

“We can be ethical only in relation to something that we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in,” wrote Aldo Leopold in *A Sand County Almanac*. The book I am currently writing, *The Nature of Loyalty*, is, like much of my work in ethical philosophy, motivated by the judgment that Leopold was substantially correct. I believe we can only be *ideally* ethical in relation to something, or someone, whom we can see, feel, understand *and* love: someone, that is, with whom we have a genuinely personal relationship. Toward such persons we bear what I will refer to as *loyalty obligations*—moral obligations that instruct us to direct certain forms of special care and attention to particular individuals or groups (unlike general obligations, which are owed toward all persons merely in virtue of their being persons.)

The book falls into three parts. The first part constitutes a critique of current philosophical theories of loyalty obligations. There are a variety of these, but they tend to share certain underlying assumptions and, as a result, to manifest similar flaws. The most common mistake here is to assume that loyalty obligations cannot be justified in their own right, but must instead be reduced to some other, allegedly less problematic, type of obligation. Voluntarist theories, for instance, attempt to reduce loyalty obligations to voluntarily assumed contractual obligations, but are unable to account for many apparently legitimate loyalty obligations. (Ordinarily, at least, children seem to owe certain forms of special treatment to their parents, whether or not a voluntary arrangement has been established between them.) *Agent-neutral* consequentialists, on the other hand, argue that loyalty obligations are reducible to each agent’s overriding duty to maximize the general good, while *egoistic* consequentialists reduce one’s loyalty obligations to one’s obligation to maximize *one’s own* good. Both approaches, though, conflict with our pre-theoretical moral beliefs that such obligations continue to bear force even when they conflict with the identified good (whether it be the general good, or one’s own), and that they can at least sometimes override such competing obligations. Samuel Scheffler’s ‘hybrid theory’ and Michael Slote’s ‘satisficing consequentialism’ attempt to respond to this problem by modifying agent-neutral consequentialism to allow that agents are sometimes permitted to fall somewhat short of *maximizing* contributions to the good.

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But while such “spacemaking” approaches might justify an *option* to be loyal to one’s associates, they cannot capture the pre-theoretical intuition that such loyalty is often *morally required*. Peter Railton’s ‘sophisticated consequentialism’ does somewhat better; ultimately, though, it depends on implausible psychological claims regarding human choice and freedom.

The book’s second part proposes, develops and defends my own positive account. In marked contrast to currently dominant theories, my account does not attempt to reduce loyalty obligations to some other form of obligation. It is based, rather, on the thought that loyalty obligations are grounded in *desert*: when I am obligated to bestow special treatment and attention on someone, it is precisely because this is how she deserves to be treated. Such treatment, I argue, constitutes treatment *as an individual* and is to be considered ethically *ideal* treatment (as opposed to the decidedly non-ideal manner in which we are permitted to treat those who are strangers to us.) Rather than viewing them as inherently non-moral, then, my account agrees with common sense that personal relationships constitute the contexts in which we come closest to morally ideal behavior. Moreover, the claim that the desert of the person to whom one owes a loyalty obligation is itself the ground of the obligation corresponds far more closely to our pre-theoretical intuitions than do the accounts rejected in Part One, which locate the ground of such obligations in one’s own good (egoistic consequentialism and, to the extent that they recognize loyalty obligations at all, spacemaking accounts), the general good (agent-neutral consequentialism), or the agent’s own autonomy (voluntarism).

The most obvious objection to the thought that loyalty obligations are grounded in desert points out that this would seem to imply that the objects of these obligations are more deserving than others. The desert-based account might thus seem to incorporate an invidious hierarchy of individual worth. But this objection mistakes the *scope* of the desert claim with the question of *what is deserved*: it ignores the fact, upon which the desert-based account ought to insist, that *all* participants in personal relationships are, by their nature as persons, deserving, and that what each deserves is to be *speciallly* treated

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*by certain particular others.* This idea is central in my account of romantic love, whose exclusivity is justified, I argue, precisely because every person deserves to be loved by someone as if she alone deserved to be loved.

Part three turns to the question of political loyalty. It will be noticed that my account begins with, and focuses on, *personal* relationships involving loyalty. This is in marked contrast to most thinking about loyalty, which tends to begin with our relationships to more abstract objects of loyalty (communities, countries, nations) and to take these as paradigmatic. My account, by contrast, treats these as deviant cases of questionable legitimacy: if obligations that manifest loyalty are fundamentally justified by the fact that such treatment is deserved insofar as it constitutes treatment as an individual, it becomes questionable whether a political community, which is not an individual and cannot literally be said to deserve anything, can have any sort of direct claim to its constituents' loyalty. It is precisely due to the artificial and abstract nature of the entities involved that political loyalty is far more likely than is personal loyalty to be turned to inherently destructive and harmful ends. The consideration of patriotism, nationalism, and other political loyalties that constitutes part three ends, then, largely in agreement with the sentiment expressed by E.M. Forster, who famously wrote that "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country."