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The morality in/of compromise: some theoretical reflections

Abstract. *This article aims to highlight the position occupied by compromise in the field of ethics. The argument is set out in two stages. First, the author attempts to clarify the contours of compromise by treating it as both a procedure or process of conflict resolution and a goal or “solution” to be achieved. In the second stage, he examines the distinction that could be made between “morality in compromise” and “morality of compromise”, so as to measure its import and show how compromise not only contains elements specific to morality as a system but can also be a form of morality in itself.*

Key words. *Agreement – Compromise – Conflict (of values) – Dispute – Ethics – Exchange – Morality – Negotiation – Pluralism – Reciprocity*

Résumé. *Cet article entend mettre en exergue la place que revêt le compromis dans le champ éthique. Pour ce faire, l'argument est déployé en deux temps. D'abord, en s'efforçant de préciser les contours de la figure de compromis en la traitant à la fois en tant que procédé ou processus de règlement de conflit et en tant que finalité ou “solution” à atteindre. Ensuite, dans une seconde étape, il est question de reprendre la distinction qu'on pourrait faire entre “éthique du compromis” et “éthique de compromis” pour en mesurer la portée et montrer comment non seulement le compromis contient inmanquablement des éléments relevant spécifiquement du système de la moralité, mais peut constituer lui-même une forme de moralité.*

Mots-clés. *Accord – Compromis – Conflit (des valeurs) – Echange – Ethique – Différend – Moralité – Négociation – Pluralisme – Réciprocité*

Compromise. A compromise is a sort of bargain in which several agents who see advantages in co-operative efforts of some sort agree to proceed in a way that requires each of them to surrender, perhaps only temporarily, some of their ends, interests or policies, in order to secure others. There is nothing immoral in compromise, as such, but it is not surprising that the word commonly has some negative implications, and that there is an application of it with essentially derogatory meaning. This occurs when we talk of a person or an institution being compromised. Some deals, we seem to think, go beyond the regrettable denial of a worthy goal or abandonment of a significant interest: they require the undermining of self and integrity.

These morally damaging compromises involve the sacrifice of basic principle, where the notion of principle concerned is more to do with depth than universality. Consequently, although it will inevitably have a moral flavour about it, such a principle need not itself be a moral principle such as might be thought binding upon every rational agent. Clearly, there are difficulties in characterizing such a notion more accurately; here I shall have to rest with an intuitive grasp on the idea, which should anyhow suffice to suggest the way in which principle, in this sense, does much to constitute the core of character and to shape people's fundamental expectations of each other. Hence it is a central criticism of someone that they are unprincipled or lack principle. When compromise reaches to the sacrifice of principle then it ceases to be a normal, if perhaps unfortunate, requirement of collaboration or conflict and becomes morally suspect. The Machiavellian challenge suggests that this is sometimes or often necessary. (Coady, 1991: 380)

In this article we propose to set out some signposts for a reflection on the moral character of compromise. At the origin of this reflection are two queries. The first has to do with various issues running through contemporary societies: interethnic conflict, multiculturalism, identity claims, hybridization of cultures, etc. At a time when pluralism, globalization and homogenization, but also hybridization of cultures, post-colonialism and multiple modernities, are posing a greater challenge than ever, it is interesting to take a closer look at the notion of compromise, to examine the utility and justification of applying it to these questions. To what extent is such a notion likely to be operational in apprehending such issues and in elucidating problems of a social, political or economic nature? Here the notion of compromise takes on an operational, practical and pragmatic character. The second query bears more specifically on the ethical stakes involved in compromise: what position does the notion of compromise occupy in the ethical field? Here the aim would be to prepare the ground for an approach to the values, the axiological categories, on which present-day societies are based. It is the second query that will be the focus of this article, although the first is not entirely disposed of and will remain as a backdrop, as it were, to our argument.

