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Liberal Nationalism in Substantive and Performative Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper sketches some developments in the discussion of liberal nationalism since the early 1990s and proposes a generic understanding of nationalism according to which its main feature is the act of sorting people into members and non-members of the nation with a view to regulating access to political goods linked to the state. One discussion of liberal nationalism that has recently received renewed attention is the relation between nationalism and multiculturalism. Liberal nationalism sees nationalism as a response to increased diversity and involves normative demands on nationalism for accommodating this diversity. In light of the proposed generic understanding of nationalism, the question arises whether such a liberal nationalism is coherent. This question requires us to distinguish between a substantive and a performative perspective on nationalism, raising the possibility that liberal nationalism can be substantively coherent but performatively incoherent.

Keywords

liberalism, nationalism, political philosophy, multiculturalism, national identity, nation

1. Introduction

‘Nationalism’ is not an unproblematic term. First of all, it is often used pejoratively, i.e., as a way of branding whatever is labeled as nationalism as problematic or objectionable. Second, setting aside pejorative uses of the term, nationalism can designate very different things. It can refer to (a) certain kinds of social practices or policies, (b) a type of ideology supposed to be operative in society or politics, or (c) a normative view formulated in political philosophy to capture the claims at the center of such an ideology or the normative assumptions or principles that might underlie or justify such practices or policies. In this paper, I focus on nationalism as a view discussed in political philosophy. However, we formulate such views precisely in order to help us identify, understand, and assess nationalism as empirical phenomena, e.g., nationalist practices or policies.¹ One of my points in the following is that there might be a closer relation between nationalism as a view in political philosophy and nationalism in practice than we often assume when we engage in philosophical discussions of nationalism.

This paper more precisely focuses on so-called liberal nationalism. Liberal nationalism has been at the center of much work on nationalism in political philosophy since around 1990. The idea of liberal nationalism concerns the possibility of whether there might be a morally acceptable or perhaps even positively justified form of nationalism, and what such a form of nationalism might then look like. There are two general senses of liberal nationalism. One concerns nationalism based on liberal *justifications*. The idea here is that there might be forms of nationalism that serve liberal

¹ For a similar distinction regarding multiculturalism, see David Miller, “The Life and Death of Multiculturalism,” in *Federalism and the Welfare State in a Multicultural World*, ed. Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, Richard Johnston, Will Kymlicka, and John Myles (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 319-339.

purposes. The most discussed version of this is the instrumental national identity argument, according to which a liberal welfare state requires support for redistribution among citizens, which in turn requires a kind of solidarity or social cohesion that can best (or perhaps only) be secured by a common national identity.² Another sense of liberal nationalism concerns liberally *constrained* nationalism. The idea here is that liberalism—understood as normative principles of individual freedom and equality—places limits on the permissible forms of nationalism. Such limits may pertain to nationalism policies or to underlying conceptions of the nation.

The idea of liberal nationalism has given rise to a number of standard discussions within political philosophy. One of these discussions concerns the issue of *coherence*.³ The question here is whether liberalism and nationalism are consistent and whether there can really be a liberally acceptable form of nationalism. Another discussion is rather *empirical* and investigates whether nationalism policies actually have the effects assumed in liberal justifications for nationalism, e.g., whether specific nationalism policies generate the desired kind of common national identity, or whether a given kind of shared national identity actually secures the desired kind of solidarity.⁴ In this paper, I will not enter into these two standard discussions, although I will sketch parts of each along the way.

² David Miller and Sundas Ali, “Testing the National Identity Argument,” *European Political Science Review* 6, no. 2 (2014): 237–259.

³ David Miller, “The Coherence of Liberal Nationalism,” in *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics*, ed. Gina Gustavsson and David Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 23–37.

⁴ Gina Gustavsson and David Miller, eds., *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Although discussions of liberal nationalism have generally started out from the concern with coherence and over time moved increasingly in the direction of the empirical discussion, a new version of liberal nationalism has recently appeared that raises new versions of both the coherence and the empirical debates. Whereas traditional liberal nationalism assumed certain liberal constraints on permissible conceptions of the nation—e.g., that a national identity has to be accessible to newcomers if a liberal state is to be permitted to support it—the claim now is that nationalism should be *multicultural*.⁵ The idea here is not simply that multiculturalism requires the accommodation of minority groups, but also that the national identity is transformed in such a way that minorities can share in it and feel national belonging, and that a liberally justified nationalism has to be inclusive of minorities in this way. On this view, nationalism and multiculturalism are thus not opposites but should go hand in hand.

My first main claim in this paper is that the diversity of discussions and understandings of liberal nationalism means that we should think about what makes all these issues of nationalism. I propose a generic understanding of nationalism to capture all of these discussions. The generic understanding is quite simple, namely that nationalism is primarily the act of separating between members and non-members of the nation with a view to regulating access to political goods linked to the state. This is primarily a theoretical and conceptual point. I think it is nevertheless important because it both provides a way of understanding what the many debates about nationalism have in

⁵ Tariq Modood, “A Multicultural Nationalism,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 25, no. 2 (2019): 233–246; Tariq Modood, “Multiculturalism as a New Form of Nationalism?,” *Nations and Nationalism* 26 (2020): 308–313.

common and because it allows us to ask some further questions about nationalism, which I do in the second half of the paper.

