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.

SIMON KELLER is Research Fellow at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne, and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Boston University.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td></td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td></td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What is loyalty?</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Friendship and belief</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>What is patriotism?</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Against patriotism</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Filial duty: debt, gratitude and friendship</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Filial duty: special goods and compulsory loyalty</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Is loyalty a value? Is loyalty a virtue?</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Communitarian arguments for the importance of loyalty</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Josiah Royce and the ethics of loyalty</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Disloyalty</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Postscript: universal morality and the problem of loyalty</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td></td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
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. 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...
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,
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.
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.
Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed to the writing of this book, through conversations about the material and in other ways. I have the space (and memory) to mention only some of them.

Much of the book was written while I was a fellow at the Center for Ethics at Harvard University. I am grateful to the Center and the Boston University Humanities Foundation for funding my time there, and to Arthur Applbaum and my group of fellows for helpful discussions about my work. I owe special thanks to Deborah Hellman and Catherine Lu, who gave comments on drafts of several chapters.

I have talked through almost all of the material in the book, at one time or another, with Casey O’Callaghan, Aaron Garrett, David Lyons, Amelie Rorty and Caspar Hare. My thoughts about patriotism owe much to conversations with Igor Primoratz and Marcia Baron. I have benefited from the input of several audiences at talks and conferences; I received especially helpful feedback during vigorous conversations about friendship at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, about filial duty at Monash University, and about Royce at the “Royce and Community” conference in Oklahoma City. My chair, Charles Griswold, has been very supportive of my research and my requests for time to focus on it.

Two of my reviewers for Cambridge University Press, I now know, were Jimmy Altham and John Doris. I learned a great deal from their careful and generous reports, and also from that of a third reviewer, who remains anonymous. Nick Zangwill provided helpful feedback and suggested the book’s title. While preparing the final manuscript, I received very extensive and insightful comments from
Alice MacLachlan; these led to many changes in the text and in my thinking, and made me aware of just how far I am from having said the last word.

Most of all, I am grateful for the support and encouragement of my wife, Maree Henwood. I fear that it would send the wrong message to dedicate a book called *The Limits of Loyalty*, so let me just say that she is the one who makes it all possible and worthwhile.

Some of the material in the book has been previously published, in the following articles.


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.
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.
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. That is loyalty in advocacy.

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. 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.