CHAPTER 2

National Identity

I

To understand what we mean when we talk of someone's having a national identity, we must first get clear about what nations are. This is not entirely straightforward, and a good deal of the later discussion will depend on my answer to this question. It should be obvious right away that nations are not things that exist in the world independently of the beliefs people have about them, in the way that, say, volcanoes and elephants do. In the case of volcanoes and elephants, once we know the criteria for something's being one, it becomes a fairly simple matter of observation to decide whether a given object is an elephant or a volcano, or to settle how many elephants (or volcanoes) there now are in a particular region of the earth. Asking the analogous question about nations involves us in difficulties of a different order. It is not merely that the criteria are more complex; it is also that people's own beliefs about their nationhood enter into the definition. So if we say of a set of people that they compose a nation, we are not merely saying something about their physical characteristics or their behaviour, we are also saying something about how they conceive of themselves. And this may be controversial inside the group as well as outside it.

It may help us to grasp the point if we take a parallel case that raises fewer emotive issues. Consider what is involved in a set of people forming a team. When we describe a group of people in this way, we imply that they work or play in close proximity to one another. But we also imply more than this: we imply that they see themselves as co-operating to achieve some end, that they regard one another as having obligations to the team. These two parts of the definition can

pull apart. For instance, we might say 'The England cricket team isn't really a team at all; they're just a bunch of individuals.' We call them a team because they act together in certain ways—they go out on the field together, they throw the ball to one another, and so on—but we deny that they're a team because we believe that each is motivated by personal ambition rather than team spirit. (And this will of course have some consequences for the way that they behave; bowlers will be unwilling to bowl at the most aggressive batsmen, and so forth.) We can imagine two participants arguing about such a claim, one seeing individualism where the other sees co-operation, and we could see that it would not be easy to decide who is right.

Nations are like teams in this respect. There can legitimately be disagreement about whether a particular group of people, say the Scots or the Québécois, form a nation or not, and this is not just a matter of the vagueness or complexity of the criteria for being one. It is also a matter of interpreting what people believe about themselves. As I suggested at the end of the last chapter, the problem is further complicated by the fact that the attitudes and beliefs that constitute nationality are very often hidden away in the deeper recesses of the mind, brought to full consciousness only by some dramatic event. So simple empiricism isn't going to settle the issue, not even empiricism of the kind that surveys people's beliefs about their place in the world. You cannot resolve the issue of Scottish nationhood by asking a representative sample of Scots, 'Do you see yourself as belonging to a distinct Scottish nation?' This is relevant evidence, certainly, but it has to take its place alongside evidence of other kinds before a final judgement is made.

To gain a fuller understanding of what nationhood involves, it may be helpful to clear away two common misunderstandings that bedevil this question.[1] The first is the confusion of 'nation' and 'state'. In ordinary speech 'nation' is sometimes used as a synonym for state: when someone refers to 'the newly emerging nations of the Third World', it is very likely that they are really talking about newly created *states*. This usage is not likely to be helpful if we are trying to

[1] These confusions were both nailed down with force and precision in B. Barry, 'Self-Government Revisited', in D. Miller and L. Siedentop (eds.), *The Nature of Political Theory* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983), reprinted in B. Barry, *Democracy, Power and Justice* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), but they continue to flourish and so it seems necessary to make these points once more.

clarify the principle of nationality, since one of the main issues we have to consider is precisely the relationship between nations and states, and in particular the question whether each nation has a right to its own state. When this question is posed, 'nation' must refer to a community of people with an *aspiration* to be politically self-determining, and 'state' must refer to the set of political institutions that they may aspire to possess for themselves. Let us say, following Weber, that a state is a body that successfully claims a monopoly of legitimate force in a particular territory.[2] We count states by seeing how many such bodies there are. Some of these states will be multinational, in the sense that they exercise their rule over several discrete nations. The Soviet Union was such a state; rather unusually, it openly conceded that the peoples it governed were of different nationalities. (More than one hundred were recognized.) Rather less common is the case where a single nation is for historical reasons divided between two states. This was the case for the Germans before the reunification of 1990, and is still the case for the Chinese and Koreans today. A third case occurs where people of a single nationality are scattered as minorities in a number of states—the position today of the Kurds and the Palestinians. None of this would make sense if we did not understand 'nation' and 'state' in such a way as to make it an empirical question whether those who compose a nation are all united politically within a single state.

The confusion of nation and state is an elementary error, albeit one that is encouraged by everyday usage. The confusion of nationality and ethnicity is more understandable, because here we are dealing with phenomena that are indeed of the same general type. Both nations and ethnic groups are bodies of people bound together by common cultural characteristics and mutual recognition; moreover, there is no sharp dividing line between them. Let us say, again somewhat stipulatively, that an ethnic group is a community formed by common descent and sharing cultural features (language, religion, etc.) that mark it off from neighbouring communities. Two points must then be conceded at once. The first is that, in order to understand the national identities of various peoples in the world today, we need to examine their ethnic origins. Typically, though not always, a nation emerges from an ethnic community that furnishes it

[2] M. Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 78.

with its distinct identity.[3] The second is that ethnicity continues to be a possible source of new national identities. Indeed, one could put this more strongly: where an ethnic group finds its identity being threatened or its legitimate political aspirations being denied, it would be quite surprising if it did not begin to think of itself as a nation and to express those aspirations in nationalist terms.[4]

But having conceded these points, we must also insist on their contraries. Even nations that originally had an exclusive ethnic character may come, over time, to embrace a multitude of different ethnicities. The clearest example of this is the American nation, originally ethnically Anglo-Saxon, but now incorporating Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and many other such hyphenated groups.[5] This example also reveals the limits of the second point. We have no reason to think that Italian-Americans, an ethnic group, will develop a national identity separate from that of other Americans. It

[3] For a detailed exploration of this point, see A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986).

[4] For a recent example, consider the emergence of Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka. (I draw here upon R. N. Kearney, 'Ethnic Conflict and the Tamil Separatist Movement in Sri Lanka', *Asian Survey*, 25 (1985), 898–917.) Ethnic conflict between the minority Tamil community and the majority Sinhalese community began to appear shortly after independence in 1948. The Tamils felt that both their religion and their language were under threat from the Sinhalese, and they also feared the effects of government-sponsored migration into traditional Tamil homelands. After two decades in which the Tamils attempted to secure political protection for their community through a federal constitution, a nationalist movement emerged in the 1970s. 'Immediate precipitating factors were said to include the adoption in 1972 of a new constitution that contained no elements of federalism, on which Tamil leaders had insisted, and that reiterated the exclusive position of Sinhalese as the official language. Further, the constitution conferred a special status on Buddhism as the religion of the majority, dealing another symbolic blow to the Tamil community' (p. 905). In 1976 the Tamil United Liberation Front was formed, an organization which claimed that an independent Tamil state 'has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil Nation in this country'. The ensuing political violence has been widely reported.

