

INTRODUCTION

WHY COMPROMISE?

The Concern

ALBERT EINSTEIN is credited with the warning “Beware of rotten compromises.”¹ My book is an effort to explain and support this warning.

But the book is about much more. It is about peace and compromise.

More specially: what compromises we are not allowed to make for the sake of peace.

The short answer is: rotten compromises are not allowed, even for the sake of peace. Other compromises should be dealt with on a retail basis, one by one: they should be judged on their merit. Only rotten compromises should be ruled out on a wholesale basis. Even though the book is about compromises that we should avoid, come what may, its main goal is to leave the widest (morally) possible room for compromises made for the sake of peace, including cases in which peace is achieved at the expense of justice. The book is in pursuit of just *a* peace, rather than of a *just* peace. Peace can be justified without being just.

This is not an easy claim to make, but this is the claim I am making.

The compromises discussed in the book are political compromises, rather than personal ones. The distinction is not always clear. Some personal deals have immense political

INTRODUCTION

implications. Robert Oppenheimer's role in creating the atomic bomb is often referred to as a Faustian bargain. According to Freeman Dyson, the deal was this: an atomic bomb in exchange for the chance to do physics on a grand scale,² or, more to the point, Oppenheimer's being in charge of doing physics on a grand scale. Whatever the real details of Oppenheimer's Faustian pact are, the political implication of the atomic bomb is as obvious as its mushroom cloud.

I see a rotten political compromise as an agreement to establish or maintain an inhuman regime, a regime of cruelty and humiliation, that is, a regime that does not treat humans as humans. Throughout the book I use “inhuman” to denote extreme manifestations of not treating humans as humans. Inhuman in the sense of cruel, savage, and barbarous behavior conveys only one element of “inhuman” as I use the word; humiliation is another element. Humiliation, as I see it, is already not treating humans as humans, but humiliation intensified by cruelty equals “inhuman.” So a fusion of cruelty and humiliation is what an inhuman regime consists of.

The idea of an inhuman regime, a regime of cruelty and humiliation, guides my understanding of rotten compromises. The basic claim is that we should beware of agreeing, even passively, to establish or maintain a regime of cruelty and humiliation—in short, an inhuman regime.

Many bad things popped out of Pandora’s box, and choosing inhuman regimes as the bad thing to avoid at all costs calls for justification.

Inhuman regimes erode the foundation of morality. Morality rests on treating humans as humans; not treating humans as humans undermines the basic assumption of morality. I draw a distinction between *morality* and *ethics*. Morality is about how human relations should be in virtue of our being human and in virtue of nothing else.

WHY COMPROMISE?

Ethics, in contrast, is about what relations we *should* have with other people in virtue of some special relationships we *have* with them, such as family relations or friendship.

Morality, by its very nature, is based on the category of belonging to humanity, in the sense of belonging to the human species. The assault on humanity inflicted when humans are treated as nonhumans undermines the very project of morality, the project of constituting human relations as they should be.

For the sake of defending morality we end up with a stern injunction: rotten compromise must be avoided, come what may. But what does the “come what may” come to? Chapters 4 and 5 are meant to answer this question. The upshot is that the “come what may” should be taken quite literally.

Let me stress again, the book contains stern warnings against rotten compromises, yet its aim is to provide strong advocacy for compromises in general, and compromises for the sake of peace in particular. It limits wholesale prohibitions on compromises to the bare minimum. Limiting wholesale prohibitions to the bare minimum does not mean that all compromises are justified. There might be good reasons to reject a particular compromise on the ground that it is unfair, unreasonable, or untimely. Selling Manhattan (in 1624) for merchandise worth 60 guilders was not a terribly good idea for the Native Americans involved, nor, for that matter, was the selling of Alaska by the Russians (in 1867) for 7.2 million dollars.

