



Holding It All Together: on the Value of Compromise and the Virtues of Compromising

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Abstract

Public discourse and theoretical literature currently show controversy on the value of political compromise: some oppose it, others welcome it, and on both sides, arguments differ. The different positions in these debates on compromise build on particular understandings of what politics is all about (four understandings are distinguished: Pragmatist, Principled, Agonist and Deliberative). These understandings oppose one another and are even mutually exclusive. An encompassing position that combines elements from these different approaches is needed to bring us beyond this situation of controversy and take the debate on compromise a step further. In this paper, I show that Paul Ricoeur's understanding of politics and of the role of compromising therein offers such a perspective. His work combines elements of the different positions, provides an understanding of compromise and implies lessons for compromising.

Keywords Compromise · Disagreement · Political practice · Virtue · Paul Ricoeur

Introduction

In cases of political controversy, a compromise might be presented as a solution; it is sometimes accepted, but in other cases, it is not. In current political practice, however, compromise itself has become a central object of dispute. Some argue that we have lost the ability to compromise—an ability that is crucial for a functioning democracy and that we need in our times of polarization more than ever (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; Weinstock, 2013). Others maintain that compromising is part of a type of politics that we should distrust. They relate it to elite politics and deal-making that obscures controversies and suppresses real political battles (e.g., Mouffe, 2005). In this controversy, one can recognize the often-witnessed ambiguity

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between compromising as something constructive or positive and compromising as treason.

However, the dispute goes deeper. Within the camps of those that welcome compromise and those that reject it, there is also disagreement. Advocates of compromise disagree on whether this practice is supported merely by pragmatic considerations or follows from some fundamental democratic value or principle (see, e.g., May, 2005 and Rostbøll, 2017). Some critics of compromise maintain that advocates of compromise underestimate societal diversity, while others argue that such advocates show little ambition and should aim for consensus instead of compromise (e.g., Habermas, 1984; Mouffe, 2005). Champions of these different positions criticize one another's presuppositions. One blames the other, for instance, for invoking the idea of a political setting in which the winner takes it all, a setting that he feels is uninhabitable (Weinstock, 2013). The other retorts to attacks such as these that the basic characteristic of politics, being agonism, is thereby neglected (Mouffe, 2005). What becomes clear from these debates is that different valuations of compromise and compromising rely on different concepts and ideals of politics. The disagreement on compromise in current political practice expresses a deeper and more fundamental controversy.

This fundamental disagreement might block finding new answers to questions such as When is a compromise a good and proper compromise? Is compromising more suitable in national settings than in international contexts? Are compromises in politics more appropriate than in private life? If we want to surpass the current contradicting positions on the value of compromise in politics, then we have to move beyond conceptual analyses, compromise and focus on the question of whether and how the tensions between the underlying understandings of politics can be dealt with. Here, the work of Paul Ricoeur is particularly promising. Ricoeur, in many of his publications, deals with the notion of compromise. Compromise is always part of a broader analysis that focuses on subjects that are central to politics, such as justice, recognition or political virtue. Ricoeur, furthermore, emphasizes the plural or complex character of what politics is about. He does not attempt, however, to promote one understanding of politics at the expense of others but tries to find a position that gives the different understandings all their due.

Unfortunately, Ricoeur has not presented an encompassing theory of compromise and politics. His answer to our question, therefore, has to be reconstructed.¹

In this article, I will offer a reconstruction of Ricoeur's understanding of compromise and of its relation to the many faces of politics. The central question is as follows: What can and should the role of compromise be in politics according to Ricoeur, and what guidelines for practical politics follow from his argument?

In the remainder of this article, I will first offer an overview of the different valuations of compromise and compromising and of the relations of these valuations to different understandings of politics. Next, I will show how Ricoeur, in different parts of his work, deals with compromise. He discusses compromise in relation to

¹ For similar reconstructive approaches see, e.g., Dallmayr, 2002; Dauenhauer, 1998, 2002; Hoskins, 2013; Kaplan, 2003.

justice, recognition and responsibility. These three elaborations of compromise are, as will be made explicit in the following section, intrinsically connected. Together, they also show how Ricoeur understands the relation between the different perspectives on politics. The final section includes which guidelines for compromising follow from Ricoeur's analysis.

