**Patriotism: Commitment, not Pride.**

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**1.Introduction**

This paper is about patriotism, what it is and whether it is good (morally and practically). I am working under the assumption that we might understand the term, “patriotism”, “patriotic”, and “patriot” in various ways. I doubt there is one “true” meaning to the term and its cognates. However, some descriptions better fit the word’s use in common discourse, and some descriptions are ethically and practically preferable. My concern is to argue for a conceptual understanding that meets two criteria. First, the description should latch on to a broad intuitive use of the term as is common in public discourse. In other words, I do not want to describe “patriotism” as stipulated out of thin air. That said, because the word is used in several ways, the use discussed is by no means exhaustive of how “patriotism” and its cognates might be understood. Second, the one of many definitions discussed is chosen normatively, i.e., both moral and practical reasons support this description.

The sense of patriotism defended is based on Margaret Gilbert’s conceptual analysis. Gilbert has written two pieces (one co-authored with Itzel Garcia) defending a joint commitment account of patriotism (2009 and 2018). She admittedly grounds her account in her own intuitive understanding of the term.[[1]](#footnote-1) What she finds intuitive, however, is something I find intuitive as well, and something others have good reason to find intuitive too. This paper explains her account, but the greater focus is on defending the account in the two respects mentioned earlier, i.e., that it matches well with the common (broad) understanding of the term, and more importantly, that it proves morally sound and practically useful.

The plan going forward runs as follows. The next section describes a barebones account of patriotism. I then overview potential objections to patriotism itself, given that barebones definition. Section 3 describes Gilbert’s account of patriotism. Section 4 explains how her account overcomes the previously mentioned objections. Section 5 explains why Gilbertian patriotism not only overcomes traditional criticisms, but also proves morally and practically useful. Indeed, I argue that patriotism as understood in Gilbertian terms is best understood as a moral virtue. The penultimate section explains and responds to potential objections, and lastly Section 7 offers concluding remarks.

**2. Barebones Patriotism and its Critics**

*2.1 Barebones Patriotism*

If you are an American, patriotism might conjure images of The US flag, fireworks, and the military. But as far as the concept is concerned, this is surely misleading. Patriotism is not like the 4th of July, nor distinctively American. Patriots come from all countries, and the concept itself goes back much further than 1776.[[2]](#footnote-2) Understood then, from a wider scope: what is patriotism at minimum? What do all patriots, from all countries, have in common? To begin, there seems an intimate connection between patriotism and country. Patriotism concerns individuals and their relationship to a country, typically a country considered “theirs.” We can stop short of what Alasdair MacIntyre argued, i.e., that, “Patriotism is defined in terms of a kind of loyalty to a particular nation which *only those possessing that particular nationality* can exhibit” (287) (emphasis added). This seems to go too far; what it means to “possess” a nationality might be stricter than whatever it takes for someone to “belong” in the relevant sense. What it is to consider a country “mine” is a question unto itself. For simplicity, let us assume that a country C counts as person P’s country if *any* of the following conditions hold: (1) P is a legal citizen of C, (2) P resides or did reside in C for an extended period, or (3) P herself personally identifies with C in some significant sense.

We can contrast patriotic acts with acts that are unpatriotic. The former type of acts are most often viewed in a positive light, while unpatriotic acts are seen negatively. So now we have this much: patriotism is a concept that relates an individual and her country. This relationship is also (generally) seen in a positive light.

In addition to patriotic acts, there are patriotic persons, i.e. *patriots*. Patriots exemplify patriotism. But what is it, for an individual to exemplify a positive relation to her country? Some might argue patriots benefit their country, love their country, are proud of their country, or represent the essence of their country. For example, David Archard argues that patriotism’s, “key elements are a special affection for or love of the pátria, (and) a sense of pride in its achievements…” (1995:102).[[3]](#footnote-3) However, we can momentarily step away from anything this specific. Persons who believe in patriots can argue that none of the aforementioned (love, pride, affection) are necessary for patriotism. It’s less controversial to simply say that patriots bear a positive relationship to their country. Likewise, patriotic *acts* have a positive relation to country, and unpatriotic acts a negative one. Patriotism, in the most minimal sense, can be understood as follows:

*Barebones Patriotism: acts, expressions, and attitudes that bear a positive relation to one’s country.*

Admittedly, “positive” is vague. But as a barebones definition, it should be. Some see *benefiting* one’s country as being the important sense of “positive.” Others might argue that good intentions, not actual results, are what matters. Still others might insist that pride or respect grounds patriotism. Yet all of these, (pride, respect, beneficial results, good intentions) are generally understood in a positive fashion; hence, the barebones definition above captures a minimal sense of patriotism and its cognates.

