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Towards a Global Ethics of Compromise¹

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Abstract: We live in unprecedented times characterised by social, economic, and ecological crises in the global perspective. To respond to these challenges, the concept of sustainability was developed as a global blueprint for just action. The problem with global sustainability is that we have conflicting visions of what is just and what is sustainable. How to deal with conflicts in a fair way in situations in which consensus is out of reach, and global action that really makes a difference (as opposed to any action that people happen to agree on) is required? This article explores the elements of an ethics of compromise as a solution to contemporary global challenges such as sustainability. I argue that consensus is not a necessary condition for cooperative action. I propose a theoretical model of fair political compromise that does not require compromising one's own moral values, and discusses the methods and conditions of application in international affairs. To this end, I draw on Martin Benjamin's notion of integrity-preserving compromise. Such compromise can be an ethically legitimate mode of peaceful conflict resolution in situations of rationally irreducible difference.

Keywords: Conflicts; Dissensus; Practical ethics; Integrity-preserving compromise; Global ethics of compromise.

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1. Introduction

In October 2014, a group of people gathered in Tarn, in the south-west of France, to protest against a controversial dam project. According to the authorities, the Sivens dam project, worth over 8 million Euros, was aimed to boost the local economy and to improve the irrigation of crops on the local farms. But this project received severe criticism from the people concerned about the local environment. According to the opponents, the Sivens dam would damage vegetation, pollute the reservoir and ground water, and would not serve the public interest in general. The construction area became a protest site.

Similar stories happen all over the world, when different visions of environmental and economic development create conflicts. But in Tarn on October 26, 2014, an explosion of a police grenade killed one of the protesters. Remi Fraisse was only 21 year old. This occurrence shook up the public opinion not only in France, symbolizing a deeper friction inherent in pluralistic societies and the practice of democracy.

In situations where achieving consensus is not possible, we need effective procedures and strategies for conflict resolution. This is especially relevant when it comes to sustainable development that is plagued with conflicting visions, many of which are legitimate and cannot be rationally reduced to one option. Sustainable development, called also sustainability, is a concept that was introduced into the political discourse in 1987 when the World Commission on Environment and Development held a conference on the link between economic development and environmental limits. The meeting, which was chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, resulted in a report entitled “Our Common Future” (WCED, 1987) that introduced the concept of sustainable development into global policy discourse. The so-called “Brundtland definition” of sustainability remains the most popular one until today. It defines sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 42). Sustainability is therefore a concept of intergenerational justice that integrates the social, environmental, and economic dimensions of development and well-being. While it is meant to provide a global vision and universal system of values that guides the practices and behaviors, it runs into the problem of culturally-based difference and different interpretations of what is actually to be sustained and what is doing the sustaining (Söderbaum, 2008; Dereniowska, 2017a; Daly, 2007). The inherent conflict in the concept of sustainability, epitomised by the Sivens dam story, constitutes the fundamental global challenge of our times: how to deal with conflicts in ethically legitimate way in situations in which consensus is out of reach, and global

action that really makes a difference (as opposed to any action that people happen to agree on) is required?

The guiding question of this article is what specifically can be done if there is no consensus and we need nonetheless positive change? Is consensus on moral and political matters a necessary condition to achieve cooperative action? I argue that there is a *modus operandi* that allows us to acquire constructive potential from diversity, and enable cooperation and understanding despite the differences. This *modus operandi* is founded on integrity-preserving compromise as a problem-solving tool. In the next steps, I will discuss the model of compromise based on philosopher Martin Benjamin's prototype, which in many ways converges with the figure of compromise as a tool that accounts for "morally divided social peace," elaborated by Arnspenger and Picavet (2004). I will then suggest the elements of ethics of compromise, and its challenges in the global perspective of sustainability.

