

## **Is patriotism a virtue, or a vice? Should 'national feeling' be encouraged or discouraged by nation states today?**

Patriotism is a concept that has intrigued philosophers and political theorists for centuries. It is defined by Stephen Nathanson (1993) as four criteria: a) special affection for the country; b) personal identification with the country; c) special concern for the well-being of the country; and d) willingness to sacrifice to promote the country's good.

In this essay, patriotism will be examined through two lenses - morality, whether patriotism is morally legitimate or even a moral obligation; and consequences, whether patriotism creates more good or harm.

Leo Tolstoy (1987) argues that patriotism is not morally legitimate under two arguments - first, that patriotism promotes one's country's interests at the expense of other nations, through whatever means necessary. This is against any moral precept, as it violates the Golden Rule of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". His second argument stipulates that patriotism is morally questionable due to its irrationality. Those who are patriotic believe their country to be the best, even though only one country can objectively hold that position. George Kateb (2000) strengthens this claim of irrationality. He argues that "citizens" are not discernable individuals, and social ties are impersonal and invisible. As this position is contrary to reason, it is hence an immoral belief. This position is further reinforced by Simon Keller (2005), who believes patriotism to be in bad faith. He argues that the patriot does not judge his country objectively and is clouded by biases; and as rationality requires objective recognition of a country's strength, this position is in bad faith.

On the surface, these arguments appear quite plausible. It seems morally illegitimate and irrational to prioritise your own country above all else. However, a few strong responses have been levied against this claim. To Tolstoy's first argument, Marcia Baron (1989) argues that patriotism can be compatible with morality, as love for our country need not override all other moral considerations - for example, there could be universal precepts which override concern for your own country. Her argument is more persuasive than Tolstoy's, as Tolstoy assumes a strong form of patriotism, whilst Baron's is more reasonable and realistic. This takes down Tolstoy's assertion that patriotism necessarily entails maximising your country's interest at the expense of all else. Furthermore, patriotism need not manifest itself into the belief that one's country is the best. One can feel patriotic about their own country while accepting its flaws and the objective superiority of other countries.

At the same time, Benedict Anderson (1991) rebuts Kateb's argument stating social ties are impersonal and that care for your "fellow citizens" is irrational. Anderson argues that all communities are "imagined", and this does not in any way diminish the legitimacy of the bonds we have with them. This hence demonstrates how the feeling of obligation and sacrifice we have towards other members of our community is not irrational nor morally illegitimate. As for Keller's argument of patriotism being in bad faith, a simple response suffices - it is enough to say that this is *my* country and *my* fellow citizens and treat them accordingly. Even if we accept the characterisation that patriotism is a form of biased egoism and that it might not be completely rational, it is not a

reason to deem it morally illegitimate. Hence on the clash of moral legitimacy, it appears that patriotism is morally legitimate.

As for moral duties, many argue that patriotism is a moral obligation. Richard Dagger (1985) argues that compatriots make the state function smoothly, allowing individuals within it to flourish. Hence, we have a reciprocal duty to be patriotic and have special concern for other members of our community. Maurizio Viroli (1995) furthers this by arguing that you owe gratitude and a special duty to your country due to the benefits it grants to you. Andrew Mason (1997) argues on the basis of associative duty that we owe a special duty to citizens who are close to us, just as how we have a duty to our close friends.

These three arguments for moral duty for patriotism have been subject to fierce criticism. Igor Primoratz (2002) disagrees with this narrow conception of patriotism and duty. He proposes a hypothetical scenario - if someone denied special concern for other citizens on top of concern for general humanity, or if she could only save one of two random people and did not save her compatriot, would she be committing a moral wrong? Through appealing to our intuitions, Primoratz demonstrates that having a moral duty to be patriotic is illogical. At the same time, a response to Dagger states that he conflates patriotism with civic obligations. Dagger successfully proves that we might have a reciprocal duty to follow the laws of a state or to pay taxes, as the state gives us benefits and protection we might otherwise not have. This is the famous social contract argument forwarded by Rousseau. However, this does not prove that we have a special obligation to our compatriots. This hence responds adequately to Dagger's argument. As for Viroli's argument, it is argued that there are three criteria for gratitude and reciprocity, none of which are fulfilled by patriotism. First, gratitude ought to be for individuals who have acted on behalf of an entity, not the entity itself, as the entity has not directly conferred benefits onto you. For example, the individual doctors and nurses within a hospital should be thanked, instead of the hospital as an institution. Second, gratitude ought to be for those who act for the right reason - for your benefit. In the instance of a nation-state, most actions are for the benefit for the smooth functioning of the state itself, whereas you as an individual citizen is merely an inadvertent beneficiary. A parallel can be drawn with a waitress who was given a tip, not because the customer wanted to reward her service, but because the customer did not want to keep the change. Under the same logic, the waitress ought not feel gratitude nor reciprocate the benefit she received. Third, gratitude ought to be felt for a benefit conferred freely, not a *quid pro quo* exchange with the state - an exchange of taxes for services. Hence, we have no obligation to reciprocate what the state gives us, given it is impersonal, unintended and not free. These counterarguments appear to sufficiently demonstrate the arguments for a moral duty for patriotism to be inadequate.

