

Young Patriots or Junior Historians? An Epistemological Defense of Critical Patriotic Education

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THE PROBLEM OF PATRIOTISM

In his recent book, *Achieving Our Country*, Richard Rorty laments the demise of a critically engaged American nationalism. “A contemporary American student,” Rorty writes,

may well emerge from college less convinced that her country has a future than when she entered. She may also be less inclined to think that political initiatives can create such a future. The spirit of detached spectatorship, and the inability to think of American citizenship as an opportunity for action, may already have entered such a student’s soul.¹

Rorty’s agenda is not only to diagnose the contemporary civic malady of “detached spectatorship” — a malady that, according to his diagnosis, has its roots in the condition of our educational systems — but indeed to provide a remedy.

The example of Rorty is notable here because it emerges from a position on the political left, but the claim that American patriotism is embattled is a familiar one. Likewise, we are familiar with the claim that American education is somehow to blame for this situation or at the very least has not done enough to ameliorate it. On the other hand, we are equally familiar with contrary claims: that American patriotism — or jingoism, or unilateralism, or some other related political phenomenon — is *too* prominent in the cultural landscape, and that education ought to *moderate* if not indeed *undermine* patriotic sentiments, in favor of cosmopolitanism or at least a more rational and principled liberalism. What are we to make of this debate? More specifically, in the field of history — where much of the debate is waged — is it reasonable to uphold patriotism as an educational goal?

This essay will participate in this debate via an analysis of the position taken by Eamonn Callan. Callan defends teaching history in support of patriotism, but argues for a particular *kind* of history education in support of a particular *kind* of patriotism. In what follows, I will argue that his position — or something quite close to his position, with some refinements and qualifications — may be defended not on political or moral grounds, as he tends to do, but rather on epistemological grounds. In other words, I will argue that a satisfactory understanding of the epistemology of history can accommodate patriotic education without sacrificing critical inquiry as an educational ideal.²

ANALYZING SENTIMENTAL HISTORY

In the fifth chapter of *Creating Citizens*,³ Callan takes up the discussion of patriotism by way of a critique of William Galston. Galston had argued, in a widely cited 1989 article,⁴ for both the legitimacy and the necessity of education towards civic commitments. Specifically, he had claimed that civic education cannot tolerate historical accounts of its institutions and central figures that are based on rigorous, critical research. Instead, civic education “requires a more noble, moralizing

history: a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy objects of emulation.”⁵ Galston thus articulated, with admirable philosophical consistency, the apparent consequences of an intuition that is commonly held; namely, that we may and must inculcate certain habits or commitments in children regardless of whether those habits and commitments withstand the light of mature reason.

Like Galston, Callan is a proponent of patriotic education — but he rejects Galston’s approach as overly “sentimental.” He means, quite specifically, that the emotions fostered by a Galston-type civic education are ones that we have *no right to feel*.⁶

There are some emotions [that] we earn the right to feel with the consequence that they are truly our own — emotions we have paid for, so to speak, in thought and experience — and others that have in some way been illicitly appropriated or aroused so that they do not belong to us in [any] but the shallowest sense (CC, 103).

Thus, emotions have different levels of justification. They are not simply passions, irrational and unevaluable on moral or epistemic grounds; rather, our “thought and experience” have something to do with their inherent legitimacy or illegitimacy.

What does it mean to pay for an emotion in thought or experience? To flesh out Callan’s suggestion, consider Alasdair MacIntyre’s by-now-familiar insight that “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’”⁷ If MacIntyre is right, this kind of situating of one’s narrative within a larger narrative is what it means to possess a particular moral identity, to feel specific emotions of loyalty or commitment to a group. For example, I feel an obligation to my family when I see my own story as bound up with the story of my family.

Under what circumstances, then, is the feeling of obligation legitimate? In most cases, that feeling is indeed paid for in thought and experience: the daily experience of growing up in that family. So loyalty to family is “paid for”; it is not mere sentimentalism. Similarly, I feel some kind of obligation to my nation or people when I see my own story as bound up with the story of that nation or people. That feeling of patriotism is paid for through my sense of the history of the nation, the way I tell the story of the nation to myself, and my experience as a member of that nation. If one has thoughts and experiences of this sort, then the feeling of loyalty is earned.