[5] In saying this I do not mean to imply that all sub-communities in America have found adopting an American national identity as comparatively straightforward as have the immigrant Irish and Italians. American Indians have typically had a sense of their identity and a desire for political autonomy that sets them at odds with the larger community. In the case of blacks, the problem is not so much one of a competing national identity as a difficulty in wholeheartedly adopting a national identity whose principles—equal rights, equality of opportunity—have been flouted in their own case. I use American examples to show how ethnic and national identities can co-exist, without supposing that the group identities of all Americans have the same relatively harmonious shape.

seems perfectly possible for ethnicity and nationality to co-exist, neither threatening to drive out the other. Everything will depend on whether the ethnic group feels secure and comfortable with its national identity and the political institutions that correspond to it. So to say that the boundary between nationality and ethnicity is a porous one is not to say that the two phenomena should be conflated. Overlooking the distinction has got a good deal of discussion of nationality off to a false start.[6] Ernest Gellner, for instance, defines nationalism as 'a theory of political legitimacy which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones', and he quickly draws from this the inference that, since 'there is a very large number of potential nations on earth', but there is only room for a smaller number of political units, 'not all nationalisms can be satisfied, at any rate at the same time'.[7] The fault here lies with the premiss, which assumes that a nation must be understood as an ethnically homogeneous community. Once we recognize that there can be multi-ethnic nations, the inference can no longer be made. Of course in a purely hypothetical sense any ethnic group can be regarded as a 'potential nation', in so far as we can envisage circumstances which lead it to have national aspirations. But we should interest ourselves in what is likely to happen, not in what merely *could* happen. Gellner's critical claim about nationalism may be no more damaging than the observation that the telephone system would grind to a halt if every subscriber chose to make a call at the same time.[8]

II

Having now drawn preliminary distinctions between nationality and statehood on the one hand, and nationality and ethnicity on the other, let us look more directly at what distinguishes national identities from other identities, what is implied by describing a

[6] Further examples can be found in Barry, 'Self-Government Revisited'.

[7] E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1983), 1–2.

[8] Gellner does not in fact think that every 'potential nation' is likely to make nationalist demands; indeed, he calculates that we find at the very most one 'effective' nation for every ten potential ones. But he estimates the number of potential nations by counting languages, making the assumption that having a distinct language is sufficient to make a group into a 'potential nation'. Once again, this blurs the distinction between ethnicity and nationality.

particular community of people as a nation. For the moment I want to bracket off the critical questions that we shall need to ask later, and try to understand nationality from the inside, to say what is involved in thinking of oneself as a member of a national community. There are at least five aspects that deserve our attention.

The first noteworthy point, acknowledged very widely among those who have thought seriously about the subject, is that national communities are constituted by belief: nations exist when their members recognize one another as compatriots, and believe that they share characteristics of the relevant kind—which shared characteristics are relevant will be apparent shortly. So it is a mistake to begin from the position of an outside observer trying to identify nations by looking to see which people have common attributes such as race or language. On the one hand, we may find people who share one or more such attributes, and yet do not constitute a nation because they do not think of themselves as forming one (Austrians and Germans, for instance). On the other hand, if we take those peoples who do by the test of mutual recognition and shared beliefs form nations, there is no one characteristic (such as race or religion) that each of them has in common. This becomes clear as soon as one looks at the candidates that have been put forward as objective criteria of nationhood, as Ernest Renan did in his famous lecture on the subject:[9] to every criterion that has been proposed there are clear empirical counter-examples.[10]

The conclusion one quickly reaches is that a nation is, in Renan's

[9] E. Renan, 'What is a Nation?' in A. Zimmern (ed.), *Modern Political Doctrines* (London, Oxford University Press, 1939). Renan wrote as a liberal nationalist who opposed the aggrandizing element in German nationalism, and especially the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. By insisting that nations were constituted by the beliefs of their members rather than by objective criteria such as race or language, he sought to counteract such ambitions.

[10] The most plausible of these criteria is language. Most nations possess a single public language (which may co-exist with a number of private languages spoken by the members of particular groups), and this is not an accident. If nations require a common public culture, as I shall later argue, then this is most easily expressed through a national language that everyone can speak. Moreover, political unity is easier to sustain when communication between members of the polity is not hampered by linguistic divisions. But it is not hard to find examples of nations with two or more official languages: Switzerland is perhaps the most prominent. In these cases we may expect most nationals to be bi- or tri-lingual. One might try to salvage the language criterion, therefore, by saying that a nation must either speak one (public) language, or else, by common agreement, give public accreditation to two or

memorable phrase, 'a daily plebiscite'; its existence depends on a shared belief that its members belong together, and a shared wish to continue their life in common. So when I identify myself as belonging to a particular nation, I imply that those whom I include as my co-nationals share my beliefs and reciprocate my commitments. The claim I make may be a false one; I may see myself as belonging to a distinct Cornish nation, say, but if other Cornish men and women do not regard their Cornish identity in this way, then I am simply mistaken. More generally, one may argue that all national identities are fictitious: this is an issue we shall return to shortly. These possibilities stem directly from the fact that nations are not aggregates of people distinguished by their physical or cultural traits, but communities whose very existence depends upon mutual recognition.

The second feature of nationality is that it is an identity that embodies historical continuity. Nations stretch backwards into the past, and indeed in most cases their origins are conveniently lost in the mists of time. In the course of this history, various significant events have occurred, and we can identify with the actual people who acted at those moments, reappropriating their deeds as our own. Often these events involve military victories and defeats: we imagine ourselves filling the breach at Harfleur or reading the signal hoisted at Trafalgar. Renan thinks that historical tragedies matter more than historical glories. I am inclined to see in this an understandable French bias, but the point he connects to it is a good one: 'sorrows have greater value than victories; for they impose duties and demand common effort'.[11] The historic national community is a community of obligation. Because our forebears have toiled and spilt their blood to build and defend the nation, we who are born into it inherit an obligation to continue their work, which we discharge partly towards our contemporaries and partly towards our descendants. The historical community stretches forward into the future too. This then means that, if we are going to speak of the nation as an ethical community, we are talking not merely about

more. Notice, however, that this amended criterion makes essential reference to the way people regard their languages, not merely which languages they speak, so it is not 'objective' in any straightforward sense. On this question see also R. Quirk, 'Language and Nationhood', in C. MacLean (ed.), *The Crown and the Thistle* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1979). I defend the claim that the Swiss are a nation despite their linguistic diversity in Ch. 4 below.

[11] Ibid. 203.

community of the kind that exists between a group of contemporaries who practise mutual aid among themselves, and that would dissolve at the point at which such practice ceased; but about a community that, because it stretches back and forward across the generations, is not one that the present generation can renounce. Here we begin to see what sets national communities apart from other groups to which we may give our allegiance, groups that may, from another point of view, appear more 'real' or solid because they are based on face-to-face contact between the members—sports teams or professional associations, for instance.

The third distinguishing aspect of national identity is that it is an active identity. Nations are communities that do things together, take decisions, achieve results, and so forth. Of course this cannot be literally so: we rely on proxies who are seen as embodying the national will—statesmen, soldiers, sportsmen, etc. But this means that the link between past and future that I noted above is not merely a causal link. The nation becomes what it is by the decisions that it takes—some of which we may now regard as thoroughly bad, a cause of national shame. Whether this active identity is a valuable aspect of nationality or, as some critics would allege, merely a damaging fantasy, it clearly does mark out nations from other kinds of grouping, for instance churches or religious sects, whose identity is essentially a passive one in so far as the church is seen as responding to the promptings of God; here the group's purpose is not to do or decide things, but to interpret as best it can the messages and commands of an external source.

