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When Is It Hard to Compromise?

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Abstract

In philosophy, it has been common to distinguish between compromises of principles, judgments, or deep values on the one hand, and compromises of interests, preferences, or personal values on the other hand. Many philosophers have argued that compromises that belong to the first group are harder to achieve than compromises from the second group. In this paper, I will re-evaluate this traditional assumption and evaluate three common arguments that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, or personal values. I aim to show that these arguments are unconvincing. My discussion has some practical implications. The advice that we *should* interpret conflicts of principles as conflicts of interests, as the latter are easier to solve, does not seem very helpful if it turns out that all kinds of compromises can be equally difficult (or easy) to reach.

A Problem

The philosophical discussion of compromises has largely centered upon questions of ethics and justice. It has been asked, for instance, what kinds of ethical rules should govern compromising processes, when compromises are fair, and whether there are concessions that are ethically unacceptable (Kuflik 1979; Margalit 2010; Ceva 2016; Wendt 2019). Another topic that has interested philosophers is the question of the definition of “compromise.” In particular, it has been asked whether compromises should be distinguished from other bargaining processes. Some authors have argued that compromises are not merely “bargains” or “deals” (Benditt 1979, 29; Lepora 2012; Hall 2022). Others have emphasized that, in ordinary language, the results of all kinds of bargaining processes can be called “compromises,” given that these processes lead up to solutions in which all parties get something—but something less than what they wanted (Braybrooke 1982, 141; Jones and O’Flynn 2012, 120).

What has *not* raised much discussion is the claim that there are two main groups of compromises. It has been customary to distinguish between (1) compromises of principles, judgments, or deep values, and (2) compromises of interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values. The assumption that there are two sorts of compromises usually goes hand in hand with another, stronger claim: compromises that belong to the first group are harder to reach than compromises from the second group. Martin Golding, for instance (1979, 10), argues that it “is far from clear that conflicts that are rooted in differences of principle or ideology, for example, can be terminated either by a directly negotiated compromise or by submission to a third party.”

Joseph Carens (1979, 130) writes that “political conflicts are not limited to conflicts of interests” but include “conflicts of principles, of rights, or of ideologies.” In his view, “it is

not obvious that conflicts of this type can be settled by compromise” (Carens 1979, 130). Søren Holm (2010, 400) argues that “when the different views of the parties stem only from the fact that they have different interests,” then the “differences can be mediated through reflection and/or compromise.” However, according to Holm, compromise is not “a viable option in a context of deep value conflict about an important ethical issue” (Holm 2010, 399). Ian O’Flynn and Maija Setälä (2022, 915) write that “cases of conflicting preferences” are different from “cases of conflicting judgments,” as in the latter, compromises can be “harder to swallow.”

In this paper, I will re-evaluate the traditional assumption that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values.¹ I will argue that the issue is not as simple as it may seem. It is an empirical issue whether compromises that belong to the first group are harder to reach than compromises that belong to the second group, but even if they are, the reason seems contingent rather than inherent. My point is not to deny that there are differences. Rather, I will argue that the differences are less systematic than is commonly thought. Notice also that the distinction between two groups does not suggest that there are no differences between principles, judgments, and deep values. Obviously, they are very different things, although they all are compromisable.² However, as I will show, they have an important common feature which is not shared by interests, preferences, and personal values.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first introduce how compromises are understood in this paper. I then distinguish between two groups of compromises and illuminate the difference with concrete examples. After that, I explain what it means to say that a compromise is “complicated” and evaluate three arguments for the view that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values. I aim to show that these arguments are unconvincing. Finally, I draw some conclusions and evaluate the significance of the debate.

Compromise: Key Features

Philosophers disagree about the proper meaning of “compromise.” Without any intention of contributing to that debate, I will introduce how the notion of compromise is used in this paper.

¹ Here I rely on an ordinary language understanding of interests, preferences etc. Somethings is in a person’s interest if it increases her chances to get what she wants. A person prefers A to B if she wants more A than B. To some extent, the distinction between preferences and judgments resembles that between desires and beliefs. (Cf. Jones and O’Flynn 2023, 81).

² For example, when two professors disagree and have different judgments about the quality of a PhD thesis, they can make a compromise. If they do, they compromise over the course of action they will take in the evaluation process.

