



THE PHILOSOPHY OF NATIONALISM

Paul Gilbert

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Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

New York London

First published 1998 by Westview Press

Published 2018 by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gilbert, Paul, 1942–

The philosophy of nationalism / Paul Gilbert.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8133-3083-1 (hardcover). — ISBN 0-8133-3084-X (pbk.)

1. Nationalism. I. Title.

JC311.G557 1998

320.54—dc21

98-11322

CIP

ISBN 13: 978-0-8133-3084-6 (pbk)

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Preface

This book originates in a paper given to the International Society for the Study of European Ideas conference in 1990 (published as “Criteria of Nationality and the Ethics of Self-Determination,” *History of European Ideas* 16 [1993], pp. 515–520). While that paper provides the book’s *leitmotiv*, it now strikes me as grossly oversimplified and, worse, absurdly overoptimistic. Recent events on the world stage have helped me to realize this, but I also have many colleagues at Hull and elsewhere to thank for enabling me to improve on what I wrote then—too many, I fear, to thank individually. For reading and criticizing the manuscript, however, I should like to express my special gratitude to Matthew Festenstein, Kathleen Lennon, Loretta Napoleoni, and an anonymous reader for Westview Press. My commissioning editor, Sue Miller, provided valuable encouragement at the start of the project, and toward the end my copy editor, Christine Arden, did her best to make my text accessible. My thanks to them and to my project editor, Melanie Stafford, as well as to Chris Glover, who turned my words into a typescript.

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Introduction

Nationalism, which for nearly fifty years had seemed of interest only to specialists in political science and of no interest at all in political philosophy, is now back in the mainstream of both subjects. An enormous literature on nationalism has developed in political science,¹ in addition to a small but growing one in philosophy.² The former concentrates on the explanation of nationalist movements, the latter on their moral justification. But the two concerns are seldom brought together. In this book I set out to do just that, by arguing that the explanation of different nationalist movements depends upon the different justifications they can offer for pursuing their goals. In particular, I maintain that different nationalisms differ in the accounts they give of what constitutes a nation. This difference, in turn, is determined by what kind of group is held to have a right to independent statehood. The proliferation of diverse accounts of what a nation is—ethnic, cultural, economic, political, and so on—is best explained by regarding the nation as a group of a kind that has a right to statehood. The different accounts follow from the different grounds that can be offered for such a right.

The main task of the book, therefore, is to attempt to classify the accounts of nationhood that can be given in terms of the kinds of argument for statehood they support. It also aims to locate these accounts within their intellectual backgrounds and to provide some philosophical assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. This effort, given the huge scope of the subject, is necessarily tentative and programmatic. But it does involve treating nationalist ideas seriously and eschewing the widespread view that nationalism “hardly counts as a principled way of thinking about things.”³ I have proceeded on the assumption that even when no explicit defense of nationalist positions is offered, one can often be reconstructed—and, indeed, I wrestle with some sample texts with the intention of eliciting such a defense. I do not, however, believe that simple philosophical theories can be detected in their pure forms in many actual nationalist movements. These movements involve, for the most part, sometimes unstable combinations of different intellectual elements, so the theories I discuss may be regarded as ideal types. Yet my intention is to throw light on the real world by means of them. This book may be compared, then, to an introductory chemistry text

that lists the elements, explains their principal compounds, includes sketches of blast furnaces and sulfur kilns, and mentions Lavoisier and Dalton. If it is of some use in explaining the complex phenomena of nationalism, the present work has achieved much of its purpose.

The book's aim may seem idealist in an objectionable sense, relying on ideas to explain historical phenomena rather than on material circumstances. But this charge is unjustified. There is still a place for explaining why a particular group which aspires to statehood adopts the account of the nation that it does, and it is not unduly cynical to suppose that this account will apply easily to the circumstances that the group finds itself in—a territorial account if it shares a territory, an ethnic one if it is of common descent, and so forth. These are material circumstances which it is the province of history or political science to uncover, along with the particular concerns which motivate urgent demands for statehood. It should be noted, however, that nationalism, as I understand it, is by no means restricted to such aspirant groups. Nationalism pervades the politics of established states as well,⁴ so much so as to be nearly invisible. I accept the arguments recently offered⁵ that questions in political theory about democracy or distribution within such states presuppose some idea of the nation which legitimizes them, and on this point I have nothing to add here. Indeed, it follows from the view of nations suggested that states may commonly legitimize themselves through assuming that they are nation-states. Whether they are in reality depends not only upon whether their citizens are what they take themselves to be but also upon whether their account of nationhood supports their claim to legitimacy. If it does not, then they do not represent a nation.