The fourth aspect of a national identity is that it connects a group of people to a particular geographical place, and here again there is a clear contrast with most other group identities that people affirm. For example, ethnic or religious identities often have sacred sites or places of origin, but it is not an essential part of having the identity that you should permanently occupy that place; if you are a good Muslim you should make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once, but you need not set up house there. A nation, in contrast, must have a homeland. This may of course be a source of great difficulties, a point I shall return to when considering the politics of nationality, but it also helps to explain why a national community must be (in aspiration if not yet in fact) a political community. We have seen already that nations are groups that act; we see now that the actions

they aspire to perform must include that of controlling a chunk of the earth's surface. It is this territorial element that has forged the connection between nations and states, since as we have already noted a state is precisely a body that claims legitimate authority over a geographical area.

Finally, a national identity requires that the people who share it should have something in common, a set of characteristics that in the past was often referred to as a 'national character', but which I prefer to describe as a common public culture. It is incompatible with nationality to think of the members of the nation as people who merely happen to have been thrown together in one place and forced to share a common fate, in the way that the occupants of a lifeboat, say, have been accidentally thrown together. There must be a sense that the people belong together by virtue of the characteristics that they share. It is not so easy, however, to pin down precisely what this entails. Let me at this stage at least try to guard against certain elementary errors. One is that the shared characteristics must be based on biological descent, that our fellow-nationals must be our 'kith and kin', a view that leads directly to racism. If what matters to nationality is that people should share a common public culture, then this is quite compatible with their belonging to a diversity of ethnic groups. Indeed, it is possible to regard ethnic mixing as the source of the nation's distinctive character, as Defoe did in his satirical description of the English:

> While ev'ry nation that her powers reduced,
> Their languages and manners introduced;
> From whose mix'd relics our compounded breed;
> By spurious generation does succeed;
> Making a race uncertain and uneven,
> Derived from all the nations under heaven.[12]

All that matters is that the melding together of different 'races' should have produced a people with a distinct and common character of its own. Equally, although every nation must have a homeland, it is by no means essential that every member should have been born

[12] D. Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman* in *Works*, v (London, Bell and Daldy, 1871), 437. More acerbically still (p. 439):

> We have been Europe's sink, the jakes, where she
> Voids all her offal out-cast progeny.

there. So immigration need not pose problems, provided only that the immigrants come to share in a common national identity, to which they may contribute their own distinctive ingredients. Indeed, it has proved possible in some instances to regard immigration as itself a formative experience, calling forth qualities of resourcefulness and mutual aid that then constitute the national character—I am thinking of the settler cultures of the New World such as the American and the Australian. To arrive with nothing and then to make good in the new society is to show that you are made of the right stuff. As everyone knows, there is nothing more illustrious for an Australian today than to have an ancestor who was carried over in chains by the First Fleet.

Another error is to suppose that the common public culture required for a national identity must be monolithic and all-embracing. A public culture may be seen as a set of understandings about how a group of people is to conduct its life together. This will include political principles such as a belief in democracy or the rule of law, but it reaches more widely than this. It extends to social norms such as honesty in filling in your tax return or queueing as a way of deciding who gets on to the bus first. It may also embrace certain cultural ideals, for instance religious beliefs or a commitment to preserve the purity of the national language. Its range will vary from case to case, but it will leave room for different private cultures within the nation.[13] Thus, the food one chooses to eat, how one dresses, the music one listens to, are not normally part of the public culture that defines nationality. The boundary between public and private culture will often be subject to controversy: I shall return to look at this issue in some detail in Chapter 5. Let us for the moment remind ourselves that national identities are not all-embracing, and that the common public culture that they require may leave room for many private cultures to flourish within the borders of the nation.

It is equally wrong to suppose that 'national character' consists in a set of features that everyone who belongs to the nation must display in equal measure. Hume remarked that the vulgar think that

[13] This is an empirical generalization, since plainly some national identities are more inclusive than others, and at the extreme one can envisage a public culture that left little room for private diversity. It is also intended as an indication of what a public culture *needs* to contain in order to serve its unifying function—one can argue, as I do in Ch. 5, that a public culture should not be so all-embracing as to obliterate private subcultures.

everyone who belongs to a nation displays its distinctive traits, whereas 'men of sense' allow for exceptions; nevertheless, aggregate differences undoubtedly exist.[14] This is surely correct. Instead of believing that for any given nation there is a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for belonging to that nation, we should think in terms of Wittgenstein's metaphor of a thread whose strength 'does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres'.[15] Most Poles are Catholics, but you do not have to be Catholic in order legitimately to identify yourself as Polish. It is also worth noting that people may be hard pressed to say explicitly what the national character of their people consists in, and yet may have an intuitive sense, when confronted with foreigners, of where the differences lie.[16] National identities can remain unarticulated, and yet still exercise a pervasive influence on people's behaviour.

III

These five elements together—a community (1) constituted by shared belief and mutual commitment, (2) extended in history, (3) active in character, (4) connected to a particular territory, and (5) marked off from other communities by its distinct public culture—serve to distinguish nationality from other collective sources of personal identity. This gives rise to a further question over which theorists of nationality and nationalism have divided rather sharply: is national identity a distinctively *modern* phenomenon, something specific to post-Renaissance or perhaps even post-Enlightenment societies, or is it simply a continuation of tribal and other such loyalties which are coeval with the human species? Each of these perspectives may in turn be combined with a positive or negative attitude to nationality itself. Thus, those who see it as a modern phenomenon may on the one hand see it as performing necessary functions in industrial societies, as allied to notions of democracy,

[14] D. Hume, 'Of National Characters', in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. Miller (Indianapolis, Liberty Classics, 1985), 197–8.

[15] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1963), 32.

[16] 'It is only when you meet someone of a different culture from yourself that you begin to realize what your own beliefs really are' (G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962, 145).

etc.; on the other hand, they may regard it as, say, a pernicious invention of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century ideologues, to be contrasted with the benign rationalism of the Enlightenment proper.[17] Equally, those who see it as a continuation of older loyalties may regard it as a cement that holds societies together, inspires mutual concern between members, etc.; or else they may see it as a relic left over from a more barbaric period of human history, which we should strive to overcome as far as we can.[18]

We might hope to throw some light on this question by examining the history of the concept of 'nation' itself. Those who adhere to the modernist interpretation of nationalism often claim by way of supporting evidence that the concept in its present meaning is also of relatively recent origin.[19] Unfortunately, the story appears to take a rather different form in different European languages. Originally the term was used for kin groups, and by extension for groups of foreigners regarded as having a common place of origin. In this sense it was used to classify students in medieval universities by country of origin—'the nation of France', etc. However, in English at least it is also possible to find early uses of the term to refer to people of common stock and customs which distinguish them from their neighbours, encompassing what we would today recognize as separate nationalities. Thus, the *OED* cites a passage from Fortescue's *Absolute and Limited Monarchy* (*c.*1460) in which he describes the Scots, the Spaniards, and other such peoples as 'nations'.[20] In the debates arising from the Union of the Scottish and English Crowns in 1603, the Scots and the English are commonly referred to as two distinct nations.[21] In Defoe's poem of 1701 cited above, 'nation' is repeatedly applied to Romans, Saxons, Danes, Normans and the many other peoples who are identified as having contributed to 'that heterogeneous thing, an Englishman'. In France, we find 'nation' widely used alongside 'patrie' in political debates throughout the eighteenth century; characteristically, both king and *Parlements*

[17] This is the view of E. Kedourie in *Nationalism* (London, Hutchinson, 1966).