A compromise involves two or more parties. When the parties settle a dispute through mutual concessions, they compromise. If only one party makes concessions, it is no longer a compromise (Day 1989; Archard 2012). Compromising parties are often in asymmetrical positions, which means that one side is powerful, while the other is weak (Golding 1979, 15). However, this does not prevent compromises. Compromises are often unfair in one sense or another.³ A compromise ensures that each party gets at least *something* they value, and compromising is often preferable to perpetuating a disagreement. Having at least one solution is better than having no solution at all.

Compromises are proposed when the original situation involves disagreement and a motive to agree. The disagreement might concern, for example, the price of an old apartment. The seller thinks that the price should be relatively high, and the buyer thinks that the value of the apartment is rather low. If they discuss the details of the apartment and then agree on the “correct” price, then they have *not* found a proper *compromise* because their disagreement has disappeared. However, if they agree on the price but continue to disagree over how much money should have been transferred—the seller thinks she did not get exactly as much as she should have gotten, and the buyer thinks she paid a bit too much—then they have agreed to compromise.

They have both made concessions, as they both had a motive to do so. One wanted to sell her apartment, and the other wanted to have that apartment. The concessions cause some unpleasant feelings but, on the whole, the parties might be satisfied (Bellamy 1999). It is *not* a necessary feature of compromises that the parties are disappointed or regret their decision. They regret only the concessions they made (Lepora 2012). Note that outsiders may fail to see that the seller and buyer made a compromise. The outsiders do not necessarily know whether the seller and the buyer just changed their minds, or whether they made concessions, which are a necessary part of compromises.

In ordinary language, the results of all kinds of bargaining processes can be called compromises, given that the processes lead to solutions that benefit all parties, even if less than they hoped and—in their own view—deserved (Braybrooke 1982, 141; Jones and O’Flynn 2013, 120). Plausibly, it makes sense to distinguish between “compromises” and “deals” when the discussion concerns a compromise about matters that are very important to the parties (Lepora 2012; Lepora and Goodin 2013; Rääkkä 2024). However, in this paper, I call all kinds of bargains and deals compromises, as suggested by the apartment example above.

Compromises can be bad solutions, of course. Suppose two medical doctors disagree on how a particular patient with heart problems should be treated, and they both have a motive to save the patient. One doctor supports treatment A, while her colleague supports treatment B. Treatments that could be described as compromises between treatments A and B include treatments C and D. Both doctors understand that both C and D would be much

³ Here I skip the discussion about the fairness of compromises. For a discussion, see e.g. Ruser and Machin 2017.

riskier for the patient than either A or B. If they compromise, they end up with a decision that is worse than either of the original suggestions. However, if they do *not* compromise, the conflict continues, and the patient will likely die soon.

The best resolution would be for either of the doctors to concede (and perhaps suggest that “next time we will rely on my suggestion” or something like that—if there will be a “next time”). These kinds of situations may sound (unethical and) extraordinary, but they are relatively common in politics. Unfortunately, in politics, parties must make compromises and agree on decisions that are clearly suboptimal compared to any of the original policy suggestions. Any politician is likely to have supporters who would disappear if she gave up (cf. Hall 2022).

Many authors have emphasized that compromises must be voluntary—otherwise, they are not compromises (Jones and O’Flynn 2020, 119). The voluntariness of a compromise requires that the overt act of compromising, represented by a handshake, signature, or verbal statement, be unforced. However, it also requires that the parties understand what they are sacrificing and what they stand to gain from their concessions. Compromises must be voluntary simply because only then do they have obligatory force. To be a party in a compromise is to have freely accepted a moral commitment. In this sense, compromises can be compared to promises. A person may promise something because it sounds good, but if it ceases to sound good, this does not imply that the person should not keep her promise (Raz 1975). The same is true of compromises: if a compromise does not sound good anymore for a person, it does not follow that the agreement does not bind her anymore. It does.

In short, agreements are compromises if they involve mutual concessions, are voluntary, and do not resolve the parties’ disagreement completely (cf. Wendt 2019, 2858).