Disagreement on Compromise

According to some, making compromises means betraying values and principles, undermining basic interests or losing one's integrity. Others maintain that compromising shows a willingness and ability to find creative and practical solutions, solve problems and move on. Scholars in the history of ideas have shown that this opposition of valuations has been around for a long time. In earlier times, but also today, compromise and compromising were and are often understood as related to individual integrity (or its absence) (See, e.g., Benjamin, 1990; Fumurescu, 2013; Tillyris, 2017).

In recent literature, the value (or downsides) of compromise is often linked to political practice. Some hold compromise (for reasons to be discussed later) of value for politics; they sometimes even call it a crucial element. Such a valuation clearly inspires Gutmann and Thompson's (2012: 11) often cited definition: "[A compromise is] an agreement in which all sides sacrifice something in order to improve on the status quo from their perspective, and in which the sacrifices are at least partly determined by the other sides' will". Others take a completely different stand: Compromise is not the best but the worst in politics. Compromising, according to Mouffe is "to reconcile conflicting interests and values"(Mouffe, 2005: 3, 14). By doing so, she argues, the central characteristic of politics is neglected: conflict and disagreement. The compromising attitude, according to Mouffe, similar to consensus-orientation, feeds on a moralistic ideal and a view of human nature that encompasses unity, empathy and rational communication. It overlooks the fundamental agonism, antagonism even, between groups of people. The compromising attitude is utopian and even dangerous because it suppresses people's true nature and might open the door to enmity and violent outbursts. Sometimes compromising is inspired by the idea that politics is a matter of deal-making. This must also be discarded, according to Mouffe. Such an economic perspective on politics also pacifies the political practice, and it neglects the affective relations that are also a basic element of politics (Mouffe, 2005: 14ff.).

A completely different type of critique of compromising rejects it, not because compromise neglects basic striving and disagreement but because it overstates it. Advocates of deliberative democracy, for example, give consensus a crucial role in politics. Their ideal is a practice in which people convince one another of the best position by only using rational arguments (Cohen, 1997; Habermas, 1984). Settling for a mere compromise means failure according to this ideal.

In addition, among those that value compromise and compromising, differences can be discerned. First, there are those that understand compromise as a profitable transaction. One compromises if one cannot realize all of one's goals, but, as a

balance, wins by striking this deal.² The consideration that compromise can keep the settlement of disputes peaceful and is, thus, to everybody's advantage also belongs to this position. In opposition to this Pragmatic position stands a second position. This second type of advocate for compromise criticizes the first for its focus on individual advantage and pluralism. It emphasizes reasons for compromising on common values, such as respect and democratic principles. These common values support compromising, even in cases in which one might obtain everything one wants without compromising. The argument for compromise, here, is principled and does not refer to (desirable) consequences, similar to the Pragmatic position. This position, which might be called Principled, maintains that politics is neither captured by the idea that the winner takes all nor about maximizing the realization of given individual preferences. Politics is about realizing common values. According to some, the ground for compromising lies in recognizing the value of the position of others (*sanguinic compromises* in terms of Margalit (2009: 39–47), Weinstock (2013: 543, 552). Others refer to respect the equality of citizens (Bellamy et al., 2012: 280; Dobel, 1990; Ford, 2018; Gutmann & Thompson, 2012: 35, 109–117; Kappel, 2018; Kuflik, 1979), shared virtues of citizens (Moody-Adams, 2018) or respect for other citizens as co-rulers (Rostbøll, 2017). According to the Pragmatists, these demands are much too high. Is showing respect to one's fellow citizens not already included in adhering to the democratic system of voting and accepting its outcomes, they ask (May, 2005). Compromising might, furthermore, have all kinds of effects, such as enhancing mutual understanding or generating a feeling of recognition. Such effects (that are welcomed by some) should, however, not be mistaken for reasons for compromising (Table 1).

