

## Patriotism Without Bad Faith

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This is an extract from Robert Fussell's list of things that American infantryman in World War II, fresh out of high school, characteristically believed:

1. America is the best country in the world because it is the only really modern one.
2. It is the world leader in technology, producing ... airplanes and tanks, which, being the best in the world, are going to win the war. They are certainly better than anything the Germans or the Japs can make. (Only the brightest and boldest of the troops perceived that American tanks were seriously outgunned by the German ones). Among the troops only the finely tuned noted the superiority of the German machine guns. Discovery of any of these facts was demoralizing, and a problem confronting the brighter US infantryman was rationalizing away the sorry truths when among dumber people.<sup>1</sup>

The amalgam of credulity and close-mindedness that Fussell describes is an example of what Jean-Paul Sartre called bad faith: "The one who practices bad faith is hiding displeasing truths or presenting as truth pleasing falsehoods."<sup>2</sup> Bad faith is a subversion of critical thinking by its wishful counterpart. We desire certain things to be so, and the desire is strong enough to prevent us from understanding the world as it is. The most obvious source of the desire in Fussell's case is patriotism of a certain kind. Patriotism as tribal vanity hinges on fictions of collective superiority that must be insulated against the claims of the real world if they are to survive. And of course, mass schooling has traditionally played a big role in instilling such fictions and encouraging the bad faith that protects them from revision. This bad faith is not benign. If the attitude that Fussell describes seems harmless enough at first glance that could only be because one has, for the moment, forgotten the role that an analogous fact-resistant sense of national superiority played in sustaining the terrible will of the Nazis.

A good question, then, is whether patriotism can be saved from its association with bad faith. The question has an obvious educational importance. Some of us believe that a good education is centrally about learning to live with intellectual integrity, and bad faith is repugnant to that. But many people also think that cultivating patriotism is a necessary part of civic education. They must be wrong if patriotism and bad faith cannot be divorced from each other. In fact, if they cannot be divorced, education is properly antipatriotic so far as it cultivates intellectual integrity. Simon Keller has argued ingeniously that no divorce is possible. I want to assess his argument.<sup>3</sup>

A methodological point before I proceed further: the philosophical interpretation of any alleged virtue or vice is vulnerable to opposing errors, and our interpretive strategies must find a route between them. The first problem is that virtue exists in close proximity to vice. A laudable humility can be hard to distinguish from a deplorable self-abasement; a respectful compassion and a contemptuous pity exist on either side of a blurred boundary; heroic patience and self-defeating passivity may require delicate judgment to discriminate, and so on.

Elusive borders between virtue and vice make it easy to miss the positive role a particular trait may play in the moral life unless we are careful to interpret its role charitably. No one can deny that patriotism can function in morally bad, even terrible ways. But that fact must not blind us to the possibility that in some nontrivial range of circumstances it also functions as a virtue. I argue that Keller succumbs to the temptation to interpret patriotism uncharitably. A better construal is available than the one he presents.

The other interpretive challenge we face arises from the close proximity of virtues to each other. The blurred boundary between justice and charity, for example, may gull us into thinking that the one we focus on somehow includes all that is good in the other, and then we assign the favored virtue an inflated importance. I have no doubt that in popular political morality the status of patriotism as a virtue is often wildly inflated, with familiar catastrophic consequences in some cases. I have argued elsewhere that patriotism can at best claim to be a dependent virtue. More exactly, it has a positive moral status only in circumstances where it is guided by a sense of justice.<sup>4</sup> Thus I assume throughout this essay that only a justice-guided patriotism could possibly count as virtuous. If Keller is right, however, arguing for a justice-guided patriotism is an oxymoron because the bad faith that all patriotism harbors would be liable to defeat any guidance that justice could provide.

Keller says that a susceptibility to bad faith is integral to any particular loyalty when two conditions are met: the loyalty is ungrounded in any perceived objective value that the object possesses, and yet it essentially involves a belief that the object nonetheless has objective merits. The inclination to bad faith thereby produced constitutes a full-blooded vice when the beliefs and choices it distorts impinge on matters of serious moral interest.<sup>5</sup> To understand this, we need to say more about the first of these conditions.