Two Types of Compromises

In philosophy, it has been customary to distinguish between (1) compromises of principles, judgments, or deep values on the one hand, and (2) compromises of interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values on the other hand (Benditt 1979, 130; Holm 2010; O’Flynn and Setälä 2022). The first group of compromises are possible solutions to conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values, while the second group of compromises are solutions to conflicts that concern interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values. This distinction makes sense, although some authors have argued that certain conflicts can be seen *either* as conflicts of judgments (or principles) *or* as conflicts of interests (Wolff 1965, 21; O’Flynn and Setälä 2022, 906). Furthermore, some philosophers think that certain conflicts are *both* conflicts of judgments (or principles) and conflicts of interests. Examples include labor management disputes (Benditt 1979, 27) and conflicts over tax legislation (Carens 1979, 130). However, I assume here that the two types of compromises are mutually exclusive. Let us consider some clear cases.

Here is an example of a compromise of judgments. Two doctors disagree on what the best medicine would be for their patient. One says that the patient should have medicine A, and

the other says that the patient should have medicine B. These two medicines cannot be used together. They compromise and decide that they will first try medicine A, but only for three days, and then turn to medicine B, which will be used for at least six days. This decision is clearly better than the continuation of the disagreement and no effort to help the patient at all, but both doctors are still rather unhappy with the solution. The supporter of medicine A thinks that it should be used for longer than three days, and the proponent of medicine B thinks that the treatment should start with that medicine.⁴ They have conflicting judgments, and they both feel that they have the *right* judgment, and that the colleague is simply *mistaken*. These feelings do not prevent a compromise, but they do make the parties regretful about it.⁵

On the assumption that each of us has an interest in having her preferences satisfied (O’Flynn and Setälä 2022, 904), here is an example of a compromise of (preferences and) interests. Two persons would like to have a dinner together, but one wants to eat Korean food, and the other Italian food. They compare prices and talk about health effects, but these kinds of considerations do not settle the issue. The person who would like to have Korean food thinks that the local Korean restaurant is more stylish than the Italian one and that Korean food is better and tastier than Italian food. The person who would like Italian food has similar ideas, but in favor of the Italian restaurant and cuisine. They start to discuss these opinions but notice that, even if they agree on most things, they still have different preferences. They decide to make a compromise. They will have the main course at the Korean spot and then walk to the nearby Italian restaurant to have a large dessert. Both are a bit disappointed, but they understand that there are not many options. They will not have a second chance to enjoy dinner together in the near future. For instance, they cannot go to the Italian place today and the Korean place tomorrow. In addition, they both think that Italian and Korean are the best options. For instance, they do not want to go to any fast-food restaurants, although they are available.

What is the difference between conflicts of judgments (or principles) and conflicts of interests? Obviously, both judgments and interests are *reason responsive*—that is, a person can change her judgment after hearing a reason to do so, and the same holds for interests. If I have an interest in seeing a particular movie, I might change my mind when I learn that a certain actor is involved. I will then prefer to see some other movie.⁶ The difference between conflicts of judgments (or principles) and conflicts of interests is not that judgments are reason responsive, while interests are not.

⁴ “While we shall speak of people compromising over differences of judgment, strictly speaking it is not their judgments that they compromise. They compromise over the course of action they should take, given their different judgments about what that course of action should be.” (Jones and O’Flynn 2023, 80.)

⁵ Chiara Lepora (2012, 7–9) calls these kinds of compromises “intersection compromises”, where compromising parties preserve some of their views and only a subset of the views that each held from the onset is sacrificed.

⁶ David Hume denies that disputes of taste can be intelligible. “It is plainly an error in a critic, to confine his approbation to one species or style of writing, and condemn all the rest. But it is almost impossible not to feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition. Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” 1757).

One option is to say that when people have a conflict of judgments, they think that there is a matter of fact to be solved, and when people have a conflict of interests, they do not think so. The doctors who disagree about the appropriate medicine (correctly) think that they are talking about facts. However, could it be that people who disagree about the price of an apartment or the tastiness of certain foods do not think so? In fact, this view is implausible. People whose interests conflict often think that they have the *right* interests. It is not unusual for a person who loves a certain food to assume that she loves it because it *is* the best food (given its taste, health effects, and so on).

