

## Nationalism or democracy<sup>1</sup>

Lloyd J. Carr (Winter 2023)  
Philosophy Department, Emeritus  
Rivier University

“Democracy” is a political honorific; most governments whose political systems are recognized on the international stage refer to themselves as “democracies.”<sup>2</sup> Many, however, are nation-states, founded on nationalistic principles. I want to argue that nationalism and democracy are incompatible, and that because they are mutually exclusive conceptually, any actual political practice attempting to combine them must end up sacrificing one for the other. My plan is to use both conceptual analysis and an empirical fact. Empirically, human history teaches that as far back as we know people have moved, migrated, explored and traveled all over the globe and have interbred wherever humans have encountered each other. The reasons for this won’t play a role in my argument, and so can be left to the side; the main point I will need is the fact that humans are movers and everywhere genetically mixed. Conceptually, the definitions of nationalism and of democracy are sufficiently complex to allow analyses to isolate component concepts that make for the tensions between these two political theories. My plan, then, is to combine conceptual analysis with empirical fact to support a conclusion of incompatibility. If my argument is correct, then any claim that a nationalistic political state is a democracy (i.e., a democratic nation-state) is false; while such a claim might be useful or pleasing political rhetoric, it cannot be the reality. The analysis of concepts necessarily involves defining terms and the two central concepts here are “nationalism” and “democracy.”<sup>3</sup> In offering an analysis of each, I have been mindful that these two very complex and somewhat “plastic” concepts can be presented so as to make them appear incompatible when in reality they might not be; I have therefore tried to be “neutral” in my presentation, and leave it to the reader to judge the results.

### I. Definition of nationalism:

Nationalism is both a political theory and an ideology. When we consider nationalism as an ideology, it is at the center of political movements whose goal was (and still is) to form and maintain a nation-state. My focus here will be on nationalism as a political theory, that is: a set of connected concepts and principles that both describes and attempts to justify a certain basis of statehood. There are two normative principles that summarize the theory of nationalism: (a) each *nation* should form a state (a government) by which its interests and goals are promoted, and (b) the state (the government) should promote the interests and goals of one *nation* (or one dominate nation), namely the nation that creates the state to do just that.<sup>4</sup> According to nationalism, a nation-state is a nation’s state; the nation considers the state “theirs.” The nation collectively believes it “owns” the state because the nation creates the state for the nation’s benefit.

I will mean by “state” the standard characterization: (1) a territory with reasonably defined borders, containing (2) a population of sufficient size, administered by (3) a government, and (4) recognized by other states as a viable, reasonable stable political system. A “nation-state,” then, means that the population within a given state’s territory (typically called the nation’s “homeland,” “motherland,” or “fatherland”) constitutes, totally or in large majority, a *nation* that has formed a government whose primary mission is to serve the welfare of that nation.

Given the political theory of nationalism, as characterized here, it becomes central to define what a “nation” is; what kind of connections among a group of people are thought to make it a nation (also called “a people” or “a

folk”) such that the resulting collective gains a national identity, each member of which believes s/he possesses an identity as a member of a nation? There are several such connections.<sup>5</sup>

1. Kinds of nations:

a. *Cultural* – A nation might be defined in terms of the cultural tradition it’s member practice and seek to preserve. In this case, the culture is a monoculture as there can be no such thing as a culturally based multicultural nation. So, for example, Celtic culture might be the basis of the “Celtic nation,” or Hispanic culture the basis of the “Hispanic nation,” or the culture practiced in southern India the basis of the “Dravidian nation,” or the culture of certain northeast Indigenous Americans the basis of the “Abenaki nation.” In each of these groups, the nation is formed and identified by the cultural tradition/history its members creatively practice and intentionally maintain. This includes, typically, a spoken language, often bearing the same name as the nation whose language it is, a style of cuisine and clothing, a folk art tradition (e.g., graphic designs, folk music and dance), perhaps an architectural style, and cultural (national) celebrations.<sup>6</sup>

b. *Religious* – Members who identify as belonging to the same religion, practicing the same faith, have sufficiently strong bonds to serve as a basis for forming a nation, as in “the Christian nation” or “the Muslim nation” or “the Jewish nation” or “the Hindu nation” or “the Buddhist nation.” In each case, the identity of the nation is determined by the religious affiliation of its members. The idea of a religious nation intersects that of a cultural nation, but not completely as there is the possibility that communities of different cultures practice the same religion in which case a religious nation would be (incidentally and accidentally) multicultural. (This is actually the case with the 5 above named religions.) Conversely, it is possible for members of different religions to belong to a single cultural tradition. If a religious nation creates a nation-state, it is likely though not necessarily a theocracy, since the primary role of the government would be to promote and maintain the religion of the nation.

c. *Ethnic* – Ethnic identity is a loose and imprecise notion. Those who identify themselves as having an “ethnicity” sometimes are referring to a cultural tradition into which they were born, raised and practice. But often by “ethnicity” they mean something stronger, namely a non-political identity inherited from their biological parents that is not cultural or religious but thought to be rooted in one’s genetic heritage, ancestral lineage, or “gene pool.”<sup>7</sup> This notion of ethnicity is commonly called one’s “nationality.” For example, someone whose parents identify as, say, Basque, identify themselves as having a Basque nationality, even though they might not speak the Basque language, might not have been raised in the Basque culture, perhaps have never lived in or even visited the Basque region in northern Europe, and might not know anything about Basque history; nevertheless, if asked “What nationality are you?” they would readily answer “Basque.” All those who were born with a Basque nationality, then, form, collectively, the “Basque nation.” Similarly, all those born of, say Italian parents, or Japanese parents, or Polish parents, or German parents, or Ethiopian parents, or Chinese parents, etc. would, according to this view, inherit from their parents an Italian, or Japanese, etc., nationality. On the basis of this inherited identity, the Italian, or the Japanese, or the Polish, etc. nation is formed, consisting of all and only members who share their ethnicity in common. Whereas membership in a culturally based “nation” or a religiously based “nation” is essentially voluntary, such that it is practically possible (even if socially or psychologically difficult) for a member to shed a culture or leave a religion and practice another one, one’s nationality is believed to be genetic (or somehow biological) by those ascribing to this notion of ethnicity, and this makes a person involuntarily a member of a nation from birth until death.<sup>8</sup> In each case of an ethnic nation, the nation is determined by the common “nationality” of its members.

d. *Racial* – A person’s racial classification is another way that a “nation” has been thought of. According to this view, humans evolved certain characteristics based on the general environmental conditions of the area of earth

for which they became naturally selected. These characteristics are passed on to offspring, resulting in racial groups, commonly identified by the most noticeable of the phenotype characteristics (e.g., skin color, hair texture, eye color, complexion, etc.). Thus, there is the “black race” associated with the African continent, the “white race” associated with the European continent, the “Asian race” associated with the Asian continent, and so on. Nations are formed on the basis of such racial identities; the “white nation” consists of all humans of the white race, the “black nation” consists of all humans of the black race, and the “Asian nation” consists of all humans of the Asian race. In each case, the nation and one’s national identity is determined by racial classification. As with ethnic based nations, membership in racial based nations is not thought of as something voluntary but is determined at birth according to the genetically based racial makeup of one’s parents that their offspring inherit.

