

Loyalty: A Help or a Hindrance? Examined through the Perspective of Moral Accountability

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Loyalty can be morally helpful or harmful. Helpful because it offers me a reason to do good: I do not feel worthy of human closeness if I have violated my ethical system. For example, I was given a warning for speeding this Summer. I could have withheld this information from my parents, but then I would have felt unworthy of their affection, so I instead told the truth. In this situation, my loyalty to them increased my moral accountability, but loyalty can also reduce moral accountability and offer me an excuse *not* to do good: in the previous example, I could have withheld this speeding information from my parents without consequences. If they did find out, they would still love me because of their loyalty to me.

I am wary of the reduction of moral accountability due to loyalty. For example, ‘senioritis’ afflicts many of this nation’s college-bound youths. These students know that their top choice college has already accepted them, so they have no incentive to work hard and reaffirm their academic excellence to the college because they will go there anyways. In this sense, they no longer have academic accountability. In the same way, I think loyalty in relationships reduces accountability. People with loyalty are ‘stuck together,’ and they can often get away with unfavorable actions because of this. For example, one time my father told our family a one-liner about this same concept: he asked, “how do you turn a fox into an elephant? You marry it.” He was making a joke about a woman losing accountability for her appearance after marriage because she no longer has to impress her partner, and she is no longer accountable for her looks.

Ironically, my father may have lost accountability for the moral good after marriage; he knew that telling the joke would not have affected his relationship with my mother because of their loyalty to each other. If they had not been married, I do not think that he would have made this same joke. This concept can be generalized, and I have observed that lots of people with loyalty continue their relationships despite personal failings that seem insurmountable. This is negative, and I want to hold potential part-

ners to high standards despite our commitments to each other. However, I wonder if it is even possible to do this: can I have loyalty and retain moral accountability? I think the two are incompatible. The clear solution to increase accountability is to eliminate loyalty entirely: if people’s relationships can end at any time if they do the wrong thing, people would be held accountable for their actions and more inspired to act morally. There are two common objections to my thoughts.

First, this idea isn’t prudent, and the widespread adoption of my thinking would create a negative, or at least unfamiliar, world. In a world without loyalty, and where everyone was concerned about making ethical decisions, we would create a self-policing community wherein each member would deputize himself to punish ethical offenders, and each would employ their own relationships as moral incentives. Arguably, part of the beauty of relationships is knowing that, regardless of personal failure, someone will always support you. For example, spouses do not have to testify against each other in court, despite the horror of their beloved’s crime. I don’t know what I think about this self-policing world. I want to live in an ethical world, but is there any value to ethical decisions if someone is forcing you to make them? For example, customers hold companies accountable to make politically correct choices, but doesn’t this cheapen the choice? We all know it was forced. Maybe part of the beauty of a relationship is that both members make their own choices without worrying about their partner leaving them if they act on their own will. Do I want to partner with someone unconditionally, and do I want someone to partner with me unconditionally? I do not know.

Second, some would object to my premises. People are not exclusively morally righteous or immoral. No ivy-bound kid turns into a senioritis-afflicted slacker, no married woman turns from fox to elephant after marriage, and my father did not turn from an

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Loyalty: A Help or Hindrance? (continued)

