

Is Patriotism a Virtue?

5. Is patriotism a virtue or merely permissible or is it misguided to think that citizens ought to cultivate patriotic attitudes? In your answer, be clear about what you mean by patriotism, and consider arguments that support and oppose your position.

In this essay I will examine the ideal of patriotism as a moral value. It will be important to first establish distinctions between understandings of what defines patriotism. I will then consider if states have the right to expect patriotism as a duty. In doing so, I will support an argument that patriotism is never an absolute duty. I will then discuss the normative implications of patriotism in terms of issues such as international relations, immoral obedience and racism. In view of this, I will further argue that there are some forms of patriotism which are morally permissible and some versions which are not.

Igor Primoratz argues that a “justified” patriotism requires both a “value-based” preference for one’s country’s “distinctive merits” and an “egocentric” patriotism based on the country being their own.¹ He explains this is because value-based appreciation would mean a similar preference would have to be given to other countries that display the same merits, whilst egocentric patriotism is irrational.² Yet Peter Konigs argues that love for one’s country (Primoratz’s egocentric patriotism) can exist separately from pride in one’s country (value-

¹ Igor Primoratz, “Patriotism: A Deflationary View” *The Philosophical Forum* 33 (2002), p.443-445.

² Ibid., p.445.

based patriotism).³ Konigs looks at love of a country as an *emotion*, which does not need to be rational to be judged as positive or negative. He sees this kind of patriotism as “subjective” as it is about “extreme personal value.”⁴ Primoratz also does not acknowledge ‘levels’ of patriotism in his definition. Stephen Nathanson addresses “super patriotism” which requires complete and unquestioning obedience to the state.⁵ Yet a person can possess a more moderate patriotism that is not unquestioning or limitless. In this essay I will argue that moderate patriotism, including particular affection for one’s country, is morally permissible, whilst super patriotism, which is unquestionably obedient and always chooses one’s country above all else, is not.

It is also worth noting that Primoratz emphasises that a patriot feels for their country a “stronger and deeper concern than the concern one has for all other human beings,” and that this is “expressed in, and tested by, what she is willing to do, and indeed sacrifice, for her country.”⁶ By including within his definition what many see as negative behaviours, Primoratz unfairly predisposes a rejection of patriotism. Yet Konigs raises an important objection: “to be a patriot means, first and foremost, to love one’s country, and we should not, by way of definition, equate patriotism with a certain pattern of behaviour.”⁷ It is also important to remember that the rhetoric of patriotism, often utilised in political manipulation, is distinct

³ Peter Konigs, “Patriotism: A Case Study in the Philosophy of Emotions” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 85 (2012), p.300.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.301.

⁵ Stephen Nathanson, *Should We Consent to be Governed?* (Belmont: Wadsworth Thomson Learning, 2001), p.10.

⁶ Primoratz, “Patriotism: A Deflationary View,” p.444.

⁷ Konigs, “Patriotism: A Case Study in the Philosophy of Emotions,” p.305.

from the actual value of patriotism. The way values are used in political discourse do not necessarily reflect their 'real' meanings.

What we must first consider is whether individuals owe their country patriotism as a moral *duty*. A prominent argument for this is that patriotism is required as an expression of gratitude to a state one has depended upon. Plato's *Crito* expresses the super patriotic idea that Socrates must submit to an unjust death penalty out of obedience to the state. It argues that: "since you were brought into the world and nurtured and educated by us [the state and its laws], can you deny in the first place that you are our child and slave, as your fathers were before you?"⁸ Nathanson argues that this reasoning cannot justify unconditional obedience, as our obligations to the state, alike that to our parents, are "*conditional* on how they treat us," both in the past and *in the present*.⁹ The state unjustly ordering Socrates' death is mistreatment that overrides any obligation to obey; the right to protect his own life is of greater importance.¹⁰ Primoratz goes one step further than this to say that gratitude towards the state is inappropriate as gratitude is only owed to those who deliberately bestow benefits solely for one's own good, without any kind of 'payment' such as taxes or obedience.¹¹ It is very difficult to justify that we owe the state significant patriotism for benefits bestowed upon us indirectly, without our request, especially in childhood before we could rationally consider the implications.

⁸ Plato, "Crito," in *Classics of Philosophy*, ed. Louis P. Pojman, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.52.

⁹ Nathanson, *Should We Consent to be Governed?* p.15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹¹ Primoratz, "Patriotism: A Deflationary View," p.448.

The social contract argument is also employed to support patriotism as a duty. Plato argues that: “he who has experience of the manner in which we order justice and administer the State, and still remains, has entered into an implied contract that he will do as we command him.”¹² Nathanson opposes this statement on a number of levels. Firstly, staying in a country does not necessarily mean that someone approves of the laws and decisions of a nation.¹³ Even in the most oppressive and corrupt state, an individual may choose to stay, despite strong opposition to the law, as they do not wish to leave their family, friends, culture and environment. Nathanson also points out that agreeing to obey the laws is not unconditional; one expects that their obedience will mean their rights are respected.¹⁴ Alike the gratitude argument, if the conditions change, so does one’s obligations. Finally, as this ‘social contract’ is at most an implicit agreement, it is “inherently vague and thus cannot provide grounds for an unlimited duty to obey the law.”¹⁵

Significantly, although considering these arguments demonstrates that states do not have an absolute right to super patriotism, it does not rule out patriotism being a moral good. In order to assess whether patriotism is a moral virtue, I will now consider normative implications.