2. Compromise Model

Compromise is a morally ambiguous concept. Its common association, or meaning, is a betrayal of moral principles and values. Compromising ethical commitments is often seen to disvalue one's own integrity and credibility as moral agent (e.g., Probuscka, 2009). Not surprisingly, compromise has not received much attention in philosophical ethics preoccupied with the question of complete, consistent theory that would resolve all moral dilemmas without remainder. But if we acknowledge the normality of intra and interpersonal conflicts and that often these conflicts involve ethically legitimate positions that cannot be rationally resolved, we face a dilemma: which course of action might we take in the fairest way? If consensus is unavailable, possible solutions are resorting to force, leaving the matter unresolved, or seeking compromise (Benjamin, 1990). These alternatives beg the question of the features and conditions of morally legitimate, fair compromise.

The model on which I draw was developed by Martin Benjamin in his book *Splitting the Difference. Compromise and Integrity in Ethics and Politics* (1990) and in later works. He differentiates between what he calls a *loose compromise*, and *compromise sensu stricto*. The loose compromise takes place when two parties argue and end up picking a third option that is an improvement over both. But this scenario is not really a compromise. In agreeing on a win-win solution derived from the synthesis of opposing views, there are mutual gains without losses. The loose compromise means that the parties compromise on the initial positions only to find agreement on a

superior solution. Strict compromise, on the other hand, is when the disputants agree on a third option that takes “splitting the difference” between them for policy, but continue to hold their moral views. Each party gains something from the chosen course of action; each party must also make concessions on which things to hold as valuable (2003, p. 135).

The standard sense of compromise is *a settlement of differences by mutual concessions* for mutual gain, through reciprocal “give-and-take discussion” on a singular course of action for the sake of agreement (Benjamin, 2003, p. 136). Legitimate compromise consists of both the *process* and the *outcome* (Benjamin, 1990, p. 4-8). Paying attention only to compromise as an outcome can wrongly give support to agreements arising from unequal distributions of power and coercion. This threat and the possibility of inequity and discrimination in compromise-based solutions was also raised by Arnsperger and Picavet (2004, p. 198). This cannot be fair compromise. Similarly, fair procedure of compromise can potentially lead to an uneven “splitting the difference” between opposing positions.

Compromise is a discursive method of conflict accommodation engaging adversarial reasoning. Contrary to negotiations, emphasis is put on rational persuasion on *mutual concessions*. Compromise also differs from bargain insofar as it accentuates *equal hearing* and *not overstating demands* on the other side (Benjamin, 1990, p. 43). Acceptable compromise does not necessarily mean agreeing with the other side that a third, middle ground is the correct *moral* position. Rather, it is acknowledging that from a practical perspective, *all things considered* a third position is the best position (Benjamin, 1990). Arnsperger and Picavet (2004) explain this type of compromise in terms of a strategic suspension of demands of a party to conflict in order to make progress on something now, and perhaps to come back to the renounced demands at other time: “compromise is not a *first-degree* agreement which rationally silences dissension but, rather, a *second-degree* agreement which suspends the *deleterious effects* of the first-degree disagreement until the object of that disagreement *can be taken up again* in a renewed, hopefully more promising way by at least some parties” (p. 198). The compromise-type agreement can be seen as compromising that is necessary in social and political interactions, rather than compromising one’s moral position.

A compromise position is not considered, therefore, as the correct moral position narrowly defined (i.e., what one believes to be morally correct), but as a judgment about what ought to be decided for policy given the following considerations (Benjamin, 1990): 1) the situation of the rationally irreconcilable conflict, 2) the circumstances of compromise, and 3) the role of each party in the social network.