I do not subscribe to the adage “A lean compromise is better than a fat lawsuit.”³ But I do claim that only rotten compromises should be prohibited in all circumstances. Other compromises should be evaluated on their merit, case by case. Some may turn out to be shady deals (deals with suspicious motives), shoddy deals (exchange of phony goods,

INTRODUCTION

“beads and buttons,” for true valuables), or shabby deals (exploitative ones, taking advantage of the vulnerability of the weak party). These are all forms of morally bad deals, yet given the alternatives, they might on occasion be justified. Rotten compromises are different. They are never *justified*; at best, they may be *excused*.

Rotten compromises usually are at the heart of darkness. Extreme forms of racist regimes are the epitome of not treating humans as humans, and constitute a direct affront to the assumption of shared humanity. A compromise to establish or maintain racist regimes is the epitome of rottenness.

Indeed, one depressing example of a rotten agreement has the characteristics of Joseph Conrad’s celebrated *Heart of Darkness*.⁴ Though this example is a clear case of a rotten compromise, it blurs the line between a personal rotten deal and a collective rotten deal. It concerns the private domain of King Leopold II of Belgium over the Congo, under the sham of “enlightening Africa.” If there have ever been regimes of cruelty and humiliation, this king’s personal rule of that colony, between 1880 and 1908, is surely among them. The population of the Congo was not only enslaved and inhumanely brutalized, but also half of it (between eight and ten million) was slaughtered in order to “lighten the darkness of Africa.”⁵ Thus Conrad’s book, as we learn from Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost*, is not an allegory but a reality. Leopold’s Congo Free State constituted a direct assault on the very notion of shared humanity.⁶

Two types of agreements were involved in the workings of the Congo Free State. One dealt with the acquisition of land in the Congo, usually from local chieftains. Agreements of this type can hardly be described as compromises. They were extracted by threats and direct intimidation. The other type of agreements, such as those concluded among

WHY COMPROMISE?

Leopold II, France, and the United States (1884–1885), are compromises—and very rotten ones at that. They contain trade advantages in the Congo in exchange for the recognition of Leopold's inhuman regime. These rotten compromises differ from shady, shoddy, and shabby compromises; they are morally wrong at all times. Leopold II ran the Congo as his private realm. One may therefore say that agreements with Leopold, bad as they were, were personal agreements, not political compromises between two collectives. This is technically true, but only technically.

Compromise, an Ambivalent Concept

The concept of compromise, I believe, should take center stage in micromorality (dealing with individuals' interactions) as well as in macromorality (dealing with political units). After all, we very rarely attain what is first on our list of priorities, either as individuals or as collectives. We are forced by circumstances to settle for much less than what we aspire to. We compromise. We should, I believe, be judged by our compromises more than by our ideals and norms. Ideals may tell us something important about what we would like to be. But compromises tell us who we are.⁷

The compromises we eventually settle on, if we are lucky, are our second-best choices, and often not even that. But, again, they tell us more about our moral standing than does an account of our first priority.⁸

Yet the concept of compromise is neither at center stage in philosophical discussion nor even on its back burner. One reason why compromise does not occur as a philosophical topic stems from the philosophical bias in favor of ideal theory. Compromise looks messy, the dreary stuff of day-to-day

INTRODUCTION

politics. It looks very different from the ideal theory of micro- or macromorality. Indeed ideal theory concerns norms and ideals, not second bests. But removing compromise from moral theory is like removing friction from physics, claiming that it belongs to engineering.

Compromise is an ambivalent concept. It carries opposing evaluative forces. It is a “boo-hurrah” concept—a positive notion signaling human cooperation, coupled with a negative notion signaling betrayal of high-minded principles. Compromise is regarded on some occasions as an expression of goodwill, and on other occasions as being wishy-washy.

An *ambivalent* concept is different from an *essentially contested* concept.⁹ The latter has an uncontested and uncontestable good connotation, and the contest deals only with what represents the best example of its kind. During the Cold War “democracy” was an essentially contested term between communists and liberals. For communists, the People’s Democracy of Eastern Europe was a “real” democracy, and liberal democracy was a mere “formal” democracy; whereas for liberals it was the liberal democracy of Western Europe that was real, and the People’s Democracy a euphemism for oppressive party dictatorship. The point here, however, is that both sides regarded “democracy” as a good word, each trying to appropriate its positive connotation for its own ideology. Ambivalent words are different; they are both good and bad.

