

On Loyalty

Troy Jollimore



Thinking in Action

On

Loyalty

Loyalty is a highly charged and important issue, often evoking strong feelings and actions. What is loyalty? Is loyalty compatible with impartiality? How do we respond to conflicts of loyalties? In a global era, should we be trying to transcend loyalties to particular political communities?

Drawing on a fascinating array of literary and cinematic examples—*The Remains of the Day*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The English Patient*, *The Third Man*, and more—Troy Jollimore expertly unravels the phenomenon of loyalty from a philosophical standpoint. He reflects on the idea that loyalty shapes our very identities, and considers both the benefits and the dangers of loyalty: on the one hand, how excessive loyalty can move us to perform immoral, even evil, actions; on the other, how loyalty can expand our lives and give us a sense of meaning and belonging.

Troy Jollimore is Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Chico, USA. He is the author of *Love's Vision*, and of the National Book Critics Circle Award-winning book of poetry *Tom Thomson in Purgatory*. His essays and book reviews have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *LA Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and elsewhere.

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The Bookwatch

TROY JOLLIMORE

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Contents

Introduction vi

Loyal Action, Loyal Thought One 1

Conflicts of Loyalties Two 31

Loyalty, Tribalism, Violence Three 52

Loyalty, Community, and Morality Four 75

A Man without a Country Conclusion 95

Notes 102

Index 109

Introduction

When Eizaburo Ueno, a professor of agriculture at the University of Tokyo, passed away unexpectedly in May 1925, he left behind a dog, a purebred golden brown Akita Inu that he had named Hachi. Hachi had been Professor Ueno's pet for a little over a year, and had fallen into the habit of meeting his train at the Shibuya Station at three o'clock every afternoon. Following the professor's death, Hachi continued to show up at that station just before three every afternoon, until his own death nine years later. The dog—now known as Hachiko—became famous as a symbol of loyalty and dedication throughout Japan. After his death a statue of him was erected in the station where he used to wait. An annual ceremony in Hachiko's honor draws hundreds of dog lovers to the spot. The story has inspired a number of magazine articles and books. 1987 saw the appearance of a Japanese feature film, *The Tale of Hachiko*; in 2009 there was an American film, *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, starring Richard Gere. In *Hachiko Waits*, a children's book from 2004, we find the following passage:

From that day on, people from all over Japan came to see *Chuken* Hachiko, the famous dog who sat in Shibuya Station waiting for his master. Many people who had fallen on hard times drew strength from meeting him. "If Hachiko does

not give up hope, we will not give up hope,” they said to one another. Many people stroked Hachiko’s fur, believing that touching him would bring them good fortune. Those who could gave the Station-Master money so that the *Akita-ken* would not go hungry. Everyone who met Hachiko was moved by his loyalty and devotion.¹

Stories of loyal dogs are not difficult to find. Indeed, the loyal dog story has become a fairly standard part of the body of tales and urban legends that arises after a catastrophe of any sort. YouTube and other online sites are replete with videos such as “Grave 305: Loyal Dog Sits by Grave of Floods Victim in Brazil” and (following the 2011 tsunami and earthquake that devastated Japan) “Ultimate Loyalty: Japanese Dog Refuses to Leave Injured Friend Behind.” A YouTube search for “loyal dog” conducted on 28 May 2011 turned up over 3600 videos with such titles as “Loyal Dog Stays by Deceased Owner’s Side” and “Soldier, Loyal Dog Make Final Journey Together.” (A search for “loyal husband,” by comparison, turned up just over 650 videos.)

But perhaps we are being too quick in applying the word “loyalty” to Hachiko and his kind. Can a dog really be loyal, or possess any virtue in the full-blooded sense? Some people might feel some hesitation saying this, akin to what the philosopher John McDowell expresses when he refers to “the courageous behavior—so called only by courtesy—of a lioness defending her cubs.”² McDowell’s intuition is that while the lioness’s behavior resembles courage in some respects, something is lacking, preventing it from amounting to genuine courage. Similarly, we might feel that something in the behavior of Hachiko, or any other dog for that matter, prevents such behavior from amounting to genuine

loyalty—despite the fact that such canine behavior is sometimes taken as the very paradigm of loyalty.

The issue is complicated, of course, by the fact that there is much disagreement about animal cognition. Just what is going through the mind of a creature like Hachiko when he shows up at the train station, day after day, seemingly awaiting his master's return? It's hard to say. What we can observe is a kind of consistency of behavior over time, and, in particular, a kind of attachment. Hachiko's steadfast attachment to a particular person—his commitment to meeting the train every day, and his apparent refusal to accept that his master is not going to return and to find somebody else to be his companion—is what looks like loyalty to us. But what, then, might be missing from such a case that would explain our hesitation to call this loyalty in the fullest sense?

Perhaps we tend to think of animals as fairly crude machines, so that their behavior is not the result of thought in any genuine sense at all: it is more or less automatic, and not preceded by any sort of deliberation. (This is presumably what McDowell assumes is going on in the lioness case.) Perhaps we do not think of Hachiko as having a genuine choice about how to act. Rather, he just shows up every day like clockwork. Or perhaps he does not have the sort of awareness of time that would inform him that with each day the likelihood of his master's return grows smaller. If every day feels like the first day to Hachiko, then the consistency of his behavior seems less a matter of loyalty than the result of a kind of ignorance.³

Another possibility is that Hachiko's "loyalty" fails to be self-reflective in a way that makes it seem not only deficient but a little bit disturbing. After all, the dog's commitment seems to involve no evaluation of the owner—his attachment

to Professor Ueno does not in any way express a considered view that Ueno is a good man, worthy of such devotion. And this might remind us of some human attachments, cases in which people stood by or obeyed a spouse, friend, or political leader who did not merit their loyalty.

