
A Critique of Group Loyalty

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When someone describes a person as “loyal,” this description is typically thought to be a form of compliment. Approbation seems to be a part of what many take to be the very meaning of the word. However, a close look at some cases of loyalty, such as those found in Nazi Germany and during other tragic episodes in history when otherwise nonhomicidal persons were persuaded to murder fellow human beings for the sake of their group, suggests that the concept of loyalty needs to be reassessed. Although most people evince approval of what they take to be the positive character trait or virtue of loyalty, I hope to show that the notion has not been adequately scrutinized. My analysis does not presuppose moral absolutism, the thesis that there is a single true morality. What I have to say applies to the absolutist, the relativist, and the moral skeptic. I argue here that, in spite of the positive connotation of “loyalty,” the concept is itself morally neutral, and remaining loyal to a group whose values one does not share is irrational.

To begin, consider whether any person should blindly obey the dictates of his group. The most obvious and nefarious case in recent history leaps immediately to mind: under Hitler, many Germans were persuaded to obey the orders of their superiors on the grounds that they belonged to the group “the Good Germans.” Because of the unreflective obedience of most of the German people, millions of Jews and other innocent people were slaughtered. Clearly, a loyalty to *that* group in *that* instance was bad, insofar as it led to catastrophic consequences. In attempting to understand what happened during that episode, we quickly see that the atrocities committed by perfectly ordinary human beings resulted from a sort of domino or snowballing effect. Many people were “just doing their jobs,” and they were motivated to continue “doing their jobs” by a combination of factors: commitment to what was perceived to be Hitler’s “noble” aim, conjoined with, on the part of some, a generalized fear of failing to do what was demanded of them in the name of the group. As “the cause” grew stronger, the former motivation came to dominate. People were persuaded to believe

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that it was in their best interests to bind together with their fellow Germans in order to conquer “the evil enemy,” the Jews. The power and efficacy of appeals to “loyalty” and “solidarity” are nowhere better illustrated than in the disturbing documentary film *Triumph des Willens*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl in 1934.

In retrospect, it has become obvious to thoughtful people everywhere that the Germans were swindled into adopting Hitler’s megalomaniacal and arguably psychopathic telos as their own, though in a slightly different guise, which they believed to be moral. We can now see clearly how, through propagandistic appeals to loyalty and group solidarity, ordinary people were persuaded to condone and even perpetrate moral horrors. We can only lament that individual Germans, with rare exceptions, did not think for themselves. Instead, they acquiesced to a form of “ethics by authority,” where the authority in question was, in the judgment of humanity, morally depraved. Undeniably, Hitler’s “cause” gained strength through the erroneous interpretation of group loyalty as a virtue.¹

Loyalty involves a commitment to go along with one’s group, *even when* the group’s action is something that, left to one’s own devices, one would not have thought to do. In other words, loyalty is supposed to provide an *extra* reason to do what one would not otherwise do. How many of the German people, before Hitler came to power, considered murdering their Jewish neighbors? Very few, I would surmise. Despite the well-documented prejudice against Jews throughout history (Botwinick 1998), the Holocaust occurred only when people were galvanized to act en masse. The Germans were persuaded to do what they, as isolated individuals, most likely would never have done, on the grounds that loyalty required it. The general moral to draw from the story of Hitler and the Third Reich is that no one should submit to the dictates of a group when they conflict with one’s own personal moral convictions. It is no one’s duty to acquiesce to the will of a group.

Group Dynamics

The “convictions” of a group emerge from a bargaining process in which compromises are made and amoral and sometimes irrational forces act upon agents seeking one another’s support. In bargaining processes the lowest common denominator may prevail and, when the momentum of the group is forceful, persons often end up “jumping on the bandwagon” for morally irrelevant reasons, for example, out of a fear of rejection or ridicule. This outcome gives the group the appearance of holding a stronger, more stable commitment to the alleged interests of the group than is in fact the case, for part of what appears to be the group’s enthusiasm derives from purely

1. The correct interpretation of the Holocaust is of course open to debate, but certain glaring examples support my interpretation, for example, the case of Adolf Eichmann, who, until the bitter end, claimed that he had merely done his duty.

psychological fears, which are egoistic and therefore amoral (unless, of course, ethical egoism—the thesis that prudence and morality coincide—happens to be true).

