How to Think about Nationalism

Kian Hudson

The debate over what nationalism is, and whether it should be embraced or rejected, has in recent years become increasingly urgent. Political movements and heads of state around the world—including America’s last Republican president—identify as nationalist. Voters are asked to consider nationalist approaches on nearly every issue of public importance, particularly in the realms of immigration, trade, industry, and foreign policy. And because nationalism invariably invokes claims about who we are and to whom we belong, it has raised questions of identity that lie at the center of our most heated political disputes.

As nationalism has become a subject of considerable public controversy, its defenders and detractors have exchanged arguments and counterarguments in countless op-eds, essays, and books. Yet these volleys have tended to generate more heat than light. It is often unclear what the disputants understand “nationalism” to mean in the first place, which makes it difficult to evaluate the various arguments on offer, understand how they relate to one another, or consider what significance they have for concrete matters of policy.

To bring some clarity to the conversation, it would help to identify what the dispute over nationalism is really about. This task is less straightforward than it might seem, for “nationalism” can refer to a number of discrete ideas, each of which has its own challenges and implications for public policy. As we will see, however, the various ideas the term can invoke all rest on a single type of claim—that we owe some special set of obligations to some special set of people. We can therefore reframe the debate over nationalism more clearly by asking two central
questions: What is the content of such obligations, and which set of people are properly the object of such special concern?

These questions are difficult because they force us to reconcile two competing yet widely held intuitions: that we have universal moral obligations to all people by dint of their humanity, and that we have some particular moral obligations to specific individuals due to some special relationship we have to them.

We can begin to answer these questions by first recognizing that we bear a duty of affection—an obligation to appreciate the true virtues of our country. It is good to recognize good things for what they are, after all. Moreover, such appreciation presents no conflict with our universal obligations.

Our particular obligations, however, do not end with mere appreciation. We also owe a duty of loyalty—an obligation to give special moral consideration—to our co-citizens. This duty arises from the special relationship we have to our co-citizens, which is premised both on our shared participation in the grand project of governing ourselves and on our unique capacity to care for one another. Crucially, this relationship distinguishes our co-citizens from other groups to which we could conceivably owe obligations.

At the same time, while the loyalty we owe to our co-citizens can justify prioritizing their interests over those of others, it cannot justify ignoring the moral worth of those beyond our shores. And indeed, our universal moral obligations necessarily circumscribe what we rightfully do in fulfilling our particular moral duties. This, in turn, means that the policymaking implications of our loyalty to our fellow citizens—whether we call it nationalism, patriotism, or something else—are not nearly as clear-cut as we might think.

Reconciling our universal and particular moral obligations will always be difficult, and the policy implications far from obvious. But we can begin to tackle the problem by formulating a more lucid understanding of nationalism and the obligations it entails.

THREE CONCEPTIONS OF NATIONALISM

“Nationalism” has long been used to designate a wide variety of ideas. Six decades ago Hans Kohn, one of the 20th century’s most important scholars of nationalism, observed that the term had already become a mere “catchword with very different meanings.” Over half a century later, matters have hardly improved.
Nonetheless, let us begin at the beginning. The term “nationalism” was first coined by 18th-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, who used it to refer to the idea that we ought to have an affection for the delightfully particular things—the art, the institutions, and the traditions—that give our nation its unique character. He thought a man could be fully himself only if he understands and learns to relish the singular characteristics of his national culture. But Herder also believed that one nation’s characteristics are incommensurable with another’s. “To brag of one’s country is the stupidest form of boastfulness,” he wrote, for weighing the virtues of one nation against another would be akin to comparing crab apples with grapes. “[N]ature has distributed her gifts differently,” he observed, “different fruits grow on different trunks, according to climate and care.” Rather than insisting on the superiority of our own nation, then, Herder argued we should “be pleased that there are so many flowers and peoples on the colorful meadow of the earth, that so many flowers bloom here and across the Alps, so many fruits ripen!” Put another way, properly loving one’s nation, according to Herder, is like properly loving one’s wife: It consists in appreciating all that is beautiful about her, not in sizing her up against all the others.

