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Article *in* Contemporary Philosophy · April 2007

DOI: 10.5840/pcw200714118

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Loyalty in the Workplace: To What End?

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ABSTRACT: Corporate codes of conduct frequently impose a duty of loyalty upon employees. I examine the notion of loyalty in general, and loyalty in the workplace in particular. I conclude that unless loyalty is defined and articulated in favor of a larger social project (rather than in favor of a person, a set of rules, or other entity), efforts to encourage loyalty will be a source of epistemic distortion at best, and oppression at worst.

LOYALTY IN THE WORKPLACE is often freely given, and sometimes demanded. Most vehicles in the employee parking lots of auto assembly plants are the same make as those being assembled inside. Workers often arrive early, and work late, without insisting that every moment spent on the employer's real estate be compensated. The purchasing habits of retail employees tend to favor their employers. And even at family and social gatherings, employees often find themselves praising their employers' products and services.

And yet employee loyalty is nevertheless demanded by many employers from time to time, and in a variety of direct and subtle ways. Most obviously, employee loyalty is called for by corporate codes of conduct. A simple internet search that includes the terms "code of conduct" and "loyalty" can turn up hundreds of examples of corporate codes that include some form of loyalty requirement. Most organizational codes of conduct, in fact, prohibit actions that conflict (or might appear to conflict) with employer interests.

This article explores the notion of workplace loyalty. The idea of loyalty-as-virtue is revisited, taking into account the rigorous treatment of this topic by such thinkers as Royce and Fletcher. Particular attention is given here to the possibility

that personal relationships at work, and whistleblowing, represent two examples of workplace disloyalty.

1. Loyalty as Reliable Duty Fulfillment

Loyalty can be described and defined in many ways, and each definition predetermines the application of the concept within any specific context. Dogs are loyal. So are sports fans. Mob bosses, teenage peer groups, cult leaders, academic department chairs, and political leaders all exhibit some preference for loyalty. But when demands for loyalty are incorporated into a corporate code of conduct, those demands deserve careful scrutiny. Especially when a corporate code of conduct is held out – and enforced – as the articulation of corporate ethical policies. Similarly, when employer insistence upon loyalty interferes with a system or pathway for the accommodation of whistleblowing, a dysfunctionality can emerge.

For purposes of this effort, I borrow from Andrew Olquist's taxonomy of loyalties published in a 1982 issue of *The Journal of Philosophy*. For him, loyalty was not a singular concept, but an expression of several different impulses. I have reorganized his descriptions, for purposes of this analysis, into the following: Loyalty as reliable duty fulfillment; loyalty as devotion to duty; loyalty as other-directedness; and loyalty as devotion to a mutual cause.

The first categorization of loyalty is normative. It considers reliable external behavior to be the best indicator of loyalty. Under this approach, keeping one's promise of devotion, fulfillment of contractual obligations, and reliable fulfillment of employment responsibilities are all indicators of loyalty. Conversely, this approach the definition of loyalty can sometimes be better understood by asking a subsidiary question: Which behaviors and traits exhibit disloyalty?

A careful analysis of this version of loyalty will reveal that the idea of loyalty contributes little *per se*. That is because disloyal actions are usually described in terms of breaching duties other than the duty of loyalty, such as truth-telling or the reliable meeting of responsibilities. If an action violates a duty *other than* loyalty, I would use Ockham's razor to argue that that external duty may – and therefore should – be examined without the excess baggage of loyalty.

As R.E. Ewin observes, this somewhat skewed definition is circular: to define loyalty in terms of what is morally due the object of loyalty, is to reduce the notion of loyalty to mere dutifulness in pursuit of another obligation. Further, to the extent that loyalty would function solely under the umbrage of "moral duty," the concept becomes a straw person adorned with the normative brush of "good" faithfulness (as opposed to "bad" reliability and obedience, which John Ladd readily associates with Nazi jingoism). Under this regime, loyalty is defined and described as merely as the virtue of dutifulness in pursuit of right actions.