1. Although the premise about the value of compromise is based on the need to take seriously disagreements and conflicts, it is not to say that any differences are legitimate disagreements. Nor it is to say that a compromise is the best or superior means of resolving disagreements. Indeed, the efforts of mainstream moral and political philosophers have been to a great extent dedicated to establishing a set of consistent, abstract rules and principles that lead to eliminating differences and disagreements. The aim was to provide an objective basis for resolving moral conflicts without remainder. The practical concern for the objective foundations of ethics was to stop all human misery, war, and bigotry that stem from moral conflicts (Benjamin, 1990, p. 77). Differences can stem from any sources, including prejudice, bad reasoning, ignorance, and so on. But even when these biases are overcome, some conflictuality remains (aka reasonable pluralism) (Cohen, 1993; Rawls, 1993). In other words, not all moral differences come from the lack of adequately comprehensive, straightforward ethical guidelines. Some of them result from an irreducible plurality of important values and principles (e.g., justice and mercy) on both the interpersonal and interpersonal level (Berlin, 2000). Even if we agree on the principles of justice, for example, still the same principles can be differently interpreted by different parties in concrete situations, generating disagreements over their modalities (Picavet, 2015). So far we have at our disposal no single, complete ethical theory for conflict resolution that would render compromise unnecessary (Benjamin, 1990, p. 43). Therefore, coming from the practical need to solve problems in current settings, we can simply acknowledge that in situations of reasonable disagreements, when consensus is out of reach and there is no way to rationally settle the differences, compromise is the last-resort mode of peaceful conflict resolution. After all, “in the practical settings we cannot always suspend judgment and action” (p. 28).

2. Compromise is a solution protocol that may not apply to all cases of disagreement. It is the best *modus operandi* for specific cases of reasonable disagreement that cannot be rationally resolved because:

- The relevant empirical information about, for example, affirmative action on climate change, is complex and hard to evaluate;
- Even if all (or most) agree about relevant factors, they will differ on the weight or importance of them;
- In many cases our concepts are vague and subject to different interpretations (e.g., nature, justice);

- The way we assess evidence and weigh moral and political values is shaped by our total experience in life up to now (which differs for each of us since each only experiences a tiny piece of life and the world);
- Finally, there often is no common vocabulary to express the ways we characterize values and principles. The incommensurability between Kantianism and utilitarianism is a classical example.

In circumstances that require an urgent action and cooperation despite all the uncertainties or without time for a throughout rational dispute that may result in consensus, compromise offers feasible ways to navigate disagreements (Dereniowska, 2017a). Under these circumstances, compromise *sensu stricto* proves to be the most efficient tool that allows for political progress *and* continuous ethical debate on conflicting matters. The strict compromise is *not* a conflict resolution in the sense of finding a definite answer to our moral dilemmas. Rather, it is a provisional agreement on a course of action under the circumstances of compromise. It is not meant to give closure to ethical debate, but rather it leaves room for further dispute, negotiation, and perhaps modification of one's beliefs. In other words, underneath the political compromise there might be a continued moral disagreement.

3. The role that each party plays in the social and political context is also an important consideration in conflict accommodation. Seeing oneself as a part of a larger community in which decisions must be made is essential to a full appreciation and effective use of compromise (Dereniowska and Matzke, 2018). Moral agents are not monads existing in a social and political vacuum, but rather they are subjects that belong to certain groups, communities, and societies with specific cultural and historical contexts; individuals as members of collective units are participants in social, cultural, and political life. The shared aspects of individual existence necessitates that certain (always evolving) social norms exist in order to sustain the functioning and evolution of society and economy. Analogically, from a perspective of social justice, Arnsperger and Picavet note that "simply recognising that our good is *in part* linked up with our ability to consider that we are living in a just society is an invitation to compare this good with other goods, and some balance can be established in the course of social life between all these goods, in the form of compromise," which in turn strengthens some forms of impartial standards and procedural equality (2004, p. 200).