It was not long, however, before nationalism came to represent a very different idea: that each nation ought to have its own state. This notion—perhaps best encapsulated by Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini’s maxim “for every nation a state, and one state for the whole nation”—was derived from the love of nation Herder had espoused. Mazzini, like Herder, saw the nation as a discrete object worthy of our affection. But unlike Herder’s nationalism, which Isaiah Berlin observed was never political, Mazzini’s was overtly so: It made claims about whom the state should govern (a single nation) and for what purpose (to promote the nation’s interest). Since Mazzini’s nation-state ideal may require overturning regimes and redrawing boundaries, his notion of nationalism went further than affection in demanding concrete action.

Mazzini’s nationalism would come to transform the globe, inspiring 19th-century unification movements in the Old World and 20th-century independence movements in the New. Notably, his understanding was framed in the language of political morality: It insisted that nations have moral significance, that individuals can fully realize their political selves only by participating in their nation’s governance, and that the
state is legitimate only to the degree that it respects the intrinsic value and unity of the nation.

This second sense of nationalism is in turn distinct from a third, more contemporary interpretation of the term—the idea that, as a matter of practical policy, a global order of nation-states is the geopolitical system most conducive to human flourishing. This conception is most closely associated with Israeli political theorist Yoram Hazony, who has argued that “the world [is] governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course.” This theory does not rest on claims of moral right and legitimacy; Hazony, for example, rejects the claim that nations have a moral right to states of their own. It is instead concerned with the practical benefits of locating governing authority at the level of the nation. It maintains that a world of nation-states is more peaceful than one without, since nation-states need not engage in wars of conquest; more creative, because healthy competition among nation-states leads to productive experimentation; and more conducive to satisfying the urge for national self-determination—an urge that is, in this view, an inescapable practical reality rather than a justified moral principle.

In practice, this third sense of nationalism functions chiefly as a criticism of international political institutions. Its exponents argue that, in contrast to the benefits brought by nation-states, attempts at transnational governance result only in more conflict, deeper sclerosis, and a greater concentration of power.

Because these three discrete senses of nationalism represent very different ideas, whether an argument succeeds in defending or denouncing nationalism depends first on which nationalism it is addressing. Herder makes a sound case for relishing the beauty in one’s culture, but his arguments scarcely provide a basis for renouncing international institutions. Likewise, an argument criticizing the dangers of Mazzini’s insistence on nations’ moral right to separate states would have no purchase against Hazony’s pragmatic case for the nation-state system. Such disparate understandings of the term also have distinct policy implications. On the matter of America’s relationship with the Kurds, for example, Mazzini’s nationalism suggests supporting Kurdish independence, Hazony’s suggests hard-headed ambivalence, while Herder’s disclaims such political inferences altogether.

Amid these contrasting definitions, one might be tempted to look to semantics: If only we could discern which definition reflects
nationalism’s *true* meaning, we might proceed on firmer ground. But any such inquiry is sure to be as unsuccessful as it is uninteresting. “Nationalism” has become an irreducibly ambiguous term, so choosing any single meaning from among the three would be arbitrary at best. Nor would it help us understand the debate thus far, much less clarify the debate going forward. We can only make progress, then, by focusing on substance—by first discerning the underlying premise that unites the various meanings of nationalism and then by identifying where they depart from one another.

**TWO CENTRAL QUESTIONS**

Critically, each of the three notions of nationalism suggests that the nation has unique significance. Herder’s nationalism treats the nation as a unique object of affection, Mazzini’s treats the nation as a unique object of devotion, and Hazony’s assumes that the interest of the nation has unique significance. Where they depart from one another is on precisely what that special something is and whom it involves. More precisely, while every flavor of nationalism endorses the idea that we stand in a special relation to our nation and that we owe something to its members not owed to other human beings, they disagree with respect to the two crucial questions raised at the outset: What is the *content* of these particular moral obligations, and which set of people is the proper *object* of these obligations? This disagreement is the real battleground in the fight over nationalism.