*2.2 Critiques of Patriotism*

Is anything wrong with having a positive orientation toward one’s country? Let us summarize common objections against patriotism, some heard in academic publications, others in casual conversation, and still others in the media. While it is impossible to cover all objections, many objections unmentioned will bear similarities to the mentioned. Likewise, responses to the mentioned objections can be altered in relevant ways to respond to unmentioned, but similar criticisms.

*2.21 Looking down on others*

One potential problem with a positive orientation toward one’s own country is an assumed implication that this comes alongside negative orientations toward other countries. At first glance, however, this might seem a fallacious assumption: logically speaking, one can have a positive orientation toward one’s own nation, without any negative orientation toward nations. Yet upon reflection, we have reason to worry. While thinking positively about one’s own country and compatriots does not necessitate negative thinking about competitors, such negative thinking does manifest a common habit of human thought. San Francisco 49er fans need not hate the New England Patriots. Still, they often do. Studies in social psychology show that humans frequently defend their preferences in comparative ways.[[4]](#footnote-4) Such comparative exercises might then solidify their original preferences even further. Perhaps it is this line of thought which motivates the objection. For example, consider Paul Gomberg’s (1990) piece in *Ethics*, “Patriotism Is Like Racism.” The title alone suggests that patriotism (read: a positive relationship to one’s country) somehow implies that one looks down on other countries, as racists looks down on other races.

*2.23 Resource hogging*

A similar but distinct objection to the “looking down” criticism goes like this. Many resources in this world are limited. Our time and energy, likewise, is limited. If I have a positive orientation toward my own nation (and neutral orientation toward others), then I am likely to work in ways that help my nation in particular. Indeed, some seem to think that patriotism, by definition, requires this. What Richard Areneson has called the, “Patriotic Priority Thesis”, contends that, “…morality requires that the members of each nation-state give priority to helping needy fellow compatriots over helping needy foreigners” (129:2004).[[5]](#footnote-5) We might surmise that because my energy is limited, efforts put toward prioritizing my own country will come at the expense of other countries, or even at the expense of my family. [[6]](#footnote-6) For instance, if Tom defends his country in war, he thereby refrains from many other things, i.e. defending other countries, spending time with his family, furthering his education, etc. Some might worry that patriotism takes away from efforts to better the world as a whole, and/or from helping other countries more in need than one’s own. And hence in this sense, patriotism might imply failing to give proper due to other nations or persons.

*2.24 Blind Love*

Next, some worry that patriots are blind to their nation’s failings. Or said differently, perhaps a positive orientation toward your country is wrong, because a negative orientation is deserved.[[7]](#footnote-7) Simon Keller expresses this worry well, in his paper, “Patriotism as Bad Faith.” He argues, “patriotism, properly understood, involves a disposition to fall into a kind of bad faith and that this is a reason to think that patriotism is certainly not a virtue and is probably a vice” (2005:563). If this objection points to a true phenomenon (i.e. if patriots indeed overlook their country’s sins) it is a strong objection. Nations full of patriots are then nations full of persons overlooking or even making excuses for wrongdoing.

*2.25 Cosmopolitism*

A different inquiry focuses not so much on patriotism itself, but on the fact that patriotism implies citizenship, i.e., it implies that persons belong to some nation rather than others. Some argue against nationhood all together, advocating instead a global community consisting of “citizens of the world,” or that at the least, contend that we should focus on our relationship to humans before our relationship to country. Consider Martha Nussbaum, who asks the following, “…should they (citizens) be taught that they are above all citizens of the United States, or should they instead be taught that they are above all citizens of a world of human beings…to share this world of human beings with citizens of other countries?” (1994:156). Nussbaum further argues that they should be taught the latter, which she calls “cosmopolitan education.” For those who hold Nussbaum’s view or something similar, patriotism is misguided insofar as it accepts the existence of nations at all. And admittedly, a positive orientation toward one’s nation seems to imply favoring that nation’s existence.

**3. Gilbert’s Unpatriotic Patriotism**

As the section title suggests, Gilbert defines patriotism in a way that some might call “unpatriotic.” Under her account, red, white, and blue decorations, or American flag lapels, have nothing to do with the concept. I say this in jest; it is uncontroversial that true patriotism goes beyond such superficial displays. Yet some features of Gilbert’s account might indeed raise eyebrows. For instance, according to Gilbert, patriotism is not defined in terms of pride, nor is pride even necessary. Neither is it necessary that patriots judge their country admirable. In Gilbert’s words,

There are, I think, good reasons for not insisting that, by definition, a patriot is

proud of his country. For one thing, someone may not be given to pride…

If he otherwise passes the bar as a patriot, it would seem wrong to deny him that label on account of his lack of pride in his country,…More to the point, perhaps, one’s country may be such that pride is not an appropriate attitude towards it, given its attributes and actions….Depending on its actions, what it does may merit not pride but shame, guilt, or remorse, or, simply, lack of pride(2009: 344).