This brief overview clearly shows that the different valuations of compromise that were distinguished entail different understandings of what a compromise is. The different positions also express different understandings of the nature of politics. The disagreements on the value of compromise mirror disagreements on what politics is all about. This implies that to gain in the standing debate on the value of compromise, in general and in more particular questions (such as when is it appropriate to compromise?), we should take the different underlying understandings of politics and their relation into account.

Ricoeur on Compromise: Three Elaborations

Compromise is an important theme in Ricoeur's work. He repeatedly returned to this subject, albeit often in quite different contexts. Unfortunately, he did not integrate these analyses into a single encompassing publication on compromise. In this section, I will present three elaborations of compromise that Ricoeur presented, elaborations that are all connected to a particular aspect of social and political practice. In

² See, for instance, the idea of the Pareto-improving compromise in Van Parijs (2012). In addition, the position of J.S. Mill, as presented in Thompson (2007), can illustrate this position.

Table 1 Perspectives on compromising in politics

	Politics as maximization of particular preferences or values	Politics as realization of the common values
Positive on compromising	I. Pragmatic position Compromise as a deal that is profitable for all parties	II. Principled position Compromise as an expression of shared values
Negative on compromising	III. Agonistic position Compromise as neglect of basic diversity and antagonism in politics	IV. Deliberative position Compromise as failure to reach rational consensus

the next section, I will show how these three approaches are connected and that they contain Ricoeur's answer to the issue of the plurality of perspectives on the political.

Compromise and Justice

A first theme that Ricoeur relates to compromise is justice. In a broad range of publications, he discusses the plurality of claims on just distribution in modern society (Ricoeur, 1987, 1992, 2000, 2005a, 2005b). These disagreements on justice occur on different levels, according to Ricoeur. The first level is that of the everyday political debates on the proper distribution of particular goods; the second level of disputes concerns the aims of good government (security, welfare, freedom, etc.) and their specific meaning; the third level is about the legitimation of governmental power in general (Ricoeur, 1987, 1992: 258–261). The first level has Ricoeur's special attention. He criticizes Rawls and others that, according to Ricoeur, suggest a commonality that is not warranted. Rawls, by employing his notion of primary goods, neglects the diversity of items that can be distributed and the diversity of ways of valuing such items. On this point, he agrees with authors such as Walzer and Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), who emphasize the plurality in terms of 'spheres of justice' and 'orders of value'. He considers the approach of Boltanski and Thévenot the most fruitful. Here, social diversity is rendered in terms of competing justifications. Each order – the market order, the religious order, the domestic order, etc. – has its own value hierarchy and justification. In the practice of social life, these different orders often clash, and in such cases, competing justifications can be given for different lines of action. At this point, Boltanski and Thévenot introduce the notion of compromise; and that is the second reason why Ricoeur favors their analysis over Walzer's. Compromise is a way to reach a peaceful solution in the case of fundamental disagreement on the proper action: when the justifications of different orders of value clash. It is the answer, our only answer according to Ricoeur, to violence.

People compromise because there is an irreducible plurality in justifications and a wish to solve disputes peacefully. This irreducible plurality implies that the justification that can be given for any compromise is always weaker than the justifications that are given for the 'pure' position that is based on a particular order of value. There is no overarching position, no external point above the different value orders, no unitary idea of justice to which a defender of a compromise might refer (Ricoeur, 1991, 2000: 81–90). Compromises, therefore, are fragile. "A compromise is always threatened with being denounced by pamphleteers from all sides as a surrender of principle" (2005a: 210; 1991).

In an interview on compromising, Ricoeur emphasizes that true compromise actually preserves the plurality and does not hide it. In a false or fraudulent compromise, he argues, it is suggested that there is no tension between different systems of justification. He provides the example of a factory owner who says to his employees: "we are one big family". The factory owner in this example tries to mask the fact that, whatever other relation he and his workers may have, there is also the value order of the market of the labor force that implies competition and not harmony

between employer and employees. A compromise is honest or true if it expresses the force of the claims of both sides (Ricoeur, 1991; see also 1992: 273).