It is here that much in the book will ring strangely in its readers' ears. For the book does not take the existence of the nation for granted. Rather, it proposes that the nation's existence depends upon whether there is a kind of group which possesses a right to statehood and, if so, upon what kind it is. The first chapter defends this approach. It attacks, in particular, the nominalist assumption which many political scientists make, that a nation is just what its members call a nation. This, I believe, is the wrong reaction to the proliferation of diverse accounts of nationhood. Specifically, it fails to account for disputes as to what nations there are in a territory and, hence, what states there might be rightfully be there. In Chapter 2 I answer the question as to why nations have a right to statehood by appeal to the principle that the members of a nation have, or might appropriately have, national obligations which a state could enforce. A nation is determined by its membership, which in turn is decided on the basis of either the sort of people or the kind of community thought to constitute the nation. An answer to the previous question, then, depends upon which can explain national obligations.

Chapter 3 investigates the view that nations represent *natural* divisions of humankind. We can develop this view by seeing people either as sorted out ethnically or as forming family-like communities. Both versions are rejected, however, so we turn, in Chapter 4, to accounts of the nation in terms of its members' psychological attitudes. Here we look, in particular, at two forms of the voluntarist view that nations are constituted by their members' will to associate together; but neither is plausible, as we shall see. Voluntarism is often associated with political (or civic) nationalism, which is investigated in Chapter 5. In holding that the features that collect people into a nation can be identified only in terms of their actual or desired state, political nationalism overstates, I suggest, the connection between nationhood and statehood for which I am arguing. Nevertheless, statehood does impose conditions on the character of nations, most notably territorial ones. These are discussed in Chapter 6, which culminates in a more promising account of the nation—namely, an economic one.

Nationalism is frequently taken to involve the promotion or defense of a national culture. The concept warrants a more extended treatment than it usually receives; accordingly, the next three chapters are devoted to it. In Chapter 7 culture is discussed as a system of communication, such as that exemplified in a national language. Here, in contrast to the usual essentialist versions, a plausible social constructionist account of such a national culture is identified. Its plausibility depends, however, upon its tacit importation of certain values. Chapter 8 turns to a discussion of culture as a value system. It considers and rejects a wide range of arguments for national rights to statehood based upon distinctive national values, proposing instead a form of communitarianism which incorporates values arguably common to all nationalisms. Even if this ethical case for nationalism were accepted, however, it is doubtful that any contemporary groups would qualify as nations under it. But nations are thought to be historical entities which transcend such ephemeral circumstances. In Chapter 9, accordingly, I examine the notion of a national history, commonly lumped together with other aspects of national culture. This notion does not, I conclude, yield results which strengthen the case for nationalism.

In a brief conclusion I express skepticism at the prospects of success for the nationalist project. It may well be that nationalism continues to enjoy its pervasive political power only because it has not been given the serious scrutiny it deserves.

Chapter One

Nationalism, Nations, and Names

The Nature of Nationalism

*No easy hope or lies
Shall bring us to our goal,
But iron sacrifice
Of body, will, and soul.
There is but one task for all—
One life for each to give.
What stands if Freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?¹*

These lines by Rudyard Kipling may seem the epitome of nationalism, with their appeal to personal sacrifice in pursuit of a common national task—the task of ensuring the survival and independence of the nation, which is of greater importance than the lives and interests of its individual members. However, in introducing the World War II anthology in which this poem was reprinted, Harold Nicolson uses the poem to illustrate his observation that “our patriotism”—the English kind, that is to say—“is not nationalistic.”² English patriotism, he must have thought, does not peddle the “easy hope or lies” that nationalism, as he understood it, depends upon. “English pride” is not the complacency and self-satisfaction about the country that fosters them. How, then, are we to understand nationalism? What is it, and how should it be evaluated?

