

Nationalism and the Limits of Global Humanism

STEPHEN NATHANSON

Can nationalism be good? Many people think not. They link nationalism with violence, hatred, racism, and xenophobia. These links are not just the products of overheated imaginations or paranoid worries. They are real, and they make it easy to see why some people reject all forms of nationalism as immoral, illegitimate, and undesirable.

But what are the alternatives to a world of nations? The most obvious alternative is a unified world, one in which human beings transcend national differences and organize themselves on the basis of their shared humanity with all people. This is the ideal of global humanists.

It is easy to see why humane people would find the global humanist perspective more attractive than nationalism. For globalists, the violence, hatred, and destruction that nationalism spawns can be avoided only by doing away with nationalism itself. In the ideal world of the global humanist, no attention would be paid to the differences between people that nationalists treat as having ultimate significance.

For all of its appeal, the global humanist position has its own difficulties. I shall try to show in this essay that there are strong arguments for the legitimacy of some nationalist claims. Global humanists will have difficulty avoiding the force of these arguments because they appeal to precisely the values that global humanists claim to respect. This is not to say that all forms of nationalism are legitimate, but if some forms are, then any form of global humanism that denies this will itself be badly flawed.

I believe that if we evaluate the competing ideals of nationalism and global hu-

Nations and Nationalisms

Like others who enter this area, I need to give some account of what I mean by the terms "nation" and "nationalism." These definitional questions are themselves hotly debated. I will answer them in a way that is brief and sufficiently clear to permit discussion, while recognizing that noted scholars would reject the account that I give.¹

First, what is a nation? The best answer to this question, I think, is that of Eric Hobsbawm, who defines a nation as "any sufficiently large body of people whose members regard themselves as members of a 'nation.'"² This answer may be rejected on the grounds that it is either empty or paradoxical. Both of these charges emerge because the definition appears to generate an infinite regress. If we say that "a nation is a group of people who believe they are a nation," we seem to be led to the further elaboration that "a nation is a group of people who believe that they are a group of people who believe they are a group of people...." Further attempts to eliminate the word "nation" from the definition fail, as it reappears each time we substitute for the word "nation" in our definition.³

The solution to the problem is to recognize that members of nations do not see themselves as united by their common belief. They always cite some specific things that unite them—a common culture, for example, or common ancestors, a common history, shared political institutions, or attachment to a particular territory. None of these particular features actually defines nationhood, however. While each of them may be sufficient to ground a sense of nationhood, none is absolutely necessary.

Different people believe that their claims to be a nation are rooted in different sorts of facts. As theorists, we can look at all of these claims and see that the essential thread uniting them is simply the *belief* about group membership and not the specific basis on which this or that group rests that belief. Hobsbawm's paradoxical definition brings out this fact.

What about nationalism? How shall we understand it? One of the contested issues here is whether nationalism essentially involves the goal of a separate territory and political sovereignty for one's national group. I think that while a territory and a state have been the typical goals of nationalists, neither is absolutely essential to a nationalist ideal. My view is that the essence of nationalism is the goal of national

flourishing. However we conceive of the national group, nationalists are people who identify with their national group and want it to flourish.

There are good historical reasons why national flourishing has generally seemed to require a state and a territory. Nonetheless, circumstances change, and people may be able to construct other institutional frameworks that permit national groups to flourish without a territory or state. If this occurs, there is no reason why nationalists could not pursue these alternative institutions as their goal instead of seeking a separate territory. We could acknowledge this as a significant development or shift in the nature of nationalism while recognizing the features it has in common with older, territory-based conceptions of nationalism.⁵

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that established states can be nationalistic. Nationalism is not limited to those who lack a state or whose national group is endangered or oppressed. Many people who are patriotic do not think of themselves as nationalists, but "patriotism" is simply another name for nationalism. As such, it inspires in people a partiality or special concern for their own nation and motivates its adherents to promote their own nation's well-being.⁶

What Is Special about National Identity?