But then we should remember that politics is not an exercise in linguistic philosophy, and that a contest about the use of words is never about words alone. What is contested in the case of “compromise” is the very idea of compromise: is it good—like friendship and peace—or is it bad, like timidity and spinelessness?

Superficially, it sounds silly to ask whether compromises are good or bad, much like asking whether bacteria are good

WHY COMPROMISE?

or bad: we cannot live without bacteria, though sometimes we die because of bacteria. Yet that asymmetry makes the question about the goodness and the badness of bacteria, as well as those of compromise, worth asking. We have ten times as many bacteria in our bodies as we have cells, and many of those are vital for our existence. A small number of bacteria are pathogenic and cause disease, and with the proper treatment, we may get rid of them. Similarly, compromises are vital for social life, even though some compromises are pathogenic. We need antibiotics to resist pathogenic bacteria, and we need to actively resist rotten compromises that are lethal for the moral life of a body politic.

Tension between Peace and Justice

I believe that beyond the ambivalence toward compromise and the spirit of compromise lurks a deep tension between peace and justice. Peace and justice may even demand two incompatible temperaments, one of compromise for the sake of peace, and the other of a Michael Kohlhaas-like bloody-mindedness, to let justice prevail, come what may.¹⁰ In the Hebrew Bible peace and justice live in harmony: “justice and peace kissed” (Psalm 85:11). By contrast, for dark Heraclitus, peace and justice live in disharmony: “Justice is strife.”¹¹ The Talmud recognizes the tension between the two: “When there is strict justice there is no peace and where there is peace there is no strict justice.”¹² The spirit of peace, for the Talmudists, is the spirit of compromise as manifested in arbitration; the spirit of justice—“Let justice pierce the mountain”¹³—is manifested in trial.¹⁴

Moses, in the eyes of the rabbis, incarnates the spirit of justice, and his brother Aaron incarnates the spirit of compromise and peace. Moses is admired. Aaron is loved.

INTRODUCTION

The tension between peace and justice is at the center of this book; compromise is the go-between. I am particularly interested in the moral status of compromise made for the sake of peace at the expense of justice. How far can we go for peace by giving up on justice? Quite a distance, I say, but not the whole way. This is the short answer. My long answer is this whole book.

Declaring that two terms are in tension is often a way of muddying the waters and declaring them deep: tension between peace and justice needs elucidation. We tend to view peace and justice as *complementary* goods, like fish and chips, whereas in actuality peace and justice stand to each other as *competing* goods, like tea and coffee. The tension is due to the possibility of a trade-off between peace and justice: to gain peace, we may be forced to pay in justice.

Levi Eshkol, a former prime minister of Israel and a hero of mine, had the reputation of being a relentless compromiser; a tall story had it that when asked whether he would like tea or coffee, he answered, “Half and half,” the idea being that the spirit of compromise may blind one to the fact of competing goods among which one has to choose. The trade-off between peace and justice is no laughing matter; it can be tragic, and the sense of this tragic choice pervades the book.

Not everyone agrees that peace and justice may collide. One objection to that view is the idea that peace is a constitutive part of justice and hence an essential component of justice: more peace is more justice. A different, yet related, view is that peace is only casually linked to justice: more peace may bring about more justice.¹⁵

This is not my view. An analogy may explain my position. Caffeine was regarded as essential to coffee, or at least as a contributing factor to coffee’s main characteristic, that of be-

WHY COMPROMISE?

ing a stimulant. Removing caffeine from coffee was once inconceivable. But we can remove caffeine from coffee beans, thus creating a drink that competes with coffee: decaffeinated coffee. Peace is the caffeine of justice: it enhances justice. But peace, like decaffeinated coffee, can compete with justice. Between peace and justice there may exist a trade-off, much as between coffee and decaffeinated coffee. It is because of those situations of trade-off between peace and justice that I talk about tension between them.

