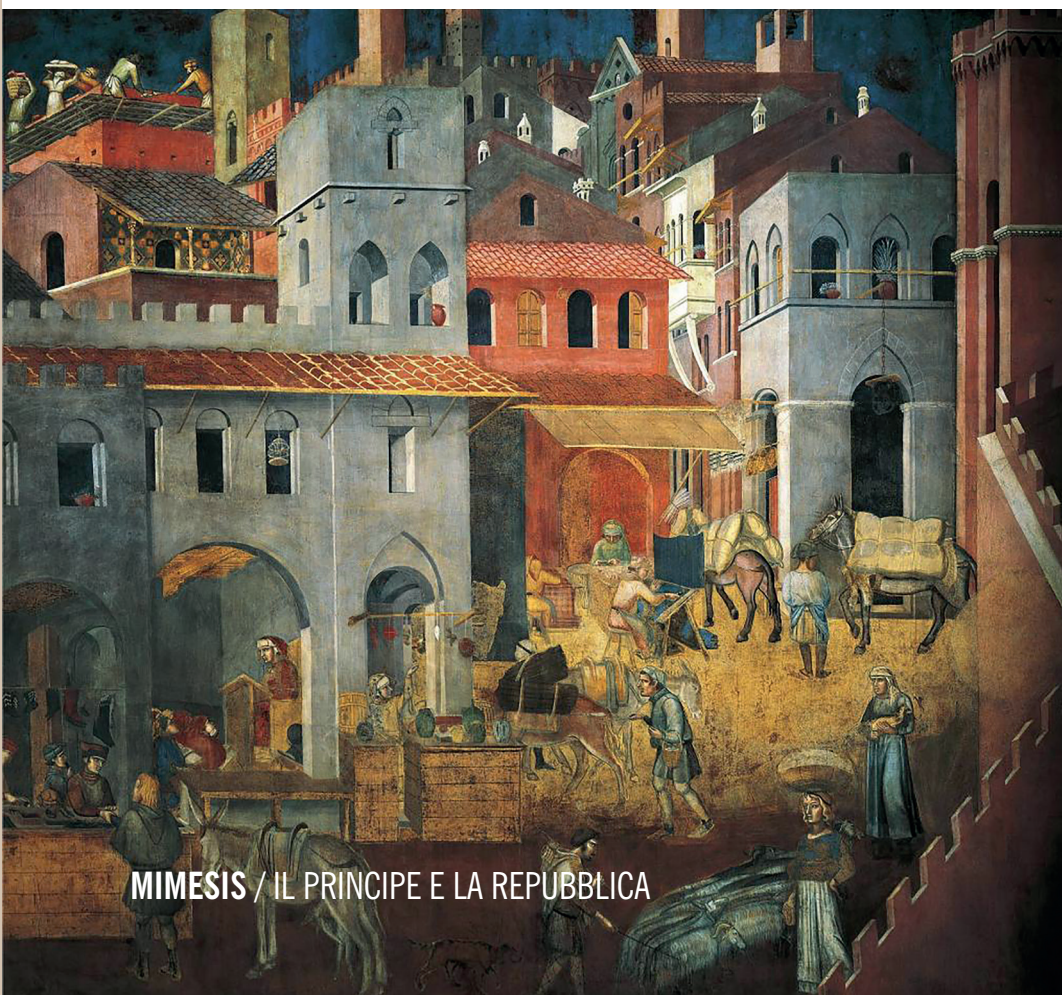


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ORDINATE AND INORDINATE NATIONALISM

In this essay I try to demystify the concept of “nationalism.” The task is complicated, because the political rhetoric surrounding nationalism—the rhetoric for and against it—has reached a fever pitch in the United States and Europe. It is also complicated because so many commentators have tried to sidestep the difficult questions surrounding nationalism by repairing to a less-than-perfectly helpful distinction, that between “nationalism” and “patriotism.”¹ This distinction is, no doubt, meant to clarify—to sort out bad from good, intemperate from temperate. But it is a highly artificial distinction, nonetheless, and has tended, unfortunately, to obscure rather than clarify what most needs to be explored.