Of these 4 main types of nation, two are considered to be the result of nurture or conventional (cultural and religious nations) and two are thought to be the result of nature (ethnic and racial nations). And of the 4, the one most associated with traditional nationalism as a political ideology and presented as justification for nationalistic movements and the forming of nation-states, has been ethnic nationalism. I don’t want to examine the truth, or even the plausibility, of these 4 ideas of “nation”; it is abundantly clear that all 4 have major flaws and the last two (ethnic and racial) are fatally flawed.<sup>9</sup> However, to the degree that they, especially ethnic nationalism, have played a fundamental role in nationalism, understanding the ideas of “nation” and “national identity” is necessary for understanding nationalism.

The above 4 types of nation are not as distinct as presented; there is much overlap among them. For example, while the core of an ethnic nation is believed to consist of an identity inherited from an individual’s biological parents or ancestral lineage, it will typically include cultural and religious components; being brought up within a more-or-less strong cultural and religious tradition reinforces that ethnic identity. In the case where the same name applies to a person’s ethnicity and to their religious or cultural identity, for example the “Jewish nation,” the overlap can make for confusion. So, the philosopher Spinoza both lost and didn’t lose his Jewish identity. How so? Well, he lost his religious “Jewish identity” (he was believed to be an atheist and excommunicated) but retained his ethnic “Jewish identity” (which could not be taken from him). Likewise with racial nations, they will commonly be accompanied by cultural and religious traditions which serve to reinforce the bonds that unite a population, such that its members think of themselves as possessing a “thick” and “rich” national identity rather than a “thin” one based only on race. Still, these 4 types are sufficiently distinct to allow for tension to exist. So, for example, someone who ethnically identifies as a member of one nation, say Japanese, could be born within the territory and socialized/enculturated in the language and traditions of another nation, say Serbia. The possibility to be ethnically a member of one nation and culturally/religiously a member of another nation means that, in the event that the governments of two such nation-states enter into conflict, individuals can be pressured to “take sides” and have their allegiances come under scrutiny.<sup>10</sup> It is important, then, to distinguish the various kinds of nations even though in reality there is typically much overlap.

But no matter the type of nation (a through e), the application of nationalism (as defined above) to these various groupings yields states, called “nation-states,” each of which will - in accord with the definition of nationalism - favor the interests and goals of *one* nation (of whatever type). A nation-state will, thus, have: (i) a territory (with reasonably clear borders), the nation’s homeland, (ii) a set of natural resources (size of population, soil, water, minerals, sunlight, etc.), (iii) a geophysical environment determined by its location on earth (rivers, mountains, ocean harbors, deserts, etc.), (iv) a climate and patterns of weather conditions (number of seasons, length of growing season, seasonal flooding or droughts, etc.). No matter the political organization of the nation-state, no matter its type of government, there are two overarching tasks it has: first, to protect the nation from threats and

enemies (internal as well as external) seeking to do it harm; second, to arrange the civil life of the nation that makes it as favorable as possible, given the constraints that are imposed by (i) – (iv). The nation-state's *raison d'être* is to assure and promote the welfare of the nation. My question then is: can this be a democracy?

## II. The central principles of democracy:

Democracy is a form of government that, since its modern elaboration and justification by political philosophers in the early European Enlightenment, has been adopted by an increasing number of countries.<sup>11</sup> Today, early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many if not most governments recognized on the international stage call themselves “democracies.” Like many other forms of government, democracy represents a compromise – a trade-off – between government control over the people governed and the peoples’ desire to be free of government control. In democracy, the line between these two values (control and the absence of control) is flexible, shifting, sometimes vague, other times more clearly demarcated and rigorously enforced; but overall, the balance in a democracy favors political freedom over government control compared to most other forms of government. In the short run, this can make for a degree of social disorder, inefficiency, policy failures, poor administration (especially during emergencies), and internal conflict between branches of government; in the long run, however, favoring less control in democracy rather than more is considered to have far more benefits for the governed than any short run inefficiencies. The theory of democratic government is broad enough to require further specification into types: direct, representative, constitutional, parliamentary, presidential, etc.<sup>12</sup> The following principles of democracy are considered to be common to all types.<sup>13</sup>

1) *Government by consent of the governed.* This is typically achieved in democracies by the ballot; individual citizens express their preferences on a ballot in periodic election events, and their votes are aggregated into a collective choice by the parliamentary principle of majority rule (or plurality rule for more than 2 alternatives). Citizens cast their ballots either directly for candidates for office and for policies (propositions and warrant articles) or indirectly by electing representatives to office who have publicly stated their positions on policy issues and agree to represent the interests of their voters. Citizens in a democracy thereby practice a system of indirect self-government in which political authority (power) is given to office holders from (or revoked by) the governed who, in turn, are subject (i.e., subject themselves) to the authority of their government. The consent must be informed (at least to a large degree) or the governed are merely having the wool pulled over their eyes; the governed must be able to tell political truth from falsities, or at least political likelihood from unlikelihood, in order to make reasonable ballot decisions. This is typically accomplished in a democracy by a politically independent or “free” press, one ideally immune from political influence. Also, the governed must put their trust in the voting process, not “blind trust” but trust backed by a trustworthy voting system.

