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The Mortality and Morality of Nations

URIEL ABULOF
Princeton University and Tel-Aviv University

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The Mortality and Morality of Nations

Standing at the edge of life's abyss, we often seek moral meaning and "symbolic immortality" in religion, civilization, state, and nation. What happens, however, when the nation itself appears mortal? *The Mortality and Morality of Nations* seeks to answer this question, theoretically and empirically. It argues that mortality makes morality, and right makes might; the nation's sense of a looming abyss informs its quest for a higher moral ground, which, if reached, can bolster its vitality. The book investigates nationalism's promise of moral immortality and its limitations via three case studies: French Canadians, Jews, and Afrikaners. All three have been insecure about the validity of their identity or the viability of their polity, or both. They have sought partial redress in existential self-legitimation: by the nation, of the nation, and for the nation's very existence. The rise and fall of nations transpire not only in blood and iron but also in pride and shame, in justice and in guilt.

URIEL ABULOF is an associate professor of politics at Tel-Aviv University and a senior research Fellow at Princeton University's LISD / Woodrow Wilson School. He is the author of *Living on the Edge: The Existential Uncertainty of Zionism* (2015), which won the Bahat Prize, Israel's most prestigious academic book award. Abulof studies political legitimation, nationalism, and ethnic conflicts. His articles have appeared in journals such as *International Studies Quarterly*, *International Political Sociology*, *Nations and Nationalism*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and *International Politics*.

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Preface

> We search for immortality, and the kind of immortality we seek determines the kind of life we lead.
>
> – Hans J. Morgenthau, *Death in the Nuclear Age*

> Small nations. The concept is not quantitative; it points to a condition; a fate; small nations lack that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future; at a given moment in their history, they all passed through the antechambers of death; in constant confrontation with the arrogant ignorance of the mighty, they see their existence as perpetually threatened or with a question mark hovering over it; for their very existence *is* the question.
>
> – Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*

Standing at the edge of life's gaping abyss, we seek everlasting meaning, a sense of purpose and propriety, transcending the transient individual. We often find this solace in the morality of seemingly immortal collectives. Religions, civilizations, states, and nations are such "timeless beacons," shedding their eternal light on the right path. What happens, however, when the nation itself appears mortal, when its members live with a constant sense of uncertainty about their collective's existence?

The Mortality and Morality of Nations presents this puzzle and pieces it together. It submits that mortality makes morality, and right makes might: the nation's sense of a looming abyss informs its deliberate and deliberative quest for a high moral ground, which, if reached, can bolster its vitality. The book investigates nationalism's promise of moral immortality, and its limitations, via the narratives of three "small nations": French Canadians, Israeli Jews, and Afrikaners. All three have been insecure about the validity of their identity or the viability of their polity, or both. They have sought partial redress in existential self-legitimation: by the nation, of the nation, and for the nation's very existence. If this endeavor fails, however, the nation may pursue different

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existential paths. For the most part, Israeli Jews still subscribe to Zionism's ethnonationalism, but French Canadians – now Québécois – have largely shed ethnicity, and Afrikaners have surrendered national sovereignty. The rise and fall of nations transpire not only in blood and iron but also in pride and shame, in justice and in guilt.

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Living in Jerusalem is living on the edge. I was born there, spending most of my life among, and between, Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, left and right, doom and deliverance. Jerusalem has seen them all, and more, witnessing the rise and fall of peoples, empires, religions, civilizations, and nations. Existential fears and hopes are so omnipresent as to be near transparent. Studying them thus becomes ever more daunting – yet rewarding. Leading this existential investigation, I am fortunate to have had the company of family, friends, and colleagues, who have inspired and encouraged me along this long, and often lonely, journey. I am especially grateful to Baruch Kimmerling z"l, Avraham Sela, and Sasson Sofer from the Hebrew University; Azar Gat, Yossi Shain, and Motti Tamarkin at Tel-Aviv University; and Wolfgang Danspeckgruber at Princeton University. This book could not have been accomplished without their help and insights.

