Patriotism  
Opposition Brief by Joel Erickson



Every child is instructed to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, indoctrinated to respect the American flag, and inculcated to revere veterans as heroic champions of liberty. Patriotism—our deep-seated affinity toward our country—undergirds our national consciousness and unites the disparate microcosms within our nation. Day after day, hour after hour, moment after moment, the culture reinforces the supreme perspective that patriotism is a virtue. Our duty, as it were, as American citizens, inheres in honoring our country, right or wrong.

Ought we, however, to affirm this largely undisputed assumption? This brief proffers evidence undermining the philosophical foundations of patriotism, exposing its subjectivity and exhibiting its erosion of rationality. Because patriotism has entrenched itself in the American value paradigm as incontrovertibly positive, challenging that fixed assumption through might not ingratiate you with your judges. Always accentuate the credibility of your sources and engage in persuasive techniques such as lamp shading to mitigate the potential prejudice of your audience.

Opposition Brief: Patriotism

# Philosophers on patriotism

Patriotism often rejects morality

Primoratz, Igor [Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His main research areas are moral, political and legal philosophy. His most recent book is Terrorism: A Philosophical Investigation (Polity, 2013). He is the editor of Terrorism: The Philosophical Issues (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Civilian Immunity in War (Oxford U.P., 2007) and Terror from the Sky: The Bombing of German Cities in World War II (Berghahn, 2010)] "Patriotism,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/patriotism/>

“Machiavelli is famous (or infamous) for teaching princes that, human nature being what it is, if they propose to do their job well, they must be willing to break their promises, to deceive, dissemble, and use violence, sometimes in cruel ways and on a large scale, when political circumstances require such actions. This may or may not be relevant to the question of patriotism, depending on just what we take the point of princely rule to be. A less well known part of Machiavelli’s teaching, however, is relevant; for he sought to impart the same lesson to politicians and common citizens of a republic. 'When the safety of one’s country wholly depends on the decision to be taken, no attention should be paid either to justice or injustice, to kindness or cruelty, or to its being praiseworthy or ignominious' (Machiavelli 1518 [1998], 515). The paramount interests of one’s country override any moral consideration with which they might come into conflict.

“This type of patriotism is extreme, but by no means extremely rare. It is adopted much too often by politicians and common citizens alike when their country’s major interests are thought to be at stake. It is encapsulated in the saying ‘our country, right or wrong,’ at least on the simplest and most obvious construal of this saying. Not much needs to be said about the moral standing of this type of patriotism, as it amounts to rejection of morality. 'Our country, right or wrong' cannot be right.”

Patriotism can lead to rejection of individual justice and solidarity

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“MacIntyre concedes that ‘on occasion patriotism might require me to support and work for the success of some enterprise of my nation as crucial to its overall project … when the success of that enterprise would not be in the best interests of mankind’ (14). If so, this type of patriotism would seem to involve the rejection of such basic moral notions as universal justice and common human solidarity. “Tolstoy and other critics have argued that patriotism is incompatible with these notions – that it is egoism writ large, an exclusive and ultimately aggressive concern for one’s country, and a major cause of international tensions and war. This is not a fair objection to patriotism as such. Patriotism is defined as a special concern for one’s country’s well-being, and that is not the same as an exclusive and aggressive concern for it. But the objection is pertinent, and has considerable force, when brought up against the type of patriotism advocated by MacIntyre. MacIntyre’s patriot may promote his country’s interests in a critical, and therefore non-exclusive way, over a range of issues. But when it comes to those “large interests” of his country that are beyond criticism and must be supported in an irrational way, his concern will inevitably become exclusive, and most likely aggressive too. If justice is understood in universal, rather than parochial terms, if common human solidarity counts as a weighty moral consideration, and if peace is of paramount importance and war is morally permissible only when it is just, then this kind of patriotism must be rejected.”

Tolstoy thought patriotism stupid and immoral

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“Patriotism has had a fair number of critics. The harshest among them have judged it deeply flawed in every important respect. In the 19th century, Russian novelist and thinker Leo Tolstoy found patriotism both stupid and immoral. It is stupid because every patriot holds his own country to be the best of all whereas, obviously, only one country can qualify. It is immoral because it enjoins us to promote our country’s interests at the expense of all other countries and by any means, including war, and is thus at odds with the most basic rule of morality, which tells us not to do to others what we would not want them to do to us (Tolstoy 1987, 97).