Vacillating between Lasting Peace and Just Peace

Political philosophers have dealt with the notion of a lasting (“permanent”) peace, but hardly ever with the notion of a just peace. This is so, perhaps, because philosophers feel that the idea of a just peace may be the enemy of the notion of just (i.e., simply) a peace, in the cliché sense according to which the best is the enemy of the good. It is preferable, in this view, to worry about the stability of peace than to worry about whether or not it is just. Another reason is, perhaps, that since both peace and peacemaking seem so good and just in and of themselves, there is no need for justification. But this explanation won’t do. After all, most philosophers are not pacifists who believe that peace is justified at any price. Many thinkers maintain that there are just wars, which should be preferred to extremely unjust states of peace. To be sure, there is a difference between *just* peace and *justifiable* peace; not every injustice justifies going to war. Still, most thinkers would agree, some states of injustice justify war. Yet while there are many intensive debates about just and unjust wars, there are no parallel and independent debates about just and unjust peace.

INTRODUCTION

Concern with Cruel Humiliation

The issue of cruel humiliation as a major moral concern looms large in my book *The Decent Society*. This time, I address extreme forms of humiliation, namely, humiliation combined with cruelty. I am concerned about humiliation as a loss of human dignity, rather than about social or national honor. But the sense of national humiliation plays an important political role in the effort to achieve compromise in the form of a peace agreement.

It seems that the orthopedic task of a peace treaty—to stiffen up the nation’s posture—is almost impossible to achieve. A peace agreement by nature requires painful compromises, and there will always be those for whom any compromise is seen as shameful capitulation, those for whom dying “sword in hand” is preferable to accepting any compromise. But this in itself—the fact that some will always regard a peace treaty as capitulation—should not *morally* weigh heavily with the peacemakers. There is, however, a related consideration, the *moral* consideration of honor and humiliation, that any peace treaty should take into account.

The Munich Syndrome

It was Isaiah Berlin who initiated me into the topic of compromise and rotten compromise by conveying to me a strong sense of the importance of the spirit of compromise in politics, but also by conveying the formative experience of his generation: the Munich agreement as a definitive rotten compromise.

The appeasement trauma never left Berlin and his generation. For a few days during the Suez campaign of 1956, Eden’s

WHY COMPROMISE?

obsession with appeasement resonated with Berlin, as did his idea that if Nasser were not stopped, he might become unstoppable—only until he realized that the analogy between the real Hitler and the Mussolini-on-the-Nile was an analogy gone wild.

We were discussing the Suez affair and I complained indignantly of the misuse of the Munich agreement by paranoid politicians: those who see Chamberlain's umbrella, the symbol of defeatism, everywhere.

Berlin admitted as much and added a story. A man was seen banging fiercely on top of a whistling boiling kettle. “What are you doing?” the man was asked. “I can’t stand steam locomotives.” “But this is a kettle, not a locomotive.” “Yes, yes, I know, but you have to kill them when they are still young.”

I suspect that the often-used analogy of appeasing Nasser as Mussolini-on-the-Nile, or Saddam as Hitler-on-the-Tigris, is of the kettle-as-young-locomotive kind.

As much as I want to use the Munich agreement as the paradigm case for a rotten compromise, I am acutely aware of its obnoxious role in political propaganda.