The difficult question of nationalism is not whether people are fundamentally animated by love of country (“patriotism”) or hatred toward others (“nationalism”), a false dichotomy. The more troubling question has to do with (a) the various kinds of *goods* that people are attracted to when they feel affection toward their nation, and (b) *the degree to which* such goods ought to be prioritized over other, competing goods, including those of other nations. In

1 Charles de Gaulle is often quoted as saying, “patriotism is when love of your country comes first; nationalism, when hate for people other than your own comes first.” According to a recent statement by the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (<http://www.pass.va/content/scienze-sociali/en/events/2019-23/nations/statement.html>), a similar distinction is found in the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, which “distinguishes between patriotism and nationalism,” the former, a “noble sentiment,” involves “love of one’s homeland.” The latter, a “perversion” is the “idolatry of one’s own state” and a denial of “the human rights of other people and of migrants.” For a more nuanced view of Catholic Social Doctrine on the matter of nationalism, see V. BRADLEY LEWIS, *Is Nationalism Consistent with the Catholic Faith*, in *National Catholic Register*, 6 August 2019: <https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/is-nationalism-consistent-with-the-catholic-faith>.

its deepest, most philosophically challenging form, the problem of nationalism is not one of good versus evil, but of adjudicating among rival goods whose relative standing is a legitimate cause for puzzlement and political contestation.

The essay below does not supply—does not even try to supply—a final answer to the problem of balancing rival goods. Instead I offer a framework for thinking through the problem by marking some crucial distinctions and charting out the philosophical terrain. There are at least four distinct types of nationalism, each grounded in slightly different visions of the goods associated with national life. Yuval Levin identifies these in his helpful essay *Burke and the Nation*, and I will describe them more fully below.² In the most cursory terms they center on (1) love of country, (2) national character, (3) the nation in world affairs, and (4) the nation in domestic affairs.

Building upon Levin's insights, I argue that each of these forms of nationalism can be embraced, or not, to varying degrees. Probably this could be mapped onto a continuum starting with full-throated nationalism at one extreme and ending with a full-throated repudiation of it at the other. But for purposes of exposition and analysis I reduce the positions here to three—what I call “inordinate nationalism” at one extreme, “ordinate nationalism” in the middle, and a complete “rejection” of nationalism at the other extreme.

Putting the four types of nationalism together with the three ways of embracing them, we arrive at “figure 1.”

2 <https://www.aei.org/research-products/speech/burke-nation/>.

Fig. 1

	Inordinate	Ordinate	Rejected
Love of country			
National Character			
Nation in World Affairs			
Nation in Domestic Affairs			

I. – *On the Nationalism/Patriotism Distinction*

Nothing about the original meaning, much less the etymology, of the words “nationalism” and “patriotism” necessitates a sharp contrast between them. Both words are modern, though built on ancient roots. The OED notes that in their early uses, they “appear to have been more or less interchangeable.”³ Both could take on negative or positive values depending on context, much as they do today.

That “patriotism” could be negative (a vice as opposed to a virtue) is clear from that famous quip of Samuel Johnson in 1744 that “Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel.” (He was referring to William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham, the so-called “patriot-minister.”)

3 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <https://www.oed.com/>. See the entry for “Nationalism,” and the comment after definition 1 (a).

Or we might recall the way the English poet and novelist Horatio Smith put the matter in 1836: “Patriotism is too often the hatred of other countries disguised as the love of our own.”

Conversely, that “nationalism” could be positive (a virtue, not a vice) is a fact writ large in American history. Theodore Roosevelt’s Progressive campaign platform leading up to 1912 was called the “New Nationalism,” which meant empowering the national government to attend to common problems. President Wilson, referred to the “greatest nationalist” as one “who wants his nation to be the greatest nation,” in part by doing “its duty and mission among the nations of the world.” And President Coolidge also spoke favorably of nationalism: “In our domestic affairs an exceedingly important principle to observe is nationalism. This is all one country. We are all one people.” Again, there is nothing inherent in the words nationalism or patriotism that requires one to be good, the other bad.

