

CHAPTER I

What is loyalty?

THE QUESTION

There are different things to which you can be loyal and different ways in which you can be loyal. The way you feel and act towards your spouse, for example, is probably quite different from the way you feel and act towards your favorite football team, even though both are manifestations of loyalty.

This chapter begins to formulate a definition of loyalty, looking at what it is that all loyalties have in common, and how loyalties can differ in object and type while still counting as loyalties.

As far as possible, I want to answer these questions without prejudging or second-guessing our everyday uses of the concept. In telling a story about the nature of loyalty, there is a temptation to try to guarantee that anything that *really* counts as a loyalty will be something valuable, or something that deserves our approval. But I do not think that we should begin from the assumption that loyalty is, or ought to be made to look like, something that answers to certain independent evaluative standards. The first goal is to reach a better understanding not of true or good or sensible or rationally defensible loyalty, but just of loyalty.

Loyalty is sometimes spoken of as a character trait, as when we say that a particular person is, as well as being brave and clever, loyal. We can also speak of loyalty as a principle or ideal. Behind all these ways of thinking about loyalty, though, is the idea of a certain kind of relationship between individuals and the things to which they are loyal. There is the subject who is loyal, and there is the object to which she is loyal (which I will sometimes, unimaginatively, call X).

I start by making some important, but often overlooked, observations and distinctions. Then, I examine some of the things that philosophers say or presuppose about loyalty's nature. All of this in hand, I offer and defend my own suggestion about what makes something a loyalty.

LOYALTY AND CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

Imagine a person who has thought through the arguments and decided that classical utilitarianism is correct, and who, as a result, always endeavors to maximize happiness and minimize suffering. It is natural to say that she is committed to the cause of maximizing utility, and, if she follows the utilitarian principle in her everyday life, that she is principled and conscientious. (If you doubt that a utilitarian can really be principled or conscientious, then imagine a conscientious Kantian, or a conscientious follower of some other ethical theory.) It would be forced, though, to say that she is *loyal* to utilitarianism. What drives her is not loyalty to the utilitarian principle, but rather her considered conviction that that principle is true.

The point here is not that abstract moral principles are not the sorts of things to which a person can be loyal. Perhaps they are. Imagine a different person who also follows the utilitarian principle as best he can, but does so not because he thinks that the principle is true, exactly, but rather because he identifies with it; perhaps he has been brought up in a community of utilitarians, has developed a fondness for the utilitarian principle, and thinks of it as one to which he, by virtue of his unusual history, has a special connection. He follows the utilitarian principle because he thinks of it as *his* principle. It seems fair enough to say that this character is loyal to utilitarianism, and that that is why he acts as he does.

I take this to show that there is a difference between loyalty and conscientiousness. Just because someone deliberately follows a principled pattern of behavior, or is committed – perhaps fiercely – to a cause, does not mean that she is loyal.

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The point is related to a further one, which is that the facts about how a person acts are not in themselves enough to tell us whether, or to what, she is loyal. If I reliably keep my promises to you, then that might be because you are someone to whom I am loyal. Or, it might be because I believe that people should always keep their promises, or because I want to think of myself as the kind of person who always keeps promises, or because I promised your father that if I made you any promises I would keep them. In these later cases, it appears that the loyalties that drive me to act, if any, are to things other than you. The fact that you act towards something in the way that you would if you were loyal to it does not establish that you really are loyal to it. Whether or not you are loyal to something depends not only on what you do, but on how you are motivated.

EXPRESSIONS OF LOYALTY

There are several broad ways in which loyalty might be expressed. I want to focus attention on five. I will call them “loyalty in concern,” “loyalty in advocacy,” “loyalty in ritual,” “loyalty in identification,” and “loyalty in belief.” I do not mean the list to be exhaustive. There may well be other ways of manifesting loyalty. And, I do not mean to suggest that every expression of loyalty falls neatly into just one of these categories; the boundaries between types of loyalty can be blurred.