I have worked on this book, on and off, for seven years, but in retrospect it seems to have always been there, lurking in fateful moments of my youth: the Israeli bombing of Iraq's nuclear facility, the Lebanon War, the First Intifada, the Oslo peace process, and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Then came the haunting days of the Second Intifada. I still recall walking with Shani, my wife to be, in the horridly empty streets of downtown Jerusalem during Passover, meeting with friends, and wondering together if this was the beginning of the end. Then, as now, I have been struggling to make sense of it all. Looking at the world through the worldviews of my people, and of other peoples, is the best way I have found to do so.

I owe thanks to many I have conversed with about this research. Each exchange of ideas was valuable in the ongoing learning process that produced the book before you. In particular, I wish to thank Evelyn and Jeff Abel, Pierre Anctil, Mike Aronoff, Daniel Bar-Tal, Avi Bareli, Mark Beissinger, John Breuilly, Walker Connor, Daniele Conversi, Ronnie Ellenblum, Beth English,

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Completion of the book, I quickly learned, was just the beginning of another journey, and here I found the best companion I could hope for in Robert Dreesen of Cambridge University Press. I am deeply grateful for his intuitive understanding of this project and professional help in its publication. In this process, I gained invaluable insights from the comments of the three anonymous readers of my manuscript.

Finally, family: it is hard to be an existentialist, but it might be even harder to live with one. To my parents, Noga and Daniel; my siblings, Dikla, Dror, and Rachel; and most of all to my wife, Shani, and children, Nevo and Keshet, it is my happy duty to inform you, we have only just begun . . .

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1

Introduction

> "What is the Moral Sense, sir?"
>
> He looked down, surprised, over his great spectacles, and said, "Why, it is the faculty which enables us to distinguish good from evil."
>
> . . . "Is it valuable?"
>
> "Valuable? Heavens! lad, it is the one thing that lifts man above the beasts that perish and makes him heir to immortality!"
>
> Mark Twain, *The Mysterious Stranger*[1]

We are not alone. In the evolutionary tree of life, the human race is a twig. We share Earth with close relatives that exhibit humanoid traits, such as a large brain, bipedalism, opposable thumbs, tool making, imitation, emulation, causal understanding, communication skills, sociability, and sentience.[2] It is tempting to dismiss "human exceptionalism" – the idea that humans are inherently unique – as vainglory informed by the fiction of our creation in "God's image." Some scientists reduce human exceptionalism to the bare facts that "we're the only animals who cook food, and no other species is as destructive of its own and other species."[3] Others go further, concluding, "There is nothing special about being human, any more than there is anything special about being a guinea pig or a geranium."[4] Still, our interest in human exceptionalism is itself quite exceptional. Pigs and geraniums, as far as we know, do not contemplate their uniqueness.

The social sciences can employ their distinctive insights, tools, and vocabulary to chart the blurred boundaries between humans and other animals (or

[1] Twain, 1992 [1916]:70. [2] Bearzi and Stanford, 2008. [3] Bekoff, 2013:49.
[4] Gee, 2013:xi.

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machines for that matter) to show what we share with other species and where we stand apart.[5] Shouldering this task is onerous. The very idea of "human nature" conjures up the perils of destructive reductionism and biological determinism, which many deem empirically frail and morally flawed. Still, both evidence and common sense suggest that certain traits humans share distinguish us from other animals.[6] Indeed, social scientists have implicitly embraced this view in heuristic models, such as *homo sociologicus*, *homo psychologicus*, or *homo economicus*.[7] However, it is far from clear how distinctively *homo sapiens* these models are. After all, chimpanzees too are highly social and have a rich emotional life. They may even surpass humans in their "rational behavior" toward material maximization, and, like us, are prone to psychological fallacies such as "loss aversion."[8]