But is that subjective experience enough? If so, then apparently *any* loyalty — no matter how insular or xenophobic — might be justified on the basis of personal thoughts and feelings, without any possibility of critical evaluation. To block this erosion of the insight about the justification of emotions, the important point to emphasize here — the epistemological point — is that if one tells a story, there is always the possibility of getting the story *wrong*. That is how we can generate the traction necessary to justify the evaluative judgments that we make about emotions. Whether or not the story is accurate in every detail is not significant, of course, but the claim here is that it is possible to misconstrue the basic trajectory of the narrative.⁸ Thus, for example, if I intentionally whitewash the history of my nation

— if I ignore the moral lapses and fixate exclusively on the justice and rightness of its actions and its representatives — then I have concocted a false narrative. Telling a false story is like paying for an emotion with a forged check or with counterfeit money. In other words, it is not paying for the emotion at all; it is sentimentalism.

THE CRITIQUE OF SENTIMENTALISM: MORAL OR EPISTEMOLOGICAL?

Callan believes that the most pervasive form of “misrepresentation of reality,” as he calls it — the most common kind of false story that sentimental patriots tell — is the “fiction of moral purity” (CC, 105). This dovetails with Galston’s reference to a “pantheon of heroes”; one easily imagines a false story in which, for example, the founders did no wrong, indeed *could* do no wrong. Sentimentalism, Callan claims, is sustained by such fictions.

But as it stands, this is incomplete, because the fiction of moral purity is a species of a larger genus. Consider the emotional inverse of patriotism, a deeply embedded aversion to commitment to one’s country — perhaps even a commitment to the destruction of one’s country, or at least to the passive neglect of one’s country due to its inherent moral hopelessness. Surely this emotion, too, can be unearned. However, the sustaining fiction in this case is not one of moral purity, but rather of moral *pollution* — the belief that the founders could do no *right*, that a nation was conceived in *sin*.

Thus, it may be true, empirically, that patriots tend to succumb to fictions of moral purity. Perhaps Galston is a case in point. But rather than focusing on the *purity* aspect of the notion of this phenomenon, as Callan does, we ought to focus on the *fiction* aspect. The problem with the evaluative judgment of moral purity is not that moral purity is inherently unrealistic as a fact about moral lives in general (although of course it is). Rather, the problem is that the evaluative judgment is *false*, false *empirically*, false *in this case*. This evaluative judgment would be false in this case *even if* it were true in other cases. In other words, the argument is not a moral one; it is an epistemological one.

Now, Callan focuses on the fiction of moral purity in order generate three perceptive arguments against Galston’s sentimentalism, three “moral liabilities” (CC, 106). But each of these three arguments, too, is miscast in moral and political terms, and would be better argued on epistemological grounds. For example, Callan claims that sentimentalism “blind[s] us to the possible values that were rejected in the choices not taken” by the moral exemplars in question (CC, 107). His insightful term for this liability is the “constriction of the historical imagination.” But then, rather than being satisfied that such a constriction is *inherently* problematic, he continues by trying to spell out the *instrumental* moral costs of this constriction, namely, that “this will tend to blind us to the contemporary relevance of those same values.” Notice, however, that it is entirely contingent whether there really were or were not values to which we are now blinded. Perhaps there were, and perhaps there were not. And if there were, perhaps those values have contemporary relevance, and perhaps they do not. This argument against fictions of moral purity — an instrumental moral argument based on the contemporary usefulness of a choice not made — is misplaced.

Likewise, Callan calls attention to the way in which telling a story of moral purity about one person or institution tends to lead to an expansion of such uncritical stories. But this is not an inherently moral or political problem. To be sure, if we promote this “coarseness of vision” in our students, then among the things they will not be able to do is to evaluate contemporary political institutions. But more generally, they will not be able to evaluate institutions *at all*, political or otherwise. Similarly, he calls attention to the way in which telling a story of moral purity tends to result in the equation of innovation with treachery. This, too, is not an inherently moral or political problem. To be sure, if we promote this knee-jerk conservatism in our students, then among the things they will not be able to do is to evaluate when a political innovation is appropriate and when it is treacherous to our principles. But more generally, they will not be able to evaluate new ideas *at all*, political or otherwise.