Up to this point, compromising, for Ricoeur, seems to be a pragmatic way to acknowledge and deal with the fundamental plurality in modern society – a plurality that he thinks will only increase because of the ever-growing number of roles that we engage in (Ricoeur, 1991, 2000: 93). In the interview just mentioned, however, he also maintains that compromises, fragile as they may be, are the only way to realize the common good. They open the road for new, more encompassing principles (Ricoeur, 1991: 2, 6). Making a compromise, Ricoeur argues, means rising above one order of value and its particular justification; it involves some kind of transition. It means stepping over the border of one's own world, seeing one's position from above and as one next to others. Creating a compromise means that one has the imagination to understand how others can inhabit other value orders. Ricoeur compares this to "learning a foreign language to the point of being able to appreciate one's own language as one among many" (Ricoeur 2005a: 209). This idea of access to the common good that compromising offers must not be misunderstood. The individual that reaches beyond his familiar value order might have the vision of a common good, but it will always be a vision from a particular angle, from a particular order of value. We have an idea of the common good that transcends all diverse orders and perspectives: the idea of common humanity. That, however, is a picture that is very abstract and without differentiation and plurality. It is similar to the biblical world of Eden with essentially only one human; that is not a political setting but is a Utopia. A compromise might envision an understanding of the common good; it can never be the supercompromise that expresses *the* common good (Ricoeur, 2000: 91).

The consequence of this line of thought is that the common good is a presupposition as well as a result of compromise. The common good is a result as far as the compromise opens the road to a future encompassing principle that bridges current disagreement. It is a presupposition in the sense that some vision of it is needed to come to a viable compromise (Ricoeur, 2010: 210).

Deweert (2022) points out a further topic in Ricoeur's work that relates to compromising and that is relevant here: the topic of memory and forgetting. Compromising means accepting the unacceptable but it might also involve shelving ideas and desires that the other side considers to be truly intolerable. In this sense compromising contains an element of renunciation or forgoing. Ricoeur compares this moment of renunciation to forgiving as a kind of willful forgetting some ideals and concerns in order to make a better common life possible (Deweert, 2022: 823; Ricoeur, 2004, on renunciation and compromise see also Thuderoz, 2013).

Compromise and Recognition

Recognition is a second theme that Ricoeur addresses in relation to compromise. In a particular sense, recognition was already present in the theme discussed above. Compromising, as we saw, implies transcending one's own value order. It means developing some understanding of other people and of the other value world they

live in. This “awakening to worlds of others” entails some kind of recognition of others (Ricoeur, 1992). In clearly preserving the difference between the two value orders in a true compromise, and not disguising it in a fraudulent compromise, each particular position is respected (Ricoeur, 1991, 1992; See also Yeager & Herman, 2017: 8).

In other parts of Ricoeur’s work, the relation between compromise and recognition is elaborated in a different way. Here, he offers a phenomenological analysis of the capable person, and especially of his development (Ricoeur, 1992, 2005a, 2005b). The capacities of such a well-developed person include the ability to say, to narrate, imputability and the act of promising. A person can develop such basic human capacities, and he can recognize them in himself. However, for real development, other persons fulfil necessary functions. First, because all these capacities involve action towards others: they are only meaningful when they are employed in relation to others, and, therefore, they can only be learned in such relations. The second important role of others lies in their recognition of one’s capacities. Ricoeur follows Hegel (and Honneth’s reading of him, more particularly) in emphasizing the importance of being recognized by others. Everybody longs for and struggles for the recognition (of one’s abilities) by others: in family relations, in legal relations, and in social relations. This social level particularly has Ricoeur’s interest. The struggle here is apparent “at work, for example, in the struggle to achieve and protect one’s rank in the hierarchy of authority; in access to housing, relations in the neighborhood and locality, and the many encounters that make up daily life” (Ricoeur, 2005b: 5).