This is also supported by etymology. “Nationalism” builds on the word *nation*; which enters the English language through twelfth-century Anglo-Norman and French. It means “a people united by common language and culture”—or it may denote “family” or “lineage”—all of which traces back to the classical Latin word, *natio*, which simply means “birth.” Patriotism, too, comes through Middle French, building upon *patriot*, “a fellow-countryman” or “someone who loves his country.” Ultimately, it originates from the Ancient Greek adjective *patrios*, “of one’s fathers,” and the noun *patria*, “a clan,” with its fundamental root in *patēr*, “father.” So, etymologically we have “-isms” built upon “fatherland” and “birthland.” What’s the difference?

Of course, it is easy to understand *why* a distinction would eventually be drawn between nationalism and patriotism. In the volatile years from the French Revolution to the end of WWII (and still today), national pride has been a perpetual engine of deep-seated hatred and war. Nationalism has also been tainted by its association with the phenomenon of “white nationalism” and all the havoc it has wrought upon the United States and Europe. The need was felt, therefore, to dissociate the more harmful inflections of nationalism from the decent and politically salutary “love of one’s nation” that now flies under the banner of “patriotism.” The distinction was forged, in other words, for

political reasons: to jettison one kind of phenomenon while salvaging another.

But is the difference between nationalism and patriotism really one of *kind*, as the distinction itself leads us to believe, or rather one of *degree*? To contrast them in terms of “love” and “hate” is, of course, to suggest a sharp categorical difference. But this badly obscures a fuller, more accurate understanding of nationalism as it actually appears in political life. To speak about “love of country” without specifying in what respect(s) and to what degree(s) is to speak inadequately. So too with dismissing all forms of national self-preference as “hatred.” Are there no reasonable forms of self-preference?

For the sake of philosophical clarity (as opposed to political utility) I will here drop the nationalism/patriotism distinction. I do not expect everyone to follow my lead, but I do think the exercise facilitates clear insights.⁴ In any event, at a time when the word “patriotism,” too, is widely dismissed as “right wing”—a codeword for “xenophobia,” “chauvinism,” and “nativism”—what is there to lose?⁵

2. – *Four Types of Nationalism*

Love of Country

The Y axis in Figure 1 distinguishes among four types of nationalism. The first is “love of country,” that is, love of one’s *nation*. Many who have lived abroad for an extended period of time, only later to come home, know exactly what this feels like. To some extent it is simply about *place*—the light, the look of the

4 If I were pressed to find a politically neutral term I would probably follow David Miller, who speaks of the “principle of nationality.” But I resist this here, because I do not regard nationalism as reducible to a single principle, due to the different forms it can take. See D. MILLER, *On Nationality*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995.

5 See e.g., A. ETZIONI, *It’s Hard to Be a Patriot*, in *City Journal*, January 19 2020: https://www.city-journal.org/in-defense-of-patriotism?utm_source=City+Journal+Update&utm_campaign=cb32ea6513-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_01_20_05_38&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6c08930f2b-cb32ea6513-109479981

landscape, the local fashions, and the smell of the food. There is comfort in what's familiar.

But it is more than that. To speak of what is “familiar” is to associate one's place (rightly, I think) with the relationship of “family”—not family in the literal sense (or not necessarily), but family in the extended sense of a community among fellow citizens stretching back in time to our ancestors and forward to our progeny. Such feelings and associations naturally evoke a sense of awe, even a sense of gratefulness and debt. C. C. Pecknold, quoting from Thomas Aquinas, writes that “the reverence we give our country ‘includes homage to all our fellow-citizens and to all the friends of our country.’” This is not the same as the reverence owed to God or to one's actual parents, but it is nevertheless “situated in the middle of things, an excellent good which brings us benefits . . . that we share in common with other human beings.”⁶ Love of country, then, is a distinct type of nationalism.

National Character

A second *type* of nationalism relates to national character. Yuval Levin writes that such “character is a product of common experience, formed over history, and holding us together in time, . . . the sum of the things we do and believe, and something like the nation's personality.”⁷ If we think for a minute about *individual* character (as opposed to national), we recognize this immediately as a profound concern of human beings. The ability to inherit, not by instinct, but by practices mixed with choice; also, the ability to shape, and deliberately to maintain, or not, a specific *character* or set of *characteristics*: this is fundamental to the metaphysical freedom of human beings, one of our highest potentialities.