Human beings are by and large social animals, who generally enjoy being liked and appreciated by others. People tend to care what other people think about them and to coalesce into like-minded groups. Those who speak out against the status quo or the prevailing opinion represent an adversarial position vis-à-vis the group, which stigmatizes them as enemies to be maligned (or worse). Throughout history very few people have had the courage to stand up against the reigning opinions of their groups, even in instances where, in retrospect, it has become obvious that the group was making grave mistakes.

The compelling argument against submitting to the dictates of a group is that the group might be wrong. Either it was morally permissible to treat blacks as beasts of burden, or it was not. Either it was morally permissible to slaughter the Jews, or it was not. In any such conflict, only one of the sides can be right. (If moral relativism is true, then “everything is permitted,” so the law of the excluded middle still holds.) If a morally corrupt person is leading one’s group, then the principles of the group will be derivatively immoral, as was plausibly the case with Nazi laws. Persons who act against their own conscience, in favor of the dictates of a group, betray their erroneous belief that they are less able to render judgments about moral matters than are other members of the group, namely, those with whom they disagree.

Those who surrender in situations of group conflict fail adequately to appreciate the following question: What qualifies one to be a moral authority? When we look closely at “ethics by authority,” we see that no rational grounds exist for believing that other people are better equipped to discover moral truths than are we. One of the serious problems with holding group loyalty as a paramount value exemplifies the problem with any ethics by authority. In this case the “authority” in question is the group reified into an institutional structure that its members are enjoined to obey. To appreciate the gravity of this problem, we must now consider the general problem with ethics by authority.

The Problem with “Ethics by Authority”

An ethics by authority responds to the fundamental question of moral philosophy—“What should I do?”—with a simple, univocal answer: “Do what you are told to do.” The voice of some institutional (e.g., familial, religious, governmental, educational) authority is accepted as a *moral* authority. The theory is deontological insofar as it exacts obedience regardless of the reasonably foreseeable consequences of obedience. A commitment to an ethics by authority betrays a faith in the superior moral vision of the alleged authority. Each version of ethics by authority proves dubious, however, because of the epistemological problem raised by the question, What grounds can we ever have for believing that another human being is a moral sage?

Consider the sorts of people to whom we often defer in moral matters. Our parents serve as our moral authorities throughout our childhood. But the qualifications for being a parent are quite minimal: fertility and sexual desire. What do these properties have to do with moral sagacity? Nothing. Still, as children, we are obliged to obey our parents, and habits of submission, regrettably, become for some people habits for life.

Throughout our grade-school and high-school educations, we obey the moral dictates of our teachers and school administrators (in addition to those of our parents). But the qualifications for being a teacher—holding a university degree and being conversant with a specific subject matter—have little if anything to do with the capacity for making sound moral judgments. Likewise, academic administrators are trained to manage schools, not to ascertain moral verities. To the extent that administrators serve as prudential managers of groups, their activities can be viewed as purely amoral.

In society most people heed the moral authority of their governmental leaders. When leaders deem it necessary to go to war, the vast majority of people submit to their wishes unreflectively, under the assumption that the leaders are in a superior position to render judgments on such matters. In fact, however, the properties requisite to a successful political career have, at best, nothing to do with the ability to make sound moral judgments. Some would even claim that the sorts of skills often exemplified by those who succeed in politics—for example, duplicity, sycophancy, and chameleonic malleability—are the antitheses of the qualities one would expect to be the character traits of genuine moral leaders.