While I will defend the above sentiments, it is apt to note that in many ways this goes against the popular grain. As some might recall, in 2008 Michelle Obama made a statement about the election of her husband, noting that it was the first time that she felt, “proud of her country.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This statement was followed by highly critical reactions from those who found her statement unpatriotic and offensive. Such outcry implies that pride is a necessary component of patriotism. If it weren’t, Obama’s lack of pride would not imply a lack of patriotism.

As noted already, many academics go along with the grain above and argue that pride is part of patriotism. Consider, Robert Audi who argues, “I take patriotism as a trait to be a feature of character that entails a significant degree of loyalty to one’s country and an associated disposition to take pride in it…” (2009:367). Or we can take the words of Keller who says, “…you could have a special desire that your country improve its moral record while feeling no pride in your country and wishing that you had been a native of somewhere else; *but that is not the mindset of a patriot”* (2007:616)(emphasis added). Despite the common tendency to connect pride and patriotism, Gilbert sees things differently (and notably, under her account, Michelle Obama’s lack of pride would not imply a lack of patriotism.) Indeed, on Gilbert’s account, the person Keller describes as, “feeling no pride” in her country, and “wishing that (she) had been a native of somewhere else” might, contrary to Keller, indeed be a patriot. According to Gilbert, patriotic acts are not necessarily done with pride. Although not prideful, Gilbertian patriotic acts do have a particular motivation, i.e., “the basic patriotic motive.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

What is it, according to Gilbert, to act with the basic patriotic motivation? One notable factor is that such motivation is not *individualistic.* It is not a motive that derives from a personal decision or a personal inclination. Rather, the patriotic motive is connected to Gilbert’s notion of a joint commitment.

To understand Gilbertian joint commitment, it is helpful to first understand individual commitment. Suppose that every year, on the 4th of July, I put on my American flag t-shirt, out of a sense of tradition, and the personal decision to continue this tradition. Hence, I am committed to wearing this t-shirt on The 4th. This commitment is manifest in the following situation. Suppose around 11am on The 4th of July, I hear the national anthem, realize it is Independence Day, and also that I’m wearing a plain white t-shirt. I then think, “Oh no, I forgot my American-flag t-shirt.” I then put on the shirt as soon as possible. All of these actions indicate a personal commitment to my wearing that particular shirt on that particular day.

Unlike the personal commitment described above, a joint commitment requires more than a single person’s decision.[[10]](#footnote-10) Rather, a joint commitment is made when *two or more* persons openly express their willingness to do something, plan something, or commitment to something, together. Suppose that Margaret and Itzel are eating lunch. Margaret says, “I think we should wear our USA lapel pins on Memorial Day.” Itzel then replies, “Yes let’s do that.” By both expressing their willingness, Itzel and Margaret are now committed to wearing their lapel pins together. This joint commitment stands even if Margaret personally changes her mind. Because she is part of a joint commitment, Margaret is under an obligation to wear her pin, barring a *joint* rescindment. If Margaret breaks the commitment anyway, Itzel has standing to rebuke and proclaim, “But we agreed to wear the pin!”[[11]](#footnote-11)

It is not only pedestrian concerns for which joint commitment is relevant. Gilbert claims that political communities themselves are founded on the basis of joint commitments.[[12]](#footnote-12) Time is too short to explain Gilbert’s full theory of political obligation, so for our purposes it suffices that a country is characterized, in part, by joint commitments that explain laws and traditions. For instance, my obligation to pay my taxes can be understood as my part of a joint commitment I have with my fellow country persons, a commitment to obey the laws of our land. It is not only laws that can be understood this way. While there is no US law that says we must respect military personal, various joint commitments, via social norms, have (arguably) been formed that obligate citizens to do just this. How such joint commitments arise in large-scale political communities is much more complex than a two-person case. For example, in voting, nations express their willingness for elected officials to lead and make surrogate decisions. Imagine that an elected leader proclaims, “All our citizens are eternally grateful for the sacrifices of military personal.” This statement is spoken on the group’s behalf, and citizens are then expected to express gratitude toward the military.

Gilbert argues that parties to joint commitments are obligated to act in accordance with the relevant demands. If acting otherwise, individuals must clarify that their actions are personal, i.e. *not* on the group’s behalf (1987:189). The default assumption is that members act on the group’s behalf. This is the crux to Gilbert’s patriotic motive: the patriotic motive is acting on behalf of one’s country (2009:320). Acting on behalf of your country, in Gilbert’s sense, is acting to fulfill political joint commitments. Or, in Gilbert’s own words, “One acts on behalf of one’s country if and only if, being party to the joint commitments that constitute it, one acts in light of these commitments in order to conform to them” (2009:327). Moreover, for Gilbert patriotic acts just are those acts which are on behalf of one’s country (2009:320). On this view (with pride and love out of the picture), patriotic acts can include paying taxes, military service, voting, political activism, and even suing the government.