The same is true of national character, but in the aggregate. The fundamental, communal good of self-determination, means not only inheriting but also taking an active role in the creation and maintenance of a particular way of life. For this, nations are uniquely necessary. Given the geopolitical conditions of the

6 C. C. PECKNOLD, *What Thomas Aquinas Teaches Us about Patriotism*, in *Catholic Herald*, 5 July 2019: <https://catholicherald.co.uk/what-st-thomas-aquinas-teaches-us-about-patriotism/>

7 Y. LEVIN, *Burke and the Nation*.

modern world, the project of communal self-determination can take place only in a political community the size of a nation. Smaller than this, the community cannot be defended; larger, it dissipates into multiple communities with too little in common to forge a shared way of life. Again, nations are good, and so is our ability to shape and maintain a national character.

Of course, love of national character is not incompatible with a strong dislike, even *hatred*, for aspects of national character that seem perverse or unjust, much as individuals can sometimes hate stubborn aspects of their own character. A nation must be worthy of love to receive it. But this does not negate the possibility of loving what is lovable in a national character, even as we strive to reform what is less so. *Abusus non tollit usum*.

The Nation in World Affairs

A third type of nationalism—perhaps the most familiar—has to do with preference for one’s own nation in world affairs. Below I will attend to the obvious point that self-preference can be practiced inordinately. But here my argument is that it can also be practiced ordinally and that it *must* be so if nations are to fulfill the ends that only they can serve.

For all the immorality that occurs among nations and within them, nations are nevertheless essential for the cultivation and maintenance of the moral life. The family is not enough, and neither is a “world community” of moral universalism. Rather, the moral life requires for its full actualization a vast network of supportive intermediary institutions such as schools, churches, laws, and unspoken rules of conduct. What is significant about nations is that they do support and defend these particular, embodied forms of moral association and practice. And because they support and defend them, they engender affection, even loyalty—not towards nations in general, of course, but toward *our particular* nation.

In an insightful and now classic essay about the appropriateness of national loyalty, Alasdair MacIntyre points out that precisely such loyalty is what leads individuals to sacrifice immediate self-

interest for the good of the whole.⁸ The welfare state, in other words, would be virtually impossible without national affection and loyalty. So too would military service, at least of the sort that requires one seriously to risk one's life for the defense of one's country. National loyalty is, as MacIntyre points out, indispensable for the continuance of political community over time; and, again, political community is indispensable for the flourishing of the moral agent. The love of one's nation as *special* vis-à-vis other nations is thus reasonable and necessary.

The Nation in Domestic Affairs

A fourth and, for present purposes, final form of nationalism focuses on the importance of the nation in domestic affairs. As opposed to what? As opposed to sub-national attachments, which in themselves are often good, but which may become deeply problematic (not only politically but also psychologically and spiritually) if pressed too far. Domestic nationalism is the belief that modern-day politics ought to take the form not merely of a plurality of regions (Maryland, Maine, etc.) or a plurality of interest groups (industry, agriculture, etc.), or a congeries of identity groups (people of color, LGBT, women, etc.), but of a unified nation capable of thinking and acting together as a whole.

If there is such a thing as a "national interest" or a "common interest" then there is room for this form of nationalism which emphasizes the value of the political community in its broadest domestic sweep. Certainly, the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, writing in the wake of the woefully inadequate "Articles of Confederation," thought such a national interest existed (see especially Federalist 23, 30, and 64). But they were far from alone. The unmistakable tendency of American politics has been ever toward a more national exercise of power, away from the power of states. This can of course go too far. But the tendency has been deliberate, not accidental. It was embraced in American history by the Populists, the Progressives, Woodrow Wilson, and the architects of the New Deal. And such nationalism is still viewed as

8 A. MCINTYRE, *Is Patriotism a Virtue*, in *The Lindsey Lecture*, University of Kansas 1984: <https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12398/1s%20Patriotism%20a%20Virtue-1984.pdf>

important today, not only by “conservatives,” as the rhetoric from the left might suggest, but also by liberals and democrats (whether or not they use the term) who know what the eclipse of this form of nationalism would mean.⁹ The truth is, most members of the American political elite today are “nationalist” in this fourth sense of the word. They dream of an America united by a shared moral vision. They disagree, of course, about the substance of the vision; but *that* the nation should have a unified vision is rarely denied.