To take another common case of ethics by authority, consider the religious authorities to whom millions of people turn for moral guidance. Religious authorities are human beings with a particular interest in religious matters. They might have become educators, restaurant owners, real estate brokers, or politicians. Instead, they have opted to devote themselves to the religious life, spending vast amounts of time with religious texts, in religious convocations, or in various religious exercises. Are religious leaders *moral* authorities? Admittedly, of the candidates considered so far, they seem *prima facie* the most concerned with morality. However, because “the word of God” (assuming, for the sake of argument, that God exists) is necessarily mediated by human interpretations, when we defer to the authority of religious leaders, we are accepting that their interpretive faculties are somehow better attuned than are ours to receive “the word” as transmitted by God through some medium. Why should their having had the desire to communicate with God give us any grounds for believing that self-proclaimed religious authorities have in fact developed a surer method for doing so? What rational grounds can we have for accepting religious leaders as moral authorities?

As cynical as this analysis may appear, the fact that many charlatans have been exposed in the religious domain of contemporary society (for example, Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker, Charles Manson, and a variety of other cult leaders) lends inductive

support to my contention. Assuming that our laws are intended to reflect our commonsense views of morality, then if these self-proclaimed religious authorities are criminals, they are *prima facie* morally reproachable as well and, therefore, far from obviously well suited to offer anyone else guidance in moral matters.² But we need not adduce the most sensational cases of recent history to make the general point about the dubiousness of appeal to religious authorities for moral guidance. A consideration of the Inquisition would suffice.

When we elevate the group to the status of a reified thing to serve as our moral authority, we encounter all of the problems of any ethics by authority, only in a much more severe form. Consider the case in which one's own opinion differs from that of one's group. If one submits to the "will" of the group, that is, the majority opinion, then one is exalting to the status of moral authority some group of individuals whose opinions differ from one's own. Capitulating to the opinion of a group is tantamount to submitting to the opinion of some one member of the group whose opinion diverges from one's own.³ But what rational grounds do we have for believing that *that* person is a moral authority? If the foregoing analysis is correct, we have none whatsoever. In submitting to this authority, we commit precisely the error of the Germans with respect to the Nazi regime.

Loyalty and Relativism

Some will claim that the whole point of forming groups is to make cohabitation more successful. We bind together in order to further our own interests, and this process sometimes requires a willingness to compromise on the part of the individual members of the group. According to a conventionalist view of morality, it does appear that conformity to the dictates of one's group is a part of the agreement entered into whenever we decide to become members of a group. We cannot expect all of our idiosyncratic desires to be met, but some of them will be easier to satisfy than they otherwise would have been, owing to our association with this group. In Hobbes's view, we have agreed to band together in order to avoid a "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" life in "the state of nature."

If moral relativism is true, then it is a mistake to think that some moral reality exists beyond appearances. In that case, might makes right, so in any moral dispute

2. Fallacious appeals to authority, *argumenta ad verecundiam*, involve invoking the opinions of persons on matters outside their domain of expertise. I am assuming that the charlatans at issue do not distinguish what they practice from what they preach. Still, even if they do and are flagrantly hypocritical (which television evangelists in particular may be), my criticism is not an instance of *argumentum ad hominem*, because in regard to moral matters, one's moral conduct *is* relevant to one's suitability to offer moral advice.

3. Later I discuss the regrettable tendency of groups to descend to the lowest common denominator. In group behavior, more minds lead not to a greater probability of truth but rather to a greater probability of agreement with the most persistent member(s) of the group.

whoever gets the last word, whoever gets his way, makes his way the “morally right” way. Here, acceptance of an ethics by authority serves as a practical means of deciding what to do, a simple, straightforward, virtually mechanical procedure for determining the right course of action. To the question “What should I do?” the answer is unproblematic: “I should do what I am told to do.” And the grounds for such acceptance must ultimately lie in the increased efficiency achieved by living as a member of a group rather than facing life as a rugged individualist. It is a sociological platitude that dissenting individuals are automatically branded by groups as “other,” “deviant,” “bad,” and sometimes even “insane.” And it is undeniably much more difficult to achieve one’s mundane goals when one has forsaken the “I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine” approach, which yields so many benefits for so many people, all of whom have recognized that cooperation is crucial to success, if not survival, in society.