Patriotism kills for an imaginary abstraction

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Recently, Tolstoy’s critique has been seconded by American political theorist George Kateb, who argues that patriotism is ‘a mistake twice over: it is typically a grave moral error and its source is typically a state of mental confusion’ (Kateb 2000, 901). Patriotism is most importantly expressed in a readiness to die and to kill for one’s country. But a country ‘is not a discernible collection of discernible individuals”; it is rather “an abstraction … a compound of a few actual and many imaginary ingredients.’ Specifically, in addition to being a delimited territory, ‘it is also constructed out of transmitted memories true and false; a history usually mostly falsely sanitized or falsely heroized; a sense of kinship of a largely invented purity; and social ties that are largely invisible or impersonal, indeed abstract …’ Therefore patriotism is ‘a readiness to die and to kill for an abstraction … for what is largely a figment of the imagination.’”

Patriotism a vice, not a virtue

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“When asked ‘why do you love your country?’ or ‘why are you loyal to it,’ a patriot is likely to take the question to mean ‘what is so good about your country that you should love it, or be loyal to it?’ and then adduce what she believes to be its virtues and achievements. This suggests that patriotism can be judged from the standpoint of ethics of belief – a set of norms for evaluating our beliefs and other doxastic states. Simon Keller has examined patriotism from this point of view, and found it wanting. Keller argues that whereas one’s love of and loyalty to a family member or a friend may coexist with a low estimate of the person’s qualities, patriotism involves endorsement of one’s country. If the patriot is to endorse her country, she must consider her beliefs about the country’s virtues and achievements to be based on some objectively valid standards of value and an unbiased examination of the country’s past and present record that leads to the conclusion that it lives up to those standards. However, the patriot’s loyalty is not focused on her country simply because it instantiates a set of virtues a country can have. If that were the case, and if a neighboring country turned out to have such virtues to an even higher degree, the patriot’s loyalty would be redirected accordingly. She is loyal to her country because that country, and only that country, is her country; hers is a loyalty ‘in the first instance.’ Thus the patriot is motivated to think of the patria as blessed by all manner of virtues and achievements whether the evidence, interpreted objectively, warrants that or not. Accordingly, she forms beliefs about her country in ways different from the ways in which she forms beliefs about other countries. Moreover, she cannot admit this motivation while at the same time remaining a patriot. This leads her to hide from herself the true source of some of the beliefs involved. This is bad faith. Bad faith is bad; so is patriotism, as well as every identity, individual or collective, constituted, in part, by patriotic loyalty. This, in Keller’s view, amounts to ‘a clear presumptive case against patriotism’s being a virtue and for its being a vice’ (Keller 2005, 587–88). This portrayal does seem accurate as far as much patriotism as we know it is concerned.”

Even at its best, patriotism is a dangerous virtue

Macedo, Stephen [Laurance S. Rockefeller Professor of Politics and the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University, member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Vice President of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy], “Just Patriotism?” Philosophy and Social Criticism, Vol. 37, no. 4 (2011). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/patriotism/>

“Patriotism’s critics are correct to warn of its abuses. The interests and passions that lead us to love our own people – right or wrong – and favor them over others can all too easily be aroused by opportunistic leaders who play on the mental laziness of voters in mass democracies. The practice of patriotic politics must attend to its pathologies; even at its best it is a dangerous virtue.”

Patriotism indistinguishable from pernicious nationalism

Robert Jensen [professor of journalism at the University of Texas-Austin], "The Problem with Patriotism," in Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War, edited by Yahya R. Kamalipour, Lee Artz. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=cdOxAAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA67&dq=critique+of+patriotism&ots=V4OSDoexh9&sig=Vni6jkpeaGwQhEqAkM8uEK50zMQ#v=onepage&q&f=false>

“An editor at one of the top U.S. journalism reviews also implicitly endorsed patriotism in arguing that journalists serve their country best when asking ‘tough, even unpopular questions when our government wages war.’ He distinguished ‘patriotism, love of one's country,’' from ‘nationalism—the exalting of one's nation and its culture and interests above all others. If patriotism is a kind of affection, nationalism is its dark side.’ There is only tine problem with all these formulations: patriotism cannot be distinguished from nationalism: patriotism in general is morally indefensible; and patriotism in today's empire, the United States, is particularly dangerous to the continued health of the planet. I argue that everyone—citizens and journalists alike—should abandon patriotism and strive to become more fully developed human beings with allegiances not to a nation but to humanity.”

# No rationale for experiencing patriotic sentiment

Summary

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“At first glance, in a country where patriotism is almost universally taken to be an unquestioned virtue, this may seem outrageous. But there is a simple path to what I consider to be this logical, moral conclusion. If we use the common definition of patriotism—love of, and loyalty to, one's country—the first question that rises is, What is meant by country? Nation-states, after all, are not naturally occurring objects. In discussions with various community groups and classes since 9/11, I have asked people to explain which aspects of a nation-state—specifically in the contest of patriotism in the United States—they believe should spark patriotic feelings. Toward whom or what should one feel love and loyalty? The answers offered include the land itself, the people of a nation, its culture, the leadership, national policies. the nations institutions, and the democratic ideals of the nation. To varying degrees, all seem like plausible answers, yet all fail to provide an acceptable answer to that basic question.”