By a “groundless” loyalty Keller has in mind both its motivational and justificatory status.<sup>6</sup> A loyalty is motivationally groundless when it is unexplained by a more psychologically basic motive; it is basic in the justificatory sense when no good reason beyond the bare fact that one has the loyalty can be cited in its justification. The example of filial loyalty he gives is evidently to be understood as groundless in both senses. As a motivational matter, your loyalty to your father, say, is simply an aspect of your love for him, not the manifestation of some more general desire, such as a craving for the esteem of respected older males. And as a justificatory matter, there might be nothing better to be said for your loyalty beyond the fact that he is your father. His merits, whatever they are, might be irrelevant to your love. And so filial loyalty, at least as an aspect of filial love, would appear not *essentially* to involve any particular belief about one’s parents’ merits.

But suppose a man believed (wrongly) that the justification of his loyalty depended on his beloved father excelling over others in certain respects. A tension now erupts between the motivational source of his loyalty, which depends not at all on his father’s merits, and what he takes to be its justification, which depends precisely on those merits. The motive that drives filial loyalty will incline him to

evaluate evidence which bears on his father's merits in a way that protects what he take to be its justification. For to assess the evidence impartially may cast doubt on the very legitimacy of his love, and doubt on that score will be experienced as a betrayal of something at the core of his identity. Evidence about his father's demerits will tend to be palliated and evidence of merits amplified because the loyalty he cherishes is otherwise threatened. This is bad faith. But it rests on a misunderstanding of filial love and loyalty, which as matters of motivation and justification are both properly basic on Keller's view.<sup>7</sup>

With one crucial difference, this is just the structure of patriotism, as Keller understands it. Like filial loyalty, patriotic allegiance is motivationally ungrounded. Patriots act loyally when that requires self-sacrifice simply because it is *their* country that is under threat, for example. But unlike the filial case, loyalty to one's country cannot be properly groundless with respect to justification, or so Keller claims. Patriotism necessarily "makes reference to, or latches onto, aspects of the country that are taken to merit pride or approval or affection or reverence."<sup>8</sup> The patriot must be able to justify the special regard he holds for his country by appealing to reasons other than the mere fact that the country he loves is his. Keller's brief discussion of Rian Malan's book *My Traitor's Heart* is intended to bring this point into focus.

*My Traitor's Heart* is mostly about the last two decades of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Malan has harrowing tales to tell from his career as a journalist, and he writes with acuity about the guilt, resentment, and distrust that afflicted relations between liberal whites and their black compatriots. Keller describes Malan as an

Afrikaner who has come to believe that his country is cruel, paranoid and violent, and that its national project is rotten to the core. While Malan regards South Africa with a distaste that sometimes seems very much like hatred, he displays a deep personal concern for his country — a concern that he does not hold toward anybody else's South Africa. Malan might indeed love South Africa but it would be an odd use of language to call him a South African patriot. His feelings for his country are not patriotic feelings. His book would not have been called *My Patriotic Heart*.<sup>9</sup>

I have doubts about how Keller interprets the content of Malan's traitor's heart. I say more about that subsequently. Still, what seems right here is the idea that someone who declares that his country really is completely and irredeemably worthless could not without strain at the limits of intelligibility add "but I'm still a devoted patriot." Keller would say that all this just goes to show that patriotism necessarily exhibits the distinctive psychological matrix for bad faith. Patriotic loyalty is motivationally groundless: patriots are inspired (or seduced?) to love their country simply because it is theirs. Patriotic loyalty nonetheless cannot be groundless in the justificatory sense because patriots must have reasons for their patriotism that appeal to the objective value of the country they love. Their motivationally groundless loyalty thus disposes them to wishful thinking when taking the measure of their country's value.

