

# Patriotism as an Environmental Virtue

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**Abstract** Define “patriotism” as love for one’s country and devotion to its well-being. This essay contends that patriotism thus defined is a virtue and that environmentalism is one of its most important manifestations. Patriotism, as devotion to particular places and people, can occur at various levels, from the local to the national. Knowing and caring about particular places and people and working to protect them is good for us and good for them and hence a good thing overall. Knowing and caring and working less on behalf of more remote places and people is also good, since it allows us to focus our efforts, act effectively, and do more good in the world. Philosophical analyses of patriotism by Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum are complemented by the more “down to earth” understanding of the virtue presented here. While patriotism’s dangers are undeniable, so are the dangers stemming from lack of patriotism. The proper answer to bad patriotism is not cosmopolitanism, but good patriotism: the kind illustrated by environmental activists.

**Keywords** Virtue · Patriotism · Cosmopolitanism · MacIntyre · Nussbaum · Thoreau

## Introduction

I think that patriotism is a good thing. Or rather, I think that *the right kind of patriotism* is usually a good thing. Patriotism, like all good things, can go wrong in various ways and wind up doing more harm than good. I don’t mean to ignore patriotism’s dangers, and address some of them below. Meanwhile, putting my main thesis into what I hope is a slightly clearer form, I assert: “Patriotism is a virtue.”

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What do I mean by patriotism? My dictionaries' primary definitions of "patriotism" are "love of and devotion to one's country" and "devotion to the well-being or interests of one's country" (Soukhanov et al. 1992; Brown et al. 1993). These definitions accurately capture current usage. However, older understandings of "patriot," "patriotism" and even "country" were more flexible, allowing for patriotic connection and devotion to various particular localities and groups, at smaller scales than the nation-state (see entries in the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*). I find this older understanding of the term appealing, in recognizing the range of patriotic connections open to individuals, and the possibility of less abstract, more "grounded" forms of local patriotism.

Let me stipulate then that in what follows, by "patriotism" I will mean love, devotion, and a strong differential concern for one's own locality, state, region, or country, shown both in thought and action.<sup>1</sup> When I say "concern," I mean concern for both the places themselves and the people who live within them. When I say "a differential concern," I mean you care more about these places than you do about other places, or places in general; and that you care more about these particular people than you do about other people, or people in general. And this concern is shown in substantial activity on their behalf.

A patriot is particularly concerned to defend his own country and countrymen and women, however, broadly or narrowly he defines these, and to promote their well-being and interests. He might condemn an imperialistic war between two foreign countries and boycott the aggressor country's goods. But he will risk his life to defend his own country from attack. A patriot might condemn the exploitation of poor laborers in third-world sweatshops, and sign a petition asking Nike to change. But she will care more about poor people in her own community and spend some of her own valuable time to improve their lives (work one evening a month in a soup kitchen; testify before the city council in support of affordable housing). This differential attentiveness, concern, and action are what I take to be patriotism.<sup>2</sup>

What do I mean by virtue? "Virtue" is the generic term commonly used for any character trait people wish to commend. In both common speech and philosophical discourse, "the virtues" refer to those traits whose possession we believe makes a person a good person, or a better person than she would be without them. They do this by helping people succeed in what we take to be our characteristic or important activities and endeavors.

For the most part, current philosophers endorse one of two different conceptions of virtue. On the one hand, there are moralistic conceptions, such as Julia Driver's: "a moral virtue is a character trait which, generally speaking, produces good

<sup>1</sup> Miller (1998) usefully distinguishes differential *concern* from differential *valuation* of people: "on the face of it, according equal value to different people's lives does not entail equal concern for them" (p. 207). Pace Gomberg (1990) and other critics, patriotism involves greater concern for compatriots, but not necessarily a belief in their superiority.

<sup>2</sup> It is of course possible to help people locally or (less often, perhaps) work to protect local places, based on strongly held universalistic moral principles. So every instance of locally-focused altruism does not constitute patriotism, as I've defined it. On the other hand, it would be a mistake to define patriotism as action taken with no reference to such universal moral principles or ideals. People often appear to be motivated by particular loves *and* universal principles, in one and the same commendatory act.

consequences for others” (Driver 1996, p. 122). Here virtue is explicitly altruistic: good because it secures good consequences for others, not for the virtuous individual herself. Driver offers this as a definition of *moral* virtue, but she recognizes no other kind. Virtue simply is moral virtue. Excellent people are people who act morally.

On the other hand, there are conceptions of virtue that equate it with human excellence more comprehensively understood. For example, Martha Nussbaum defines the virtues as character traits which dispose us to “choose and respond well” across the full range of human experience (Nussbaum 1993, p. 245). In this way, the virtues promote the flourishing of the virtuous agent herself, as well as the flourishing of those around her. This expanded notion of virtue supports a broader list of virtues. On this view, the virtues may include *moral* virtues such as kindness and justice and generosity, *personal* virtues such as self-knowledge, integrity and commitment, and *intellectual* virtues such as patience, intelligence and clarity of expression. Because there is more to life than living morally, I think this more expansive view of virtue deserves to prevail, and follow it below.

However, even this broad view of virtue needs broadening, because just as human flourishing involves more than moral excellence, it also involves more than *human* excellence. We depend on nature. In particular, our continued existence depends on maintaining key ecosystem services (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005) and our full flourishing depends on preserving sufficient wild, untamed nature for our physical, intellectual, and spiritual sustenance (Thoreau 1971; Leopold 1949). Arguably, virtue also involves recognizing the intrinsic value of nonhuman beings and responding accordingly (Rolston 1988; Swanton 2003, pp. 46, 94). For all these reasons, my own list of virtues includes *environmental* virtues such as temperance, stewardship, and respect for nature: qualities that further ecological sustainability, the necessary grounding for human flourishing (Wensveen 2001). Such environmental virtues have recently been usefully explored and typologized by Sandler (2007). Sandler, however, forgot to include patriotism among them (hence this article).

The virtues, then, on my view, are *all* those qualities that help us perform characteristic, essential, or important human activities well. They thus facilitate personal, social, and ecological flourishing—the flourishing of all life. I believe this, ultimately, is what makes them virtues (Cafaro 2004, pp. 45–65). *Vita qua vita bonum est*. It is sometimes necessary to distinguish individual, social, and ecological flourishing for analytic purposes, particularly when they conflict, or appear to conflict. But in my opinion, all three are so supremely valuable and so intimately related that no human character trait that undermines any one of them counts as a genuine virtue.