Wherein, then, lies the difference? Such conundrums used to be dormant, but recent years have stirred interest in human exceptionalism. We do not yet initiate our students into Homo Sapiens 101 through consilience of biology and culture, nature and nurture, but we are gradually getting there.[9] Some scholars have been examining cross-species similarities (e.g., the applicability of Hobbes' image of the bestial state of nature to international relations).[10] Others have been probing the qualities that set humans apart (e.g., aspects of communication and cooperation).[11]

This book joins in the latter line of inquiry. Inspired by philosophical existentialism, it centers on humans as mortal and moral agents, free to construct meaning in a meaningless universe.[12] It seek to tap into the social actors' shared understanding of this world and of their political life in it.[13] To this end, I examine four unique human qualities: mortality, morality, liberty, and language. Scholars have investigated such aspects of mortality as collective fear, angst, anger, humiliation, anxiety, and "cultural trauma," often perpetrating and perpetuating violent conflicts.[14] Several have also probed the drivers of individual and social morality.[15] Few, however, have examined both mortality

[5] Barash, 2012; Friedenberg, 2008; Mazis, 2008. [6] Pinker, 2002. [7] Jager et al., 2000.
[8] Jensen et al., 2007; Santos and Platt, 2014; Taylor, 2009.
[9] Richerson and Boyd, 2005; Wilson, 1998. [10] Bowles and Gintis, 2011; Gat, 2009.
[11] Barash, 2012; Gottschall, 2012; Pinker, 2007, 2011.
[12] Flynn, 2006; Kaufmann, 1960; Tymieniecka, 2010; Batthyany and Russo-Netzer, 2014.
[13] I share much of Taylor's (1985:1) critique of "naturalism," namely "the ambition to model the study of man on the natural sciences" (see also Tully and Weinstock, 1994). Naturalism is prone to "reification": turning human qualities into "things," stripping individuals of their autonomy and reducing them to cogs of an abstract social machinery (Vandenberghe, 2001). I thus prefer hermeneutic understanding of the agents' intersubjective (shared and socially embedded) reasoning to account for the non-reductionist *emergence* of social phenomena (see also Greenfeld, 2013; Sawyer, 2005). However, I still see substantial merits in naturalist investigations into human behavior, especially when we cannot tap into the social actors' own discourse about their actions.
[14] Alexander, 2012; Bar-Tal, 2013; Cruz, 2000; Shaver and Mikulincer, 2012; Wohl et al., 2012.
[15] Bloom, 2013; Eisenberg, 2000; Haidt, 2012; Jost et al., 2009; Rothbart and Korostelina, 2006.

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and morality,[16] and fewer have studied their interplay in the life, and language, of nations – the focus of this book.

Stipulative definitions of this existential square – mortality, morality, liberty, and language – set the conceptual stage.[17] *Mortality* here does not equal death, but signifies *the awareness of the inevitability, availability, and indeterminacy of death*. We know that it is bound to happen, but its exact timing is unknown, unless we choose to bring it on.[18] Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges once commented: "To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death."[19] This is not entirely true. Many animals fear death and some, notably elephants, seemingly grieve.[20] Still, only humans have the above sense of mortality, which we start developing in early childhood, consolidate around the ages of 5–6, and typically master before puberty.[21]

Morality here signifies *the creation of, and subscription to, categories of good and evil*, involving conscience and feelings of shame, guilt, and remorse. According to this definition, morality is not "goodness," and moral acts may be both virtuous and vicious. Thus, Nazism, however abhorrent, harbored a moral worldview, constructing (racist) categories of good and evil.[22] Morality also does not equate here with benevolence, cooperation, fairness, or "reciprocal altruism," which some nonhuman species exhibit.[23] While "animals feel empathy for each other, treat one another fairly, cooperate toward common goals, and help each other out of trouble," they do not construct, or profess to act according to, categories of good and evil.[24]

Liberty here signifies *the availability and viability of choice*. The availability of choice is anchored in imagining this world as both the outcome of past processes and the foundation of future trajectories.[25] The viability of choice reflects the "degrees of freedom" that we think we may possess both in pursuing "our way" in life. Such liberty, which has arguably increased throughout modernity, is uniquely human.[26] Importantly, free choice underpins negative liberty (from constraints) and positive liberty (self-determination), for every choice creates self-imposed limitations on subsequent choices.[27] Again, as with mortality and morality, I stress the intersubjectivity of our socially embedded sense, accurate or false. For example, we may in fact enjoy a multitude of choices but think we have none.

