

Avishai Margalit. *On Betrayal*. Harvard University Press 2017. 352 pp. \$26.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780674048263).

Is it better, as E. M. Forster believed, to betray our country than to betray our friends? For Avishai Margalit, dilemmas of loyalty and betrayal have formed the basic plots of human existence, from Judas to Edward Snowden (3). In *On Betrayal*, Margalit explores treason, apostasy, and class betrayal, shedding significant light on our ‘thick’ relationships by examining their corrupted forms.

Margalit frames his engaging, unpretentious, and philosophically sensitive discussion as a contribution to political philosophy, taking the theme of betrayal as ‘a good indirect way to deal with fraternity’ (3), the somewhat neglected third republican value after *liberté* and *égalité*. While *On Betrayal* is refreshingly not solely concerned with strictly liberal societies, it does belong to a recent tradition of broadly communitarian challenges to liberal individualism. Liberals find talk of solidarity (*fraternité*) ‘outdated’ (7) or ‘archaic’ (5), and worry that liberty in particular will suffer if citizens show the sort of interest in each other that solidarity seems to call for. Margalit, by contrast, argues that the realization of liberty and equality requires trusting and caring citizens: relationships, rather than communities or individuals, are at the centre of political and ethical life. ‘Collectives’ are nothing more than ‘a ticket for taking the bus to the dwelling of couples’ (78-9), and in ‘friendship, you don’t act for your sake or for your friend’s sake; you act for the sake of the friendship’ (110).

Except in unusual cases, thick relations such as friendship are governed by what Margalit calls ‘ethics’ rather than ‘morality’ (276). Morality concerns minimal obligations to others, especially strangers, whereas ethics is concrete and guides us in our particular relationships to friends, family, and others with whom we identify or might be identified. This intuitively appealing distinction has some interesting consequences, as Margalit’s comments on the Jewish fraudster Bernie Madoff make clear: ‘There is no moral difference between the case in which Madoff cheats a gentile and the case in which he cheats a Jewish acquaintance. But there is an ethical difference: on top of cheating, there is in an affinity scam a sense of betrayal’ (148). This seems to mean that it is better to defraud those who trust you purely as a person than those who trust you because they share your race or religion. If this is Margalit’s view, then there is reason to doubt that the concept of loyalty belongs at the centre of our thinking about right and wrong.

Whether loyalty should occupy this privileged place is one question; another is whether, as a matter of fact, it can still do so, given the growing pluralism of modern society. The relative importance of loyalty in ethical life might inevitably decline as the number of different groups to which the average person belongs (defined by race, religion, political affiliation, class, gender, etc.) increases. No one need any longer fear the total isolation experienced by someone facing exile in a pre-liberal setting; there is always another chat room to join. But, while the distinction between stranger and friend has notoriously blurred in the age of social media, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that we belong equally to every group with which we might identify. If we care about some more than others, then Margalit is surely right that loyalty and betrayal deserve more attention than philosophers have tended to give them.

When should we be loyal, and to whom? Margalit’s reflections cover an impressive range of historical examples, many of which illustrate the difficulty of ‘disentang[ling] the conceptual from the empirical’ (17) in judgements of betrayal. Some of these hard cases are personally meaningful for him, for example, Israeli soldiers who were judged first as heroes and later (wrongly, in his view) as traitors (16-17). Other cases are clearer: Nazi Germany did not deserve the loyalty of its citizens, and those (like eventual chancellor of West Germany, Willy Brandt) who worked against Nazism from within are obviously not traitors, but heroes (26). Ethical obligations to one’s own thus depend

upon meeting certain fundamental moral obligations, and Margalit's emphasis on loyalty is no endorsement of tribalism or jingoism: 'Siding on moral grounds with the party that is wronged, even against your own people, when their struggle is nonviolent is justified. Siding with the other party when they are violently attacking your people can be justified only in extreme cases' (275).

But it is not really Margalit's purpose to arrive at judgements. While he compares the 17th century Catholic Gunpowder Plot to espionage for the Soviet Union carried out by American citizens in the 20th century, and counts both as examples of treason (181), he doesn't quite say that the Catholic Guy Fawkes or the spy Morris Cohen acted wrongly. Is that because these conclusions are so obvious that they don't need articulating, or because there are no obvious conclusions? It isn't clear: 'Invoking the accusation of treason is a crude political and religious weapon. This doesn't mean that the accusation is always baseless; what it means is that the accusation is always a big stick that leaves no room for niceties and nuances' (182). We learn that Vidkung Quisling, the Prime Minister of Norway under German occupation in World War II, is an 'ideal type,' a 'traitor par excellence' (191), but the ensuing discussion (191-6) concentrates on tangential themes of megalomania and madness, and Margalit passes up an opportunity to orient us using a clear point of reference. Edward Snowden is introduced as an example of ambivalent loyalties and a mistaken, puritanical 'yearning for totally transparent society' (294), but Margalit stops short of a condemnation, and offers instead an odd (and not particularly edifying) analogy: 'Betrayal and hypocrisy are necessary by-products of civilized life the way urinating is a necessary by-product of drinking' (305). Even Margalit's more characteristically sound observations can leave us without any clear direction, as in his reply to Forster's dilemma (to betray one's *friends* or one's *country*): 'England is not just an abstraction: it includes ... E.M. Forster's aunt who raised him. Exposing England to the danger of the German blitz was endangering Forster's concrete aunt and not merely the abstract principles of the Magna Carta' (237). This is true as far as it goes, but the real question is what to do when a concrete aunt is working against England's interests, and it is a fair question whether Margalit is sidestepping rather than resolving the dilemma Forster had in mind.

With his conversational style, and admirable desire to bring out the full complexity of his theme, Margalit can thus sometimes appear evasive, even though he intends his book to be action-guiding: 'Ethics is to be regulated by advice rather than by orders. But it is strong advice, similar to "the doctor advised me to take antibiotics twice a day"' (135). Of the few very clear prescriptions in the book, some come with a doctor's air of authority but not much else to justify them: 'Those who donate their sperm to a sperm bank or surrogate mother can and should be kept in the dark and not establish thick relations with their seed' (49). What if a surrogate mother is already in thick relations with the baby she carries? And if she is not, why shouldn't she be? A policy of keeping everyone 'in the dark' will be a hard sell in our time, especially considering that the 'seed' is now widely thought to have rights. Here, at least, it looks as though the creative organization of our own personal lives will (sometimes) be sacrificed in the interest of dubious claims about healthy relationships – exactly as liberals fear.

In other respects, Margalit's guiding ideal of a community composed of particular, concrete relationships is not ambitious enough. For him, a political community is a 'backward-looking' (239) 'community of memory' (73-5). He dismisses Rorty's ideal of a 'solidarity of the future' (75), as well as the (related) Christian vision on which 'only forward-looking relations are compatible with the idea of establishing the kingdom of God' (239). Here, though, is a dilemma we really do not have to face. A pluralistic society can welcome all sorts of people, and a stable society does not need every citizen to be solemnly devoted to preserving the memory of those gone before. This is good news, since there is good reason to doubt that everyone *can* be loyal in this way to the past. Some people

are understandably and rightly absorbed in the present, while others are busy dreaming up a world yet to come. The good life (for an individual) probably involves an equal measure of faithful memory and creative imagination, but if we are thinking of solidarity in political, rather than purely ethical terms, we should welcome a division of labour in these matters. We do not need individually to be all things: we can rely on each other.

Stephen B. Hawkins, Champlain Regional College