Defenders of nationalism cannot avoid answering these questions, even if they are only dimly aware of them and even if their answers are only implicit. Herder, for example, gives a direct answer to the first question: We have an obligation to appreciate what is beautiful in our nation. But while he recognizes the importance of the second question, his answer is less than precise: A nation, he says, is “[a] great and unweeded garden full of leaves and weeds,” a “gathering place of fooleries and faults as well as of sublimities and virtues without distinction.” His discussion of the issue underscores just how difficult defining the nation really is. He observes that neither geographical boundaries nor “a Reichstag of the Princes,” nor even “a common language of the people,” can alone constitute a nation. He even wonders aloud why Bohemia and Moravia (historically Czech lands) should not count as part of Germany.

The importance of these questions—and the answers to them—is clearer in Mazzini’s nationalism. Mazzini leaves no doubt about what
obligations nationalism demands or to whom these obligations are owed. He argues that Italians ought to devote their very selves to Italy, a nation that extends "wherever the language of the si' is heard." He explains that one’s country "is the land where your parents sleep, where is spoken that language in which the chosen of your heart blushing whispered the first word of your love; it is the home that God has given you, that by striving to perfect yourselves therein, you may prepare to ascend to him.” He enjoins his fellow Italians to “[l]ove your country…. Give it your thoughts, your counsels, your blood.”

These two questions are central to Hazony’s nationalism as well, even though he attempts to bypass them. Because Hazony prefers see-what-works empiricism to abstract moral reasoning, he insists on separating his claim that “an order of national states is the best form of political order” from “the more personal question of whether nationalism is a virtue or a vice in the individual.” In truth, however, assessing how well the nation-state system works requires first specifying for whom it ought to work: We cannot begin to determine whether a system of independent, non-interfering nation-states is preferable to a system that includes institutions of international governance until we decide whether our chief concern is the condition of our own nation or of humanity as a whole.

If we avoid answering these questions, it quickly becomes apparent that we cannot assess the justice of any discrete decision. Take, for example, the issue of how nation-states arise. Hazony observes that the United States, Britain, and France became strong and stable nation-states due to “the overwhelming dominance of the American, English, and French nations over any and all competing nations or tribes within their borders—a dominance that was achieved in all three cases through the destruction of any significant competitors over centuries.” But does such dominance and destruction represent glorious victory, unfortunate necessity, or unacceptable travesty? That question demands an answer, and we cannot answer it, or others like it, until we determine what we owe our nation and whom our nation includes.

Furthermore, these two questions are of foremost importance because of their profound personal significance. To ask them is to ask whom we should prioritize and who we can rightfully demand prioritize us; to answer them is to decide on whom we can depend and among whom we truly belong. These questions drive at the heart of how we
see ourselves; they are the real reason the dispute over nationalism is so contentious. After all, the passions that nationalism arouses do not come from strong opinions on the pragmatic upsides and downsides of international institutions; notwithstanding their practical importance, it is hard to become too excited about the International Atomic Energy Agency or the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. The debate over nationalism is a heated one because it raises issues of identity— with great stakes for ourselves and our fellow citizens.

Focusing on these questions also helps us understand why the debate over nationalism is not just intensely divisive, but also intrinsically difficult. As we have seen, nationalism inevitably involves the claim that there is a special class of people to whom we owe particular obligations—obligations we do not owe to everyone else. This claim, however, runs headlong into the intuition that every human being, simply by virtue of being human, has dignity and moral weight that we are bound to respect. This belief is widely and deeply held: Even Mazzini insisted his nationalism was consistent with a love for humanity, arguing that nationality and humanity are “equally sacred.” “To forget humanity,” he wrote, “is to suppress the aim of our labors; to cancel the nation is to suppress the instrument by which to achieve the aim.” The chief challenge for Mazzini and other nationalists is to explain precisely how these ideas fit together. In view of our universal moral obligations, what could justify nationalism’s favoring some people above others?