Reflection on compromise is by no means widespread, in fact there are difficulties entailed in simply stating the notion clearly (Luban, 1985). In some respects the notion can even seem incongruous or paradoxical. At first glance, the idea of compromise can seem to have pejorative overtones and may inspire in some mistrust or even rejection, as though it inevitably implied “abdication” or “dishonorable concession”, “unprincipled compromise”. Yet there is indisputably a fundamental distinction between “compromise” (*compromis*) and “compromising with conscience”, i.e. “dishonorable concession” (*compromission*).¹ “Dishonorable concession” is a vicious mixture of the levels and principles of reference. “There is no confusion in compromise, as there is in dishonorable concession. In compromise, each party remains in his or her place, no one is despoiled of his or her order of justification” (Ricoeur, 1991: 2). It is probably the mistrust of this notion that is to blame for the relatively few studies on compromise. As Pétrovici already remarked in the late 1930s, “it is a phenomenon perpetually condemned in theory and always used in practice” (1937: 736). Generally speaking, reflection on the matter thus remains fairly rare. The subject of compromise is not highly regarded by philosophers, political scientists and sociologists, to say the least.

Before getting down to the actual discussion, it seems useful to begin by defining, if only provisionally, what is generally understood by compromise. Etymologically, a compromise is an agreement reached through mutual concessions (com + promise). But this definition is vague and unsatisfying. More accurately, we could add that compromise can be considered to be an objective one seeks to attain (an agreement, resolution of a conflict, etc.) as well as a means or process by which it is attained. In one case, compromise is a form of agreement or “solution” to a dispute or difference, to a conflict or disagreement, while in the other it is a procedure for resolving conflicts (Simmel 1995). But, as Roy (1990: 330) points out: “While solution is understood to be an answer that fulfills all the givens of a problem, the chief characteristic of a political problem is that it is insoluble”. In this sense, we can join de Jouvenel in talking about the “solution myth”. If the problem can be solved, in the precise sense of the term, then it is a technical problem. But a political problem can only be settled, usually by the difficult path of negotiation and compromise (Hallowell, 1944). Compromise is that mode of conflict resolution or prevention in which the parties agree to withdraw or to reduce some of their initial demands.

Consent can be obtained directly by mutual concessions or, more often, through the intervention of a third party who acts as a mediator or arbitrator. Alternatively, a compromise that puts an end to a dispute is an explicit, deliberate compromise. This kind of compromise implies acknowledgment of the other (Roy, 1990). These are the chief considerations underpinning the idea of compromise, which are echoed in the quotation that opens this article. We will now discuss them one by one, with special emphasis on what could be called the morality in/of compromise. We will see in particular how some authors who take the concept of compromise seriously readily associate it with a form of morality, thus giving it a specific ethical value (Pennock and Chapman, 1979).

The way is now clear to develop our argument by setting out the characteristics of compromise and its ethical dimension. We will do this in two stages. First we will attempt to clarify the contours of compromise by treating it both as a procedure and as a goal or aim. Then we will inquire into the validity of the distinction between morality *in* compromise and morality *of* compromise.

Compromise as process and as aim: for a pragmatic approach

Contrary to certain vague and confused views of compromise, which, as we have already shown, need to be superseded (Nachi, 2001), we favor developing a reflection that takes the notion of compromise seriously. In this perspective, compromise would in a way be a matter of “common sense” in that it implies an attitude conducive to acknowledgment of the other, cooperation, negotiation, understanding, in virtue of which the parties to the compromise process work towards coordinating their actions and coming to an agreement.

Some of the most interesting early analyses of compromise are to be found in economics, international relations and game theory. Many contributions, for the most part normative and theoretical in tenor, use a formalized analysis for either resolving certain conflicts of interests on the basis of rationality or utility, or working out a theory of negotiation (Elster, 1994: 234–6). Central to this perspective are the “logical structure” and “optimal strategies” that lead to compromise solutions and the resolution of conflicts of interest and thereby determine coordination of the action (Golding, 1979: 6). The pioneering analyses developed by Thomas C. Schelling

in his book *The Strategy of Conflict* (Schelling, 1986) are representative of this approach and are indisputably still valuable today.