Like most patriotism theories, Gilbert’s account leaves much room for disagreement on which acts “count” as patriotic, because not everyone will agree on which joint commitments exist. Suppose Jane believes that all Americans are jointly committed to upholding the constitution. Jane also believes that the constitution prohibits discrimination based on sex. She hence sues the government for so discriminating. Jane we can argue, is a patriot, insofar as the suit aims to uphold the constitution, thereby upholding a political joint commitment. Yet others might see things differently, because while they agree Americans are committed to the constitution, they disagree on what the constitution requires.

**4. Overcoming the Critiques**

This section explains how Gilbert’s patriotism successfully deals with the problems mentioned in section 2. Let us start with patriotism implying negativity toward other countries. Understanding this objection in light of Gilbert’s account, things play out in an interesting fashion. If patriotism is keeping political joint commitments, it is unclear how this has any effect on one’s attitudes toward other nations. To understand, let us look at things in a non-political light.

Suppose that Tom and Mary are a couple, and in virtue of this hold many joint commitments between them. These commitments concern things like raising their children, managing their joint budget, and allocating household chores.[[13]](#footnote-13) Suppose someone argues the following: When Tom and Mary fulfill commitments, they do wrong to the rest of the world. Because they hold so many interpersonal commitments, they are bound to treat third-parties immorally. Therefore, it is wrong for Tom and Mary to hold so many interpersonal commitments.

This objection against Tom and Mary seems either based on false assumptions, or if not based on false assumptions, creates problems where none exist. Let me address the former. There is little reason to conclude that Tom and Mary’s joint commitments imply poor treatment toward third-parties. Indeed, the commitments described were mundane, i.e. the type of commitments common between couples. It is odd to argue that couples, in virtue of sharing their life together, thereby do wrong to those outside the relationship. It is admittedly possible that Tom and Mary treat others poorly. Perhaps they are selfish and mean, rarely help those in need, and often make hurtful comments to everyone other than each other. But this has little to do with joint commitments. In other words, in this case Tom and Mary are bad people, but not due to their joint commitments. The commitments themselves imply nothing ethically suspect.

One might argue that Tom and Mary’s commitments prioritize their relationship above other relationships. This seems true, but also unproblematic. Most have some relationships prioritized over others. This is just what it is to have family and friends. Now some might bite the bullet and argue against these basic structures of human interaction. This is a project anyone is free to take on. But until there is a plausible case against family and friends, we should not assume these basic relationships are problematic.

We can analogize the Tom and Mary example to nations: some might see problems with fulfilling joint commitments in two respects. Yet the first supposedly problematic respect is based on a mistake; the other is uncompelling. Let us start with the former. One might argue that commitments to country are problematic, for these commitments imply poorly treating other nations. But just as Mary and Tom’s commitments to each other in no way implies treating third parties poorly, likewise citizens’ commitment to their country does not imply treating other countries poorly. One fulfills political commitments because they owe this compliance. And lacking the same commitments to other nations, one lacks the same obligatory compliance. But the absence of commitments to other nations does not imply poor treatment. Consider, for instance, that Mary has a special commitment to spend time with Tom. She lacks this same commitment to coworker, Mark. This, does not, in itself, imply that Mary will treat Mark poorly. Likewise, a French citizen’s commitment to France in no way implies he will treat China poorly. The French citizen fulfills commitments to France, Chinese citizen to China, and neither the French citizen nor the Chinese citizen treats other nations poorly in doing so. The French citizen fulfills commitments to France and rather than China, because he owes compliance to France and not China. This says nothing about his disdain for China, nor about any disrespect in any other way. On the contrary, as Robert Goodin has pointed out, special duties to compatriots sometimes result in treating foreigners *better* than nationals. Goodin notes that we do not require that foreigners serve in the military, pay taxes, and that they are often exempt from punitive legal penalties imposed on citizens (1998:669). So far from there being a problem with special duties amongst nationals, these duties often help rather than harm third parties.

Under Gilbert’s account, persons are obligated via joint commitments, not any sense of superiority. Said differently, they are obligated to one another simply because the parties involved expressed a willingness to so commit. But why make agreements with your own nation instead of other nations? The problem, some might insist, is that one has special commitments to country at all. Here is my response: an objection along these lines is like objecting to Tom and Mary having commitments to each other rather than Mark, or Jose, or Sarah. Yet this is a strange objection: persons form couples with some and rather than others because life leaves little room for commitments with everyone. Special relationships are formed which allow for an intimacy impossible with large groups. Choosing one person as your partner does not imply this said partner is somehow superior or more deserving than others. All it says is that for various reasons (such as limited resources), you choose to form various joint commitments with this particular person (commitments you lack with others.) Whether between two individuals or thousands, there is nothing wrong with having particular persons or entities to whom we are obligated. None can be obligated to everyone, nor is this desirable. Life is limited. And often by luck (birth place), or sometimes by choice (immigration) we happen upon commitments that we owe our own country but not others. Such commitments are neutral with respect to third parties.