Of course, most of us intuitively recognize that there are at least some people to whom we have particular obligations beyond those owed to unknown strangers— and that our very identities are in some measure constituted by the special relations we have with such people. The obligations that accompany our familial relations are the most widely accepted example: Having children makes parenthood an inescapable part of one’s identity, and few moral notions are as universally and viscerally felt as parents’ special duties to their children.

Acknowledging that we have both universal and particular obligations is essential to thinking clearly about nationalism. Even when these beliefs are not explicitly invoked, each provides crucial support for the competing perspectives on nationalism: Skeptics wonder how nationalism could be consistent with our universal duties, while supporters worry that cosmopolitanism severs the special relations that make us each who we are. These camps fervently oppose each other
because each views the other’s position as denying one of these obligations— as rejecting a self-evident and sacred principle. And the dispute so rarely progresses because it is far from obvious how these intuitions should be reconciled. Any attempt to commend or condemn nationalism that fails to directly confront this tension is liable to make matters more confused.

The crux of the dispute, then, is this: Is there some expansive set of people— narrower than humanity but broader than family—with whom we have a special relationship, to whom we ought to feel particularly obligated? If so, what is the content of those obligations, and which people might be their object? We cannot adequately address today’s policy disputes without first grappling with and ultimately answering these questions.

**The Duty of Affection**

We may begin by first considering the content of our particular obligations. Here it is useful to imagine a spectrum from less to more demanding. At the far end of the spectrum lies the idea that we must sacrifice everything for our nation, including our own interests and other moral obligations. History is not entirely unfamiliar with this unconditional view; it is aptly illustrated by the Soviet propaganda glorifying Pavlik Morozov, a teenage boy said to have been murdered by his family for heroically reporting his father’s disloyalty. For decades Soviet authorities valorized the boy as a martyr and urged others to follow him in refusing to allow anything—even familial love—to stand in the way of fulfilling their obligations to their country. Today, however, most of us rightly recognize the evil of such unqualified devotion; even if the nation is an important thing, it is assuredly not the only thing that matters.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the notion that our obligations to our nation do not demand any action at all, but instead merely require us to adopt a particular attitude. Herder’s affective, apolitical nationalism offers an example of this approach. He articulated what we might call the duty of affection—an obligation to appreciate the good in our nation. He believed his countrymen should see their country as it really is: They should not insist their country is better than others or laud it with false praise, but should instead see—as he did—the beauty genuinely present in its landscape and literature and song. For Herder,
affection for one’s country and countrymen is good not because it is useful or because it makes for more productive or more cooperative citizens, but because it is true.

We thus might say that the duty of affection is ultimately the responsibility of being a good critic—not the fount of unremitting negativity the word sometimes conjures, but a person who, in good faith, goes beyond identifying flaws and helps others see the beauty that really is present in the object of critique. As G. K. Chesterton explained, a good critic is, like God, “easy to please and hard to satisfy.” The first attribute is even more important than the second, for without the eagerness to be delighted, “appreciation perishes, because it loses the power to appreciate.” The duty of affection does not require us to ignore our country’s vices, but it does require us to applaud her virtues.

Unlike most other obligations, the duty of affection does not implicate the cosmopolitan’s concern that such obligations amount to a denial of the equal dignity of mankind. The duty of affection does not require us to prefer some people above others; it simply requires us to appreciate truly existing goods, and it is therefore justified regardless of its object, so long as its object has at least some attributes worth appreciating. It is doubtlessly right to see the good in something, whatever that something is. When Americans see the beauty in the vistas that surround them, when they feel gratitude for the peace and justice they enjoy, they think and feel rightly.

Apart from the cosmopolitan concern about our obligation to humanity as a whole, we also might worry that appreciating our country’s merits could make us complacent about correcting her faults. But this concern, too, is misplaced, for being a good critic means being hard to satisfy as well as easy to please. Far from lulling us into proud satisfaction, appreciating the beauty of one’s country is an indispensable motivation for correcting her remaining imperfections. As Chesterton observed, “[n]o man ever did, and no man ever can, create or desire to make a bad thing good or an ugly thing beautiful. There must be some germ of good to be loved, some fragment of beauty to be admired… things must be loved first and improved afterwards.”

