nongovernmental projects by Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>23</sup>

To gain a truly cosmopolitan education, citizens must learn about both the glories and the sins of their national ancestors. National shame is, no less than national pride, a sign of a special attachment; one is not ashamed of the moral infractions of foreign nations. Moreover, a special concern to right the wrongs of one’s own nation’s history more than those of other nations is itself a form of loyalty, a loyalty and partiality consistent with a morally acceptable nationalism.<sup>24</sup>

A cosmopolitan education will teach the richness of other cultures; of special value is learning about the cultures of potential adversaries. This is important as both a step toward global reconciliation and the expansion of human consciousness. Just as Schönberg’s atonal music or the initially uncomfortable forms of abstract expressionist art introduces us to new possibilities of human consciousness and human meaning, so does coming to appreciate other cultures enlarge our understanding of what it means to be human.

This essay began with Herder’s glorification of nationalism and his insistence that nationality is sacred, but Herder’s nationalism was not narrow or xenophobic. Perhaps surprisingly, he had disdain for the idea of national pride,

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<sup>21</sup>See, e.g., Yoram Hazony, “Antisocial Texts: Who Removed Zionism from Israel’s Textbooks?” *The New Republic* 222 (April 17 and 24, 2000): 46, 48, 50–55. Hazony considers the attempt to create a universal history to be part of a “de-Judaization of Israeli schools” (p. 53).

<sup>22</sup>An alternative would be to present an attempt at shared narrative alongside narratives with a more frankly nationalistic perspective from each side.

<sup>23</sup>See, e.g., the work of the Shared History Booklet Project, available at <http://www.vispo.com/PRIME/internat.htm>.

<sup>24</sup>Moral emotions of pride, shame, and loyalty are complicated in interesting ways when people have more than one national attachment. Consider the mix of loyalties and feelings of pride and shame that a Palestinian American or German-born Jewish American might have. Although the charge of “dual loyalty” is often used as an accusation of insufficient patriotism, an enlightened nationalism makes room for a more nuanced and less exclusivist view of loyalty, one that could see some expressions of multiple loyalties in a positive light. Although the possibility of conflicting loyalties is present, multiple loyalties might also temper the passions of a singular loyalty and impel work toward reconciliation.

because for him *all* nations are sacred: “No love for our nation shall hinder us in recognizing everywhere the good which can be effected progressively only in the great course of times and peoples.”<sup>25</sup>

Herder insisted that nations learn “the difficult lesson that no people is specially chosen by God, but that truth must be sought, and the garden of the common good cultivated, by all.”<sup>26</sup> If we can embrace something closer to Herder’s vision of nationalism, a cultural nationalism that is compatible with cosmopolitan education and world citizenship, then we will have taken a large step toward global reconciliation.

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<sup>25</sup>Kohn, *Idea of Nationalism*, p. 433, translating from Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 18, p. 137.

<sup>26</sup>Kohn, *Idea of Nationalism*, p. 436, translating from Herder, *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 17, pp. 221–222.