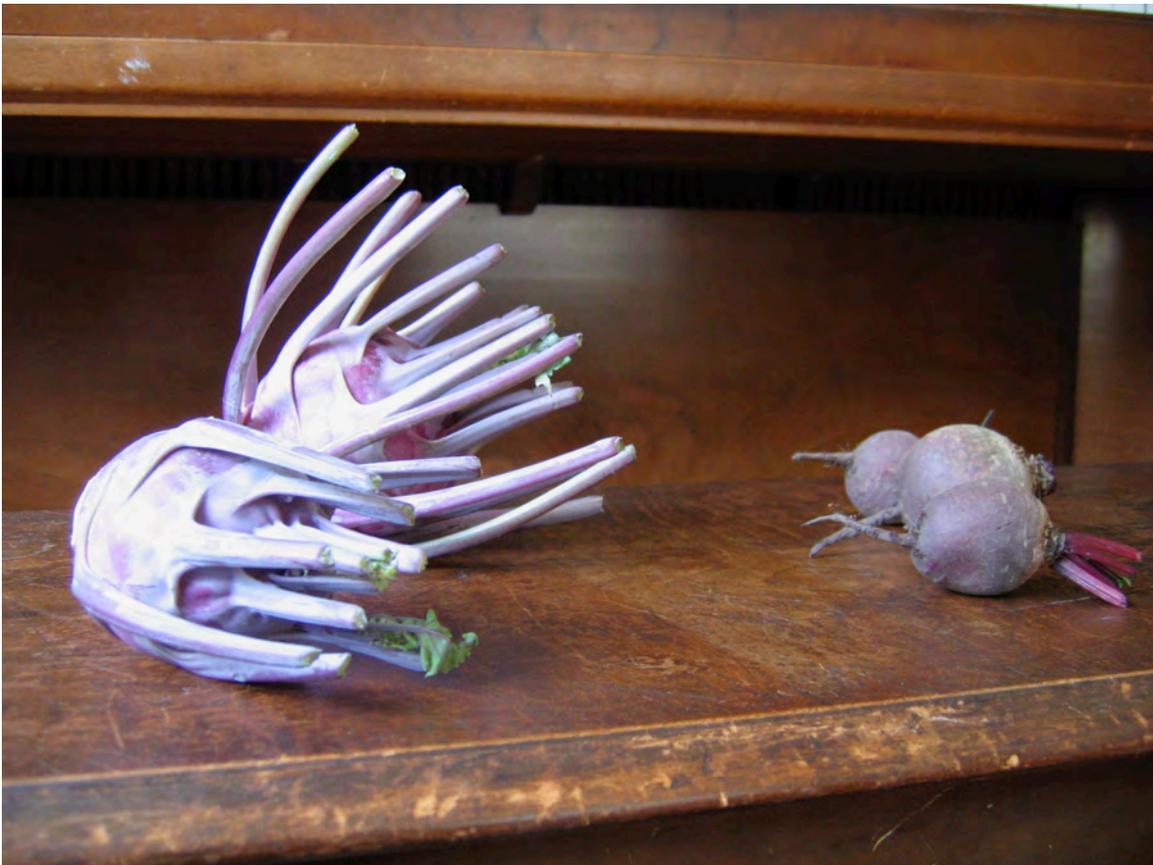
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egalitarian to a chauvinist; we are all somewhere in between, and people form relationships and develop loyalty for others because they have faith in who the other is and will become. I agree with this line of reasoning: I am loyal to certain friends because I believe that I know them well enough to have faith in their future decisions. Even if I disagree with their most recent actions, that shouldn't erase the long history we have together because I know that they are generally good. Thus, I accept this critique.

However, I don't think this is contingent upon loyalty. Historical data can predict future actions, and this can be used to make decisions about relationships. If someone has a history of being good and errs once, that person deserves forgiveness more than a person with a history of doing bad things- any rational person would make this decision. However, loyalty corrupts this process. A person with loyalty would look at these same two offenders, and they would forgive the person they have loyalty to. If all

people deserve equal treatment, like I so fundamentally believe, how can someone I am loyal to deserve good things more than someone I am not?

Overall, loyalty can make me morally accountable to others, but I am also wary of its ability to erode accountability. Some aspects of loyalty are good, such as looking to past experience as criteria to judge someone's actions, but I don't think that these aspects are exclusive qualities of loyalty. I do not know what this means for my own life. I have decided that there are both good and bad implications of loyalty. I do not know how to have relationships without loyalty if I wanted to, or if this is even possible. Going forward, loyalty holds me accountable, but I will be aware of its possible harms, and I will try to increase my accountability in my relationships. I do not want loyalty to absolve me if I do something badly, and I do not want to unfairly judge people I do not have loyalty to.



HOW OUGHT WE TO JUDGE DIFFERENCES?