[16] Bandura, 1988, 2002. [17] On types of definitions, see Schiappa, 1993.
[18] For Cave (2012), the "Mortality Paradox" consists of the inevitability of death and its "impossibility," our inability to imagine our own nonexistence.
[19] Borges, 1964:114. [20] Anderson, 2011; King, 2013.
[21] Kenyon, 2001; Slaughter, 2005. [22] Gossman, 2009; Koonz, 2003.
[23] Boehm, 2012; De Waal, 2006, 2013; Field, 2001; Katz, 2000a; Krebs, 2011; Rowlands, 2012.
[24] Bekoff and Pierce, 2009:1. [25] Bruner, 1986.
[26] Cochrane, 2009; Mazis, 2008. Several authors suggest liberty is on the rise in the modern era with both positive (Welzel, 2013) and negative (Greenfeld, 2013) effects.
[27] Berlin, 2002.

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Finally, *language* is an *open-ended, creative, and socially acquired system of communication*. Many animals can communicate – through visuals, vibration, sound, smell, touch, and chemicals.[28] Only humans have the ability, even the instinct, to use a finite set of elements (e.g., words) and rules (grammar and syntax) to create infinite combinations, each of which is comprehensible.[29] Only humans can communicate across mediums about intangibles – including their mortality, morality, and liberty. People are storytellers, contriving narratives to express and ease their anxieties and uncertainties, to justify themselves and their actions, and to probe alternative courses of being and doing.[30]

To sum up, we are not unique in being unique, and certainly, "man hath no pre-eminence above a beast," but our mortality, morality, liberty, and language do set us apart from other animals, and bring us together as humans. Granted, squaring human exceptionalism into these four existential sides does not exhaust human nature. All four qualities draw, for example, on our tortuous emotions, symbolic imagination, self-consciousness, reflexivity, learning capacity, and "theory of mind" by which we ascribe mental states to others and ourselves.[31] Moreover, a single treatise cannot fully encompass the full resonance of existentialism in human affairs. In this book, my first contribution to "*political* existentialism," my aim is more modest. I want to explicate how mortality and morality figure and intertwine in the life of nations – in both theory and practice.

THEORY

The nexus between mortality and morality is as old as humanity itself, at least according to the Bible. "God planted a garden eastward in Eden," we are told, with many fruitful trees, and "in the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Adam and Eve were then immortal, and amoral, but a reversal of fortune soon followed, when both defied God. Tasting of the forbidden moral fruit, they were banished by God, and turned mortal.[32]

In the gardens we plant on Earth, Eden's two trees have merged into one – a "moral tree of life." Aware of our mortality, we seek symbolic immortality. We cultivate a perpetuation project, a *causa-sui* (a cause of itself), to transcend our transient existence and imbue it with everlasting meaning; occasionally, we even die, or kill, for it.[33] To grow, these existential trees, offshoots of our individual

[28] Rogers et al., 2000. [29] Pinker, 1994.
[30] Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gottschall, 2012; Henriques, 2011:18.
[31] Greenfeld (2013), for example, anchors human exceptionalism in mind and culture, and holds the modern, national, transformation of the latter as breeding madness.
[32] Genesis 2, 3. Fromm (2010) saw this "act of disobedience" by Adam and Eve as the symbolic commencement of human conscience and freedom. Note, however, that in the biblical narrative, curiosity, not conscience, sparked this moral awakening.
[33] Becker, 1973; 1975; Frankl, 1984 [1946]; Trémolière et al., 2012. Watson (2014) traces the search for meaning after "the death of God," while Scruton (2014) suggests that the search should still be guided by our encounter with "the sacred."