At least four sorts of answers have been suggested; so before trying to characterize nationalism in detail, we need to get clear what sort of phenomenon it is. Is it a sentiment or feeling? Is it a system of practices or rituals? Is it a policy or course of political action? Is it a set of beliefs or doc-

trine? Nationalism, it has been suggested,³ is a certain type of sentiment, a feeling of loyalty to one's nation. In this suggested sense, nationalism is sometimes equated with patriotism⁴ and sometimes, as it seems to be by Harold Nicolson, contrasted with it.⁵ Which of the two pertains may depend upon whether nationalism is thought well or ill of; for patriotism is generally allowed to be a virtue.⁶ Nationalism, on the other hand, is often condemned either as a bad form of patriotism—like jingoism or chauvinism—or as a sentiment contrasted with it. However, while patriotism evidently is a sentiment, nationalism is not. At most, it gives rise to sentiments, perhaps to patriotic ones. Patriotism is love of one's country, whether one's country is thought of in nationalist terms or not. Nationalism, I shall suggest, involves, among other things, a belief about the proper object of patriotism—namely, one's nation. Putting this belief together with someone's belief as to what his nation is will naturally lead him to patriotism. It may be natural, therefore, to confuse the sentiment of patriotism to which nationalism gives rise with the belief that it consists in, but such a view would be mistaken. And similarly mistaken would be the view that nationalism is a sentiment of the same order as patriotism, but to be contrasted with it because it is the wrong sort of feeling or the right sort of feeling directed at the wrong sort of object.

One reason for thinking of nationalism as a sentiment of attachment to one's nation rather than as a belief that the nation is the proper object of such a sentiment may be the view that this attachment arises not from any belief but, rather, from a natural human disposition. Some nationalists, as we shall see, advance this view. But it is one thing to hold the view and therefore to espouse a form of nationalism, and quite another thing to have the supposedly natural sentiment it posits. Furthermore, though some nationalists may in fact have no good or adequate reason for their attachments, it does not necessarily follow that they hold no beliefs which they *count* as a reason. To suppose otherwise is to erect a crude dichotomy between reason, which cannot lead us astray, and passion, which often does. In this vein, patriotism is sometimes thought of as directed at the right sort of object, because it is one for which there is a reason, and nationalism as directed at the wrong sort, because there is only an irrational attachment to it.⁷ But to follow this line of thought is to avoid engaging intellectually with the nationalists' system of beliefs which justify their choice of object.

A second sort of reason that might be offered for rejecting the view that nationalism consists in a set of beliefs, though not necessarily for thinking of it as a sentiment, is the observation that we may describe as a nationalist someone who simply takes pride in her nation and gives it her support. But vigorous flag waving at football matches, which may be taken as an expression of nationalism, does not, it may be concluded, imply the

possession of beliefs about nations. Nationalism, on this account, is not so much a system of beliefs as a set of practices,⁸ through which national loyalty is cultivated and nations are sustained. This is indeed nearer the mark than the view of nationalism as national sentiment, but it similarly confuses effects with causes or, more properly, acts with their justifications. Certainly not all nationalists could articulate the beliefs which, I shall argue, characterize their nationalism; but they take their support for a nation, even if they cannot produce the justification, to be justified. Perhaps the justificatory beliefs are articulated by nationalist intellectuals or perhaps their articulation may be the task of an observer, since it plays no part in the practices that the beliefs justify.⁹ In either event the practices in which the nationalists engage are not to be thought of as contrasted with beliefs: They are the expressions of them. Much the same can be said of the suggestion that nationalism consists in the pursuit of certain policies—namely, those taken to favor a nation. Nationalism as a form of political action would be unintelligible unless the policies that such action supported were not founded on a set of beliefs. Again, whether or not individual nationalists consciously hold the beliefs, their actions still express them.

It is necessary to establish that nationalism is a set of beliefs or a doctrine if we are to have any hope of understanding and evaluating it in terms of the reasons there may be for and against it. Yet establishing that it is a doctrine only leads us into the difficulty of determining precisely what doctrine it is, because several very different doctrines all seem to count as nationalism. Indeed, the problem of definition routinely troubles observers.