It further seems that compromise is a flexible and complex notion that cannot be elucidated by a simple definition, however complete it may be, for a succinct analysis cannot do it justice. As Golding rightly points out, there is no set of necessary and sufficient pre-defined conditions that could simply be fulfilled in order for a compromise to be achieved. We are therefore inclined to try to grasp the idea of compromise through its internal logical structures and dynamics, so as to identify its principal components together with the processes that govern its constitution. That is why it would be more judicious to look at compromise from a pragmatic standpoint, and to treat it as a process aimed at preventing, or temporarily or durably suspending, a dispute or a disagreement. We will thus speak of a pragmatic of agreement (*pragmatique de l'accord*), i.e. an approach designed to elucidate the concrete forms of agreement, compromise and reconciliation brought into play with a view to ending a dispute. In this perspective, in order to fully understand a compromise agreement, or more generally for any concrete form of compromise to be intelligible, we must look at the context² in which it was worked out and put together; we need to analyze the circumstances of the negotiations, the nature and scope of the concessions made, the institutional and non-institutional arrangements involved, etc.; failing which, it would be useless to try to understand why it exists and what it means for the parties involved! It is therefore important, as we have indicated, to distinguish two different but complementary approaches to compromise: one focuses on analysis of the outcome, on the form of the end agreement, while the other is concerned with revealing the process and the dynamics entailed in shaping a compromise agreement. In one case, Golding points out, resolution of the conflict can be regarded as a compromise without asking how it was actually reached; in the other, compromise is associated with a specific process aimed at putting an end to or suspending the conflict.³ He writes:

As to avenues of approach, two are possible: end-state and process. The first looks to the result or outcome – the agreement or adjustment – and tries to see how it compares with the original situation for which it is alleged to be a compromise. The second looks to ways and means, the methods by which the result is reached, and it characterizes the result as a compromise in virtue of the process by which it is achieved. I suspect that adoption of the one or the other approach determines how one deals with the question of fairness (and perhaps also the rationality) of compromise.

The end-state approach will tend to the view that fair outcome is a unique point or set of points in the region of possible outcomes. . . . The process approach, on the other hand, has a laxer, shall we say, more compromising view of the matter. It will judge the fairness of the outcome in terms of the procedures followed in reaching it. . . . The process approach to the phenomenon of compromise requires that we go beyond mathematical game theory and into the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and moral philosophy. (1979: 7–8)

Golding expresses a marked preference for the process approach, and he goes on to make yet another distinction, this time between two “types” or “forms” of compromise. These are, on the one hand, what he terms directly negotiated compromise, in which the parties do not call upon outside help or intervention (i.e. a “negotiated solution”), and, on the other hand, third-party compromise (i.e. an “arbitrated solution”) (1979: 7–8).⁴

Generally speaking, compromise presupposes a dispute, disagreement or conflict, in the broad sense: conflicts of values, of interests, of rights, of principles, etc.⁵ In certain cases where the conflict is not open, or the difference or dispute not visible, there is no reason to seek an arrangement, reconciliation or compromise. Using a dichotomy established by Boltanski, it can be said that compromise implies *ipso facto* the existence of a “state of dispute” and has no reason to exist in a “state of peace” (Boltanski, 1990).

In this way a set of core concepts can serve to outline the notion of compromise: among them is necessarily the concept of “conflict” and its corollary, “cessation” or “suspension” of conflict, or to use Golding’s terminology “termination of the conflict” (Golding, 1979: 9). Furthermore, for a dispute to be terminated or suspended, the parties must agree to mutual concessions. That is where another, no less crucial, set of concepts comes in, like those of understanding, cooperation, negotiation and reconciliation. For Golding, the concept of “negotiation” is indispensable in analyzing the idea of compromise (1979: 14). It can even be regarded as one of the most important because it lies at the heart of every process and dynamics involved in compromise. Indeed constructing a compromise inevitably requires concessions on the part of all parties present, which implies negotiation, regarded as a “negotiation under the constraints” of the situation.

For the dynamics of compromise to be set in motion, the parties must agree on the stakes and the terms of the negotiation, i.e. on what is negotiable and what is not. In a way, the interests of the parties must at least partially coincide; Golding calls this a partial

coincidence of interests. Once this condition is fulfilled, negotiation can become fully meaningful for all the parties. Then intentions of rivalry and competition can be replaced by intentions of cooperation and conciliation.⁶ It is in this way, through a process of cooperation triggered by the dynamics of the search for a compromise, that a state of conflict or dispute is moved towards a state of “peace”, precarious at times, it is true, or peaceful coexistence. But, as Freund points out, we must realize that

compromise does not mean weakness, goodness or the expression of a certain peaceful inclination. For, had this been the case, the conflict would have been avoided in the first place. Compromise is a procedure that envisages conflict but rules it out in the end because it is felt that it is more advantageous for one or the other party not to carry an antagonism to the extreme limit. (Freund, 1981: 75)

It is this daily task of pacification that, to our mind, should be studied in detail and should constitute the principal concern of what we propose to call a pragmatic approach to compromise.