But even if this is so, should it disqualify Hachiko's behavior as loyalty? Some people think that the virtues, being good character traits, must always lead to good consequences; and if we accept this view then we will indeed find ourselves pushed in the direction of denying that the kind of non-self-reflective commitment displayed by Hachiko could be a true example of loyalty. But this seems to idealize virtue too much: it is surely at least sometimes the case that loyalty is not self-reflective, that sometimes it positively discourages objectivity and self-criticism, and that it therefore sometimes leads to bad behavior and regrettable consequences. We seem to be faced with two alternatives: either accept that the virtues can at least sometimes lead to bad things, or deny that loyalty is a virtue.

THE TWO FACES OF LOYALTY

The common view is that loyalty is a virtue. Indeed, William Bennett devotes a chapter to loyalty in his *Book of Virtues*. "Our loyalties," Bennett writes, "are important signs of the kinds of persons we have chosen to become. They mark a kind of constancy or steadfastness in our attachments . . . Real loyalty endures inconvenience, withstands temptation, and does not cringe under assault. Yet the trust that genuine loyalty tends to generate can pervade our whole lives."⁴

And if loyalty is typically seen as a virtue, its opposing terms—disloyalty, betrayal, treason—are almost universally viewed as moral vices. This is particularly true in the realm of politics, where to allow oneself to be perceived as disloyal

is frequently a form of political suicide. One of the guiding thoughts of this book is that genuine loyalty is always “from the inside,” in the sense that one can only be fully loyal to a community to which one belongs. The concern with loyalty in the political sphere, then, tends to reflect people’s fears and anxieties about being infiltrated, corrupted, and subverted by outside influences. Accusations of disloyalty are nearly always code for “you are not one of us,” which helps to explain why overzealous practitioners of dirty politics are inordinately fond of accusing their opponents of that particular “vice.” Ann Coulter’s *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terror* represents a recent and particularly vitriolic example. Nor are historical examples hard to find.⁵ Jonathan Glover offers the example of Horatio “Horace” Bottomley, a British member of parliament who helped to incite anti-German fervor at the beginning of World War I:

“I call for a vendetta—a vendetta against every German in Britain—whether ‘naturalized’ or not . . . You cannot ‘naturalize’ an unnatural abortion, a hellish freak. But you *can* exterminate him.” [Bottomley] urged that naturalized Germans should be made to wear a distinctive badge and not be allowed out after dark. Their children should be excluded from schools. And he further supported this treatment of Germans by encouraging fantasies of them being stripped of protective dignity. After the war, “If by chance you should discover one day in a restaurant you are being served by a German waiter, you will spill the inkpot over his foul head.”⁶

The fact that loyalty so easily lends itself to such uses is one of the clearest available reminders that we should not always treat loyalty as a virtue. The fear of outsiders, and the desire

to brand as outsiders those among us who express dissent—along with the need for those whose careers depend on popular approval to deal with these public sentiments by proving somehow that they are loyal and thus do belong—can not only distort and pervert otherwise good intentions but, worse, can allow those who indulge in jingoism to place the stamp of moral goodness on their intolerant and, at times, murderous actions:

Robert Prager, a German-born coal miner, was accused in April 1918 by a crowd that swelled to 500 people of hoarding explosives outside of St. Louis. Prager, who had tried to enlist in the navy but had been rejected on medical grounds, was stripped, bound with an American flag, dragged barefoot and stumbling through the streets, and lynched as the mob cheered. At the trial of the leaders of the lynch mob, their defense counsel argued that the killing was justifiable “patriotic murder.” It took the jury twenty-five minutes to return a not guilty verdict. One jury member shouted out, “Well, I guess nobody can say we aren’t loyal now.” The *Washington Post* wrote of the trial that “in spite of the excesses such as lynching, it is a healthful and wholesome awakening of the interior of the country.”⁷

As such examples suggest, what often turns out to be especially dangerous is the need to demonstrate one’s loyalty—to prove to one’s fellows that one is a team player, possessed of the proper patriotic sentiments. And what better way to demonstrate the depth of one’s commitment than to show that one is willing to commit the most horrible acts of violence? This is particularly true, perhaps, when such acts are committed against people toward whom one would ordinarily bear strong ties of loyalty. “Thou knowest not how sweet is

the *amor patriae*,” wrote Colucci Salutati in the 14th century. “If such would be expedient for the fatherland’s protection or enlargement, it would seem neither burdensome nor a crime to thrust the axe into one’s father’s head, to crush one’s brothers, to deliver from the womb of one’s wife the premature child with the sword.”⁸

Recent events provide evidence for the power of such sentiments. On 16 March 1968, American soldiers in so-called “Charlie” company murdered—and, in many cases, tortured and raped—hundreds of Vietnamese civilians, mostly women, children, and elderly persons, in the Vietnamese hamlets of My Lai and My Khe. The massacre, now known as the My Lai massacre, eventually became one of the most notorious atrocities committed during the Vietnam War. For years after the event, however, many in the American military and general public downplayed the significance of the event or even praised those who carried it out. The few soldiers who had tried to stop the massacre and protect the innocent victims were denounced by members of the U.S. Congress, received hate mail and death threats from the public, and had mutilated animals placed on their doorsteps. Of the obedient soldiers who had followed their orders and slaughtered scores of defenseless civilians, Staff Sergeant Kenneth Hodges said: “As one of the sergeants who trained Charlie Company, I was very pleased with the way they turned out. They turned out to be very good soldiers. The fact that they were able to go into My Lai and carry out the orders they had been given, I think this is a direct result of the good training they had.”⁹

American military personnel continue to place a high value, perhaps excessively high, on loyalty to their country, commanding officers, and fellow soldiers. Concerns about the effect of training that emphasizes these character traits