Loyalty in concern

You might express your loyalty to X by prioritizing X’s interests, or welfare, over the interests of comparable others. To prioritize X’s interests is to care more about X’s interests than about the interests of others, and to be motivated to do more to advance them. If you prioritize X’s interests, and if you do it out of loyalty to X, then you are displaying loyalty in concern.

A parent’s loyalty to her child, for example, typically includes loyalty in concern. A loyal parent is prepared to do things for her own child that she would not do for just any child.

Loyalty in advocacy

Imagine that you feel an allegiance to Al Gore. Perhaps you have always liked and admired him, perhaps he did something kind for you many years ago, or perhaps you are from the same town. At a dinner party, your companions start to talk about what a hopeless presidential candidate Gore was, and how incompetent he must have been to lose that election. You disagree, but if they were talking about anyone else you would play along or just stay silent. But this is Al Gore, so you feel compelled to say something in his defense. It is natural to think that in doing so you are acting out of loyalty to Gore. It may certainly seem that way to you; given the way that you feel about Gore, it may seem to you that you would be letting him down or doing the wrong thing by him if you did not stick up for him in this hostile environment. Your loyalty is expressed here as something other than a preparedness to do what advances its object's best interests. You are not trying to advance Al Gore's interests by defending him at the dinner party. (Perhaps there is a respect in which Gore is better off if he has a vocal sympathizer at a distant dinner party, but it is far-fetched to think that *that* consideration is what drives you to take your stand.) Rather, you are expressing your loyalty to Gore by being his advocate, by standing by him or sticking up for him.¹ That is loyalty in advocacy.

Loyalty in ritual

Loyalty is sometimes expressed through the performance of or participation in rituals, or more generally in practices that are understood to symbolize or express loyalty.² This is obviously the case with regard to patriotism; when a person expresses her patriotism

¹ Stroud gives a similar case, in which you are present when someone makes a mean joke about your friend: "it is *disloyal* to join in the joke". "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship," p. 503.

² See the discussion in chapter 4 of Fletcher's *Loyalty*.

by reciting a pledge of allegiance, saluting the flag or standing to attention during the national anthem, she is participating in a structured, conventional ritual that carries meaning as an expression of loyal commitment to country. For another case, think of someone who does not especially enjoy or value attending church for its own sake, but nevertheless feels loyal to her religious heritage and goes to church every week for that reason. It would be distorting things to say that she is trying to advance the interests of her religious heritage, or that she is acting as its advocate. Rather, through the ritual of attending church she honors and affirms her loyal commitment to the way of life in which she was raised.

There are many other cases in which loyalty is expressed in the same basic way – cases in which loyalty is manifested through the engagement in rites or practices or customs that are conventionally associated with loyalty – even though the word “ritual” is probably not the one we would first choose to describe the behavior involved. In wearing a wedding ring, or staying to the very end of your team’s game even though it is losing badly and the weather is miserable, you are doing something similar to the patriot in saluting the flag. It is less a matter of trying to benefit the object of your loyalty, or advocating its cause, than doing what you do if you really are a loyal romantic partner or fan.

George P. Fletcher suggests that the point of engaging in a ritual of loyalty is to demonstrate loyalty, by which he means that the point is to communicate loyalty, to make it public and visible; through rituals, he says, communal loyalties are established and deepened.³ I think that the more fundamental unifying feature of rituals of loyalty is that those who perform them see them as ways of honoring and respecting the objects of their loyalties. A patriot who salutes the flag in private is not communicating her loyalty to anyone, but she is still expressing her patriotism. The person who attends church out of loyalty to her religious heritage, or who wears a concealed token of her love for her romantic partner, may well do so not in order to announce her loyalty, but just as its

³ See *Loyalty*, chapter 4, especially p. 62.

expression. She is venerating the thing to which she is loyal, whether her veneration is communicated to anyone or not.

