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Compromise

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Synonyms

[Arrangement](#); [Bargain](#); [Compact](#); [Deal](#); [Settlement](#); [Trade-off](#)

Definition

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “compromise” (in the sense relevant here) as “[a] coming to terms, or arrangement of a dispute, by concessions on both sides; partial surrender of one’s position, for the sake of coming to terms; the concession or terms offered by either side.” In brief, it is an agreement arrived at through mutual concessions (Pennock and Chapman 1979).

Etymologically, the word “compromise” stems from the Latin *compromissum*, which referred to the reciprocal promise of two disputing parties to submit themselves to the judgment of an arbiter, a *compromissarius*. In the Middle Ages, compromise came to refer to the process of electing a *compromissarius* as community representative. Since then, these associations with arbitration

and election have gradually disappeared, and compromise has come to refer simply to a particular kind of agreement between disputants themselves.

Conceptualization

One way to conceptualize compromise (in the current meaning) is to take it as the overlap between four other concepts, namely, conflict, concession, consensus, and consent. Together, they are part of a semantic field with two dimensions: conflict-consensus as an inter-actor dimension and concession-consent as an intra-actor dimension. At the intersection of these dimensions, one finds compromise; it has something of all four concepts while still differing from each of them.

To begin, every compromise implies conflict. Some think this can be a conflict within one person who has to compromise on his own convictions (sometimes called an “internal compromise”), but the typical case is a conflict between two or more actors. They settle their conflict, or rather suspend it, through an agreement they can all live with. Once the compromise has been reached, the initial conflict usually lingers on and its reemergence remains thinkable. Should the actors wear each other out in an exhaustive battle, balancing forces without coming to an agreement, they arrive at a stalemate, not a compromise.

On the other side of the dimension, secondly, compromise differs from, but also overlaps with, consensus. In every compromise, actors agree on at least some points, for instance, on the very fact that they are having the conflict, the terms of their conflict, the desirability to suspend the conflict, the preferability of peaceful settlement over violence, and of course the contents of the compromise itself. Indeed, according to many compromise theorists (though not all), the actors involved have to recognize, at least temporarily and to some extent, each other's legitimacy. (As long as Hamas and Israel do not grant each other a "right to exist," they might make deals, but not genuine compromises.) Compromise, it is believed, requires a certain degree of mutual respect and recognition or at least a willingness to tolerate the other side. Still there is, as said, a continuing conflict as well; a compromise never amounts to a complete consensus. Should the actors manage to agree on an arrangement they consider better than their initial positions, they have arrived at a synthesis, not at a compromise.

Thirdly, for the actors involved, compromise implies concessions. In order to reach an agreement, they give in on their initially preferred positions and accept a suboptimal (second-best or *n*th-best) arrangement instead, leaving them with moral regret. Still, they can accept such an arrangement for a variety of reasons, even for reasons unrelated to the issue at hand, but typically they regard the arrangement better than other ones they consider attainable *and* as better than continuing the conflict without the compromise. The concessions made in compromise are supposed to be mutual; every actor involved has to give in at least to a degree that is acceptable to the other actors. Should an actor be coerced or deceived to make more concessions than he is actually willing to consent to, one speaks of exploitation and treachery, not of compromise. And should, in an extreme case, one actor willingly and unilaterally abandon his initially preferred position and make all the concessions, there will be a capitulation, but again not a compromise.

Finally, compromise needs at least some measure of consent. A compromise, most theorists agree, requires more than a merely mental act of

acceptance – of the often grudging submission to the inevitable. It requires consent – the voluntary, unenforced, and honest willingness (however partial and conditional it in these respects may be), to agree with the arrangement. This consent may be explicit, but also tacit, and outside the negotiation room the actors may deny their consent vigorously. Given the fact that concessions have to be made, the consent can never be wholehearted, but some measure of genuine consent is necessary because it creates moral obligations to heed the agreement on the side of the other parties. As philosophers say, mutual consent makes compromises "morally transformative": it changes the moral status of actors toward one another.

Types and Reasons

Many compromises are about material interests or what are sometimes derogatively called "bread-and-butter issues." These can be complicated and sensitive, but often they allow for somehow "splitting the difference" between parties. Such non-moral compromises are also often called deals or bargains and have been the subject of extensive scrutiny by economists and game theorists. More controversial are so-called moral compromises: compromises that involve conflicts on moral issues and hence often also concessions on moral principles. These tend to be particularly hard to strike and are often highly controversial. Many different writers, such as libertarian Ayn Rand and President John F. Kennedy, have even stated that while compromises on interests are often needed and good, compromises on moral principles should never be made. Others, however, have rejected this distinction and defended the necessity of making political compromises on principles, as well. In the literature on the ethics of compromise, abortion is often mentioned as a moral issue on which compromises are particularly difficult to achieve.