The four forms of nationalism just considered are not radically different phenomena, but various inflections of the same thing. This is important to stress because it further highlights the inadequacy of the nationalism/patriotism distinction. By “Patriotism” is usually meant a moderate version of the first type of nationalism (love of country). But what about the other forms? By “nationalism” is usually meant an immoderate version of types 1, 2 and 3. But what about type 4? And what about the possibility of holding all four types moderately? These important questions are not encouraged by the crude distinction between nationalism and patriotism.

Of course, if it is true that these four types of nationalism have a common core, some quality or set of qualities that makes them what they are, then one should be able to identify what that common core is. Happily, this has been done. Nationalism in all its variety is, as MacIntyre has pointed out, “one of a class of loyalty-exhibiting virtues, . . . other members of which are marital fidelity, the love of one’s own family and kin, [and] friendship.”¹⁰ William Galston makes a similar point, arguing that nationalism (his word is “patriotism”) is “not so different from other loyalties.” It is, of course,

9 For a good example, see M. LILLA, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, Harper Collins, New York 2017. The whole book is a critique of our overly individualistic and atomized nation, especially the rising phenomenon of “identity politics.” His argument is that a healthy national politics ought to be about commonality, not difference.

10 *Ibid.*, MacIntyre says this about “patriotism,” but his use of the term is indistinguishable from my use of nationalism. “Patriotism” for him is “a kind of loyalty to a particular *nation* which only those possessing that particular nationality can exhibit” (my italics). “Patriotism does generally and characteristically involve a peculiar regard not just for one’s own nation, but for the particular characteristics and merits and achievements of one’s own nation.”

not identical to “love of parents,” he writes, but “it does not follow that one’s country cannot be a legitimate object of affection.”

“A country is, among other things, a place, a language (one’s ‘mother tongue’), a way of life, and a set of institutions through which collective decisions are made and carried out. One can love these things reasonably, and many do”.¹¹

Again, we are dealing with a form of love and loyalty. The four different *types* of nationalism stress different facets of that loyalty (e.g., to place and character) as well as different contexts (e.g., domestic and international) in which these loves and loyalties come unavoidably into conflict with other, competing goods.

3. – *Ordinate and Inordinate Nationalism*

So far I have identified four kinds of nationalism but said nothing about what makes them “ordinate” or “inordinate.” One advantage of charting out the terrain as I do in Figure 1 is that it encourages the asking of this question, not hastily as if it were simply a matter of love versus hate, but patiently. For just as there are four kinds of nationalism, so too does the distinction between ordinate and inordinate admit of four sets of considerations.

As with all varieties of love and loyalty, the difference between what is ordinate and inordinate depends on the weight one assigns to competing goods. This is true whether one believes there exists, out there somewhere, a single correct ordering of goods (monism), or whether one believes, as I do, that there are multiple coherent orderings whose appropriateness is relative to context and one’s particular character (pluralism). Either way, what is wrong turns out to be what is disproportionate vis-à-vis competing goods—a love or loyalty in which higher goods are sacrificed to lower. Again, I do not try here to resolve the problem of competing goods in any specific or definitive way. But I can at least identify the goods in question and offer some general remarks about their values.

11 W. GALSTON, *In Defense of a Reasonable Patriotism*, 23 July 2018: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/in-defense-of-a-reasonable-patriotism/>

God and Justice

In the case of the first kind of nationalism, “love of country,” two of the most frequently noted competing goods are “God” and “justice.” There are doubtless others besides, but these two appear most often in the literature. That duty to God should trump duty to one’s nation was the point so famously expressed by St. Peter, speaking to the representatives of the Jewish nation in Jerusalem: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” But St. Peter was not alone. Sophocles’ character Antigone had expressed a similar sentiment when she defiantly refused to obey political decrees running counter to her understanding of divine law: The “decrees” of man are not so powerful as to override “the unwritten and unfailing statutes of heaven,” she proclaims—statutes not “of today or yesterday, but of all time.” And Plato’s Socrates made this point as well to the court: “I, men of Athens, salute you and love you, but I will obey the god rather than you; and as long as I breathe and am able to, I will certainly not stop philosophizing.”