Loyalty in identification

One way in which someone's loyalty might be expressed is through a tendency to identify herself with the object of her loyalty. Such a loyal person to some extent treats the thing to which she is loyal as though it was her, feeling as she would feel and acting as she would act if certain things that are true of it were true of her. If your loyalty to your favorite sporting team is expressed in such a way, then you may feel like a success yourself when your team is doing well, and like a failure when your team is doing badly. You may feel pride when your team does something good – when it wins a tough game or raises money for charity – and you may feel shame when your team does something bad – when it gives an insipid performance or mistreats its players. Such reactions exist beyond any tendencies to want to advance the interests of the object of your loyalty, to serve as its advocate, or to venerate it through involvement in appropriate rituals.

Loyalty in belief

The last kind of loyalty that I want to discuss has its primary expression not in particular emotions, desires or actions, but rather in the tendency to form or resist certain beliefs. As someone's loyal friend, you may be especially inclined to believe that she is not guilty of the crimes of which she is accused. As a loyal parent, you may be especially inclined to believe that your child has special virtues and talents. As a loyal fan of a football team, you may be especially inclined to believe that it was someone from the other team who started the fight.

Your loyalty to X is expressed as loyalty in belief if being loyal to X inclines you to hold or resist certain beliefs, independently of the evidence. One way of seeing whether you are displaying loyalty in belief is to ask whether you would have the beliefs that you have

about X if it were not X but some other comparable thing (to which you are not loyal) that was involved, and if you had just the same evidence with regard to this alternative thing as you actually have with regard to X. So, a father might be displaying loyalty in belief if he believes, having watched his daughter play in a soccer game, that she was one of the best players on the field, but would not believe the same about another girl if he saw her do on the field exactly what was done by his daughter. Later chapters show that loyalty in belief is a common and often problematic part of some familiar manifestations of loyalty.

LOYALTY AND SELF-AWARENESS

A curious feature of loyalty in belief is that it is difficult to see how someone could display it with full awareness of what she is doing. It is difficult to see how someone could form a belief in conscious response to a consideration that she knows not to bear upon its truth.⁴ (There is something very odd about someone who believes P, while happily admitting that her reasons for believing P do not bear upon the question of whether P is true or false.) Rather than being a problem for the idea that loyalty could be expressed as loyalty in belief, this observation illustrates something that there is good independent reason to believe: it is possible to be loyal to something, and to have your loyalty influence your actions, without knowing it.

Suppose that you are on a hiring committee, and a good friend of yours is an applicant for the job. You make a special effort to consider your friend's application on its merits and without bias, and believe that your effort is successful. After considering all the applicants, you come to the conclusion that your friend really is the best person for the job, and so he gets your vote. Some years later, perhaps after your friend has been hired and the appointment has not worked out well, you look back at the hiring process and realize that really, all along, you were influenced by your loyalty to

⁴ See Williams, "Deciding to Believe."

your friend. You thought at the time that you were not acting out of loyalty, but, looking back, you realize that you were.

Along similar lines, people can be imagined who insist that they are not loyal to something, when it is clear to others that they are. I might insist, and really believe, that I feel no love or loyalty towards my father, and that when I do things for him I am really just acting out of self-interest – trying to secure my inheritance or keep him off my back – when it is obvious to those around me that I am wrong about my motivations, that I am in denial about the deeply felt connection with my father which really leads me to act as I do, even as I do my best to rationalize it away.

There is, by the way, a quite different argument that could show that those who are loyal need not be aware of it: some nonhuman animals can be loyal. Some birds are loyal to their mates, and a dog, or a breed of dog, can be informatively described as more loyal than another. But loyal birds and dogs presumably are not aware of being loyal, because they have no idea what loyalty is. (The same might be said of young children.) I suppose that when we talk about loyalty in animals we might just be getting it wrong – perhaps animals are not really *loyal* at all – and it is possible that loyalty in animals, though it exists, is utterly different from loyalty in humans. My own view is that animals really can be loyal and that some kinds of loyalty in animals are not so different from some kinds of loyalty in humans. I am, for this reason, motivated to provide an account of loyalty that is less intellectualized than some.⁵ But my arguments for the account will not depend upon the claim about animals.

