

Loyalty as a Virtue

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Aristotle defined virtues as dispositions that we praise; I would amend the definition to read 'dispositions that we trust'. Virtuous people are those to whom we turn for help in emergencies, and for comfort in times of grief. They are orientated towards others, disposed to nurture, to protect and to give in all the ways that enable us to face our difficulties and to know that we are not alone. And seen in that way, while the ancient cardinal virtues of courage, wisdom, temperance and justice must still retain their central place in our moral thinking, there is no doubt that loyalty stands alongside them, as one pillar, and perhaps the most important pillar, of every durable human community.

We have been living through times in which loyalty has been, if not disparaged, at any rate regarded with suspicion, as being a state of mind that is too exclusive and too discriminatory to be pursued in our open and globalised world. To be loyal to a group you must distinguish between the group and its rivals; to be loyal to your family you must downplay or overlook its faults; to be loyal to your nation you must seek to preserve its identity and its assets in something like the form in which they were inherited. And in all these ways loyalty comes up against some of the most determined and vociferous prejudices of our times – prejudices that exalt the stranger and the outsider against the neighbour and the friend. It seems to me that we will not understand the anger and (in many cases) contempt aroused by the Brexit vote if we do not see that it has placed loyalty at the centre of politics, challenging all citizens of this country to affirm their attachment to its history and identity in a way that many of the most privileged among us are reluctant to go along with. Especially among young people has it become a question whether they really do *belong* to the country that demands their commitment, whether there is not some other, maybe wider, maybe narrower, sphere of allegiance that would better define their sense of who they are. Do we belong, in the last analysis, to this territory that our ancestors defended, or do we belong to our network of Facebook friends, or to the Pied Piper's Twitter account? And it has been an enduring project of the European Union to subdue, and even to erase, the sentiments of national loyalty which so often stand in the way of its ruling project, which is to present Europe itself, as expressed in the institutions of the Union, as the social and political entity by which we define our attachments and our future.

That project did not work, and we are surrounded now with the debris left by its failure. Governments, faced with the social and economic problems caused by global markets, mass migration and the voiding of traditional obligations, call on the people to come together, to integrate, to create the consensus on which new solutions can be built. But their call is addressed to *us*, to those within our national borders, and it is a call that presupposes the very loyalty and attachment that so much of modern politics seems to deny. You cannot ask the citizens of France to accommodate the mass migration into their country of people whose customs, religion, language and social aspirations set them at odds with their neighbours if you do not tell them that it is their duty as citizens and patriots to do this. You must make appeal to the loyalty by which they themselves define their sphere of public obligations. You must tell them that they *owe it to their fellow citizens* to act in this way: in other words that to act in any other way is to violate the trust on which the political order depends.

Angela Merkel violated that trust when she told the Germans that she would admit a million refugees (many of whom turned out not to be refugees at all) into their country, without consulting their opinion in the matter. The trust on which she had been depending for acceptance was damaged and to a certain measure removed from her. Her argument that it is the duty of Europe to open its doors to those threatened beyond its borders cut no ice with the German electorate, for whom it is first and foremost their identity as a nation that is at stake. Politicians must protect national identity. If they introduce strangers into the community they must first ascertain that they too will be loyal citizens, defining their identity and their obligations in terms of the country where they reside. On the whole Europeans accept that there is a duty of hospitality, and that refugees should be rescued. But they also recognize that the duty of hospitality is meaningless if you have no home to offer, and that a home is created by the habit of standing side by side with your neighbours in its defence. In other words hospitality can be offered only where there is also loyalty.

Everybody is now aware that national loyalty has become a central issue in politics, and aware too of the many ways in which our elites have in recent times disparaged it. Far from seeing national loyalty as a manifestation of a necessary human virtue the habit has arisen of dismissing it as one more sign of the ubiquitous sin of 'racism' – the brutal and belligerent state of mind that condemns our civilisation to justified punishment in the eyes of many who enjoy its great advantages. The accusation of racism, which generated so much of the scorn poured on

ordinary voters in the wake of the Brexit vote, has, in my views, become a poisonous input into our culture, and one that has little or no foundation in reality. But to rebut it properly we need to examine exactly what loyalty means, in the life of the ordinary person, and what we lose when it ceases to be perceived as a virtue.