A person who wants a certain amount of money when she sells her old apartment may well think that she wants that price because it is the *correct* price (given its location, the price of similar apartments, and so on). Phenomenologically speaking, from a first-person point of view, conflicts of judgments (or principles) and conflicts of interests may look and feel similar. In both types of conflicts, the parties can and often do presume that there is a best or right answer to be given, and each party may assume that she can provide it. At the very least, parties can and often do assume that some answers are *better* than others, and that they have a better answer than the party with whom they disagree.⁷

Conflicts of interests are not always settled, even if all parties share the relevant facts. What about conflicts of judgments? Will they be solved when all parties have access to comprehensive evidence concerning the issue? In fact, this is not the case. Two medical doctors can share all the relevant evidence concerning the influence of two medicines but still disagree on which is better, that is, more efficacious (cf. O’Flynn and Setälä 2022, 902). In science, it is common for researchers to share all the relevant data but still reach different conclusions, say, about the speed of climate warming. In courts, judges usually have the same evidence available for their decisions, but they still make different evaluations of the sufficiency of the proof. These and similar examples suggest that conflicts of judgments (and principles) resemble conflicts of interests (and preferences). Both types of conflict allow parties to agree about the grounds of the conclusions but disagree about the conclusions—whether they concern appropriate medical treatment or good food. Rational disagreements are possible in all kinds of contexts.⁸

Now, the two types of compromises *are* different. The difference is as follows. When two medical doctors disagree about an appropriate medicine, they can respect their opponent’s views and behave politely, but at bottom, they must think that the opponent should agree. If Doctor Anna thinks that medicine A is the proper medicine for a patient, then it would *not* be appropriate for her to think that Doctor Bill may have a different opinion and it is

⁷ Deliberation and the exchange of reasons do not presuppose that there is or that the deliberators think that there is a correct or best answer. It suffices that they assume that some answers are better than others. For a discussion, see Sen 2006.

⁸ The view that rational subjects can disagree with each other despite having access to the same evidence and understanding its meaning is called permissivism (Ballantyne 2018; Rosa 2018). Permissivists reject the *uniqueness thesis*, which says that any set of evidence can justify at most one kind of doxastic attitude toward the view licensed by the evidence in question.

completely fine that he has it. If Anna thinks so, then it raises the question of whether she really thinks that medicine A is the best medicine, or whether she wants to cure the patient in the first place. In conflicts of judgments (and principles and deep values), people's opinions are meant to be *universalizable*.

In conflicts of interests, parties often hope that the other party will change her mind and acknowledge what is true or right.⁹ However, as opposed to conflicts of judgments, in conflicts of interests, this need not be so. It is *appropriate* to present one's view as an opinion that should be taken into account but need not be accepted by others.¹⁰ Consider an example. Cecilia and Deborah would like to spend more time together, but for many reasons, they can do so only on Sunday mornings. The problem is that Cecilia thinks that she should go to church on Sunday mornings, and Deborah wants to visit her sick mother on Sunday mornings. When they talk about the problem, they need not try to convince the other side of the right thing to do on Sunday mornings.

When Cecilia says that she should go to church, she need not imply that all others should do so as well. When Deborah says that she should visit her mother, she need not suggest that all people visit her mother or their own mothers. They have different personal values and commitments, and their problem is completely practical.¹¹ They can make a compromise and decide that Deborah will sometimes join Cecilia at Sunday service, while Cecilia will sometimes join Deborah when she sees her mother. They can also decide to skip their usual undertakings once a month or so. These kinds of concessions are likely to cause unpleasant feelings, but overall, the women may find them reasonable solutions.

In conflicts of interests, a party can demand that her opponent agree with her, say, about the "true" price of an old apartment or the "best" place to spend time on Sunday mornings. However, she need not do so. It is completely appropriate for a party to claim a certain price without saying that the price is somehow "right"; it is just the price she wants.¹² Of course, she can present arguments that support her claim, but their point may be merely to explain why she wants what she wants. In conflicts of judgments and principles, things are different.

In these conflicts, it is inappropriate for a party not to demand that the opponent agree. For example, consider conflicts over the acceptability of abortion (Devolder and Douglas 2017, 113) or the issue of whether active, voluntary euthanasia should be legalized (Holm 2010;

⁹ Here I assume that *truth* is the property of assertions or propositions that are said, in ordinary discourse, to state what the case is or what the facts are. I rely on a basic version of philosophical realism and assume that my argument is consistent with any plausible understanding of "truth". For a discussion, see e.g. Wiggins 1987.

¹⁰ What is "appropriate" is a crucial point and a key to understand the difference between the groups of compromises. Obviously, judgments of all kinds are also involved in compromises that concern mere interests, but that do not show that compromises of judgments do not differ from compromises of interests.