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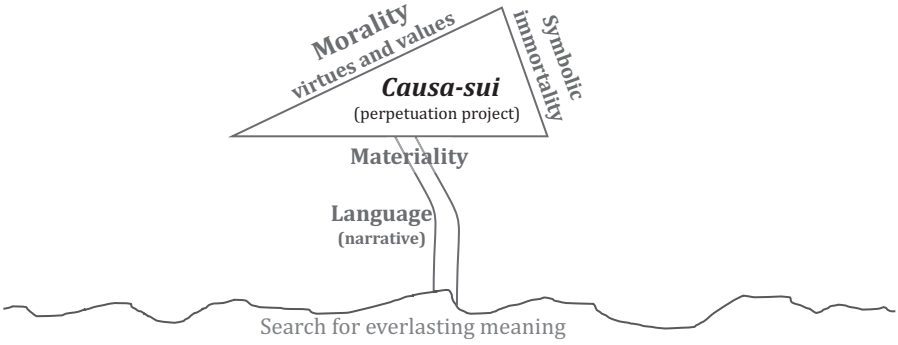

FIGURE 1. *Causa-Sui* (Moral Tree of Life)

mortality and morality, need the nourishment of creative language (narratives). Picture the crown of these trees as a triangle: it requires an objective, material base while the subjective, mental sides lend each *causa-sui* a symbolic immortality and morality. A *causa-sui* is a constant work in progress. Maintaining the material base (the "hardware") is hard enough, but the mental interplay of mortality and morality (the "software") is equally daunting. They complement and compensate one another, especially when the *causa-sui* becomes reflective – when we become aware of it and reason its merits and limitations. The smaller our sense of symbolic immortality, the greater our need for moral support. In the triangle, as the "immortal side" contracts, the "moral side" must extend (Figure 1).

As long as the two mental sides keep their combined length intact, each relative part may shift without breaking the triangle. If, however, both our collective immortality and morality decline, let alone if our material base crumbles, our *causa-sui* may collapse and unleash *anomy*, a sociomoral vacuity.[34]

We may find remedies – in other trees. After all, humanity has cultivated a forest of multiple *causae-sui* – some complementary, others competing. Our moral trees of life come in different heights. Some individuals find existential solace in the micro, private sphere, for example, seeking perpetuation through their offspring, art, belief in resurrection, spiritual reincarnation, or love.[35] Others, perhaps most of us, also tend the taller trees of collectivities – a village, a tribe, an ethnic community, a class, a religion, a nation. Still others climb the towering trees of civilization, humanity, and Earth itself.[36] But the leap from a

[34] Marks (1974).
[35] Brombert (2013) shows how art relates to, and tries to transcend, mortality. See also Cave, 2012.
[36] Scheffler (2013:45, xlii) holds that "the coming into existence of people we do not know and love matters more to us than our own survival," and thus "what is necessary to sustain our confidence in our values is that we should die and that others should live."

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collapsing to a confident *causa-sui* demands that we see the latter as both viable and available – we must have the (subjective) liberty to change course for a different cause. Without it, we fall.

This book explores a small section of this vast forest: the mortality and morality of nations (MMN). Within the large realm of nations, which I define as *self-determining peoples*, I am specifically interested in ethnic nations with an exceptional sense of collective fragility. The decision to focus on nations is plain enough given the preeminence of national *causae-sui* in modern times. Several scholars have noticed the symbolic immortality of nations, acknowledging its immense importance, but mostly in passing. For example, in his seminal *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson stresses that nations, much like traditional religions, "always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future," thereby alleviating man's troubling sense that "mortality is inescapable."[37] And Calhoun astutely notes: "Nationalism has emotional power partly because it helps to make us who we are, because it inspires artists and composers, because it gives us a link with history (and thus with immortality)."[38]

I decided to further focus on ethnic communities (ethnies), who draw on imagined kinship, since scholarship often portrays their ascriptive affiliation as breeding strong passions and emotional closure that leaves little room for moral reasoning.[39] The ethnie, especially when engulfed in a protracted conflict, arguably feels collective angst that facilitates in-group cohesion and out-group aggression.[40] However, as I show, these trajectories are evitable, partly thanks to the ethnie's exercise of moral reasoning. Overall, while ethnic nations form the hub of my investigation, I also examine nonnational ethnopolitics as well as national aspirations that eschew ethnicity.