2) *Political equality.* This concept requires the rule: one citizen, one vote. Each citizen is thus equal in the sense that: (a) the rule prohibits weighted voting – the idea that certain citizens, say the rich or the educated or those in positions of social influence, will have their votes given more value when tallied than the votes of other citizens; (b) the rule excludes disenfranchising certain citizens – the idea that certain citizens will not have their votes count at all; (c) the rule requires that each citizens’ voting profile, their individual preferences concerning the proposals or candidates on the ballot, will be counted and no voting profile will be excluded. Each citizen, with one vote, has an equal say in how they will be governed with respect to each ballot issue.

3) *Individual freedom.* Citizens in a democracy expect and are granted a relatively high degree of freedom from government control. Clearly, some degree of coercive government control in the form of regulations, laws, fines and punishments, norms and expectations concerning behaviors (enforced or encouraged as the case may be) is

necessary for any society to function. But a democratic government, being ultimately in the hands of the governed, is arranged such that as much freedom from government control is afforded to each individual citizen as is compatible with equal freedom to all citizens.

4) *Political liberties*. Individual and civil liberties to form beliefs, to express one's mind, to plan and act as an individual sees fit, to form and pursue goals, and in general to arrange and live one's life, are protected in democracies by a set of rights, publicly known and officially sanctioned. The right to be treated as an equal under the law, the right to equal access of information, the right to express oneself, the right to assemble and petition government authorities, the right to equal opportunity and equal access to social benefits, the right to own property, the right to a degree of privacy – these are some of the typical rights of citizens that a democratic government should and will protect.

These 4 central components of democracy are interrelated and mutually supporting. They are maintained and effective to the degree that the population governed by a democratic government *believe* in their value and put them into practice, and they will be expressed and clarified in the constitution of a constitutional democracy. A democracy is, in effect, a kind of *epistemic* (doxastic) collective, people held together by believing in the same core democratic values, accepting, updating and practicing the same core democratic political principles.<sup>14</sup> As an epistemic collective: (i) a degree of mutual trust between citizens and government (for neither can know everything about the other), and (ii) predominantly truthful politically relevant information, become necessary conditions for democracy to function; these two values, truth and trust, are central to working democracy.

Sometimes, however, we find that these 4 components of democracy work against each other. It is expected that a measure of government control will inevitably constrain the extent of civil liberties, but there are occasions in a democracy when, say, rights and freedoms clash, and the protection of certain democratically held rights will mean a measure of democratically assured individual freedoms must be sacrificed; likewise, the other way around. Ideally, such clashes of political values are resolved in democracies by discussion, argument, compromise, and agreement of the parties involved, through a legal process in a politically independent judiciary. Of course, the actual political systems calling themselves “democracies” fall far short of the above 4 ideals; this is to be expected. But if we focus on the concept of democracy itself, that is “pure and perfect democracy,” “democracy in the ideal,” these 4 components and their interactions will be seen to be essential. Remove any one and the other 3 lose their grounding, and it is no longer the concept of democracy we are discussing.

It follows, then, that in a democracy the important distinction within the governed is between citizen and non-citizen; it is not between citizens who are in the majority and those in the minority on any given ballot issue. While the majority/minority distinction might be significant for a given round of voting, the profile of who is in which group can, and typically will, change on some other ballot issue. And the minority on any given ballot issue still receives the benefits listed under the above 4 components of democratic government while non-citizens do not. Qualification for citizenship is, thus, crucial in a democracy. My question, then, is: in a democracy can national identity be the qualification for citizenship?

### III. An empirical fact <sup>15</sup>

Anthropology as well as genetic research on the human genome have revealed that the species homo sapiens (human beings) evolved from the hominid family in central Africa (approximately 300,000 years ago) and subsequently migrated in various waves to establish populations in every part of earth. Human migrations, no doubt, had causes: climate changes, resource depletions, food availability, and perhaps competition/conflict over

desired environments are speculated to have played their part in the large-scale movements of humans within and to various continents and islands. Whatever the causes, however, this pattern of movement has become part of the human profile: humans, largely if not totally, are wanderers, explorers, and travelers, ready to satisfy their curiosity about “parts unknown,” ready to improve their situation by migrating, and ready to occupy environments that offer novel challenges to human ingenuity.

Significantly, wherever humans of one wave of migration have made contact with humans from an earlier wave of migration, they have interbred. Genetic analyses of even relatively isolated populations on distant islands reveal that its inhabitants are genetically mixed. There are no “pure” gene pools or “lineages” either ethnically or racially, within the human population, according to anthropological findings and genetic analyses. And because every human is a vast blend of genetic traits, inherited from ancestors who were themselves genetic blends, the above notions of “an ethnic nation” and “a racial nation” become not just difficult to comprehend, but must be considered fundamentally social constructs.<sup>16</sup> The best we can say is that homo sapiens form a biological species, and there is no more narrow genetic base on which to divide humans into anything like “nations” as proposed by ethnic and racial nationalism.

Cultural and religious nationalism succumbs to the same empirical story. Cultural studies reveal that there are no “pure” cultures. Wherever humans have practiced a culture, it has always been a blend of many different cultural influences from earlier migrating people; human languages, cuisines, celebrations, dress, folk music and dance traditions – all the central components to culture – have directly or indirectly intermingled and influenced each other. Cultures have always evolved by absorbing from and accommodating to surrounding cultures.<sup>17</sup> The same can be said of religions, at least the major religions that have been presented as the basis of “nationhood.” Comparative religious studies finds that as humans have migrated and interbred, their religious practices have likewise influenced each other resulting in complex religious systems containing both formal and informal beliefs, doctrines, stories, and practices absorbed from each other. In short, cultures and religions are as much a “blend” as the human genome is; how could it be otherwise?