Land not an adequate justification

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“Land: Many people associate patriotism with a love of the land on which they were born, were raised, or currently live. Certainly people’s sense of place and connection to a landscape is easy to understand; most of us have felt that. I was born and raised on the prairie, and I feel most comfortable, most at home, on the prairie. But what has that to do with love or loyalty to a nation-state? Does affection for a certain landscape map onto political boundaries? If I love the desert, should I have a greater affection for the desert on the U.S. side of the border, and a lesser affection when I cross into Mexico? Should I love the prairie in my home state of North Dakota, hot abandon that affection when I hit the Canadian border? In discussing connections to the land we can sensibly talk about watersheds and local ecosystems, but not national boundaries. And ties to a specific piece of land (i.e., the farm one grew up on) have nothing to do with a nation-state.”

People not an adequate justification

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“People: It's also common to talk about patriotism in terms of love and affection for one's countrymen and women. This can proceed on two levels: either as an assertion of differential value of people's lives or as an expression of affection for people. The former—claiming that the lives of people within one’s nation-state are more valuable than lives of people outside it—is immoral by the standards of virtually all major moral philosophies and religions, which typically are based on the belief that all human life is equally valuable. It may be true that especially in times of war, people act as if they value the lives of fellow citizens more, but for most people that cannot be a principle on which patriotism can rest. Certainly everyone has special affection for specific people its their lives, and it's likely that—by virtue of proximity—for must of us the majority of people for whom we have that affection are citizens of the same nation. But does that mean our sense of connection to them stems from living in the same nation-state? Given the individual variation in humans, why assume that someone living in our nation-state should automatically spark a feeling of connection greater than someone elsewhere? I was born in the United States near the Canadian border, and I have more in common with Canadians from prairie provinces than I do with, for example, the people of Texas, where I now live. Am I supposed to, by virtue of my U.S. citizenship, naturally feel something stronger for Texans than Manitobans? If so, why?”

Culture not an adequate justification

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“Culture: The same arguments about land and people apply to cultures. Culture—that complex mix of customs, art, stories, faith, and traditions—does not map exactly onto the often-artificial boundaries of nation-states. More importantly, if one rejects the dominant culture of the nation-state in which one lives, why should one have affection for it or loyalty to it?”

Leaders not adequate justification

Robert Jensen [professor of journalism at the University of Texas-Austin], "The Problem with Patriotism," in Bring 'Em On: Media and Politics in the Iraq War, edited by Yahya R. Kamalipour, Lee Artz. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=cdOxAAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA67&dq=critique+of+patriotism&ots=V4OSDoexh9&sig=Vni6jkpeaGwQhEqAkM8uEK50zMQ#v=onepage&q&f=false>

“Leaders: In a democracy, it is clear that patriotism can't he defined as loyalty to existing political leaders. Such patriotism would he the antithesis of democracy: to be a citizen is to retain the right to make judgments about leaders, not simply accept their authority. Even if one accepts the right of leaders to make decisions within a legal structure and agrees to follow the resulting laws, that does not mean that one is loyal to that leadership.”

Policies not adequate justification

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“Policies: The same argument about leaders applies to specific policies adopted by leaders. In a democracy, one may agree to follow legally binding roles, but that does not mean one support them. Of course, no one claims that it is unpatriotic to object to existing policy about taxes or transportation planning. War tends to be the only policy over which people make demands that everyone support—or at least mute dissent about—a national policy. But why should war he different? When so much human life is at stake, is it not even more important for all opinions to be fully aired?”

Governmental structures not adequate justification

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“Governmental structures: If patriotism is not loyalty to particular leader or policies, many contend, at least it can mean loyally to our governmental structures. But that is no less an abandonment of democracy, for inherent in a real democracy is the idea that no single set of institutions can he assumed to be, for all times and places, the ultimate expression of democracy. In a nation founded on the principle that the people are sovereign and retain the right to reject institutions that do not serve their interests. Patriotism defined as loyalty to the existing structures is hard to defend.”

Democratic ideals not adequate justification

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“Democratic ideals: When challenged on these other questionable definitions of patriotism. most people eventually land on the seemingly safe assertion that patriotism in the United States is an expression or commitment to a set of basic democratic ideals, which typically include liberty, justice, and equality. But problems arise here as well. First, what makes these values distinctly American? Are not various people around the world committed to these values and working to make them real in a variety or ways? Given that these values were not invented in the United States and arc not distinct to the United States today, how can one claim them as the basis for patriotism? If these values predate the formation or the United States and are present around the world, are they not human ideals rather than American?”