In other words, a commitment to a value of loyalty may seem, on the face of it, legitimate for the staunch moral relativist, who sees morality as nothing more than a set of conventions agreed upon by members of a community in order to make cohabitation more pleasant and efficient (Harman 1975, 1984). Even then, however, at some points a further commitment to the values of one’s group will impede or even undermine one’s fundamental projects and plans. Then, loyalty to the group must be renounced, on pain of irrationality, because the relativist’s only reason for associating with a group is to benefit from that association. Therefore, even the relativist must ultimately depend upon himself as the final arbiter in moral matters, for the dynamics of his group evolve over time. Only the individual himself can determine the point at which association with the group has greater costs than benefits to him. In other words, the relativist must, on every occasion when his values come into conflict with those of his group, decide on his own once again to remain in the group or go his own way. In a later section I investigate in some detail a concrete example of the problem relativists have with loyalty.

Loyalty and Nonrelativism: A Wager Argument

What attitudes toward loyalty are reasonable for the absolutist and the moral skeptic? For the absolutist it is easy to see how the arguments against the putative moral authority of another merely human being, no matter what his pretensions may be, apply to any alleged group authority. The rational response to conflicts between one’s own moral conscience and one’s group is to defer ultimately to one authority alone, namely, one’s own conscience.

Consider the following “wager argument.” Suppose that a person’s intuition about a policy conflicts with the prevailing opinion of his group. Then he has the following choices:

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| Case 1: Go along with the group | The group is right | The group is wrong |
| Case 2: Divorce oneself from the group | The group is right | The group is wrong |

In the first case, if the group is right, then the agent does the right thing but deserves no credit for doing so, because he is swayed only by amoral considerations. Alternatively, if the group is wrong, then the agent does the wrong thing, and he commits the error of rationality diagnosed in the previous analysis of ethics by authority. Either way the agent fails: morally, intellectually, or both.

In the second case, in which the absolutist opts to divorce himself from the group from which he dissents, the group again may be right or wrong. If the group is right but the individual desists from acting in accordance with it because of his moral scruples, then he is mistaken in his judgment; but if *ought* implies *can*, and he acts on the best evidence available to him, after careful assessment of the facts of the case, then he cannot be blamed, morally or rationally speaking, for his mistake. If, in contrast, the group is wrong and the agent acts rightly in desisting from going along with the group, then, by heeding his own conscience, the agent acts with both moral and intellectual integrity.

This analysis shows that the rational approach to any moral conflict with one's group is to heed one's conscience, because if one does the right thing only fortuitously or for nonmoral reasons, then one's action has no moral value worth acknowledging.⁴ Suffice it to say that, in any view of morality according to which intentions have moral relevance, the preceding wager argument applies.⁵

Having considered the situation of the moral relativist, who affirms that might makes right and therefore that the prevailing opinion is the right opinion, and the absolutist, who in contrast affirms the possibility of being mistaken about moral matters in a substantive sense, let us now turn to the moral skeptic. The moral skeptic is agnostic on the absolutism-relativism issue. Is there a single true morality? Do any moral principles apply to all people at all times, regardless of where and when they live and regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves? To these questions, the skeptic gives no answer beyond an expression of his unwillingness to take a stand one way or another. But this answer implies that the skeptic, no less than the absolutist, holds open the possibility of a substantive sense of moral fallibility among human beings, and that is all that is necessary for the preceding wager argument to apply. So long as the moral skeptic accepts the *possibility* of being morally mistaken, then all of the same options remain real for him. In other words, for the moral skeptic no less than for the absolutist, loyalty to a group whose moral judgments and policies conflict with his own may be both morally and intellectually reproachable.

4. I am aware of the utilitarian counterintuitive analysis of such a case. To offer one hyperbolic example, die-hard utilitarians would insist that if a drunk driver accidentally hit a car, killing an occupant who was on the way to bomb a public gathering, which would have killed hundreds of people, then the drunk driver's action would be morally permissible, which is to say, right, which is to say, obligatory (because, for utilitarians, maximization of social utility is not only permissible but obligatory), and any other action would have been impermissible.