The fact that humans have always been “on the move,” migrating to distant places and everywhere intermixing, means that every internationally recognized state (as defined above) contains within its borders some significant degree of genetic, cultural and religious diversity. Individuals (and thus groups of individuals) within each state’s territory are a blend: ethnically and racially with respect to ancestors/lineage, culturally and religiously with respect to their social practices. Thus, any political attempt to divide a population into nationals and non-nationals is objectively unfounded and ultimately arbitrary; for any two individuals, one of which is declared a national and the other declared a non-national, there will be a third individual occupying a middle space between these two who presents a puzzle where s/he belongs. Nevertheless, a nation-state is committed to classifying its population into nationals vs. non-nationals, for without doing so nationals could not be favored. How might this be done? If the nation is religious, it might be a doctrinal difference that separates a population into different groups; if the nation is cultural, it might be different spoken languages or different styles of dress that divides a population; if the nation is racial, it might be skin color; if the nation is ethnic, it might be ancestral lineage characterized by, say, family name. As a consequence, every nation-state has its dominant nation - the nation (of whatever type and however demarcated) that the state has been designed to favor - and its subordinate nation(s). The important distinction in a nation-state is, then, between nationals and non-nationals, the former category being privileged in so far as the government attends to its welfare while the latter are inevitably considered as having a lesser status; non-nationals are typically viewed by nationals as “outsiders,” as “other,” and as “not one of us.” In a nation-state, nationals (however identified) are automatically granted citizenship, sometimes even if they don’t reside within the nation-state’s homeland borders (making them a “diaspora”). Non-nationals are either denied citizenship, even if they have lived within the nation-state’s territory for generations, or have a long and difficult process of

application. If both nationals and non-nationals are granted citizenship, non-nationals tend to be “second class citizens” compared to nationals.

#### IV. The impossibility of a democratic nation-state (equivalently, a nationalistic democracy)

Many modern nation-states call themselves “democracies,” fewer describe themselves as “nationalistic democracies,” but this latter description is just another way of expressing the same thing: a state that presents itself as equally a democracy and founded on nationalism. On the surface, such a state seems possible; on the one hand, as a nation-state, the resident nation for whose benefit it exists is dominant and favored, and on the other hand the 4 democratic principles (above) applies to it. There appears to be no insurmountable problem arranging a political system in which, for example, “France is for the French (i.e., the French nation),” or “Japan is for the Japanese (i.e., the Japanese nation),” and have the French or the Japanese live under a democratic government. However, once we add to the mix the empirical fact that nowhere on earth is there a human population of any significant size that is “pure” ethnically, racially, culturally, or religiously, we run into deep problems that require either giving up (or seriously limiting) some democratic principles in order to satisfy the principles of nationalism, or giving up (or seriously limiting) some principles of nationalism in order to satisfy the principles of democracy. This is not a matter of compromising the clashing principles so as to gain “the best of both worlds,” or a matter of temporary suspending one or the other of the clashing ideals only to resume it after, say, an economic or a military crisis has passed; the clashing principles are at the core of democracy and of nationalism (as these are defined above) such that suspending (or seriously limiting) one for the other is tantamount to sacrificing one for the other. In other words, my argument is that it is conceptually impossible, and therefore practically impossible, for a state to be simultaneously a democracy and a nation-state.

There appears to be 3 areas of incompatibility between democracy and the nation-state (again, as these two political systems are characterized above). The first concerns the matter of equality, the second concerns citizenship, and the third concerns accurate politically significant information. I present each as a dilemma with added comments addressing possible weaknesses in the argument.

(1). The problem of political equality.

A dilemma:

(i) Assume a democratic nation-state.

(ii) In this nation-state, non-nationals are not politically equal to nationals. (True by the above definition of “nation-state.”)

(iii) In this democracy all citizens are politically equal. (True by the above definition of “democracy.”)

(iv) If, for the sake of democracy, the government of (i) gives non-nationals political equality with nationals, then the nation-state (i) is failing to favor the dominate nation over any subordinate nation.

(v) If, however, for the sake of nationalism, the government of (i) denies non-nationals the same political equality that nationals enjoy, then the democratic government of (i) is failing to abide by the democratic principle of equality.

(vi) The government of (i) must either grant or deny its non-nationals equal political status as its nationals enjoy.

Thus, (vii) this state must either fail to be a nation-state or fail to be a democracy. A democratic nation-state (assumption (i)) is impossible. (Conclusion from (iv), (v), and (vi)).

Comments: This argument is valid because it is an instance of a valid argument form: the dilemma. So, the only question is: are the premises true? The premises (ii) and (iii) are true by definition; given the above definitions of “nation-state” and “democracy,” they cannot be rejected as false. Premises (iv) and (v) are each true, given that there must be either equality or inequality between any two groups with respect to political status. Finally, premise (vi) is a tautology and so is necessarily true. The main apparent weakness in this argument is if we assume in (i) a democratic nation-state in which non-citizens and non-nationals are co-extensive; that is, a state in which a person’s identity as a non-national (however characterized) is a necessary and sufficient condition for exclusion from citizenship status and thus barred from treatment politically equal to that given to citizens. But such a “limited democracy” (i.e., democracy limited to nationals only) is not a democracy at all, for (as argued in section III above) there is no non-arbitrary, objective way of identifying who are nationals and distinguishing them from non-nationals, and as a result non-nationals will be wrongly excluded from political treatment equal to citizens. I submit, then, that this argument is sound; the politically important value of equality represents one unresolvable clash (i.e., conceptual incompatibility) between nationalism and democracy; when it comes to the problem of political equality, either nationalism or democracy must be given up (or fatally compromised) in order to put the other into practice.

## (2) The problem of citizenship.

A dilemma:

(i) Assume a democratic nation-state.

(ii) In this democracy, full citizenship is a conventional political status granted to the governed who qualify, which a citizen can voluntarily renounce.

(iii) In this nation-state, full citizenship is an involuntary political status granted to its nationals and either denied to or restricted in status to its non-nationals.

(iv) Thus, there is a population in this state who would qualify for full citizenship if this state were a democracy, but who would not qualify for full citizenship if this state were a nation-state. (Inductively from (i), (ii), and (iii).)

(v) If, for the sake of a democratic government, full citizenship is granted to this group of non-nationals, it violates a nationalistic principle that full citizenship goes only to nationals and is either denied or restricted in status to non-nationals.

(vi) If, for the sake of nationalism, full citizenship is granted only to members of the nation and denied to or restricted in status to this group of non-nationals, it violates the democratic principle of citizenship.

(vii) The state must either grant or deny (or restrict) full citizenship to this group of non-nationals.

Thus, (viii) the state must either fail to be a nation-state or fail to be a democracy. A democratic nation-state (assumption (i) is impossible. (Conclusion from (iv), (v), (vi), and (vii).