Once again, this expansive definition of “virtue” differs from common usage and much philosophical usage, which often limits virtue to moral virtue, narrowly understood. Since I intend to argue that patriotism *is* a moral virtue—a character trait that promotes altruism and helps us act rightly toward other people—as well as an environmental virtue, you may disagree with my broad definition of virtue and still agree with me that patriotism is one. But the broad definition is important to fully understanding my argument, which is that patriotism is good for nature, good

for human societies, and good for us as individuals—this last, despite the fact that it sometimes does involve self-sacrifice.

### Why Patriotism is a Virtue

Patriotism is a virtue in part because it sustains human communities, which are essential to human flourishing. The ancient Greeks had no trouble understanding this. They recognized that the *polis* could be fatally endangered. Their land could be taken away from them, their families enslaved by aggressive outsiders. The main defense against this was their citizens' patriotic willingness to risk their lives to defend their homelands.

Even in a country like the United States, with all our wealth and power, our safety depends on the willingness of certain individuals to risk their lives for the rest of us. If most of us are unlikely to be called to sacrifice our lives for the greater good, some are much more likely: soldiers, firefighters, policemen working in dangerous neighborhoods. It's not clear that this division of labor (a huge protected majority, a small minority of brave protectors) is good for our country as a whole. But the simple point I want to make here is that even in individualistic America, we depend on some people being self-sacrificing and patriotic—whether we are or not.

This example helps define a basic, minimal need for patriotism. As things currently stand, without people willing to die for their country, a country cannot survive. What I want to say now is that patriotism also demands that citizens *live* for their countries. A less heroic patriotic concern and effort are needed, so that our nations and our communities may not only survive, but flourish. Such effort is shown in social and civic-minded projects of all kinds: volunteer fire departments; efforts to create new parks; volunteering in local schools or on local school boards. These take ongoing effort. The health of our communities depends, in part, on how many people take the time to engage in them. Without these efforts, houses burn, children do without parks, and schools fall into mediocrity. Without them, our communities are worse communities.

Engaging in such activities usually demands sacrifices, in time and money. But they also typically provide real benefits to the individuals making the sacrifices. Here we come to a second main reason why patriotism is a virtue: it is good for us as individuals, in several ways.

First, patriotic activities help us feel connected and affiliated with other people. They introduce us to our neighbors and fellow citizens, and these connections make life more interesting and enjoyable. Second, they lend meaning to our lives, as we engage in projects that are larger than ourselves. It's good to feel that you've had some say in how your town is governed, to point to a park or greenway you've helped create, or to a school that you've helped improve. Conversely, it feels bad to walk through the town where you live and feel like an outsider, unconnected to the people and places around you.

Now, this is not to say that becoming socially involved is always wonderful. Local politics is often tedious. Sometimes you get to know the neighbors and you wish you hadn't. But most of us have enough choice in how to get involved that on

balance, the personal connections and enhanced meaning we get from these activities improve our lives. We miss out on a lot when we withdraw from political and social engagement, and our communities miss out, too.

Here I'd like to emphasize again that patriotism, as I define it, is not coextensive with nationalism. If we are lucky, we have numerous affiliations that give our lives meaning, and belong to various communities that provide scope for our efforts (Appiah 1996). For me, these include Fort Collins and Colorado State University and the short-grass steppe ecoregion, as well as Colorado and the United States. Patriotic connection and effective action are often easier to make sense of at more particular, local levels. Nothing has done more to distort our understanding of patriotism than the facile equation of patriotism and nationalism (Pinsky 1996).

The ancient Greeks had an easier time of it. Living in small city-states, their patriotic limits were simpler and more clearly defined. Even then, however, clashes of affiliation existed; witness the conflicting claims of family and *polis* in Sophocles's *Antigone*. We too may face conflicting claims on our allegiance. But I think that before we can say anything very intelligent about them, we need to get a much fuller view of our patriotic possibilities.

It is also true that the local efforts I'm praising can be undertaken from a variety of motivations, including general feelings of benevolence; and justified for a variety of reasons, such as their upholding universal moral principles, or helping to maximize overall happiness. Still, I think that attention to the phenomenology of such activities will show the importance of particular connections, for most participants. I care how well *this* class of second-graders is reading, or whether or not *this* natural area is paved over to build a new mall. That is why I take action. Such particular concern increases the likelihood of engagement. It helps us engage effectively. It enhances the meaning of these activities for the participants (perhaps by connecting general ideals or principles to lived experience and to our interactions with people and places we actually know). Particular connections also keep "doing good" from becoming just an impersonal transfer of resources and instead help make such activities "good in themselves." Patriotic particularism thus increases the good generated by our do-gooding.

### Meeting the Dangers of Patriotism

I have said a little about the benefits of patriotism. What are its dangers?

The first and greatest danger is contempt or (more often) indifference toward outsiders. Our tender feelings toward our fellow citizens can make it easier to dismiss the value of people outside this charmed circle, or at least act in ways that fail to honor that value. Patriotism can encourage an "us versus them" mentality, and rationalizations for "our" superiority are easily generated.

A second danger is the stifling of dissent within our own communities. Criticism of the community may be seen as unpatriotic and uncritically following orders may be seen as the highest form of patriotism. When these two aspects of patriotism—contempt or indifference toward outsiders, the stifling of dissent within a community—synergize at the national level, then imperialistic aggression and

war become more likely. I think it is fair to say that patriotic feelings and uncritical patriotism have sometimes facilitated unjust wars.

These dangers of patriotism are real. How should we address them? Here politicians and political thinkers on both the left and the right are often unhelpful. Liberals, by and large, have abandoned patriotism, perhaps believing its dangers are not worth its benefits (but see Rorty 1998, for a plausible attempt to specify a liberal patriotism). Conservatives, contrarily, too often embrace patriotism uncritically, saying, in effect: “wave your flag, support your government, and shut up.”<sup>3</sup>

The insufficiencies of both approaches are obvious. In particular, both undermine political involvement. For without some sort of patriotic concern, I have little reason to get involved in politics (beyond private interest, which will rarely get the average citizen involved). Abstract ideals may motivate political action, but ideals are more effective when combined with a concern for the well-being of particular communities toward which people feel strong affiliation. And on the other hand, blind obedience is worse than no political involvement at all.

Rather than follow either of these paths, I suggest that we define and practice a better sort of patriotism. We can loyally work to protect the places and people within our particular circles of concern, without dismissing the value of those outside these circles, or aggressing against them. Perhaps we can see our way clearer to such a position by recognizing a certain arbitrariness, or chance, in who or what we take to be inside or outside the circle! I was born an American and some combination of chance and my own decisions have led me to live in northern Colorado. So I am more concerned with American foreign policy and the Roosevelt National Forest and homeless people in downtown Fort Collins, than I am with French foreign policy or the Coconino National Forest in Arizona or homeless people in Paris or Tucson. But that doesn't mean I think these other people and places are any less important or valuable, considered absolutely.<sup>4</sup> That doesn't mean I will throw trash on the Coconino when I go hiking there, or kick a homeless person when I'm walking around Tucson or Paris.