[18] In the previous chapter I cited Hayek as an example of someone who took this latter view.

[19] See e.g. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 1.

[20] *Oxford English Dictionary*, x (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989), 231.

[21] For examples see A. V. Dicey and R. S. Rait, *Thoughts on the Union between England and Scotland* (London, Macmillan, 1920).

appealed to it to justify their authority.[22] We cannot then say that the concept of nation entered political discourse only with the rise of nineteenth-century nationalism; it is already recognizably in place at least a century earlier in French, and a good deal before that in English.

There may none the less have been a small but subtle shift in its meaning. One indication of this is that appeals to 'nation' appear to increase in their intensity at moments when traditional structures of authority are being challenged. Kohn has pointed out the frequent invocation of the concept by seventeenth-century anti-royalists such as Milton and Cromwell.[23] During the French Revolution we again find constant appeals to the idea. As the Abbé Sieyès wrote, in his great revolutionary tract, 'The nation is prior to everything. It is the source of everything. Its will is always legal; indeed it is the law itself.'[24] What this suggests is that, where structures of authority can no longer be taken for granted, the source of authority has to be found in something more fundamental, and the nation provides such a source. Kings and parliaments could each claim that they represented the nation more authentically than the other.[25] But for these appeals to make sense, the nation must be conceived as an entity capable of acting on its own behalf and expressing its will. So what is added to the older idea of a nation as a people united by place, descent, and customs is the idea of common agency—the third element in the account of nationhood that I offered above.

To put this slightly differently, there seems to be a connection between the idea of nationality as it emerged in the seventeenth and

[22] See R. R. Palmer, 'French Nationalism Before the Revolution', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 1 (1940), 95–111; L. Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1992), 154–88.

[23] H. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York, Macmillan, 1944), ch. 4.

[24] E. J. Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* (London, Pall Mall Press, 1963), 124. Note also that Sieyès, in direct opposition to the royalist position cited below, *identifies* the nation with the Third Estate; 'it is impossible to find what place to assign to the caste of nobles among all the elements of a nation' (p. 57).

[25] Thus in 1766 Louis XV remonstrated with the Parlement de Paris, claiming that no nationwide body of *parlements* could be 'the organ of the Nation, the protector of the Nation's liberty, interests and rights'. Those who took this view forgot 'that public order in its entirety emanates from me, and that the rights and interests of the nation, which some would make a body separate from the monarch, are necessarily joined with mine, and rest entirely in my hands' (Palmer, 'French Nationalism', 104).

eighteenth centuries and the idea of popular sovereignty.[26] By the latter I do not mean the idea that the people should rule in any direct way, but the idea that they are the ultimate source of political authority. Although this idea was more congenial to liberal and radical opponents of the *ancien régime* than to its supporters—monarchists would prefer to find the principle of political unity in the monarchy itself—once it became a staple of political argument, it could be invoked by all parties. In later periods it was taken up by democrats proper. If we are going to say that all power stems ultimately from the people, we need to have some conception of who 'the people' are, what binds them together into a single body. With the activist element added, nationality does this for us: 'the nation' conveys the idea of a circumscribed body of people bound together by common customs and capable of being represented by a prince or a parliament.

We are now better placed to see in what sense nationality is a modern idea. Three of its constituent elements can readily be discovered in pre-modern cultures, for instance in the Greek and Roman periods:[27] the idea that peoples are marked off from one another by distinct characteristics, so that a line can be drawn between compatriots and foreigners (e.g. between Greeks and barbarians); the idea that each people has its own homeland, for which they should rightly feel a special affection; and the idea that the nation is a fitting object of loyalty, and service to it is a virtue. These ideas are sufficient to ground the claim that rule by foreigners is a form of oppression which may rightly be resisted, so it would be wrong to suggest that this older proto-nationalism has no political implications. (Thus, we find Scottish writers of the sixteenth century listing the distinctive national traits of the Scots and the English as grounds for resisting the Union of the Crowns.[28]) But what is missing here, and is new and distinctive in modern ideas of nation and nationality, is the idea of a body of people capable of acting collectively and in particular of conferring authority on political institutions.

It seems, then, that those who see nationality as an exclusively modern phenomenon and those who see it as the continuation of

[26] See E. Kamenka, 'Political Nationalism: The Evolution of the Idea', in E. Kamenka (ed.), *Nationalism* (London, Edward Arnold, 1976).

[27] This is borne out in Kohn, *Idea of Nationalism*, chs. 1–2.

[28] See N. MacCormick, 'Nation and Nationalism', in *Legal Right and Social Democracy* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982).

ancient tribalism are both half right. There was no sudden conceptual break, no invention of a radically new way of thinking about human communities. Ideas of national character and so forth were of long-standing. What was new was the belief that nations could be regarded as active political agents, the bearers of the ultimate powers of sovereignty. This in turn was connected to a new way of thinking about politics, the idea that institutions and policies could be seen as somehow expressing a popular or national will. I have pointed out that there is no necessary link between nationalism and democracy, but equally, it is no surprise that the activist element in nationality should be anathema to a certain kind of conservative. Those who view politics as a practical activity best left in the hands of an élite who have been educated in the relevant political tradition are bound to view with distaste the activist idea of a people collectively determining its own destiny. Two of the most swingeing of recent attacks on nationalism have come from acolytes of Michael Oakeshott, Elie Kedourie and Kenneth Minogue.[29] Minogue regards nationalism as essentially a revolutionary theory and 'therefore a direct enemy of conservative politics'. He offers a reductive psychological explanation of its appeal: 'Nationalist theories may thus be understood as distortions of reality which allow men to cope with situations which they might otherwise find unbearable.'[30]

IV

The politics of nationality will occupy us later. The point I have been making here is that, when conservatives of Oakeshottian stripe deplore nationalism, they are reacting precisely to the element that distinguishes modern ideas of nationality and nationalism from premodern ideas. But now I want to consider another respect in which nationality may be considered a distinctively modern phenomenon, an aspect that leads us directly to the question that will occupy the rest of this chapter: are national identities *defensible* parts of personal identity? This aspect is the dependence of national identities on media of mass communication.

