

Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions

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Philosophy, Religion, and the Meaning of Nationhood in the 21st Century

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CONTRIBUTORS

Leonard Ferry teaches at Niagara College, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. He has studied at the University of Toronto, Brock University, and Dalhousie University, and is a co-editor of *Bringing the Passions Back In: The Emotions in Political Philosophy* (2008).

James Gerrie is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University, in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada. He studied at Mount Allison University and the University of Guelph, and his research focuses on the philosophy of technology and the philosophy of religion—in particular, the role of religion in the public sphere in democratic societies.

Louis Groarke is a Professor in the Philosophy Department at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. His writing in philosophy has focussed on ethics, political philosophy, aesthetics, and logic, from a broadly Aristotelian perspective. He is the author of *Moral Reasoning: Rediscovering the Ethical Tradition* (2011), *An Aristotelian Account of Induction* (2009), and *The Good Rebel* (2002). He has also co-edited *Ideas under Fire: Historical Studies of Philosophy and Science in Adversity* (2013).

P. D. Haskett is a graduate student in philosophy at the Dominican University College in Ottawa. Haskett is a graduate of St Francis Xavier University and Carleton University, and works primarily in classical Greek political philosophy.

Philip MacEwen teaches philosophy and humanities at York University in Toronto, Canada. He is a graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Music and of the University of Toronto, and the editor of *Ethics, Metaphysics and Religion in the Thought of F. H. Bradley* (1996) and of *Idealist Alternatives to Materialist Philosophies of Science* (forthcoming).

James G. Mellon is a graduate of Saint Francis Xavier, Queen's and Dalhousie Universities, and has taught at Mount Allison, Lakehead, Dalhousie and Saint Mary's Universities. His articles have appeared in such journals as *Religion, State and Society*; *Religion Compass*; *Ethnopolitics*, *Ethics, Policy and Environment*; and *Politics, Religion and Ideology*.

Robbie Moser is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick, Canada, where he teaches the history of mediaeval and analytic philosophy. His current research explores the various aspects and insights of pre-modern philosophy in light of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

Graeme Nicholson is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto. His scholarly interests range over phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ancient Greek philosophy. He is the author of *Justifying Our Existence: An Essay in Applied Phenomenology* (2009), *Plato's Phaedrus: The Philosophy of Love* (1999), and *Illustrations of Being: Drawing upon Heidegger and upon Metaphysics* (1992).

William Sweet is Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Centre for Philosophy, Theology, and Cultural Traditions at St Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. He is President of the World Union of Catholic Philosophical Societies, and a past-president of the Canadian Philosophical Association and of the Istituto Internazionale Jacques Maritain (Rome). His most recent books are *Migrating Texts and Traditions* (2012), *Ideas under Fire* (2013, co-edited with L. Groarke and J. Lavery), *What is Intercultural Philosophy?* (2014) and *Care of Self and Meaning of Life* (2015, co-edited with Cristal Huang). He is also the editor of the Continuum *Biographical Encyclopedia of British Idealism* (2010) and translator and editor of *Natural Law: reflections on theory and practice by Jacques Maritain* (2001, Chinese translation, 2009). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Scott Ventureyra completed his PhD in theology at the Dominican University College in Ottawa. He has published in academic journals such as *Science et esprit*, *The American Journal of Biblical Theology*, *Studies in Religion*, and *Maritain Studies*.

INTRODUCTION: NATIONHOOD AND OBLIGATION

William Sweet

In the 21st century, with the rise or recognition of new nations and, at the same time, with globalization, expansionism, ethnic conflict, and cultural clash as perceived threats to nations, the concept of nationhood has attracted increased attention. Some write of the contested “conceptions of nationhood” in countries in which one finds a multitude and diversity of cultures and traditions; that there are ‘aspirations to nationhood’ of ethnic and cultural groups within states¹; that, in some countries, there are new “claims to nationhood” (e.g., “constructions of Indigenous nationhood”² by Indigenous populations); that, in some places, there are efforts to ‘rebuild nationhood’³; that there are new “narratives of nationhood”⁴; and that there have been very different approaches to nationhood.⁵ One also notes concern about the ‘preservation’ of nationhood – whether, in the proximity of dominating or domineering states, or the dominance of social media and related technologies, small nations can endure.⁶ It is true that there have long been concerns about preserving communities, traditions, and cultures, but they have not always been cast as a matter of ‘nationhood.’⁷

The term ‘nationhood’ is a relatively new one in the English language, dating from the mid-nineteenth century,⁸ but it is also a somewhat vague term. Moreover, while at times reference to nationhood is taken to be purely descriptive – “the fact or status of being a nation”⁹ – the term can also have a normative character – e.g., that certain acts are expected of an entity that has nationhood, and that there are obligations or duties on those who are members of a group that has, or that claims, nationhood. One might well ask, then, how one is to understand ‘nationhood’ today. Does there need to be more precision in the concept of nationhood? What is the relation of nationhood to national identity? What is the ground for the obligations or duties associated with nationhood, such as the duties of citizens to the nation and to co-nationals? And what is the place of philosophy and religion in understanding such obligations?

The essays in this volume of *Philosophy, Culture, and Traditions* pursue these and related questions, exploring issues of nation and nationhood, but also how nationhood has this normative dimension, both historically and conceptually, today.

NATIONHOOD AND NATION

In very general terms, ‘nationhood’ means the situation of being a nation – of being in some specific condition or state – much the same as adulthood or priesthood is the condition of being an adult or a priest.