

# **Morality and Nationalism**

**Catherine Frost**



Routledge Innovations in Political Theory

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# Morality and Nationalism

This book takes a unique approach to explore the moral foundations of nationalism. Drawing on nationalist writings and examining almost 200 years of nationalism in Ireland and Quebec, the author develops a theory of nationalism based on its role in representation.

The study of nationalism has tended towards the construction of dichotomies – arguing, for example, that there are political and cultural, or civic and ethnic, versions of the phenomenon. However, as an object of moral scrutiny this bifurcation makes nationalism difficult to work with. The author draws on primary sources to see how nationalists themselves argued for their cause and examines almost two hundred years of nationalism in two well-known cases, Ireland and Quebec. The author identifies which themes, if any, are common across the various forms that nationalism can take and then goes on to develop a theory of nationalism based on its role in representation. This representation-based approach provides a basis for the moral claim of nationalism while at the same time identifying grounds on which this claim can be evaluated and limited.

It will be of strong interest to political theorists, especially those working on nationalism, multiculturalism, and minority rights. The special focus in the book on the Irish and Quebec cases also makes it relevant reading for specialists in these fields as well as for other area studies where nationalism is an issue.

**Catherine Frost** is Assistant Professor of Political Theory at McMaster University, Canada.

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**For Robin and Sean and  
Naoíse and Fionn  
whose future this concerns**

# Preface

This project started with my own puzzle over what to think about nationalism. My family is Irish and I spent my youth in the Republic of Ireland. As a schoolchild I learned about the struggle for Irish independence, memorized the names of the heroes of the 1916 Rising, and was taught the Irish language upon first entering school. There could be no doubt in the mind of an attentive student that the birth of the Irish State was an achievement for which one should properly be grateful.

I emigrated to Canada with my family as a teenager. In Canada the future of the State is cast in doubt by the nationalism of Quebec, and the prevailing belief I encountered among Canadians was that nationalism was an undesirable doctrine of strife and dissent. This left me in conflict over what to think about nationalism as a phenomenon. In one country there was widespread acceptance of its legitimacy, in another there was a large body of opinion that felt it was harmful and dangerous.

If the question were put to me today, I would have to admit that I am indeed grateful for the achievement of an independent Ireland. Yet what am I supposed to think of this response? Do I need to liberate myself from an attachment to the idea of an Irish nation; something that I know was an object of indoctrination in my Irish schooling? Am I a bad Canadian if I think Quebec should have the option to go its own way, perhaps to develop itself as a separate political and cultural community?

My object in writing this book was to outline an understanding of the moral worth of nations that could account for my feeling that Irish independence was a genuine achievement, but that did not sanction every extreme to which nationalism has been taken in the past. I am aware of the stifling environment that nationalism can foster, as well as the violence and conflict it can entail. But I am not convinced that



these difficulties are a necessary part of nationalism, or even that such conduct serves the ends at which nationalism aims.

The problem, as I see it, is that we lack a clear sense of what the ends of nationalism really look like. In turn, moral theorizing about nationalism has been held back by a tendency to rely on a truncated or bifurcated view of the phenomenon. Such theorizing struggles to come to grips with a phenomenon that refuses to conform to the categories developed to contain it. This book is an attempt to find a way out of this impasse. My hope is that it might help restore a fuller picture of nationalism, help explain why we should take nationalism seriously, and help clarify what we should (and should not) be expected to do about it. If it succeeds in making inroads on any of these items, it will have served an important purpose.

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In the case of my family I most particularly thank my parents, Bryan and Mary, for their steady interest – both practical and philosophical – in how the project unfolded. I also thank Robin and Sean Frost for preferring play-doh over philosophy, and I thank their parents, Bob and Johanne, for home cooking, belly laughs, and perspective. I thank my brother Nick for helping me shake my bookish obsessions once in a while, and my brother Stephen for reminding me that our humanity lies beyond anything we can define or perform, and has a dignity all its own.

Earlier versions of Chapter 1 appeared in 2001 as “The worth of nations” in *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 9: 481–502. I am grateful to Blackwell Publishers for permission to incorporate this material here.