Let us move on. Does patriotism, understood through the joint commitment lens, suggest that patriots are blind to their own nation’s failures? Patriotism as rose-colored glasses is easy to understand if patriotism implies a sense of national pride. If patriots *must* be proud of their country, it will be easy to overlook national flaws. But if patriotism is rather exemplified through the motivated keeping of national commitments, things look very different. For example, consider Americans who overlook racism and sexism. One cannot overlook this without reigning on the national commitment to equality (all persons are created equal…). Fulfilling commitments often demands facing a nation’s sins head on rather than ignoring them. Another example: a patriot might sue their own country as a means of commitment keeping. If a country is violating its obligations, someone who is party to these obligations faces pressure to speak-up. After all, members to this commitment can be rebuked if they do not do their part in making sure the commitment is kept. In some cases, suing the government is a way of making sure the commitment is kept. Here is the point: there is nothing about a joint commitment account of patriotism that implies a nationalism blind to failures. Indeed, this type of patriotism implies quite the opposite.

But what if a nation has “bad” commitments? Imagine a country founded on nepotism. Here patriotism is exemplified in commitment keeping, i.e. in furthering nepotism. This seems an unfortunate patriotism, indeed. That said, this still fails to show that patriots are especially likely to overlook the wrongs of their country. Rather, it is patriots *openly* engaging in wrongs. The question then becomes, how might an account of patriotism handle fundamental national flaws, i.e. flaws which are not hidden and pushed aside, but that are essential to the structure of the nation’s norms and institutions? To answer this question, we can turn to Gilbert’s distinction between obligations that arise from joint commitments, and “all things considered” obligations. Here is what she says,

I now stipulate a sense of ‘‘ought’’ that captures this situation, so that one can also

say that when I have decided to act and not changed my mind, I ought so to act, all

else being equal. This, then, is not the moral ‘‘ought’’ unless the qualifier ‘‘moral’’ is

stretched quite wide (2009: 328).

The above makes clear that political commitments, although they do result in obligations, these obligations are not necessarily moral. Rather than moral force, joint commitments provide an agent with reason to act, all thigs considered equal. You are obligated insofar as you are a rational agent, and without competing considerations rationality demands these commitments be fulfilled. In respect to patriotism, then, a joint commitment formed via national membership gives patriots sufficient reason to act, all things considered equal. But all things are not always equal. Hence, we can distinguish different patriots. Gilbert calls *wise patrio*ts those who recognize that moral commitments can trump political commitments. Or as she says, “The wise rational patriot will only support and uphold a given polity-constituting joint commitment if he ought to, all things considered” (2009: 343). “All things considered” includes the possibility of considering “moral things.” Hence, we see that wise patriots do not fulfill commitments at all costs; they weigh the reasons provided via the commitment with competing moral forces. The key to ethically informed patriotism is keeping political commitments even if *personal inclinati*ons suggest otherwise. Said different, political joint commitments “trump” personal inclinations, or at least they do for the patriot. It is not necessary, however, to keep joint commitments if moral considerations (which are not personal inclinations) are the trump card. Patriotism is expressed not in fulfilling all political joint commitments all the time, but in being inclined to fulfill them over mere inclination. So the disposition toward patriotism (the disposition to keep political commitments over inclination) is compatible with putting ethics before country.[[14]](#footnote-14) This is an advantage of Gilbert’s account, insofar as it can calm patriotism critics who fear the concept immorally puts country above all else.

The last objection concerns the problem of nations themselves. Imagine a cosmopolitan world, in particular, one in which nations are abolished. In this world, we all work together for humanity as a whole.[[15]](#footnote-15) It might seem that patriotism works against this, insofar as patriots are committed to their country. Those who show commitment to country are unlikely to want to abolish their country. Or so it might seem. But this all depends on how one views commitment. If patriotism is a commitment to benefit one’s country, or a commitment to take pride in your nation, this might be problematic for cosmopolitanism. After all, those who believe their nation is admirable probably support its existence, and a country’s abolition is typically not for its benefit. It is unclear, however, that patriotism in Gilbert’s sense runs into the same problem. One can be committed to fulfilling all current obligations, but see nothing wrong with the dissolution of the entity that makes these obligations possible.

Let us return to Tom and Mary. Suppose that Mary has been struggling with thoughts of divorce. She is unsure if she and Tom are best together, in the long run. Mary can have these doubts while simultaneously standing by her commitments to Tom, *as long as she does stay in the marriage*. Mary might look at it this way: while she questions whether she and Tom are meant to be, as long as they *are* together she wants to make the best of things. Gilbertian patriots can take a similar stance. Perhaps many prefer a world without nations. This, in itself, is compatible with keeping their political commitments (hence showing patriotism) while their country *does* exist. Even if the world is better off without nations, as long as nations are around it can be best to be patriotic in the Gilbert sense.