Such dependence arises for the fairly obvious reason that nations

[29] Kedourie, *Nationalism*; K. Minogue, *Nationalism* (London, Batsford, 1967).
[30] Minogue, *Nationalism*, 148.

cannot be communities in the most straightforward sense of that term. Unlike, say, monastic communities, they are not based on face-to-face relationships with each member having direct personal knowledge of the identity and character of the others. Nor are they bound together in the way that tribes, clans, and other kinship groups are, where each member is indirectly linked to every other by ties of marriage and descent, so that, although I may not personally know my clansman, I can if need be trace out the lines that affiliate us. What holds nations together are beliefs, as I have already emphasized, but these beliefs cannot be transmitted except through cultural artefacts which are available to everyone who belongs—books, newspapers, pamphlets, and more recently the electronic media. This is the basis of Benedict Anderson's claim that nations are 'imagined communities', by which he means not that they are wholly spurious inventions, but that they depend for their existence on collective acts of imagining which find their expression through such media.[31] How do I know what it means to be British, what the British nation is supposed to be like? I find out from newspaper editorials, or history books, or films, or songs—and I take it for granted that what I am ingesting is also being ingested by millions of other Britons whom I will never meet. So nations cannot exist unless there are available the means of communication to make such collective imagining feasible.

As noted earlier, this gives us another sense in which nationality is a distinctively modern phenomenon. But it seems also to reveal what is intellectually suspect about it. If nations are imagined in this way, why are they not indeed wholly spurious inventions? We might describe the process as follows. A number of people find themselves tied together politically, either because they are subjects of the same state or because it is in their interests to acquire a state of their own. In either case, it is helpful for them to conceive of themselves as forming a community with its own distinct national character, traditions, and so forth. There is an incentive both to produce and consume a literature that defines such a common identity. But we have no reason to think that the identity so defined corresponds to anything real in the world; that is to say, there is nothing that marks off this group of people from those around them other than their *wish*

[31] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. edn. (London, Verso, 1991).

to think of themselves as forming a distinct community. National identities are, in a strong and destructive sense, mythical.

It may be helpful to flesh this story out with some examples. Consider two elements that are frequently central to national identity: language and a common history. If we examine the formation of national identities in the nineteenth century especially, we often discover that as part of this process a national language had to be created. In some cases this might involve transforming a spoken dialect into a print-language by compiling dictionaries and so forth. In Bohemia, for instance, Czech was spoken only by peasants, while the nobility and middle classes spoke German. Integral to the emergence of a distinct Czech nation was the elevation of Czech into a literary language, involving among other things the compilation of a grammar, a history of the language, and a Czech–German dictionary. Two manuscripts purporting to contain Czech poetry from the Middle Ages were discovered. These were later shown to be forgeries,[32] but meanwhile they performed an important role in fostering the illusion that the Czech language—and by implication the Czech people—had deep historical roots.

In other cases, the language itself was in reasonably good shape, but was used by only a proportion of those who were to be included in the nation. This case is exemplified by Hungary, where Magyar was spoken by rather more or rather less than half of the population, depending on how inclusively Hungarian territory is defined. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, a policy of enforced Magyarization was pursued, with Magyar used exclusively in government and administration, Magyar made compulsory for all children in primary schools, and harassment of newspapers appearing in non-Magyar languages.[33] This policy did not in the end succeed, but once again it underlines the importance attached to a common national language in most national identities. In cases of either kind—the artificial creation of a written language, or the imposition of such a language on minority groups—someone who later appeals to common language as a feature marking off one particular national community from its neighbours will be obliged to draw a veil over the actual process whereby the language gained its current status.

[32] See H. Seton-Watson, *Nations and States* (London, Methuen, 1977), ch. 4.
[33] Ibid. ch. 4; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, ch. 6.

Veil-drawing is also required in the case of national history. Renan remarked that 'to forget and—I will venture to say—to get one's history wrong, are essential factors in the making of a nation'.[34] One main reason for this is that the contingencies of power politics have always played a large part in the formation of national units. States have been created by force, and over time their subject peoples have come to think of themselves as compatriots. But no one wants to think of himself as roped together to a set of people merely because the territorial ambitions of some dynastic lord in the thirteenth century ran thus far and no further. Nor indeed is this the right way to think about the matter, because the effect of the ruler's conquests may have been, over time, to have produced a people with real cultural unity; nevertheless, because of the historical dimension of the nation, together with the idea that each nation has its own distinct character, it is uncomfortable to be reminded of the forced nature of one's national genesis.

As a result, various stories are concocted about the past history of the people who inhabited the territory now defined as national. Personal characteristics presently seen as constitutive of national identity are projected back on to these distant forebears. Consider one of the examples chosen by Schama to illustrate the consolidation of a Dutch national identity at the beginning of the eighteenth century, de Hooghe's eulogy of the Dutch Republic:

> Romeyn de Hooghe disposed of the whole problem of *when* the Dutch became Dutch by following much earlier chroniclers in attributing to the Batavians of antiquity most of the characteristics he liked to imagine embodied in his contemporaries. Thus the first dwellers in the bog-lands or hol-lands of the nether Rhine exhibited the perseverance, simplicity, hatred of imperial tyranny that was to emerge in their Netherlandish descendants seventeen hundred years later. This imaginary historical continuity was to have great force and endurance, keeping the fable of burghers in bearskins at the back of the popular imagination when it considered its remote national origins.[35]

Sometimes the back-projection had a more explicitly political character. A staple of English political thought in the seventeenth century was the idea of an 'ancient constitution' which found the

[34] Renan, 'What is a Nation?' 190.
[35] S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (London, Fontana, 1991), 54.

source of the rights and liberties of Englishmen in a common law whose origins lay in the distant past beyond the Norman invasion.[36] Defenders of the status quo against royal absolutism saw an essential continuity between the ancient constitution and the present one; radicals (such as the Levellers) saw the Norman Conquest as introducing a rupture, and on this basis sought to reclaim what they took to be their ancestral rights against the present political establishment.[37] Both sides needed to mythologize the past. As Pocock says of the common lawyers, they 'supposed that the common law was the only law their land had ever known, and this by itself encouraged them to interpret the past as if it had been governed by the law of their own day . . .'[38] Here, then, what is projected back is not a set of personal traits, but a set of institutions which is portrayed as the unique and treasured possession of the people in question.

V

These examples show that national identities typically contain a considerable element of myth. The nation is conceived as a community extended in history and with a distinct character that is natural to its members. Dispassionate research is likely to reveal considerable discontinuity, both in the character of the people who have occupied a given territory, and in their customs and practices. It is also likely to reveal that many things now regarded as primordial features of the nation in question are in fact artificial inventions—indeed, very often deliberate inventions made to serve a political purpose. It appears, therefore, that national identities cannot survive critical reflection. If one applies to them normal canons of rationality, they are revealed to be fraudulent. It seems to follow that there can be no justification for giving national loyalties any role in our ethical and political thinking.

But this conclusion is too quick. Rather than dismissing nationality out of hand once we discover that national identities contain

[36] See J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1957).

[37] This is to simplify a complicated picture. See C. Hill, 'The Norman Yoke', in *Puritanism and Revolution* (London, Mercury, 1962) for a far more detailed analysis.