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# 1 Introduction

It is remarkable to me that so much contemporary theorizing on nationalism pays so little heed to what actual nationalists have had to say on the topic. Perhaps this is in part due to the broad dismissal issued to nationalist writings by the influential theorist Ernest Gellner, who in the early 1980s confidently advised his fellow scholars that “we shall not learn too much about nationalism from the study of its own prophets” (1983: 125). Much though I admire Gellner’s work, I respectfully disagree with this pronouncement. For if we do not turn to nationalist voices to help us understand the roots of the phenomenon – its deep motivations and aspirations – then we must rely on other scholars and theorists to represent them for us. Yet if we never check these representations against the original, we can never be sure that the nationalism these theorists are talking about is the same as the nationalism we face in everyday life. Since nationalists are rarely heard in their own voice in the theoretical debate, there has not been much opportunity to confirm how well these theories capture nationalist concerns. This makes the theoretical effort somewhat suspect from the beginning, and it contributes to deep divisions in thinking on the topic.

There is a second reason for going to the source rather than settling for a theoretical rendering of nationalist motivations. By looking at nationalist arguments we can ask whether they have something to say about the moral worth of nations that is missed in existing moral theorizing. As it now stands, nationalist arguments are studied mostly for their historical or sociological insights, but rarely as claims about political or social good. Yet I believe that these arguments reveal a genuine concern for the conditions of the populations involved and this insight may help us to recast our thinking on nationalism.

Moved by these concerns, I began reading the very nationalist writings that Gellner felt were “hardly worth analysing” (1983: 124).

## 2 *Introduction*

I turned in particular to two cases that I knew to have a long and rich nationalist history – those of Ireland and Quebec. Both can trace their nationalist activism back over two hundred years and both had prominent figures and movements who served as leading voices for the nationalist cause. My goal in starting this work was perhaps overly optimistic. I hoped to identify a central theme to nationalist argument, and through it to gain better insight into what nationalists felt justified their claim and what they aimed at achieving. As it turned out, nationalist argument presented a more complex picture than I had anticipated, but in the end I believe the effort to make sense of this complexity yields its own rewards.

But of course, such work does not take place in a vacuum. There is much to be learned from existing theories of nationalism especially once we have an appreciation of how these ideas appeared in the thinking of nationalists themselves. Many existing theories of nationalism already recognize that nations can pay dividends at two levels. At the personal level they can provide benefits via a secure sense of one's context and a feeling of belonging and esteem. These benefits have been recognized in the work of theorists such as Will Kymlicka (1995), Charles Taylor (1995b, 1999), and Avishai Margalit writing with Joseph Raz (1990). But often these accounts stop there, at the individual level, and this leaves out an important part of the picture. Because of this, these accounts run into problems when individuals are attached to different national origins, as in the case of immigrants. If nationalism is justified solely at a personal or individual level, then everyone has an equal claim to seeing his or her nationality politically or socially established. This faces us with a situation of almost certain moral stalemate.<sup>1</sup>

There is also a collective level to be considered. At this collective level, theorists such as David Miller (1995) and Yael Tamir (1993) recognize that nationalism pays a dividend in terms of political efficacy. But they attribute this to the existence of affective ties between co-nationals, and promise that a richer kind of collective life will result. This account proves problematic however, because it cannot explain the origin of these ties without becoming circular – I have ties to my co-nationals because they are my co-nationals (Canovan 1996: 53).

So the first thing that distinguishes the approach taken in this project is that by turning to nationalist argument, it starts from a point that other theories of nationalism overlook. This gives us reason to hope we can bypass some of the intellectual cul-de-sacs that have stymied existing theories of nationalism. The second major feature of this project is that it employs a methodology that aims to keep

theory close to the ground. This methodology, sometimes called “contextualism” involves using a case-study approach to help understand and evaluate moral phenomena. It’s based on the belief that observing real-world experience can provide vital feedback into normative thinking, and it calls on the theorist to pay close attention to how events and ideas unfold in practice (Carens 2000: 1–6).

For this reason I focus on the experience with nationalism in two historical cases – those of Ireland and Quebec, as mentioned. However, what makes these two cases interesting from my point of view is not what makes them engaging for most scholars of nationalism. I am interested in the fact that some aspects of these cases are often thought to be morally uncontroversial. In Ireland, changing the political order to establish an independent state in the twenty-six counties is generally regarded as a morally legitimate measure, even though nationalist efforts to uphold a certain “character” for the population – affecting women’s rights, language use, and economic development, for instance – proved problematic. In Quebec, efforts aimed at cultural self-preservation – such as regulating language use and fostering economic development – are often defended as legitimate, but changing the political order is considered more problematic. Because similar measures appear in a different light in these two cases I think they can help highlight factors that establish the moral standing of the nationalist claim.