Thus, Callan is certainly not wrong to notice these detrimental features of unrestrained sentimentalism, but his account is too narrow. The problem with promoting historical falsehoods is not only that patriotic loyalty must be justified by the historical judgments that support it, and not only that encouraging falsehood leads to particular negative moral or political consequences. Rather, the problem with Galston-type sentimentalism — the problem with teaching a “noble, moralizing history” — is that it cannot avoid crippling the qualities of critical inquiry that serve as our educational goals. Promoting vice can never be a virtue.

INQUIRY INTO “WHAT IS BEST”

Such lofty rhetoric is all well and good, but as long as we are faced with a dichotomy of critical history versus patriotic history, Galston’s prescription may seem like the least-bad option. Callan’s alternative is to ask a different kind of question about the past, what he calls in one place a melding of powerful emotion and critical acuity [that] depends on a certain way of looking at the past, a way that is both emotionally generous and imaginative (CC, 118). We can ask a historical question that does not avert its eyes from unpleasant facts, even as the question itself nurtures patriotic emotions. If we ask this question, we need not sacrifice critical historical inquiry on behalf of patriotism, or vice versa. The historical question that we should ask is: *what is the best of our political tradition?*

Asking “what is best in this political tradition?” stands in opposition to asking “what is *dominant* in this political tradition?” In Callan’s account, asking “what is dominant” is a something like a disengaged, objective historical question.⁹ But asking “what is best” requires the interpreter of history to take a particular interpretive stance, to be *engaged* with the object of historical inquiry rather than disengaged. It is both an expression of patriotism, and *supportive* of patriotic commitments. Callan emphasizes that the historical interpreter must be both *emotionally generous* and *imaginative*. Asking “what is best” requires the ability to read one’s history charitably, to try and discern the best of the actors in that history, with a sensitivity to the historical context in which actions were taken or beliefs were held. In Callan’s view, apparently, these two descriptors characterize inquiry into “what is best” in a unique way. But exercising generosity and imagination does *not* entail whitewashing history. On the contrary, asking “what is best” only makes sense

in the context of an awareness of the full picture. The kind of interpretation that asks “what is best” avoids the Scylla of sentimentalism, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of nihilism, on the other. It allows for the possibility of relative moral impurity and does not collapse into mythologizing, while nevertheless fostering political allegiance.

Now, Callan presents the notion of asking “what is best” as a kind of fortuitous solution to the problem of patriotic education. Regardless of what academic historians do, he might say, at least we have a defensible solution within the bounded sphere of history in the schools. On closer analysis, however, that solution begins to look less fortuitous and more a product of the epistemology of historical inquiry. Consider, first, that Callan’s suggestion focuses rather narrowly on the political history of one’s own nation. In American political history, we quite easily see that slavery and racism may be what is dominant, but emancipation and the struggle for civil rights may be what is best, in the sense of a moral precedent about which we can be proud and on which we can build a hopeful vision of the nation’s future. However, if we turn away from the history of the United States to, for example, ancient history, the notion of asking “what is the best of the political tradition” does not have the same force, because we are not as invested in the narrative. Our own identities are not wrapped up in the story; simply put, most of us are not patriotic about the Roman Empire. It may therefore appear that, outside of the political history of our own particular nation, the question of “what is best” has no special status.

But does the study of ancient Rome require any less emotional generosity and imagination? Consider an inquiry into Caesar’s actions in his rise to power, and the moral compromises that he made. And then consider an inquiry into Lincoln’s actions in *his* rise to power, and the moral compromises that *he* made. Without equating the two cases, surely the process of inquiring into each requires precisely the same qualities of mind. Furthermore, a parallel argument can be made regarding aspects of *American* history other than the political — social or cultural history, for example. These areas also require the emotional generosity — the balancing of evaluative judgment with sensitivity to historical context — that was supposedly the distinctive hallmark of asking “what is best.”¹⁰ In other words, these qualities of interpretation are characteristic of *all* good historical inquiry. If this is so, then asking “what is best” takes on a different cast. Rather than a fortuitous solution to the problem of patriotic education — a solution that just *happens* to accommodate both patriotism and critical inquiry for the limited purpose of history in the schools — Callan’s suggestion emerges as an under-developed insight into the epistemology of historical inquiry in general.

