

Patrick J. Deneen

Patriotic Vision: At Home in a World Made Strange

Patriotism exhibits an unarticulated agreement with Aristotle's great and challenging assertion that "all men are by nature political animals." According to Aristotle, humanity in full flourishing requires the goods that a political community affords—the material goods of sustenance, shelter, protection by an organized defense, and the less quantifiable goods of education, the bonds of friendship, the opportunity for contemplation. Patriotism is the recognition of a debt. Individual human flourishing rests upon a sufficiently good regime, and individuality exists not "by nature" but instead requires the antecedent institutions and practices of a city. Thus, Aristotle argues, "the city is by nature prior to the household and to each one of us taken singly." To be fully human requires cultivation in a political community, a cultivation that is unnecessary for "beasts or gods" since they are incapable, or not in need, of such sustenance, but necessary for human beings, ironically, in order that they can become fully human. Patriotism, as an acknowledgment of the debts owed to particular origins and as a defense of the institutions and practices that constitute us, is an echo of this Aristotelian under-

standing of the relation of wholes to parts.

Yet if patriotism is a laudable expression of gratitude and perhaps even a requirement for human nobility, at the same time Aristotle reminds us that a "good citizen" is only rarely "a good man." It is a rare polity that does not call upon its citizens at times to act ignobly, at odds with virtue. Thus, if the love of one's own is a core political requirement, at the same time it remains one of the most persistent threats to justice. Patriotism, that form of loyalty that extends our souls beyond the familial and the amicable, represents one of the most potentially ennobling and potentially degrading forms of love. It at once directs our devotion to that which makes human flourishing possible, the polity, and yet ever portends the transformation of that devotion into blind obeisance, impassioned intolerance, and willing collaboration with that which is unjust and even evil.

Thought and virtue demand a limit to our love. We should not love that which is unjust, or that which inclines us to act

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unjustly or acquiesce in injustice. We should not love any person or place that would make us worse by dint of our love. We should love no one, and no thing, without reservation. And yet loyalty, to be meaningful, requires that we love that which is imperfect, even morally frail. The core feature of loyalty would be lost if we abandoned those people or places we otherwise cherish at the first sign of moral imperfection. Indeed, an inclination to avoid all forms of injustice would preclude the possibility of our loving in the first place. At critical moments, it is precisely our loyalty that compels us to abide with that to which we have dedicated ourselves, even given these frailties. Indeed, perhaps *because* of imperfections, our loyalty demands that we re-double efforts to support, reprimand, and improve those people, things, or places we love.

Clearly there can be no formula for navigating the calm seas and the submerged shoals of patriotism: it is neither morally defensible to demand an unreflective patriotism from a citizenry nor humanly virtuous to call for its cessation. Yet the idea of “balancing” patriotism with the critical distance demanded of universal moral claims seems ultimately to defeat the necessary priority required by patriotism. How can this tension be maintained without betraying the demands of each? If “balance” hollows out the core loyalties of patriotism, then must one simply decide one way or the other: between the love of one’s own and the love of one’s own virtue?

To love one’s own seems to be the “default” position of most human beings. We begin our lives loving what is nearest to us, including our parents, our siblings, our childhood friends, as well as our hometown, our region, our homeland. We understand the essence of growing up and the central purpose of education to be the process of mov-

ing us away from such automatic loves. Without necessarily leaving behind our first loves, we learn that our parents are not omnipotent, that our hometowns are repositories of conventionality and parochialism, that our country is marred by episodes of injustice and cruelty. We move psychically and physically away from these people and places, choosing our own friends and lovers, creating our own families, exploring new towns and regions and nations. We create ever greater critical distance between our unchosen primary loves and our conscious, mature loyalties.

This movement away from unchosen commitments by means of a consideration of, and eventual dedication to, a particular choice among alternative loves is mimicked in its own way by the enterprise of political theory. As an educator in political theory myself, it is part of my vocation to challenge all those loyalties with which students enter college. Political theory often does, and by some lights always should, teach us one thing above all: a rejection of patriotism. Patriotism is one of the most impassioned “loves of one’s own,” a sentiment of affection for the place of one’s birth and upbringing, and for the ways of life and traditions of a particular people. Political theory, on the other hand, teaches us at some level about the (mere) conventionality of every way of life. The theoretical study of politics compels us to recognize the insufficiencies of all political forms, to appreciate the virtues of regimes and traditions that are not our own. It points ultimately to the question of the best regime, a regime of perfect justice which, while implausible if not impossible, nevertheless always stands as an accusation against all existing regimes, even, and perhaps especially, one’s own.