Many philosophers are rightfully concerned that nationality can be an arbitrary difference that gets in the way of global justice. Patriotism is often heavily associated with war, particularly as governments frequently employ patriotism to encourage involvement. Yet

¹² Plato, “Crito,” p.52.

¹³ Nathanson, *Should We Consent to be Governed?* p.21.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.22.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.23.

despite such rhetoric, there is nothing inherently militant about patriotism. Surely one can love their country *because* it is peaceful and just in its international relations? Stephen Macedo makes an interesting point that some patriotic “attitudes might even help motivate concern for justice and human rights insofar as one cares about the reputation of one’s political community on the global stage and in the annals of history.”¹⁶

The important question here is if patriotism means that a member of a country must obey and support its state, regardless of whether they are right or wrong. Although I was concerned with Primoratz including in his base definition of patriotism the placing of members of one’s community over all other people, this can be seen in super patriotism.¹⁷ Nathanson argues that “what is central to super patriotism is the belief in an unconditional and unlimited obligation to do what the state says.”¹⁸ Plato reflects this view that if the state, “leads us to wounds or death in battle, thither we follow as is right.”¹⁹ If, through arguing against ideas of gratitude and social contract, we dismiss patriotism as an absolute duty, then its ideal cannot override the supreme value of not killing unjustly. As such, super patriotism, which would require this, is morally indefensible. Yet Macedo argues that: “among the rights that are crucial for checking the pathologies of patriotism is the freedom to criticise government, including official narratives of political events, past and present.”²⁰ Criticism of government is generally seen as the opposite of patriotism; but if we use patriotism as ‘love of country,’

¹⁶ Stephen Macedo, “Just Patriotism” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37 (2011), p.422.

¹⁷ Primoratz, “Patriotism: A Deflationary View,” p.444.

¹⁸ Nathanson, *Should We Consent to be Governed?* p.24.

¹⁹ Plato, “Crito,” p.52.

²⁰ Macedo, “Just Patriotism,” p.419.

rather than blind obedience, the two can become compatible. One can have a deep concern for one's country, but not support its current actions, without any contradiction of values.

Patriotism is also commonly associated with racism; as loving one's country is seen to mean considering oneself as superior to all other nations. This is a relevant criticism of super patriotism as blind obedience, even when other's rights are violated, creates a clear message that other's rights are less important than their country's will. However, as Primoratz explains, if patriotism is universalised it can avoid this charge. He argues that one must grant other nations "the same moral legitimacy she claims for hers."²¹ Macedo uses a helpful analogy to explain: "because I value my special relationship with my partner I can regard it as valuable for everyone to experience a similar special relationship."²² A moderate patriot can recognise that others will love their nation, as much as they do.

Thus I believe that moderate patriotism escapes the charges that make super patriotism morally impermissible. Yet I still do not see it as a moral virtue. This is because, as König's definition of 'love of country' explained, moderate patriotism is largely an emotion with no clear set of behaviours firmly attached.²³ As Maurizio Viroli explains "love of country can be generous, compassionate and intelligent, but it can also be exclusive, deaf and blind."²⁴ Patriotism can inspire people to morally ideal behaviour, such as voluntary community service or self-sacrifice in a just war. Yet there is nothing in the ideal of moderate patriotism itself

²¹ Primoratz, "Patriotism: A Deflationary View," p.456.

²² Macedo, "Just Patriotism," p.415.

²³ König, "Patriotism: A Case Study in the Philosophy of Emotions," p.301.

²⁴ Maurizio Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p.6.

that clearly identifies only positive behaviour as the correct expression of patriotism. Patriotism is probably best equated with the connections we form with partners and friends. Macedo explains that: “just as it is permissible to form deep attachments to imperfect others, so, too, it is not always wrong to feel a special attachment to and responsibility for one’s own country.”²⁵ Primoratz argues that community, alike family, can be important for one’s identity; but there is nothing ‘missing’ from one’s identity if they are not patriotic.²⁶

We can see that moderate patriotism is permissible, but cultivating it is still dangerous. Viroli explains how love of country based on shared conceptions or ethnicity can promote intolerance of diversity.²⁷ Primoratz argues that preference for one’s country can become tied up in “other kinds of partialism, such as tribalism, racism or sexism.”²⁸ If a nation wishes to encourage patriotism it needs to be careful about the way it approaches the task. To avoid these negative implications of patriotism, Viroli calls for a “patriotism of liberty” where members of a state love their country because of “its particular way of living in freedom.”²⁹

As such, patriotism is not a duty. Super patriotism, which requires complete blind obedience, is in fact morally wrong, as it can demand the transgression of important moral duties. More moderate patriotism is acceptable, but cultivating it is not necessarily morally advisable, as moderate patriotism can easily be manipulated into a less innocent form.

²⁵ Macedo, “Just Patriotism,” p.413.

²⁶ Primoratz, “Patriotism: A Deflationary View,” p.454.

²⁷ Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism*, p.12.

²⁸ Primoratz, “Patriotism: A Deflationary View,” p.456.

²⁹ Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism*, p.13-17.

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