Loyalty itself, further, is not universally recognized as right action.. George Fletcher notes that loyalty can be as dangerous as helpful. He points to nepotism within organizations, organized crime, and even wars of vengeance, as examples of loyalty in the pursuit of less than honorable ambitions. For Fletcher, loyalty is entirely context-dependent. Some seemingly disloyal actions do not necessarily violate a duty, but nevertheless trigger disappointment. However, any definition of

loyalty in terms that limit its boundaries to the expectations of another will necessarily reduce the concept to that of anticipatory obligation. Loyalty then becomes enslaved to the informed or uninformed hopes of the person or group seeking loyalty, and loses its status as an independent concept that can be grasped by the person from whom loyalty is expected.

If those who have power are allowed to define loyalty in terms of the fulfillment of duties, oppression – or at least the perception of oppression – can be the outcome. This can be seen in obvious cases like totalitarian political regimes. But empirical studies such as those done by Watson and Shepard demonstrate that even in within the relatively freewheeling environs of the modern corporation, top-down rule changes can trigger resentment by employees and reduce, rather than enhance, their personal, voluntary sense of loyalty to their employer.

2. Loyalty as Devotion to Duty

A second view, which treats loyalty as a virtue, emphasizes wholeheartedness in the fulfillment of duties. That is, loyalty is measured by the passion and persistence with which duties or obligations are performed. George R. Randels, Jr. understands loyalty to be a social passion, a type of love that characterizes a person. Like Robert C. Solomon, he believes that loyalty also helps to define the identities of individuals and groups. Seen through this lens, loyalty refers to the level of dedication and commitment brought to bear by an individual. It recognizes the intensity with which the actor identifies with the purposefulness of the actions. It acknowledges that most people prioritize and performed certain highly valued duties with greater zeal than other they apply to other tasks, and that loyalty is a quality that accompanies such focus.

It is this variation of loyalty that most closely lends itself to an Aristotelean virtue formulation, because its excesses and deficiencies inhibit the flourishing of person or entity. A person who fulfills responsibilities owed to another in a minimal, mechanistic, or mindless manner hardly contributes to the well-being of anyone, including himself or herself. But obligations completed in an overly zealous manner are not necessarily fulfilled optimally. This ideal of loyalty seems to elicit a greater zeal in the performance of a duty on behalf of another.

Defined in this manner, loyalty all but disappears once it is examined alongside, and eventually conflated into, other virtues, such as courage, sincerity, and trustworthiness. The virtuous qualities – other than loyalty itself – that this variant of loyalty highlights are themselves more readily recognized and more easily understood, than loyalty-as-passion. In most analyses, these other virtues tend to overshadow and absorb loyalty, until loyalty as a separate virtue is effectively deflated or deconstructed.

To confine virtuous or "good" loyalty to an Aristotelean mean, finally, is also unhelpful. Disloyalty, as noted above, can usually be understood in terms of a separately identifiable moral failing (breach of trust, breaking of a promise, etc.), or, alternatively, as a moral, immoral, or amoral action that engenders disappointment on the part of the object of loyalty. And overzealous, blind loyalty serves as a mere

exaggeration of an epistemic flaw that is essential to the concept of loyalty, as discussed below.

3. Loyalty as Other-Orientation

An orientation toward, and a sensitivity to, the Other, is generally understood under most ethical and religious regimes to be right action. A social epistemology of Other-orientation, under these regimes, is a precondition for such right action. That is, my efforts to attempt to understand the interests of another individual or group, and my decision to align my actions with what I believe *they* perceive to be their best interests, enable me to act in ways that will help the Other(s) to flourish. This Other-orientation can be articulated in terms of duty, as in the case of some religious worldviews (e.g., "Love thy neighbor"), or it can be articulated as an expression of phenomenological intersubjectivity. Empathy and interpretation are the foundational dynamics of this version of loyalty. To attempt to empathize with the Other, and interpret the needs and interests of the Other, involves a global interpretative perception. But it also tends to (or, in the view of some, necessarily) objectify the Other.

"Strong" Other-orientation, from this view of loyalty, reduces influence of the Subject and increases the influence of the Other. Members of personality cults and victims of "brainwashing" provide examples of the extreme form of Other-orientation. But strong Other-orientation can be seen whenever there is a generalized willingness to yield one's locus of authority, selfhood or critical perspective, to the influence of another. "Weak" Other-orientation is a less empathetic expression of Other-orientation, involving a willingness or tendency to presume the needs and interests of another. Acts of chauvinism – whether in a patristic, colonial, or other social-engineering context – provide examples of weak Other-orientation. The essential difference between strong and weak Other-orientation, then, is the perception and deployment of power.

