



# Loyalty: An Essay on the Morality of Relationships

*George P. Fletcher*

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At a time when age-old political structures are crumbling, civil strife abounds, and economic uncertainty permeates the air, loyalty offers us security in our relationships with associates, friends, and family. Yet loyalty is a suspect virtue. It is not impartial. It is not blind. It violates the principles of morality that have dominated Western thought for the last two hundred years.

Loyalties are also thought to be irrational and contrary to the spirit of Capitalism. In a free market society, we are encouraged to move to the competition when we are not happy. This way of thinking has invaded our personal relationships and undermined our capacities for friendship and loyalty to those who do not serve our immediate interests. As George P. Fletcher writes, it is time for loyal bonds, born of history and experience, to prevail both over impartial morality and the self-interested thinking of the market trader.

In this extended essay, George P. Fletcher offers an account of loyalty that illuminates its role in our relationships with family and friends, our ties to country, and the commitment of the religious to God and their community. Fletcher opposes the traditional view of the moral self as detached from context and history. He argues instead that loyalty, not impartial detachment, should be the central feature of our moral and political lives. Writing as a political "liberal," he claims that a commitment to country is necessary to improve the lot of the poor and disadvantaged. This commitment to country may well require greater reliance on patriotic rituals in education and a reconsideration of the Supreme Court's extending the First Amendment to protect flag burning. Given the worldwide currents of parochialism and political decentralization, the task for us, Fletcher argues, is to renew our commitment to a single nation united in its diversity.

Bringing to bear his expertise as a law professor, Fletcher reasons that the legal systems should defer to existing relationships of loyalty. Familial, professional, and religious loyalties should be respected as relationships beyond the limits of the law. Thus surrogate mothers should not be forced to surrender and betray their children, spouses should not be required to testify against each other in court, parents should not be prevented from willing their property to their children, and the religiously committed should not be forced to act contrary to conscience.

Yet the question remains: Aren't loyalty, and particularly patriotism, dangerously one-sided? Indeed, they are, but no more than are love and friendship. The challenge, Fletcher maintains, is to overcome the distorting effects of impartial morality and to develop a morality of loyalty properly suited to our emotional and spiritual lives. Justice has its sphere, as do loyalties. In this book, Fletcher provides the first step toward a new way of thinking that recognizes the complexity of our moral and political lives.

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