As for Berlin, what may have kept his appeasement trauma at bay was a deeply held belief (which he shared with his mentor, the historian H.A.L. Fisher) that history is “one damn thing after another.” Hence there is no room for reading history as a series of prefigurations, with one figure—say, Hitler—heralding another figure in the future, and every compromise covered by Chamberlain’s umbrella. The issue of compromise was for Berlin the flip side of the golden coin of moral courage and integrity. His personal fear was that his tendency to seek compromise was a sign of timidity. Yet he set as high a premium on compromise as did Edmund Burke in his celebrated speech of March 22, 1775, on the

INTRODUCTION

question of conciliation with America: “All government—indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act—is founded on compromise and barter.”¹⁶ By barter, I presume, Burke meant give-and-take. For Burke, too, compromise is not just a matter of politics but one of personal strategy. But then it seems that compromise is one of those values both necessary and impossible. Moreover, it is necessary and impossible precisely when it matters most—namely, when, for the sake of peace, we have to compromise justice.

This leads me to a related lifelong concern of Isaiah Berlin that made a deep impression on me: his famous insistence that values may conflict with one another and cannot be reduced to one another. Berlin rejoiced in the clash of values as an expression of human variety, even when he saw the tragic side of such clashes. I can almost hear him say, with Walt Whitman-like exuberance, “In holding the values we do, we do contradict ourselves. Very well then, we contradict ourselves. But then we are large and contain multitudes.”

The clash, or the apparent clash, at the center of political thought is that between freedom and equality. I believe the clash that should bother us most is that between peace and justice.

The Concern with the Passive Side

A typical rotten compromise has two sides: one is the perpetrator of a regime of cruelty and humiliation, and the other is a passive participant, merely lending its support to such a regime by signing the agreement. I am concerned with the perspective of the passive side. With the evil perpetrator, the rotten compromise is the least of the evil things it does.

WHY COMPROMISE?

Its rottenness lies in actually establishing and maintaining an inhuman regime, a regime of systematic cruelty and humiliation. But the rottenness of the passive side is in lending support to the active side. It is the British passive side in the Munich agreement that interests me, not the Nazi active side. The Nazi regime is rotten not so much for the agreement it signed, as for creating the reality that made the treaty rotten.

In the case in which both sides to the agreement are perpetrators of cruelty and humiliation—as, for example, in the case of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of August 23, 1939, also known as the Hitler-Stalin pact—the issue is not the rottenness of the pact itself but of their very cruel deeds.

The Choice between Stalin and Hitler

One large issue still remains to be covered: what about a passive side (say, Churchill) having an agreement with one perpetrator (Stalin) against another (Hitler)? Is such an agreement rotten? This is a rather misleading presentation of the choice, since Germany invaded Russia. It was not, simply, a choice out of compromise of siding with one perpetrator against the other. But still the issue of choosing between the two stood before Churchill.

The choice was not an issue of the lesser evil, but a choice between radical evil and evil, Hitler being the radical evil. In any case, I felt the need to deal with morally comparing Stalinism and Hitlerism.

Personally I find this particular comparison painful to carry out. I am keenly aware that the heroism and the sacrifice of the Red Army and of the Soviet civilians, more than anything else, brought about the defeat of Nazi Germany. Moreover, as a Jew, I am intensely conscious that many Jews

INTRODUCTION

were rescued by the Red Army, regardless of the still-open question whether the Soviets made a special effort to rescue Jews during the evacuation of 1941. The claim of a special decree by the Kremlin to give priority to the evacuation of the Jewish population during the rapid advancement of the German army may be nothing more than a propaganda myth. But it is not a myth that many Jews, with or without priority, were saved, thanks to the Soviets, among them, devastatingly, only a very few members of my large extended family. Like many others, I feel an immense gratitude toward Soviet Russia for its role in saving the world from Hitler. I believe that the effort to belittle the Soviets' role in the defeat of Germany is despicable. Yet, in the context of prewar Europe, the moral question for someone like Churchill of whether to side with Stalin or with Hitler, both ruling over cruel and humiliating regimes, should be addressed. Indeed, I undertake a moral comparison of the two in the book's conclusion.

The moral significance of the Second World War is a topic I endlessly discussed with Stuart Hampshire. The war was his formative experience, and he convinced me that it should also be at the center of my generation's thinking. Hampshire had perfect pitch for moral ambiguities. I tried, perhaps by osmosis, to learn from him not just the sense of the twentieth century but also its sensibility.

