

# On National Identity

## A Response to Jonathan Rée

Ross Poole

Jonathan Rée's 'Internationality'<sup>1</sup> makes a number of significant contributions to the sparse philosophical literature on nationalism. The concept which gives the paper its title promises, I think, to be particularly useful. Just as we are now accustomed to think of individual subjects as constituted in and through relations of intersubjectivity, so Rée suggests we should think of individual nations as constituted in and through relations of *internationality*. Only somewhat paradoxically, it is the system of relations between nations which explains the existence of nations; not the other way around. If I understand him correctly, Rée does not intend to deny that there must be internal structural changes in a country before its inhabitants – landlords and peasants, bosses and workers, men and women – begin to think of themselves as members of the one national community. But a crucial moment in this process is the existence of an international framework which demands that its constituent communities satisfy certain political, legal, military and geographic conditions of existence. National self-recognition requires that people begin to think of their nations – and themselves – as confronted with different and perhaps opposing others. Otherness is as crucial to the identity of nations as it is to that of individuals.

Rée's article also has a particular message to philosophers in that it challenges us to examine the cultural specificities of our chosen activity. Too often, philosophers have taken their calling at its own word and treated it as if it occupied a terrain free of local determination and affect. Though at one level we are all too well aware of the differences between French, German and English styles of philosophy, we rarely pause to consider the extent to which these differences might be more than matters of style but lie at the heart of our enterprise. Rée's discussion of English philosophy of the 1950s reminds us that philosophical speculation and argument always take place within and are informed by specific social environments and histories. It invites us to think of the enterprise of philosophy as arising within and contributing to particular national cultures. This does not necessarily destroy the pretensions of philosophy to pursue truths which are abstract and universal; but it must recognise that its point of departure is always concrete and particular.

There are, however, several issues where I found myself in some disagreement with Rée's position, and I would like

to say something about two of these which seemed to me of particular importance. The first concerns his dismissal of the concept of *identity* as it occurs in the term 'national identity'. This term is, he suggests, 'one of the great political, ideological and conceptual follies of our time' (p. 8). Against this, I want to suggest that the concept of identity plays a crucial role in our understanding of nationalism, and that Rée's grounds for rejecting it are based on misunderstanding. The second disagreement concerns the attitude we should adopt to nationalism. Rée continues a well established tradition amongst left-wing intellectuals in taking a position opposed to nationalism. The system of internationality (in his sense) is 'a deceit, a con and a scam, a living falsehood' (p. 10) and we would be well rid of it. Now it is clearly not possible for us near the end of the twentieth century to take the kind of naively optimistic view of the beneficence of nationalism that was perhaps possible in the mid-nineteenth century. Still, I wish to argue for a more nuanced perspective on national identity than Rée allows for. Nationalism is a much more morally complex phenomenon than he recognises, and a dismissal of it which does not take account of that complexity risks throwing out some babies along with the sewage.

### Conceptions of identity

Let me begin with the notion of identity. This term is used in a bewildering variety of ways in popular sociology, cultural studies, political discussion (particularly about ethnic affairs) and the press, and one might well be sceptical about the possibility of establishing a reasonably unitary sense. Still, there are two uses (or perhaps tendencies) which seem to be dominant. In one sense, identity refers to what is characteristic of and perhaps specific to a particular group or community: in this sense, national identity designates the particularities of tradition, politics, history, geography and culture insofar as these enter into a prevailing conception of a nation. The titles of Fernand Braudel's book *The Identity of France* and of the collective work edited by Raphael Samuel *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* provide good examples of the term being used in this way.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the term is often used to refer to a mode of individual existence – a way in which individuals conceive themselves and others. In this

sense it is individuals who have identities (or sometimes search for them), and national identity is a certain kind of shared self-awareness. The term is used in something like this sense in the title of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, by Perry Anderson in his very interesting review of Braudel's book, and by any number of other writers.<sup>3</sup>

The existence of two (at least) apparently distinct senses of the term 'national identity' might be taken to provide sufficient reasons to reject the term on the grounds of ambiguity (though I will say something to connect the two senses later). Curiously enough, however, this is not Rée's worry; indeed he does not discuss the first use of the term at all. His objections are to the second. He writes

The trouble with this use of the word *identity* is that ... it tends to remove all pain, awkwardness and opacity from people's relations to their own subjectivity: it reduces problems of personality to matters of self-image. ... The possibility that people might be deceived or mistaken about themselves is excluded *a priori* (p. 9).