Many corporations have published a code of conduct that signals an attempt to impose strong loyalty in favor of the corporation. The Boeing Corporation code, for example, prohibits employee actions that "might create a conflict of interest for the company." This calls upon employees to place (their perception of) corporate interests ahead of their own interests, or those of their community or society. This fiat speaks to the creation of, rather than the resolution of, conflicts of interest. In fact, conflicts of interest of varying degrees and types occur every workday, and even extend beyond the workday and the workplace. Family obligations, health maintenance issue, large and small ethical dilemmas, and a plethora of other interactions and dynamics that comprise an employee's Being create present or potential conflicts of interest vis the immediate or perceived interests of her employer. It is the thoughtful, insightful and wise resolution of those conflicts, not the existence of those conflicts, that can allow the individual, the corporation, and society to flourish.

Moral virtues (e.g., honesty and sincerity), then, are dependent upon epistemic virtues. In particular, a truth-seeking intentionality precedes specific truth-seeking about ethics, morality, or virtues. Montmarquet suggests that epistemic

responsibility requires such evidence of moral conscientiousness as impartiality, intellectual courage, and an other-directedness.

Loyalty to persons interferes with such moral conscientiousness. When I am loyal to country, kin, community, or a corporation, I engage in at least a partial suspension of my judgment of, and critical thinking about, that entity. As Dennis Moberg observes, a constant and continual reconsideration and recalculation of the costs and benefits of one's marriage, citizenship, or work affiliation negates any notion of loyalty.

4. Loyalty as Devotion to a Mutual Cause

It is this version of loyalty that most accommodates epistemic clarity. To the extent that I perform my pre-existing duties, or perform them well or zealously, I have not employed new curiosity or engaged in a fresh critique of those duties or their ends. And to the extent that my focus is on the Other and the interests of the Other (as I perceive that the Other perceives those interests), I am also forfeiting my intellectual appraisal of those interests and their effective pursuit. But if I critique my own Other-orientation, I discover that I am afforded the opportunity to independently appraise the interests of the Other, my selection and performance of duties on behalf of those interests, and the overall project represented by both.

This idea of thoughtful loyalty to mutual ideals, rather than to specific persons or groups, can readily be interpreted as disloyalty or betrayal by the objects of such loyalty. This has been observed in connection with groups as diverse as business organizations and political communities. Moberg, for example, suggests that the common project of peers within a business organization can serve as an appropriate object of loyalty. He recognizes that some projects can be evil, and that fierce and zealous loyalty to "good" projects can result in ruthlessness. But he proposes that common projects that qualify for loyalty are those first-order efforts that promote flourishing, and that are not based on fear, the promise of tangible external rewards, or the need for second-order social rewards (p. 72).

Lisa Tessman, similarly, has examined the impact of loyalty on the freedom and the future viability of feminist communities, and communities of racialized groups. She draws from Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between a group (in particular, a nation) as the object of loyalty (which, in turn, is itself not exempt from criticism), and the larger project of that group. She observes that liberatory communities can benefit from a form of discerning – and even critical – loyalty that honors the group's larger project. Otherwise, the most honorable loyalty to persons, such as loyalty to a group engaged in a liberatory struggle, may be problematic. As Sally J. Scholz notes in the context of her analysis of the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, liberatory movements and organizations flourish when they avoid stasis, and purposefully seek renewed understandings of language, duty, identity, and purpose (p. 345).

The contexts of the analyses by Moberg (corporate workplace) and Tessman (feminist and minority political communities) are different – if not diametrically opposed to each other – but the tenor of both analysts is very similar. Both Moberg and Tessman are idealists who, like Josiah Royce, find meaning and significance in

a higher social purposefulness. Their postmodernist emphasis on a social consciousness – irrespective of person or entity – echoes Royce's century-earlier post-Kantian *Philosophy of Loyalty*, wherein he called for a "loyalty to loyalty," that is, a wholehearted dedication to the betterment and the flourishing of society.