How should we study the mortality and morality of nations? I regard nationalism as, among other things, "a discursive formation that gives shape to the modern world," constituted by the nations' own claims about their social solidarity, collective identity, and political legitimacy.[41] This strong discursive, intersubjective, dimension makes nationalism more, not less, real for the life of people, and peoples, worldwide. This book thus takes a Weberian approach to causality and methodology.[42] I seek a rigorous understanding (Max Weber's *Verstehen*) of the reasoning of the social actors without subjecting their views to my factual and value judgments or trying to unearth their unconscious underpinning.[43] I hope to gain insights into the perspectives of the nations, through their own language, with regard to their collective mortality, morality, and liberty, and to turn these insights, through comparative historical research, into generally applicable models.

[37] Anderson, 1991:10–12. [38] Calhoun, 1992:3.
[39] Brown, 1999; Ignatieff, 1994; Spencer and Wollman, 1998.
[40] Halperin et al., 2013; Wohl et al., 2012. [41] Calhoun, 2007:27. See also Calhoun, 1997.
[42] Elsewhere, I discuss at length the merits and limitations of this approach (Abulof, 2014c).
[43] Martin, 2000.

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MMN does not purport to reveal the objective causes of ethnonational existential uncertainty. Internal and external conflicts, menacing geostrategic realities, demographic turbulence, power-hungry politicians, and greedy media – these are but some of the possible contributing factors.[44] Instead, my aim is to elucidate the social actors' discourse and deliberation about their mortality and morality. I tap into their "witcraft" – their argumentative "art of reasoning" – to reveal how they themselves reflect upon their predicament and its possible remedies.[45] I discuss the objective circumstances mainly to contextualize this intersubjective reasoning.

To be sure, this mode of inquiry paints a partial picture. All too often, we lie to others, and to ourselves.[46] There are obviously causes for existential insecurity that the social actors themselves are reluctant to share. Leaders resorting to hateful rhetoric are unlikely to admit their role in inciting their public's sense of besiegement. Media outlets cultivating mass anxieties and fears rarely lay bare their economic or political considerations in arousing existential sensationalism. Often enough, however, other actors, from within and without the nation, would try to unmask the hidden agenda of these "agents of doom." Tellingly, such denouncements occasionally involve framing these agents as themselves constituting existential threats to the nation. My analysis explicates these counternarratives as well.

There are other valid modes of inquiry into the realm of MMN. Quantitative hypothetico-deductive research, for example, is useful, but even robust correlation can never reveal intersubjective reasoning. Moreover, while we can measure the material wealth and strength of nations, it is incalculably harder to quantify nations and their changing sense of mortality and morality.[47] I therefore chose not to run large-n regressions, but to examine "small nations" qualitatively, as described by Milan Kundera:

> Small nations. The concept is not quantitative; it points to a condition; a fate; small nations lack that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future; at a given moment in their history, they all passed through the antechambers of death; in constant confrontation with the arrogant ignorance of the mighty, they see their existence as perpetually threatened or with a question mark hovering over it; for their very existence is the question.[48]

[44] A good example of scholarship focusing on such factors is Marx's research on the role of race (1998) and religion (2003) in building the nation-state in the early modern period. Marx suggests that elites facing internal strife and seeking to consolidate their subjects resorted to antagonistic manipulation of the masses by stirring their passions about internal – racial or religious – enemies.

[45] Billig, 1996. On discourse and argumentation analysis in political science, see Crawford, 2009; Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012.