5. In the sort of utilitarian case cited in the previous footnote, advice one way or another is irrelevant to the agent in question, who is not at all *intent* upon acting one way or another. Accordingly, ascribing moral blame or credit in the case seems rather like ascribing moral properties to a bolt of lightning or a hurricane.

Loyalty and Institutions

Beyond its irrationality, the value of loyalty becomes decidedly dangerous because of the potential for corrupt institutions, the administrators of which are human beings and therefore fallible. Consider for a moment the nature of administration. The purpose of an administration is to manage an institution. Those in positions of power have that power by virtue of their having been appointed by the relevant community to act as agents for those affected by the institution (Calhoun 1994). One obvious problem with an exhortation to group loyalty is that it leads to the reification of institutions: the club, the university, the government, the military. The institution acquires an importance above and beyond its purpose to protect and further the interests of those who banded together to form it and appointed certain individuals to head it. Anarchists are particularly sensitive to this problem, and they reject the legitimacy of any organization that arrogates power over the individuals composing it. In works such as George Orwell's *1984*, we find dystopic visions of the most insane sort of institutional reification, wherein the institution becomes an organism capable of obliterating the rights and totally ignoring the needs and desires of those for whom it was originally erected. A single charismatic psychopath can turn an institution teeming with unreflective bureaucrats concerned with doing their job, that is, with following the orders of their superiors, into a moral monster of the Orwellian sort. Witness Nazi Germany.

This problem arises because, qua administrator, one's first and foremost obligation is to maintain the institution. But things comprise all and only their properties. Modifications of policies constitute modifications of the very identity of an institution. In other words, every proposed change constitutes, in some sense, an assault upon the institution, and so will be opposed by individual administrators and their subordinate bureaucrats, whose vocational duty it is to defend the structure as it stands.

The ultimate anarchist argument may be that if a given policy is good, then the people will themselves assent to it uncoerced. Any policy to which they will not assent should not be a policy to which they are obliged to adhere. After all, our governments are *our* governments. We create them, and we should be able to disband them when they fail to serve the purpose for which they were fashioned. When a government or, more generally, an institution begins to take on its own properties, to espouse its own self-serving agenda, which serves to perpetuate the selfish interests of the administration, then it has lost touch with its *raison d'être*. We find this phenomenon, of bureaucracies run rampant, throughout our society, even though the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America clearly states:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their

just Powers from the consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation on such Principles, and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

The problem with an exhortation to group loyalty is entirely analogous to that encountered in defending the “right to life” of a thoroughly corrupt institution. If a given policy or principle is advocated by a group, then, according to those who believe in the value of loyalty, each individual should agree to it *in the name of the group*, even if it conflicts with the individual’s personal values. But, as the anarchist correctly recognizes, the group’s favoring a policy or principle is not a *moral* reason for adopting it. Either sound reasons for its adoption exist, or they do not. That others accept it is not, in and of itself, a sufficient reason for accepting it.

When should we dissent from the policies of our groups? Precisely and only when they conflict with our deepest convictions and values. If a policy is sound, then we should support it. If it is not, then we should not support it. The extra value supposedly imparted to a policy due to the majority of one’s group having accepted it is illusory. That value should *not* be added to the supposed value of a bad policy, because a bad policy should not be supported at all. When invoked, loyalty supports good policies when they are already good, and bad policies when they are bad.

Arguably, more atrocities have been committed throughout human history in the name of morality than for any other reason. To condone practices and policies merely because they are supported by one’s group is equally absurd. For if one’s group advocates immoral or bad policies, then something is wrong with the group, and one should seek above all to free oneself from its influence. A group is not good simply because it is a group. Some groups are bound by principles that we deem legitimate; others are not (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazis). When the interests and values of a group, once thought to be consonant with one’s own, metamorphose radically, then the individual must either metamorphose radically or abandon the group.⁶ To conform to the changes wrought within a group by the more powerful members is to capitulate to their wills. To permit oneself to be assimilated into a homogeneous mass of compromising chameleons is to renounce one’s individuality, which consists of those very values that gave rise to the idea that loyalty is a good thing. In other words, such capitulation amounts to a practical contradiction of sorts. Loyalty becomes no more and no less than a religious tenet. And although religions may appease the human need for security, they become irrational when they begin to erode people’s fundamental values.