¹¹ The distinction between deep values and personal values is not that deep values are moral commitments the parties hold dear while personal values are not. Both deep values and personal commitments can be very important (and dear) for people.

¹² So, the distinction between the two types of compromises is not that one involves universalizable judgments while the other does not. The difference is that (only) in conflicts of judgments and principles it is inappropriate to present one's view as not universalizable.

Huxtable 2014). These are conflicts of principles or deep values that purport to be correct and true. A person involved in those disputes can respect her opponents' viewpoints and understand their backgrounds, but in the end, she should think that others are mistaken if they disagree with her. If she does not think so, something is wrong—perhaps she is uncertain of her own position, or perhaps she does not really care about the truth after all. (For a discussion, see Kappel 2018, 83-89.)

Compromises of principles, judgments, or deep values involve arrangements that do not look optimal from the point of view of the parties' opinions, which are meant to be universalizable. Compromises of interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values can involve such arrangements, but this is not necessary.

On the Difficulty of Compromises

Is reaching a compromise more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values? The usual reply to this question has been affirmative, but here, I challenge the traditional view, at least to some extent.

When certain compromises are said to be more difficult to reach than others, the difficulty in question can arise from various factors. Usually, when philosophers argue that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values, they mean that compromises are *less likely to be achieved* when the conflict concerns the former rather than the latter group. A compromise can be unlikely to be realized for different reasons. Let us consider three reasons that have been common in the literature. All these reasons can be used in arguments for the claim that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, commitments, or personal values.

1. Legitimate Claims

It may be tempting to think that in conflicts of interests, the parties understand that people's interests differ, and they are willing to split the difference fairly and agree to compromise. It may also be tempting to assume that such willingness is absent in conflicts of judgments and principles, for why would anyone "understand" an opponent who seems to have a clearly *false* view?¹³ In conflicts of interests, the opponent's interest can be seen as a legitimate claim—one more or less similar to one's own claim—but it is hard to consider the opponent's untrue views as "legitimate" in any sense of the word. If this is so, it may seem natural to think that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles and judgments than in conflicts that concern interests. Theodore Benditt (1979, 31) argues as follows:

¹³ If "one is convinced of the error in the opposing position, the willingness to move to 'an intermediary' position is missing" (Scott 1997, 154).

Ordinarily it is considerably more difficult to achieve compromise when principles rather than interests are in conflict, or where the conflict is seen as one of principles rather than interests. First, insofar as the opposed principles purport to be objectively valid, [...] and each party thinks of himself as right (and thus as in the right), neither will think of his opponent as having a legitimate claim that must be taken into account and satisfied to some degree. This is in sharp contrast to the situation involving conflicts of interests.

O’Flynn and Setälä (2022, 915) defend a somewhat similar view, although they contrast conflicts of judgments and preferences rather than conflicts of principles and interests. They point out that in “cases of conflicting preferences, deliberation may enable the parties to reach an agreed judgement on what is fair, and that may take the sting out of having to compromise.” However, in their view, the same does not hold for cases of conflicting judgments, as the parties “continue to disagree on what is right or best” (O’Flynn and Setälä (2022, 915)).¹⁴

It is plausible that, in some conflicts of interests (and preferences), the parties understand their opponents’ claims, which can make agreeing to compromise relatively easy. However, it is important to keep in mind that in some conflicts of interests, the parties make claims they consider true or “objectively valid.” From their point of view, the opponent defends mistaken views (say, about the “correct” price of an old house). If these attitudes make reaching a compromise difficult, then there are many cases of conflicts of interests that must be very difficult.

However, it is not clear that trust in the truth of one’s own views makes agreeing to compromise difficult. Nor is it clear that compromising becomes easy when the parties notice that their opponent has a claim that is “legitimate” in some sense. Of course, there are cases of conflicts in which the parties are primarily interested in the legitimacy of their opponent’s claim.¹⁵ However, the usual motivation to compromise is not related to such evaluations. Usually, the parties are motivated to compromise when they assume that, overall or on balance, they can benefit from compromising. This motivation is present not only in conflicts of interests but also in conflicts of judgments and principles. As Peter Jones and Ian O’Flynn (2012, 122) argue, when “people find a reason to compromise on matters of principle, their reason is very commonly that the compromise promotes a goal whose importance justifies the sacrifice of principle.”