In considering defenses of nationalism, I want to begin with the view that Judith Lichtenberg calls the "Flourishing Argument." She identifies it as "the belief that human beings need to belong to or identify with some group beyond their immediate family or, in any case, that they flourish when they do."⁷ Notice that while the Flourishing Argument stresses the importance of group membership for individual flourishing, it does not refer specifically to nations. Even if we accept this principle, then people who take membership in a nation to be especially important must show why this is so. Why do people need a national group in order to flourish? Why aren't other forms of association (such as families, religious groups, professions, et cetera) sufficient for individuals to flourish?

This gap in the argument may evoke a skeptical reply from people with global humanist sympathies. They may wonder why people must identify with the national group. All of us are members of many different groups. Why is our membership in a nation of preeminent importance? What is to keep us from identifying with all humanity? After all, if we could identify with humanity as a whole, we could avoid the worst evils that nationalism has given rise to: hatred and suspicion of other nations and the violence and destruction that these attitudes provoke.

This globalist objection may be met by the claim that humanity is too large and indistinct a group for people to identify with. While this is a plausible response, it may not seem that strong. After all, many modern nations are also extremely large and are composed of people from many diverse groups. In fact, increasingly in the modern world nation-states are homes to people of disparate cultures, religions,

and national origins. Identification with nation-states may seem no less artificial than identification with humanity as a whole. So one may continue to wonder why national affiliation is so special.

To put the point rhetorically: If people have to identify with some large group in order to flourish, why not identify with all humanity and avoid the many problems to which national identifications give rise? Why must human flourishing and human associations rest on the basis of membership in a national group?

Defensive Nationalism

I have a great deal of sympathy with this globalist challenge to the Flourishing Argument. Like many others, I lament the divisive and destructive tendencies of nationalism. Nonetheless, I think that this challenge to the Flourishing Argument can be met by defenders of nationalism. In meeting it, nationalists can show both that some forms of nationalism are legitimate and that any form of global humanism that does not acknowledge this is unacceptable.

The most powerful reply to global humanists comes from the view that I will call "defensive nationalism." The strength of this position is evident in the following eloquent, highly charged statement by the Israeli writer and peace activist Amos Oz, who writes:

I think that the nation-state is a tool, an instrument, . . . but I am not enamored of this instrument. . . . I would be more than happy to live in a world composed of dozens of civilizations, each developing . . . without any one emerging as a nation-state: no flag, no emblem, no passport, no anthem. No nothing. Only spiritual civilizations tied somehow to their lands, without the tools of statehood and without the instruments of war.

But the Jewish people has already staged a long-running one-man show of that sort. The international audience sometimes applauded, sometimes threw stones, and occasionally slaughtered the actor. No one joined us; no one copied the model the Jews were forced to sustain for two thousand years. . . . For me this drama ended with the murder of Europe's Jews by Hitler. And I am forced to take it upon myself to play the "game of nations," with all the tools of statehood. . . . To play the game with an emblem, and a flag, and a passport and an army, and even war, provided that such war is an absolute existential necessity. I accept those rules of the game because existence without the tools of statehood is a matter of mortal danger, but I accept them only up to a point. To take pride in these tools of statehood? To worship these toys? To crow about them? Not I. . . . Nationalism itself is, in my eyes, the curse of mankind.⁸

What Oz presents here, with considerable reluctance, is the case for a negative or defensive nationalism. Although he regards nationalism as a curse, he nonetheless believes that a national group can justify its claims to a state and a territory because the alternative for members of that group is exposure to the risk of destruction by other groups.

I do not think that there is any plausible rebuttal to this argument. When the very existence of a group is threatened by others and when possession of a territory of its own would enable it to defend itself, then the threatened group has a strong, presumptive moral claim to a territory of its own.