In Aristotle's account of the matter, a virtue is a disposition, and resides in the desire to do what is reasonable and honourable, in the face of the desires and interests that conflict with it. Courageous people are those who face danger with resolution, not because they are fearless or unaware of the risk, but because this is what duty and honour require. They are as much inclined to fear as cowards, and have learned to resist fear only because they are also moral judges of their own behaviour, in the habit of viewing their conduct from outside, as though it were the conduct of another. Cowards give way to their fear, and run from the conflict, because they have not acquired the disposition to do what honour rather than appetite requires. Vice is the disposition to give way to appetite in the face of temptation, and the vicious person, having succumbed to this temptation, is then faced with a situation that no person can reasonably desire, namely the perception of his own shameful behaviour. In the dialectic of decision-making cowards, like courageous people, are faced with two views of their dilemma – the view from within, in which their own desires dictate the outcome, and the view from without, in which their conduct is seen as others would see it, an object of judgment and not just a product of desire. In the virtuous person these two visions coalesce. The desire that prevails in the moment of action, which is the desire to do what is honourable, is also the one that is endorsed from outside. There is a harmony between the two perspectives, and they live at one with their own nature, approving from without the motive that rules from within. Not so the cowards, whose unhappiness comes from their divided nature, and from the self-reproach that is the inevitable result of their situation, as social beings in need of others' approval. It is reflections like those that persuaded Aristotle of the intimate connection between virtue and happiness, which he even at one point defines as 'an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue'.

The outside view of our actions is the one that puts us in touch with others. It tells us that we are judged by our fellows, and that in the long run others are more important to us than our immediate interests. The moral life consists in adapting our desires to the external view of them, learning to be in our own eyes what we wish to be in the eyes of others, and indeed steadily disciplining our motives so that it is the other and not the self that is the judge of them. Virtue is an other-directed attribute, and the one who

lacks virtues is the one whom no one really trusts, whether in personal dealings or in the great emergencies and trials that involve us all. They do not trust him because in a certain sense others do not matter to him. Their judgment has no influence on his conduct because it is never rehearsed in time. The very thing that we each need for our individual happiness – the view from outside that endorses what we are and what we do – is what is needed by the wider society in its effort to endure and protect itself in all the trials of communal life. The free rider and the cheat may get away with it. But their vicious behaviour is parasitic on the behaviour of those who live in a more virtuous way. Our paradigm of virtue, indeed, is the person who does what he or she ought to do, even though no one is watching and no one will ever find out that the expectations of the moral order have been disobeyed. There is no such thing as a society in which everyone is a free rider. And when everyone cheats the result is either social anarchy or the growth of the totalitarian state as the default response to it.

Loyalties come about in two ways: through visceral attachment and through rational choice. When children enter the world they realize within a few moments what a dreadful mistake they have made and reach round for the home where they belong. They will not find that home; but if they are lucky there is at least a mother there to enfold and protect them. There begins at once the primary attachment that thereafter dominates their life. Attachments of that kind are, as psychologists have conclusively shown, necessary to our moral development, and all the strictures against disturbing or violating them have as many arguments in their favour as any other moral truths. The horror with which matricide has been envisaged by all known societies is proof of the universal value attached to the Mother as object of love and loyalty. And when children are deprived of the Mother, or some similar object that promises safety and nurture in return for attachment, they develop neither socially nor biologically as they should.

Attachments of that kind come about in other ways too, notably through erotic feelings and the sharing of a household. The fact that these attachments are rooted in fate and proximity, rather than in policy and choice, does nothing to undermine the loyalty that is intrinsic to them. On the contrary, the loyalty is all the stronger in that it was never consciously chosen, but grew from the circumstances as plants grow in the soil. Siblings especially evince this kind of loyalty, standing up for each other however much their lives have diverged and their interests grown apart. The loyalty that binds them is not like the promise that binds the signatories to a contract: it is not founded in justice or the need to respect an explicit deal. It is founded in the state of mind that the Romans called piety (*pietas*), the

disposition to acknowledge ties and obligations that have not been chosen, but which form part of what one is and what one has inherited.

Such obligations are to be distinguished from the obligations founded in promises, contracts and explicit choices. A modern firm demands loyalty from its employees, but only up to the point that the contract specifies. You do not, in signing up to Coca-Cola Inc., agree to lay down your life for the firm, or to defend its interest in every conflict. A contract specifies the exact duties required of the signatories; it both promises something and limits the scope of the promise, so that the parties can understand their obligations as having been consciously chosen. When the social contract philosophy arose during the 17th and 18th centuries it was part of the general stance of liberal individualism, encapsulated by Hobbes in his saying that 'there is no obligation on a man that ariseth not from some act of his own' – in other words that our obligations are all *undertaken* and neither discovered nor imposed. The social contract establishes government by consent, and the citizen is obliged to obey the law since, in doing so, he is merely obeying himself, standing by his own decision.