One key to curbing the dangers of patriotism, then, is to recognize that basic moral rules still hold, regarding how we may treat other people and places. Anything *doesn't* go, once we are outside our circles of patriotic concern. A basic, universal morality remains (Nathanson 1989).<sup>5</sup> I see no reason why this must fatally conflict with patriotism, any more than a special concern for our family

<sup>3</sup> Conservatives also often use patriotic symbols as means to score cheap political points; witness the flap, during the 2008 US presidential campaign, over Barack Obama's missing flag pin. Such episodes lend credence to charges that patriotism is only for dolts and those who want to control them.

<sup>4</sup> Here I disagree with McCabe (1997), who writes: “patriotism requires... that one believe one's nation is better, and for this reason deserves more” than other nations (pp. 207–208).

<sup>5</sup> I thus substantially agree with Nathanson (1989) when he writes: “the proper answer to the question, Is patriotism a virtue? is that the moral value of patriotism depends on the circumstances in which patriotism is exhibited and the actions that it motivates. When patriotism is in the service of valuable ends and is limited to morally legitimate means of attaining them, then it is a virtue. When patriotism leads to support of immoral ends or immoral means to achieve otherwise legitimate ends, then it is a vice” (p. 539). If I understand Nathanson correctly, however, I am unlike him in leaving it an open question, whether universal or particular moral commitments should prevail, in particular instances when they conflict. See Schmidtz (1997) for a searching discussion of this issue.

members must do so. This is particularly true in Western democracies, where an essential part of the political legacy is a commitment to universal human rights (Barber 1996).

Of course, occasional conflicts between universal morality and our special areas of loyalty will occur, and these may be hard to adjudicate. But most of the time these values enhance one another. This is because our particular loyalties provide the spheres of activity where we can best work to uphold morality. We show our patriotic concern by advocating for more morally acceptable policies from our government, our familial concern by cultivating moral behavior in our children. It is true that resources are limited and \$200 given to a local political candidate is \$200 not sent to Oxfam to provide family planning or education in less developed nations. But such conflicts are unavoidable; ignoring our particular loyalties only simplifies this situation by ensuring that we will choose wrongly (by failing to take care of our own children's needs before sending money to Oxfam, for example).

The second key to defining a good sort of patriotism is to recognize the value of patriotic dissent. Real democracies are participatory democracies, which depend on citizens intelligently debating important issues. Sometimes we will agree with our government or with a majority of our fellow citizens, sometimes we will not, and it is probably more important that we voice our concerns when we are in the minority. American history is filled with examples of patriotic dissent, from Thomas Jefferson's criticisms of John Adams's Alien and Sedition Acts, to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil disobedience in Birmingham. No important political progress has been made in this country without intelligent dissent to challenge the moral laziness and mammon-worshipping tendencies of Americans.

Let me make this point a little clearer. We easily—perhaps too easily—recognize the patriotism of the men and women who serve in our armed forces. We also need to see the patriotism of people who help us think harder about how those armed forces should be deployed. Ninety-nine members of the United States Senate voted to pass the USA Patriot Act a few weeks after 9/11; we need to recognize the courage and patriotism of the lone member who voted against it (Russell Feingold, D-Wisconsin). Most important, we need to see patriotism in a thousand less heroic actions that help sustain society.

Still, you might say that given its dangers, we'd be better off without patriotism. I've suggested, first, that a special concern for our own communities and nations helps sustain them and us. And second, that patriotism's dangers need to be balanced by an understanding of the dangers stemming from a lack of patriotism. For Americans, at the present time, I judge that the dangers of political apathy and social fragmentation outweigh the dangers of excess patriotic zeal (McConnell 1996; Putnam 2001). I leave it to patriots in other countries to make their own judgments here.

My third reply supporting “constructive engagement” with patriotism is that some kinds of particular affiliation are inevitable, so we might as well support the right kinds. Human beings naturally seek community and find meaning in projects larger than themselves. We can do this more or less effectively and intelligently. Mock all patriotic concern, and you will be met with “America: Love it or Leave it.” You will find it harder to talk to your fellow citizens about the common good,

while political reactionaries and corporate lobbyists step in to define it for you. For all these reasons, I believe a proper patriotism is both possible and necessary.

### Environmentalism as Patriotism

Let me relate this to a special concern of many of us: environmental protection. In my view, environmentalism, rightly understood, *is* patriotism.<sup>6</sup> The word comes from the Latin root “*patria*”: fatherland or homeland. So patriotism would seem to indicate a general concern to protect the land and the people of one’s homeland, however extensively one defines them. On this view, environmentalists are patriots *par excellence*, literally committed to protecting the land and *all* its inhabitants, including its non-human inhabitants.

Environmental activists typically work to protect the places they know and love, whether it is open-space threatened by sprawl, or a downtown threatened by a new Super Wal-mart. They involve themselves in their communities: leading hikes to teach boy scouts and girl scouts about the plants and animals around them, or tipping off reporters to illegal dumping. They hand out campaign literature for green candidates and pack city council meetings to argue about zoning changes. They do all this not to make a buck, but because they care about where they live and other special places they have gotten to know, and because they want to preserve them for their children and grandchildren.<sup>7</sup>

Environmentalists don’t only protect these places, they *celebrate* them as well: hiking and camping and kayaking and skinny-dipping to show their patriotic attachment to their country. Just as a 4th of July parade with marching bands provides a sense of belonging and larger community to many, so may a hike up Long’s Peak, or an Audubon Society field trip to watch the birds at a local reservoir. In these activities, people bond with the land and with each other. They come face to face with what will otherwise remain mere abstractions: biodiversity; “America the beautiful.” They learn the history of the natural and human communities of which they are parts. They come to see their own lives as parts of larger stories, their own efforts as parts of larger struggles and achievements.

This is patriotism! And it is the kind of patriotism that we need more of today. We live in a country whose citizens move on average every 6 years; and where more and more people spend the best part of their days gazing into computer screens, focused on virtual realities of one kind or another. In this world, those who work to strengthen the bonds of community and our ties to the real, physical world around us are doing necessary, patriotic work (Nelson 2002).

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<sup>6</sup> My understanding of the connection between environmentalism and patriotism has been greatly influenced by Nelson (2002).

