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## THE LIMITS OF LOYALTY

We prize loyalty in our friends, lovers, and colleagues, but loyalty raises difficult questions. What is the point of loyalty? Should we be loyal to country, just as we are loyal to friends and family? Can the requirements of loyalty conflict with the requirements of morality? In this book Simon Keller explores the varieties of loyalty and their psychological and ethical differences, and concludes that loyalty is an essential but fallible part of human life. He argues that grown children can be obliged to be loyal to their parents, that good friendship can sometimes conflict with moral and epistemic standards, and that patriotism is intimately linked with certain dangers and delusions. He goes on to build an approach to the ethics of loyalty that differs from standard communitarian and universalist accounts. His book will interest a wide range of readers in ethics and political philosophy.

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## *Preface*

We all have loyalties; think of some of yours. Probably, many of your loyalties are to other people: your friends, for example, and perhaps your colleagues, parents, children or romantic partner. You might also be loyal to certain institutions, like a university or a political party; or to your favorite brands or shops or restaurants; or to your pets, your country or your profession. Some of your loyalties, probably, are very important to you, playing a major role in your life and your self-conception; examples might be your loyalties to your spouse and children. Others, while having their place, probably do not seem quite so important: your loyalty to a local coffee shop, say, or your loyalty to your favorite football team.

If you are loyal to something, then you probably favor it, in one way or another, in your actions. You might promote its interests, treat it with respect or veneration, follow its orders, or act as its advocate. But loyalty is not just a matter of how you act; it is also a matter of how you think, and how you are motivated. If you are loyal to something, then thoughts of it may inflame your passions, it may be something towards which you feel warmth and affection, and you may be saddened by thoughts of its suffering or demise. You may think of it as *yours* – your country, your friend; in any case, you probably think of it as something with which you have a special connection, perhaps by virtue of a shared history or commitment. You may also form judgments about it in distinctive ways; you might give it the benefit of the doubt, or trust it implicitly, or you might, as someone who has a stake in its performance, judge it with an especially harsh and critical eye. And it may play a special role in

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your imagination; you may imagine it to meet a certain ideal, and you may imagine yourself as its special champion or guardian.

This book is about the nature of loyalty, and the ethical issues that loyalty raises. I am particularly interested in three questions. First, what is involved in different forms of loyalty? For example, what exactly is patriotism, and how does it differ from other kinds of loyalty? Second, how should different forms of loyalty be regarded from an ethical point of view? For example, are we obliged to show certain sorts of loyalty to our parents, and is it always good to be a good friend? Third, what is the ethical status of loyalty as a general proposition? For example, is loyalty a virtue, and is it, as some suggest, the phenomenon on which healthy moral thinking is founded?

We need to pay a great deal of attention to the first question before we can make much progress with the other two. There are many ways in which loyalties differ, in kind as well as in object. A loyal patriot, for example, does not treat her country in the same way that a loyal friend treats her friends, or that a loyal parent treats her child, or that a loyal fan treats her favorite football team. The differences between loyalties are ethically significant. Just because we say that one kind of loyalty is good, dangerous, permissible, obligatory, or whatever, does not mean that we should say the same about other kinds of loyalty. Investigating loyalty and its ethical significance begins, then, with questions in moral psychology. We should start by looking carefully at different kinds of loyalty, and the kinds of action and thinking that they involve, and only then look to questions about loyalty in general.

In taking this approach, I set myself apart from most philosophical writing on loyalty. The literature on loyalty can be divided into two major strands. The first and most prominent is the discussion of the problem that loyalty poses for universalist morality.<sup>1</sup> Universalist

<sup>1</sup> The literature is vast. For some examples, see Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, Book II Chapter 2; Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories”; Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality”; Baron, “Impartiality and Friendship”; Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of

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moral theories say that individuals are valuable by virtue of properties that they possess inherently, like rationality or sentience, and that our moral principles should therefore be impartial principles; they should not pay attention to how others happen to be connected to us. Loyalty is a problem for universalist morality because loyalty involves partiality (if you are loyal to your daughter, then you favor her over other children, just because she is your daughter); and it seems obvious that loyalty is sometimes desirable (it would be wrong *not* to pay special attention to the interests of your own daughter). Yet universalist theories, like utilitarianism and Kantianism, seem to imply that we should be impartial (your daughter is no more valuable than anyone else simply because she is your daughter). Should we then reject universalist morality, or disapprove of loyalty? Or can loyalty be satisfactorily accounted for after all, provided our universalism is sufficiently sophisticated?