5. Personal Relationships and Workplace Responsibilities

Linowes and Spencer have observed that it was less than a hundred years ago when some companies employed investigators to monitor the drinking habits, sex lives, leisure activities, and even hygiene of employees ... outside of the workplace. These tactics are generally not used today, but personal relationships within organizations continue to stir controversy even when sexual harassment or gender bias is not necessarily involved. For example, Boeing Corporation, whose code of conduct was mentioned above, recently fired its president and chief executive officer, Henry Stonecipher, for violating its code. Stonecipher admitted that he had been having a consensual sexual relationship with another executive (who, in turn, was not a subordinate of the CEO). When explaining its response, Boeing's board of directors observed that its corporate code prohibits employees from engaging in any behavior that might raise questions about company's honesty, impartiality, reputation or otherwise cause embarrassment to the company. Boeing employees are also prohibited from engaging in any activity that might create a conflict of interest for the company or for themselves individually.

This implementation of Boeing's corporate loyalty requirement allows us to review the four articulations of loyalty described here. First, it does not appear that any duty (other than the duty of loyalty) of the CEO was left unfulfilled as a result of his relationship with the female executive. Second, there is no indication that, while engaged in the personal relationship, he approached his responsibilities with any less fervor or dedication than before.

Only when loyalty is defined in terms of the object of loyalty, does Stonecipher's termination make sense. Boeing's board insisted that Stonecipher did not exhibit loyalty toward Boeing when engaged in a relationship with another employee. Does a consensual relationship with a co-worker (outside of any concerns about sexual harassment or gender bias) necessarily raise legitimate concerns about the company's honesty, impartiality, reputation or otherwise cause embarrassment to the company? If this is the fundamental question raised by the Boeing case, it is a troubling one. Dishonesty, for example, does not necessarily flow from consensual co-worker relationships. Even if marital infidelity is involved (as it was, it so happens, in Stonecipher's case), what role should the employer play in ensuring the marital fidelity of its employees? Similarly, in the absence of any showing of partiality at the workplace, should the employer concern itself with the after-work social preferences of its employees? And how much monitoring of the private lives of employees should be triggered or informed by corporate concerns about its reputation and determination to avoid embarrassment?

Perhaps, as has been suggested by Duska, a corporation is not necessarily a proper object of loyalty *per se*. If most duties associated with loyalty are already properly recognized as important and independent duties (e.g., honesty, impartiality,

and a concern for the employer's credibility and reputation), employee loyalty may be proposition that is not easily or adequately described without reference to those other duties. This possibility relieves loyalty of a requirement that it have as its object – or objective – corporate interests. It avoids the phenomenological tension that would be created by an attempt to elevate a corporation to the status of Other. It allows those other duties to be considered separately and directly, without a conflation of those duties into a notion of loyalty. And this possibility precludes the creation of a dynamic that is almost necessarily and immediately reduced to an archaic, slippery-slope conflict with employee privacy rights. These concerns lead me to the conclusion that employers' loyalty demands might not be fully warranted if construed in terms of loyalty as duty, as devotion, or as other-directedness.

The fourth regime suggested here, that is, loyalty as devotion to a mutual cause, may be more reasonable. In the Boeing case, for example, Stonecipher had been brought into the company a year prior to his termination, for the explicit purpose of improving the company's ethical climate. Boeing had had a recent history of ethical difficulties, and some military contracts were arguably at risk. By having an affair with a co-worker, he signaled (and modeled) an unwillingness to take seriously the company's concern about being above reproach. Stonecipher, it might be argued, was disloyal to the cause of corporate ethicality.

If, then, a corporation seeks to develop an ethical climate that is above reproach, does marital infidelity, or the sending of sexually charged emails over the company's server, or the dating of co-workers, matter? If this question is answered from a rules approach, loyalty to a mutual cause would not be properly warranted. Any attempt to construct, articulate, and implement behavioral boundaries will lead corporate governance backwards, toward the oppressive days of the morals police as described by Linowes and Spencer.