Now, it is an empirical issue whether compromises that solve conflicts of interests tend to be more beneficial and therefore easier than compromises that solve conflicts of judgments or

¹⁴ Of course, when parties have conflicting interests and they agree to compromise, they also “continue to disagree” on what should have been done. If they do not, then they have just reached an agreement, and the need for a compromise has disappeared.

¹⁵ This holds both for compromises of interests and for compromises of principles. Thus, even if evaluations concerning “legitimacy” had some relevance that would not show that compromises of principles are particularly difficult.

principles. However, we do not need to settle this question. Whatever the correct answer is, there is nothing *inherent* in compromises of interests that would make them *necessarily* more beneficial and easier than compromises of judgments and principles. By making concessions that concern judgments about what is true or right, a person can potentially gain a great deal and advance her goals—including moral goals.

2. Regret and Unease

It may be tempting to think that compromises that solve conflicts of principles or deep values cause considerable regret, whereas compromises that solve conflicts of interests are not that bad, psychologically speaking. It may also be tempting to assume that people who consider compromising are aware of this and therefore less willing to agree to compromise in cases of conflicts of principles and deep values than in cases of conflicts of interests. If this is so, then reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, or personal values and commitments. Søren Holm (2010, 400) defends this line of thought and argues that in deep value conflicts, “it may be more difficult to achieve a resolution or a compromise” than in cases of conflicts of interests. The example he has in mind is the legalization of euthanasia:

For the philosopher the [...] problem with “agreeing to disagree” as a policy solution is that it requires [...] the philosophical proponents of euthanasia to acquiesce in what they see as illiberal legislation prohibiting euthanasia in circumstances where it should be allowed; and it requires the philosophical opponents of euthanasia to accept that a kind of killing they think is profoundly unethical should be allowed in law. We can see how philosophers on both sides might “agree to disagree” as citizens, but if they continue to believe, as they almost inevitably must do, that they have the correct argument on their side, agreeing to disagree will create significant cognitive dissonance and unease. (Holm 2010, 402.)

The observation that compromises tend to entail regret and “unease” is common in the discussion concerning the nature of compromises (Lepora 2012, 19; Jones and O’Flynn 2012, 117; Lepora and Goodin 2013; Hall 2022, 225). Are these unpleasant feelings stronger or more common in the context of compromises that solve conflicts of principles or deep values than in the context of compromises that solve conflicts of interests? Again, this is an empirical issue, but obviously, compromises that decide conflicts of interests can cause considerable psychological distress.

First, in some conflicts of interests, the parties think that they have the “correct argument on their side.” That is, a party in a conflict of interests may think that her interest (say, having sushi dinner in some particular restaurant) is valid, while the opponent’s interest is

mistaken.¹⁶ As already pointed out, the idea of “seeing the truth” is not limited to conflicts that concern principles or judgments but is also common in conflicts of interests and preference.

Second, a person can have such strong interests that she will hesitate to make any concessions about them. A person selling her old house may love the place, and the idea of accepting a lower price than she wants (and is strongly interested in having) is out of the question. She may be well aware that agreeing to compromise would cause her serious negative feelings, and she would suffer from serious cognitive dissonance. If she is aware of the consequences, she may decide not to sell it—unless someone is willing to pay the price she wants, or almost the price she wants.

It may be that compromises of principles and deep values are more psychologically demanding than compromises of interests, but this need not be so. If it is, it is accidental and contingent rather than a necessary difference between the two types of compromises.

3. Moral Integrity

One of the most common reasons to think that reaching compromises of principles is harder than reaching compromises of interests is the view that negotiating persons think that compromising principles sacrifices one’s moral integrity and moral reputation, while compromising interests does not (cf. Menkel-Meadow 2016, 1). Whether or not this view is justified, supporting the view seems to imply that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, or personal values and commitments. As Benditt (1979, 31) points out, “to compromise on matters of principle is to risk a loss of esteem, not only on the part of others, but even on one’s own part.”