Compromise looked at in this way appears as a bulwark against violence insofar as it puts to the test a “logic of reconciliation” and a “space for arbitration”; this includes any practice that makes it possible to keep differences, disputes or conflicts from degenerating into violence. Compromise, as Ricœur writes, “is what keeps society from falling apart”, and he goes on:

In this sense, compromise is a barrier between agreement and violence. It is in the absence of agreement that we compromise for the good of civil peace. We could even say that compromise is our only response to violence in the absence of an order recognized by everyone, and in a way unique in its references. As we have nothing but fragmentary references, it is between these references that we are obliged to compromise. (1991: 3)

The ultimate stake in compromise, its primordial aim, is to go beyond conflict and dispute to the benefit of a state of peaceful coexistence in which the partners in a situation of dispute manage to “wrest from each other” a “common accord”. The compromise attains this high point, this transcendence, when each party is convinced that the other is “doing their best” to cooperate and find an arrangement, when each party knows that the other is fully and really assuming their role and their convictions in the most likely and reasonable way. All of which presupposes in certain situations an ethical backdrop, which we will now examine and attempt to define.

The moral aim of compromise: the distinction between morality *in* and morality *of* compromise

We have presented a few elements and features of the dynamics and process of compromise-building. We will now attempt to elucidate the ethical dimension of this kind of agreement by looking at its characteristic features and its specificity.

Clearly the idea of morality *in* and/or *of* compromise is not a concept that can be taken for granted; we need to define exactly what we are talking about. In a certain sense we can correlate these two levels of distinction with two configurations: on the one hand, the aspects of morality inherent *in* compromise, insofar as the process of seeking an agreement makes it possible to contain violence, and, on the other hand, that which presupposes that compromise, in itself, in its logic and its makeup carries a moral aim. We notice that this distinction coincides with the separation Golding establishes between morality *in* compromise and morality *of* compromise (Golding, 1979: 6). From there, we can ask ourselves if these two levels conceived separately necessarily call for the same meaning in terms of ethical reflection. We can advance that taking into account that the role of morality in constructing the figure of compromise in a way makes for a more fruitful approach, capable of illuminating certain features of this form of agreement. Alternatively, considering compromise itself as a “form of morality” allows us to envisage the ethical questions from a different angle. To a certain extent, the choice of action or decision in a given situation and the justification of certain moral values can themselves be regarded as the expression of a compromise. Such considerations lead us to look more closely at the nature of morality, at the foundations of compromise and at the likely links and connections between the two. Kuflik singles out these connections when he raises the question: “*how is it possible* for persons to be compromising toward each other without thereby compromising their own moral integrity in the bargain?” (Kuflik, 1979: 38).

In an attempt to find a satisfactory answer to this question, Kuflik suggests considering three important elements that help clarify the relationship between morality and compromise.

I suggest, as Kuflik, that the relationship between morality and compromise can be clarified if we consider the following claims:

1. Principles of right and wrong limit what may be legitimately compromised; from a moral standpoint, some claims are non-negotiable.
2. The role of morality in relation to compromise is not merely limitative: subject to the relevant restrictions, compromise is often to be regarded as not just tolerable but as positively desirable.
3. In addition to limiting what may be compromised, and within those limits, frequently commending compromise to us, moral considerations can play a still more constructive role (Kuflik, 1979: 39).

Clarified in these terms, the relationship between morality and compromise appears in a new light. Nevertheless, another aspect of this approach to compromise is also worth examining. What makes Golding's distinction between morality *in* and *of* compromise pertinent? Why this nuance? What specific meaning should be assigned to each of these moralities? In other words, what is the axiological configuration of *of* compromise and *in* compromise? At first sight, what could be called "morality *of* compromise" signals the existence of moral principles and of values that serve as a basis for working out a compromise solution. As we saw above, compromise requires negotiation and therefore a form of reciprocity, of exchange, an interaction or a transaction between two or more actors. This obviously presupposes a common language; but above all it supposes something more: some degree of "moral legitimacy" or of "moral credit" that each party accords the other. Or, as Golding observes:

It [the compromise process] presupposes a commonality or, more exactly, a community. The compromise process is a conscious process in which there is a degree of moral acknowledgement of the other party. The other party is accorded some degree of moral legitimacy, and so are some of his interests. (1979: 16)

It could thus be said that the compromise process implies certain moral qualities that favor compromise-building. These moral qualities operate in such a way that the attitude of cooperation, the efforts and the mutual concessions, which are part and parcel of the compromise process, cannot be reduced to a form of cooperation based on self-interest or aimed at some egotistical need, that is to say a purely strategic cooperation. At stake is the primordial principle of reciprocity and exchange that plays a fundamental role in any compromise process (Simmel, 1999).

It is in this sense that the parties involved can find themselves in a moral posture that is sometimes favorable and other times unfavorable to compromise-building, and this depends on the situation and on the interactions between the parties, which explains why these parties “should” (i.e. have a moral obligation to) agree to cooperate and to make some concessions so that the negotiation process can move towards a compromise agreement. As a consequence, the moral dimension acts as both a support and a constraint (institutional, social, etc.) for the dynamic process of building and realizing a successful compromise. Different ethical or axiological considerations intervene to turn the compromise into an acceptable agreement. We have only to recall how these influence the dynamics of compromise. Indeed it seems difficult to distinguish clearly what is due to axiology and what is due to strategy or to other considerations that go into the dynamics of compromise, but features like good faith, trust and loyalty nevertheless play a sometimes decisive role. Everyone knows that such strongly ethical categories are very important in this kind of situation, in which the negotiators or compromisers attempt to go beyond what separates them.⁷

We now come to Golding’s distinction, which separates morality *in* compromise from morality *of* compromise. This distinction seems to be induced by the author’s desire to differentiate two levels or two configurations that endow compromise with characteristics specific to and inherent in each of the two moralities. To talk about morality *in* compromise is to regard the latter as the profound expression of a “moral sense”. Moreover, this very moral sense can turn out to be a form of compromise.⁸ No doubt a thorough analysis would be needed to justify this claim. But what we can say, generally and roughly speaking, is that any moral system worthy of the name carries within it the ideas of peace, tolerance and reconciliation and, in the last analysis, the idea of compromise. Morality advocates peace, (re)conciliation . . . *and* compromise. Therefore, through a better understanding of the different sorts of compromise, we arrive at a broader and, in various respects, more pertinent way of thinking about the foundations of morality and of axiological values. Kuflik has nicely seized this aspect of morality as compromise. He writes:

We have been looking at compromise from the standpoint of morality. To conclude our discussion, it may be interesting to turn the subject inside out, so to speak, and to see whether the notion of compromise can illuminate the nature of morality – if not morality as a whole, then at least that complex of moral

concerns for which the term “justice” has been reserved. The suggestion that the principles of right and/or of justice can be represented as the terms of a very special sort of compromise agreement has played a role in at least two traditions of moral thought. (1979: 55)

The two traditions the author alludes to are echoed in Plato and some social-contract theorists. We cannot analyze these here but, without going into detail, we can say that, according to Kuflik, the principles of justice are presented by the first tradition in terms of “compromise agreement” and by the second in terms of “mutual accommodation” (Kuflik, 1979: 62). The latter is formulated most fully in Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness. For this author, justice principles presuppose the existence of a “reconciliation pact” and a “cooperation among equals for mutual advantage” (Kuflik, 1979: 62). Rawls’ principles of justice are therefore, so to speak, the outcome of a reasonable adjustment between the choices of the original persons or contracting parties (see Arnspurger and Picavet, this issue). Ultimately, as Kuflik points out, having a sense of justice also means having a sense of concession and accommodation, and consequently a sense of compromise.

These are general considerations on the figure of the compromise as a moral figure. No doubt they need to be completed so as to achieve a more coherent approach, which we hope to do at a later time.