Here the diverse doctrines that different nationalists seem to hold make an answer difficult. Consider only a few examples. In Ulster, Irish nationalists challenge the existence of the Northern Irish state while Ulster Unionists support it as part of the United Kingdom. Their disagreement is not simply a factual one as to whether, by certain agreed criteria, Northern Ireland satisfies the conditions for being part of Ireland or those for being part of the United Kingdom.¹⁰ The criteria employed by the two sides in the dispute are different, and this difference reflects a disagreement in their doctrines, though even these conflicting doctrines are themselves not free of internal differences and complexities. On the Irish nationalist side a united Ireland is mainly dictated by the criterion of common occupancy of the national homeland. Irish nationalism is the doctrine that a certain territory—the island of Ireland—constitutes the national home and thereby warrants national statehood. Surely, it may seem, this doctrine is quite typical of nationalism generally.¹¹

A moment's reflection will dispel the illusion. For, contrary to the impression created by nomenclature, we observe in Northern Ireland a con-

test not between nationalism and something else but between two forms of nationalism. Ulster Unionism is, of course, a type of British nationalism, attested by the Unionists' constant asseveration of British nationality. Their criterion has nothing to do with occupancy of a British homeland. While asserting their right to occupancy of Northern Ireland, they do not base their claim to British statehood on its being part of a British national home. Rather, they base their claim on an allegiance they take themselves to share with the people of Britain. That is what they believe constitutes them as part of a British nation and entitles them to live under the British state.

The two nationalisms are so different that it seems hard to see what they have in common apart from the vocabulary of nationhood employed in support of analogous but competing political claims. Yet both are undeniably forms of nationalism: Irish nationalism is paradigmatically so and a model for many other nationalist movements, whereas British nationalism is arguably the forerunner of nationalisms generally¹² and still retains its essential features.

Welsh nationalism,¹³ by contrast with mainstream Irish nationalism, is founded on an assertion of the distinctiveness of Welsh culture from, in particular, that of England. Although Welsh nationalism has political goals, these may seem to be subordinate to its cultural ones, most notably the preservation of the Welsh language. This, too, seems a characteristic form of nationalism, to be found, for example, in Quebec and Hawaii. Indeed, many thinkers take a common culture to be essential to the nationalist conception of nations.¹⁴ These nationalisms seem quite different, however, from the British, Canadian, and American nationalisms with which they compete. The last contrast is particularly acute. The American nation is, after all, ostensibly based on quite other principles than common culture or ethnicity or even a territorial homeland.

*America is West and the wind blowing.
America is a great word and the snow,
A way, a white bird, the rain falling,
A shining thing in the wind and the gull's call.
America is neither a land nor a people. . . .
Here we must live only as shadows.
This is our race, we that have none, that have had
Neither the old walls nor the voices around us.
This is our land, this is our ancient ground.—
The raw earth, the mixed bloods and the strangers. . . .*¹⁵

Quoting these lines by Archibald Macleish as the United States prepared to enter the war against fascism, Harold Nicolson countered the notion that American nationalism is "something comparatively artificial and

unauthentic . . . not a pulsation of the blood but a deliberate form of belief,"¹⁶ by observing that its basis in an idea, rather than in "generations of gradual growth," does not make it any the less genuine.¹⁷

The American "melting pot" absorbs a wide range of cultures and races, requiring of its members only commitment to its constitutional principles of individual liberty and formal equality. American nationalism conceives of the nation as a sovereign people whose national unity is forged by just such constitutional commitments. It is a form of nationalism that recurs in postrevolutionary France, whose example was followed by many. Some theorists regard this emphasis on the sovereignty of the people as paradigmatic of nationalism.¹⁸ But American nationalism could scarcely be more different from cultural nationalism, or from the ethnic nationalism of, say, Chicano nationalism or black nationalism directed against it in the 1960s. For here we have a nationalism that celebrates ethnic origins and yet excludes from the nation, whose interests it advocates, those who do not share these origins. In the minds of many, this has seemed the inevitable tendency of nationalism, and a deeply disturbing one, however understandable it may have been in the cases just mentioned.