[38] Pocock, *Ancient Constitution*, 30–1.

elements of myth, we should ask what part these myths play in building and sustaining nations. For it may not be rational to discard beliefs, even if they are, strictly speaking, false, when they can be shown to contribute significantly to the support of valuable social relations.[39] So what purposes do myths of the kind described above serve in the constitution of national identity? Two purposes at least: they provide reassurance that the national community of which one now forms part is solidly based in history, that it embodies a real continuity between generations; and they perform a moralizing role, by holding up before us the virtues of our ancestors and encouraging us to live up to them. Now these may be valuable functions. If we accept for the moment the idea of nations as ethical communities—this is a question to be explored in the following chapter—it seems very likely that their ethical character will be strengthened by the acceptance of such myths. People's sense of solidarity with and obligation to their compatriots will be increased.

Consider, as an example of a salutary myth, the evocation of the 'Dunkirk spirit' in post-war Britain. At Dunkirk in 1940 the British Expeditionary Force had been evacuated under German fire by a flotilla of small boats crossing the Channel. The symbolic importance of this event was quickly appreciated. It was taken to show, on the one hand, the instinctive solidarity of the British people in the face of a national crisis; on the other hand, it revealed something distinctive about their character: their ability to improvise a solution to a problem without being ordered to do so by some higher-up (in implicit contrast to their German opponents). Shortly after the event, Orwell drew his lesson:

> . . . there can be moments when the whole nation suddenly swings together and does the same thing, like a herd of cattle facing a wolf. There was such a moment, unmistakably, at the time of the disaster in France. After eight months of vaguely wondering what the war was about, the people suddenly knew what they had got to do: first, to get the army away from Dunkirk, and secondly to prevent invasion. It was like the awakening of a giant.

[39] In an earlier discussion of this point, I gave the example of a happy and loving family which is supported by the (false) belief that all the children are the biological offspring of the parents; see D. Miller, *Market, State and Community* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989), 243.

Quick! Danger! The Philistines be upon thee, Samson! And then the swift unanimous action—and then, alas, the prompt relapse into sleep.[40]

This image, of a people whose patriotism was usually dormant but who were capable of pulling together in an improvised way when the need arose, served as a salutary myth in the years that followed. Naturally enough, it was invoked by politicians: most banally, perhaps, by Harold Wilson, who at the end of 1964 launched a 'Spirit of Dunkirk' campaign in an attempt to ward off the sterling crisis that was destroying the economic policy of the Labour government.[41] Probably a close study of the evacuation of Dunkirk would reveal many aspects—incompetence, cowardice—that the myth overlooks.[42] But it was surely no bad thing for the British to have the story of Dunkirk in their collective memory of the years that followed. It reminded them of what they were capable of, and served as a kind of moral example. Orwell himself put the general point very nicely in a later essay. 'The belief that we resemble our ancestors—that Shakespeare, say, is more like a modern Englishman than a modern Frenchman or German—may be unreasonable, but by existing it influences conduct. Myths which are believed in tend to become true, because they set up a type or "persona", which the average person will do his best to resemble.'[43]

But what if the myth runs directly counter to what we know to be historical fact? This is an unusual case. Normally the imagined history fills in blanks where no direct evidence is (or even could be) available: we shall never be in a position to know very much about

[40] G. Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ii, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), 86.

[41] 'I believe that our people will respond to this challenge because our history shows that they misjudge us who underrate our ability to move, and to move decisively, when the need arises. They misjudged our temper after Dunkirk, but we so mobilised our talent and untapped strength that apparent defeat was turned into a great victory. I believe that the spirit of Dunkirk will once again carry us through to success' (cited in P. Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, 155). It should be said that Wilson, who had previously deplored appeals to the Dunkirk spirit, later tried to pass this off as a temporary lapse.

[42] I learn from David Archard that this exercise has indeed been carried out—see N. Harman, *Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

[43] G. Orwell, 'The English People', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, iii, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1970), 20–1.

the real moral qualities of the primitive Batavians. Or else it places a particular interpretation on events whose occurrence at a sufficiently basic level is not in dispute: no one in seventeenth-century England denied that William I had sailed to England with his troops and defeated Harold in battle; but, whereas one party talked about the Norman Conquest, implying a radical break in the nation's legal constitution, the other party refused to apply that description to the event. (William 'acquisivit, non conquisivit Angliam', wrote Spelman.[44]) Equally, it is not in dispute that the *Mayflower* landed somewhere in the vicinity of what was to become Plymouth in 1620, but to what extent the landing represented a decisive moment in the colonizing of America (the Pilgrims were approached shortly after they arrived by an Indian who already spoke English), or whether the country's liberalism can be traced back to the ideas expressed in the *Mayflower Compact*—these are much more contestable questions.

National histories contain elements of myth in so far as they interpret events in a particular way, and also in so far as they amplify the significance of some events and diminish the significance of others. Renan remarked, again with characteristic insight, that 'it is of the essence of the nation that all individuals should have much in common, and further that they should all have forgotten much . . . every French citizen must have forgotten the massacre of St. Bartholemew's and the massacres in the South in the thirteenth century.'[45] Anderson draws attention to the curious character of this last phrase.[46] The events referred to were religious pogroms, directed against the Huguenots in the first case and the Albigensians in the second. 'Must have forgotten' implies both that the events were remembered and that the memory was deliberately suppressed. Renan's meaning, I take it, was that no Frenchman could recognize as his forebears those who had carried out the massacres. It is not denied that the events occurred, but they do not form part of the story that the nation tells itself.

Where the occurrence of certain events is explicitly denied, this is likely to signal a nation gripped by a monolithic ideology. The obliteration of Trotsky from the historical record of the Bolshevik

[44] Cited in Pocock, *Ancient Constitution*, 112.
[45] Renan, 'What is a Nation?' 191.
[46] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 199–201.

revolution by Stalin and his successors is a case in point. It was well nigh impossible for a regime whose legitimacy depended upon acceptance of an official ideology to concede that its most famous critic had also played a leading role in bringing the regime into existence. Here, then, we find a stark contradiction between the official history imposed on the peoples of the Soviet Union by the Communist regime, and the facts as any impartial historian would recount them. But this, fortunately, is a comparatively unusual case. More often, national myths involve telling stories about events whose occurrence is not in doubt, and different factions inside the nation will offer competing interpretations of these events along the lines of the English dispute about the Norman invasion. In this respect the political disputes that arise over national identity may not be so different from the disputes that arise between historians themselves whenever they go beyond the simple recording of fact to offer general explanations of the events they are describing.

If this is so, the crucial line of division may lie not between the truth of 'real' history and the falsehood of 'national' history, but between national identities that emerge through open processes of debate and discussion to which everyone is potentially a contributor, and identities that are authoritatively imposed by repression and indoctrination.[47] In the former case the collective sense of national identity may be expected to change over time, and, although at any moment some of its components may be mythical in the sense I have indicated, they are very unlikely indeed to involve the outright denial of historical fact. Identities that are authoritatively imposed, by contrast, serve a narrower range of interests, and it may be imperative to falsify the historical record at certain points in a fairly blatant way. (This will be so, for instance, whenever the current regime's title to authority rests on some alleged historical event such as the abdication of a king or the revolutionary overthrow of the previous regime.)