My second main claim is that this generic understanding of nationalism prompts us to consider a distinction between two perspectives on nationalism that discussions of liberal nationalism in political philosophy have usually not taken into account. The distinction is between what I call a *substantive* perspective focusing on the content of nationalism, which is the usual perspective adopted in political philosophy, and what I call a *performative* perspective. I suggest that the proposed generic understanding of nationalism shows that the substantive perspective may be inadequate. Precisely because nationalism is about sorting between members and non-members of the nation, it is not sufficient to discuss nationalism in terms of who are actually members and non-members according to a specific version of nationalism; we also need to consider the implications of the very act of making this categorization. I suggest that this distinction between the two perspectives is especially relevant in relation to recent calls for multicultural nationalism, which might be coherent in substantive terms but risk being incoherent in performative terms.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sketches some developments in the discussion of nationalism within political philosophy. Section 3 proposes a generic understanding of nationalism, which provides an understanding of how the different discussions are all discussions of nationalism. Section 4 introduces a distinction between two different ways of discussing nationalism, which I call the substantive and the performative perspectives. In section 5, I discuss the implications of adopting the performative perspective with a specific view to what it might imply for recent discussions of multicultural nationalism.

2. Phases in the Philosophical Discussion of Liberal Nationalism

Within political philosophy, there has been a lively debate on nationalism since around 1990. This debate has moved through several phases during which the focus of the discussion has gradually changed. Early contributions were concerned with whether the nation could be a relevant and legitimate political category and hence whether nationalism was a respectable position to discuss within political philosophy at all. This discussion took place against the backdrop of a post-1945 liberal worldview that was premised on ideas about liberal democracy and universal human rights and that linked nationalism to either the horrors of National Socialism or to wars taking place in the Third World in relation to decolonization.

At this early stage, mainstream liberal political philosophers approached the discussion of nationalism as a version of the discussion between moral universalism and particularism and, at least for some, nationalism seemed like any other form of chauvinism.⁶ This is understandable, not only for theoretical reasons, but also for external political reasons. Around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, nationalism was mostly associated with the type of civil wars that broke out around the world as the governing logics of the old bipolar world order suddenly lost their grip. The need to theorize nationalism started out by assimilating nationalism to already familiar theoretical categories, so that nationalism was discussed, for example, as a version of communitarianism set up against individualist and cosmopolitan liberalism.⁷ One problem with this kind of approach is that seeing nationalism as an instance of a well-known theoretical category may not capture distinctive

⁶ For examples of this discussion, see, for instance, Robert E. Goodin, “What is So Special about Our Fellow Countrymen?” *Ethics* 98, no. 4 (1988): 663–686; Paul Gomberg, “Patriotism is Like Racism,” *Ethics* 101, no. 1 (1990): 144–150.

⁷ See, e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre, *Is Patriotism a Virtue? The Lindley Lecture, 1984* (N.p.: University of Kansas, 1984).

aspects of nationalism, especially if the theoretical category is drawn from moral philosophy or a political philosophy developed to address other types of political issues. Another problem with this development is that discussions of nationalism are haunted by thematic associations to these more general debates in which nationalism had been seen as a species. For instance, because nationalism was long contrasted to cosmopolitanism, it is difficult to engage in discussions of nationalism without thereby getting embroiled in questions of global justice and the justifiability of state borders, even if the specific form of nationalism in question is concerned with domestic political issues.⁸

A more interesting discussion of nationalism started out by taking the idea that nationalism has a distinctive nature seriously and at the same time rejecting the moralized assumption that nationalism is necessarily a bad thing. Yael Tamir's 1993 book *Liberal Nationalism* provided the label for this approach to nationalism.⁹ David Miller delivered the most thorough articulation of this kind of view in his 1995 book *On Nationality*.¹⁰ The very term 'liberal nationalism' signals that nationalism is not conceptually opposed to liberalism. This means that nationalism is not necessarily morally problematic (at least, not relative to liberalism). Although there certainly are very problematic forms of nationalism, there might be versions of nationalism that are morally

⁸ There were also counternarratives to nationalism, for instance, so-called postnationalism, which is characterized by claims that rights were increasingly not premised on national citizenship. See Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Considered as empirical claims, these claims are false, and increasingly so.

⁹ Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁰ David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

legitimate or even required. This possibility also suggests that nationalism is about something else and is as such on a different theoretical level than liberalism, which is why ‘liberal’ can be a normative qualification of nationalism. I will return to the definition of nationalism in the next section.

First, however, it is worth noting an interesting, more recent development in the discussion of liberal nationalism. The first phase of liberal nationalism discussions in the nineties was mostly focused on *normative* conditions of nationalism, e.g., on whether there were liberally acceptable *justifications* for nationalism, which conceptions of the nations a liberal state could legitimately endorse and promote, and within which liberal constraints it could do so. The second phase turned toward *empirical* questions about what the actual *effects* of shared nationality are. These empirical questions were still prompted by normative concerns, namely by arguments for nationalism policies based on claims that common nationality provides a common identity that in various ways facilitates and supports—and, in a stronger version, might even be necessary for the realization of—liberal values such as social justice and deliberative democracy.