Let me clarify that Gilbert’s patriotism does not itself imply cosmopolitism, but is merely compatible with it. Her view fits nicely with a post-nationalistic world, one in which there is a non-national patriotism similar to that put forth by Juergan Habermas (1998). We can imagine that some patriots favor national boundaries, while others do not. The point is that Gilbertian patriotism leaves open the possibility of patriots with a cosmopolitan worldview. This openness benefits her theory: it seems right that patriots can come from all walks of life, and all ends of the political spectrum. Theories that excludes persons on the basis ideology are at a disadvantage.

**5. Patriotism as a Virtue**

In this brief section, I explain how Gilbert’s patriotism can be understood as a virtue.[[16]](#footnote-16) Consider Aristotle’s golden mean. Virtue holders goes neither too far nor too short. For our purposes, this means neither too far nor too short with respect to keeping political commitments (commitments involving what an entire nation has agreed to jointly uphold). As mentioned, some commitments might be enforced though law, while others might be closer to social norms. Let us consider the ways that persons might go too far, too short, and just right, in this type of commitment keeping. Too short involves those instances in which personal inclination trumps commitments. Going too far is keeping commitments even over more important moral considerations. Getting things just right is knowing that political commitments trump personal inclination, but not morality.

Gilbert mentions the “too much” side of the spectrum, labeling these individuals, “blinkered patriots.” She describes the blinkered patriot as someone, “who makes it a rule to comply with any pertinent polity-constituting joint commitments whatever else is true. She therefore fails to act appropriately when the moral situation is such that all things considered she should not act on a given polity-constituting joint commitment” (2009:343). Rather than a “blinkered patriot,” we can call this person (someone who takes patriotism too far) a “nationalist” and their vice is “nationalism.” We might, likewise, give a name to the “too short” side of the spectrum, and call it “political selfishness.” The mean is, of course, “patriotism.”

Patriotism skeptics might ask the following: If doing something as simple as paying taxes counts as an exemplification, is this trait a virtue? First, let us remember that motive is key to Gilbert’s account.[[17]](#footnote-17) While it is cumbersome to articulate, an act counts as patriotic not merely in fulfilling political commitments, but fulfilling them because one is motivated *by the commitment itself.* Paying taxes from fear of prison falls short of patriotism, and is not an exemplification of any virtue at all. But doing this because one recognizes the importance of fulfilling their role in the community, then it is indeed both patriotic and virtuous. Of course, not all virtuous acts make you Nobel prize worthy. Rather the virtuous person is consistently disposed to doing the right thing, at the right time, and in the right way. Many displays of this consistent disposition are unremarkable. When we think of other virtues, they too, are commonly exemplified in small ways. The temperate person keeps his cool while waiting in-line at Starbucks, and the generous person gives a larger than average tip. These are small examples of virtue, just like paying taxes. Persons consistently disposed to virtue don’t skip the small stuff. For while patiently waiting in line at Starbucks is not morally impressive, losing one’s cool shows a lack of temperance. Likewise, NOT paying taxes shows a lack of patriotism. At times it is easier to recognize a virtue when we compare it to the opposite vice.

Even accepting the above, one might still wonder how patriotism makes one a better person? Well, let us compare the Gilbertian patriot to someone who rejects this type of patriotism. Imagine agents who fail to keep even basic political commitments. They cheat on their taxes when they can, ignore red lights when it suits them, and ignore their fellow country persons in the midst of disaster. These seem both bad qualities and blameworthy ones. Agents who recklessly violates traffic laws are not the kind of persons wanted as community members. And being a good community member, I would argue, is what Gilbertain patriotism is all about. The patriot can be counted on to fulfill their end of the social bargain, thus enabling collective life to run smoothly.

**6. Is this Patriotism?**

Perhaps you agree that the trait Gilbert, Garcia, and I all call patriotism is a good quality, even a virtue. Perhaps you also agree that nations are better off with citizens who keep their commitments. But this is not patriotism, one objects. Patriotism is about love and pride of country.[[18]](#footnote-18) Or at the very least, one might protest, it should involve positive attitudes and emotions directed toward one’s country. Let us again appeal to Audi who argues patriotism is, “to be subject to emotions closely connected with one’s perception of (your country’s) well-being…” (368:2009).[[19]](#footnote-19) But what Gilbert calls patriotism has none of the intuitive features, i.e. it not only lacks pride (or does not require it by necessity), but also does not require any sort of “feeling” at all. Or so this argument goes. Let me push back against these claims.