Should we say that national identities are more valuable the more accurately they reflect the real historical record? Leaving aside questions about the sense in which we can call any historical narrative true or false, the historical accuracy of national stories seems to

[47] For a fuller discussion of this issue, and of national myths more generally, see D. Archard, 'Myths, Lies and Historical Truth: a Defence of Nationalism', *Political Studies* (forthcoming).

matter less in its own right than for the effect it has on the nation's present self-understanding. For instance, we think that Germans should not deceive themselves about what went on during the Holocaust; but this, I think, is less because we think it intrinsically valuable for present-day Germans to have true beliefs about what their fathers did[48] than because we think they are less likely to succumb to racism once again if they understand how the Holocaust came about. (This example also shows us the limits of Renan's remark about the importance of forgetting.) Very often, where national identities are freely debated, there is a healthy struggle between those who want to hold up a bowdlerized version of the nation's history as an extended moral exemplar in Orwell's sense and those who draw attention to lapses and shortcomings: injustices inflicted on minorities, acts of treachery, acts of cowardice, and so forth. The first group remind us of how we aspire to behave; the second group point to defects in our practices and institutions that have allowed us to fall short.

Let us recall, therefore, that the aim of this book is by no means to offer a blanket defence of nationalism, but to discriminate between defensible and indefensible versions of the principle of nationality. We have discovered that, when assessing national identities, we need to look not only at what the identity presently consists in—what people believe it means to be Italian or Japanese—but at the process by which it has arisen. To the extent that the process involves inputs from all sections of the community, with groups openly competing to imprint the common identity with their own particular image, we may justifiably regard the identity that emerges as an authentic one. No national identity will ever be pristine, but there is still a large difference between those that have evolved more or less spontaneously, and those that are mainly the result of political imposition. Compare, for example, the emergence of a national identity in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain, which involved competition between a number of groups—tradesmen, women, the Welsh and Scots, as well as the English aristocracy—each seeking to establish themselves as citizens, and offering contrasting images of

[48] Except in so far as we think it an insult to the survivors of the Holocaust to have the truth about it distorted or suppressed. This may matter less when those survivors have themselves died.

British identity to support their claims,[49] with the Chinese cultural revolution of the 1960s, where an attempt was made by a small political clique to impose a uniform definition of Chinese identity upon the mass of the people, involving a deliberate attempt to destroy traditional Confucian moral values and replace them with Maoist ideology. Although in both cases we can find mythical elements in the final product, the *quality* of the myth will be very different in the two cases.

But, still, why succumb to myths at all? Why not simply acknowledge that national identities are fictitious and start one's practical thinking somewhere else? To revert to a metaphor that I used above, why *shouldn't* I regard myself as having been thrown together with my fellow-citizens in the same random way as the occupants of a lifeboat have been thrown together? The occupants of a lifeboat, after all, must establish relationships among themselves. They must treat one another decently, they must work together to keep their craft afloat, and so forth. It seems no handicap that they can all recognize that it is the merest chance that has brought them together. In the same way, people who live together under a common set of institutions are obliged to respect and co-operate with one another, and it is not obvious why, in order to do this, they must think of themselves as bearers of a common historical identity.

The answer to this question comes in two parts, of which the second will be treated more fully in the following chapter. The lifeboat model is badly misleading as an account of social relationships in a national community. For in such a community people are held together not merely by physical necessity, but by a dense web of customs, practices, implicit understandings, and so forth. There is a shared way of life, which is not to say that everyone follows exactly the same conventions or adheres to the same cultural values, but that there is a substantial degree of overlap in forms of life. One can't detach this way of life from the national identity of the people in question. Even the physical landscape bears the imprint of the historical development of the community: roads may meander round fields in deference to the property rights of landowners, or they may be driven in straight lines to serve the needs of the state and its

[49] See the account in L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992). I return to consider the formation of British identity in greater detail in Ch. 6 below.

armies. Language, social customs, holidays and festivals, are all equally the sediment of a historical process which is national in character. So one is forced to bear a national identity regardless of choice, simply by virtue of participating in this way of life. Of course, one may react violently against the current interpretation, struggle by every available means to change it. But it misrepresents the position completely to suppose that we are starting out with a blank sheet in the way that the occupants of the lifeboat have to do.

In national communities people are more tightly bound to the past than the denizens of our imaginary lifeboat. This limits the choices they can make in various ways, but it also gives them resources on which they can capitalize. As I noted earlier, their obligations to one another do not arise simply from the present fact of their co-operation; they can appeal to their historic identity, to sacrifices made in the past by one section of the community on behalf of others, to back up the claims they make on one another now. No one can reasonably complain if a lifeboater jumps across to the first piece of wreckage that floats by, preferring to take his chances alone, whereas in a national community a case can be made out for unconditional obligations to other members that arise simply by virtue of the fact that one has been born and raised in that particular community.[50]

The implications of this last point will be spelt out more fully in later chapters. What I have tried to indicate here is what we would lose if, in hyper-sceptical vein, we were to regard national identities as wholly fictitious merely because we find that they embody shared myths. There is one last issue that I want to address before concluding the present chapter. So far I have been focusing on the 'national' in 'national identity', trying to get clear about what distinguishes nationality from other kinds of collective identity, and trying to see what follows from the fact that nations are 'imagined communities' in Anderson's phrase. The final question is this: how far is it defensible to regard as a constituent of personal identity our unchosen membership of an historic community?

[50] We do of course recognize the right of individuals to emigrate, which is the equivalent in this context to jumping boat. But it may be that the aspect of personal liberty that is protected by this right is seen as so important that it overrides an obligation to the community which nevertheless continues in force. We are surely prepared to disapprove of people who desert their country in its hour of need merely in order to enjoy a more comfortable life.

Behind this question lies the idea that a person's identity should be something that he works out for himself, reflecting his choices as to what is really valuable to him. To say this is not necessarily to subscribe to a shallow form of individualism; this view can accommodate the person who decides to identify with a group or an institution—an ethnic group, say, or a political party—because that group or institution embodies the values that on reflection she subscribes to. The trouble with nationality, however, is precisely that it is something for the most part unchosen and unreflectively acquired. Of course, sometimes people do choose their nationality—for example when they emigrate with the intention of becoming American or British. But we should think of these cases as necessarily being exceptions to the general rule—you could not have national identities in a world where everyone chose their 'nation'—and so they do not confute the general point. Valid identities are those that are freely chosen, and nationality (normally) fails this test.