THE DUTY OF LOYALTY

The duty of affection is thus an appropriate, even essential, beginning to our particular obligations. But do such obligations end there, or do they
demand something more? Perhaps, at least in some circumstances, we
have an obligation to prioritize some individuals’ interests over those of
others. This obligation, which we can call the duty of loyalty, demands
more than our affection; it requires action. When the chips are down,
when a choice must be made, the duty of loyalty demands that certain
people’s interests take precedence.

Because the duty of loyalty requires us to treat some people dif-
ferently than others, it potentially conflicts with the cosmopolitan
intuition that all human beings deserve our respect. For this reason,
whether this duty is justifiable will depend on its object — on whom we
are called to prioritize. After all, there are no doubt some relations that
cannot justify differential treatment. Racism is the paradigm case: The
wrong of racism is, at least in part, that it denies our intrinsic equality
by asserting the relevance of something — skin color — that is in truth
morally irrelevant.

One might object by noting that loyalty to one’s race is not always
bad — that it is perfectly good, for example, for an African American man
who has suffered racial discrimination to feel a special obligation to help
others who might suffer similar prejudice. Yet this example illustrates the
importance of precisely specifying the relation at issue: The relationship
underlying this expression of loyalty need not be defined by the accident
of skin color, but could instead be defined and justified by a distinct simi-
larity of experience that produces a distinct capacity for assistance. The
man’s experiences place him in a position to be of particular help to those
suffering from similar prejudice, and such capacities are well-established
justifications for particular loyalties. Or consider another example: Most
of us recognize that a man who stumbles across a child drowning in a
puddle has a special obligation to help simply by virtue of physical prox-
imity, even if he has no particular connection to the child — and even if
doing so will make him late to his own child’s birthday party.

These examples illustrate the importance of precisely identifying the
objects of our loyalty, and they show us that some loyalties do have
moral foundations. The Good Samaritan’s loyalty to the child in need
is justified by his special capacity to help. The loyalties lawyers have to
their clients and doctors to their patients are justified by the implicit
and explicit promises they make when entering into the profession. Our
loyalty to our parents is justified by — at the very least — the gratitude
we owe to them for bringing us into the world.
If nationalism properly refers to a duty of loyalty, then, we must decide which group could justifiably be the object of such loyalty. The natural answer, of course, is the nation. But what exactly is the nation?

French scholar Ernest Renan attempted to solve this puzzle in 1882, and his answer remains among the most perceptive. Renan argued that each of the traditional definitions of the nation wither upon scrutiny. The nation is not defined by the actions and holdings of kings, for “a nation can exist in the absence of the dynastic principle… nations that have been formed by dynasties can separate themselves from these without for all that ceasing to exist.” Nor is it defined by blood ties, for “the leading nations of Europe are nations of essentially mixed blood… one does not have the right to go through the world fingering people’s skulls, and taking them by the throat saying: ‘You are of our blood; you belong to us!’” Nor even is the nation defined by language, for there are many polyglot nations, and there are many people that speak the same language yet remain disunited. “Languages are historical formations,” Renan explained, “which tell us very little about the blood of those who speak them and which, in any case, could not shackle human liberty when it is a matter of deciding the family with which one unites oneself for life or for death.”

After rejecting these definitions, Renan ultimately settled on the idea that the nation is a “spiritual principle” that includes both “the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories” as well as the “present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.” He thus anticipated many contemporary observers in defining the nation in terms of a shared history: “To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions of being a people.”

Renan’s answer, however, raises still more questions. What does it mean for any group of people to share past glories in common? After all, what is normally referred to as “shared history” is not literally shared in the sense of a common experience; it involves historical figures who long predate us. On what grounds can we be said to partake in this history today? And with whom do we do so?

The answer is that we share this history as co-citizens. What unites contemporary Americans with the great heroes of American history is
that they were—and we are—all part of a common project called the United States of America. We are all working together—often fractiously, yes—to rule ourselves. We argue with one another, but we all agree to be bound by the laws our representatives enact on our behalf. All Americans, no matter their creed or race, share in the history of George Washington and Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, because these figures were engaged in the same project we are all tasked with today—forming a more perfect union. All American citizens are together engaged in a massive, generation-spanning collective project of self-governance.