It is no accident that political theory should call patriotism into question. The word “theory” comes from the ancient Greek word *theorein*, meaning “to see.”

Over time, it came to describe a special and intensified form of “seeing” in the Greek world. Certain designated city officials—*theoroi*—were charged with the task of visiting other cities, to “see” events such as religious or theatrical or athletic festivals, and to return to their home city, where they would then give an account of what they had seen. To “theorize” was to take part in a sacred journey, an encounter with the “other” in which the theorist would attempt to comprehend, assess, compare, and then, in idiom of his own city, explain what had been seen to his fellow citizens. This encounter would inevitably raise questions about the customs or practices of the theorist’s own city. Why do we do things this way? Might there be a better way of organizing the regime? Might there be a *best* way of life that is not our way?

This tension between the theorist’s role as critic and the city’s imperative to protect its way of life is deeply embedded in the history and the practice of political theory. The full implication of that tension was revealed when Socrates was accused of impiety toward the gods of Athens and of “corrupting the youth” and was subsequently put to death after being found guilty at his trial. Throughout the Platonic corpus—which idealizes, dramatizes, and “theorizes” the life of Socrates—there is constant evidence of the abiding tension between the role of the theorist and the exigencies of the city. In his most famous dialogue, the *Republic*, we discover that Socrates has “descended” beyond the walls of the city of Athens, to the multicultural port city of Piraeus, where he has gone to “see” a festival celebrating a new, foreign

goddess who is being accepted into the Athenian religious world. While Socrates expresses appreciation for the Athenian procession, he expresses even greater admiration for that of the “foreigners,” the Thracian worshipers. It is there, “outside” the city, in the midst of “theoretical” activity, that Socrates undertakes his most radical political enterprise—the description of the perfectly just political regime, one fundamentally at odds with the Athenian regime and all existing regimes.

By this estimation, a theorist is in some respects defined by a kind of “outsideness,” an alienation originally induced by the experience of physically moving from one place to another in order to assess the virtues and vices of one’s own cultural practices. Although we have largely forgotten the original meaning of the word, we still consider “theory” to involve at least the internal ability to raise questions about accepted norms and customs and to provide a critical dis-

tance that in many instances expressly confronts a nation’s patriotic sensibilities.

It is thus not surprising that political theorists of many stripes have been suspicious, if not downright hostile, toward patriotism. This has been more common for thinkers on the Left—such as Emma Goldman, who wrote an essay entitled “Patriotism, A Menace to Liberty”—but it is not unknown among thinkers on the Right, such as Samuel Johnson, who more famously declared that “Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels.” There are good reasons for thoughtful people to be suspicious of patriotism. We do not admire the evident patriotism of the German people un-



Socrates, citizen of Athens.

der the Nazi regime. A story like “The Lottery” reminds us that the unquestioned acceptance of custom can support wholly malignant practices that continue in the name of “the way we do things here.” An ancient play like Sophocles’ *Antigone* suggests the limits of patriotism when fundamental obligations, such as religious ones, conflict with the demands of the state. People of varying ethical and religious backgrounds, from St. Augustine writing as a Christian, to Martha Nussbaum writing as a secular liberal ethicist, criticize the place of primacy that nations presume to hold under a widespread patriotic sentiment. A thoughtful person should never blindly sacrifice his “theoretical” perspective before the altar of patriotism.

Does this mean that it is impossible for a thoughtful person to be patriotic? Does this require that “theorists” should by default view the actions and claims of the state with a skeptical eye? Are “theoretical vision” and patriotism mutually exclusive?