I do not see how global humanists could possibly reject this argument. If they do reject the legitimacy of defensive nationalism, they are in the awkward position of beginning with a humane desire to respect all people equally and ending with the rather callous view that some people should simply permit themselves to be slaughtered or deprived of basic rights. Reasonable global humanists must concede, I think, that in some circumstances it is morally permissible for people to form national states.

On Having a National Identity

The argument for defensive nationalism is valuable for a second reason. It suggests an answer to the objection that national identity is arbitrary, that there is no more reason to identify oneself with a national group than there is to identify oneself simply as a human being.

Why do people identify with a particular nation? One reason is because other people may force them to take national identity seriously. While I might think of myself as a global humanist who wishes to ignore national, cultural, racial, or ethnic differences, others in my society may not permit me to do so. They may label me as a member of a particular group and, based on my label, subject me to various forms of negative treatment. In this situation, my identification with a particular group is forged and strengthened because important aspects of my life are made to depend on my being a member of it.

Having identified me in a certain way, others may make it difficult or impossible for me to flourish, and my ability to flourish (or even to survive) may come to depend on how effectively the group that I am identified with can deal with this situation. This in turn provides me with powerful, personal incentives to act on behalf of this group and to be more concerned about its well-being than I am about the well-being of other groups.⁹

Of course, this is not the only way that people acquire a sense of national identity, but it does serve to reveal the artificial quality of the question of why we should identify with our national group rather than with all humanity. Many people have no real choice about this because the decision is made for them by others. One's identity as a member of particular group is formed and given central importance by the fact that other people ascribe this identity and base important decisions about how to treat people on it.¹⁰

In other cases, of course, a national (cultural, ethnic, or political) identity is regarded positively by the person who bears it. It is not imposed by hostile others.

Nonetheless, even a positive sense of identification and the acceptance of a particular identity are not accidental occurrences. Most ethnic, religious, political, and national groups work very hard to produce a sense of group identity. They raise children to feel a sense of loyalty and kinship. They build institutions to maintain coherence among both children and adult members of the community. They develop rituals and symbols that serve to unify the group. They celebrate their histories and build monuments to the group's achievements. They also impose sanctions on those who violate the group's norms, fail to support it sufficiently, or abandon it entirely.

Globalists are right that there is nothing natural about national identity. It takes work to create these identities. In fact, however, many people and institutions are doing this work. By contrast, very few people are doing this kind of work to produce a global identity. If we compare the resources that are devoted to developing national identities to those that are devoted to developing a global, human identity, it should come as no surprise that the sense of national identity is stronger than the sense of human identity.

Flourishing

To this point, I have discussed a negative or defensive version of the Flourishing Argument. I would now like to examine a more positive version of this argument.

Before doing so, let me briefly review the defensive nationalist argument to make clear what it shows or does not show. The defensive argument shows that if people need a state to defend themselves from attack, then they have a presumptive claim to some form of national recognition. I call the claim presumptive rather than absolute because it can be undermined in some cases. For example, if a threatened group needs a territory to survive but is willing to adopt barbaric practices toward its neighbors or other inhabitants of their region, then others may have no duty to recognize this claim.¹¹

With this limitation in mind, I want to return to the Flourishing Argument and examine it more carefully. As we saw earlier, this argument appeals to the idea "that human beings need to belong to or identify with some group beyond their immediate family or, in any case, that they flourish when they do." As stated, this formulation gives us a part of an argument, but it is obviously incomplete. I suggest filling it out in the following way:

1. Human beings need to identify with or belong to a national group in order to flourish.
2. Individual human beings can only flourish if their national group flourishes.
3. It is desirable for human beings to flourish.

One virtue of this formulation is that it permits some stretching of the notion of flourishing so that it can include necessary conditions of cultural flourishing like physical survival. It thus permits us to see the link between the positive and negative versions of the Flourishing Argument. What I called the case for defensive nationalism is the negative version. It interprets premise 2 as a claim about physical survival. Humans can't flourish if the groups that they belong to are victims of attack and have no way to defend themselves.