This turn from the normative arguments of political philosophy to the empirical investigations of social science was prompted by another shift, namely toward seeing liberal nationalism primarily as a response to the increasing diversity of modern states. Whereas earlier phases in the discussion of nationalism had seen it, e.g., as a remedy for the supposedly individualistic and formalistic nature of liberal states (nationalism as communitarianism), or as a position in debates on global justice (nationalism as the opposite of cosmopolitanism), this new phase in the discussion of liberal nationalism rather saw common nationality as a condition for social cohesion and solidarity. Nationalism is an answer to a need for “ties that bind,”¹¹ which

¹¹ Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 173

motivate citizens to support liberal institutions and contribute to a welfare state. Moreover, this need for motivation is not primarily due to alleged failures in the moral architecture of liberalism but a reaction to diversity, primarily as caused by immigration.¹² I return to the relation between liberal nationalism and diversity, and more specifically multiculturalism, in section 6. Before that, we need to reflect on how we might understand nationalism if our understanding is to encompass all of the different forms of nationalism in its development and phases, as sketched above.

3. A Generic Understanding of Nationalism

The basic claim of nationalism is that there is such a thing as nations and that they matter politically. Miller provides a good illustration, proposing

an idea of nationality which I take to encompass the following three interconnected propositions.

¹² Central works on this theme include Philippe Van Parijs, ed., *Cultural Diversity versus Economic Solidarity* (Brussels: Deboeck University Press, 2004); Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka, eds., *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution in Contemporary Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Keith Banting and Will Kymlicka, eds., *The Strains of Commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Nils Holtug, *The Politics of Social Cohesion: Immigration, Community and Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), as well as Miller and Ali, “Testing the National Identity Argument,” and Gustavsson and Miller, *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics*.

The first concerns national identity, and claims that it may properly be part of someone's identity that they belong to this or that national grouping. This claim in turn subdivides into two: that nations really exist ... and that, in making our nationality an essential part of our identity, we are not doing something that is rationally indefensible....

The second proposition is ethical, and claims that nations are ethical communities. They are contour lines in the ethical landscape. The duties we owe to our fellow-nationals are different from, and more extensive than, the duties we owe to human beings as such....

The third proposition is political, and states that people who form a national community in a particular territory have a good claim to political self-determination.¹³

It is worthwhile to unpack this passage in several respects. In this section, I sketch a generic understanding of nationalism that draws attention to certain aspects of such characterizations of nationalism.

The first thing to note is that nationalism requires the existence of nations. In Miller's words, nations really exist. In order for this to be an interesting claim, the category of the nation has to be distinct from other well-known political categories, especially the state. Nationalism most fundamentally rests on the assumption that there are entities we can call nations, which are not the same thing as states. Whereas the state is a formal political and legal institution, the nation is an informal social category. A nation is a certain kind of group of people. We can therefore ask, What grounds the membership of a nation? In virtue of what does a certain group of people form a nation? Nationalism always involves an at least implicit claim about the grounds for membership of the nation, i.e., the idea that there is some difference between members and non-members of the

¹³ Miller, *On Nationality*, 10–11.

nation, which for any given nation can be conceived of in terms of criteria for being a member. These membership criteria sum up to what we might call a conception of the nation.¹⁴

The second defining aspect of nationalism is that nationality has normative significance. In Miller's words, nationality might ground duties and claims for political self-determination. However, ethical duties and claims for self-determination are only two examples of ways in which nationality might have normative significance. This normative significance can pertain to a range of different domains, including individual ethical duties, state policies across many areas of policy, drawing of borders, state membership, and so on.

For example, because nationalism assumes that the state and the nation are different things, nationalism allows us to ask questions about the relation between the state and the nation, and to articulate normative views about what this relation should be. We might, for instance, ask whether the state and the nation are congruent in different senses.¹⁵ Since nationalism at this fundamental level is the idea that people can be sorted into members and non-members of the nation, it is possible to ask whether the citizens or residents of the state are members of the nation, or vice versa. Alternatively, if members of a nation happen to live in a certain area, we can ask whether the territory of the state is congruent with the area supposedly inhabited by members of the nation. One can then formulate the normative aspect of nationalism as versions of the claim that the state and the nation *should* be congruent, e.g., that state borders should be (re)drawn to encompass the area inhabited by members of the nation, or that residence and citizenship within the state should depend

¹⁴ Sune Lægaard, "Liberal Nationalism and the Nationalisation of Liberal Values," *Nations and Nationalism* 13, no. 1 (2007): 37–55.

¹⁵ For a classic sociological version of this way of understanding nationalism, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

on membership in the nation.¹⁶ Given the further (but not uncontroversial or unproblematic¹⁷) assumption that the nation can be identified and delimited independently of the state, i.e., that nations can be pre-political, one can articulate demands that a pre-political nation should have its own state. However, nationalism can also work the other way round; given a state, it is possible to demand that all citizens of the state should form a nation, which provides reasons for policies of ‘nation-building.’¹⁸

For present purposes, the point is that this is just one among many domains in which the normative significance of nationality can be articulated. A different version of nationalism might rather assert that the national culture is valuable and should be supported by the state. This is not in itself a claim about congruence (although it might fit nicely with such claims) or a claim about individual ethical duties.

This raises the question of what such different normative claims across different domains have in common. One way to answer this question would be to refer back to the point that they all invoke the nation as something really existing that is different from states. This answer would then

¹⁶ This implies that nationalism can conflict with other candidate principles for determining state membership, e.g., principles such as the ‘all-subjected principle’ from discussions of the democratic boundary problem, according to which all people who are subjected in a relevant sense with regard to a democratic decision should be entitled to participate in that decision. See Vuko Andrić, “Is the All-Subjected Principle Extensionally Adequate?,” *Res Publica* 27, no. 3 (2021): 387–407. Such democratic principles are non-nationalist principles of state membership.