3. Preserving Integrity in Compromise-seeking Solutions

Theoretically, one of the most interesting premises of Benjamin's prototype of ethical (i.e., ethically legitimate) compromise is an assumption that a person can retain moral integrity even when being morally divided or ambivalent about a certain course of action (Benjamin, 1990, p. 43). Social relationships and institutions would be impossible without a certain amount of integrity in the individuals who compose them. Integrity is crucial in social organisations that involve interdependence and need coordination among its members (p. 52-53). Meeting the societal norms and expectations—even if they are not perfectly coherent with one's own system of norms and beliefs—can be an objective in its own right, and it can be motivated by variety of reasons, such as the need to maintain a certain reputation or to maintain social cooperation. These considerations play an important role in the making and evaluation of choices (Picavet, 2015). The reason why integrity-preserving compromise is attainable has to do with two dimensions of moral integrity ingrained in individual and group identities²: *internal integrity*, which is holding commitments to certain moral values and principles and enacting them through corresponding ways of life, and *external integrity*, which refers to the place of individuals and groups in shared social order. Internal integrity provides a structure for a unified and unalienated life, while its external dimension provides the basis for reliance, trust, friendship, and love in the relational context. It is this social, collective context that commits one to “resolving the policy question on terms that pay equal respect to the contending reasonable positions and that stand a chance of public acceptability” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 141). This requirement is not necessarily a challenge to one's integrity, in fact “taking into consideration all your values and principles, not simply those underlying your personal moral position, the compromise may be more integrity-preserving than any plausible alternative. The same will be true of those holding the opposing personal moral position” (p. 141). This is especially the case in the context of teamwork, maintaining cooperative relationships, and policy formation. From the perspective of effectiveness in these areas, resolving moral problems in a way “that can maximally accommodate differing viewpoints and maintain mutual respect ... is highly desirable” (Benjamin, 1990, p. 30-31). Both familial and professional relationships (especially professions that are highly specialized and imbued with

² While Benjamin classically refers in his works to individual moral identity, I prefer to bring up both individual and group identity, the latter meaning the general value system, mission and strategy of a group or organization. The internal integrity aspect roughly relates to declared values, principles, and mission, whereas the external integrity aspect can be related to practiced values of the group or organisation.

public responsibility and trust) flourish when based on mutual respect and non-coercion; antagonized interactions that lead to the escalation of resentment or destroy the spirit of cooperation result either in stalemate or violent resolution. This applies to both internal and external conflict situations.

The role of an individual in familial, societal, and professional contexts may in some situation require suspending (as opposed to giving up) deeply cherished personal moral commitments and values. An illustration of an internal conflict that involves circumstances of compromise is a hypothetical case of a Jehovah nurse working at a municipal hospital, who occasionally may be ordered by a physician to administer blood transfusion to a patient in life-threatening condition. The transfusion of blood is against the moral code of Jehovah Witnesses. Participating in the act of administering the blood transfusion may be interpreted as breaking the religious moral code. Simultaneously, nurses and physicians in virtue of being members of medical profession are expected to follow the professional ethics code, and to prioritize the live and health of a patient over personal beliefs. This illustrates the possibility—and at times a necessity—of an internal compromise that is integrity preserving.

An external compromise in situations of moral conflict on political matters, especially among groups and organisations may involve more complexity, albeit the mechanism of compromise is similar. Dereniowska and Matzke (2018) discuss how compromise can play a positive role in radical environmental activism, even if it would seem highly unlikely. For example, the radical environmental activist group Earth First! was premised on the rejection of continued compromise by mainstream environmental groups with industry and development interests. The group was formed as a reaction against perceived failures of mainstream groups' (such as the Sierra Club) response to proposals to dam various regions of the American West. The motto of the new group became "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth." Both their actions (aggressive civil disobedience coupled with ecosabotage) and demands (e.g., asking for several times more acreage for wilderness preservation than the mainstream groups) seemingly fit their conviction that compromise is a betrayal of their moral convictions and results only in further deterioration of environmental protection. But despite their uncompromising rhetoric, the radical activism of Earth First! can be related to historically accepted norms of protest movements within constitutional democracies and imply something like reaching a fair compromise. Three elements in the group's tactics align with the logic of protest: i) commitment to moral suasion that coincides with the logic of protest in the democratic context that depends heavily on public support, ii) an acceptance of punishment for one's role in illegal protest, practiced by the group's members, and iii) the willingness to back off of certain kinds of direct actions when others object and continue to object, and the reasonableness of their