These references suggest that love of country becomes inordinate when it displaces the love and obedience owed to God. But the problem is that this line is not always easy to draw. “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s” is helpful, but it does not tell us what is Caesar’s. Here I note the problematic tendency of so many political actors to suppose that their own political goals are God’s goals too. This occurs on both sides of the political divide today—conservatives and progressives who believe their vision for the country is somehow ordained by God. The visions, of course, differ radically; but the conflation of political vision and divine will tends to be similar. This is one way we are misled into believing that our own national agendas are perfectly ordinate while those of our rivals are not.

The rival good of “justice” stands in a similar way. It is obviously not good (ordinate) to love one’s country “right or wrong,” refusing to acknowledge real national faults. And yet people can reasonably disagree over what justice demands. As MacIntyre and others have pointed out, justice looks different depending upon the moral framework through which it is viewed: utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, particularism, universalism, theism,

and so forth. Readers of John Rawls will know that this was precisely the problem prompted John Rawls to propose a single “theory of justice,” a theory to which, he hoped, all citizens would pledge allegiance, at least in their political lives. But Rawls’s dream was never realized. Citizens continue to operate today on the basis of rival moral outlooks and incompatible scales of value. And as long as this is true, the boundary between ordinate and inordinate nationalism will be a matter of legitimate contestation, which is not to deny that some boundaries exist.

Diversity and Toleration

With the second kind of nationalism, love of national character, the competing goods look different. The trouble here arises when the “character” deemed national is not really national after all, but partial and exclusionist. The all-too-familiar practices of antisemitism, anti-Catholicism, racism, and misogyny are all ways of artificially truncating national character. So too is that “nativism” which imagines nothing but harm coming from immigrants, or from fellow citizens who do not look like “us.” When American nationalism traffics in such prejudices it resembles what the Nazis called *Blut und Boden* or “blood and soil.” It is, in other words, a nationalism grounded exclusively on racial purity and place of birth.

What makes this so inordinate, again, is its discounting of goods that ought to be more highly regarded, in this case those of diversity and toleration. Especially in America have diversity and toleration been central to our national experience, but they are not merely local goods. They are also *liberal* goods that find their principled justification in texts such as Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* and, more broadly, John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. Even while Americans have pursued these goods inconsistently or imperfectly, diversity and toleration have still been central to our experience and a great benefit to our country.

Yet, as important as they are, diversity and toleration are still not *absolute* goods, which helps explain the ongoing tension surrounding national character. Why does “love of national character” so often degenerate into partiality and exclusion? Part of the answer, no doubt, relates to unreasonable fear, insecurity, and

even hate—the litany of vices leveled by people on the left against nationalism of all sorts. But this kind of answer is far from adequate. The deeper problem lies in the fact that diversity and toleration must find their proper place among other goods, such as that of political unity, for example. In every polity, there are things beyond the bounds of toleration, things which, if allowed free reign, would undermine the goods on which a nation's survival depends. Because of this, a concern about the *limits* of diversity and toleration is always appropriate. The trouble is that there are no simple or universal rules about how to balance such goods, no escaping from the demands of political deliberation and prudence.

Cosmopolitan Beneficence

With respect to the third kind of nationalism, preference for one's nation in world affairs, the good most often thought to compete is that of cosmopolitanism—the beneficence and hospitality owed to fellow human beings wherever they happen reside. The idea here, articulated most famously by Immanuel Kant, is that all humans, qua rational beings, have equal moral standing, and that nothing about national allegiances ought to jeopardize this.

But here, as in the other cases above, the dividing line between ordinate and inordinate nationalism proves difficult to discern, even, apparently, for Kant.¹² If there is an easy case to make out it is, of course, that of hatred toward other nations, the very vice marked off by the nationalism/patriotism distinction. When nationalism leads automatically to hatred of everything foreign, something has indeed gone wrong. But the numerous intermediary positions between hatred, on the one hand, and full cosmopolitan equality, on the other, are much harder to judge. There is,

1. the belief, *unaccompanied by hate*, that international affairs is intrinsically competitive, perhaps even a zero-sum game, and that each nation ought to tend first and foremost to its own interest.