Returning to the original practice of “theory,” we can see that quite the opposite is true. The “theorist” was a designated office in the city. To “theorize” was a requirement of particular regimes in antiquity. Part of the self-definition of ancient cities involved the practice of calling their own practices into question. The activity of “seeing” foreign ways of life comprised only half of the theorist’s duty. The other half, just as essential, was the “giving of account” of what the theorist had seen. This could not be done by employing the concepts and language of the foreign city, for to do so would make it nearly impossible for the theorist’s fellow citizens to begin to form an understanding of exotic foreign practices. Instead, the theorist delivered his report firmly in the idiom of his own city: the position required a man deeply versed in his own language, his own customs and way of

life, indeed, the office required a man deeply sympathetic to the patterns of thought and action that characterized his native city. A “theorist” would betray his office if he were, so to speak, to “go native” while abroad: no Athenian “theorist” could conceivably observe a Spartan gymnastic festival and then simply return in a condemnatory stance toward his own city. Even if a “theorist” were persuaded that foreign practices were superior to those of his own city, the primacy of the theorist’s allegiance to his own city demanded the careful and prudent explanation of those practices to his fellow citizens, presented in ways that sought to evoke similar admiration by means of native assumptions and shared understandings.

Such gradualist explanations were not handed down from a position of superiority or greater knowingness by the theorist, but rather were indelibly informed by a prior respect for the practices of the theorist’s own city. For even if imperfect, those practices were nevertheless the source of other civic virtues—the bases of which might be undermined if insufficiently appreciated in an indiscriminate embrace of foreign practices. Those practices were, as well, the source of prejudices that, if directly confronted, would produce a hostile reaction to the theorist’s account, thereby defeating prospects for amelioration.

The theorist was chosen, then, not only for a recognized ability to “see” and apprehend with sensitivity the new and unusual, but equally for his abiding appreciation for the customs and practices of his own way of life. These are not mutually exclusive qualities, but intimately connected. A theorist was, by definition a patriot—one who treasured his cultural inheritance and traditions, knew intimately the stories and histories of his homeland, and saw these as fundamentally constitutive of his identity. At the same time, it was by means of deep

familiarity and love for that cultural inheritance that the theorist was able to move fellow citizens to a renewed devotion to those practices, in some instances, or to subtle questioning of dubious customs, in others.

One sees a form of “patriotic theory” particularly in the works of the ancient playwrights. The connection between “theory” and “theater” is more than linguistic, for the ancient playwrights were a species of “theorist”—people of intense vision—who by means of their “accounts” made possible a form of “theorizing” for the city’s wider citizenry as well. The playwrights retold old stories about the city and expanded on well-known tales and legends like those of Oedipus and Theseus and Orestes. By doing so, these theatrical theorists at once tapped into the constitutive material that informed their own perceptions of the foreign, while altering the ancient tales in ways that could open new vistas and ways of thinking for their audiences. The *Oresteia* or the Theban trilogy might begin in foreign cities—might, like the theoretical journey itself, take one outside the city gates, if only figuratively—but, significantly, each of those play cycles concludes in Athens. In each case the trilogy demonstrated to the Athenians their own best qualities—their system of self-governance, for instance, or their openness to foreigners (thus reaffirming the value of “theorizing” and theater)—by means of recalling and recasting ancient stories. An Athenian audience could celebrate the unique features that constituted the Athenian character, leaving the audience more consciously patriotic, and yet also newly aware of potential shortcomings embedded as warnings in the subtle but familiar retellings by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and kindred theorists.

The city, in effect, pre-committed itself to a course of potential change and im-

provement by means of selecting the appropriate *theoroi*. Without knowing the kinds of accounts with which it would be confronted, the city relied upon the theorist’s reservoir of patriotism to ensure that the city’s vital customs and practices were, in the first instance, valued and respected, and yet potentially subject to reconsideration. One might even say that the prospects for patriotism were extended and broadened by these practices. Reliance on the *theoroi* precluded the possibility of entrenched forms of parochialism or unquestioned yet vile customs, while it also undermined the accusatory claims of ungrateful cosmopolitans, “citizens of nowhere,” whose initial stance was always one of hostility, mistrust, and ingratitude toward any existing city. “Theory” kept the city open to improvement without loosening the ancient loyalties. It helped to make the city a worthwhile object of devotion, in some respects anticipating Edmund Burke’s observation that “To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely.”