<sup>7</sup> As applied to the United States, this locally-focused description of “environmentalists” leaves out some top leaders and staff members of large environmental organizations working primarily at the national level, and a few thousand dedicated souls focused on issues far from home (sending high-tech cooking stoves to poor people overseas, for example, to cut back on deforestation and indoor air pollution). But the description does capture the vast majority of serious environmental activists: the backbone of the environmental movement.



We also live in a world where large corporations can crush a community or destroy a landscape with frightening ease. Since many corporate executives will attempt to wring the last dollar out of a landscape or a community with no moral scruples, our land and our communities need patriots who will identify and defend the common good against these behemoths. (When they do so, they are often derided as “nimby’s”; short for “not in my back yard.” As if indifference to our communities and surroundings were the height of rationality. The proper name for “nimbyism” is patriotism.)

In fact, appeals to patriotism have been important and effective in many environmental battles over the years. In the campaigns to create Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and other national parks in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, patriotic rhetoric often figured prominently (Runte 1979). Park boosters appealed to citizens’ desire to preserve what was grand or unique about America, or to preserve historically meaningful landscapes.

Again, when the United States enacted foundational environmental laws like the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act in the 1960s and 1970s, these were often promoted in overtly patriotic terms. Preserving a healthy landscape was described as farseeing and patriotic; polluters were not just harming innocent people, they were putting profits over country. Perhaps it isn’t an accident that the last time environmentalists won major victories, in the early 1970s, was also the last time such patriotic rhetoric was widely and unironically employed by the American left.

## Particularism Versus Universalism

The kind of patriotic commitment I’m advocating, however, demands focus. Moral philosophers often develop universal arguments about the equal value of all X’s or Y’s. “All people have certain inalienable rights.” “All sentient beings have intrinsic value.” These arguments are necessary, I think, to help articulate a correct ethics. But they mislead us if we assume that they show that we should, or can, *care equally* about all X’s or Y’s, or that we *have equal responsibility* for all X’s and Y’s, or that we should *devote equal time and resources* to trying to protect all X’s or Y’s (Walzer 1983; Miller 1995).

If I am going to be an effective environmental advocate, I have got to focus. I can say something intelligent about conservation issues in northern Colorado, because I’ve learned a little about the land and its history, and the potential effects of particular land-use changes. I can advocate more effectively here because I know some of the land managers and the politicians in the area. I can call up editors and reporters on the local newspapers and pitch stories, or try to influence their coverage of important ongoing issues. The mayor of Fort Collins may be a pro-growth Republican, but I know that he grew up trout fishing the local Cache la Poudre River with his father. We’ve talked about what that meant to him and what my own rambles along the river with my sons mean to me. Maybe that made a difference recently, when he voted with the greenies on city council to oppose a new dam project that would harm the river.

Similarly, I know and care more about Yellowstone National Park than about Krueger National Park in South Africa, and this too allows me to more effectively advocate for its protection. As a former ranger with the National Park Service, I can call up park managers and discuss their upcoming decisions more easily. As an American citizen, I can pester my Congresswoman's staff about bills that affect Yellowstone, or write opinion pieces in the newspaper that alert my fellow citizens to problems there. Such actions are more likely to do good than signing on-line petitions to the chief of Krueger National Park.

Now, this doesn't mean we should be completely indifferent to what is happening further afield. In fact, a person with a deep knowledge of environmental issues in northern Colorado can better understand what is happening in southern Colorado or Utah; a person familiar with the issues facing US national parks can better understand management issues in national parks around the world. He or she is also more likely to explore other places respectfully and support international conservation efforts. But all of this usually begins at home!

So does our *appreciation* of nature (Louv 2005). I can only enjoy and celebrate those aspects of my country that I experience personally. I might get a thrill hearing Ray Charles sing "America the Beautiful," but it really means something to me because I have recently seen a sunrise over the Pawnee Buttes east of Fort Collins, or the first bluebird of spring on a friend's ranch. I can enjoy nature and belong locally, in a way that I cannot do elsewhere. And environmentalism can only be a life-affirming and personally enriching activity if it involves connection to the land and communities around you.<sup>8</sup>

A positive local patriotism is the key to environmentalists avoiding the Scylla of indifference and the Charybdis of burnout. Enjoy nature, in whatever way most engages you. Learn the plants, the birds, the insects, the stars—and teach them to your children, your students, your friends. Learn the history of where you live (its real history, warts and all) and resolve to write a new chapter to the local story of which you can be proud.

## The Meaning of America

Of course, we are not just residents of Fort Collins or Baltimore or Butte, but also, many of us, Americans. At this juncture in history, I think that gives us some unique opportunities, both at home and abroad.

The United States has contributed two great political innovations to the modern world. The first is a Constitution that guarantees individual rights to all its citizens. The second is our system of national parks: lands set aside to protect a wild heritage

<sup>8</sup> "Who cares," you might ask, "whether environmentalism is life-affirming and personally enriching? Environmentalists' goal should be to convince people to behave in more environmentally responsible ways—not to make people feel good." I answer, first, that if doing good doesn't feel good, or isn't part of larger changes in our lives that improve them, we are less likely to do good. Many environmental examples could be given. Second, that on my view, virtue proves itself by furthering the flourishing of life, including the flourishing of the virtuous person's own life. For a general defense of such an environmental virtue ethics, see Cafaro (2005).

for future generations. Both these innovations have been widely copied abroad; both are works in progress here at home. They point to ideals of human dignity and human restraint that the world's people should strive to further actualize.

I believe that our current environmental conflicts are more than struggles between different interest groups. Rather they are struggles about the meaning of America. What will future historians identify among our most lasting contributions to world history? National parks and the world's first important international environmental treaty (the Pan-American Migratory Bird Treaty of 1904)? Or our country's undermining world efforts to combat global warming, under the Kyoto accords? Will history celebrate America's trailblazing commitment to preserving all the native species under our stewardship, with the Endangered Species Act? Or will it remember instead our gluttonous consumerism, which undermines human and ecosystem health worldwide? Our actions will answer these questions. American environmentalists need to convince our fellow citizens that we have the nobler, more generous conception of what our country should be (Nelson 2002). We need to appeal to their patriotic concern to motivate them to action. We need to remind them that in addition to the dominant materialistic tradition, there is an American tradition of "plain living and high thinking" that needs revival (Shi 1985).