¹⁷ Arash Abizadeh, “On the Demos and Its Kin: Nationalism, Democracy, and the Boundary Problem,” *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 4 (2012): 867–882.

¹⁸ Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*.

raise the question about what positively characterizes nations, apart from being something else than states. For instance, one might argue, as Miller does, that the nation is a collective with a shared “public culture.”¹⁹ Here, I will argue that we can also try to answer this question in a different way: rather than explaining what different nationalist claims have in common by reference to a more fundamental theory of what nations *are*, we can alternatively look at *that in relation to which* the nation is invoked. If we approach the question in this way, my suggestion is that the usual examples of nationalism have the following feature in common, namely that they take membership in the nation as a criterion for access to rights or goods of a political kind.

To say that rights or goods are of a political kind here means that they are provided or regulated by states. Citizenship, a legal system, state support—all these are political goods linked to the state. It is of course possible to articulate normative views that invoke the nation without linking it to the state. Miller’s idea of ethical duties owed to co-nationals might seem to be an example of this. Nevertheless, Miller precisely articulates this ethical nationalism as a justification for why a nation-state both can and should take special care of its own members. In any case, a claim about the normative significance of nationality that did not in some way link this to political goods would be uninteresting for the purpose of discussions of nationalism in political philosophy.

Therefore, my claim is that all of the ways in which political nationalism claims that nationality has normative significance links this significance to political goods and thereby to the state. Therefore, while the basic point of nationalism is to claim that nations exist as something *distinct* from states, what the many different versions of the normative aspect of nationalism have in common is that they assert the significance of the nation *in relation to* the state. This means that

¹⁹ Miller, *On Nationality*, 68–70.

nationalism is sorting people into members and non-members of a given nation with a view to the distribution of *political* rights, duties or goods.

This claim prompts another question, namely, whether *any* sorting of this kind qualifies as nationalism. One might wonder whether only *some* ways of sorting people into members and non-members count as nationalism. In light of my discussion above, another way of formulating this question is to ask, Are there limits to the kinds of membership criteria that can constitute a conception of the nation on the basis of which a sorting of this kind counts as a form of nationalism?

There are clearly different kinds of nationalism based on different conceptions of the nation. This variety is, for instance, the focus of the classic (and often criticized) discussion concerning ‘civic’ versus ‘ethnic’ conceptions of nationalism.²⁰ For present purposes, the important thing to notice is that if we focus on these kinds of questions, they lead us to discussions of the *content* of nationalism. Such discussions can be set at different levels, from the most general level concerned with nations as such (what kinds of groups qualify as nations?), down to the intermediate level concerned with types of nationalism (what is ‘civic’ or ‘ethnic’ nationalism?), and to the specific level concerned with concrete instances of nationalism (what does it mean to be Danish?). My point

²⁰ See Læggaard, “Liberal Nationalism.” For a recent attempt to operationalize a related distinction between liberal and conservative nationalism, see Gina Gustavsson, “Liberal National Identity: Thinner than Conservative, Thicker than Civic?,” *Ethnicities* 19, no. 4 (2019): 693–711. For an attempt to formulate a cultural intermediate between ethnic and civic national identities, see Patti Tamara Lenard, “Inclusive Identities: The Foundation of Trust in Multicultural Communities,” in *Liberal Nationalism and Its Critics*, ed. Gina Gustavsson and David Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), XXX–XXX.

is that this is not the only type of discussion we can have—and perhaps not the only one we should have. In the next section, I will elaborate on the different types of discussions.

4. Substantive and Performative Perspectives on Nationalism

As already noted, the sketched generic understanding of nationalism easily gives rise to questions concerned with the content of nationalism. In this section, I explain further what I mean by this and show that this is not the only way to approach and think about nationalism.

The questions raised above, as well as the corresponding normative discussions of which types or specific instances of nationalism qualify as liberal and on what grounds, assume what one might call an *ontic* reading of nationalism. Two assumptions characterize this reading, namely:

- 1) Nations are *social kinds* that exist and enter into relations with other social kinds, such as the state.
- 2) Nations may exist *independently* of nationalism; nationalism can be a *response* to the existence of nations and a claim about their proper significance.

An ontic approach to nationalism naturally leads to a focus on the content of conceptions of the nation. This is the case, for instance, in discussions about whether membership in the nation requires a certain ethnicity, religious background, or language, or a subscription to specific values. Such discussions consider the nation as an independently existing group of people who either share or do not share these properties. Similarly, the idea that nations exist independently of nationalism is reflected in discussions of nationalism focused on which conception of the nation is assumed in a given type of nationalism or in a specific nationalism policy; such discussions assume that nations already exist and then ask whether specific policies should be based on this in one way or another. I

call this an ontic approach precisely because it assumes that the nation is a (non-empty) category of existence.

This kind of approach and the resulting focus is so common in philosophical discussions of nationalism that one often takes it for granted or fails to notice it at all. Most discussions of liberal nationalism have, for instance, proceeded directly from the initial question about which forms of nationalism are liberal to the substantial question about which conceptions of the nation are permissible as a basis for state policies. The normative question immediately turns into a substantive question about membership criteria.