But if this question is answered from the perspective of virtue theory, it is more tractable. Corporate expectations of, say, the wisdom and personal choices of CEO hired to elevate the moral climate of a corporation, might be different than the expectations for other workers. And when loyalty is defined and articulated in terms of developing those organizational habits and behavioral patterns that optimize the mutual flourishing of the organization and its members, hard and fast rules give way to preferences and patterns of behavior. This latter approach may indeed result in the toleration of some social awkwardness within the organization (including co-worker dating); but the toleration of specific behaviors or actions—during an ongoing organizational commitment to the development of a more wholesome and ethical environment—may be more reasonable than any rule-oriented alternatives.

6. Whistleblowing

The practical wisdom of a virtue-theory view of loyalty can also inform the way in which whistleblowing procedures are understood within an organization. If, for example, loyalty to an employer is tantamount to the fulfillment of proper (and properly delegated) employment duties, whistleblowing would not necessarily represent disloyalty. If an employee is asked perform a task that conflicts with his

or her understanding of his or her rightful work duties, he or she may choose to clarify the proper boundaries of such duties. Clarification of duties, under these circumstances, would not violate a notion of loyalty-as-duty, or loyalty-as-devotion.

A phenomenological view of loyalty, in turn, is especially problematic within a corporation. An employee's co-workers, including his or her supervisors, are very much an integral part of the employee's work experience. They are Others, and the intersubjectivity of working alongside these co-workers affects the employee's sense of being at work. In a sense, whistleblowing represents an intentional redefinition—or termination—of this intersubjectivity. If other individuals—but not the corporation itself—are the proper object of loyalty, whistleblowing is indeed an act of disloyalty under the loyalty-as-empathy view.

Only if whistleblowing is understood in terms of a commitment to the mutual flourishing of self and others (including both the corporation and society) can loyalty obtain. But the larger mutual cause (e.g., an ethical work environment, or organizational citizenship, or corporate social responsibility) must be more than a mere ideal. As Royce observes, actions in favor of theoretical altruism are insufficient to constitute or represent loyalty. For the virtue of loyalty-to-mutual-cause to be engaged, there must first be a mutuality, a common cause, a sense of togetherness-toward-flourishing.

7. Conclusion

I have argued here for the reasonableness of workplace loyalty in the service of a higher organizational cause than duty, devotion, or empathy. When approached from this perspective, loyalty—whether in a workplace context or otherwise—is an important virtue because it represents a disposition in the direction of flourishing. It functions best when it operates toward the enhancement of an ideal, rather than in favor of a person, a group, a set of rules, or other entity. I look forward to further deliberation (and perhaps even empirical investigation) of the proposition that genuine truth-seeking and epistemic clarity are enhanced when loyalty in favor of a larger ideal or purpose – rather than a person, group, or set of rules—is sought.

I have offered this brief exploration of the notion of loyalty—within a particular and narrow context—with the full expectation that any serious philosophical discussion about loyalty by organizational leaders and policymakers will likely trigger even larger questions. In this regard, I share Lynn Holt's optimism about the value of thoughtful deliberation in the pursuit of such larger inquiries: What is the larger purpose and vision of the organization? What is its role in society, and what are its social obligations? To what end should organizational and individual virtues be encouraged and fostered? How important are—and how important should be—the intellectual and epistemic virtues of, and within, the organization? And what role do those virtues play in the formation and articulation of an organizational ethos?

As organizational leaders, and those who teach or advise them, become more alert and more sensitive to the philosophical implications of the articulation of an organizational ethos, I believe their efforts will be rewarded. Just as I have suggested here that a rule-based definition of loyalty can be largely unhelpful, I

would hope that organizational leaders would discover that the mere adoption of a set of glib rules or aphorisms can prove to be an ineffective, somewhat irrelevant, and largely unsatisfying means of framing and affecting the moral climate of the organization. Similarly, I trust that an appreciation for the value and importance of the epistemic virtues—and the corresponding commitment to honesty and truth-seeking—would contribute to the flourishing of the organization. Finally, I expect that if serious, philosophical reflection on the telos of the organization take place as part of any effort to define its ethical parameters, sought-after qualities such as loyalty will not necessarily be reduced to a narrow notion of the avoidance of any thought, word or action that might possibly conflict with the immediate or short-term expectations of any given collection of organizational leaders at any one point in time.

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