My initial puzzlement with this charge was that I could not think of *anyone* who uses the notion of national identity who would think that it had these consequences. Indeed, it is a cliché of recent discussion that identities are socially constructed, conflictual and opaque. No doubt we should be wary of clichés, and it is important to bear in mind that we may be committed by the use of concepts in ways which we are not aware of and might not accept. But Rée does little to examine recent uses of the term in order to show that it does have the implications he alleges,<sup>4</sup> so it is also possible that it is Rée who is mistaken. Either way, we need to look more closely at the relevant concept of identity.

Rée locates the origins of this concept in Locke's famous discussion of personal identity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.<sup>5</sup> He provides no evidence for this genealogy, and for reasons which will become clear shortly I am very dubious about it. Still, Locke's discussion provides a convenient starting point. Locke was concerned to elucidate a concept of 'being the same person' which would explain the sense in which we think of people as retaining their

identity over time, a conception which is presupposed by a number of social practices – e.g. praise and reward, blame and punishment, promise making and keeping, and so on. After considering a number of actual and possible examples, Locke suggested that the criterion of personal identity lies in the fact that persons are able to remember what they once were and did. The special access that memory gives me to my own past explains why I am taken to be the same person as the I who existed in the past and properly accountable for actions that I have performed, contracts that I have entered into, and the like.

According to Rée what Locke's account comes down to is 'that persons are simply what they remember having been, or, roughly speaking, that you are what you think you are' (p. 8). On this enormously unsympathetic reading of Locke, identity – and perhaps the person – is nothing but the intentional object of certain acts of consciousness. There are many problems with this, including the one that Rée mentions: it is hard to see how we could ever be mistaken about ourselves. Even on a more sympathetic reading of Locke it is pretty clear that he does not provide a coherent conception of personal identity. Philosophers have long objected to it on the grounds of circularity: the relevant notion of memory presupposes the concept of personal identity; it does not provide an independent criterion of it. But perhaps a more important problem in the present context is that it is hard to see how a psychological fact such as memory could have the enormous social and moral consequences that are supposed to follow from personal identity. Why, for example, should my being able to recollect having done something explain why I should be punished for it?

While most subsequent philosophy has rejected Locke's account, it has accepted his way of posing the problem. The search for a criterion of identity has consisted in the attempt to establish a set of physical or psychological relations which will be sufficient to explain why we choose to treat an individual who exists at one time as the same person as an apparently quite different individual who exists at another time. And by and large there is little reason to suppose that later accounts, e.g. those in terms of bodily continuity, have been much more successful than Locke's. This has been shown perhaps most decisively by Derek Parfit,<sup>6</sup> who argues that there are no such privileged physical or psychological characteristics, and that the interesting relations which do hold between past and future 'selves' (his terminology) are not sufficient to justify the attribution of personal identity. On Parfit's account, the idea that persons retain their identity through time is at best a loose and misleading form of expression; at worst, it is a ground level philosophical mistake with a number of important consequences for our thinking about ourselves and others.