What counts as patriotism, intuitively? Surely it is not the tongue-in-cheek mentioned wearing stars and stripes or having a red, white, and blue mailbox. Whatever “real” patriotism is, it goes beyond these superficial displays. Let me mention a few acts which seem intuitively patriotic. Some came up in private conversation, others were seen in the media.

1. John McCain refusing release as a POW.
2. Whistle blowers who call out government maleficence
3. Celebrities who perform for the military in war zones.

The above acts are intuitively patriotic (though of course, there is never examples that please everyone), and can also be understood in terms of joint commitment. When McCain refused his release, he did so because he was committed to the military principle that, “The prisoners must be sent home in the order in which they were captured,” (Hubbell:2015: mid page). Hence, in refusing release, he was fulfilling a joint commitment and thereby a patriot in the Gilbertian sense. Not only was he disposed to keep this commitment to proper ordering of prisoner release, but he was disposed to do so in the most difficult of circumstances. However, one might object as follows: isn’t there a world of difference between this example and paying taxes? Well, yes. Paying taxes does not require the temperance and bravery of submitting yourself to torture. But this shows just two things, and neither are problematic for Gilbert’s account. The first is that patriotism allows degrees.[[20]](#footnote-20) Acts can be more or less patriotic, based on the difficulty involved in fulfilling political commitments. Something similar is true of most virtues. While my donating five dollars to the girl scouts is generous, it pales in comparison to my neighbor’s donation of half her income. Virtue is displayed in great ways and small ways. Typically, the greater the sacrifice involved, the more admirable the virtue appears. Circumstances, moreover, test true virtue: the virtuous person is disposed to keep them even in difficult circumstances. Often, however, we are unsure if we are so disposed, for the relevant circumstance never arrived. McCain’s virtue was tested in the most arduous fashion, and he passed the test. His patriotism was made even more impressive because it was also generous, temperate, and courageous.

Let us move on to the other examples of intuitive patriotism. Whistle blowing and celebrity performance can again be understood as keeping political commitments. The former might involve keeping various commitments in a single act. There might be both a legal requirement and a social norm to call out politicians who harm the public, in addition to employment related requirements to report malfeasance. The celebrity performance is an example of a political commitment not founded in law, but social norms, i.e. the norm to respect those fighting for the community’s safety.

**Conclusion**

This paper advocated for the value of a particular understanding of patriotism put forth by Margaret Gilbert. She argues patriotism is exemplified via the fulfillment of joint commitments one holds as a country member. Of course, fulfillment is not quite enough, one must also act with the patriotic motive, i.e. fulfill the joint commitment because one respects the obligation to do just this.

Gilbert’s patriotism is valuable not only because it accords with the broad intuitive notion of patriotism as a type of “positive orientation towards one’s nation,” but also because it fends off traditional worries about patriotism itself. Many such worries are centered around the idea that patriotism is at outsiders’ expense. But when patriotism is seen as completing obligations formed via joint commitments, this is less worrisome. We all accept, after all, that we hold some obligations to some persons, but not to others. Hence fulfilling joint commitments is just a matter of recognizing and thus completing your end of a bargain. This says nothing at all about how you might treat third parties. Indeed, it is compatible with Gilbert’s conception that patriots also have commitments with other nations.

There is an additional factor of Gilbert’s account which can dispel worries about nationalism. The relevant joint commitments which create patriotic obligations come with an “all things considered” equal clause. You are supposed to keep this obligation, to not let mere inclination overcome this fulfillment. But moral reasons are not mere inclination, and can indeed justify (morally) breaking the immoral commitment. Patriots who keep this in mind are unlikely to go to extremes, extremes which worry so many patriotism critics.

Let’s close by reiterating what Gilbert also makes clear in her piece. The claim is not that this definition of patriotism is the one true conception. Many possible definitions fall under the broad umbrella of positive orientation toward country. Various terms are used in popular and scholarly discourse. In this sense, Gilbert’s definition is just one of many competing ones. Yet it should, in an import sense, win the competition. It should win, insofar as society would benefit from using this as the “go to” understanding of the term.

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1. In her own words, “The primary basis of the claims about intuitiveness I make here is my own sense