Comments: The lower part of this compound argument is valid because it is an instance of a valid argument form: the dilemma. But are the premises true? Premises (ii) and (iii) are each true by the definition (above) of “democracy” and “nation-state.” Conclusion (iv) follows inductively, assuming in (i) a population of sufficient size and complexity. In a democracy, the qualification for citizenship status can’t be based on any of the types of national identities that define a nation-state. First, with regard to ethnic and racial nation-states, a democracy can’t be based on any genetic/physical properties that individuals possess involuntarily; the reason for this is that a democracy (as defined above) is an *epistemic* collective; i.e., people united by a set of *common beliefs* (not just a set of beliefs held in common) in certain political values and principles.<sup>18</sup> To base citizenship on non-epistemic



criteria such as ethnicity, or genetic traits, or phenotypical characteristics as ethnic and racial nation-states are committed to do, violates this foundational epistemic condition of democracy.

What about religious or cultural nation-states? Aren't they based on sets of common beliefs? Not really; politically these two types of nation-states are based on practices rather than beliefs. In each of these two types of nation-state, non-nationals would be identified as those who don't practice the national religion or the national culture. However, the line between nationals and non-nationals in such cases is not only vague, it is impossible to draw. First there is the problem of pretense: individuals can openly pretend to practice the national religion or national culture and thus more-or-less easily "pass" as members of the national class, gaining thereby the citizenship benefits that are available to nationals but withheld from non-nationals. Meanwhile they secretly practice an alternative religion or culture, making them "in their hearts" non-nationals, in effect non-citizens. But (secondly) even if we assume "honesty in practice" on the part of the population, there is the problem of unjust arbitrariness; as argued above in Section III, the distinction between nationals vs. non-nationals in religious and cultural nation-states is not just difficult to make, in many cases it is impossible. Religiously, how would someone who was a theist in their 20s, an atheist in their 30s, and a theist again in their 40s be classified? Would they gain, lose, and re-gain their national identity? How would an agnostics, or someone who practices parts of two or three different religions (one of which is the national religion), or someone who practices only some, say less than half, of the nation's religious principles, be classified? Culturally, how would those in the population who practice both the national as well as some alternative culture be classified? Third, even though the difference between nationals and non-nationals is vague in the cases of a religious and a cultural nation-state, the anti-democratic element in these cases seems to be the lack of "openness," that there is no "pathway" to full citizenship in religious or cultural nation-states; to be meaningful to its citizens (i.e., nationals) a nation-state can't be "open." In contrast, a democracy is "open," in the sense that the pathway to citizenship can, at least in principle even if difficult in practice, be traveled by non-citizens. If we find that a state presents itself as a democracy but has no possibility for non-citizens to become full citizens – perhaps because they are not the right gender, or not the right race, or don't practice the right religion, etc. – then such a state fails the principles of democracy and is open to criticism of engaging in anti-democratic practices.

In sum, the nature of a democracy requires that it *must* be politically neutral with respect to culture, religion, race, and ethnicity; it can't "favor" one culture, religion, race, or ethnicity over others within its population. A nation-state, in contrast, *must* do so.

In light of these comments, the above premises (v), (vi), and (vii) are submitted as true, and if they are then this part of the argument is sound. The question of citizenship status represents a second area of unresolvable conflict (i.e., conceptual incompatibility) between democracy and nationalism; one of these must be given up if the state is to implement the other.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. The problem of accurate politically significant information.<sup>20</sup>

A dilemma:

- (i) Assume a democratic nation-state.
- (ii) As a democracy, this state has certain foundational principles and necessary conditions. (True by the above definition of "democracy.")
- (iii) As a nation-state, this state has certain foundational principles and necessary conditions. (True by the above definition of "nation-state.")

- (iv) The governed's access to predominately accurate information concerning politically significant matters is a necessary condition for democracy to function; without reasonably accurate information the consent of the governed is not legitimate. (True by the above analysis of democracy).
- (v) The governed's belief in a nation's common national identity is a necessary condition for a nation-state to exist; without this belief, nationalism can't be implemented to form a nation-state. (True by the above analysis of nationalism).
- (vi) Belief that any population of a politically significant size is united by a common national identity is empirically inaccurate information. (True by anthropology and genetic research on human populations).
- (vii) If the government of (i) provides accurate information to the governed concerning their lack of any common national identity, then the government undermines a necessary condition for the state to be a nation-state.
- (viii) If the government of (i) promotes empirically inaccurate information concerning the governed possessing a common national identity, the government undermines a necessary condition of democracy.
- (ix) The government of (i) must either provide empirically accurate information concerning the governed possessing a common national identity (if it's a democracy) or provide empirically inaccurate information concerning their common national identity (if it's a nation-state), but can't do both.
- Thus, (x) this state must either fail to be a nation-state or fail to be a democracy. (Conclusion from (iv), (v), (vi)).

Comments: Statements (vii), (viii), (ix), and (x) of this argument forms a valid inference because it is an instance of a valid argument form: the dilemma. We turn to the question of the premises: are they true? (ii) - (v) are true given the above conceptual analyses of democracy and nationalism. (vi) is an empirical claim and so must be considered probable, given that the empirical facts described in Section III are accurate. What of (vii) and (viii)? If (vi) is probably true, then the antecedent of (vii), whose truth-value is contingent on the truth-value of (vi), is probably true; its consequent is true (given the above analysis of nation-state), so in any case (vii) is true. The weakest premises are (viii) and (ix).

With respect to (viii), it *is* a necessary condition for democracy to function that its citizens have reasonably accurate information concerning politically significant matters. But is the belief that they do *not* possess a common national identity politically significant information? In a nation-state it *is* politically significant that its citizens *not* have this information; that is, it is politically foundational that they believe they are united by a common national identity, even if this information is false. But in a democracy, however, is it politically significant that the government provide accurate information in this case? If it is, then we have a third core inconsistency between democracy and nationalism, making a democratic nation-state impossible. But it's not clear (to me, at any rate) that it is; it depends on many factors. For example, is there a ballot issue concerning a state's democratic principles that might be affected by this belief one way or another? Is there a cultural or religious climate within the population that makes this belief politically significant? Many circumstances within the political life of a democracy can be imagined that make it necessary for the government to *withhold* accurate information (concerning a war, for example); but are there circumstances in the life of a democracy that make it necessary for the government to *provide* or *promote* inaccurate information? There might be. So, the truth-value of (viii) must be left open; there are possible situations in which it is true and others in which it is false.