objections is clear and to modify the attitude and behaviour. Dereniowska and Matzke (2018) interpret the aim of the group as finding a balance between provocative acts that gain attention in an informationally-crowded world and slow down ecologically destructive practices long enough for legislative changes to take place, and the necessity of not being dismissed by the public as dangerous extremists or eco-terrorists. The Earth First!'s direct actions—from legal protest to monkeywrenching—can be seen as part of a larger process in which compromise is almost always necessary, and is even more so for the party trying to change the status quo.³ An external integrity aspect required the group to recognise the broader community and context in which decisions are made; the need to win the minds and hearths of the public to further environmental cause required, in effect, balancing the internal and external integrity dimensions. Fostering this balance through compromise is an essential element of moral practice that maintains social cooperation.

4. A Framework for a Global Ethics of Compromise

The ethical framework for fair compromise is based on several premisses regarding the nature of moral disagreement and conflict, the role of ethical theory in conflict resolution, and moral pluralism. What does an ethically plausible conception of compromise require? Is there anything like robust ethical underpinnings of compromise? In affirmatively answering these questions, I will address the elements of an ethical framework and principles that support legitimate compromise.

The standard compromise, according to which all parties both gain and sacrifice something valuable, has been also discussed by philosophers Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2013). Skeptical about the common ground agreements, they see compromise as essential for the well-functioning of democracy and for enacting any positive change: “Classic compromises serve the common good not only by improving on the status quo from the agreeing parties’ particular perspectives, but also by contributing to a robust democratic process ... To restrict political agreements to common ground or common goods, especially in a polarized partisan environment, is to privilege the status quo, even when all parties agree that reform is needed” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2013, pp. 186-8). The improvement-oriented function of

³ Neither is the “no compromise” motto mere rhetoric. Earth First! uses aggressive activism to push hard for positions well beyond the supposed reasonableness of mainstream environmental groups, arguing, for example, for zero-cut on old-growth and roadless areas, and for restoration projects that include removal of key dams (Dereniowska and Matze, 2018).

compromise is what shall be in the centre of considerations regarding the ethics of compromise.

Ethical theory implied by the model of standard compromise alludes to the idea that there is more than one set of competing values, principles, theories, or judgments in each particular case that can be morally valid, and still rationally evaluated. This diversity can stem from different sources. For example, epistemologically it can result from different understandings and perceptions of a specific situation. Or, it might arise from the fact that some deeply cherished values are inherently incompatible on the ontological level, such as mercy and justice (see more in Dereniowska, 2017a). In situations of rationally irreducible disagreements, no single ethical theory can unambiguously support decision making in the real world. In such cases, “the most plausible conception of ethics is not only compatible with but also requires a certain amount of internal as well as external compromise” (Benjamin, 1990, p. 44).

Rejecting the Platonic quest and the doctrine of final harmony—reflected in the idea that there must exist a single, harmonious scheme for morality once and for all—implies commitments to moral pluralism (Hampshire, 1983, 2001). But moral pluralism can mean very different things. On a radical interpretation, it may be interpreted as a denial of moral truth, implying the lack of shared moral standards of evaluation, thus falling into the trap of ethical relativism. Such an unstructured pluralism would render a pluralistic ethics of compromise inadequate for dealing with global challenges such as sustainability. However, accepting pluralism does not presuppose any particular position with regard to validation and the legitimization of claims. Conversely to descriptive relativism, which assumes that any particular opinion or claim is relative to something (be it culture, agent, etc.), pluralism does not imply that opinion, etc., is relative to anything. In the most basic sense, moral pluralism simply states that sometimes we cannot fully determine the singular answer to moral conflict, and that moral truth(s) may be more complex than we currently suspect (Wolf, 1992). This position, although acknowledging the incompleteness of any specific ethical theory and situatedness of any concrete moral judgment, does not preclude some objectivist and universalist elements.