Conclusion

At the end of this rapid overview, it becomes clear that the notion of compromise is a pivotal concept, a boundary-concept which, to our mind, deserves a special effort to explore its many meanings. We set out to highlight one of these essential meanings, the one that touches on the field of ethics. However, we by no means claim to have said the last word on the subject, far from it. At best our developments can be regarded as the first signposts planted in what is surely a fairly complex domain, and one that is moreover largely unexplored. In different respects, the idea of compromise deserves to be reconsidered in relation to a whole set of concepts, which include conflict, cooperation, negotiation, consensus, agreement, etc., in order to see how these entertain a strong relationship with the notion of compromise. This will enable us to take a fresh look at individual reactions, social or economic transactions, coordination of action, etc. In the

past, as we have emphasized, the idea of compromise was often rejected, looked down on or neglected because, owing to an ingrained prejudice, it was associated with unprincipled concession. Recent studies, in particular by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), have altered this outlook, and the concept of compromise has become of capital importance for sociological thought (Thévenot, 1996). This reflection should be developed until compromise is finally regarded as an object of study in its own right, i.e. until a genuine sociology of compromise has been constituted with all that implies in terms of theorization and concrete research.

It seems necessary to separate out different spheres of compromise and to try to see the contours and meanings of the concept in light of its relations with neighboring concepts, treating it as much as a more or less developed process as an aim or a goal to be reached. This is what we have tried to do by focusing on the ethical dimension of compromise. In fact, the concept of compromise turns out to be central to understanding certain human actions that have a moral aim. But it also appears that it can play a crucial theoretical role.

We also find the idea of compromise in various areas of social life, which gives it an undeniable anthropological dimension and makes it inseparable from the “human condition” (see the Introduction to this issue). What appears obvious then is the pivotal position occupied by compromise, in spite of the mistrust some may feel and the negativity with which any compromise decision is met. Benjamin sums up the paradoxical character of compromise in an evocative formula:

Like fire, compromise is both necessary and dangerous to human life. Were we never to accept political compromise on matters of ethical conviction, we would cut ourselves off from large numbers of our fellow humans; were we always to accept it, we would become alienated from ourselves. (1990: 3)

But there, too, we have not failed to stress the paradoxical character of compromise when we underscored, on the one hand, how indispensable it is in settling differences or disputes, how necessary it is for the permanence of the social bond, and how compromise actually makes it possible to keep conflicts from degenerating into violence, and, on the other hand, how, in some contexts, it could turn out to be “dangerous” insofar as it can undermine certain fundamental values or principles, slipping into unprincipled compromise or sometimes turning into “betrayal” (Benjamin, 1990). It is this ambivalence and this paradox that make the problem of

compromise at once so stimulating, so slippery and so complex. Yet all of this should be seen as a challenge and not as a hindrance. As Ricœur writes:

Our Western society is at present compelled to invent a civilization of compromise because we live in an increasingly complex society, where the other is all around us. We are not headed towards a society that would be necessarily more peaceful, we are headed towards a society in which the roles held by the ones and the others are more and more numerous and interdependent . . . Role conflicts are on the increase, and the only way out remains compromise. (1991: 3)

All things considered, this merely confirms the idea of the importance of compromise at both the theoretical and the empirical levels as well as in day to day social and political life; and shows that a reflection on this boundary-notion is therefore fully justified.

Translated from the French by Nora Scott

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Notes

1. In French “compromise” is rather a pejorative word suggesting an unsatisfactory solution; the English “compromise” is an honorable concession.

2. Golding writes: “The denomination of a particular agreement as a compromise requires, in fact, that we know something about its context” (Golding, 1979: 6).

3. Commenting on this distinction between the two different approaches, Kuflik writes:

Martin Golding calls our attention to two rather different ways of understanding what is meant by “compromise”. On an “end-state” analysis, a resolution of conflict can be characterized as a compromise quite apart from how it was reached. According to the “process” analysis, however, a compromise just *is* a certain way of achieving conflict resolution, whatever the actual term of settlement might be. (1979: 39).

4. The “third-party” issue is important when considering the dynamics of compromise and, more broadly, those of conflict. The reader may be interested by the study of Freund (1975).

5. For a reflection on these various aspects of “conflicts of interest or principles”, see Benditt (1979).

6. Golding warns against any analysis identifying compromise with cooperation. “Compromise does require cooperation, but not every form of cooperation involves compromise” (1979: 13).

7. On the implications of trust for legitimizing the compromise process, see Golding (1979: 18–19).

8. “Consideration is given”, Kuflik writes, “to what can be learned from trying to picture morality itself as a compromise” (1979: 39).

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