The second strand of philosophical writing about loyalty is more constructive, sometimes aggressively so. It is a strand followed in the two major English-language books about loyalty, Josiah Royce's *The Philosophy of Loyalty* and George P. Fletcher's *Loyalty*, as well as in much communitarian writing. Its central claim is that loyalty is a central human need and, indeed, the foundation of moral agency. You need to be loyal, runs the suggestion, in order to understand or construct your very identity, and in order to have a plan for a moral life and the motivation to live it. The moral life is, or at least grows out of, the loyal life.

Both strands of the literature on loyalty have features that tend to obscure the questions I am most interested in. First, they involve top-down approaches to the ethics of loyalty. We start with a high-level moral theory, then we see if we can find and cope with potential counter-examples; or, we set out with the ambition of showing how loyalty can serve as the foundation of morality, then try to make individual loyalties fit into that project. Secondly,

Morality"; Cocking and Oakley, "Indirect Consequentialism, Friendship, and the Problem of Alienation"; Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion"; and the articles referred to in the discussion of universalism and communitarianism in Chapter 3.

neither approach has much use for subtle distinctions between loyalties. For the literature on loyalty and universalism, what matters, for the most part, is that loyalty involves partiality. For the project of grounding morality in loyalty, there is pressure to make loyalty look like a single, unified phenomenon – a basic element in whose terms more complex moral phenomena can be explained.

This book takes a “bottom-up” approach to the ethics of loyalty. I begin by looking at some particular kinds of loyalty and some of the ethical issues they raise, then move on to consider loyalty as a more general phenomenon. As far as possible, I proceed independently of any agenda in higher-level theory. The first part of the book examines different kinds of loyalty, focusing on friendship, patriotism and filial loyalty. The second part of the book turns to questions about the place that loyalty should take in our thinking about morality. I argue that there is no such value or virtue as loyalty, and that the notion of loyalty is not suited to any foundational theoretical role. Here is a summary of the chapters.

Chapter 1 offers and defends a definition of loyalty, arguing that the concept of loyalty is fairly thin – there are many very different things that all count as forms of loyalty – and that it is not deeply evaluative; there is no conceptual reason to think that just because something counts as a loyalty, there is something good about it.

Chapter 2 is about friendship; I argue that good friendship can involve being prepared to form beliefs independently of the evidence, and that there are sometimes good (epistemic) reasons not to conduct yourself as a good friend. Chapters 3 and 4 are about patriotism; again my concern is with dispositions of belief. I try to show that patriotism involves a tendency towards self-deception, of a certain unattractive sort, and that this is a reason to think that patriotism is a vice. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss filial loyalty, by way of filial duty. I begin with the conviction that we have special duties to our parents, defend a particular account of how those duties arise, and end with the claim that filial loyalty – in the fully fledged psychological sense – can be a duty.

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The remainder of the book focuses upon the moral role of loyalty, considered as a general notion. Chapter 7 argues that loyalty is not a value or a virtue. Chapter 8 considers and tries to defuse some well-known arguments for the claim that loyalty has some kind of central ethical importance. Chapter 9 looks closely at the system developed in Royce's *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. I argue that the development of Royce's thought reveals some formidable obstacles to the project of replacing universalist morality with an "ethics of loyalty," as well as some problems for a certain broad kind of communitarianism. Chapter 10 is about disloyalty, and the question of whether a view like mine, according to which loyalty is not a virtue, can explain why disloyalty seems so clearly to be a vice. The Conclusion states the overall view of loyalty and its value to which the arguments of the book lead.

It will already be clear that I have something to say about the view that loyalty could be the foundation of morality; I think that it is mistaken. I do not address the literature on loyalty and universalism directly in the main body of the book, though I touch upon it at several points. In the Postscript, though, I try to bring together the various claims that are relevant to that debate, and make some tentative suggestions.

Beyond advocating views about friendship, patriotism, filial duty and the ethical status of loyalty and disloyalty, I hope to advance a programmatic suggestion too. The psychology of loyalty is complicated, and often problematic. Loyalties affect the way we behave, the way we think about ourselves, and the way we form beliefs, among other things. The psychology of loyalty constitutes an important area of ethical enquiry. I hope to show that the right way to engage in that enquiry is to start with careful distinctions between different kinds of loyalty, and also that much of the enquiry can be carried out in isolation from commitments to higher-level moral and political ideologies.

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“Friendship and Belief,” *Philosophical Papers* 33:3 (2004): 329–351.

“Patriotism as Bad Faith,” *Ethics* 115:3 (2005): 563–592.

“Four Theories of Filial Duty,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 56:223 (2006): 254–274.

“Royce and Communitarianism,” *The Pluralist* 2:2 (2007): 16–30.