Two points are important here. First, people are indeed interested in their reputations, but this does not imply that they are interested primarily in their moral reputations. A person may want to be known as a tough negotiator or an ice-cold businessperson. If she wants that, then she will not be eager to make compromises that concern conflicts of interests. Of course, it may be an empirical fact that people are usually interested primarily in their moral reputations. However, for our purposes, this fact (if it is a fact) is irrelevant. It seems clear that a person may “risk a loss of esteem” both in cases of conflicts of principles and in cases of conflicts of interests.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that the “easiness” of a compromise depends largely on incentives to make it. As mentioned above, there is nothing *inherent* in compromises of interests that would always make them more beneficial and, thus, easier than compromises

¹⁶ When sushi specialists have discussions, they seem to have many standards that are perfectly reasonable, judging from how consistently they are used. Some sushi restaurants are world famous, and specialists agree that their food is the best. It is hard to believe that this agreement on a “matter of taste” is purely accidental and irrational.

of principles or judgments. Even if it were true that people are interested in protecting their moral integrity and reputation, much depends on gains that they are likely to achieve if they decide *not* to protect them (cf. Devolder and Douglas 2016, 114; Jones and O’Flynn 2012, 122). Parties can also make moral concessions and agree to compromise for moral reasons. Moral sacrifices can be morally justified—because of a “morally desirable outcome,” for instance (Archard 2012, 404).¹⁷

Now, people are not always willing to sacrifice their *personal* values and commitments. Perhaps Cecilia thinks that she should go to church on Sunday mornings, and perhaps she is not ready to agree to compromises that affect her commitment—although she does *not* think that all others should go to Sunday service as well.¹⁸ If this is so, then a person’s desire to protect her moral integrity can indeed make compromises very difficult.¹⁹ Notice, however, that we are not talking here about the difficulty of reaching a compromise in conflicts that concern principles or judgments, as defined above. Personal values (such as Cecilia’s personal commitment to go to Sunday service) are not principles or deep values that are meant to be universalizable.

People can be and often are interested in their moral integrity in one sense or another.²⁰ However, this observation does not directly support the common claim that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests or personal values.

The Lesson

I have argued that the usual arguments for the view that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, or personal values are inconclusive. I considered only three arguments: (1) one that centered upon the idea of “legitimate claims,” (2) one that emphasized the role of regret and unease, and (3) one that was based on the importance of moral integrity. Obviously, these are not the only arguments available. However, as I see it, these are the three most important and common arguments, judging from the present philosophical discussion.

The claim that some compromises are more complicated than others can be interpreted as an empirical claim about how things usually happen to be. I have not tried to evaluate this

¹⁷ This raises the question of whether the sacrifices threaten a person’s moral integrity in the first place. Devolder and Douglas (2017, 114) make an important point when they write that “if the value served by the compromise (e.g., a commitment to seeking public agreement) is itself a core value, it is not clear why sacrificing some other core value for its sake should involve hypocrisy or loss of integrity.”

¹⁸ Because Cecilia does not think that others should agree with her, the opinion is not meant to be universalizable. By universalizability, I do not refer to anything exotic (along the lines of Kant or others). Possibly, people’s personal values can be based on certain principles (which makes the distinction complicated).

¹⁹ As O’Flynn and Setälä (2022, 906) argue, people’s “moral values may matter to them personally; they may regard them as a fundamental part of who they are and as essential to living a life with integrity.” A person’s personal values can of course be “deep” in the sense that she is not willing to sacrifice them.

²⁰ Compromises and integrity, more discussion in Tillyris 2017, 488–491 and Wendt 2023, 1038–1041.

empirical claim, and I doubt that there is much research about the claim. My point was only to remark that it is more or less accidental and contingent whether reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles, judgments, or deep values than in conflicts that concern interests, preferences, or personal values.

I have also pointed out that trust in the truth of one's own views need not make agreeing to compromise difficult. People who are talented compromisers seldom change their minds. Indeed, if they do change their minds, so that they do not disagree anymore, the need to compromise disappears.

My discussion has some practical implications. In an early contribution, Robert Paul Wolff (1965, 21) wrote that the “genius of American politics is its ability to treat matters of principle as though they are conflicts of interest.” Wolff's idea is that, especially in politics, we *should* consider conflicts of principles as conflicts of interests, as the latter are easier to solve. But this idea is problematic. First, compromises of principles and compromises of interests are two different things, although they often resemble each other. Second, and more importantly, even if we could somehow interpret conflicts of principles as conflicts of interests, it would not help much. This is because there is no *a priori* reason to think that reaching a compromise is more complicated in conflicts that concern principles than in conflicts that concern interests.

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