With respect to premise (ix), it is clearly false: it is true that the government cannot do *both* (i.e., purposely promote accurate and purposely promote inaccurate politically significant information to the governed concerning the same topic, namely the governed's possessing a national identity), but *must* it do one or the other? Clearly not, it can do neither. To come out true, the meaning of premise (ix) needs to be restricted to situations in which the government of a state (the state assumed in premise (i)) is required to make a declaration to the governed concerning their possession of a national identity. (Imagine, for example, a government spokesperson in high office is asked directly by the press about this issue and must make an official public statement, or a proposal to put a

statement addressing the governed's national identity is made a ballot question.) In such a circumstance, premise (ix) is true.

In light of these comments, this third argument for the impossibility of a democratic nation-state is not sound, but is nevertheless a strong argument. The question of accurate politically significant information represents a third area of *likely* unresolvable conflict (i.e., conceptual incompatibility) between democracy and nationalism; one of these will *likely* have to be given up if the state is to implement the other.

## V. Concluding considerations

I have presented condensed ideal versions of traditional nationalism and of democracy in an effort to be both general enough to capture familiar variations and yet distilled enough to highlight the core principles of each. If these condensed versions are correct and the arguments based upon them sufficiently strong, the conclusion that nationalism and democracy are two inconsistent political theories must be accepted as well founded. A democratic nation-state is conceptually impossible; no state can be simultaneously a democracy and officially nationalistic. And if conceptually impossible, then the political practice of trying to satisfy the requirements of both is fated to fail; either nationalism must be sacrificed to implement democracy, or democracy must be sacrificed to implement nationalism. A restricted democracy in which nationals are offered the benefits of democratic principles that are withheld (totally or even partially) from resident non-nationals is, in effect, no democracy. Even if a nation-state's resident non-nationals represent a relatively small minority of its population, such that it appears to be a democracy (even to its harshest political critics, we might say) because democratic principles apply to "almost" everyone, it is not a democracy so long as its political system officially excludes non-nationals from full equality with nationals.

Likewise, a restricted nationalism is, in effect, no nationalism. If a nation-state is designed to favor the nation that creates it, it fails its political duty to the degree that it grants its resident non-nationals political benefits equal to those its nationals enjoy. This is the case even if its population of non-nationals is relatively small, making it appear as if the state practices nationalism in full force.

Someone will object: so much for theory, what about practical circumstances? If democracy is a good thing, isn't a nation-state that is democratic for *some* citizens better than one that isn't democratic at all? And isn't a nation-state that affords its non-nationals *some* democratic benefits better than a nation-state that denies such benefits to its resident non-nationals completely? Similarly, if nationalism is a good thing, isn't a state that favors *some* of its resident nationals better than one that fails to favor any? Also, what about the problem where a state is "officially," (for example, "constitutionally") a democracy but there is a pervasive "unofficial" culture of nationalism (of whatever type) practiced by a significant part of its population, a stubborn unofficial nationalism that the "democratic" government finds difficult to counter; and if it should try to counter this popular nationalistic culture, its government fears democratically being removed from power and a full blown nationalists government put in its place? If democracy is a good thing, isn't it better that its government system is "officially" democratic while the state's primary culture is "unofficially" nationalistic in practice, than the case in which such a state is not democratic at all; isn't being democratic "in name only" better than renouncing democracy completely?

Such objections make a good point: democracy and nationalism, in the real world, admit of "more-or-less"; each lie on a spectrum such that compromises become possible. Governments trying to be both should be able to, and have had to, negotiate how much their democratic values they must weaken to appease nationalistic pressures, and how much their nationalistic values they must weaken to appease democratic pressures. Such political

circumstances clearly present realistic problems for governments, but I don't see them as objections to the position for which I'm arguing. Instead, they serve to drive the point home that the requirements of democracy and of nationalism can't be simultaneously satisfied. In the real world of government, democracy and nationalism represent two players in a zero-sum game (see Appendix below). Nation-states struggle with democratic movements within their populations that seek to make them "more democratic" by, for example, applying democratic principles to its underprivileged non-nationals. To the degree they succeed, the government fails its political duty to its nationals; to the degree such democratic movements fail, the government upholds its political duty as a nation-state. Meanwhile, democracies struggle with nationalistic movements within their populations that seek to push them toward being nation-states in which their primary nations (however demarcated) can feel that their country is "theirs," and that their welfare takes priority in government policies. To the degree such political movements succeed, the government is that much the less democratic; to the degree governments counter and resist such movements, they uphold their political duty as democracies. But the two players in this zero-sum game aren't on equal footing; nationalism is better at resisting the push of democracy than democracy is at countering nationalism. This is the case for two primary reasons: first, the communitarian attachments and coherence is greater in nation-states than in democracies which tend to be individualistic and diverse.<sup>21</sup> This makes the former easier to govern than the latter. Second, a democratic threat to the nation-state is an intolerable threat to the nation and thus a threat to one's national identity; such threats are fundamentally important for nation-states to resist. In contrast, a nationalistic threat to a democracy is a threat to a set of political beliefs and practices that allows for such threats in the form of a protected right of free speech, which includes (in an odd way) a degree of anti-government protests.

## VI. Appendix: Game representation

The following three 2x2 game matrices are intended to represent the three areas of incompatibility between democracy and nationalism argued for in Section IV. These matrices are not arguments *for* the impossibility of a democratic nation-state; they are a way of *displaying* this impossibility in the form of three simple two-person games. In each, one player is Dem; Dem = a democracy state or a democratic government as characterized above in Section II. The other player is Nat; Nat = a nation-state as characterized in Section I above. Each game is intended to *show* that it is impossible for Dem and Nat to be the same player (i.e., for each game it is impossible that the same state is Dem and Nat).

### 1. The problem of political equality:

- (i) Each player has two options: grant (G) or deny (D).
- (ii) Payoff 1 represents an option's success at upholding the political principles Dem or Nat stand for, as the case may be. The goal of Dem and of Nat is to uphold the political principles for which each stands.
- (iii) Payoff -1 represents an option's failure at upholding the principles Dem or Nat stand for, as the case may be.

The question in this first game is: should non-nationals be granted or denied the same degree of political equality that nationals have?