2. the belief that one's country *is in fact* superior to others and should thus be prioritized (e.g., for being a liberal democracy that

12 P. KLEINGELD, *Kant's Cosmopolitan Patriotism*, in *Kant-Studien* 94 (2003), pp. 299-316.

protects the rights of all citizens). This sentiment can also be free of hate and is in fact perfectly compatible with charity towards other nations, but not to the disadvantage of one's own nation.

3. the belief that morality requires one to care most diligently for what is most proximate, not what is most universal or cosmopolitan.

Are any of these positions inordinate? Truly it is hard to say; and philosophers have struggled at length with how best to assess these beliefs and to weigh the competing goods.

Localism and Subsidiarity

The final form of nationalism—preference for the nation in domestic affairs—has long been known to compete with other political goods: the autonomy of individuals and groups to formulate their own ends and to realize them in practice; the cultivation of local attachments, social capital, and social trust; the efficiency and accountability that comes with the proximity of rule to those who are ruled. Here the line between ordinate and inordinate nationalism again takes a distinct form. *Inordinate* here means sacrificing the goods of local community in the name of national ideals.

A clear example can be found in the work of the American political theorist Herbert Croly, whose influential book *The Promise of American Life* was a paean to this kind of nationalism. Likening the nation to a school, he writes,

Everybody within the schoolhouse—masters, teachers, pupils and janitors, old pupils and young, good pupils and bad, must feel one to another an indestructible loyalty. Such loyalty is merely . . . the recognition that as a worldly body they must all live or die and conquer or fail together. The existence of an invincible loyalty is a condition of the perpetuity of the school.¹³

That the “perpetuity” of a nation requires a high degree of loyalty and, at times, unity, no one can deny. But Croly certainly pushed the idea too far. He wanted America to be unified behind a single “national purpose.” Realizing that autonomous groups with their own distinct interests would get in the way of this goal, he decried the very existence of such groups, even to the point of underestimating

13 H. CROLY, *The Promise of American Life*, MacMillan, New York 1909, p. 284.

their potential to help advance his own ideals of reform. Though Croly would eventually come to recognize and regret this mistake, the nationalism of *The Promise* was a classic case of inordinate nationalism of the fourth type.¹⁴ National unity at the expense of local loyalties and autonomous self-government is not only inordinate, it is unsustainable insofar as it saps the energy emerging from local affections.

But as with all forms of nationalism, the borderline between what is ordinate and inordinate is sometimes difficult to draw. There are certainly times in the historical experience of every nation when local leaders should cede considerable authority to the state. War is not the only such time. Natural disasters, economic crises, emergencies of public health: these have all been engines for increased nationalism in domestic affairs. But it is never clear in ordinary times how to strike a proper balance between national uniformity and efficiency, on the one hand, and individual freedom and autonomy on the other. Freedom and autonomy are among the highest-ranking political goods in liberal regimes. And while the temptation is evidently very great to sacrifice these in the name of efficient “administration,” the sacrifice will always come at a price. Decreased freedom and autonomy has a likely negative affect on innovation, experimentation, trust, and legitimacy. But I am aware of no easy way of negotiating the tensions among these goods.

4. – *Complete Rejection of Nationalism*

A final benefit to mapping out the philosophical terrain as I do in Figure 1 is that it reveals the extent to which the tendency to reject nationalism completely is itself a kind of inordinate extreme. If there is any sense in which the health of a nation depends upon the affection and loyalty of its citizens, then to reject nationalism completely must be a mistake.

¹⁴ On Croly's dislike of social groups, see E. A. STETTNER, *Shaping Modern Liberalism: Herbert Croly and Progressive Thought*, University of Kansas Press, Lawrence, Kansas 1993, pp. 36 and 50. For his recognition of error and his subsequent embrace of a qualified “group pluralism,” see *ibid.*, p. 93.