The patriotic vision of the “theorist” eventually came to exist independently of the actual office sanctioned by the ancient city, and in particular, came to be closely associated with the form of inquiry of the ancient philosopher. In a certain respect Socrates seems to represent the pure opposite of the activity of the “theorist,” since he famously did not travel outside the city of Athens except as a soldier during several battles in the Peloponnesian War. Yet the Platonic dialogues which feature Socrates constantly draw upon the ancient activity of the *theorist*. The dialogues demonstrate the manifold ways that Socrates “leaves” the city—by means of contemplation, by imagination, through encounters with foreign guests (like Protagoras and Gorgias) and foreign teachers (like Diotima), through encounters with foreign teachings

(especially those of Sparta, Egypt, and Persia), and through many small “journeys” within Athens that provide a setting for greater philosophic journeys.

Generations of scholars have tried to explain the apparent contradiction that seems to lie at the core of Socrates’ relationship to Athens. On the one hand is Socrates’ firm insistence that he will pursue his philosophic mission as he understands it, even in spite of the prohibition of the city—as he announces in the *Apology*; on the other hand is his deep commitment and gratitude to the city that “created” him—as expressed in the *Crito*. Most modern commentators, failing to see the “theoretical” character of the Socratic enterprise, often try to downplay or dismiss one or the other aspect of Socrates, ending with a portrait of Socrates as alienated critic or Socrates as devoted citizen. Yet these are not mutually exclusive: by ancient understandings, they are mutually reinforcing.

In the *Apology*, Socrates reveals that he engages in his form of questioning at the behest of the gods, who have declared him the wisest of men and whom he seeks to disprove in his interrogation of any purportedly wise person. His mission, then, seems to be potentially at odds with the interests and traditions of the city, and Socrates insists that he will not cease his questioning even if commanded by the city. Yet he goes on to explain to his fellow citizens that he will persist in this activity *because of*, not *in spite of*, his devotion to the city that, as the Laws tell him in the *Crito*, “begat, nourished, and educated you, and gave you and all the other citizens a share in all the noble things we could....” He insists in the *Apology* that he will continue to philosophize in order to rouse the “lazy thoroughbred” of Athens—a noble but insufficiently excellent regime—and that, while he will speak with anyone he happens to meet, “both foreigner and townsman,” he

will dwell more with his fellow citizens “inasmuch as you are closer to me in kin.” His philosophic activity is undertaken on behalf of the city, born of the same gratitude and concern that prompted him to defend it bravely in the terrible Athenian defeats at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium. For Socrates, there is an unbreakable connection between this civic loyalty and his critical activity. We misunderstand ancient “theorizing” if we do not recognize the entwining of patriotism and philosophy.

At some point, the practice of theory moved from this more integrated relationship between patriotic sympathy and critical distance born of the “sacred journey” and became increasingly and almost exclusively a form of critique that started from a skeptical, untrusting, even accusatory perspective. While one can see such a development even in antiquity—Diogenes Laertius declared in the third century A.D. that he was *kosmou polites*, a “citizen of the cosmos”—the turning point that differentiated modern from ancient forms of theorizing, that placed the theorist in an adversarial position toward loyalty, can be traced to René Descartes.

It is often forgotten that Descartes’ seminal work on “theorizing,” the *Discourse on Method*, begins with autobiographical details of Descartes’ many travels. His first step in the “thought experiment” by which he proceeds in a complete state of doubt about all inherited knowledge, all assumptions of what is true, all the most obvious facts of existence that arrive from the senses, notably occurs in a foreign country. During a winter spent in Germany, having “no cares or passions to trouble me, I remained the whole day shut up alone in a stove-heated room, where I had complete leisure to occupy myself with my own thoughts. One of the first of the considerations that occurred to me was that there is very often

less perfection in works composed of several portions, and carried out by the hands of various masters, than in those on which one individual alone has worked.”

Descartes describes the perfect antithesis of the approach of the ancient theorist: rather than proceeding from a sympathetic stance toward the inheritance of his own legacy, Descartes begins with radical suspicion toward all that has preceded him in act or thought, and especially all that is a result of the common endeavors of a community or a people. The fact that this Frenchman is in Germany as he begins these meditations only highlights the variance of his own investigations from those of the ancient theorists. He purposefully eschews the insights and experiences offered to him by an alien culture, and instead shuts himself literally within a room and figuratively within his own mind.