The terms “universalism” and “objectivism” can be seen to describe overlapping ideas from different perspectives. Although one might hold some version of these, one need not. They each can come in a variety of versions. In its strongest, absolutist form, objectivism tends to associate the moral truth with something outside of human nature and experience. It implies that there are singular normative values, principles, and their rankings in each situation, for everyone, at all times. In a weaker sense, in line with Putnam’s definition, objectivity refers to “what is objective from the point of view of our best and most reflective practice” (Putnam, 1983). Universalism can mean

that there are inter-culturally shared standards of moral evaluations, in the stronger interpretation—without exceptions. In the weaker interpretation, however, universalism suggests that there are *some* shared moral beliefs and values across cultures. In this sense, such interpretation of universalism approximates the weak version of descriptive relativism, meaning that *some* differences do exist. For the purposes here, it is sufficient to underline the overlapping idea between these terms expressed as belief that (at least some) moral beliefs and values are not purely subjective, do not depend on particular view point (e.g. cultural), they are shared cross-culturally and can be a subject of moral evaluation. This position neither excludes the correlation between morality and human experience, nor diminishes the importance of subjective aspects of morality in the following sense: it is coherent with the expectation that morality grows out of evolved moral sentiments that are then developed in cultures according to (ideally) reason.

By means of adversarial reasoning and balancing of claims, it is possible to combine objectivity in its Putnamian sense with relativism “in the sense of being relative to various other beliefs about the world which are themselves fallible” (Benjamin, 2003, p. 120). Such a combination may be imperfect or asymmetrical. Nevertheless, the underlying practical approach provides a workable alternative to absolutists top-down models of moral practice. It can be contrasted with theoretical ethics approach that is concerned with development and justification of ethical theories, and with applied ethics that is a matter of applying theory to descriptions of situations. Practical ethics, as a middle-ground approach founding an ethical practice of compromise, takes account of both pluralistic ethical theories and folk morality, and it is concerned with tools for making moral decisions and navigating ethical and cognitive dissonance in a non-ideal world (Dereniowska, 2017b).

The pluralistic middle-ground position corresponds with an important aspect of moral practice, namely the internal and external perspectives of moral agents. The internal perspective includes particular world view and a corresponding way of life, and is rooted in human nature as embodied agents and as social beings (Benjamin, 1990, p. 101). Although it can be altered by scientific investigation and objective understanding, it cannot be completely abandoned. As a matter of human psychology and sociology, internal perspective provides us with identity-conferring commitments. External perspective, on the other hand, is that of an objective spectator. It is grounded in a universal human capacity to adopt an impartial view point by means of imagination and reason. According to Martha Nussbaum, this capacity, combined with empathetic understanding of diverse human experiences and predicaments, allows us to transcend “local loyalties,” acknowledge the complexities of the world, and affirm global citizenship and peace (2010). As Benjamin argues, an external

perspective allows us to recognize a multiplicity of world views and ways of life, as well as the equal legitimacy of different standpoints. It enables us to acknowledge the idea of the circumstances of compromise and our capacity to recognize them. Finally, the external perspective can help us to see the value in compromise. Indeed, “what makes ethics and politics possible ... is our additional capacity to more or less transcend our particular world view” (Benjamin, 1990, p. 96).

The metaphor for doing ethics in situations of compromise is that of tacking between the internal and external perspectives. The ethics of compromise can be interpreted, therefore, as a middle ground approach that appeals to justice and benevolence on the one hand, and to our identity and integrity rooted in diverse ways of life on the other hand (p. 94). A caveat is in order here: as we consider individual and group identity and integrity as important elements that give shape to practical reasoning applied in specific cases, there are normative constraints on admissible pluralism; for example, widely shared, publicly accessible and rationally justifiable considerations of justice, harm, and evil constrain the appeals to identity and integrity (*ibid.*). In other words, appeals to personal (or group) integrity and identity are legitimate insofar as they do not cause suffering and perpetuate oppression. These constraints can be linked with some general moral principles linked with the universal features of human behaviour and interactions.