		<u>Nat</u>	
		G	D
<u>Dem</u>	G	1, -1	1, 1
	D	-1, -1	-1, 1

Comment: Dem's political principles require Dem to play row G; for Dem, row G dominates row D. Nat's political principles require Nat to play column D; column D dominates column G for Nat. This lands both players in the same payoff cell: the upper right (G, D) in which each achieves a payoff of 1. This cell is a Nash equilibrium, since neither player can do better by switching options if the other player stays. Thus, Dem should grant political equality to its resident non-nationals equal to that its resident nationals enjoy, and Nat should deny such political equality to its resident non-nationals. If Dem and Nat are different states, this is possible for different populations are involved. However, it is not possible in this game for Dem and Nat to be the same state (government), that is, the same player playing against itself, for it is not possible for the same state to both grant and deny political equality to the same group of non-nationals. What changes if we, nevertheless, make Dem and Nat the same state? Two cells in this new game become impossible: the (G, D) or the (1,1) cell and the (D, G) or the (-1, -1) cell. The two possible payoff cells are those resulting from choosing the same options; Dem and Nat, being the same player, must both play G or both play D. These cells are zero-sum; this state must be either democratic or nationalistic but can't be both.

## 2. The problem of citizenship:

- (i) Each player has two options: F = non-nationals receive *full* citizenship rights, or R = non-nationals have *restricted* citizenship rights, possibly down to zero.
- (ii) Payoff 1 represents an option's success at upholding the political principles Dem or Nat stand for, as the case may be. The goal of Dem and of Nat is to uphold the political principles for which each stands.
- (iii) Payoff -1 represents an option's failure at upholding the political principles Dem or Nat stand for, as the case may be.

The question in this second game is: should full citizenship rights be given to the resident non-nationals within the population, or should restricted citizenship rights (or perhaps no such rights) go to these non-nationals?

		<u>Nat</u>	
		F	R
<u>Dem</u>	F	1, -1	1, 1
	R	-1, -1	-1, 1

Comment: Dem's political principles require Dem to play row F; for Dem, row F dominates row R. Nat's political principles requires Nat to play column R; column R dominates column F for Nat. Such choices bring Dem and Nat to the same (F, R) or (1, 1) payoff cell. This cell is a Nash equilibrium, neither player can gain a better payoff by switching options given the other player doesn't switch. We see that Dem should give full citizenship rights to its resident non-national population, while Nat should restrict them (perhaps down to zero). In this way, both Dem and Nat achieve their best payoffs, given each's political values that each is trying to uphold. But, if Dem and Nat are the very same state (i.e., the same player playing against itself), it is impossible for the very same group of non-nationals (however demarcated) within its population to both be given full citizenship rights and not given such full rights (i.e., have them restricted, perhaps to zero). Thus, Dem and Nat can't be the same state. What happens if we nevertheless make them a single player? Two payoff cells become impossible to achieve, namely the two resulting from choosing *different* options: (F, R) or (1, 1) and (R, F) or (-1, -1). The two remaining payoff cells are possible to achieve for a single player playing against itself. But these two are zero-sum; any gain in upholding Dem's political principles means a failure for Nat to uphold Nat's political principles, and vice versa.

3. The problem of accurate politically significant information:

- (i) Each player has two options: A = its population receives *reasonable accurate* politically significant information from the government, or I = its population receives *inaccurate* politically significant information, intentionally, from its government.
- (ii) Payoff 1 represents an option's success at upholding the political principles Dem or Nat stand for, as the case may be. The goal of Dem and of Nat is to uphold the political principles for which each stands.
- (iii) Payoff -1 represents an option's failure at upholding the political principles Dem or Nat stand for, as the case may be.

The question in this third game is: should the government provide its population with politically significant accurate or inaccurate information concerning its population's national identity?

		<u>Nat</u>	
		A	I
<u>Dem</u>	A	1, -1	1, 1
	I	-1, -1	-1, 1

Comment: Dem's political principles requires Dem to play row A over row I; row A dominates row I for Dem. Nat's political principles requires Nat to play row I over row A; for Nat, row I dominates row A. These choices land Dem and Nat in cell (A, I) with payoff (1, 1). This cell is a Nash equilibrium, neither player can do better by switching options given that the other player doesn't switch. Thus, Dem upholds its political principles best by providing its population with accurate information concerning national identity, and Nat upholds its political principles best by providing its population with inaccurate information concerning national identity. Because it is impossible to do

both, Dem and Nat cannot be the same state (government). However, if we make them the very same state (i. e., a single democratic nation-state), the game changes and the options played must be the same, they can't differ. So, either (A, A) gets played, or (I, I) gets played. The payoffs in these two possible cells are zero-sum; upholding democratic political principles means sacrificing nationalistic principles (payoff (A, A)), or upholding nationalistic political principles means sacrificing democratic political principles (payoff (I, I)).

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## Notes

1. The "or" in the title is meant to be the exclusive, not the inclusive, disjunction.

2. See, for example, Simmons, *Political Philosophy*, Chapter 5 "Democracy" pp. 105ff.

3. Democracy and nationalism are two deeply important and widely researched political systems, each with many variations and nuances, and studied from the perspective of several disciplines. The implementation of each, along with their practice, introduces another layer of variation that further complicates the problem of trying to comprehend each in an acceptable way. In spite of their complexity, my topic allows me to reduce each down to a few principles which I take to be conceptually central; I think of these reductions as simplified, ideal versions of each. I have tried to be both true to the full theories of democracy and of nationalism in presenting these simplified versions as well as focus on those component concepts of each that conflict.

4. Any standard presentation of the political theory of *traditional* (also referred to as "classical") nationalism will highlight these two core norms. See, for example, Chapter 4, in MacCallum's *Political Philosophy*, Section 1 of the entry "Nationalism" in *SEP* (updated Sept. 2020), and the Entry "Nationalism" in *Wikipedia* (updated Nov. 2022). There has been a recent attempt to work out a theory of *moderate* (also referred to as "liberal") nationalism that justifies promoting the welfare of a nation in ways other than forming a nation-state (see, for example, Section 2 of the entry "Nationalism" in *SEP*). My focus here is on traditional nationalism; in so far as moderate nationalism is not concerned with forming a nation-state it lies outside of my topic.

5. See the entries "Nationalism" in *SEP* (updated Sept. 2020), "Nation and Nationalism" in *REP*, and "Nationalism" in *Wikipedia* (updated Nov. 2022). As these articles point out, the following are the politically main types of nations on which nationalism draws, but they are not the only kinds of nations for which nationalist thinkers have argued. I note also that the term "nation" is widely used to refer broadly to any politically established state whether or not it is a nation-state. The United States and Canada, for example, refers to themselves as "nations," as does much of the world, but they are not nation-states. It should be clear that the use of "nation" in this essay is not this broad meaning of "nation," the term is restricted to its meaning within the political theory of nationalism.