However, Ricoeur points out, there is also another route to recognition than that characterized by struggle. The root of this alternative way to recognition lies in our basic sense of goodwill towards other human beings. This basic orientation is illustrated, according to Ricoeur, in the dissatisfaction we feel towards the endless struggle for recognition. “The demand for recognition expressed in that struggle is insatiable: When shall we have sufficient recognition?” (Ricoeur, 2005b: 5). This alternative route to the recognition of others, one that is not based in the world of struggle but in goodwill, finds its expression in actions such as giving and compromising. Compromise, thus, finds its motivation in a general recognition of other human beings. Ricoeur concludes: “We can take compromise, then, to be the form that clothes mutual recognition in situations of conflict and dispute resulting from the plurality of economies of standing” (Ricoeur, 2005a: 210, See also 2005a: 219, 242, 2005b: 6, On the relation between recognition and compromise in the work of Ricoeur, see also Assayag-Gillot, 2018).

In this second elaboration of compromise, we find some elements that we already encountered in the first elaboration but also some remarks that seem at odds with what we found in that section. A clear similarity can be found in the dichotomy between the conflict-ridden plurality and specificity of values and the individuals in their concreteness on the one hand and the generality of common humanity on the other. One side is that of “mistrust inherent in the war of each against all,” and the other centers around “the goodwill that arises from the encounter with the other, with my fellow human being” (Ricoeur, 2005b: 6). In the texts on recognition, this duality is expressed in the distinction between a type of recognition that is connected

to struggle and that gives expression to particular individual capacities and a type of recognition that is linked to the goodwill that we have towards everybody regardless his or her particular attributes.

A second similarity lies in the paradox of whether compromise is to be understood as cause or effect. In Ricoeur's understanding of the relation between compromise and recognition, the latter is understood as an effect (true compromises express recognition for each value order) as well as a cause (recognition motivates compromise, just as it motivates the gift). This paradox can, however, be dissolved. Recognition in Ricoeur's analysis has two meanings, or at least two sides: recognition for particular capacities of particular individuals and recognition for each human being as a human being. The latter, taken as a cause, can lead to the first, or receiving individual recognition can lead to a willingness to compromise and, thus, increase the general type of recognition. What Ricoeur's analysis shows is an oscillation between the aspects of recognition, in which compromise functions as a bridge. Asking whether recognition is an effect of compromise or underlies it is, in the light of this analysis, a meaningless question.

Compromise and Political Responsibility

A third theme in Ricoeur's work that he links to compromise and compromising is political responsibility. The basis of Ricoeur's idea of political responsibility lies in an understanding of politics that is inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt. Similar to Arendt, Ricoeur explores an understanding of politics that centers on the common life and the common actions of a group of people. He also follows Arendt in her critique of a politics that is characterized by conflict and power play: this type of political action tends to undermine the mutual trust and the idea of a shared future that is essential for the politics of the common life. Civic trust tends to be undermined because of the turf wars that political representatives fight that citizens barely understand; it is endangered by the political rhetoric that is often used and that presents individuals and groups as enemies or worse; it is threatened by the violence that even democratic states sometimes employ against citizens (Ricoeur, 1987, 1995, 2010).

Ricoeur shares Arendt's concerns, but he differs from her in that a politics of conflict and power play is inevitable. Political representation, rhetoric, state violence, etc. form a threat to the common life, but such aspects of politics as conflict are also necessary to realize the common life. This 'world of partisanship and plurality' encompasses the realism that complements the idealism of the common life; it is the vertical relation of domination that is needed to make actual the horizontal bond between equal citizens. It is the force that realizes the form. It is *le politique* (conflict) and *la politique* (unity) that presuppose one another (Ricoeur, 1995: 20; 2007a: 248, 255; 2007b, 2013: 21). What is demanded, therefore, is political responsibility. That means being active in the plural and conflictual world of politics, but always with a basic concern for what is fragile: the common life, trust, and the will to act together. Political responsibility is one answer to plurality and conflict; the other is tragedy, according to

Ricoeur. Compromising is an approach that the responsible politician can use to avoid tragedy. It can be a way to bridge the politics of conflict and the politics of acting together in a common life (Ricoeur, 1995).