However, one could also adopt another perspective, based on a different reading of the generic understanding of nationalism, which would lead to a different focus. Instead of the ontic reading of nationalism, one might adopt what we could call a *functional* reading of nationalism. One can characterize this reading by two different assumptions:

- 1) Nationalism is an *activity, discourse, or practice*, namely the act of invoking the nation, of sorting between members and non-members of the nation with a view to make access to certain benefits conditional on perceived possession of attributes linked to membership in the nation.
- 2) Nations are *products* of nationalism.

Such a functional reading of nationalism naturally leads to a different focus. Rather than focusing on the *content* of conceptions of the nation, the functional reading turns attention to the *acts* that it sees as constituent of nationalism. Rather than asking what nations *are* in general, or which types of nations there are, or what properties characterize a particular nation, the functional reading asks what nationalism *does*.

This distinction between an ontic reading of nationalism, leading to a focus on content, and a functional reading, leading to a focus on acts and their implications, is not novel. It is to some extent analogous to the well-known distinction in classic speech act theory between locutionary and illocutionary acts.²¹ These are different ways of understanding and categorizing what goes on when people use language. A focus on locutionary acts is concerned with *what* is said, e.g., the propositional meaning of statements. A focus on illocutionary acts is concerned with what the speaker *does* by saying something (which, if successful, can then lead to perlocutionary effects). The point of speech act theory is not that there are not locutionary acts or that it is better to focus on illocutionary acts rather than locutionary acts. The point is rather that, in order to understand language use, we need both categories and the related types of analyses. My point is that we need a similar double perspective in our discussions of nationalism. The focus on the content of conceptions of the nation, which is analogous to the focus on the propositional meaning of locutionary speech acts, needs to be supplemented with a focus on what nationalism *does* and with what implications, analogous to the focus on illocutionary speech acts and perlocutionary effects. Just as the focus on illocutions in speech act theory is concerned with the philosophical question about what speakers do by performing certain speech acts, i.e., how these constitute new social facts in a non-causal manner, my proposal is that we should also look at acts performed through nationalist discourse. This is a matter of non-causal constitution rather than causal effects (a priest makes it the case that two persons are married by saying, under appropriate conditions, “I hereby declare you husband and wife”), which primarily call for philosophical analysis rather than empirical investigation. However, just as illocutionary acts can have perlocutionary effects, the acts involved in nationalism discourse can also have further effects depending on how they are taken up

²¹ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

and by which audiences. Nevertheless, my focus in this paper is primarily on the first kind of implications of nationalist discourse analogous to illocutionary acts.

In keeping with this analogy, I propose to characterize perspectives based on the ontic reading as substantive perspectives on nationalism, and perspectives based on the functional reading as performative perspectives. It is not my main aim to argue for this distinction between (a) substantive perspectives based on an ontic reading of nationalism, leading to a focus on content; and (b) a performative perspective based on a functional reading of nationalism, leading to a focus on effects. Even though there are many differences between the domain of speech act theory and the domain of nationalism, I hope that the analogy I propose is comprehensible.²² My aim is rather to draw attention to the difference such a distinction would make for how we discuss nationalism.

²² Similar concerns with performative effects are also found elsewhere in political philosophy. So-called political realism is the view that political philosophy should not be a form of applied ethics but should rather proceed from ‘distinctively political forms of normativity’ supposedly inherent to politics. See Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Howthorn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). In addition to meta-ethical claims about different types of normativity and methodological claims about how to do political philosophy, political realists also make claims about undesirable performative effects of doing political philosophy as a form of applied ethics. Political realists criticize mainstream liberal political philosophy as a form of ‘moralism’ on the assumption that, if one approaches politics on the basis of abstract moral values, as liberals supposedly do, then this blinds one to political complexities, consequences, and possibilities. According to realists, moralist political philosophy thus involves a worrisome form of blindness to political reality. This might lead to further bad effects if people actually act on liberal political philosophy. However, a main part of the realist

My first claim in this regard is, as already noted, that discussions of nationalism in political philosophy tend toward ontic readings. Philosophical debates about liberal nationalism usually focus on which forms of nationalism (or nationalism policies) are justifiable. Philosophers tend to discuss such questions based on formulations of nationalism as a normative position, assuming the existence of the nation.²³ The usual question is what content the nation can have if certain forms of nationalism or nationalist policies are to be justifiable. This is a natural and unsurprising move. If nationalism is a claim about the normative significance of nations, then it seems sensible to approach this by discussing how we understand the nation and how we assess specific forms of nationalism or nationalism policies relative to which conception of the nation—i.e., which substantive membership criteria—they rely on.

My second claim is that, even though natural, this might be an inadequate or even a problematic approach. More precisely, there are two types of problems. One is that this substantive

criticism of moralism is that this in itself is problematic, since it involves a blindness to certain aspects of reality. Without necessarily agreeing with political realism, my point about the performativity of nationalism discourse is analogous to this realist criticism of moralism.

²³ This is not the same as assuming that nations are not created, which is what the classic discussion in nationalism studies between primordialists and modernists was about. Most liberal nationalists, e.g., Miller, acknowledge the modernist view that nations were at some point created, either as functional requirements of the modern state (cf. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*) or through political ‘nation building’ (cf. Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*). My point is that they nevertheless proceed to take the existence of nations for granted and focus on their content rather than on what we do by adopting this way of talking about nations.

approach risks reifying nations.²⁴ If we assume equivalence between the normative question about the justifiability of nationalism and the substantive question about criteria for membership in the nation, we assume that nations exist. This is the first assumption in what I called the ontic reading. However, this naturalizes nations and thereby draws our attention away from other questions we might ask, including whether nations as described actually exist or, if they do, why this is the case, or how they might be changed. This links to the second problem, which is that if we adopt the substantive perspective, we easily end up ignoring or downplaying the performative perspective and the functional issue.

