

The Myth of Nationalism

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Two Questions on Nationalism

- ◆ A genealogical question: How did nationalism occur, develop and persist?
- ◆ A philosophical question: Is nationalism a reasonable or justifiable doctrine?

Overview

- ◆ The concept of nation
- ◆ Minimal nationalism
- ◆ Radical nationalism vs. moderate nationalism
- ◆ An argument for minimal nationalism
- ◆ My objections
- ◆ Tibet and nationalism

The Concept of Nation

A nation is a community of people who recognize that they are distinct from other communities in terms of

- ◆ Ethnicity
- ◆ Common history
- ◆ Cultural tradition

Minimal Nationalism

- (T1) The claim to self-determination or national sovereignty is *intrinsically* valid (in a normative sense);
- (T2) The members of a nation have a *distinctive* moral obligation, internal or external, to the nation.

Radical Nationalism

1. The claim to self-determination or national sovereignty is *overridingly* valid;
2. The members of a nation have a greater moral obligation to the nation than to *anything* else.

Moderate Nationalism

1. The claim to self-determination or national sovereignty is only *prima facie* valid;
2. The members of a nation have a greater moral obligation to the nation than to any other *group* to which they also belong, but this obligation doesn't take precedence over *universal* moral obligations, such as the obligation to respect human rights.

Minimal Nationalism

- (T1) The claim to self-determination or national sovereignty is intrinsically valid;
- (T2) The members of a nation have a distinctive moral obligation, internal or external, to the nation.

A Political Argument for T1

The claim to self-determination or national sovereignty is intrinsically valid in that

Self-determination and national sovereignty play a central role in protecting or promoting the members' freedom, interests and welfare.

“Why do nationalist claims require a defense? In some situations they seem plausible: for instance the plight of some stateless national groups — the history of Jews and Armenians, the misfortunes of Kurds — makes one spontaneously endorse the idea that having their own state would have solved the worst problems.” (N. Miscevic 2005)

Objections to the Political Argument

- ◆ A nation's 'freedom' is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for individuals' freedom.
- ◆ If the argument implies that self-determination and national sovereignty are just extrinsic means (albeit significant means) to achieve certain intrinsic ends such as individuals' welfare, then it cannot be used to argue for nationalism.
- ◆ Nation-based values and interests can be totally reduced to individuals' values and interests; otherwise they would be mysterious (e.g. the Hegelian conception of nation-state).

Minimal Nationalism

- (T1) The claim to self-determination or national sovereignty is intrinsically valid;
- (T2) The members of a nation have a distinctive moral obligation, internal or external, to the nation.

A Cultural Argument for T2

The members of a nation have a distinctive moral obligation, internal or external, to the nation in that

Human values, the meanings of life and personal identities originate, to a great extent, from the nation with its distinctive culture and tradition.

“What we find in people is the need not only to be able to say what they can do but to say who they are. This is found, not created, and is found in the identification with others in a shared culture based on nationality.” (K. Nielsen 1993)

“The idea is that people make use of different styles to express their humanity. The styles are generally determined by the communities to which they belong. There are people who express themselves ‘Frenchly’, while others have forms of life that are expressed ‘Koreanly’ or ‘Icelandicly’.” (A. Margalit 1997)

Objections to the Cultural Argument

- ◆ A gap between value and obligation
- ◆ Are there any (public) obligations other than civic obligations?
- ◆ Rawls's idea of neutrality (the liberal conception of state vs. the communitarian conception of state)

Summary: the Myth of Nationalism

- ◆ *Myth 1:* Self-determination and national sovereignty are intrinsic ends.
- ◆ *Myth 2:* A nation has its own interests over and beyond individuals' interests.
- ◆ *Myth 3:* The members of a nation have a distinctive moral obligation to the nation.
- ◆ *Myth 4:* It is a legitimate goal of the state to promote nation-based values.

Tibet and Nationalism

My claim: nationalism is NOT the 'source of normativity' in justifying *either* the secession of Tibet *or* the integrity of China.



Thank You!