An important implication of Keller's argument is that patriotic dissidents are infected with the same bad faith that corrupts patriotic conformists. The dissident

appeals to putative virtues and accomplishments of a beloved country as a critical foundation for dissent. But the availability of that foundation depends on whether the virtues and accomplishments really can be ascribed to their country. Any evidence for doubt threatens patriotic commitment. To the extent that patriotic dissidents keep faith with that commitment, they will be averse to impartially confronting the evidence for doubt.

Keller must assume “country” is to be treated as equivalent to “state” when he says that Malan believes “his country is cruel, paranoid and violent, and that its national project is rotten to the core.” That is a fair summary of what Malan says about the apartheid regime. But “country” has another familiar and altogether different meaning: it can signify a largely intergenerational, territorially concentrated community (or congeries of overlapping communities) that stretches back into the past and ahead into an indefinite future. That Malan would depict his country *in that sense* as rotten to the core is plainly false. For one thing, he loves and admires far too many of his compatriots, mostly black but some whites as well, for that to be true; for another, his deep attachment to the land and much of the culture of South Africa is experienced as emotionally inescapable. That is presumably why Keller acknowledges toward the end of the passage I quoted that it might be right to say that Malan even loves his country. For rhetorical convenience I call the two senses of “country” between which Keller slides the *state-centric* and the *community-centric* concepts respectively.

Which of these two concepts is internal to patriotism? If we want an answer that holds any interest within a democratic political morality, the answer cannot possibly be the state-centric option. Whatever else government *for* the people could mean, it surely suggests that the state is merely an instrument for promoting justice and prosperity for its people. To love the state is thus to glorify the political means over the political end. “I love my state” has a sinister ring to it. That is because love for the state is in conflict with the strictly instrumentalist attitude to political authority that we expect from free and equal citizens.

The ethically interesting concept of patriotism for us entails the community-centric idea of country. I want to say more about what the political uses to which the concept may be put. Here is an example that comes from circumstances akin to South Africa at the time depicted in *My Traitor’s Heart*. Zarah Ghahramani’s childhood and youth in Iran’s Islamic Republic were cosseted. But dabbling in dissident politics while at university leads to her arrest and incarceration in Tehran’s notorious Evin prison. Torture quickly follows.

One morning after the broadcast of prayers as I sat with back against the concrete bricks of the cell wall, words and solace came to me from a braver part of myself. “If I survive Evin,” I thought, “no matter how bruised I am, I will still have Iran. I will still have my country.” Because Evin was not Iran. It was just a prison that could be found in a hundred different countries. The interrogators at Evin could never have what I could have, if I lived. They could never have Iran. This thought consoled me that day. By the next day, it had no power to soothe. I said the words over and over again anyway: “I will still have Iran.”<sup>10</sup>

No thought becomes wise just because some people find it consoling in their most desperate hours. Still, I think it would be wrong to dismiss Ghahramani’s “I will still

have Iran” as some kind of stress-induced hallucination. The Iran she “had” was an imaginative construction with scarcely any relation to the state in which she was imprisoned, but that does not make it a foolish illusion.

The idea that nations or peoples are imagined communities has been made familiar through the seminal work of Benedict Anderson. What Ghahramani’s case nicely illustrates is the way in which such imaginings can do very serious normative work in politics. The relevant community can be conceived in ways that express ideals that become foci of public argument and mobilization.<sup>11</sup> To love an object is to desire its flourishing, and therefore, to love a country in the community-centric sense presupposes some conception of what it is for the community to flourish. Ghahramani’s appeal to a beloved country is to an ideal of a tolerant and humane Iran, inspired in her case by the great medieval Persian poets but also and as powerfully by Federico Garcia Lorca, the martyred republican dramatist and poet of the Spanish Civil War. That ideal drew her into political protest on the streets of Tehran, and though other protesters no doubt drew inspiration from less bookish sources, many were evidently driven as she was by identification with a normatively imagined community for Iran, a community whose values would condemn the repressive rule of the mullahs.