If the book enunciates a firm admonition against making rotten compromises, it also sends a word of warning against a bloody-minded uncompromising cast of mind—the mind of the sectarian. I received a stiff warning of that kind myself from no less a figure than Irving Howe. It made a lasting impression on me. Here is the story of my first meeting with Howe, which ended with a warning.

In the gloomy days following the 1973 Yom Kippur War, a delegation of intellectuals from the United States came to

WHY COMPROMISE?

Jerusalem and stayed at the illustrious King David Hotel. There were no visitors in Israel at the time, and these were perhaps the first to arrive after the war and just before the elections. I was on the slate of a tiny peace party on the left called *Moked*. We knew almost all our voters by name. The quality of the support was never in doubt—it was the party of the intelligentsia—but the numbers were very much in question.

In the event, we got a single seat in the Knesset out of 120. The party advocated a two-state solution, Israel and Palestine. During those Golda Meir days, the mere mention of a Palestinian state was a heresy that guaranteed for its adherents a place in the frozen lake of Dante's ninth circle of hell. The frozen lake has melted since then. The idea of two states has now become an Israeli consensus, one that many Israelis express in public, but that not enough Israelis believe in private.

Ariel Sharon, the commander of my unit in that war, was at the time the great unifier of the Right. He forced Begin's party and the General Zionist Party to form an election bloc—the bloc that later succeeded in bringing Begin to power. Against army regulations, Sharon started campaigning for this bloc while still in uniform. Worried that Sharon would set about stirring things up in the army, the government ordered that anyone listed on a party's slate be immediately released from service duty for the duration of the election campaign. So, along with Sharon, I found myself released from active service, and headed from the Suez Canal back to Israel proper.

On the day I arrived home in Jerusalem, I was assigned to meet that delegation from the United States at the King David Hotel, to present to them the ideas of our *Moked* party, as other parties were presenting their own ideas. I was relatively young and very angry, so I guess I gave the speech of an angry young man, believing then, as I still do now, that it was Golda

INTRODUCTION

Meir's government that had brought upon us that horrendous war. When it was all over, two people approached me: "My name is Irving Howe." "My name is Michael Walzer." As both names rang a huge bell, I was surprised and impressed. Then Howe said to me, "I agree with a great deal of what you said. But why do you promote a party that has no chance of winning elections? Why don't you join the Labor Party and change it from within? They will surely let you people be active among them. Sharon is doing politics; you are not." Then came the punch line. "Let me tell you. From my experience, the one thing you should avoid at all costs is becoming a sect. Sectarian politics is a terrible waste. I feel that you are in danger of becoming sectarian, as I was in my youth." I sensed that Irving Howe had said something disturbingly important. In all the years since, I have been haunted by Irving's commandment: Thou shall not be sectarian. Sectarian politics is the opposition to the spirit of compromise.

Chapter 6 is an effort to describe the cast of mind Howe warned me against.

So here is the telegraphic message of the book: On the whole, political compromises are a good thing. Political compromises for the sake of peace are a very good thing. Shabby, shady, and shoddy compromises are bad but not sufficiently bad to be always avoided at all costs, especially not when they are concluded for the sake of peace. Only rotten compromises are bad enough to be avoided at all costs. But then, rotten compromises are a mere tiny subset of the large set of possible political compromises.

I tried to shape the book in discursive lecturing style, informal, anecdotal, autobiographical, only lightly footnoted, with a direct appeal to the listener, as "you" rather than an indirect formal appeal to "the reader." The danger of this lecture style

WHY COMPROMISE?

is in tilting the balance between the rhetorical and the logical in favor of the rhetorical. In philosophy, this is a serious danger. When it comes to ethics, the rhetorical may turn into sermonizing, the danger being not in disregarding the truth, but in disregarding arguments and distinctions. I try to argue by making distinctions, hoping to keep away from sermonizing as much as I can.

Whether I succeeded is for you to judge.