Ricoeur here emphasizes, as he did elsewhere, that compromises to some extent reach beyond the particular positions, but at the same time retain the plurality of perspectives. In addition, because compromises cannot be deduced from an overarching understanding of the common good, the justification that can be given for them cannot be as firmly grounded as the arguments for each particular position. For this reason, Ricoeur maintains that compromises themselves are also fragile. Making compromises and defending them, therefore, implies having courage (Ricoeur, 1987: 39; 1995).

Yeager and Herman (2017: 3, 8) interpret Ricoeur's analysis of political responsibility as an argument for a duty to compromise. Although Ricoeur values compromising, this claim is much too strong. It does not fit Ricoeur's line of argument. Ricoeur on several occasions addresses the problem of finding the proper answer in situations of conflicting values and claims. In his answer, he follows the Aristotelean virtue ethical tradition, and amends it. To take the proper actions one needs 'critical phronesis' (critical practical wisdom or prudence), according to Ricoeur. In line with Aristotle's ethics, he argues that a good politician should be prudent, which means being able to weigh the relevant considerations in a particular situation, keeping the horizon of the common good in mind. To this classic virtue ethical perspective, he adds, however, a Kantian sieve. The critical phronetic politician should always check whether his intended action respects the dignity of others (1992: 290; 1995; 2005a: 210). Although Ricoeur, thus, includes some Kantian elements, neither his idea of political prudence nor his analysis of political responsibility includes a duty to compromise. Compromising certainly can be a good thing to safeguard the common life, but it might in particular cases not be supportive or be bad from a moral perspective.

Putting the Pieces Together

This overview shows that the themes of justice, recognition and political responsibility in Ricoeur's work, although they are elaborated in different works, are closely connected. Only slightly exaggerating, one might say that compromise is what connects them. The realization of the common life in a pluralist setting is only possible by invoking compromise; compromise is an expression of recognition, and recognition contributes to the development of a capable person; and the capable person is able to act responsibly and knows when it is prudent to compromise to realize the common life.

Clearly, compromise in Ricoeur's analysis is not a phenomenon that can and should be understood in isolation from its role and position in a broader understanding of the political. This observation brings us back to the issue of the many faces of the political and its relation to compromise.

Ricoeur on Compromise and the Many Faces of the Political

In Ricoeur's understanding of politics, we can recognize all four approaches that were distinguished above. With Pragmatists, Ricoeur recognizes that politics means dealing with fundamental plurality and disagreements. In modern society, many orders of value exist that each have their own justification for their own priorities. To avoid conflicting claims in that pluralistic setting that lead to violence ("tragedy"), compromising can be a proper strategy. Ricoeur agrees with Agonists that "society is no Eden". In modern societies, there is no harmonic and generally shared conception of the common good. On the proper way of dealing with specific situations, but also on the meaning and priority of general principles, people fundamentally disagree. This fundamental disagreement and adversity should not be masked by false compromises that suggest otherwise. Deliberationists find Ricoeur at their side when he envisions the possibility of integrative compromises that point to a future formulation of shared conceptions and valuations. "Learning one another's language" in the course of a debate might bring mutual understanding and a common perspective on particular issues closer. With the Principled position, Ricoeur shares the idea that politics must answer to the basic values of recognition and respect for all citizens as equals. This is what capable persons in modern society need and deserve, and this is what prudent and responsible politicians should always take into account.

Ricoeur, however, also has points of disagreement with all four positions. In fact, the observation that elements of all four positions can be found in his work shows that he finds each of them individually incomplete or one sided. Furthermore, in his analyses, he explicitly criticizes positions that express one of the four approaches that I distinguished here. A Deliberative position overestimates the possibility of consensus and neglects the importance of rhetoric in political debate (Ricoeur, 1987: 36). The Principled position is naïve as it neglects the ever-looming threat of conflict turning into violence (Ricoeur, 1987, 1992: 258 ff.), something that the Pragmatists clearly understand. This latter position, however, is shortsighted on the point of goodwill towards other human beings. It is blind for cases in which maintaining peace (through compromising) is trumped by concern for the lives and dignity of particular individuals or groups of people (2005a, 2005b: 5). The Agonist position misses the importance of an idea of commonality in political life (Ricoeur, 1992, 2000, 2010).