LOYALTY AS PRIORITIZING INTERESTS

The next two sections describe and criticize some claims about the nature of loyalty that appear in the philosophical literature. Philosophers who write about loyalty sometimes take it for granted that to be loyal to something is to have a special concern with its

⁵ For a different view, see Fletcher, *Loyalty*, pp. 9–10.

interests. Philip Pettit, for example, says that “to be loyal is to be dedicated to a particular individual’s welfare”; and R. E. Ewin suggests that loyalty is, at least in part, “the binding of oneself preferentially to the interests of a certain group or individual,” and, later, that loyalty is a willingness to “take the interests of others as one’s own.”⁶

The philosophers who work with this conception of loyalty tend to be those who are dealing with the question of whether a universalistic moral theory can make room for partiality. The problem here is essentially a structural one: if a moral theory says that the value of individuals has nothing to do with their particular connections to other individuals, can it nevertheless allow us to favor some individuals in virtue of the connections that they happen to hold to us? To motivate the discussion, all that is needed is an idea of someone who acts well, even while acting partially. This partiality is, in such discussions, called “loyalty.”

I have suggested that there are ways of expressing loyalty that do not come down to prioritizing the interests of the loyalty’s object; there are expressions of loyalty other than loyalty in concern. That might be consistent with the conception of loyalty under discussion, though, if it turns out that prioritizing something’s welfare is always a way of being loyal to it, and if loyalty, whatever else it involves, always includes loyalty in concern. But that is not the way things are; prioritizing X’s interests is neither sufficient nor necessary for loyalty to X.

You can prioritize something’s interests without being loyal to it. I might prioritize your interests because I was ordered to do so by my commanding officer, or as a way of expressing my loyalty to your father, or because I decided for my own eccentric reasons to prioritize for the rest of my life the interests of the next person to walk through that door, who happened to be you. In all these cases, I am prioritizing your interests without feeling any special regard for you. They all count as cases in which I

⁶ Pettit, “The Paradox of Loyalty,” p. 163. Ewin, “Loyalty and Virtues,” pp. 406, 419.

prioritize your interests, even though you are not someone to whom I am loyal.

Further, you can be loyal to something without prioritizing its interests. A university professor works at an institution whose president is very unpopular among the faculty. This professor, like his colleagues, has no affection for the president; he dislikes and disapproves of him, and thinks it would be a very good thing if he were replaced. Still, the professor will not, on principle, criticize the president, or sign petitions calling for his removal. The reason he will not speak out against the president is that the president played a large part in bringing this professor to the university, and the professor feels that he owes the president his job. To that extent, he feels a special connection to the president, and feels that it would be disloyal – that he would be failing to honor this special connection – if he were to turn around and speak badly of the president.

This does not change the fact that the professor really does not care for the president. The professor's belief is not that speaking out against the president would cause him harm – the professor may well judge that his involvement will make no difference to anything – but rather that it is inappropriate, or unedifying, for one who owes his job to the president to then take a stand against him. There is certainly no generalized concern for the president's welfare; the professor would not make special sacrifices in order to secure any of the president's best interests, and would not be upset to learn that the president had fallen under a bus. His loyalty, which is, in its own way, deeply felt, is expressed purely through a refusal to criticize the president in public. He is recognizably loyal to the president, but does not prioritize his interests.

There is really nothing odd about this case. Cases in which loyalty to X does not involve a heightened level of concern for X's interests are quite common. Let me give one more example. If I am loyal to a brand of running shoes, then I have a kind of emotional attachment to the brand and go out of my way to buy and wear shoes of this brand rather than others. Perhaps it is in the interests of the brand to have a customer like me, but I certainly do not buy