
Review

The ethics of patriotism

By John Kleinig, Simon Keller and Igor Primoratz,
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There are two problems for the view that it is permissible (and even perhaps obligatory) to show a partial preference for those with whom we have a special relationship. The first arises from a commitment to impartial morality – or what is variously described here as liberal enlightenment morality, cosmopolitanism, humanism and universalism – that requires us to regard everyone – wherever and whenever they are to be found – as of equal value. The second problem arises from the claim that, even if partiality is allowed, certain forms of it are not. Thus, while it may be alright to see our friends, our loved ones and our family as owed a special regard, this cannot be so with other forms of partiality. Indeed patriotism is often regarded as a paradigm example of an impermissible partiality; it is seen by many as being, in the titular words of a much cited article by Paul Gomberg, ‘like racism’.

The contributors to this book are far less interested in the first problem than they are in the second. They do not share Gomberg’s extreme prejudicial characterisation of patriotism. To that extent this book is extremely welcome. When moral and political philosophers shared Gomberg’s view the topic of patriotism was passed over as unworthy of serious comment. The book reflects and is informed by the wealth of material written on the topic in recent years. All three writers have previously addressed the topic, do not dismiss patriotism as unworthy of serious moral comment, and have interestingly different things to say about it. They are also careful to distinguish patriotism from nationalism whose defence is much more difficult. Whereas the former is love of or loyalty to one’s *patria*, the latter is the political demand that one’s nation be a state. That demand is subject to well-known and probably intractable problems.

In rough summary their differing views are as follows. John Kleinig thinks that patriotism understood as loyalty to one’s country is owed that which – and here the debt to Aristotle is explicitly acknowledged – contributes to human flourishing by sustaining our individual identities as members of a collective enterprise. Simon Keller thinks that patriotism is a ‘kind of delusion’ inasmuch as it requires of the patriot that she be disposed to believe what is not the case. Igor Primoratz



distinguishes between ‘worldly’ patriotism that can be morally acceptable if constrained by general moral principles and ‘ethical’ patriotism that, as a ‘heightened sense of collective responsibility’, can under some circumstances be properly demanded of the individual.

Each writer is given the opportunity to outline their view, to respond to those of their fellow authors and to offer ‘final words’ both in defence of their own position and in criticism of the others. The writing throughout is commendably clear, accessible, and yet philosophically robust and challenging. It is easy to see why publishers are attracted to this debate format. It allows the reader to enjoy the dialectic of philosophical argumentation and to gain a fuller sense of the views that are being debated. On the whole it works well here. The pieces offer perspicuous and concise summaries of the distinct positions, and each author engages intelligently with the others. Having said that, there could have been less clarification (P says that I assert x, whereas I affirm y) and more adducing of reasons to prefer one view over the other. The time afforded to clarification could have been surely avoided by a pre-circulation of initial positions and their redrafting. This is especially true given that the book arose from discussions when all three were at the same Australian centre.

Nevertheless what is on offer will greatly assist the reader to make sense of what there is to be said for and against patriotism. Interestingly, Keller, who is the one unconditional critic of patriotisms foreswears – as Primoratz astutely notes – the opportunity to criticise patriotism for its violation of universal norms or for always inducing bad behaviour. He attacks it on epistemic grounds. It is bad faith. More particularly it is ‘ugly and dangerous’, meaning presumably that it is unattractive by virtue of its tendency to produce false beliefs and morally hazardous for what such errors lead to. In fact Keller seems to concede most. In his final comments he allows that patriotism *disposes* to bad faith, and that such bad faith *may* dispose the patriot to bad behaviour. Moreover, patriotism may be a ‘necessary vice’ insofar as it is the ‘fellow-feeling’ (to use Mill’s phrase) that is needed to undergird good citizenship. Yet we need to know the nature of the beast we must ride on.

On the other hand, there is much to Keller’s own thought that attempts to disarm the moral risks of patriotism by yoking it to its apparent enemy, liberalism, succeed only by getting it wrong both about patriotism and liberalism: Liberal patriots are ‘either patriots trying to make their patriotism look less threatening than it really is or liberals trying to make their liberalism look less radical than it really is’ (p. 129).

There is merit in this charge inasmuch as defenders of patriotism, even carefully qualified ones, either define an acceptable patriotism in anodyne terms that make it hard to object to or define it in terms of precisely those values that easily command approval. Behind this problematic characterisation of patriotism is a tendency to define the *patria* in very thin terms and in a form that makes it susceptible to a certain kind of philosophical evaluation. Thus a *patria* is understood as a set of properties that can either be evaluated as morally good or bad, or appraised as being true or false.



It is illuminating thus to contrast the authors' definitions of the *patria* with the description George Orwell offered of 'England' in an essay both Kleinig and Primoratz cite. Kleinig defines a *patria* as a shared language, territory, history and basic institutions (p. 27); Keller defines patriotism as a commitment to 'something special, stable, and valuable at the heart' of your country's identity (p. 57); Primoratz acknowledges that there is more to be said about the history and the use of the term *patria* but adds that saying more would 'require too long a detour' (p. 75).

Now consider Orwell's essay 'England Your England' written in 1941 as it was under serious threat. Its opening words are, 'As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me'. For Orwell English civilisation is 'solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes'. Its institutional landscape is not Parliament and the courts but 'the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside'. Orwell celebrates English 'gentleness' but it is one 'mixed up with barbarities and anachronisms'. The English respect 'the law' as something above the state and the individual, but the criminal law 'is as out-of-date as the muskets in the Tower'. The English lack artistic ability. They are beset by class divisions and significant inequality. Yet Orwell is clear that the English who come home to England 'have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air'. It is different but not fixed in its identity. England will 'change out of recognition and yet remain the same'.

Orwell was an English patriot and was desperate to see the England he both loved and despaired of survive its darkest hour. What is remarkable about his essay is not just the critical passion he displays for his *patria*, one that is some way from the endorsement or commitment of which the three authors speak. It is also the richness of the terms by which he seeks to invoke that *patria* for his readers. This is not to deny that *The Ethics of Patriotism* provides an excellent primer on and introduction to its topic. It is simply to urge better recognition of the other ways in which patriotism and the *patria* might be understood by philosophers – for instance, aesthetically and affectively. What is it to love a country? And what kind of thing is loved? The 'ethics' of patriotism could in this manner usefully be supplemented and complemented by the 'aesthetics' and 'emotions' of patriotism.

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