Such a tendency to reify the nation and ignore the performative issue obtains even in some critical discussions of liberal nationalism, i.e., in cases where philosophers are skeptical regarding the justifiability of nationalism or restrictive with respect to which nationalism policies might be liberally acceptable. Even critics of liberal nationalism who question the legitimacy of many of the nationalism policies proposed by liberal nationalists tend to accept the category of the nations but then simply reject the proposed policy implications.

My third claim is that liberals should be concerned with the performative aspects of nationalism. A liberal assuming the substantive perspective focuses on nations as existing entities

²⁴ For a general discussion of reification of categories like ‘the nation,’ see Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). For discussions of problems of reification in relation to other aspects of liberal nationalism, see Arash Abizadeh, “Liberal Nationalist versus Postnational Social Integration: On the Nation’s Ethno-Cultural Particularity and Concreteness,” *Nations and Nationalism* 10, no. 3 (2004): 231–250; Sune Lægaard, “Feasibility and Stability in Normative Political Philosophy: The Case of Liberal Nationalism,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 9, no. 4 (2006): 399–416.

and then considers whether it is permissible according to liberal principles to base certain policies on membership in the nation. This is, of course, an important question. However, this is not the only question regarding nationalism with which liberals should be concerned. Liberals should not only take nations for granted in order to discuss what this implies for policy but should also consider the effects of the very act of delimiting a bounded community, since this act constitutes a way of limiting access to political rights and benefits.

5. Implications

If we accept the distinction between substantive and performative perspectives and agree that we can apply it to the discussion of nationalism, what might the implications be? I first sketch three general implications in relation to nations, nationalism, and liberal nationalism, and then I consider a specific example where this might make a difference, namely the recent discussion of multicultural nationalism.

The obvious implication of introducing the distinction between substantive and performative perspectives is that we should take a step back and consider what happens when we engage in ‘nation talk.’ This means that a discussion of what it means to be a member of a nation is never a purely theoretical question, nor one that we can simply settle empirically; it is also a practical question with potential consequences for people. When we engage in a discussion about the substance of nations, we are engaging in the kind of sorting of people into members and non-members of the nation that can serve as a basis for limiting rights or withholding benefits. If we engage in discussions of what it means to be a member of a nation, even if we argue for a permissive or inclusive conception of the nation, we implicitly assume that membership in the nation can be a ground for discrimination. Discrimination can of course be permissible and even

required in some cases.²⁵ The point is that discussion of what it means to be a member of a nation in itself affords the exclusion of some from political rights and benefits, because this is the performative function of the category of the nation.

A further implication is that we should adopt a broader view of nationalism. Usually, political philosophers discuss nationalism as a view that they can objectify and discuss at a distance, as it were. Even though political philosophy is concerned with normative questions, the discussion of these questions is a theoretical exercise in the sense that it consists in detached analysis and criticism of arguments and concepts. However, if we accept the generic understanding of nationalism as acts of sorting people into members and non-members as a basis for regulating access to political goods and the relevance of the performative perspective on such acts, then it seems to follow that *the philosophical discussion of nationalism may in itself be a form of nationalism*. Let me explain this.

Many discussions of liberal nationalism are relatively critical of nationalism and focus on specifying constraints that nationalist policies would have to respect in order to be liberally permissible. They thus focus on the content of (legitimate) nationalism. However, precisely as such, they might themselves constitute and contribute to a form of nationalism in the performative sense, since they affirm the existence of nations and countenance the permissibility of reserving access to certain benefits to members of the nation. Even if they then argue (perhaps convincingly) that the nation should be open to newcomers and that the state should only pursue nationalist policies that respect various liberal constraints, as proponents of liberal nationalism do, they still affirm the

²⁵ Cf. the standard distinction between discrimination and wrongful discrimination, e.g., in Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, *Born Free and Equal?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

permissibility of excluding some people from political goods on the basis of their non-membership in the nation.

Therefore, philosophers engaged in the substantive discussion of liberal constraints on nationalism can in fact be engaging in nationalism in the performative sense. By discussing permissible conceptions of the nation, however restrictively, we might affirm and engage in the very activity of sorting people into members and non-members (even if we then argue that this should happen in liberally acceptable ways). According to the generic understanding of nationalism sketched earlier, this is itself a form of nationalism. Liberal philosophers of nationalism might thereby contribute to and participate in nationalism in ways of which they are not aware and which might be problematic from a liberal point of view.²⁶

This does not mean that philosophers should stop discussing nationalism. It merely says that doing so can in itself be a form of, and contribute to, nationalism in the generic sense. We should therefore be aware of this and preferably include this aspect explicitly in our discussions of nationalism.

In relation to the specific discussion of liberal nationalism, a third implication concerns the standard discussion of *coherence*²⁷ about whether there can be liberally acceptable forms of nationalism. Liberal nationalism might be incoherent if nationalism violates liberal principles, either at the level of policies or at the level of permissible conceptions of the nation. Liberal nationalists

²⁶ I only argue that discussions of nationalism that adopt the substantive perspective might be forms of nationalism, not that all discussions of nationalism are. This would not apply, for instance, to the discussion in the present paper, because it is a methodological discussion about different perspectives rather than a substantive discussion of membership criteria.