In addition a distinction is commonly made between these two cases by designating Ireland as a case of postcolonial liberation, while viewing Quebec as part of an ongoing multicultural project. While there is some truth to this reading, there are too many historical similarities between the cases for this explanation to account for all the differences in how we evaluate their nationalist experiences. The ease with which this distinction is commonly accepted, then, raises more questions than it does answers. This means that their respective experiences provide a fruitful starting place for an examination of the national claim.

## **Chapter outline**

In the next chapter (Chapter 2) I initiate this project by considering previous attempts to theorize nationalism. The chapter introduces the reader to seven major theoretical approaches, assesses their strengths and weaknesses, and uses them to establish a set of criteria that an account of the moral worth of nationalism should meet.

The following two chapters (Chapters 3 and 4) then look at nationalist argument in Ireland and Quebec from 1780 to 1950.

## 4 *Introduction*

These chapters find that arguments in defense of the national claim fall into two major formulations, and moreover, that these two formulations are historically distinct. In the Irish case addressed in Chapter 3, nationalism first appeared as a claim to an independent legislature and nationalists argued that good government required legislators to share a stake in Irish conditions. But by the middle of the nineteenth century a second formulation of the nationalist claim appeared. This one focused on creating a strong national character so that a population could express itself and its conditions adequately and authentically.

Chapter 4 then asks whether similar formulations appeared in Quebec. As in Ireland, early Quebec nationalists argued that political representatives should share the conditions of the national population in order to adequately represent its interests. And again, by the end of the nineteenth century nationalist argument was focused on issues of national character (and in particular on language) as a source of authenticity and expression.

While the two formulations start out from different points when it comes to political and cultural life, Chapter 5 cautions against reading these differences as yet another nationalist dichotomy. Reflecting on current work in liberal-nationalism, it argues that this work is premised on a divide between the political and cultural aspects of nationalism that simply cannot be maintained. Theory in this area has developed along two divergent paths, yet neither seems to be able to deliver a viable solution. Instead, to overcome this impasse, theory should focus more closely on the political/cultural dynamic to nationalism and ask how the two sides of the national equation are tied together.

Chapter 6 then sets out to reconstruct the development of nationalist argument as a conceptual history in order to understand its dynamics and to look for common themes through this development. The exercise suggests that the second formulation of the national claim may amount to an inversion of the logic of the first and that the two are inter-related in a manner that cannot adequately be reflected in an approach based on dichotomies or bifurcation. Further, it suggests that the two formulations are connected by a common concern for representational resources. Nations can provide a shared frame of reference for both political and cultural representation, and for this reason they have a claim to moral standing. However, in order to serve their representational purpose, national frames of reference are also characterized by a need for selectivity, currency, and relevancy.

Chapter 7 takes the approach to nationalism that understands it as a claim about representational resources and evaluates it in light of



existing theory in this field, including contrasting it with republican, multicultural, or post-national alternatives to nationalism. This exercise indicates the importance of establishing limits on a national claim, and the chapter suggests both internal and external limits that should play a part in a representational approach.

Returning to the original case studies, Chapter 8 asks what a representational approach can tell us about the nationalism that unfolded in Ireland and Quebec. Four main areas of interest for the chapter include the appropriateness of political independence; the conduct of nationalist governments; the role of multinational frames of reference; and the experience of minorities. While both cases have their successes and failures, it becomes clear that when understood as a claim about representational resources, nationalism is more constrained in practice than is always recognized.

Beginning in the mid- to late twentieth century both Ireland and Quebec went through a period of dramatic social change, yet the idea of the nation remains a powerful element in both communities. Chapter 9 argues that this process confirms that nations can handle a high degree of change without compromising their representational role. This suggests that from a normative point of view we need to shift our focus away from long-standing social or cultural traits as major markers of nationalism.

The tenth and final chapter reviews the overall arguments of the book and puts them into context by considering the inevitable risks we incur when we engage in representation. We should always be ready, it suggests, to revise our frames of reference in order to capture missing elements. Nationalism need not be hostile to this requirement, but if the line between establishing a frame of reference and reifying one is not observed, then nationalism can become the source of new representational problems.

## The argument of the book

This book argues that while nationalism can focus on different objectives and concerns, one constant in nationalist argument is the role of a shared frame of reference as a representational resource. Frames of reference are important because they are a pre-condition for representation, both political and cultural. The main claim of the book is that nations embody a process that establishes and maintains frames of reference at a very large and very general level. If this account is correct, it suggests that nations are evidence of an adaptive capacity that enables us to re-configure our ways of thinking,