What about the positive version of this argument, which rests on the claim that individuals can only develop in valuable ways if they are members of national communities? As a universal claim, this is clearly mistaken. Not everybody has this sort of strong identification, and people may have other identifications or activities that enable them to flourish.

Still, some activities do require a culture or a community of like-valued people, and for some people, these activities may constitute what they see as the most important parts of their lives. If there are enough such people, then the existence of a minority of loners will not upset the argument. So the Flourishing Argument need not rest on a universal psychological claim in order to be persuasive. If large numbers of people can only flourish under certain circumstances and if their flourishing is a good, then the existence of those circumstances is also a good.

One might object that these people are simply mistaken. They may think that they can only flourish if they have a nation of their own, but this is false. Even without a nation, many of them would be able to live meaningful lives. The felt need for a national state of their own rests on a delusion. There is much more to life than membership in a national group.

This objection is far from conclusive. While some may be skeptical that people need a nation in order to flourish, many people find such arguments to be plausible. Indeed, the claim that people need a community in order to live meaningfully is probably the most attractive part of communitarian philosophies.¹²

Even if one is unmoved by these claims, it is important to see that they can have a self-fulfilling quality. Suppose I believe that I need a certain kind of community in order to flourish. If I do not have such a community and believe that this lack deprives me of the opportunity to possess what is most meaningful to me, the mere fact that I have this belief may contribute to my failure to flourish. Believing that I need a community that I cannot have, I may become despondent, feel that my life is empty, *et cetera*. So, in this case, my belief that flourishing requires a community is itself a factor in bringing it about that I cannot flourish in the ab-

sence of a community. If I did not have this belief, perhaps I would find some way to develop myself or attain satisfaction.

Likewise, consider people who believe that a community is necessary for flourishing and have such a community. Believing that their own life fulfillment is tied up with the community and its degree of success, these people find that the health of the community is a component of the good life for them. They take pride in their community's achievements, support it, and engage in activities that contribute to its well-being. The success of the community is at the same time these people's own personal success. In some cases, then, if the well-being of one's community is thought to be a central aspect of a one's own life, the degree to which one finds personal fulfillment will parallel the degree to which the community flourishes.

It would be presumptuous for global humanists to tell people that their personal flourishing does not require the flourishing of their national community. Perhaps globalists could try to show this on a case-by-case basis, pointing out to people that they have many interests that are independent of their national community and that they can flourish in their individual pursuits even if their nation does not flourish. But there is no reason to believe this of everyone, and as I have argued, the possible self-fulfilling nature of these beliefs may make it difficult to refute them.

Nationalists can further strengthen this argument by invoking the value of self-determination. If groups of people believe that they can achieve flourishing lives only by joining together in some kind of collective, then perhaps there is some legitimacy in their efforts to join together, even if global humanists are correct that this group effort is not necessary for these people to flourish. Even if we disagree with people about the conditions that are necessary for their flourishing, we may be forced to acknowledge their appeal to the value of self-determination. If we have a commitment to respect people, this requires us to take seriously what they themselves think are the necessary conditions of their own flourishing.

This is not to say people's own beliefs about what they should have are always decisive. There may be reasons to oppose the realization of nationalist goals. Nonetheless, these arguments establish a strong presumption in favor of the view that nationalist aims and the attempt to realize them can be morally legitimate.

Nationalism within the Limits of Morality

To this point, I have tried to show that national flourishing can be a legitimate aim. Nationalists may be justified in wanting a territory and a state for their people if those conditions are necessary for them to survive and/or flourish. If this is true and if we understand global humanism as requiring the complete rejection of national aspirations, then global humanism is an inadequate ideal. Sometimes we ought to recognize and support nationalist claims.

extreme nationalism, we can see why global humanists can see that nationalism as an inherently immoral ideal. At the same time, we can see that moderate nationalism differs from extreme nationalism. While global moderate nationalism is justifiably aimed at extreme nationalism, there is no basis for the moral criticisms from the moral nationalist view as morally wrong or illegitimate. Humanists have a right to dream of a world without nations, there is no basis for them to criticize the moderate nationalist view as morally wrong or illegitimate.