Patriotism can be powerful. This is yet another reason why it is a mistake to cede it to militarists and reactionaries. Eight years after 9/11, security remains a strong concern for many Americans (too strong, in my opinion). Those leaders who can speak convincingly to common security concerns will likely continue to find the way open for their favored policies. It is important for environmentalists to speak to our fellow citizens' security worries and articulate a compelling vision of the "national interest," so that in meeting them, we really benefit our country and the rest of the world.

For example: was it truly in our national interest to oppose international efforts to combat global warming, during the Clinton and Bush administrations? Will it really enhance national security to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other pristine wilderness areas? The figures on US oil reserves and rising global temperatures suggest that promoting conservation and developing alternative energy sources are better bets for increasing our security and the security of the rest of the world (IPCC 2007).

Again: would a true patriot encourage snowmobile and jet ski use in our national parks? Rescind protection for streams and rivers threatened by mine-related pollution? Weaken the Endangered Species Act? I don't think so. If there was any patriotic concern for the land—the "homeland"—during George W. Bush's administration, it certainly took a back seat to corporate profits and paybacks to campaign contributors. Environmentalists, who generally skew left politically, might have been able to block some of these assaults on nature, if we could have found common cause with conservatives for whom patriotic themes resonate (Bliese 1997). If environmentalists had successfully branded Bush's anti-environmentalism as unpatriotic (which it was), we might have made it harder for him to stampede Americans into the Iraq war.

I believe Americans, today, are failing in our important moral responsibility to help sustain the global life-support systems on which all humanity depends. As an American and, I hope, a patriot, I take this failure to heart. Unlike President Bush, I will not say that it is your patriotic duty to shop for your country. Unlike President Obama, I do not agree that a growing economy is the *sine qua non* of American well-being. In fact, I believe it is our patriotic duty to consume less and to question more, in order to help move our country toward a just and sustainable future (McKibben 2007). A nation of pampered consumers will not be able to stand up for our highest ideals and act morally on the world stage. We can and must do better.

### MacIntyre on Patriotism

Reconnecting patriotism to *patria*, the land, can help correct some errors in recent philosophical explorations of patriotism. The errors in the two cases that I explore below stem from a kind of over intellectualism. Specifically, their authors substitute an intellectual construct for the real warts-and-all phenomenon of patriotism, praising or demonizing it accordingly. So while their discussions may illuminate possibilities in ethical theory, their generalizations about patriotism itself are suspect.

In his influential lecture “Is Patriotism a Virtue?” (1984) Alasdair MacIntyre helpfully classes patriotism as a “loyalty-exhibiting virtue,” along with marital fidelity, love of family, friendship, and personal commitment to various institutions. “All these attitudes exhibit a peculiar action-generating regard for particular persons, institutions or groups, a regard founded upon a particular historical relationship of association” (p. 308). “The particularity of the relationship is essential and ineliminable,” MacIntyre affirms (p. 309). Marital fidelity as a virtue is not a commitment to marriage generally, but to my particular spouse; the virtue of patriotism does not play out as a commitment to citizenship or nationalism as ideals, but to my particular city or country. This seems accurate both to the meaning and the experience of marriage and patriotism.

MacIntyre goes on to discuss how patriotism, thus defined, necessarily conflicts with any plausible universal morality, including the impartial demands of justice. It is a defining feature of universal moralities that they may call into question all aspects of our lives, personal or communal, no matter how ancient, well-entrenched, beloved, or supposedly sacred. Such a universal acid, MacIntyre believes, necessarily conflicts with the robust acceptance of particular communal beliefs and commitments that is at the heart of patriotism. But the conflict works both ways. “While the liberal moralist (is) able to conclude that patriotism is a permanent source of moral danger because of the way it places our ties to our nation beyond rational criticism, the moralist who defends patriotism is able to conclude that liberal morality is a permanent source of moral danger because of the way it renders our social and moral ties too open to dissolution by rational criticism” (p. 317).

MacIntyre thus uses the issue of patriotism to articulate the theoretical concerns at the heart of *After Virtue*, including the fundamental incommensurability of different moral vocabularies, the “systematic incompatibility” of different moral

standpoints (p. 309) and the need to ground morality in particular traditions and practices. Because of MacIntyre's *theoretical* commitment to this last position, "patriotism" for him will be a virtue. We cannot have any morality at all without some degree of "patriotism," thus defined. But it will be a patriotism where at least some of our particular commitments are off-limits to the full force of rational criticism. If it was not, MacIntyre believes, then it would not be patriotism, but simply another form of moral universalism.

Just here, I think, is where MacIntyre goes astray. For we may hold robust patriotic commitments, not just while also holding robust universal moral commitments (which he acknowledges). We may hold robust patriotic commitments while accepting that *all* our practices, *all* our particular relationships, the meaning of *all* our values, *all* our tentative weightings and balancing of those values, and *all* aspects of our communal narratives, are up for continuous rethinking and renegotiation (Dewey 1948). Indeed, today, taking patriotism seriously and acting upon it in a complex and changing world demands such rethinking and renegotiation.

Consider the American environmental patriot. She asks us to question and change practices that are unsustainable and in fact threats to our communities; even well-entrenched, beloved practices like personal automobility. She asks us, following Aldo Leopold, to rethink and strengthen our relationships with the nonhuman world. She questions fundamental American values such as individualism and endless economic growth, and asks us to recalibrate how we balance them against other values, such as sustainability and the strength of our communities. She asks us to reconsider national narratives that Americans find deeply meaningful, such as the "settlement" of our country, and write new chapters that take into account new ecological realities. All this calls for more thinking, not less. Such thinking is itself an important part of patriotism. And crucially, such thinking may call for *limiting* a community's or nation's acquisitiveness or aggression.

MacIntyre is skeptical of the possibility of a moderate or "liberal patriotism," which limits its patriotic ardor within the dictates of universalistic morality. Such a patriotism would be "emasculated," he suggests, because "important situations in actual social life" arise where "the patriotic standpoint comes into serious conflict with the standpoint of a genuinely impersonal morality or it amounts to no more than a set of practically empty slogans" (p. 309). And what are these important, actual situations? Interestingly, the only examples MacIntyre gives are international competitions for "essential resources," such as arable land or fossil fuels:

What your community requires as the material prerequisites for your survival as a distinctive community and your growth into a distinctive nation may be exclusive use of the same or some of the same natural resources as my community requires for its survival and growth into a distinction nation. When such a conflict arises, the standpoint of impersonal morality requires an allocation of goods such that each individual person counts for one and no more than one, while the patriotic standpoint requires that I strive to further the interests of my community and you strive to further those of yours, and certainly where the survival of one community is at stake, and sometimes

perhaps even when only large interests of one community are at stake, patriotism entails a willingness to go to war on one's community's behalf. (pp. 309–310)

Now *if* we frame the resource conflict as one of *survival* and *if* we posit two radically different moral views, patriotic particularism and ethical universalism, then MacIntyre is clearly right. These orientations will push us in opposite directions and patriotism will sometimes push us toward war. The example is analogous to similar ones designed to bring out the importance of other particular loyalties: the mother choosing to save her drowning son rather than a stranger, etc. The theoretical point is made.