A seemingly similar but actually different distinction is that between pragmatic and principled compromises. This distinction concerns the *reasons* for which one compromises. A pragmatic compromise is struck in order to achieve other

goals; it is seen as a mere instrument and often as a necessary evil. In case of a principled compromise, by contrast, one has distinctive moral reasons to compromise (for instance, the felt need to respect one's opponents' dignity). Striking the compromise is then considered morally desirable, even if there would otherwise be no need for it (for instance, because one has won an absolute majority). Opinions differ, however, on the question whether principled compromises really exist, especially in politics, or whether all compromises are necessarily pragmatic and therefore, in part at least, "strategic." This debate has only recently been opened and is far from finished.

Besides these two sets of reasons for compromising – pragmatic and principled – a third set has occasionally been suggested, namely, *epistemic* reasons. The moral dilemmas and controversies that underlie many of our social issues and policy debates are simply too complex, it is argued, to be resolved by one individual actor. Unintended consequences and unforeseen negative side effects will always be possible. A more prudent approach then would be to involve more actors than is strictly necessary and to opt not for one clear-cut course of action but instead for a compromise. This would do more justice, it is thought, to the complexity of the issue at hand. When the actors involved recognize this possibility, recognize their own cognitive and imaginative limits, and recognize each other as "epistemic peers" (three recognitions that may not come about easily), they have strong epistemic reasons to compromise.

Ethics of Compromise

The subject of compromise touches upon many core issues in the field of (applied) ethics, including conflict resolution, integrity, and self-identification. It is also an important topic when it comes to the relationship between professional responsibility and personal morality. A useful distinction has been made between the morality *of* compromise (concerning the question whether and when we should compromise in the first place) and the morality *in* compromise

(concerning the question how and under which constraints we should compromise once we have decided to do so). That these two issues bear upon each other seems obvious, but few ideas exist on how exactly they are related. It seems safe to say, at any rate, that the degree to which a compromise can be made in a proper way (morality *in* compromise) determines in large part the degree to which it should be made at all (morality *of* compromise). Assessing the former before entering the process may, however, prove an impossible feat.

In relation to the morality *of* compromise, authors have noted the so-called paradox of compromise, which states that to hold a moral value dear implies that one wants to achieve it, but to achieve it one often has to compromise on that very value. In other words, a compromise will let you have more than you would have had without it and less than you aimed for. Not all actors might see things in this way, however. Uncompromising actors might deny that a compromise on their fundamental principles would give them any gains at all. For them, to join in a compromise means to be "compromised" or even to be stained with moral guilt. Here the aesthetics of compromise easily takes over from the ethics of compromise. People may speak of bad compromises as ugly, rotten, and stinking. Others, however, have praised the creativity and beauty of good compromises.

As these diverging valuations show, compromises almost by definition arouse a sense of moral ambivalence, albeit not in the same measure for everyone. From the viewpoint of a consequentialist ethic such as utilitarianism, compromises do not pose particularly difficult questions. They naturally fit with the principle that our moral choices should maximize overall utility. Compromises are often just necessary if one wants to promote "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." The consequentialist appreciation of particular compromises can be very "principled" and morally considerate, not less so at least than many high-minded rejections of them.

The opposite position often stems from a duty-oriented ethic such as deontology: it espouses absolute principles on which one should not

compromise at all. Immanuel Kant's famous condemnation of lying, for instance, does not allow for compromises. Often, however, deontological reasoning is not used to denounce compromises categorically, but rather to set some strict limits around them. In international relations, for example, compromises, even bad and not fully just ones, must often be struck for the sake of peace, but perhaps even in that sphere, some compromises should never be made, not even to avoid war. For instance, Margalit (2010) has famously argued that compromises which support systematically cruel political regimes that break the bonds of our common humanity are "rotten" compromises and should be rejected. Others have argued that compromises are only morally acceptable if they improve on the status quo, if they do not violate basic human rights, if they do not trespass God's commandments, and so on. Needless to say, none of these deontological conditions for legitimate compromise making is generally accepted.

Virtue ethics, the third major approach in ethical theory, tends to be least outspoken about and most ambivalent toward compromises. Its comparative silence on the subject has to do with the fact that virtue ethics, contrary to the other two, primarily aims not at the moral quality of single actions but of human persons as a whole and the lives they live. Its ambivalence stems from the fact that compromises seem at odds with some virtues (steadfastness, courage), but required by others (prudence, charity, peacefulness). Despite this ambivalence, it seems clear that the exercise of virtues does affect the moral acceptability and quality of compromises. A bravely, patiently, and sincerely made compromise will, other things equal, tend to be better than a cowardly, rashly, and deceptively made one. In other words, while consequentialism and deontology have much to say about the morality *of* compromise, virtue ethics seems more helpful for assessing the morality *in* compromise.

One notion with a distinctly virtue-ethical flavor that is frequently juxtaposed to compromise is integrity (Benjamin 1990). In present-day political and administrative ethics, integrity is of course a very central concept, but much of the "integrity

management" literature deals with forms of inappropriate behavior (bribery, conflicts of interest, harassment) rather than with morally ambivalent decisions such as compromises. In the literature on compromises, however, the question is raised whether actors can compromise on moral principles without harming their own moral integrity. And this question is often answered positively: many authors argue that compromising can be a sign of moral strength rather than moral weakness and that, in fact, an unwillingness to compromise shows a lack of integrity.