How then might Keller’s argument about the bad faith in patriotism apply to examples of the community-centric concept such as Ghaharmani? By his lights, she would count as a dissident patriot who draws on some cherished things that belong to country she loves (namely, the poetry of Hafez and Saadi) to criticize other things (namely, repression in the Islamic Republic). But as a patriot, her motivationally groundless commitment to Iran is in deep tension with the justificatory challenge of defending the objective merits of her country, which she must adduce as the basis of her dissent. What this implies, I suppose, is that she is necessarily inclined to bad faith if anyone suggests that Saadi’s poetry is pretty awful or that the best interpretation of Hafez would cast him as an exponent of Islamic autocracy, and so on.

Keller’s argument yields what seems to me an implausible reading of Ghaharmani’s dissident patriotism because it badly overstates her justificatory challenge. I want to propose an alternative understanding that breaks the connection he posits to bad faith.

What justifies Ghaharmani’s love of country? The ethically interesting question is about the best available answer she could give because that answer will be the one that patriotism, on its most charitable interpretation, would support.

Iran is a country of over 70 million people. The ability of each to live a decent life, and the ability of their descendants to do so, depends substantially on whether they can muster the collective will to create and sustain just political institutions. A reasonable assumption is that Iranians have as much ability to create such institutions as anyone, and that assumption gives grounds for reasonable hope that they can in fact be created. To love Iran, then, in a way that tracks the instrumental value of creating just political institutions for Iranians is to respond with love to something

of immense moral significance. That something is the dignity and welfare of the Iranian people. This does not presuppose that any collectively imagined political community is as valuable as the human lives it encompasses. The point is rather that any love of country expressed in the effort to achieve justice for its people straightforwardly derives its moral merit from the worth of the people's lives.

Ghaharmani has a particular, idiosyncratic story to tell about how her love came about and prompted her political activism. But to confuse that story with the justification of her love is to miss how compelling the available justification really is. And because the justification is so compelling, Iranians who have a comparable love for their country need not worry that only through bad faith can the justification be shored up against corrosive self-doubt.

An important feature of patriotism that comes into focus when we think of its justification in this way is its orientation to the future. The patriot seeks to create or perpetuate a polity in which the people can prosper. What strictly counts then is the justification of hopes for future achievement rather than belief about the merits of past and current accomplishment; and inspiration for that future might come from exogenous (Lorca) as well as endogenous sources (Hafez and Saadi). No doubt beliefs about past or present accomplishment can nourish hope in the future, and discrediting them can shake hope. And when hopes for the future are embattled, bad faith in beliefs about the superiority of one's own country may be a symptom of sheer desperation. (That is one reason why we might hesitate to condescend to Fussell's unfortunate infantrymen.) But to expect some bad faith under those conditions is not to discern an internal connection to patriotism that applies across the board.

This suggests an interesting reason why ascribing patriotism to Malan might be a mistake, as Keller suggests, though not for any reason that Keller gives. The dominant political mood of *My Traitor's Heart* is despair, and despair is the defeat of hope. A hopeless love of country is certainly a psychological possibility, and its natural mode of expression will be a resigned acceptance to the evils of the present. But whatever else patriotism could be as a political virtue, it could not be consistent with that acceptance, and therefore, it must require a hope that love of country by itself does not entail.

The aim of this essay has been modest. I have shown that patriotism does not entail bad faith on a suitably charitable interpretation of what might constitute patriotism as a political virtue. Therefore, an education that gives pride of place to intellectual integrity is not necessarily threatened by the cultivation of patriotism. Still, I would not want to suggest that patriotism and intellectual integrity are always easily reconciled in the world as we know it, and a good education will not pretend otherwise.