Contracts, promises and free agreements create obligations that can be adjudicated in the realm of justice. To renege on them is to do an injustice to the other party, and the basic principle of *pacta sunt servanda*, identified by Grotius as a principle of natural law, can be relied upon to establish their legitimacy. Breach of contract gives rise to an action for compensation, and loyalties established by contract are both transferable and extinguishable through consent of the parties or settlement in a court of law. Indeed it is contentious to call them loyalties at all, since if they are specifiable as part of the contract then they amount merely to contractual obligations, which can be fulfilled without any deeper concern for the other party than that implies. If they are not so specifiable, being open-ended calls for a community of interests, then they are not contractual obligations at all, but belong rather in the realm of piety, like the obligations of a son to his mother or a brother to his sister.

Returning for a moment to the discussion of virtue, it is surely true that contracts do not, as such, call upon any special loyalty in the signatories to them. But they call on the honesty and openness that enable us to trust each other's promises. Contracts will only be relied upon in the context of a general culture of trust, in which it is assumed that people adhere to their promises and do what is expected of them. If the other side defects, the contract is replaced by a claim for compensation. No special loyalty between the parties is assumed beyond the elementary virtues of honesty and mutual respect. Those virtues arise when there is a proper

harmony between inner motive and outer judgment of the kind that, on the Aristotelian picture, informs the virtue of courage. If we reflect on this we can begin to see how there might emerge a business ethic in which the virtues required by honest dealing become part of what is promoted and intended by the participants, who work together to produce a condition of mutual accountability and honest dealing. The habit of assuming liability for faulty products, of telling the truth about the subject matter of a contract, of acknowledging torts and breaches of contract – all such habits conform to the typology of virtue as Aristotle described it, and enter into the lives of individuals and the life of society in similar ways. Indeed they can be seen as applications of the ancient virtue of justice, and a society organised in such a way, by the free contractual dealings of its members, is one in which the demands of justice begin to acquire an over-riding authority. By working for justice we respect the free choices that bind the web of society, and accord to individuals their sovereign place in the decisions and policies that affect them. All that is contained in the idea of the social contract, which establishes a society organised by freedom, and governed by law.

In describing such a society, however, I have assumed no virtues beyond the virtues required by honest dealings. I have said nothing about loyalty, still less about the deep attachments that arise without being chosen. I have said nothing about piety – which is the disposition to accept unchosen obligations. Democratic procedures and market dealings have, over the centuries, eroded our sense of non-contractual obligations, and even the most holy of ties, such as those that compose marriage and the family, are rewritten as contracts, thereby becoming irksome and rescindable. This is a point that we must grasp, I think, if we are to understand why loyalty is a virtue, what we risk by losing it, and its place in holding the political order together.

There are two distinctions that are relevant here. One – that between piety and justice – I have already touched upon. The other, between contracts and vows, deserves a few paragraphs to itself. A contract has terms, which specify what each party promises to the other. If the terms are fulfilled, then the contract is at an end. If they are not fulfilled, or if they are breached, then the contract becomes an obligation of another kind – to compensate the party who has relied on the contract to the extent of his loss in doing so. All this has a beautiful logic to it, and the systems of contract law, notably that of the common law of England, are among the most beautiful structures of argument that human beings have created. But that architecture would be pointless if it did not propose solutions to real

problems, and did not call upon the motives that cause people to put those solutions into practice. This is why, even in the area of contract, with its foundation of pure rational choice, there is a presupposition of a virtuous community, in which people are motivated to do what they ought, regardless of their immediate interests.

Unlike contracts, vows do not have precise terms. They involve a commitment, but a commitment of the whole person, and in their most basic form the commitment is seen as a mutual gift rather than an exchange of promises. The best illustration of this is marriage, as traditionally conceived. Hegel described marriage as a substantial tie, a tie between two individuals that creates a new substance from their union. Husband and wife are both part of, and take their life from, the union that they have created and to which they have surrendered. There is no precise statement of obligations, no list of promises to the fulfilment of which the parties have agreed, no condition that brings the marriage to an end or converts it into a claim for compensation. The bond in question is existential, and this is what is intended in the vow: that I am yours and you are mine, and we are to depend on each other forever.

Increasingly, of course, that idea of a vow of marriage has been replaced by a less sublime vision, in which marriage is merely a far-reaching and somewhat indefinite contract of mutual aid, not quite as explicit as a contract of employment, but conceived in a similar way as an agreement on terms, rescindable when one of the parties defects. That it is in reality no such thing is shown by the heartbreak and loneliness that follow the collapse of a marriage. Nevertheless it suits modern people to treat marriage as a contractual tie, and to add it to the list of human relations that are being made fungible and contingent, so as to extend maximum freedom and lenience to those who want to escape from them.