Descartes' presence in a foreign land is irrelevant to his approach, for he has concluded as a result of his previous travels that all human arrangements are wholly conventional, mere accrued custom and accretions of generations, and not a result of purposive, critical thought. Travel has taught him that there is nothing more to be learned from travel: he is now a cosmopolitan, a thinker without origin or destination, an occupant of earth who can contemplate equally well anywhere he should find himself. He is the precursor of and the model for the modern philosopher, a citizen of no-place but the realm of abstract thought, one who can presumably arrive at the same patterns of thought regardless of whatever nationality he might find himself: all locations are merely accidental and tenuous. A thinker like Descartes would appear to be content to think anywhere on earth.

At the same time, Descartes reveals that this apparent lack of preferences will result in certain preferences all the same. Descartes admits that ideally, such a philosopher is a

kind of “free rider” on the wealth, security, generosity, and anonymity provided by modern nations, and especially by cosmopolitan cities that are sufficiently liberal as not to demand any loyalty in return. As Descartes relates, since his first investigations in Germany, “it is just eight years ago that this desire to remove myself from all places where any acquaintances were possible, and to retire to a country such as this [i.e., Holland], where the long-continued war has caused such order to be established that the armies which are maintained seem only to be of use in allowing the inhabitants to enjoy the fruits of peace with so much the more security; and where, in the crowded throng of a great and very active nation, which is more concerned with its own affairs than curious about those of others, without missing any of the conveniences of the most populous towns, I can live as solitary and retired as in deserts the most remote.”

Descartes inaugurates modern philosophy's estrangement from the place where philosophy begins—among, and with, one's fellow citizens—and ultimately, modern philosophy's estrangement from the world. He is the very model of the proudly ungrateful anti-patriot. G. K. Chesterton once suggested that the “main problem for philosophers” was how to “contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it.” (And Chesterton proposed a novel in which an Englishman sails the South Seas in search of new islands, only to land in England without realizing it: all that was once familiar is now new. Chesterton was proposing an “accidental” theoretical journey, in effect, as a remedy to the pathology of modern philosophy.) Descartes seems not even to have acknowledged either “wonder” or “belonging” as having any intrinsic value. By making himself a stranger from his fellows and from the world, he made it impossible to be astonished by it.

Anyone who has encountered members of the “peace movement” in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11 is all too familiar with the assumptions of the Cartesian thinker and “citizen.” Beneficiaries of the American regime—a political community that affords nearly countless opportunities for inquiry, life choices, and forms of expression—these critics of America tend to be among our most “cosmopolitan,” and most Cartesian, in enjoying “the fruits of peace” without any gratitude or acknowledgment of their costs. Often, those who have benefited most from the great openness of our regime have been quickest to denounce the deficiencies of their country.

At the same time, undoubtedly in response to the shamelessness of these critics whose first reaction to the murder of thousands of fellow citizens was an expression of barely contained abhorrence of their own country, there have been many who in a similarly automatic way have embraced the opposite pole of unreflective patriotism. Both positions betray the complex but richly productive approach of the “theoretical patriot,” rightly understood. Modernity

has made this ancient position more difficult to sustain, given modernity’s tendency to create dichotomies and subsequently force a choice between paradigms of freedom and those of restraint. Antiquity understood the falsity of such choices, rather acknowledging and employing the theorist’s initial gratitude toward his city, and rightly viewing the theorist’s role as part of the city’s self-definition. The “comparative” mission of the theorist, one that brought the theorist out of the city both physically and psychically, was part of the city’s own custom, and hence the theorist could never understand his activity as existing at some abstract level wholly apart from the city. The theorist, if critical of his own city, was a loving, loyal, grateful, and committed critic, not hostile or ungrateful.

After September 11, it is all the more imperative that we citizens of a democratic country make that “sacred journey” of the theorist, one that intensifies our vision, one that starts and ends in gratitude, and from which we may hope to deepen those devotions that America deserves—and that, through such patriotic vision, it will deserve ever more.