Parfit's argument is intended to be a demolition of the notion of personal identity. Another way of interpreting it, however, is as a brilliant *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole approach to personal identity which began with Locke. The Lockean tradition assumes that personal identity is a physical or psychological relation which underlies and helps explain certain social practices, and has sought – unsuccessfully – to discern what that relationship is. A better approach is to



reverse the direction of explanation: it is the social practices which underlie and explain personal identity. To put the point simply: identity is not so much presupposed by the practice of praise and blame as created by it. Or more carefully: the conceptions we have of the same person enduring through time and change is an artefact of a vast range of moral, legal, bureaucratic, social and political codes of behaviour. We have, I think, little difficulty in recognising that issues of identity for many items (e.g. political parties, motor cars, scientific discoveries, works of art) are resolved by social, bureaucratic, scientific or legal conventions. So too is the issue of identity for persons. The important difference between persons and other objects is that, as we are inscribed into certain modes of behaviour and we become conscious of our own identity and that of others, this self- and other-awareness is experienced not as the consequence but as the precondition of a range of involvements and interactions. Since our self-awareness defines the point from which we become aware of social relationships, it is difficult for us to recognise it as a product of just those relationships. But this is precisely what it is.

Understanding personal identity is not a matter of discovering a continuing essence, but of discerning the different social practices which create and sustain it. Some of these may be more fundamental than others in the sense that it will be hard to envisage forms of society in which they are not maintained – though certain religious beliefs about reincarnation, transmigration of souls and radical conversion should give us reason not to be too confident that our birth-to-death conception is at the core of every account. On the other hand, there will be identities which are more socially contingent in that they derive from social structures and practices which have no claim to universality – though they may well be experienced as such. On this account we can begin to understand how identities may well be plural, contested and conflicting. Individuals are formed within a variety of social practices – practices which may be complementary, contradictory or simply diverse. We need to think here, not just of what it means to be a person (which, as Hegel observed, is primarily a legalistic notion)<sup>7</sup>, but of what it means to be a man or a woman, a husband or a wife, a father or mother, a worker, a citizen, a tax payer, a consumer, and – not least – what it means to be English or French or Australian.

The concept of identity relevant to the notion of national identity does not derive from Locke but from the alternative approach I have sketched in. If it needs philosophical progenitors we could no doubt find them in Hegel, Nietzsche and Marx, but my guess is that – for better or worse – it has largely grown up without much assistance from philosophers. At most it bears only a verbal similarity to the account of Locke presented by Rée. It is true that identities exist in the consciousness of individuals, and that there is a sense in which they are intentional entities. But they are not reducible to individual consciousness and the intentionality involved is a social, not an individual intentionality. In this respect, identities do not differ from a range of other socially constituted phenomena. We can only make sense of such institutions as law courts and banks, authority and money, not to mention nations and gods, in terms of a framework of

shared beliefs and practices. All of these phenomena have, however, a great deal of depth, complexity and opacity. So too with identity. Its existence may depend upon what we say and think, but this does not mean that it *is* what we say and think.<sup>8</sup>

National identity has been especially significant in the modern world in that it has claimed to take priority over other important identities. Individuals have been asked to make – and have all too often made – sacrifices of their families, property and even their lives on behalf of the nation. The demands of the nation have been taken to override the claims of everyday morality and religion. National identity is conceived to be inescapable in that failure to answer its calls is counted as a betrayal, even in the absence of any explicit commitment. So it is a matter of some importance to discern the social forces which have given rise to and sustained this form of identity.<sup>9</sup> It is here that we can begin to glimpse the connection between



national identity as a form of self-identity and that sense in which it designates the attributes which are conceived to be specific to a particular nation. The emergence of nationalism has involved the attempt to create for each putative nation its own unique cultural heritage – comprising the national history, literature, landscape, ways of life, and so on. Where this attempt has been successful, these representations are embodied in the educational system, political and social rituals, cultural institutions, media and forms of communication, all of which play a key role in the process by which national identities are acquired and sustained. Individuals become conscious of themselves as having a national identity as they acquire a language, an education and the other cultural resources they need to survive in the modern world. The nation is thus a component in each individual's self- and other-awareness. A given national culture will provide a gallery of representations and these will provide some of the external moments of recognition through which each individual acquires his or her own self-awareness.<sup>10</sup>