Dedication to this shared project not only helps explain what makes our history shared; it also demonstrates why loyalty to our co-citizens is justified. We rightly place special weight on the interests of our fellow citizens when we vote, for instance, because we are necessarily voting with them. Each of our votes has practical significance only because of laws and institutions that are themselves part of this project and that exist due to the sacrifices and decisions of fellow citizens, past and present. Our votes matter because we can be confident that they will be heeded by institutions built over centuries, and that our co-citizens will respect the election’s outcome and abide by the laws subsequently adopted. Voting is thus fundamentally an enterprise in collective decision-making, and the collective that is making the decision is constituted by our co-citizens. As we participate in this decision-making process, we are appropriately loyal to the interests of that collective as a whole.

This loyalty finds further support in the prosaic fact that, even today, we each have a special capacity to assist our fellow citizens. As citizens, we each have the power to directly influence the laws under which we live—a power we simply do not have with respect to non-citizens. And as the Good Samaritan example shows, such special capacities can ground special obligations.

This insight—that our loyalty to our country stems from our unique ability to care for our co-citizens—is far from novel. Adam Smith observed it in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: “The state or sovereignty in which we have been born and educated, and under the protection of which we continue to live, is, in ordinary cases, the greatest society upon whose happiness or misery our good or bad conduct can have much influence. It is accordingly, by nature, most strongly recommended to us.” Smith also shows how this loyalty can be reconciled with our cosmopolitan intuitions. Providence, Smith says, “seems to have judged that
the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding.”

Indeed, this idea has ancient origins. It is eloquently captured in an aphorism recited by Cicero, quoting Euripides: *Spartam nactus es, hanc orna*—Sparta is your portion, adorn her. Regardless of whether we had a choice in the matter, our country has been bestowed to us. Let us do what we can to make her beautiful. We are the only ones who can do so.

**The Limits of Nationalism**

This duty of loyalty thus has strong justifications. Yet it has limitations as well. Take the case of the clearest particular obligation—loyalty to one’s family. Why are parents who lie and cheat to secure their children’s admission to selective schools objects of universal condemnation? After all, parents seemingly take such actions out of loyalty to their children—a loyalty we normally prize. The answer, of course, is that in resorting to such deceit, these parents violate other, more fundamental obligations—of fair dealing and honesty—that they owe to everyone. Our universal obligations constrain even our justified loyalties.

For this reason, it is not enough for a nationalist to explain which duties we owe to which people—and why such loyalties are justified. This is necessary, as we have seen, but it is far from sufficient. Translating any particular obligation—such as loyalty to one’s co-citizens—into practical policy requires taking account of our universal obligations as well. Immigration policy is illustrative: The notion that we ought to prioritize our co-citizens’ interests when making policy does not imply that we ought to entirely ignore the interests of prospective citizens. Those who wish to join us as citizens are human beings with innate dignity that entitles them to our moral consideration. Our policymaking, therefore, ought not ignore our obligations to them, even if the interests of our co-citizens properly take precedence in particular cases. Complicating matters further, some of our fellow citizens may be harmed by permitting increased immigration, while others will benefit from it. Nationalism cannot answer the empirical and moral questions raised by attempting to balance the varied interests among co-citizens.

Navigating the tensions caused by our cross-cutting obligations—our duties to family, neighbors, countrymen, humanity—will
always be difficult. And these difficulties will from time to time produce disappointments. It is essential to remember, however, that our loyalty to our co-citizens, while originally borne from affection for the good in our country, is not fair-weather fondness. It is not contingent on America or her inhabitants being good or pleasant as a general matter. We are building this ship of state together, out of the crooked timber of humanity. And, as Chesterton declared, “[t]he recognized reality of patriotism is for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, in national growth and glory and in national disgrace and decline; it is not to travel in the ship of state as a passenger, but if need be to go down with the ship.”