Compromises in Governance

"All government (...) is founded upon compromise and barter," Edmund Burke famously said in his *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775). Politics, indeed, has often been called "the art of compromise." In public governance, be it in diplomacy, labor relations, or policy making more generally, compromises are omnipresent. The public sphere is, after all, the place in which various moral perspectives and material interests come together and where choices often cannot be postponed until a perfect solution is found. Indeed, even the long-lasting constitutional arrangements within which politics and administration take place can be understood as compromises between conflicting interests and various "regime values."

If compromise is essential to governance, this seems particularly true for democratic governance (Dobel 1990). Arguably, a willingness to compromise is particularly fitting for politicians and other policy makers in democracies, because there the negotiating actors are equal by principle and must rely on persuasion rather than force in the process of decision-making. Tyrants often make concessions, too, but they do not have to agree on compromises with opposing parties, and the opposition does not have to consent to their rule. The fact that modern democracies are characterized by moral, ethnic, and religious pluralism is an additional reason to emphasize the need for political compromises. Particularly under the condition of multiculturalism, compromise making is regarded a proper political instrument, and it is

often associated with tolerance and a liberal moral and political stance. These associations are not intrinsic to the concept of compromise (non-liberal and even intolerant political actors can compromise, too), but they are very strong nonetheless.

Not only in politics but also in public administration compromise is of course a highly common phenomenon. If administrative arrangements can be divided, as is often done, into hierarchies, markets, and networks, compromises seem most suited to the last. Weberian bureaucracies with their strict hierarchy and regulatory discipline do not easily allow for compromises. New Public Management (NPM) style contract-based governing and public agencies do clearly depend on deals and bargains, but the notion of moral compromise spelled out here seems more alien to them. In governance networks, however, compromises seem particularly at home. When there is no clear center of authority, no hard and fast regulations, nor (quasi-) market mechanisms, actors will have to manage public problems with a flexible and cooperative attitude. Compromise is thus one of the most natural ways to deal with competing interests and values in contemporary governance.

Compromise and Political Theory

Since about 2010, there is a strong renewed interest in the topic of compromise in (Anglo-American) political theory. This seems to have two reasons, one theoretical and one practical. Theoretically, compromise is found interesting because it promises a middle course between two competing approaches: liberalism and realism. Ever since John Rawls' book *A Theory of Justice* (1971), the field of political theory has been dominated by political liberalism. In all its variety, this approach has emphasized the need for a consensus (in Rawls' terms, an "overlapping consensus") among people with different moral and political views. This consensus should be found in a set of (liberal) principles to which all reasonable people could voluntarily agree. The core value on which these principles should be

based and which they aim to promote is justice. In recent years, this very project has been criticized by theorists who reject liberalism and favor realism instead. They believe the aimed-for overlapping consensus can never be found because politics is inherently conflictual. The best we can achieve, they argue, is *modus vivendi* arrangements that, like no-fly zones above war-torn areas, mitigate the intensity of ongoing conflicts. Peace is probably never really attainable, but should still be the core value driving our search for such arrangements.

Now compromise is seen as a concept that can lessen the tension between these two approaches. For compromise combines, as we have seen, elements of both consensus and conflict. It is often more than a merely pragmatic bargain (*modus vivendi* arrangements), but still less than a comprehensive agreement (consensus). Hence, some theorists believe that the notion of compromise is well suited to bridge this division between liberalism and realism. But as can be expected, others remain skeptical about this possibility.

Compromise in Current Conditions

The more practical reason for the recent surge of interest in political compromises among academics has to do with the changing nature of present-day democratic politics. Admittedly, the appreciation for compromises has always varied among cultures and across time. For example, while compromise making has traditionally been valued by the Brits, it was despised by the French. And while for decades the willingness to compromise was associated with the conservative right, with the political left being inclined to reject compromise making as insufficiently radical, this seems to be largely reversed nowadays. So the appreciation of compromises has always been varying and changing. Today, however, several observers express strong concerns about a near-universal rejection of compromises among both the masses and the governance elites in Western democracies. In a culture of polarization and populist anti-elite sentiment, compromises have become unpopular with citizens and the media

and hence also with politicians themselves. Particularly in the United States, but also in other countries, politics is increasingly dominated by the constant struggle between two political blocs engaged in “permanent campaigning” and hence finds itself regularly in deadlock. Important and urgent issues, such as the national debt and immigration, can therefore not be adequately tackled. The uncompromising mindset of many politicians, reflecting an uncooperative “winner takes all” mentality, is a serious cause of concern (Gutmann and Thompson 2012).

Cross-References

- ▶ [Administrative Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Values](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Values and Personal Integrity](#)
- ▶ [Formal Rule-Making in Public Administration](#)
- ▶ [Moral Responsibility](#)
- ▶ [Philosophical Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Collaboration](#)
- ▶ [Politics and Public Policy](#)
- ▶ [Politics: Basic Concepts](#)
- ▶ [Theories of Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Value Congruence](#)

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