   of the matter in hand: Would I myself judge that such-and-such is a patriotic act, and so on?” (2009:320). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some argue that patriotism goes as far back as Ancient Greece – see Crowley (2017) and Chroust (1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See also Brighhouse (2006), Callan (2010), and Keller (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For some social science research on this area, see Festinger (1954), Salovey and Rodin (1984), Thornton and Arrowood (1966), Mussweiler (2003), Mussweiler et al., (2006), Forsyth (2000), Smith and Leach (2004), and Yzerbyt et al., (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Arneson does not himself support “Patriotic Priority”, and spends the paper arguing against it. It is my contention that if we accept Gilbert’s account of patriotism, we will no longer need to worry about Patriotic Priority, since patriotism will not imply any such priority in the first place. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alasdair MacIntyre articulates this worry well, “What your community requires as the material prerequisites for your survival as a distinctive community…may be exclusive use of the same or some of the natural resources as my community…When such a conflict arises, the standpoint of impartial 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 stand to further the interests of my own community…”(289). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A closely related concern discussed in Callan (2010) is that patriots will be pressured (or required) to take part in the evil deeds of their country’s making, and hence end up with “dirty hands.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The full quote, “for the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country because it feels like hope is making a comeback… not just because Barack has done well, but because I think people are hungry for change”(CNN:2008). Articles that discuss this comment and how it relates to Obama’s patriotism include Eastland (2008), Spillius (2008), Chavez (2008), and Wheaton (2008). In addition, other popular news sources contact the pride and patriotism. A recent Gallup survey, for instance, found that the number of Americans who were “proud of their country” went down. The title of the article about this statistic was, quite interestingly, “American Patriotism is Down” (Sparks: 2018). Many other articles described this poll the same way. And for another popular source, consider a 2014 New York Times article, that pronounced, “Americans are a patriotic bunch. Compared with people in most other countries, [Americans express more pride](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSOnline.jsp) in their nationality, and most say that being an American is an important part of their identity”(Vavreck:2014:paragraph 1) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Gilbert 2009, p. 320, also Gilbert and Garcia, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In what Gilbert calls, “complex” joint commitments (as opposed to “basic”), a group might elect a particular member or members to make decisions for the group. And so in this sense, some person (s) making a decision can result in a joint commitment. She describes this possibility (among other places) in “Modelling Collective Belief”. In her words, ““I find it plausible to argue that we allow ourselves to do so because we allow ourselves to presume that a certain complex set-up exists. We presume that the citizens at large have endorsed the idea that what their government as such thinks may be regarded as what they as a nation think. This presumption can be further articulated in terms of the notion of the joint acceptance of a view. We presume that the citizens have endorsed the idea that they may be regarded as jointly accepting whatever propositions the government itself accepts” (1987:200). Even in this case just described, I would contend this is still not a case of one person “simply” deciding. Rather it is one person deciding *in the presence of certain background conditions.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As will become important later on, this obligation is not necessarily a moral obligation. However, it remains an obligation for which Itzel has the standing to criticize Margaret if she does not fulfill it. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Gilbert 1993 and 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Gilbert, 1996, for a joint commitment perspective on love and relationships. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In, “Moderate Patriotism”, Stephan Nathanson suggests something similar, arguing, “One can have a preference for one's own country, a greater love for it, and a greater concern for its well-being without going so far as to think that morality ceases to apply at the border. If patriotism involves this sort of preference and leads people to do good things on behalf of their country but always within the limits of what is morally permissible…” (1989:538). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. What exactly, “cosmopolitan” amounts to might not be clear. But I think this definition, taken from The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, works well: The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, are (or can and should be) citizens in a single community”(Kleingeld and Brown :2014 : paragraph 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Callan (2010) argues that patriotism can be a virtue or a vice, depending on how it is displayed. It would be possible, I think to understand most Aristotelian virtues in this way. For instance, you could argue that generosity, when it goes to level of giving away money you need to support a family, is an example of “the vice of generosity. However instead of looking at it this way we can instead call the extreme not generosity but rather “fiscal irresponsibility”. The same seems true of patriotism: rather than calling the extreme end of patriotism “the vice of patriotism”, we can simply call that extremeness not patriotism but “nationalism.” This is the route I prefer, for anything that goes too far will cease to be virtuous. Other discussions on whether patriotism is a virtue include MacIntyre (2003), Gaffney (1993) and Dombrowski (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “One acts in terms of the basic patriotic motive if and only if one acts on behalf of one’s country. This motive

    is sufficient, intuitively, to make an act patriotic from a motivational point of view” (Gilbert:2009:332). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Callan (2006 and 2010) sees the “love of country” as central to patriotism. Of course, one might understand “love” as a type of feeling. If so, then Gilbert’s account is not one that understands patriotism as love. But perhaps love need not involve feelings. It seems plausible, at least, that I can demonstrate love through my commitments, even in the absence of specific feelings. Keller (2005) also argues that patriotism is about love of country, and he throws pride in there as well. In his own words, “patriotism is a kind of love for country that makes reference to, or latches onto, aspects of a country that are taken to merit pride or approval or affection or reverence” (575). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brighthouse (2006) also seems to assume patriotism is linked to a “feeling” or “sentiment”. 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. While Gilbert doesn’t directly claim that her type of patriotism can come in degrees, she talks about different types of patriots, and these different types go to greater and lesser degree of extremes in fulfilling their joint commitments. Moreover, there is nothing that conceptually prevents understanding Gilbert’s account as making sense of patriotic degrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)