TWO SENSES OF “WHAT IS DOMINANT”

Turning now to the apparent alternative — namely, inquiry into “what is dominant” — we need to distinguish two quite different senses of this question in a way that Callan does not. In the first sense, to ask the question of “what is dominant” is to conduct a straightforward empirical inquiry into the past. An historian can ask the question of “what is dominant” — even while pursuing the history of her own nation — without making an explicit commitment to the nation,

without obviously being either patriotic or unpatriotic, without demonstrating overt hopefulness or hopelessness.¹¹

Note that this empirical sense of “what is dominant” is not *opposed* to the (normative) question of “what is best” but is rather *complementary* to it. If patriotism means a prior commitment to the inflexible, jingoistic proposition that “my nation is best,” such a commitment might be falsified by empirical evidence. But if patriotism means a prior commitment to inquire into what is best in my nation, that inquiry depends for its truthfulness on a robust sense of historical context, on close attention to historical detail precisely in order that the story not be falsified. This means that “what is best” *depends* on the empirical sense of “what is dominant;” without the latter the former makes no sense. What would it mean to tell the story of emancipation without the story of slavery? How could one adequately describe the struggle for civil rights without also describing the depths of American racism? The only reason that the best *is* best is that it is not the *whole* story. The construction of a coherent normative ideal requires an empirical reality from which it is distinct.

Thus, we might want to say that the patriotic educator who pursues the inquiry into “what is best” is dependent upon the critical historian who pursues the inquiry into “what is dominant.” But earlier I called the relationship between the empirical sense of “what is dominant” and the normative question of “what is best” a complementary one, for the reverse is also true: the empirical question of “what is dominant” depends on the normative commitments of the historian as well. The apparently straightforward empirical inquiry into “what is dominant” must always be accompanied by a host of value commitments, values that (for example) guide the selection of materials according to historically contingent conceptions of historical significance. It thus emerges that the difference between the historian who asks “what is dominant” in the empirical sense and the historian who explicitly asks “what is best” is merely one of degree. The critical historian can have no *methodological* objection to the patriot who aspires to compose a history — a truthful history — of the best that the nation has produced.¹²

So much for the first sense of the question of “what is dominant,” the empirical sense of the question in which it is complementary to “what is best.” In the second sense the story of “what is dominant” represents a normative commitment; it is not *complementary* to the story of “what is best” but rather stands in straightforward *contradiction* to it. This story emerges when the historian believes that the story of “what is dominant” is the only historically significant story to be told, that the moral turpitude crowds out the very possibility of an emotion of loyalty that is legitimately earned and paid for.¹³ In this situation, the historian is committed to the normative proposition that *there is no best*, that there is simply nothing redemptive to be found in the nation’s history. The alternative to optimism about one’s own nation is not neutrality, but pessimism. The alternative to being hopeful about one’s nation is not withholding judgement, but hopelessness. At the deepest level, one must be committed either to the belief that there is *some* best, something upon which to base one’s hope for the future, or one must be committed to the belief that there is *no* best, nothing upon which to build.

However — and this is the important epistemological point — both the patriotic historian and the anti-patriotic historian arrive at their inquiry in precisely the same epistemic situation. The former believes that there is some best; the latter believes there is none. To be sure, the hopeful historian has no guarantee that she will find what she is looking for, but then again, neither does the cynical historian. In each case, the actual inquiry may surprise: the patriotic historian may find herself in despair, while the cynical historian may find redemptive elements in the nation's history — moments of moral grandeur that motivate a revision of the alienated metanarrative — despite herself. The same is true of teachers and students, who face the same interpretive situation. So the inquirer, whether the academic historian or the teacher or the student, has to be open to the possibility that prior commitments will be proven false. And thus, both the cynical historian and the patriotic historian can fall prey to the same vices: insufficient attention to historical context, inappropriate evaluation of historical sources, and, especially, an overarching closed-mindedness. And therefore, too, both must employ precisely the same interpretive virtues in their historical inquiry, not only Callan's emotional generosity but also and especially receptivity and responsibility to the historical evidence.

And yet, there *is* a difference between civic education and academic history. Even if everything I have said is correct — even if there is no inherent contradiction between patriotic history and critical history — even if the kinds of interpretive virtues that are necessary for the production of a non-sentimental patriotic history are precisely the same interpretive virtues that are necessary for the production of any good historical account — even if, therefore, the choice is not whether we want patriotic history or critical history but rather, simply, whether we want good historical interpretation or poor — even if all this is true, it is still correct that education serves certain purposes that are not simply co-extensive with the purposes of inquiry in general. This, after all, is the kernel of truth in Galston's worries about teaching history: we do want state-sponsored and state-mandated history education not only to promote good historical inquiry but also to promote good citizenship, democratic virtues, patriotic loyalty.