What, then, among all this diversity, is nationalism? After all, even the aims seem very different: territorial integration, freedom of political association, cultural survival, popular sovereignty under a liberal and democratic constitution, ethnic segregation. Just what core of common belief could lead to such differences remains quite unclear.¹⁹ Yet it is evident that the differences spring from contrasting conceptions of what a *nation* is: the population of a territory, a voluntary association, a cultural community, a sovereign people, an ethnic group. Depending on how the nation is conceived, the aims of its corresponding form of nationalism differ. The implication is that if there is any unity beneath the diversity of nationalisms, it is to be found in some common core of their conceptions of the nation.

The Concept of Nation

The word "nationalism" is a relatively recent coinage,²⁰ entering common currency as late as the nineteenth century, the era of the great spread of nationalism in Europe. "Nation" is a much older word; of Latin etymology, it was used in its original sense in the eighteenth century.²¹ Vestiges of this earlier usage persist today. "Nation" meant, very roughly, what we sometimes mean by a people, when we are thinking of them as distinct from others, particularly in terms of birth or descent. It was thus applied most easily to strangers and, for this and other reasons, was readily used to refer to the Jewish people. Shakespeare, we may recall, had Shylock say about Antonio that "he hates our sacred nation."²²

Nearly three hundred years later, George Eliot's Jewish hero, Daniel Deronda, took a different line: "[T]he idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre, such as the English have, though they too are scattered over the globe."²³

It is not that Jews no longer constituted the kind of entity they did in Shakespeare's day but, rather, that a shift in the *concept* of nationhood had taken place. It is a shift that, notoriously, led many to make efforts to assimilate into nations instead of reconstructing their own. Thus, for example, Sean O'Faolain introduced Moll Wall, a twentieth-century "Irish speaking, Dublin born Jewess," as follows: "[H]er real name was not Moll. It was Miriam, but since in her excessive efforts to *nationalise* herself she always signed her name not only in Gaelic but in an outmoded script . . . , her fellow students called her Moira, or Maurya, or Maureen, until she ended up by being universally known as Moll."²⁴

What led to this change, and what concept of the nation did it leave us with? Three developments, I believe, led to the change—and each determines a somewhat different concept of the nation. The first is the rise of the modern state with its claim to sole authority over all those who live within its borders. Such a state needs a notion of those who are subject to its authority in view of their membership of it. For the power of the state must be experienced by its members not simply as an external force, nor yet as the manifestation of personal feeling, but rather as the proper expression of the state's impersonal relation to its members. Their membership must be a clearly legal status, conferring certain rights and imposing certain duties. This status, I suggest, is what lies at the heart of the legal conception of nationality.²⁵ The aggregate of those who share their nationality in this sense is the nation, and in the same sense a single nation corresponds to every state.²⁶ The old sense of "nation" has been modified and made precise in a particular context—a context unavailable before the rise of the modern state. In this sense of the word, no general answer can be given to the question "What is a nation?" over and above providing the directions for discovering how the constitutional arrangements of a particular state determine what is the nation corresponding to it. These differ from state to state. French nationality is, roughly speaking, acquired by birth in the land of France, whereas German nationality depends upon German descent and is accorded even to those whose forbears have lived for generations outside of Germany. Different sorts of nationalists, however, may disagree as to which arrangement is correct in terms of *really* determining a nation.

It is immediately evident that this legal sense is *not* the sense of "nation" which nationalists employ. If it were, then it would be self-contradictory for a nationalist to press for independent statehood for a portion

of an existing state, on the grounds that it constituted a separate nation. Simply by virtue of their membership of the existing state the inhabitants of that portion constitute part of the same nation, in the legal sense, as others, and not a separate nation. Yet a demand for independent statehood of this sort is just what typifies many nationalists. Even when they do not need to make this demand because they already have their own state, they commonly entertain the possibility of the demand in conjuring up the specter of foreign domination as something to be resisted in the name of independent statehood.