The importance of this point can be brought into relief by considering another text. In an interview towards the end of his life, the great American poet Anthony Hecht told the following story about the untimely end of his own patriotism. Hecht was an infantryman in World War II, and one day his company came under German

mortar fire soon after several of its members had been killed or wounded. The shelling had stopped for some time when something astonishing happened:

[A] small group of German women, perhaps five or six leading small children by the hand, and with white flags of surrender fixed to sticks and broom handles, came up over the far crest and started walking slowly towards us, waving their white flags back and forth. They came slowly, the children retarding their advance. They had to descend the small incline that lay between their height and ours. When they were about half way, and about to climb the slope leading to our position, two of our machine guns opened up and slaughtered the whole group. Not long after we were able to take the enemy position from which all their troops had withdrawn. For the rest of the day there was much loud and insistent talk about that morning's slaughter, all intended as justification: "They might have had bombs on them." "They might have had some radio devices to direct German artillery toward us." Things like that. This was all due to the plain panic of soldiers newly exposed to combat, due also to guilt, to frustrated fury at the casualties we had suffered. In any case, what I saw that morning was, except for Flossenbürg, the greatest trauma of the war — and, believe me, I saw a lot of terrible things. But that morning left me without the least vestige of patriotism or national pride. And when I hear empty talk about that war having been a "good war," as contrasted with, say, Vietnam, I maintain a fixed silence. The men in my company, under ordinary circumstances, were not vicious or criminal, but I no longer felt close to any of them.<sup>12</sup>

His comrades' slaughter of innocent civilians exposed a shocking capacity for evil close to the surface of their characters. And then the evil was compounded by bad faith about what they had done. Hecht reacted with moral horror. And the target of his revulsion encompassed the patriotic solidarity he was expected to share with his comrades. The scope of that revulsion might seem excessive, if nonetheless excusable, had Hecht any reason to believe that he found himself in a company in which sociopathy and self-deception were badly overrepresented. But these were Americans who would behave well "under ordinary circumstances." They were just normal Americans, like Hecht himself.

An interesting feature of the case as described is that Hecht's refusal or inability to indulge in the comforts of bad faith — his intellectual integrity, in other words — is part of what explains his loss of patriotism. Of course, that does not mean he gives us the last word on the moral status of patriotism. Trauma can destroy a capacity for love that would otherwise enrich our own lives and the lives of others. We know this is true for the loves of personal intimacy; it would be surprising if it were not true as well for love of country. Still, a patriotism consistent with the values of the examined life will not evade the complexities of its flourishing and its corruption in the real world. The patriotic education worth having will find an honored place for voices such as Ghaharmani's; it will find one for Anthony Hecht's as well.

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1. Robert Fussell, *The Boys' Crusade* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 8–9.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 1969), 49, quoted in Simon Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

3. *Ibid.*, 52–93.

4. Eamonn Callan, "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Patriotism and Dirty Hands," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no.3 (2010): 249–70.

5. Keller, *Loyalty*, 71–73.



6. Ibid. The idea of groundlessness as a justificatory idea is introduced on p. 63. Its motivational relevance is central to the culminating argument against patriotism on p. 75.

7. I doubt that bad faith is the necessary consequence of *any* conflict between a motivationally basic commitment and the belief that the commitment requires some objective justification. If one regards the commitment as relatively trivial — something one could jettison without any distress or compunction — it is hard to see why any inclination to bad faith should inevitably emerge. The problem arises, I think, when motivationally basic commitments are matters of what Charles Taylor has called “strong evaluation:” commitments whose maintenance are subject to a particular second-order appraisal on the part of the agent, an appraisal that deems them to be “higher” than routine desires, “honorable,” or the like. (Charles Taylor, “What Is Human Agency?” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 15–44). The point is that to act against such desires is to betray what one believes truly matters among one’s commitments, and the gravity of that threat to identity puts the disposition to bad faith in motion. Keller’s example of filial loyalty is ordinarily a commitment of just this kind. Thus, although he does not explicitly connect the idea of groundless motivation to strong evaluation in Taylor’s sense, I think his argument tacitly appeals to that connection.

8. Keller, *Loyalty*, 67.

9. Ibid.

10. Zarah Ghahramani, as told to Robert Hillman, “Poetry of Protest,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 2, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/02/magazine/02lives-t.html?fta=y>.

11. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

12. Anthony Hecht, *Anthony Hecht In Conversation With Philip Hoy* (London: Between the Lines, 1999), 25.