Why do some people make this mistake? The question admits of at least two answers, each of them important for understanding the political dynamics surrounding nationalism. Some people who reject nationalism do so because they associate it exclusively with its most inordinate forms; they do not see or will not allow that nationalism can be moderate and healthy. For others, nationalism is rejected because it is inherently unstable, tending always toward ever-more extreme forms, and eventually erupting into violence. This is a slippery slope argument, whereas the first is a failure to see the full range of the phenomenon.

Both dynamics are frequently encountered in popular political writings about nationalism, but one of the best case studies I have seen is a “dialogue” between two opponents of nationalism and two supporters of it in a recent issue of *America Magazine*, a Catholic periodical.¹⁵ What makes the dialogue especially interesting is that the participants have so much in common and are attempting earnestly to understand each other’s perspectives, and yet cannot reach agreement about the value of nationalism as a political phenomenon.

Two of the interlocutors, Matthew Peterson and Kevin Stuart support what they call the “new nationalism growing in 21st-century America” for reasons similar to ones expressed in this essay. They worry that excessive “cosmopolitanism” can be, and has been, “deracinating.” They thus encourage a stronger love for

the regime marked by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and nested in a context shaped by the English common law tradition, the natural law tradition, Protestant covenantal theology, classical republicanism, and (...) liberal political philosophy.

Peterson and Stuart see such nationalism as perfectly compatible with America’s racial and religious diversity, and they believe it will lead to increased political stability and openness to immigration.

¹⁵ D. ALBERTSON, J. BLAKELY, M. PETERSON and K. STUART, *A Dialogue on the ‘New Nationalism America Magazine’* (22 October, 2019): <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2019/10/22/dialogue-new-nationalism>.

The other two interlocutors, David Albertson and Jason Blakely will have none of it. But why? Because, for them it is simply impossible to speak of nationalism without speaking of racism, “violence aimed at refugees and migrants” and a “state-centered monoculture that effaces local particularism.” In other words, they associate nationalism exclusively with the inordinate forms of type 1 and 4 in Figure 1. When they are confronted with Peterson and Stuart’s more sanguine use of the term, they can only remark that it is “puzzling.” Simultaneously, Albertson and Blakely invoke the slippery slope. Nationalism is “politically unstable,” they write. And citing Pope Francis, they worry that “a state that arouses in its people nationalistic sentiments will eventually fail in its own mission.”

Missing in this dialogue, though not for want of prompting on the part of Peterson and Stuart, is any recognition by Albertson and Blakely that nationalism can be grounded in certain concrete goods upon which all nations must to some extent depend: the goods of place and character, the project of self-determination and moral improvement over time. Such goods require for their very existence a degree of love and loyalty, lest they dissolve into extreme tribalism on the one hand or bland cosmopolitanism on the other. Shocked by the very worst connotations of “nationalism” in the historical experience of the West, those who reject it cannot see the relative goods that nationalism in its best forms can sustain.

As for the slippery slope—the fear that nationalism is politically unstable and threatening to the existence of the state—I must point out that a complete absence of nationalism is similarly unstable. If we are right that the health and (in extremis) the very life of the state depends on a degree of love and loyalty, then to refuse this love (indeed, to replace it with cynicism and relentless self-criticism) is to chart a course for ruin. The complete rejection of nationalism is not the island of political safety its proponents suppose it to be. Fearing the excesses of nationalism, they reject it altogether. But this extreme too has its consequences.

5. – *Conclusion*

The challenge, then, is to discover and encourage such moderate forms of nationalism as support the life and health of a nation while actively resisting the slide into extremes. As I have argued here, this is no easy task, in part because the rhetoric surrounding nationalism tends to obstruct a clear understanding of the rival goods that are at stake. But even without the damage done by rhetoric, it is difficult to agree upon ordinate forms of nationalism, because it is genuinely hard to balance the rival goods in question. Truth be told, there may not be any single correct balance that will satisfy every observer. And yet there is no safe harbor to found in rejecting nationalism either. Some forms of nationalism are not only healthy but essential to the flourishing of national life. The better practice (better than rejecting nationalism root and branch) is to allow it to remain a legitimate topic of open political debate in the hope that through dialogue and deliberation its excesses can be avoided while its most fruitful expressions can survive.