6. In many cases of apostasy, an individual’s own view of the group and its values, interests, and principles has changed, leading him to believe that he was mistaken to have allied himself with that group.

A Closer Look at Relativism and Prudence

I claimed early on that my criticisms of loyalty would not rely on the specific moral character of any particular group. To substantiate this claim, I now explain in greater detail how a valorization of loyalty is irrational for the moral relativist. Needless to say, a relativist would not find the “wager argument” very persuasive. Nonetheless, and strikingly, perhaps our most persuasive data regarding the inadequacy of group loyalty to a tenable and rational outlook is found in relativistic systems of organized crime. In such systems one minor betrayal, one act of treachery by a member of a group whose paramount value is loyalty and which therefore demands its members’ loyalty, causes the inevitable disintegration of the system, due to something like a ricocheting effect. The bullet of treachery ricochets back and forth against the walls, from ceiling to floor, until everyone in the room is either wounded or dead. And when the wounded recover, they wreak destructive and terminal vengeance on the traitors.

Some may think that the problem with the organized crime “families” really has to do with the content of their “moral” principles. But the problem is deeper than that: a prioritization of loyalty is untenable regardless of the content of the moral principles held by the members of a group. I have argued that a commitment to a value of loyalty is fundamentally irrational for anyone who leaves open the possibility of genuine moral fallibility. Because it provides the most illuminating example of the problem of loyalty for the relativist, let us examine more closely the phenomenon of organized crime, the systems of which inevitably come to ruin, sooner or later. The problem with loyalty diagnosed earlier, that it leads to a contentless reification of the group as an institution, is graphically evident in organized crime, where time and again betrayal ultimately leads to the collapse of the entire system. The persons who conducted their lives ostensibly in allegiance to the group, holding loyalty sacred while condoning and committing cold-blooded murder, find themselves all alone in the end, their comrades having been killed or incarcerated.

The agents deploy an idiom replete with allusions to honor and loyalty, describe what law-abiding citizens regard as abominable actions in moral terms, and redraw the lines between murder and self-defense, on the one hand, and murder and just execution, on the other. In spite of the rhetoric of honor and respect found in crime families, in the end such cases betray a fundamental Hobbesian drive to band together for egocentric ends. Ultimately, a concern to better their mundane conditions and those of their nuclear families drives men to become involved in organized crime. Mafiosi, hit men, and other lackeys share the American fascination with wealth and success (Arlacchi 1987, Forman 1993). They choose organized crime as the simplest route to financial success and community respect, the latter arising in a capitalist society as a natural concomitant of the former. By sheltering themselves from outsiders and distancing themselves from their victims and their victims’ families, the participants in organized crime come to view themselves as businessmen who have developed clever

means by which to acquire everything they want without ever having to pay, so long as they do not betray the other members of their group.⁷

The seeming inevitability of betrayal is best understood as an expression of the structural conflict between any individual and any group to which the individual belongs. In crime families, sooner or later an individual allows his greed, jealousy, or quest for power to win out against the supreme dictates of the group. Then the destruction of the entire system ensues in short order as the group divides into subgroups, each of whose members have stronger attachments to fellow members of the subgroup than to the larger group that subsumes all the subgroups. Such fragmentation is inevitable because these men get involved in the system to begin with only to further their own selfish interests. If they can further their own interests better by banding together with some small subset of the larger group, then, as rational agents, they will do so. Once the disintegration begins, the internecine destruction continues to the point of obliteration.