²⁷ Miller, "Coherence of Liberal Nationalism."

have argued that nationalism and liberalism might be consistent if nationalism adopts open and inclusive conceptions of the nation that, for instance, allow newly arrived immigrants to become members of the nation. The subsequent discussion has then focused on whether a sufficiently open and inclusive conception of the nation can at the same time perform the functions that liberal nationalists expect of a common national identity—e.g., whether it can secure the required degree of social cohesion. This opens up the possibility that liberal nationalism might be coherent but not effective. My point here is not to enter into these standard debates, merely to point out that they focus on content. The question of coherence concerns the relation between the requirements of liberalism and nationalism. As such, these debates assume what I have called the ontic reading of nationalism.

The introduction of the distinction between substantive and performative perspectives opens up another possibility, namely that liberal nationalism might be substantively coherent but performativity incoherent. The notion of performative inconsistency also comes from speech act theory. A statement is performatively inconsistent if its propositional content denies its semantic or pragmatic presuppositions, i.e., the conditions necessary for it to be meaningfully affirmed. “I do not exist” is an example of a performatively inconsistent statement; it is not a logical contradiction (a matter of inconsistent propositional content), but if I utter it, I thereby (performatively) show that it is not true.

Even if we can specify a conception of the nation that is sufficiently open and inclusive to be liberally acceptable at the level of content, it is a further question whether such coherence at the level of content translates into coherence at the level of function. In keeping with the analogy with speech act theory, we might consider the possibility for performative inconsistency both at the level of the very *act* of separating between members and non-members of the nation (analogous to illocutionary speech acts) and at the level of possible further performative *effects* (analogous to

perlocutionary effects). A performative inconsistency of the first kind might obtain between the substance of nationalism, e.g., the affirmation of an inclusive conception of the nation, and the performative function of nationalism, i.e., to sort between members and non-members in a way that might exclude people supposed to be included. I will now consider a specific example where the possibility of substantive coherence coupled with performative incoherence in the first sense might obtain, namely the recent discussion of multicultural nationalism.

As noted earlier, liberal nationalism has increasingly been formulated as a response to diversity. According to the national identity argument, the state should support a common national identity because this provides the solidarity among citizens needed to secure redistribution under conditions of diversity, especially the kinds of diversity usually debated under the heading of multiculturalism.

The term 'multiculturalism' has two main meanings. One is a descriptive sense that simply registers the demographic fact that there are differences with respect to culture, language, ethnicity, and religion within a given population. Often, at least in Europe, we mainly talk of such differences as cases of multiculturalism if they are a result of immigration (the presence of national minorities such as the Sami in Northern Scandinavia or the Scots in Britain is usually not categorized as a case of multiculturalism). The second sense of multiculturalism is normative and denotes claims about how the state should accommodate these kinds of differences, e.g., by recognizing and supporting minority groups in various ways.

Liberal nationalism is a response to multiculturalism in the descriptive sense; it is the fact of diversity that, according to the national identity argument, necessitates a common national identity and the nation-building policies required to foster and uphold it. Regarding the normative sense of multiculturalism, to the contrary, the general view has often been that there is tension or even opposition between nationalism and multiculturalism. This is because nationalism is concerned with

fostering and upholding a common national identity, whereas multiculturalism is concerned with recognition and support of diversity.

Nevertheless, there are several arguments that liberal nationalism needs to be multicultural in something resembling the normative sense of multiculturalism. From the point of view of the national identity argument, e.g., as espoused by Miller, a common national identity can only perform its function if it is actually inclusive of the population in question. If the national identity is exclusive, it will not be able to ground support for redistribution in diverse societies. This requires that the national identity be continuously open to revision and that newly arrived minority groups are invited into and included in the national identity.²⁸ In practice, while this does not support more substantial multiculturalism policies, such as granting special rights to minority groups, it does seem to require something along the lines of multicultural recognition of minority groups—not as distinct groups whose different identities should be upheld and supported as such, but as legitimate members of the nation. So at least some types of policies of recognition usually debated under the heading of multiculturalism might be justified instrumentally based on the national identity argument for liberal nationalism.

The recent proposal for multicultural nationalism is therefore not completely new. The framing and motivation for multicultural nationalism is novel, however, since it explicitly connects nationalism and normative multiculturalism in a way contrary to the common view that they are in opposition. The main claim of multicultural nationalism as articulated by theorists like Tariq Modood and Varun Uberoi is that all citizens should share the national identity.²⁹ This claim is

²⁸ Miller, *On Nationality*, 26, 129–130, 179–180.

²⁹ Modood, “Multicultural Nationalism”; Modood, “Multiculturalism as a New Form of Nationalism?”; Varun Uberoi, “National Identities and Moving beyond Conservative and Liberal

made for familiar liberal nationalist reasons and because sharing in the national identity is an important way of having a sense of belonging and being recognized as a member. So multicultural nationalism justifies the need for a common national identity with reference to multiculturalist concerns about having a secure and publicly affirmed identity and feeling of belonging. This in turn means that proponents of multicultural nationalism support certain constraints on nation-building policies. These in practice resemble the familiar liberal constraints, but the motivation does not derive from commitment to liberal principles, since Modood does not wish to tie his support for either nationalism or multiculturalism to liberalism. Rather, multicultural nationalist constraints on nation-building policies derive from a multiculturalist concern that nation building should not undermine minority identities. The upshot is that the conception of the nation supported by nation-building policies should be inclusive of minorities and allow hyphenated identities—but for reasons having to do with the importance of identity and belonging, rather than with liberal nationalist concerns to secure solidarity for instrumental reasons and to respect liberal constraints on permissible state action.