But at a time when Americans have fought two oil wars within a dozen years, I think it is important to think about the actual causes of such resource wars. The first and second Iraq wars did not involve America's "survival," but arguably, some carefully obscured combination of corporate profits, strategic *realpolitik*, and perpetuation of a wasteful and ecologically destructive "way of life." Iraq's oil is not required for our "growth into a distinctive nation," although it may be required for the endless economic growth that most Americans accept as our great national goal. The environmentalist argues that this "way of life" and the goal of endless economic growth would be well lost, *from a patriotic perspective as well as from a universalistic one*. Our gluttony is harming the United States as badly as it is damaging the global ecosystem services on which all the world's peoples depend, and a searching consideration of our "national interest" will show this. Further, he argues that meeting the global environmental challenges of the twenty-first century will require unprecedented amounts of international cooperation. Again, from either a universalistic or a particularist perspective, war is now obsolete as a means to solve conflicts over scarce resources. The imperative of endless economic growth, to the extent that it makes resource wars more likely, must be decisively rejected, if humanity hopes to survive and prosper in this century and the next (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005).

MacIntyre's analysis is not completely wrong. We can be sure that just as there will remain conflicting interests between nations, there will remain cases where particularist and universalist moralities push us in different directions. What a serious consideration of the environmental example shows is that we can think our way through to better, more ethically-justified positions in such conflict cases by thinking harder about our patriotic interests and values, and weighing them against universalistic interests and values that also remain available to us. It is not just immoral, it is foolish to try to take refuge in an unthinking patriotism here. It will not help us further our self-interest—any more than invading Iraq and squatting on its oil reserves have furthered America's self-interest. There is no magic equation that provides optimal solutions to such complex, conflicted situations. The best solutions, I submit, will be found by those who are aware of the full range of interests and values involved and subject them to searching scrutiny (Dewey 1948).

It is a deep mistake of many philosophers to equate “patriotism” with intellectual limitations.<sup>9</sup> This mistake occurs not just because intellectuals tend to look down on those who find patriotism meaningful and not just because we tend to live in our own countries of ideas, which may feel more real to us than our actual countries (clearly, MacIntyre avoids these failures). It also occurs because many philosophers still hanker after absolute certainty in ethics (Rorty 1998). Taking his analysis, correctly, up to the point of recognizing that patriotic loyalties and universalistic morality will sometimes clash, and realizing that *reason may not always be able to clearly adjudicate between them*, MacIntyre draws the moral that patriotism, itself, needs to take refuge in irrationality. *Erratum*. Patriotic particularism and ethical universalism both run up against the limits to rational justification in ethics, and so will the best combination of the two. Now and forever. That is what we have to learn to live with, whatever our theoretical preferences in ethics.

### Nussbaum on Patriotism

Of course, most philosophers are considerably less sympathetic to patriotism than MacIntyre. In “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” Nussbaum (1996) accuses patriotic nationalists of substituting “a colorful idol for the substantive universal values of justice and right” (p. 5). “Nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, race, and gender” are all, she claims, “morally irrelevant” (p. 133). All human beings, simply as human beings, have equal moral value. Morality involves recognizing this universal value and acting upon it—often in the face of surface differences or particular loyalties that obscure it. The Nazis were ethical particularists and patriots, willing to die to further the interests of the Fatherland, or kill to keep the Aryan race pure. In contrast, the “righteous Gentiles” memorialized at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, were ethical universalists, willing to risk death to save their fellow human beings (pp. 131–132).

If all patriots were Nazis and all universalists were truly righteous, this would be the end of the story. But as Walzer (1996) points out, in a commentary on Nussbaum’s essay, cosmopolitanism has its pathologies, too. The Nazis must share pride of place as the great butchers of the twentieth century with Russian and Chinese communists, followers of a universalist ideology. Patriots, meanwhile, may do much good. The Nazis were ultimately defeated by patriots from England, Russia, and the United States, defending their homelands. Jewish patriots founded the first and still

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<sup>9</sup> Keller (2007), who builds on MacIntyre’s analysis of patriotism as part of a family of “loyalty” virtues, makes this same mistake, when he essentially defines patriotism as a form of self-delusion or “bad faith” regarding one’s country’s good and bad qualities. By defining patriotism as an intellectual disability, Keller sets up a straw man, easily dismissed as a vice. But such trumped-up charges can be made against any of our particular moral commitments. The fact that some parents foolishly see only the good in their children, or even the fact (if it is a fact) that most parents are more inclined to see the good rather than the bad in them, hardly argues against parental commitment—given the importance of such commitment to human well-being. Similar considerations speak for a committed patriotism, because such commitment is the foundation for successful communities and societies. Of course, real patriots must be thinking patriots, just as good parents are thinking parents. Any virtue devolves into vice, when stripped of all reason.

the only real democracy in the Middle East. Patriots in Poland and Czechoslovakia eventually threw off communist tyranny.

Nussbaum's argument is marred by its simplified, inaccurate portrayal of patriotism. For example, she speaks of "the comfort of patriotism and its easy sentiments" (p. 7). But neither the American soldiers serving in Iraq, nor the American soldiers who have refused to serve there or who have chosen to speak out against the Iraq war once they return, are living lives of comfort and ease. Nussbaum's words are a cheap dismissal of those who struggle to make sense of patriotism's demands, or to balance the tensions between the demands of patriotism and ethical universalism. For example, those Israelis who love their country yet agonize over what justice demands for the Palestinians. Patriotism can of course be taken up lazily or unthinkingly, as a mere rationalization for selfish behavior. But so can ethical universalism. Let's kill the kulacks to speed on the formation of a classless society—and while we're at it, let's steal their stuff.

I agree with Benjamin Barber (another commentator): the answers to toxic patriotism or toxic cosmopolitanism are good patriotism and good cosmopolitanism. "What we require are healthy, democratic forms of local community and civic patriotism rather than abstract universalism and the thin gruel of contract relations" (Barber 1996, p. 31). And crucially, it is healthy democratic communities that allow us to instantiate the demands of ethical universalism. Securing human rights and a fairer distribution of resources only occurs when the proper civic infrastructure is in place, including a large percentage of individuals who think of themselves as *citizens*, concerned for the common good. These are the people who push for a living wage, or more affordable housing for their fellow citizens. Moral progress depends on the opportunities grasped by an engaged patriotism (Nelson 2002).