Underlying Rée's rejection of the concept of national identity is his suspicion that to use it is already to be hostage to the dark forces which nationalism represents. He suggests that the concept attempts to do in theory what nationalism does in practice: elide the distinction between personal identities and collective ones (see p. 9). He traces to Hegel a concept of nationhood which serves as 'a device for dismantling ordinary conceptual barriers between consciousness and experience, and between individual lives and universal humanity' (p. 8).<sup>11</sup> No doubt Rée is right to be wary of the way in which nationalist movements have overridden the claims of individuals. But this does not mean that we should ignore the ways in which social relationships enter into the way in which people come to conceive of themselves. Even liberals have now come to recognise that there is no need to assert the existence of presocial individuals in order to defend the notion of an individual right against society. Yet Rée seems to think that once we have used the term 'national identity' we have already given up the individual to the claims of the nation. On the contrary. What we have done is made a beginning in the task of understanding why it is that so many individuals have willingly given themselves up to their nation. What attitude we take to this form of identity is another question entirely.

### The nation: a cultural asset?

Rée leaves his readers in no doubt of his own attitude to nationalism: he counts himself as one of the 'haters of nationhood' (p. 11). Some of the grounds for his aversion are reasonable enough. Nationalism has long been the creature of the state; as such, it has legitimised arbitrary power and oppression and has played its role in militarism, colonialism and imperialism. Where national differences are conceived to be embodied in blood or descent, nationalism slides into racism. It has encouraged bloody and irresolvable conflicts over territories inhabited by two or more national claimants. Even in its more benign forms, nationalism has impeded the development of other affiliations and attachments, especially those that cut across state boundaries. Insofar as it is experienced as part of the natural order of things, it has preempted debate on and opposition to those policies which have been waged in its name. And yet there are other sides to nationalism: sacrifice, love, heroism, solidarity.<sup>12</sup> It has not only served the interests of imperialism; it has also provided the forms in which anti-imperialist struggle has been most effectively carried out. Though it has all too often been employed by ruling classes to stifle or marginalise opposition, it has also provided crucial rhetorical support for national health, welfare and education programmes.

This is not the place to tally 'good' aspects of nationalism to set up against the 'bad'. Probably the two are inseparable. My worry is whether we have a clear position from which to do the assessment. For good or ill, nationalism has over the past few hundred years appropriated for itself many of the cultural and moral resources which we need in order to make such assessments. Of course, there are other moral positions abstractly available: the universalistic discourses familiar to philosophers, or the appeal to local community

and tradition which has been making its appearance in left-wing circles in recent years (and to which Rée seems to give his adherence). But it is not clear that these have a social or cultural presence sufficient to set up against the claims of the nation. This is not just a matter of popular support, but of the existence of a sphere of shared meanings in terms of which debate can be carried on. The discourse of the nation also has certain depth and complexity. It does not exist in a fixed and determinate form, and is always open to interpretation and change. Nor is it automatically on the side of a reaction. Insofar as the nation defines itself as a community comprising all the people in a given territory, those who use the rhetoric of nationalism must make a commitment to some notion of popular involvement or assent. This commitment has been all too often abused but is one which a left cultural politics can and should exploit.

The nation represents, I suggest, a cultural asset that we should use, and not just hand over to others. I do not make this suggestion for merely tactical reasons (as hardnosed Leninists used to suggest that the left should make use of the rights provided by liberal democracies until it was able to dispense with them). Nationalism makes certain moral resources available which will have a place in any desirable moral outlook. Let me illustrate this with a recent example. A few years ago there was a fascinating controversy (the *Historikerstreit*) between Jürgen Habermas and a number of German historians about the significance of the holocaust in German national history.<sup>13</sup> One position in the debate, associated with Ernst Nolte and other conservative historians, was that it was time for Germans to free themselves of at least some of the guilt of the holocaust and to reclaim a continuing German national identity. One move in this argument involved the historical relativisation of the holocaust: its comparison with other twentieth-century catastrophes (e.g. Stalin's purges and his onslaught on the kulaks, the Pol Pot massacres, the Turkish genocide of the Armenians). Habermas's response was an altogether admirable and generally effective exposure of the political implications of these moves and of different conceptions of German history. There was, however, an important tension in Habermas's position. His own avowed commitments were of a universalistic kind. For him, the appropriate relationship between citizen and polity was that of 'constitutional patriotism', the rational allegiance each person owes to a properly constituted state, and the appropriate identity for the individual was not that provided by the nation, but the 'post-conventional' identity of the morally mature (neo-Kantian) rational agent. But he also wanted to emphasise the fact that the holocaust had a specific relevance to Germans *just because they were Germans*. As he wrote in a passage worth quoting at length:

There is the simple fact that subsequent generations also grew up within a form of life in which *that* was possible. Our own life is linked to the life context in which Auschwitz was possible not by contingent circumstances but intrinsically. Our form of life is connected with that of our parents and grandparents through a web of familial, local, political, and intellectual traditions that is difficult to disentangle – that

is, through a historical milieu that made us what and who we are today. None of us can escape this milieu, because our identities, both as individuals and as Germans, are indissolubly interwoven with it. This holds true from mimicry and physical gestures to language and into the capillary ramifications of one's intellectual stance. As though when teaching at universities outside Germany I could ever disclaim a mentality in which the traces of a very German intellectual dynamic from Kant to Marx and Max Weber are inscribed. We have to stand by our traditions, then, if we do not want to disavow ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

From this perspective, the issue of whether Hitler killed quantitatively more or less Jews and Gypsies than Stalin killed peasants, or whether in terms of percentage of the target population annihilated, Pol Pot holds the genocide record, is *for Germans* beside the point. Hitler, Nazism and the holocaust are episodes in German history, and therefore contemporary Germans have a special responsibility to work the matter through. What was morally abhorrent in the attempt by German historians to relativise the holocaust was not so much the political agenda that lay behind it, nor their failure to live up to the obligations incumbent on all of us who live in the post-Nazi era to remember those who died and why. It was their disowning of the special involvement that they as contemporary Germans have in those past horrors. In precisely the same way, the English have a special responsibility for Ireland, white Australians for the expropriation and slaughter of the aboriginal population, and so on. This is not a matter of whether present individuals have benefited in some way from the past actions of their compatriots. In the case of Germany, this is highly unlikely. It is rather that because we live in a certain society and have acquired a certain identity, we find ourselves inheriting specific cultural and historical responsibilities – whether or not we would have chosen these.

The point is that we can only begin to make these points from within the discourse of national identity, and it is not at all clear that this is consistent with Habermas's official commitment to universalistic moral doctrines. Indeed, it is arguable whether someone who had achieved Habermas's desired 'post conventional' moral identity could think of national identity as anything but a mark of moral immaturity and a failure of autonomy. And yet, as Habermas recognised, there is something both superficial and reprehensible in the attempt by a contemporary German (or Englishman or Australian) to disavow any responsibility for episodes in his or her national past.

I have only sketched here the first steps in what would have to be a complex moral debate. My point is that there is a moral discourse associated with nationalism, and that we are inscribed into that discourse whether we want to be or not. What is more, at least some of the resources which we will need to use in political and other debates are provided by that identity. It locates the individual in a larger social context, ascribes moral responsibilities beyond the sphere of self, family and friends, and it implies that individual well-being is bound up with that of a larger grouping.

By entering the terrain of the nation, we are not committed

to accepting prevailing definitions of the nation any more than to accepting the history of triumphs and glories we all learned at school. Moral debate should involve not just the use of but also reflection on the resources available so that we become aware of their limitations as well as their potentialities. We must be especially prepared to resist certain of the closures which have been all too characteristic of many nationalisms. If national identity assumes the existence of a common culture, then it must be inclusive and pluralistic, and not the product nor the property of a privileged group. It must be conceived of as a tradition which is open to development, change and cross-fertilisation. If nationality is to be a criterion of citizenship, then acquisition of that nationality ('naturalisation') must be available to as many of those who desire it as possible, and certainly not restricted on ethnic or racial grounds. Nations must be conceived as existing alongside other nations with different cultures and histories, with none having any intrinsic claim to superiority.