[46] Bok, 1999; Kuran, 1995.

[47] On diverse methodologies for "measuring" social identities, see Abdelal et al., 2009.

[48] Kundera, 1993:226; my translation.

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The smallness of nations here is not a matter of quantifiable size. It signifies a qualitative, intersubjective sense of collective mortality. The significance of small nations for studying MMN is immense. Small nations are not a breed apart, humans are; not just small but all nations sense their mortality and search for morality.[49] For "mighty" nations, however, these drives are often hidden in plain sight, eclipsed by an apparent self-confidence. Not so for small nations, whose existential narratives we can use as a "magnifying glass" onto the mortality and morality of nations. Small nations deeply doubt their symbolic immortality and endow their morality with existential rationale. Every nation is a *causa-sui* and entails, beyond its material base, the mental sides of immortality and morality. But small nations, by being so existentially anxious about these qualities, amplify their importance. They are the tip of the iceberg, bringing to the observable – thus more scholarly accessible – surface, an important, but understudied, phenomenon.

By analyzing ethnonational existential uncertainty, MMN answers two questions: First, how do mortality and morality figure into and intertwine in the life and language of small nations? Second, how do mortality and morality transform and shape the political-existential choices of small nations?

The answers to the two questions were implied earlier. Now, in directly addressing ethnic peoples and their national aspirations, I propose the following. First, *collective mortality is Janus-faced*; members of a small nation sense that they might not belong to an age-old community or suspect that their body politic may not survive, or both. In the life of ethnonational communities, "that felicitous sense of an eternal past and future" pertains to the *past validity of the ethnic identity* as well as to the *future viability of the national polity*. Small nations lack this double security and struggle to answer in the affirmative the existential quandaries "do we have a past?" and "do we have a future?" An answer of "perhaps not" to either would make the confirmation of the other all the more essential to the retention of symbolic immortality.

Collective morality figures as a multifaceted political legitimation, diverging along its subject (who seeks to confer legitimacy?), object (what is being legitimated?), objective (to what end?), and substance (with what message?). Morality is by no means the only response to mortality; nor is mortality the only driver of morality. However, while every nation seeks immortality and morality, when its sense of collective mortality ascends, it resorts to *existential self-legitimation*: by the nation, of the nation, and for the nation's very existence. Beyond building a material base, a small nation toils to compensate for its weak symbolic immortality by endowing its *causa-sui* with *virtues and values* via *three justificatory rationales: righteousness, rights, and raison d'être*. Importantly, while this book focuses on articulated reasoning, through both argumentation and deliberation,

[49] For example, Hutchinson (1987) traces how intellectuals reconstruct national heritage to legitimate modernization. Reus-Smit (1999) suggests that "international societies," such as ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy, absolutist Europe, and the modern international system, have based their constitutional arrangements on "prevailing beliefs about the moral purpose of the state."

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I also consider the underpinning emotions of mortality (anxiety and fear) and morality (shame and guilt).

Second, legitimation is a learning process, a diverse and protean product of ongoing contestation and deliberation. Encompassing various legitimating strategies, national morality mutates in response to its success in meeting challenges and gaining recognition, from within and without, to the national *causa-sui*. When certain strategies fail, others ascend; for example, a small nation may downplay its historical right to a land, and instead stress its legal right of self-determination. Morality can become an existential imperative to the mortal nation, reversing the "might makes right" dictum.

This moral learning process gives no guarantee. A nation sustains its *causa-sui* by *bolstering its material base and mental sides*, thus boosting its members' willingness to subscribe to the national cause. However, should the nation fail at this task, its members will probe alternative *causae-sui* that may well turn their back on the ethnic identity or the national polity. This form of political metamorphosis is predicated on the *availability and viability of the existential alternative*, on believing that change is possible and doable. Nations are not monoliths and collective *causae-sui* are never consensual; some members endorse them, others contest them. *Collective* causae-sui *can be consecutive or concurrent*. Sometimes, one *causa-sui* becomes dominant, even hegemonic, while its alternatives are dormant or subsist in the margins, awaiting their ascent. At other times, the community simultaneously pursues several existential projects, with substantial in-groups comparing the material, immortal, and moral merits of alternative *causae-sui*.

