Nationalism and the Limits of Global Humanism

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Can nations be good? Many people think not. They think nationalism with violence, hatred, racism, and xenophobia. Those faults 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 out of hand. Still, it is hard to imagine a world in which human beings do not organize themselves on the basis of their shared humanity with all people. This is the ideal of global humanism.

It is easy to understand why historians would find the global humanist perspective more attractive than nationalism. For globalism, the violence, hatred, and destruction that nationalist states can be avoided by going 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's position has its own difficulties. I shall try to show in this essay that those difficulties arise from the very definition of nationalism. If one accepts the definition of nationalism thatone accepts in practice, the definition is incoherent. Nationalists will either avoid the force of these arguments because they appeal too precisely to 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, they are forms of global humanism that deny this will have to be

I believe that if we evaluate the competing ideals of nationalism and global humanism and seek to formulate reasonable forms of these ideals, we arrive at something like a convergence of the two. Nationalism, to be morally acceptable, must conform to universal moral standards of the sort that global humanists have championed. Global humanism, however, is to be reasonable and morally acceptable must recognize the moral legitimacy and even the positive value of certain forms of nationalism.

Nations and Nationalism

Like others who enter this area, I must come to some account of what I mean by the terms "nation" and "nationalism." These definitional questions are themselves highly debated. I will answer them in a way that is brief and sufficiently close to the popular discussion, while recognizing that most scholars would reject the account that I give.

First, what is a nation? The best answer to this question, I think, is that of Eric Hobsbawm, who defines a nation as "an identifiable large body of people, whose members regard themselves as members of a nation." This answer may be rejected on the grounds that it is either more or less paradoxical. Both of these charges arise because the definition appears to generate an infinite regress. For my purposes, a nation is a group of people who believe they are a nation, and there seems to be no way to avoid the conclusion that those who believe they are a nation are a nation.

The solution to the problem is to recognize that members of nations do not see themselves as united by their common belief. They also share 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 nationality, however. While each of them may be sufficient to ground a sense of national belonging, 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 belief rests. For example, Hobsbawm's pan-nationalist definition brings out this fact.

What about nationalism? How shall we understand it? One of the contexts for this essay takes the question of whether nationalists essentially involve the idea of a separate entity and political sovereignty for one's national group. I think that while a territory and a state have been the typical goals of nationalism, neither is absolutely essential to a nationalist ideal. My view is that the essence of nationalism is the goal of national..."
What is Special about National Identity?

In considering defense 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 in order to identify with their immediate family or, in any case, that they flourish when they do." Notice that this is not a very specific principle, and that people who adopt it as a basis for a positive view of individual flourishing, which does not refer specifically to nations. Even if we accept this principle, people who take membership in a nation to be particularly important must show why this is so. Why do people need a national group in order to flourish? Why aren't there other forms of association (such as families, religious groups, professions, and networks) sufficient for individuals to flourish?

This gap in the argument may evoke a skeptical reply from people with global humanist sympathies. They may wonder if people really do identify with the national group. All of us are members of many different groups. Nationalism is not a universal phenomenon. Even in the United States and other countries, which have a long history of national identity, we are subject to many different kinds of pressures that can lead us to identify with other groups. These pressures might include economic, social, or cultural factors. The idea that people must identify with a nation to flourish seems to be too strong and too narrow.

Global identity can be met by the claim that nationality is too large and too diffuse for a group of people to identify with. While that may be plausible, it does not seem that strong. After all, many modern nations are also large and diverse. In fact, the modern world is characterized by people of many different cultures, religions, and national origins. Identification with nation-states may seem less artificial than identification with humanity as a whole. So one may continue to wonder why national affiliations are so special.

The point is that we must identify with something larger in order to flourish. But what is it about a nation that makes it so special? We need to identify with some human community and avoid the many problems that are inherent in identifying with the nation. National identities give rise to such problems. What do national identities become like? What is the basis of membership in a national group?