If we see marriage in the traditional way, as an existential tie stemming from a vow, then it is evident that it depends on virtues other than honesty and accountability if it is to endure. Indeed it depends on loyalty, which is the disposition to stand by the other regardless of the cost of doing so. Although a marriage begins in a free choice, it is a choice to renounce choice, to move beyond the realm of contracts and promises to that of fate and necessity. This capacity is a virtue in itself: it involves a kind of honouring of the other person that goes beyond the basic respect required by a free society. It depends on a kind of renunciation equivalent to the renunciation of immediate self-interest that underlies the cardinal virtues. In modern people this kind of renunciation still inspires respect, but it does not inspire emulation. It seems too constraining a thing, one of

those 'mind-forged manacles' locked round us by religion, for which we have at last found the key.

Just as marriage is being reconstituted as a purely contractual tie, so too is the bond of citizenship. And this brings me back to my initial theme, which is that of national loyalty. In a far-reaching and detailed account of global politics Philip Bobbitt has discussed the emergence in recent times of the 'market state' as he calls it.¹ The global market and the growth of trans-national businesses that have no place of residence, combined with the welfare state and the ease of migration between prosperous nations, has meant that the relation between citizens and their country of residence is increasingly one of choice rather than fate. Citizenship seems more and more like a market transaction, in which individuals promise to obey the law and contribute their taxes in return for social benefits and the protection offered by a sovereign power. In this arrangement all obligations are remade as contracts, and the idea of an identity-forming loyalty at the heart of the political order begins to seem like an anachronism.

Bobbitt was writing before the Brexit vote, and not limiting his argument in any way to Europe. But his words are prophetic of the feelings expressed by many who voted to remain in the EU, and who resented being corralled into a loyalty that they do not share, or which at any rate takes second place to other and more important ties. And those who voted to leave did so largely because they had felt national loyalty to be both necessary to their way of life, and under threat from the global forces that have put identities up for sale. They were reacting, as a Marxist might put it, to the commodification of commitment. What to do about this is a question for another occasion. But let me conclude by suggesting why I think national loyalty is a good and a virtue in those who acquire it, and why even those who wish to replace it by market deals and elective forms of citizenship must ultimately depend upon it.

The person who reneges on a contract, hoping to get away with it, is a cheat. Thereafter we trust him less and he pays the penalty of 'market ostracism'. The person who breaks a bond of loyalty is sometimes described as a cheat; but properly understood he is a traitor. He has betrayed the person, the group or the institution that depended on him, and will afterwards be viewed, by the victim and by everyone else, as in some way tainted. From the description in the book of Joshua of the fall of Jericho, to the story of the Cambridge spies, the accounts of treasonable

¹ Phillip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles*,

behaviour leave an unpleasant taste in the feelings of all who read them and, whatever the excuses offered or the benefits delivered, the traitors themselves attract at best only lukewarm praise – and never the praise referred to by Aristotle in his definition of virtue, the praise that is also an embrace of the other and a declaration of trust. In no way can treason be a part of the virtuous character, and the traitor himself will always live in a state of conflict and division, avoiding the external point of view on what he does and seizing on excuses behind which to retire into oblivion. This was abundantly shown in the aftermath of the Second World War in France, when national survival had been jeopardised by those who had treated their citizenship as a provisional and exchangeable asset and discovered that it is in fact no such thing.

Loyalties are a source of anxiety. They create fixed obligations that we can neither soften nor exchange. But they also define *where we are* in the field of obligations – the commitments that we cannot trade or relax, since they define the position from which we view the world. Obligations of family and marriage are the fixed points around which we weave the wider relations of trust on which we depend. And loyalties generally answer the question of belonging: to whom and to what do we belong, so that we are prepared on its behalf to make important sacrifices. In the world as it is today we have many ways of belonging – the familial, the religious, the national among them. But belonging is never a choice, and that is its point. It is a calling, and the Muslims are right to see their form of belonging also as a submission, a surrender to imperatives that they did not choose but which were held out to them as an invitation.

As things are in our secular societies today even the most mobile person, surviving by deals and promises that are marked by no absolute commitments, will depend upon the freedoms and the order that are maintained in the place where he lives. Even such a person will have the great question: who maintains those things? Who is prepared to make the sacrifices required by a rule of law, the maintenance of a legal system, the security of property and residence, and the beauty of a settlement, so that we mobile people can flit from place to place and always feel secure in the deals that we make with others? Surely the answer is obvious. Those who maintain those things on which we all depend are those who are guided by national loyalty, who recognize an inheritance of peaceful settlement and are attached to the people and the places that are marked by it. Their loyalty to those people and places is as much a virtue as their commitment to the ones they love, and if this virtue is going from the world then that is something to be profoundly regretted, most of all by those people of mobile

and volatile affections who recognize no obligations besides the ones that they have chosen.