Liberal nationalism and multicultural nationalism thus seem to converge, even though the reasons for their similar proposals derive from different normative premises. What they converge on is the need for a common national identity that is inclusive of the different cultural and ethnic groups in the society in question. Both liberal nationalists like Miller and multicultural nationalists like Modood have gone some way toward articulating what such an inclusive national identity could

Nationalism,” in *Multiculturalism Rethought: Interpretations, Dilemmas and New Directions*, ed. Varun Uberoi and Tariq Modood (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Varun Uberoi, “National Identity—A Multiculturalist’s Approach,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2018): 46–64.

look like. Therefore, there is reason to believe that their proposals are at least possible; we can probably characterize a version of nationalism that is inclusive in the required senses. For present purposes, however, the interesting thing to notice is that this is clearly an instance of the substantive perspective. The general project of an inclusive national identity is articulated in substantive terms, and consideration of what an inclusive national identity can and cannot consist in immediately leads to discussions of content.

However inclusive they might be, both liberal nationalism and multicultural nationalism are still forms of nationalism. If nationalism is about sorting between people with a view to limiting access to political rights and benefits, then this kind of exercise affirms exclusion of some people. Therefore, this type of view at one and the same time seeks inclusion and affirms exclusion. This is not a direct contradiction, however, since the exclusion delimits a group within which everyone who meets certain criteria is to be included. The articulation of the conception of the nation is supposed to specify who should be included and who should not. According to liberal and multicultural nationalism, immigrant minorities should be included.

When we shift to a performative perspective, the worry is that there might be an inconsistency between the performative act affirming exclusion and the substantive aim to include. This worry is especially pressing in the case of multicultural nationalism because the groups to be included and excluded are alike in many respects. Groups of immigrant origin should be included in the nation if they are already part of the state. However, new immigrants should be excluded, even if they come from the same countries of origin or have similar cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds as those to be included.³⁰ Even though this might be coherent in substantive terms,

³⁰ For a general discussion of blurring of internal multiculturalism and external immigration discussions, see Sune Lægaard, "On the Reciprocal Subordination of Multiculturalism and

since one might point to other reasons for differentiating among immigrants, e.g., time of entry or formal requirements for residence or naturalization, the very act of excluding people from specific backgrounds from the nation potentially extends to others with similar backgrounds, even though they should be included according to the substantive view. This might be the case, for instance, in the first sense of performative inconsistency noted above—which is focused on the act of exclusion—if the symbolic significance of the act of exclusion extends to people who should be included.³¹ Whether this is in fact the case would require a more detailed discussion of multicultural nationalism. Here, my aim has merely been to use multicultural nationalism as an illustration of the risk of substantive coherence coupled with performative incoherence.

A performative inconsistency might potentially also arise in the second sense, analogous to perlocutionary effects of speech acts, which concern the effects of an utterance on an audience. This might be the case if the same sorting of people into members and non-members of the nation that—according to the standard national identity argument—motivates people to redistribute to perceived co-nationals also disposes them less favorably toward perceived non-members. Even if there is a theoretically clear account of who are members and who are not, it is not a given that people's motivation will track this theoretical delimitation of the nation. There is no guarantee that the assumed motivational effects of common nationality will track the theoretical account of what the

Migration Policies,” in *Multicultural Governance in a Mobile World*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 245-264.

³¹ For a discussion of one possible version of this problem in relation to naturalization, i.e., access to citizenship, see Sune Lægaard, “Naturalisation, Desert, and the Symbolic Meaning of Citizenship,” in *Territories of Citizenship*, ed. Ludvig Beckman and Eva Erman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 40-59.

proper content of the national identity should be from a liberal point of view. So even though there could be a liberally acceptable division between members and non-members of the nation, once this distinction is introduced and invoked politically, it might in practice lead to differential treatment of members of the nation who, according to liberal nationalism, should be treated equally. The general idea of members and non-members is likely to be easier to understand and to have a greater motivational grip on many people than a specific liberally constrained and mandated version of it. So theoretical articulations of liberal nationalism can in practice fuel illiberal versions of nationalism, since the former invoke and affirm the legitimacy of distinguishing between members and non-members.

Whether such performative inconsistency in the second sense obtains is an empirical issue. As such, my claim is not that it necessarily obtains, and I cannot here show that it in fact obtains in specific cases.

6. Conclusion

This paper has sketched debates about liberal nationalism in political philosophy and proposed a generic understanding of nationalism, explaining how the quite varied discussions all concern nationalism. The paper has then offered a methodological rather than normative discussion of the framing of nationalism debates. Based on an analogy to speech act theory, I have suggested the relevance of supplementing the ordinary substantive perspective with a focus on performative aspects. I have discussed the implications of adopting this approach, which include the possibility that some substantive discussions of nationalism might themselves be forms of nationalism in the performative sense. Another implication is that we can pose the standard question of the coherence of liberal nationalism at the performative as well as the substantive level, which opens the possibility that forms of nationalism might be substantively coherent but performatively incoherent.

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