I believe that this view rests on an equivocation over the sense in which one's identity ought to be a matter of choice. Let us accept for the sake of argument that there is something wrong with a person's having an identity that is inherited uncritically and simply taken for granted.[51] We want people to be self-reflective and self-critical, to think for themselves about which relationships and affiliations really matter to them and which are of secondary importance. But this does not tell in favour of identities that one chooses at a certain moment to adopt, for instance by enlisting as a member of a particular group. With inherited identities, too, there is normally considerable scope for critical reflection. If one is born a Jew, there is a sense in which one has no option but to be the bearer of a Jewish identity in one form or another. But there is still much to decide: whether to be practising or non-practising; if practising whether to be orthodox or liberal, etc.; in general, how much importance to attach to one's Jewishness, whether to make it a central feature of

[51] This would of course be challenged by a certain kind of conservative, but I assume that the reader is likely to share a commitment to personal autonomy of the kind expressed by John Stuart Mill when he wrote that 'he who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation' (*On Liberty*, in J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism; On Liberty; Representative Government*, ed. H. B. Acton, London, Dent, 1972, 117).

one's identity, or only a minor aspect.[52] Answers to these questions are worked out partly by reflection on the identity itself ('What does it mean to be Jewish in today's world?') and partly by deciding how best to integrate that identity with other identities one bears (one's nationality, one's political commitments, one's position as spouse or parent, etc.). The case is similar with nationality: one interprets the identity, weighs it against other aspects of personal identity, and so forth. There is no predetermined outcome to this process. Note in particular that it may involve a radical rejection of the political status quo. 'Being a good German' may involve one in trying to overthrow the present regime, as in a case that Alasdair MacIntyre has discussed, that of Adam von Trott.[53] Or, to take another example, 'being a good South African' has been taken to mean uncompromising opposition to white minority rule and apartheid.[54]

The claim that only freely chosen identities are acceptable ones is likely to derive from a misguided picture of what is going on when one chooses an identity. This picture, which we might call the radical chooser view, supposes that a person can arrive by abstract reasoning at a conception of what is personally valuable to him or her, and then can look around to find concrete embodiments of those values in groups, communities, churches, political movements, etc. We start with a blank sheet, so to speak, inscribe on it our freely worked out view of what is intrinsically valuable, and from that perspective decide what identity to adopt, including which affiliations to recognize. The radical chooser view makes the task of forming a distinct personal identity an impossibly demanding one.[55] A more reasonable picture recognizes that we always begin from values that have been inculcated in us by the communities and institutions to which we belong; family, school, church, and so forth. As we come to

[52] In some circumstances there may be little choice about this. Hannah Arendt, for instance, who generally regarded her Jewish identity simply as one aspect of herself among others, found herself obliged to emphasize it during the Nazi period and its immediate aftermath. 'When one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself *as a Jew*' (cited in E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982, 109).

[53] A. MacIntyre, 'Is Patriotism a Virtue?' Lindley Lecture (University of Kansas, 1984). Trott took part in the plot to assassinate Hitler in 1944.

[54] See Michael Walzer's discussion of Breyten Breytenbach as a 'connected critic' of Afrikanerdom in *The Company of Critics* (London, Peter Halban, 1989), ch. 12.

[55] It may also be philosophically incoherent, but this is not an issue I can pursue here.

reflect on these values, we find we can no longer adhere to some, we find tensions and contradictions between others, and so forth. Finally, we reach a point where we have balanced the competing demands upon us and established our own scale of priorities between the different values. At that point we have worked out our own distinct identity. Of course, the identity is always a provisional one, and new events, or further critical thought, may cause us to revise it. But we now have an independent vantage point from which we can define our relationship to the various communities and other sources from which our values were first taken.[56]

There is no reason why nationality should be excluded from this process, and no reason why a person's final identity should not have national identity as one constituent. There would be an incompatibility only if national identities were so tightly defined as to leave no room for selective endorsement—e.g. if being French meant having to adhere unconditionally to a whole string of beliefs and attitudes—or if these identities had necessarily to be regarded as overriding—e.g. if seeing oneself as French entailed giving *that* commitment absolute priority over all the other commitments one might have. The analysis I have given in this chapter shows why the first worry is groundless. The very fluidity of national identities, which, as we have seen, gives rise to the suspicion in some quarters that they are essentially fictitious, also entails that in maintaining them people do not commit themselves rigidly to a particular set of values. Recognizing one's French identity still leaves a great deal open as to the *kind* of Frenchman or Frenchwoman one is going to be.

As to the second worry, it is certainly true that nationalist doctrine often *proclaims* the absolute precedence of national allegiances over allegiances of other kinds.[57] But to have a national identity, one does

[56] For an account of personal autonomy that is close to the one sketched here, see S. Benn, *A Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), ch. 9. Although I agree with Benn that the search for consistency among one's beliefs and commitments is essential to becoming autonomous, I am not convinced that a person achieves autonomy only when the quest is successful. An autonomous person may simply have learned to live with incoherence, acknowledging different identities and commitments which do not fit together in one neat pattern. See my review in *Government and Opposition*, 24 (1989), 244–8 for an elaboration of this point.

[57] For instance, if we accept Fichte's claim that the nation is the individual's only passport to eternity, then it follows that anyone of high ideals 'will sacrifice himself for his people . . . In order to save his nation he must be ready even to die that it may

not have to be a nationalist in this doctrinaire sense. Indeed, it would be an extreme and unusual case to find someone whose nationality always took precedence over every other source of identity. Sartre's famous example, of the young man deliberating whether to go off to fight for his country or to stay behind to look after his sick mother,[58] would make no sense if national identities necessarily trumped all others, for in that case, in recognizing his duty to fight—a duty of patriotism—he would also be recognizing its absolute priority over other duties. The fact that the dilemma appears to us a real one shows that we typically regard our nationality as a constituent of our identity on a par with other constituents, and the obligations that flow from it as competing with obligations arising from other sources.

A different case occurs when people identify with two nations, and may then be forced to decide which should be given their primary allegiance on a particular occasion. Once again, nationalist doctrines may attempt to pre-empt this by insisting that membership is an all-or-nothing affair. American immigrants take an oath of allegiance requiring them to 'renounce and abjure absolutely and entirely all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state or sovereignty', but they and their descendants have often in practice retained dual loyalties.[59] Some Jewish Americans, for example, have thought of both Israel and America as their national homes and acted accordingly, and parallels can be found among other ethnic groups such as the Irish. The point is that national identities are not in practice treated as exclusive and overriding by their bearers, whatever certain nationalist theories may claim.

In this chapter I have been demolishing various barriers to the recognition of national identities. I have sought to bring out what is

live, and that he may live in it the only life for which he has ever wished' (J. G. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, Chicago, Open Court, 1922, 136). But the claim is extravagant, and certainly not entailed by the idea of nationality itself.

[58] J. P. Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London, Methuen, 1948), 35–6. Consider also the case of conscientious objectors such as the Mennonites who fled across the border from America rather than violate their religious principles by accepting the draft.

[59] See M. Harrington, 'Loyalties: Dual and Divided' in S. Thernstrom (ed.), *The Harvard Encyclopaedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980). For an illuminating discussion of the loyalty oath, see S. Levinson, *Constitutional Faith* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988), ch. 3.

distinctive about such identities, and have hinted that this may give them a special kind of value. I have tried to pin down the sense in which we might describe such identities as mythical, and to argue that this is not a fatally damaging feature. I have also shown why acknowledging the importance of one's nationality is consistent with choosing one's own plan of life in Mill's sense. I have not, however, looked in any depth at the *ethical* significance of nationality, at the extent to which national identity may legitimately affect the way we understand our moral commitments to other human beings. This is the subject of the following chapter.