The subset of a group with the strongest sense of loyalty is always the unit individual. Therefore, when finally faced with the looming threat of life imprisonment or execution, the apprehended criminal will naturally opt for betraying the entire system. It would be irrational to remain loyal to a system that has failed him, as evidenced by his having been apprehended and therefore no longer being able to obtain the objects of his desire without paying for any of them. When one of the complices is called upon to pay for the crimes of all of the rest, the bond to them magically dissolves. The apprehended criminal may well face death whether or not he betrays his former colleagues, because they will fear him as a mortal enemy even in prison so long as he has information about their crimes, in other words, so long as he is alive and his mental faculties remain intact. Accordingly, in the interest of self-preservation, some apprehended criminals enter witness protection programs, adopt new identities, and vow to renounce their former criminal ways in return for being granted immunity from the law for having surrendered the information necessary to incriminate and convict the other members of their former groups. The chimerical solidarity of the group, referred to in ostensibly virtuous terms, especially “loyalty” and “honor,” reveals itself to have been no more than an elaborately constructed facade of simple egoism.

Whenever one believes that all members of one’s group are committed to the group in order to further their own selfish aims, then that individual must, rationally speaking, recognize that his bond to the others is strongest when all group members’ interests are being better served than they would be were the members to leave the group. Given the original motivation of any individual to enter a relativistic group arrangement, it is imprudent and even quixotic to suppose that anyone will remain

7. For an excellent depiction of this form of life, see the film *Goodfellas* (1992, directed by Martin Scorsese), which is based on the true story of Henry Hill. Although they are works of fiction, Coppola’s *Godfather* (1972) and *Godfather Part II* (1974) also portray realistically the sorts of group dynamics that operate in modern systems of organized crime.

loyal to the group when it ceases to further his own interests better than he can do himself as an unattached individual. This condition leads us to the previous conclusion, through yet another route, and even if we assume relativism: When one's values, interests, and opinions collide with those of the majority of one's group, one commits an error of reasoning in capitulating to the will of the group. The relativist is convinced that the other members of his group belong to the group only to further their own selfish ends. In other words, when he defers to the group, he sacrifices his values for theirs. But he has no rational grounds for doing so. He is rather like a person who has erected a temple to a God that he claims does not exist.

Advocates of cooperative enterprises will insist that, in reality, the nature of human commerce necessitates that we sometimes compromise in order to achieve our more important goals. But in truth the relativist never has any reason to believe that even his highest priorities will be supported by the other members of his group. Perhaps they will be, perhaps they will not. And when the acquisition of material wealth *and* the maintenance of power structures constitute a group's predominant concerns, the inherent tension among the members will lead, sooner or later, to the demise of the group. Assuming that resources are finite, the maximization of one's own mundane interests entails, of necessity, a failure to maximize the interests of others.

The tendency of mercenarily motivated groups to disintegrate will also favor the formation of progressively smaller and smaller groups, for the expulsion of members from a group bound by a commitment to the acquisition of wealth will always increase the benefits to those remaining. The group will tend to become smaller and smaller until it reaches the point at which further diminution would impede satisfaction of the aims of the individual members of the group. To take a simple example, it is difficult for one person to rob a bank successfully. But there is some number, greater than one and less than, say, ten, that maximizes the expected profits of each of the accomplices. A degree of commitment to the goals of the group is required of each of the members of the group, but the moment one of them senses that the weighted probability of his getting caught exceeds the weighted probability of his not getting caught, he will abandon the group in order to secure his own survival, that is, out of self-defense.

These dynamics explain why, when capital offenders are apprehended and convicted, it is often due to their having been in complicity with other persons or having committed the blunder of telling others about their crimes (Kurland 1994). The success of crimes of complicity depends crucially upon the group members' loyalty to one another, but that loyalty is never outweighed by perceived threats to the individual's perceived safety. The members of the group must also depend on the simple prudence of the others. One slip-up by just one member of the group may implicate all the others. Consider, for example, the case of the Tate-LaBianca murders committed by the Manson family in 1969. After the murders, Susan Atkins was arrested on independent charges. Had she not vaunted the murders to her cell mate, the mystery of the murders might have gone unsolved.

Self-reliance is important for criminals and noncriminals, relativists and nonrelativists alike. Ultimately, the group is only as good as its members. Indeed, groups often prove worse than the sum of their members, owing to the unsavory tendency of human beings to fall to the level of the lowest common denominator and act upon normally suppressed or sublimated impulses to violence and destruction.