MMN shows that mortality and morality matter, and investigates why and how they do, in the life of certain nations. My propositions that "mortality makes morality" and "right makes might" are limited to a nation's articulated reasoning of its political life. It is for the nation's own members, according to their own discourse, that mortality makes morality – their sense of a looming abyss informs their deliberate and deliberative quest for a high moral ground. It is the nations themselves that often encourage their members, in Lincoln's words, to "have faith that right makes might."[50]

Elsewhere, I have indicated that widespread and prolonged discourses on "existential threats" are rare.[51] The literature on political legitimation suggests that publics rarely dispute the morality of their own collective existence (e.g., people debate "what might legitimate the American invasion of Iraq?" not "what justifies the United States?").[52] By focusing on small nations, MMN brings these rarities to light. It reveals how existential discourses on national mortality and morality emerge and converge. A small nation weaves its safety net above the abyss; espying existential threats through the "holes in the net," it

[50] Abraham Lincoln, *Cooper Union Address*, February 26, 1860, New York City.
[51] Abulof, 2014a. [52] E.g., Hurrelmann et al., 2007; Jost and Major, 2001.

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knits "existential threads" of moral fabric to prevent its fall. MMN charts the types of existential threats and threads, and shows how the nation uses the latter to cope with, and compensate for, the former. It further reveals how this dynamic net, and our sense of liberty, may lead us to choose one collective *causa-sui* over another.

The implicit symbolic immortality of the nation underpins the "banal nationalism" of "those states that have confidence in their own continuity": habituated, reproduced, beliefs and practices that sustain the self-evident presence of the nation (and the interstate system) in our daily life.[53] National mortality challenges banal nationalism, as the nation's members doubt its very existence. Moreover, in the chronicles of banal nationalism, moral contestation typically revolves around authority and policy (e.g., legitimating the appropriation of territory).[54] Small nations deliberate their own legitimacy – the existential justification of their identity and polity.

I submit that this linkage between mortality and morality in the life of small nations is not coincidental. Still, *Verstehen* research cannot measure the probability and proportion of the elements of causality. Weber thus sought to discover whether, why, and how "the Protestant ethic" had fostered "the spirit of capitalism," but did not ascertain the relative explanatory weight of the former, let alone proclaim it the sole cause of capitalism. Weber stressed "it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history."[55] *Verstehen* can nonetheless be robust. Its descriptive propositions are falsifiable. Its interpretive analysis, especially when relying on comparative sociohistorical research, can foster generalizable, and refutable, theoretical understanding. *Verstehen* does not purport to uncover timeless "covering laws," which defy the very essence of human society as an open system of learning agents. The historical grammar of *Verstehen*'s tense is past and present perfect, not present simple.

Accordingly, MMN does not posit heightened mortality as a precondition for national morality, or the mortality–morality nexus as the only factor shaping our sociopolitical choices. These are obviously only pieces of the grand puzzle of politics. Consequently, I chose not to compare small nations to self-confident "mighty nations," itself a promising line of inquiry that may indicate *to what extent* mortal nations seek additional moral support. Instead, I focus on small nations, exploring whether, why, and how their mortality and morality have evolved, intertwined, and shaped their sociopolitical trajectories. I suggest that collective mortality has fostered existential self-legitimation on a national scale, together affecting continuity and change between alternative political projects.[56]

[53] Billig, 1995:8. [54] Fitzmaurice, 2014; Hutchinson, 1987. [55] Weber, 2001:125.
[56] "Scientific realism" often refers to this type of causality as INUS, an *insufficient* but *nonredundant* part of an *unnecessary* but *sufficient* condition (Abulof, 2014c).

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