A second sense of "nation" is one that has been employed by anthropologists and others concerned with the scientific classification of social groups.²⁷ The growth of science in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was characterized by a demand to classify the objects of study more rigorously than in common speech. Birds, butterflies, and peoples, particularly the "primitive" peoples of the expanding European colonies, yielded themselves up to classification. The old imprecise notion of a nation could be pressed into service here. *How* things are classified depends on what theory we have as to what makes them the same or different. In biological classification, evolutionary theory plays this role. In anthropological classification of peoples, a theory is needed to determine what is to count as a nation. Throughout the nineteenth century it was commonplace to regard people as divided up into races according to their physical attributes. Nations could be conveniently regarded as subdivisions of races, largely on the spurious basis that, since their languages were related, then they were also. Language thus became a test for nationhood. With the passing of racial theories peoples came to be thought of as distinguished by their own perceptions of themselves as different—for example, in view of their different languages—such that language is still a test for nationhood, despite the very different conception of the nation that is involved. Thus, in this usage, Switzerland may be thought of as inhabited by people of different nations: French, German, Italian, and so on.

The anthropologist's term "nation" is an observer's term: It need have no parallel in the discourse of the people to whom it is applied. Our ordinary concept of nation is not of this kind, however: It figures ineliminably in nationalist discourse. It is a concept which we employ as political agents in a world of nation-states where this discourse is part of our ordinary unreflective talk. We should not, therefore, be seduced into adopting some loose version of the anthropological usage. We are not, for the most part, amateur anthropologists, because we are not scientists at all, not even amateur ones. We have no knowledge of, or interest in, the theories that determine anthropological classification. Our classificatory aims are quite other than those of scientific theorists, just as the countryman's traditional classification of birds and butterflies is differently motivated

from that of the scientific ornithologist and entomologist. Nor, with certain exceptions to be discussed later, is the nationalist's interest in classifying nations an anthropological one. Most nationalists would not consider their claims about the existence of nations to be falsifiable by anthropologists' theories. Their claims, in the main, have a quite different kind of justification.

I insist on this point in order to indicate how misguided it is to sift through the definitions of the nation offered by social anthropologists, political scientists, and so on—in order to extract some common core of meaning as giving us a concept of the nation relevant to considering the claims of nationalists. Such a process is all too common among political theorists, many of whom are, in truth, not clear about what kind of activity they are engaged in—scientific, philosophical, historical, or whatever. But this process is quite misguided, since different definitions presuppose, if only implicitly, different theories and, as often as not, theories aiming to provide explanations of different phenomena.

The mistake, however, goes deeper. It lies in supposing that there is an account of the concept of nation to be offered independent of the context in which it figures. Such a supposition, I have argued, is not tenable. The legal concept is distinctive because of the context in which it figures, and so is the anthropological concept or concepts. Neither of these, though, is the context in which we ordinarily think of nations. That, I suggest, is an unavoidably *political* context. But my point here should scarcely be surprising, since we typically think of nations when thinking of nationalism. We think of them when we explicitly think about nationalists' demands for statehood and other political claims. We also think of them when, perhaps without realizing it, we accept some particular nationalist account of nations. But when we do that, we swallow the political doctrine in which it figures. For the different accounts of nations which make the giving of a unitary definition so problematic are different, I shall argue, precisely because of the political purposes in pursuit of which these accounts are put to use.

The third development which affects the old concept of the nation and provides it with a new context of application is, indeed, the development of nationalism itself. Nationalism is a doctrine that implies particular political goals which themselves presuppose the development of the modern state. Moreover, nationalism is a modern phenomenon,²⁸ and the concept of the nation it employs is a modern concept unintelligible outside of its modern political context. This fact, however, has a consequence unwelcome to those who think that we can grasp what nationalism is on the basis of an understanding of what nations are, anterior to and independent of nationalism. There is, I am suggesting, no such understanding. Nationalists are not simply utilizing in its agreed application a concept ready at hand. The use to

which they put the concept they find changes it—specifically, in a way that undermines the agreement there is about its application.