Defensive Nationalism

I have a great deal of sympathy with this globalist challenge to the flourishing arguments. I think we are right to be concerned about the consequences of nationalisms and to urge them not to use the power of the state for the benefit of any one nation. Nonetheless, I think this challenge to the flourishing arguments can be met by defenders of nationalism. In meeting this challenge, nationalists can show 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 humanist utopian visions of the future is 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 atmosphere is sick in a country...but I am not convinced of this instrument...I would hope it to be a way of world composed of dozens of different countries...In the future, we must be free to choose our own path...No. Nothing. We need to work towards our goals...The point is that the world is made up of many different groups...But the Israeli people have already passed a long and difficult war...The idea that the world is made up of different groups is not an idea...In the future, we must be free to choose our own path...No. Nothing. We need to work towards our goals...The point is that the world is made up of many different groups...But the Israeli people have already passed a long and difficult war...The idea that the world is made up of different groups is not an idea...
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 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 identities seriously. It is hard to imagine myself as a global humanist who wants to ignore national, cultural, racial, ethnic, or other 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 forced 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 disidentify or to survive. It may come to depend on how effectively the group that I am identified with can deal with such situations. This in turn provides the potential for 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.

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

FLOURISHING

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 people need a state to defend themselves from attack, that they have a prescriptive claim to some form of national recognition. I claim that the prior argument is based on an assumption that is often taken for granted, and that the assumption is misleading. The assumption is that human beings are naturally disposed to be identified with some group beyond their immediate family or, in any case, that they flourish when they do.

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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.
3. Finally, if possessing a state, territory, or other institutional apparatus, a group can organize a state, territory, or other suitable institutional arrangement.

One virtue of this formulation is that it permits something of the nature of self-determination in that it can include necessary conditions of self-determination as it is self-defined. It also permits us to see the link between the positive political liberal and the negative version of the self-determination argument. The claim here that self-determination is the negative version is unanswerable. Nothing in this argument promised a claim about political self-determination, but rather the need to defend themselves.

What does the positive version of this argument do? It states that the claim that self-determination is a universal claim, this claim is clearly mistaken. Not everyone has the right to this claim that enables them to say that the group is identifiable, and some may have the right to other things or nothing.

Still, some activities do require a culture, a community of like-minded people, and some people, these requirements cannot be met by seeing them as the most important of our lives. If there are enough such people, then the existence of the self-determination argument for such groups is under certain circumstances and if there are more than membership in a national group:

One might object that these people are simply mistaken. They may think that the wrong notion of community is good enough, even if there are not enough of them to make a meaningful group. The idea that they will not be able to make meaningful groups, if they do not have the same necessities, they require us to take seriously what these people think themselves, and the necessities of their flourishing.

This is not to say people's self-beliefs about what they should have are always decisive. There may be reasons to oppose the realization of nationalistic goals. Nonetheless, these arguments establish a strong presumption in favor of the view that nationalistic aims and the attempts 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 goal. Nationalism may be justified by wanting a territory and a territory for its people in the form of a flourishing life. This is true and if we understand global humanism as requiring the complete elimination of national aspirations, then global humanism is an inadequate ideal. Sometimes we ought to recognize and support nationalistic claims.
expression nationalism, we see not why global humanism would lead to the conclusion that the sun must emerge in order to be morally acceptable.

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The Convergence Thesis

I begin by arguing that an evaluation of nationalism and global humanism would lead to the conclusion that the sun must emerge in order to be morally acceptable.

Global humanism is not an end in itself, but rather a necessary condition for the emergence of a new world order. Without the acceptance of global humanism, it is impossible to achieve a just and equitable society.

A Formal Objection

Before concluding, I want to mention an objection to the above argument. The objection is that moderate nationalism is a necessary condition for the emergence of global humanism. This is because without moderate nationalism, it is impossible to achieve a just and equitable society.

In conclusion, the acceptance of global humanism is essential for the emergence of a just and equitable society. Without the acceptance of global humanism, it is impossible to achieve a world order that is just and equitable.
NOTES

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


2. See chapter 12 for fuller discussion of these and related issues.

3. See chapter 12 for a fuller discussion of these and related issues.

4. For a contrary view, see Amos Tversky, Decision Making (Cambridge, 1990).

5. See chapter 12 for fuller discussion of these and related issues.

6. See chapter 12 for fuller discussion of these and related issues.