Again, for me, the environmental perspective brings this home with particular clarity. Those of us living in Fort Collins are blessed with a large number of local parks and natural areas to explore. We have these because half a dozen times in the past 25 years, city and county residents voted to tax themselves in order to buy and preserve the land. This depended, in turn, on two main factors. First, 15 or 20 key activists put in the time and effort to write the proposals and mount campaigns to pass the taxes. They succeeded only because of their deep knowledge of the local political terrain. Second, a majority of residents felt enough patriotic concern to vote to tax themselves to protect the land and preserve it for future generations (campaign ads usually included pictures of cute children hiking). I'm grateful to the super-patriots with the vision and determination to push for such initiatives, and to the patriotic-enough general populace who voted for them. I'm determined to do my part to preserve this heritage for those to come

So I lobby politicians, write checks and opinion pieces in the local papers, analyze dry technical documents, and send in comments to the Forest Service and the Corps of Engineers. I find these political efforts meaningful, but often tiresome. If I didn't find them meaningful, I wouldn't push through the drudgery. But their meaning comes in large part from their particularity. I'm working with my neighbors to protect the Cache la Poudre River, the same river that I've birded so many mornings. The river where I've skipped stones with my sons, and shown them their first ospreys and kingfishers, foxes and crawdads. The river along which I



proposed to my wife. If my neighbors and I can protect our river, and if we succeed in building a community along its banks that lives in harmony with its wildlife, and if in 30 years I can walk along it and point out ospreys and otters to my grandchildren, then I will be well contented. Creating such communities and societies, linking the past to the future, preserving what is most valuable in our past and providing opportunities for future generations, are the goals of environmentalism. They demand focus.

No, responds Martha Nussbaum. The boundaries of a nation (and, we may assume, a city or a watershed) are “morally arbitrary.” “Why should we think of people from China as our fellows the minute they dwell in a certain place, namely the United States, but not when they dwell in a certain other place, namely China? What is it about the national boundary that magically converts people toward whom we are both incurious and indifferent into people to whom we have duties of mutual respect?” (p. 14). I answer, first, that we need not be incurious or (completely) indifferent toward Chinese or other foreigners. This is a straw man. “Exclusive concern for one’s own country is not a necessary part of patriotism” (Nathanson 1989, p. 538). Second, Chinese people who legally immigrate to the United States become fellow citizens, for whom we have special responsibilities by virtue of that tie. Such responsibilities include ensuring they have equal protection under our laws, access to sufficient health care when they are sick, etc. In return, Chinese–Americans take on those same civic responsibilities. Third, such responsible citizenship does not appear “magically.” It must be cultivated; its absence has deleterious consequences, for society as a whole but particularly for its less fortunate members; and for that reason, we should think twice before undermining it, even unintentionally. Fourth, dividing the world up into smaller units called nations is one way to facilitate real, effective citizenship in an immense world of 6.7 billion people. In the same way, knowledge and devotion to particular landscapes makes environmentalism possible. Fifth, the primary responsibility for improving the lives of a nation’s people resides in the people themselves, and in their leaders. If improvement is necessary, they need to take up the task themselves, as part of self-government. If they fail to do so, if they are selfish rather than patriotic, the efforts of outside benefactors are unlikely to succeed.

Earlier in her career, Nussbaum was keen to remind us that self-government is both a right and an essential human capability (Nussbaum 1993). But how this capability might be realized without a greater focus on one’s compatriots than on complete strangers, or a greater concern for my town than some Chinese town halfway across the world, remains something of a mystery. It is interesting that once Nussbaum started writing about issues of third-world development and international justice, her earlier appreciation for self-government seemed to go by the board. Perhaps with so much suffering and gross injustice to alleviate in the third-world, specifying a proper first-world citizenship might seem like a luxury; much less important than raising awareness and dollars for overseas aid. “Giving one’s money is a major way in which, in the absence of a world state, individuals can promote the good of those who are distant from them,” Nussbaum (1996) writes (p. 134). This may be true. Yet there is a world of difference between giving charity to strangers and working out a common destiny with my fellow citizens. It seems to me that

charity and citizenship are both necessary parts of a true humanity. But if that is true, then the moral claims of the wretched of the earth cannot be allowed to *displace* the moral claims, rights, and obligations of citizenship. At most, they are a necessary *supplement* to them.<sup>10</sup>

The hard truths behind Nussbaum's jibe at "arbitrary" boundaries is that they do lead to differential concern and action on behalf of others, and they do perpetuate differential access to resources. They lock in place the failures of societies, and the sins of the fathers are visited on the sons (and even more, on their daughters). *But borders also help lock in societies' successes* (Walzer 1983). They help preserve genuine human diversity in a world that has been shrunk and homogenized by modern technology. "Arbitrary" or artificial boundaries may be out of favor with the global intelligentsia. Yet they make self-government possible (Miller 1995) and self-government, we believe, is a key human capability and a fundamental human right.

Nussbaum finds it easy to dismiss patriotism because she nowhere grapples with the phenomenon itself and its complex, mixed impacts on human behavior. That patriotic affiliations might do real good in the actual world, perhaps inspire people to transcend their selfishness and act for the good of others, perhaps give their lives meaning, is irrelevant, since we can imagine better, more universalistic ideals, which would guide people to do the right thing, unerringly and for the right (universalistic) reasons. As her essay shows, this type of thinking coheres well with a managerial outlook (Pinsky 1996). The ultimate goal seems to be to turn flesh and blood human beings into efficient moral calculating machines (or, failing this, to free up the resources they are squatting on for more efficient distribution by their moral superiors). But when we consider what helps real people act morally, we find that our particular loyalties are important. For example, psychologists studying the virtue of justice have found that while a commitment to universal "fairness" helps lead people beyond selfishness, more partial strengths such as "loyalty" and "citizenship" are equally important in motivating just behavior (Peterson and Seligman 2004, Chap. 16).

All this is not to argue *against* more wide-ranging moral concerns and commitments. We may support both universal human rights and increased development aid for the world's poor, while also recognizing the legitimacy—indeed, the necessity—of people's particular moral affiliations. Such patriotic connections further and partly constitute full human flourishing, which should be the overarching goal of ethics. For that reason, patriotism is a virtue.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Nussbaum, Gomberg (1990, p. 148), McCabe (1997, p. 218), and others often couple their criticisms of patriotism with demands that wealthy Westerners give more charity to poor people in the developing world. I'm sympathetic to the latter point; some increase in development aid for the world's poor does seem morally demanded today. But I think this way of asking for it, by disparaging the rights and responsibilities of particular citizenship, disrespects the humanity of everyone involved. It turns wealthy Westerners into cash machines and paints poor southerners as incompetent children, with neither the ability nor the responsibility for governing themselves.