The reason for this outcome is that the context in which the political concept of nation occurs is a context of *debate*, not, as with the legal and scientific concepts, a context of description. This debate includes debate about the application of the term “nation.” The Irish nationalists and Ulster Unionists evidently do not agree on the application of the term. As mentioned earlier, there is no a straightforward disagreement about the facts on the basis of which a concept with agreed criteria is applied. Rather, it is a disagreement about those criteria themselves. Any satisfactory account of the political concept of the nation must allow for this latter disagreement. No synoptic descriptive account can do so.

Nominalism

Faced with this predicament, many theorists have given up the struggle to find a unitary account of nationhood. Instead they have concluded that there is no single concept of the nation but that a nation is just whatever people who take themselves to be a nation take themselves to be. A nation is, in a beguiling phrase, a *self-defining* political community.²⁹ One community will take itself to be defined by territory, another by language, a third by a common allegiance, and so forth. But there is no agreed kind of political community that they all take themselves to be, as would be the case if they shared a single conception of nationhood.

It is easy to see how this view of nations as self-defining escapes the problem of trying to characterize nationhood in a way that makes sense of competing claims to it. What *appear* to be substantive disputes over the identity of nations are really only disputes between claimants to rival statehoods or the like, who simply trick themselves out in national dress. There are only political problems to be dealt with, not intellectual and ethical ones to be debated. One national group cannot, for example, deny another’s claim to statehood, since each *is* a nation if it defines itself as such. Yet, as we have just seen, it seems a genuine question whether Ulster Protestants are part of the Irish or the British nation.³⁰ Their self-definitions do not eradicate this issue. The self-definitional view of nation is thus a very pessimistic one. Its inevitable consequence is that, insofar as national demands are grounded on claims about national identity, they cannot be compared and assessed as such. Talk of national rights and the like makes no sense on the self-definitional view. Rather, national demands assume the character of power struggles, which, if they can be adjudicated upon at all, must be judged on the basis of quite other grounds.

This consequence may itself seem a *reductio absurdum* of the self-definitional view, but it faces other difficulties as well. What, on this view, does

a political community define itself *as* when it counts as a nation through its self-definition? It cannot, contrary to appearances, be as a *nation*, since, on this view, nations are whatever their members take them to be, and so the idea of a nation would play no real part in determining what it is they define themselves as. The same difficulty affects the influential view³¹ that “a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation.” Again we can ask, What is the *content* of their belief? What is it that they consider themselves to form? But this suggestion, like the last, provides no possible answer. Its intelligibility presupposes that a common concept of nationhood enters people’s thoughts about their national identity while simultaneously denying that there is such a concept. Another way of reaching this conclusion³² is to notice that if people’s belief that they are a nation is what makes them a nation, then *what* they believe when they believe they are a nation will be that they believe they are a nation. But the content of that belief will also be that they believe they are a nation, and so on *ad infinitum*. This infinite regress of beliefs is vicious, since it means that the content of a belief in nationhood is never determinate.

In fact, the only obvious way to make sense of the self-definitional view is to see it as holding that people constitute a nation when they style themselves as a “nation.” It is not that they apply a determinate concept of nation to themselves but, rather, that they apply just the word “nation,” or whatever word in their own language functions, for political purposes, in the same way as “nation” does in English. We could extend this condition a little by saying that they call themselves by the same name, and that the name functions in the same way as those that we call “names of nations.” This interpretation of the self-definitional view of nations treats it as a form of *nominalism*—the doctrine that all the instances of a general word have in common is that they are referred to by that word. Thus the self-definitional view is a species of nominalist accounts of nations: Nations just are whatever are *called* nations. It is that species that makes what people call themselves definitive of what a nation is. In what follows I shall restrict my use of the term “nominalism” to refer only to this species.

Nominalism introduces a use of the word “nation” that, like the legal or scientific uses, is essentially an observer’s rather than a participant’s.³³ The nominalist account tells us not to bother whether peoples or states are right to call themselves nations, not to participate in their practice of it, but just to go along with their own descriptions. “Nation,” for the nominalist, means *so-called nation* and, in terms of the self-definitional version of nominalism we are looking at, *self-styled nation*. The use of the word “nation” here might just as well be in scare quotes, for the nominalist declines to employ it *in propria persona*. There may sometimes be a justification for this implicitly scare-quoted usage of the word “nation” when we