Therefore, while we can accommodate both hopeful and cynical versions of history in the academy — while we can recognize that good critical scholarship can derive from both, and that rarely if ever will scholarship *determine* so basic a commitment — we need not accommodate cynicism in the schoolroom. Within schools that are funded by the state, the liberal democratic state has a right to promote its own preservation, to endorse hopefulness and optimism and activism over the alternatives.¹⁴ Indeed, the state has a *responsibility* to do so in order to further democratic community and democratic institutions. This does not mean that the state has a right to impose a sentimental history in the vain hope of propping up unearned emotions. Much less does it have a responsibility to do so, as in Galston's account. It does not mean that the state has a right to offer false narratives, moralizing histories, or noble lies. On the contrary, the only history that the state may teach is one that is both genuinely critical and emotionally generous, one that is responsible to evidence and open to disconfirmation. But it *does* mean, on the other hand, that the state has the right to ask — and to have its teachers and students ask — “what is best.”

CONCLUSION

Whether or not Rorty is warranted in his concern about the state of American patriotism, it is surely the case that the “spirit of detached spectatorship” that he identifies feeds off of an aversion to patriotic cheer-leading in academic settings. But the conviction that there is something in the history of one’s nation that is worthy of being redeemed — something upon which to build, something that can serve as a model for a hopeful future — need not reject or disable critical inquiry. On the contrary: that normative conviction *enables* inquiry. Thus, the teaching of patriotic history as the search for “what is best” is not a merely fortuitous solution; it is, rather, an expression of the nature of historical inquiry, an inquiry that cannot avoid basic normative convictions.

The literature on patriotic education has been split between those in favor of patriotic education and those opposed to it; between the intuition that schools ought to be engaged in a project of moral education and the contradictory intuition that school history ought to foster critical historical inquiry; between nurturing students as young patriots and developing them as junior historians. Extending Callan’s arguments from the political sphere into the epistemological, I have argued that we need not choose.

1. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 10-11.

2. In referring to the epistemology of history, I mean nothing mysterious but merely our best efforts to understand the nature of historical knowledge. Nor do I mean to imply that historiographical methodology ought to derive from epistemology of history; the notion that a particular understanding of the nature of historical knowledge dictates one and only one kind of historical inquiry is a red herring. As will become clear, I intend for my discussion to apply not only to political history but to intellectual, cultural, and social history as well.

3. Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). For all subsequent references this text will be cited as *CC*.

4. William Galston, “Civic Education in the Liberal State,” in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Philosophers on Education: Historical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1998). Published earlier in N. Rosenblum, ed., *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

5. *Ibid.*, 471.

6. Callan, *CC*, 103, cites Oscar Wilde for this insight.

7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), 216.

8. Naturally, this claim — which amounts to a rejection of the all-too-common view that narratives are neither true nor false — requires more elaboration than is possible here.

9. In fact, I believe that Callan conflates an empirical sense of the question of “what is dominant” with a normative sense. I discuss this below.

10. For example, such balancing plays a role in Seixas’s conception of historical understanding. Peter Seixas, “Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding,” in *Handbook of Education and Human Development*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996) and even, surprisingly, in Wineburg’s “unnatural” historical thinking; *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

11. I shall shortly argue that, at the deepest level, the historian (like anyone else) cannot avoid being either hopeful about the country’s future, or hopeless, but I concede that these commitments need not be overt.

12. Objections there may be, but the battle will ultimately be waged on the field of historical judgment, through appeals to historical evidence and counter-evidence, despite methodological rhetoric.

13. In this context, the language of morals is helpfully concrete. But again, the point is epistemological, not moral. Thus, one might construct the argument in terms of the significance of a nation to intellectual history: in one case, a historian may arrive at the subject in search of the intellectual contribution of a particular nation, no matter how meager, and carry out that inquiry successfully, while in another, she may determine that the intellectual contribution of that nation is simply not to be found.

14. In addition to the merely negative, anti-patriotic alternative already mentioned, one might imagine alternatives (socialist-internationalist, say, or religious) in which hope resides elsewhere than in the future of the state.