6. See Margalit and Raz, "National Self-Determination" for a detailed and rich description of what they call an "encompassing group" which largely coincides with a "nation" defined by its culture.

7. Within ethnically based nations, prior to the introduction of genetic knowledge the idea of “blood” and “blood lines” were typically used to express the belief that one’s national identity is passed on to one’s offspring and thus based on lineage or descent. Continuing this image, the members of an ethnic nation believed their common nationality made them “blood related,” even if distantly, and thus having a common “descent.”

8. Margalit and Raz point out, in “National Self-Determination,” that membership in what they refer to as an “encompassing group” (which I interpret as, at its core, a “cultural nation”) is not altogether voluntary. A child born, raised, and thoroughly enculturated in such a group’s language, history, and traditions will form a national identity as a member of the group that is deep, important and self-defining in their life. But, they argue, the way this happens can hardly be considered a “choice” the child makes. Still, there is a distinction to be made between an inherited (biological) characteristic such as what one’s “nationality” is believed to be, which is properly involuntary, and one’s culture which (with a nod to Margalit and Raz) we might consider to be “non-voluntary.”

9. Section III below describes aspects of human history that makes the ethnic and racial ideas of “nation” fatally flawed.

10. Even though I take these two descriptions to be referring to the same phenomenon, I prefer the description of a “thick” and “rich” national identity over that of individuals possessing “multiple national identities;” the former seems to me more phenomenologically accurate than the latter. So, instead of saying that “an individual has two conflicting national identities,” we will say, equivalently, that “there is a conflict, e.g. the possibility of “divided loyalties,” within a person’s complex national identity.” Two recent examples of such possible conflicts in a group’s thick/rich national identity are: the WWII internment of American citizens of Japanese nationality, most of whom were culturally American (even though the United States isn’t a nation-state) with no or minimal ties to the religions or culture of Japan; the ethnically Turkish but culturally German inhabitants of Germany whose ancestors came to Germany several generations ago as “guest workers.”

11. Though direct (non-representative) democracy was conceived and tried in ancient Athens, the modern theory of democratic government was primarily the work of Locke, Rousseau, Spinoza, and to a degree Hobbes, whose political philosophies established the structure and justification for democratic government. Representative democracy became further elaborated and implemented as an Enlightenment ideal in the Federalist Papers.

12. For explanations of the various types and configurations of democracy see the entries “Democracy” in *SEP*, “Democracy” in *REP*, “Types of Democracy” on the *Kahn Academy* website, or any reliable source of information concerning politics and political systems.

13. See, for example, Jefferson’s letter to Madison of 1787, “*Democratic Government*,” and his First Inaugural Address of 1801, “*Essential Principles of Democratic Government*,” found in Vol. 3, *Masterworks of Government*, pp. 75 ff, but available in many other sources.

14. See Jefferson’s letter to Colonel Carrington of 1787, “*Democracy Based on Enlightenment*,” in Vol. 3, *Masterworks of Government*, pp. 76 -77.

15. The following factual information on human evolution is readily available from any reliable source. A Google search of “human evolution” will direct you to several sources.

16. See Margalit and Raz, “National Self-Determination,” especially section D (*The Subjective Element*) for the subjective basis of what a nation is, and Miller, “What is a nation?” part 1 of his entry “Nation and nationalism” in *REP* for the “imaginative” support that the idea of a nations requires. This is not to say, however, that a



subjective/imaginative “object” is unimportant or not politically consequential; it is to say that “nation” is not a real (i.e., a factually, objectively existing) thing.

17. Attempts to preserve cultural traditions, typically by minority populations that have been subordinate to and targeted by dominant cultures for cultural suppression, have had some success. For example, the French culture in Canada and the Native American culture in North America have intentionally resisted being absorbed and have successfully preserved certain cultural practices, including languages, that appeared threatened of dying out. The accusation of “cultural appropriation” is a current way that social pressure has been used to try to preserve certain cultural practices and prevent them from being diluted through absorption. But such attempts more prove the point than falsify it; the larger historical trend is that cultures evolve by influencing each other, adopting/absorbing and modifying each other’s practices, and this process eventually reaches the cultures of even remote populations. The earth, today, is linked by global communication technologies and this makes for an increasingly rapid and extensive rate of cultural intermixing.

18. *Common beliefs* are those that each member believes in common, and each member further believes that each member believes them in common, whereas *beliefs held in common* by a population might be held by each member in secret such that no one believes anything about what others in that population believes.

19. Another, more brief, argument for the impossibility of a democratic nation-state that appeals to citizenship status is the following:

(i) Let  $S$  = a state that is both a democracy and a nation-state. (Assumption)

(ii) If  $S$  is a democracy, then it is *possible* for its population to contain both citizens who are non-nationals and non-citizens who are nationals. (True by the above definition of “democracy”)

(iii) If  $S$  is a nation-state, then it is *not possible* for its population to contain both citizens who are non-nationals and non-citizens who are nationals. (True by the above definition of “nation-state”)

Comment: A simple assignment of truth-values according to standard propositional truth-tables shows that these three statements form an inconsistent triad; at least one must be false. Because (ii) and (iii) are each true, given my analyses of democracy and of nation-state, it must be the case that assumption (i) is false; there can be no such state  $S$  that is both a democracy and a nation-state. The apparent weakness in this triad concerns the consequent of conditional statement (iii), namely nation-states that permit non-nationals citizenship. However, if we read for “citizen” the phrase “full citizen” or “unrestricted citizenship equal to that of nationals,” then (iii) expresses the situation with full force, as presented above in my examination of nationalism.

20. An important function a democracy is provided by an independent press, a press reasonable “free” from government control. An equally important function in a nation-state is provided by a nationalistic press, a press for which the nation’s welfare is uppermost. This third problem, therefore, should be thought of broadly: either the government directly providing accurate/inaccurate politically significant information to its population intentionally, or the government attempting to control, or not, the press’s dissemination of politically significant information to its consumers.

21. See, for example, Hampton’s characterization of communitarianism in Chapters 5 and 6 of her *Political Philosophy*, and Section 3 of the entry “Communitarianism” in *SEP*.

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