The Convergence Thesis

I began by arguing that an evaluation of nationalism and global humanism would lead to the conclusion that the two must converge in order to be acceptable.

Nationalism, I have just argued, can only be legitimate in its moral form if it is morally acceptable. Nationalism, I have just argued, is a form that combines commitment to a particular nation with a recognition of duties to treat all people decently. Without this universalist component, nationalism is more than a ruthless, fanatical form of group egoism. With it, nationalism is morally acceptable.

Global humanitarianism may seem so noble an ideal that it necessarily requires the rejection of all nationalist claims, even if the lack of a state committed to opposing the efforts of groups to obtain a state, even if the lack of a state will lead to slaughter and the destruction of particular cultures. This extreme form

In order to avoid this callous result, global humanists must both recognize that national institutions can sometimes be valuable and acknowledge the claims of national groups when they are legitimate. Once they have done this, then there is no principled moral difference between the amended "moderate" globalist point of view and the moderate nationalist point of view.

A Final Objection

Before concluding, I want to mention an objection to the defense of moderate nationalism that I have offered. Someone might object that moderate nationalism, whatever its possible virtues, is merely a philosophical abstraction, while the real nationalisms that plague the world have all the vile features that global humanists deplore. From this perspective, a defense of moderate nationalism can only confuse the issues, lending legitimacy to movements that partly share its admirable qualities.

is compatible with a range of other nonessential features, such as the acceptance of duties toward outsiders. Even if it is true that most nationalists have rejected moral constraints on efforts to promote the national good, it does not follow that nationalists must continue to do so. Likewise, even if nationalists have until now all campaigned for their own territory, it does not follow that they must continue to do so. As I noted earlier, if other arrangements can be provided that make possible national flourishing, then nationalists can accept these other arrangements.

The purpose of defending moderate nationalism is twofold. The first is to separate out the elements of existing nationalisms so that we can distinguish the aspects that possess moral legitimacy from those that do not. The second is to use this analysis to encourage the development of forms of nationalism that lack the features that have made nationalism a breeding ground of hatred, violence, and war.

Nationalism, after all, is an idea, and if we can reconceive nationalism in ways that will make it more humane and pacific, then we may sow the mental seeds that can actually make the world a safer, more peaceful place. It would be foolish to think that philosophical arguments alone can produce such changes, but it would be equally foolish to deny that ideas can make a difference. Reconceiving our goals and ideals is a first step toward changing how we act in the world.

NOTES

The original version of this essay was a response to a paper by Judith Lichtenburg. I am much indebted to her interesting discussion of these issues, as well as to comments by Jeff McMahan.

1. For a fuller development of my own views, see *Patriotism, Morality, and Peace* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993).
2. For an excellent discussion of these definitional issues, see Anthony Smith, *Theories of Nationalism* (London: Duckworth, 1983).
3. Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 9.
4. I owe this objection to Jeff McMahan.
5. On this, see Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
6. For a contrary view, see Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
7. See chapter 10.
8. Amos Oz, *In the Land of Israel* (New York: Vintage, 1983), pp. 130–31.
9. For an account that stresses the connections between group identities and self-

interest, see Dov Ronen, *The Quest for Self-Determination* (New Ha-

ar, 1979).

The same points apply to racial identity. Even if there is no biological basis for racial identity, the fact that people believe in races has important social and personal consequences.

10. For an excellent discussion of these sorts of issues, see Allen Buchanan, *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce from Fort Sumter to Lithuania and Quebec* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1991).
11. For a sampling of communitarian claims, see S. Avineri and A. de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
12. I discuss these issues more fully in *Patriotism, Morality, and Peace* and in "Nationalism, Patriotism, and Toleration," in *Synthesis Philosophica* (International ed. of *Filozofska isprazmjeh*), 9 (1994): 135–52.