There are, of course, significant limitations to nationalism. The claim of each nation to sole occupation and political sovereignty over its own territory has proved tragically incompatible with the realities of ethnic and cultural intermingling in some areas. There may be limits to the extent to which even the most accommodating national identity can be transformed. Ethnic and other forms of diversity may be such as to resist inclusion within the frame of a common culture, however tolerant and pluralistic. It may be that the multicultural polity is the way of the future. This would mean the end of nationalism as we know it, and states would need to discover new principles of legitimation and societies new principles of social cohesion. These are not small tasks, and it is dubious whether proponents of multiculturalism have so far faced up to them.

Certainly there are tendencies in the advanced capitalist world which suggest that we may be moving into a postnationalist epoch.<sup>15</sup> But we are not there yet. For the time at least, the nation state is a political reality, and national identity provides one of the most important perspectives available to us. It is there to be used – critically and reflectively. To jettison it completely is to risk shutting oneself out of the debate.

#### Notes

- 1 *Radical Philosophy* 60 (Spring 1992), pp. 3-11. Page references to this article will be given in the text.
- 2 See Fernand Braudel, *The Identity of France*, 2 volumes (London, Fontana, 1989); Raphael Samuel (ed.), *The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 volumes (London and New York, Routledge, 1989).
- 3 See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989); Perry Anderson, 'Nation-States and National Identity', *London Review of Books* (9 May 1991), pp. 3, 5-8; and Ross Poole, *Morality and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), especially Ch. 5.
- 4 Rée does quote a passage from an essay 'What is National and Ethnic Identity', by Uffe Østergard according to which 'most of us have come to believe that identity is only what we say it is' (p.

- 8), so it may be that Østergard at least holds the view criticised by Rée. But the passage quoted is surely not intended to suggest that *my* identity is what *I* say it is. Indeed, Østergard goes on to say that 'sociologists and historians have learned to understand identity primarily as a discourse', and whatever this means it is a long way from the subjectivist view attributed to him by Rée.
- 5 Book II, Ch. XXVII, Section 9.
- 6 See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1984). Parfit's views on personal identity first appeared in 'Personal Identity', *Philosophical Review* Vol. 80 (1971), pp. 3-27.
- 7 See the discussion in Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, First Part, Para 34-40 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965).
- 8 A point recognised by Rée who criticises the mistake (which he attributes to Østergard) of holding that 'intentional objects ... have no ontological depth' (p. 9).
- 9 The key contributions here are Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1983) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York, Verso, 1983; revised edition 1991).
- 10 Nationalism has the mirror structure which Althusser – under the influence of Lacan – suggested was constitutive of all ideology. See his 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, New Left Books, 1971), especially p. 168.
- 11 Though it is not explicit, there is a strong suggestion in Rée's article that Hegel should be counted as a nationalist. This is not true. Hegel was strongly opposed to the nationalist currents which were making themselves felt in Prussia and other German states in the Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic periods. His own political views – in *The Philosophy of Right* and elsewhere – should properly be seen as a development of the civic republican tradition in which political obligation is the rational commitment of a citizen to a properly constituted state.
- 12 It is one of the many refreshing aspects of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* that he emphasises these aspects of the nationalistic imagination.
- 13 Habermas's contributions to the debate can be found in Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate* (Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1989). For an account of the debate, see Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1988).
- 14 Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, pp. 232-233.
- 15 I have discussed some of these in a paper 'Nationalism and the Nation State in Late Modernity' given at a conference on Germany in Europe in Sydney, July 1991. This will appear in a selection of papers from the conference edited by Bernd Hüppauf.

## Jean Laplanche

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