## Patriotism is Necessary

Love of country is a human possibility, which can be part of a fulfilling life. This possibility can also be ignored or misused. One of the worst misuses involves substituting a love of the state for a love of our land and our fellow citizens. Just as pernicious, some balance love of their own lands and peoples with contempt for others. Partly for these reasons, American intellectuals often see patriotism as a refuge for the simple-minded. Sometimes, indeed, it is such a refuge. Yet the principled understanding and retelling of our history is anything but simple. An honest patriot must wrestle with those aspects of our history of which we are ashamed. A compassionate patriot will remember history's losers, its dispossessed and despised.

Like courage, prudence, or indeed any virtue, patriotism is liable to a skewed development and to various kinds of misuse. Yet properly developed it is part of a good human life. Put another way, "patriotism" is a necessary word, but one whose meaning we must retrieve, by doing a little digging. As Henry Thoreau asserts: "It would seem as if the very language of our parlors would lose all its nerve and degenerate into *parlaver* wholly, our lives pass at such remoteness from its symbols, and its metaphors and tropes are necessarily so far fetched" (Thoreau 1971, pp. 244–245). Such has been the fate of "patriotism," a word coined by people who lived closer to the land than Thoreau's contemporaries, or ourselves. It has become a meaningless abstraction for many of us, in part through our mistaking abstractions for our true country. I think we must retrieve the word by rethinking and reliving it. When we live closer to the land, strive to know it better and work to protect all its inhabitants, human and nonhuman—that is patriotism.

The dangers of patriotism are undeniable. Yet so are the dangers stemming from a lack of patriotism. People need to band together in difficult times. We need to work with others to preserve what is important to us. We draw strength and inspiration from one another; we enjoy being part of larger efforts to achieve some common good. This emotional component need not overrule reason and morality. Like our other emotions, it is not something to suppress or be embarrassed about, but rather part of being human. It can be put to better or worse uses. In particular, patriotism can be put to good *environmental* uses, to bridge the liberal/conservative divide and achieve environmental protection. After three and a half decades of largely futile efforts to build on our early successes, American environmentalists, at least, should be willing to consider new ideas that might reinvigorate our movement.

In any case, patriotism is not as easily avoided as many intellectuals seem to think. It is a commonplace to say that environmentalism takes the place of religion, for many secular environmentalists. In a similar way, I think environmentalism takes the place of conventional patriotism among many who would recoil from the term. For lots of us, environmental work provides camaraderie and a sense of connection to something more important than ourselves. It is our way of contributing to our local communities and helping to define the meaning of America. Why not recognize this and call it by its proper name?

## One Patriot

In *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau penned some of our most memorable words against patriotism, including these, from the concluding chapter:

Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who have no *self*-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads. (Thoreau 1971, p. 321)

For Thoreau, the individual self is greater than any state, and should never be sacrificed to it. Self-development and self-exploration should be our goals. *Walden* is the record of such self-exploration, deliberately cultivated far from the distractions of politics and the enervation of daily social contact (Cafaro 2004).

The passage seems to set patriotism—a sentiment of love for one’s country—in opposition to these goals. Patriotism, Thoreau tells us, eats away at our brains, like a maggot, slowly but persistently. *Walden* argues that we must think our way toward better lives. Patriotism destroys this ability to think.

Many similarly dismissive references to a militaristic, thoughtless patriotism can be found in Thoreau’s writings. Yet when it came time to speak out against injustice, he found it necessary to use the rhetoric of a patriot. In his lecture “Slavery in Massachusetts,” Thoreau spoke angrily of the use of his state’s militia to return the fugitive Anthony Burns to Virginia and slavery:

I have lived for the last month,—and I think that every man in Massachusetts capable of the sentiment of patriotism must have had a similar experience,—with the sense of having suffered a vast and indefinite loss. I did not know at first what ailed me. At last it occurred to me that what I had lost was a country. (Thoreau 1973, p. 106)

As latter generations have often been reminded, our institutions of government may become instruments of injustice. But it is not only the threat to our own lives or happiness that moves us to fight injustice. We act because this is our country. We are ashamed of its injustices as we would be of our own, and concerned for what sort of country we are leaving our children.

Previous generations of Americans fought to end slavery and imperialist aggression. Thoreau argues that we must similarly fight to end the war against nature going on in our midst, and redefine our nation to include *all* its many places and inhabitants. In a posthumously published essay, he describes the sugar maples set up on Concord commons as a “*perfectly living* institution” (emphasis in the original):

They are worth all and more than they have cost,—though one of the selectmen, while setting them out, took the cold which occasioned his death,—if only because they have filled the open eyes of children with their rich color unstintedly so many Octobers.... No annual training or muster of soldiery, no

celebration with its scarfs and banners, could import into the town a hundredth part of the annual splendor of our October. We have only to set the trees, or let them stand, and Nature will find the colored drapery,—flags of all her nations. (Thoreau 1980, pp. 160, 165)

Here is an institution Thoreau can wholeheartedly believe in (unlike Congress, or the US Constitution); a benison to all, including future generations. Here, in the person of the anonymous selectman planting trees for his community, is an unheroic, unobtrusive service that we need to recognize as patriotism. A patriotism that is fully grounded yet expansive, not drawing lines defensively and saying “us or them,” but widening our typical circle of moral concern and inviting in nature. Here is a patriotism that is truly a virtue.

There is ample scope for exercising such patriotism in planting trees, working to create new parks, or teaching children the names of the trees towering above them and the flowers at their feet. Most important, perhaps, is learning the stories of the places we inhabit and meeting the many “original settlers” (other species) with whom we still share this country. Not all the lessons learned are pleasant, of course. Nature is not all sunshine and ripe huckleberries, and some of the original settlers are gone for good. Attempts to effect political change are complicated and frustrating. Still we must strive to know the land and create *living* institutions; institutions in the service of Life. The alternative to such patriotic efforts is the loss of our country.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Thoreau and patriotism, see Cafaro (2004), pp. 198–204. For a full account of Thoreau's environmental ethics, see the chapter titled “Nature” in the same volume. Many thanks to Ron Sandler, Kris Cafaro and two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, for detailed comments which greatly improved this paper. Thanks also to audiences at Colorado College, Colorado State University and the University of Tulsa, whose comments also helped focus and improve the final version.

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