“You Have to Do It! For Us!”

Sociological and historical phenomena such as the group behavior of men in gang rapes, the Inquisition, and complex cover-ups of government corruption all tell against the allegedly superior perspective of “the group.” In reality, groups often foster and reward what is most common, superficial, and base in human beings. The tendency of people to conform to the status quo and to the fads of their time could be documented virtually ad infinitum. We naturally form groups as a means of achieving not only mundane ends but also the psychological benefits of acceptance and comradeship. Such benefits often lead people to develop attitudes of complacency with regard to what outsiders allege to be problems of the society in which they live. That complacency rewards homogeneity, conformity, and silence and concomitantly discourages heterogeneity, dissent, and dialogue.

Anyone who does not believe that he has achieved the absolute truth about morality and the ways of the world must continue to entertain new perspectives from which his own errors might be illuminated. But when one prioritizes loyalty to one’s group, then the best course of action is to express no dissent, meekly to accept whatever the opinion of the majority happens to be, no matter how haphazard their “method” of arriving at it may have been and no matter how outrageous their policies may seem.

Obviously, we are all products of our past experiences and environments. Accordingly, from the perspective of a moral skeptic, one has no more reason to believe that our current groups have arrived at the truth than the German people had to believe that they had arrived at the truth when they enthusiastically agreed to slaughter the Jews. Put simply, temporal subsequence is not obviously epistemically relevant, and if it is, it must be demonstrated to be so (Calhoun 1997a). Still, even the Germans did not promulgate any view so radical as that it was morally permissible to *murder* the Jews. Rather, the Germans interpreted their heinous deeds along the lines of good people confronting nocent pests. Denying that the Jews were moral persons, the Germans thought that the Jews could not be murdered. Murder is a moral concept that, as such, applies only to moral things (Calhoun 1997b).

One may object that surely nothing we are doing right now has the character of what the Germans did under the Nazi regime. And it is indeed true that, under our own interpretations of our actions, nothing we are doing now could possibly come close to what the Germans did to the Jews. Still, future generations may reinterpret as immoral what the Americans did to the Iraqis in 1991, to cite only one of many

possible examples. In fact, it did not take long for some of the staunchest supporters of the Vietnam War (for example, Robert McNamara) to confess that in their nationalistic fervor they had made egregious errors that cost humanity millions of lives. Nationalistic fervor and its most pernicious expressions arise out of an erroneous valorization of group loyalty.

We are no more immune to moral error than any other people throughout history. But unless we are willing to keep our eyes open for new ways of looking at our actions and those of our fellows, then we risk spiraling into yet another dark tunnel of evil while vainly attempting to exculpate ourselves along the way by claiming that we are only doing our duty, “supporting our group.”

We naturally associate with others in groups not only for obviously prudential reasons but also, somewhat ironically, as an apparent means of escaping from our egocentric outlooks. We feel better about ourselves when we can interpret our actions in terms of something beyond us, some supposedly greater cause in our group. It is merely an appearance of objectivity and morality that leads people to attach such great importance to and to view in a favorable light the notion of loyalty.

Besides arguing that a commitment to loyalty is irrational, I have considered two concrete cases: that of the Germans under Hitler’s regime and that of organized crime. Both illustrate how a commitment to loyalty can lead one astray, whether or not one is an absolutist about morality. Without presupposing any single true moral theory, we have found that the prioritization of loyalty over one’s fundamental convictions and values is, at best, irrational and self-delusive and, at worst, dangerous. To describe a human being as “loyal” is not to pay him a compliment.

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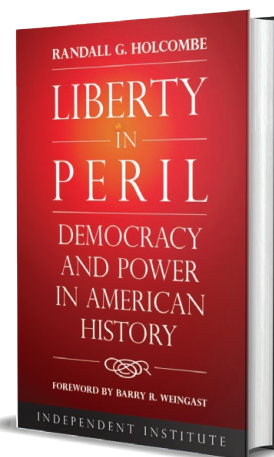
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