No one (except, of course, an advocate of ‘realism’ in politics) would deny that patriotism is a proper subject of discussion in moral philosophy: a position or attitude that needs to be subjected to moral judgment. Beyond this point, moral philosophers tend to disagree. Some see patriotism as a virtue, or a moral requirement, or even as the moral requirement, the fount and bedrock of all morality. Others consider it a non-moral attachment in need of moral scrutiny. The latter differ among themselves about the upshot of such scrutiny. On one view, patriotism ought to be constrained, but not necessarily eradicated. Others reach a much harsher conclusion: from a moral point of view, the balance sheet of patriotism is clearly negative, and we should work for its demise.

Given such a wide range of views on the morality of patriotism, it might be useful to provide a map of the terrain: a critical account of the main positions on the issue. That is one of the tasks of this paper. The other is to present and argue for my own view. The two tasks are complementary: much of what I have to say in support of the view I hold emerges from the criticism of other views.

*What is Patriotism?*

Before addressing the question of its morality, I need to say something about what patriotism is and how it relates to nationalism. As this paper focuses on patriotism as a subject in its own right—related to, yet distinct from, nationalism—the tendency to conflate the two must be overcome and a reasonably clear distinction made.

Neither common usage nor the way the two terms are used in scholarly discourse are of much help. In both, the question of the relation between patriotism and nationalism is disposed of much too quickly. This is sometimes done by reducing patriotism to a mere emotional underpinning of nationalism, which is understood as a political
ideology or philosophical theory. Some scholars have succumbed to the popular tendency of presenting ‘our’ stance as patriotism, taken to mean a reasonable, natural and wholesome loyalty to one’s country and compatriots, while portraying ‘their’ attitude as nationalism, understood as irrational, invidious and aggressive. Debates about nationalism itself have often proceeded at cross-purposes due to the ambiguity of the term (political or civic vs. ethnic or cultural nationalism) and to a wide range of competing definitions and conceptions of ‘nationalism’ and ‘nation’ advanced at different levels of discourse.

There is, however, a way of distinguishing between patriotism and nationalism I find helpful, and will assume throughout this paper. One of its virtues is that it is simple; another, that it begs no moral questions. First we need to put to one side the political sense of ‘nation’ that makes it identical with ‘country’, ‘state’ or ‘polity’, and the political or civic type of nationalism related to it. In this context, we need concern ourselves only with the other, ethnic or cultural sense of ‘nation’, and focus on ethnic or cultural nationalism. We can do so without attempting to spell out the relevant understanding of ‘nation’; it is enough to characterize it in terms of common ancestry, history, and a set of cultural traits. Both patriotism and nationalism involve love of, identification with, and special concern for a certain entity. In the case of patriotism, that entity is one’s patria, one’s country; in the case of nationalism, that entity is one’s natio, one’s nation (in the ethnic/cultural sense of the term). Thus patriotism and nationalism are understood as the same type of a set of beliefs and attitudes, and distinguished in terms of their objects, rather than the strength of those beliefs and attitudes, or in terms of theory vs. its emotional underpinnings.

Patriotism, then, is love of one’s country, identification with it, and special concern for its well-being and that of compatriots. This calls for a few brief comments. First, this is only a definition. A full account of patriotism would include the patriot’s beliefs about the merits and achievements of the patria, his need to belong to a collectivity and be a part of a wider narrative, to be related to a past and a future that transcend the narrow confines of an individual’s life and its mundane concerns, as well as social and political conditions that affect the ebb and

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