In moral terms, it would appear that patriotism is neither a virtue nor a vice. Patriotism is not morally illegitimate, nor is it a moral duty that all citizens have to adhere to. In light of this, we have to turn to utilitarian benefits and harms to determine whether patriotism should be encouraged.

A benefit of patriotism is how it promotes the public sacrifice necessary for the functioning of the state. War is a pertinent example. Soldiers often have a strong sense of patriotism, believing in the vision of a nation greater than themselves. This justifies taking extreme risks and being willing to put their lives on the line. Within the army, a sense of patriotism also disincentivises internal disagreement that sacrifices efficiency. This is both because of aversion to jeopardising the

achievement of a common mission, as well as a common feeling with your fellow compatriots. A second example is public service. If individuals believe in and are devoted to the state, they would want to participate in forwarding its strength and power through public service, which is crucial for guaranteeing functional goods and services. Hence, patriotism encourages public sacrifice and a more efficient running of the state.

Patriotism also decreases the likelihood of conflict, especially for countries which are plagued with sectarian dissent. Differences in race, religion and language are less important than the shared ideals of loyalty and devotion towards the same nation-state. Citizens become less selfish, valuing each other's welfare as their own. An example to illustrate how patriotism decreases conflict is the counterexample of Yugoslavia. The decline in Yugoslavism in the 1980s coincided with the weakening of the state, leading to bloody civil wars and its ultimate collapse.

A third benefit of patriotism is how it reduces corruption. This happens in two ways. First, highly patriotic public servants care more about the society in which they live, and are more aware of the damage they might cause to society if they are corrupt. Hence they are less likely to attempt to profit at the expense of his citizens. Second, a patriotic public is less likely to condone corruption within the government. In a state without patriotism, there is a collective action problem due to the diluted cost of corruption to the individual and the high cost of reporting, voting or campaigning on it. However, a patriotic body of citizens cares more about the effects of corruption on the entire country and are more likely to call out any corruption. This not only prevents public servants who might be corrupt to continue their behaviour, but also provides a deterrent to public servants not to attempt this in the first place. Hence, patriotism is able to reduce corruption within a state.

One last important point to note about patriotism is its inclusivity as an identity. This happens in two ways. First, patriotism does not depend on rigid distinctions in identities or characteristics that people might not be born with. This stands in contrast to identities such as race, which rely on easily identifiable and unchangeable characteristics. Second, patriotism is much easier to opt into and opt out of. In the era of globalisation, it is important that immigrants can identify with different nation-states. This demonstrates patriotism to be a system of collective identity not based on immutable characteristics, but one which can be adopted by newcomers, and can be opted out of by those who leave. Patriotism is hence virtuous in its inclusivity.

On the other hand, many argue that patriotism is a vice through causing devastating harms. First, competing patriotic identities could be extremely divisive. An example of this is the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, which happened due to the competing identities of Serbs and Croats, culminating in civil war. Second, patriotism can make people blind to their country's faults, and is problematic if mixed with the belief that one's country is beyond standards of morality. Nazi Germany is one such example, as the Germans' love for their nation was not counterbalanced by a moral doctrine that valued compassion. Third, patriotism can also be used as a dangerous tool by populist leaders, who exploit their citizens' care for their country to their benefit. Ambitious leaders could pursue risky strategies to boost their popularity, such as invading a neighbouring country to their state's detriment. Hence, patriotism can cause various serious harms.

However, one response is crucial - patriotism is not nationalism. Although the two concepts have similar meanings, nationalism exalts one nation above all others, and "by definition excludes from its

purview all who do not belong to its own 'nation'" (Hobsbawm, 1992). This exclusionary and biased nature is not shared by patriotism, which emphasises concern for one's compatriots. This rebuts the first two challenges to patriotism, including that of divisiveness and immorality. As to the third challenge of exploitation of patriotism to the detriment of the country, one can argue that patriotism need not blind individual citizens to reason and knowledge of what is good or harmful for their country. If anything, patriotism increases the concern citizens have towards their country, and citizens are less likely to be swayed by populist politicians into deceptive and harmful actions. Hence patriotism is not a vice in practical terms.

In conclusion, patriotism is a virtue. Although arguments for patriotism as a moral duty are inadequate, patriotism brings a plethora of important practical benefits. It promotes public sacrifice that is crucial to the functioning of a state, decreases the likelihood of conflict, reduces corruption, and is extremely inclusive as an identity. Hence, nation-states should encourage "national feeling", as it improves the wellbeing of the country and its citizens.

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