The principles that restrict particularism and relativism—even if part of an incomplete and inconsistent set—include variations of the principle of utility (broadly construed) and the Kantian categorical imperative. The principle of utility implies maximizing the common good and minimizing and mitigating suffering. The respect for persons and dignity provides the grounds for a cosmopolitan thinking. Although both principles are important features of moral reasoning (at least in Western democracies), they are incompatible with each other and do not exhaust the morally relevant considerations at play in a day-to-day, real-world settings. They do, however, place restrictions on ways of life (e.g., a disrespectful way of life that imposes suffering on others is not an equal partner in a pluralistic debate), and play a role in determining whether and when to seek compromise (Benjamin, 1990).

There are some additional normative commitments that supplement the pluralistic foundations of the ethics of compromise crafted for global sustainability challenges: *the principle of extended responsibility* and *the precautionary principle*. *The principle of extended responsibility* implies a commitment to take action—be it mitigation of harm, restoration of equality, or improving the sustainability conditions on our planet—that goes beyond linear causality model of moral responsibility. It requires participating in collective responsibility for common good as an inevitable aspect of bringing positive change. *The precautionary principle* puts constraints on admissible

options so that they account for the socio-ecological harms and risks. It also opens up avenues to consider non-anthropocentric standards in moral practice. For example, the existence and activities of some species of living beings may be crucial to maintaining ecosystem health and stability, independently of their contribution towards the satisfaction of human needs.

These principles, however incomplete or contestable, help to determine, but do not give a clear picture of whether we should seek or maintain compromise. According to Benjamin, it is at the end of the day a matter of judgment: “as judgment, a decision to seek or accept compromise will be highly context dependent and turn in part on insight, imagination, and interpersonal sensitivity and skill” (1990, p. 122). The exercise of judgment is in turn dependent on some criteria that give credence to arguments and their justification (as opposed to being a matter of mere taste or preference). These criteria roughly correspond with the values of accuracy, simplicity, consistency, and fruitfulness. In related manner, these values are particularly appealing in a practiced adversarial reasoning method. The other aspects of moral judgments essential in the practice of compromise involve justification of positions by reference to some common features of human nature or human behavior, such as common values, the conception(s) of the good rooted in one or multiple features of human nature or the universal capacity for reason (Benjamin, 1990, p. 84).

The problem for the ethics of compromise framework is that a recourse to contextual judgment potentially undermines the power of compromise-seeking procedures, especially in a global perspective. The voluntary condition of entering the process of compromise and delegating the questions of when and whether to seek or maintain compromise to contextual judgments makes Benjamin’s model of compromise a more descriptive account, weakening its normative force in matters of urgent policy problems. Clearly, the global characteristic of sustainability challenges requires a stronger approach to peaceful problem-solving.

This dilemma constitutes an inevitable paradox for compromise-based solutions: if a compromise is the last resort of a peaceful mode of conflict resolution that allows us to avoid enforcing specific positions or procedures, then it implies that engaging with compromise is a matter of good will from the conflicting parties. Herein lies an iteration of the proceduralist dilemma in the context of a global call for sustainability: we need positive change, preferably carried out by non-violent and non-aggressive means in the spirit of sustainability justice; at the same time, we may not have the luxury of time to wait for relevant actors to come to appreciate the value of compromise.

There are two general approaches one can take towards this dilemma. One is to accept the idea that a fair compromise is completely contingent upon context and the good will of the involved parties. The other approach, much more dubious and provocative, looks for ways that allow us to institutionalize compromise-based problem-solving procedures and facilitate reasoned cooperation. With this second option in mind, the promising ways forward could involve the following modest suggestions:

- Establishing new institutions and institutional bodies that safeguard sustainability justice principles in decision-making procedures on national and international levels, and giving them an actual influence over the decision making processes. Examples may include an institution of the ombudsperson (i.e. an independent, impartial, public advocate for justice and rights against discrimination and misrepresentation), or the World Future Council that collaborates with governments, civil society, members of parliament, businesses and international organisations, researching “future-just legislation” and advising its implementation.⁴
- Engaging trained mediators and facilitators in decision making and negotiation processes on regional, national, and international levels (e.g., to protect the process from an uneven distribution of power that may lead to under- or overstating demands, and to ensure that all parties have been equally taken into account in resulting outcome).
- Educational initiatives that promote the skills of adversarial reasoning and sensitivity to fairness in conflict accommodation. An example of such initiatives is the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD) developed by a moral psychologist Georg Lind (2016). The KMDD is aimed at enhancing moral-democratic competences through engagement in a moderated discussion on a moral dilemma. The method has been used and studied primarily in Germany at schools, universities, and in the rehabilitation programs, showing effectiveness in improving the competence of ethical judgment. An example is Hemmerling’s intervention study on successfully fostering moral competence of prisoners (2014).

The rationale for opening up the discussion about options for injecting compromise-based standards into decision making processes is linked with pluralistic commitments to non-violence and to avoiding harm and suffering. With the multifaceted crises that pose a threat to survival on our planet, we are standing on the brink of conflicts and potential wars over access and the control of natural resources

⁴ For more information see <https://www.worldfuturecouncil.org>.

(see Shiva, 2002), accommodating environmental migrants (e.g., people forced to leave their homes due to ecological cataclysm or environmental conditions becoming inhabitable), or environmental limits to pollute versus rights to development of the third world countries. With the history of colonization, historical injustice combined with still existing imperialistic tendencies, and uneven geo-political distribution of power, achieving consensus on sustainable and just solutions is unlikely (Curtin, 2005). We can also not rely solely on good will for engagement in compromise-seeking; peaceful solutions need regulatory and institutional support. The point here is that while the standard case for compromise, with its non-coercive approach, applies in general to any conflict, the global context of sustainability seems to require a stronger, internationally binding focus on peaceful modes of conflict resolution such as compromise.

5. Conclusion

In line with Martin Benjamin's philosophy of conflict (1990), give-and-take discussions based on mutual respect and responsibility provide grounds for fair compromise both in the process and in the outcome, even if consensus is out of reach. Fairness in compromise, thus conceived, requires that the gains and losses are distributed equally among the parties. Each may subsequently try to persuade the other of the superiority of their own view or try to avoid such situation in the future. Such compromise is moral in the sense of the fairness and ethical legitimacy of both the process *and* the outcome. It does not require capitulation on one's own values. It is foremost a political compromise—that is, a compromise as a necessary condition of societal and political life and decision making under certain circumstances. The special case for sustainable and just solutions to our global crises calls for compromise-seeking procedures and institutions as alternatives to existing decision making models.

The model of integrity-preserving compromise supplements a pluralistic conception of moral practice that is sensitive to structural inequalities and power-weighted decision rules in the global perspective. The global ethics of compromise suited to meet the challenges of sustainability emphasises precaution and responsibility in a multicultural world under environmental uncertainties.

There is however a potential problem with compromise-seeking. If a compromise is the last resort of a peaceful mode of conflict resolution that allows us to avoid enforcing specific positions or procedures, then it implies that engaging with compromise is a matter of good will from the conflicting parties. Under the

circumstances of urgency and risk, making sustainability policy may need normatively stronger requirements for non-violent conflict resolution. To this end, I pointed to a few ways through which compromise-based problem-solving procedures and facilitate reasoned cooperation can be institutionalized. The apparent conundrum inherent in the idea of global ethics of compromise refers back to the conflictual aspects of moral and political interactions. This note is not meant to discourage people from the promotion of mediating ways of conflict accommodation such as compromise. It is rather a reminder that if anything, we need stronger awareness of moral complexity that may occasionally involve conflicts and paradoxes. It is a call for refocusing our efforts towards creating a mindset capable of compromise, benevolence, and solidarity in times of crisis.

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