Ricoeur does not choose between these four positions, he acknowledges the explanatory power and value that each has, nor does he try to conceal the tensions between them. In Ricoeur's approach, these tensions are an essential part of what politics is all about. In his work, he repeatedly returns to this issue, introducing a particular vocabulary to distinguish between the different aspects of the political and their complex relation: *la politique* and *le politique*. This is the tension between politics as acting together and power to (as Arendt explains it) and politics as conflict and power over (as Carl Schmitt, for instance, expresses). Both aspects are essential, and they presuppose one another. This political paradox, as Ricoeur calls it, is what we as citizens in a modern democracy have to deal with, and it is what the responsible politician has to deal with. It is our ordeal.

Accepting this tension and responsibly acting upon it means acting from the presupposition of a common good, without actually having a shared conception of the common good from which we can deduce what the proper rules and actions in particular cases are. It means approaching others, even the ones with which we disagree, as individuals who deserve respect, although we have no objective guideline of what this exactly entails. Doing so might in particular circumstances mean that compromising is the best option, but it also might mean that compromise is to be avoided. Here, again, Ricoeur accepts both sides in our diagram. He does not take a definitive side in the controversy over whether compromising in politics is a good or a bad strategy. It is a matter of proper judgment in particular cases.

The tension between the different positions is loosened to some degree when one recognizes, as Ricoeur points out, that the relations of different aspects of politics are not static. The debate between Pragmatists and advocates of the Principled position on the priority of recognition and compromise dissolves if one sees that compromise can both be motivated by respect for the worth of others and have the effect of offering recognition. From a (cyclic) dynamic, instead of a static, perspective, the one stimulates the other. Something similar can be pointed out in the relation between compromising and the common good. Some vision of a common good can motivate compromising, and the process of compromising might lead the way to a future shared concept of a common good.

Compromising in politics can, thus, be understood as an important element of the way that Ricoeur brings different understandings of politics together. Might one also say that Ricoeur's position itself is a compromise? His approach, indeed, has characteristics that fit his depiction of political compromise. His encompassing understanding of politics does not try to mask the tensions between the different positions that it integrates, and it could be called fragile because it lacks the simple basis of the 'pure' positions. His position, furthermore, entails practical answers to contemporary political disputes and problems.

Ricoeur's Lessons

Ricoeur's work enables us to surpass the stalemate in the current discussions on the place and appropriateness of political compromise. He shows how the understandings of politics that underlie the different stances on compromise and compromising all express important aspects of politics but are all limited in their perspectives. Ricoeur prompts us not to take a one-sided perspective, such as Antigone and Creon did, but to try to combine the different perspectives without neglecting the tensions between them.

His approach contains or implies more specific answers to contemporary disputes on political compromise. One such dispute concerns the question of whether decision-making in a democratic society merely means that the winner takes all in majority voting or that more is demanded such as compromising with opponents even if one can win the vote without them. Pragmatists maintain that there is no reason for the latter. Compromises are only called for if one cannot realize one's goals because one has no majority (May, 2005). Advocates for a Principled

approach to compromises maintain that democracy demands much more than majority voting. Basic to a democracy is mutual respect, and that implies the duty to (try to) compromise (e.g., Bellamy et al., 2012: 280; Dobel, 1990; Ford, 2018; Kappel, 2018; Kuflik, 1979; Rostbøll, 2017; Weinstock, 2013).

Ricoeur agrees with the Principled approach that individual gain must not be the only motivation for compromising in politics. He rejects, however, a duty to compromise – that is much too strong of a claim. Compromising sometimes might not be the proper thing to do. His argument for a compromising attitude, furthermore, lies not in deontological considerations. It follows the Aristotelean tradition, as Arendt expressed it: political action as living the good life together with others under just institutions. A compromising attitude in this line is not a duty but something that follows from the responsibility that every member has for this common project. Following Arendt and others, Ricoeur argues that this project, especially under conditions of conflict and individual strife, is in danger. A society in which each individual or group merely looks for its own advantage and the realization of its current preferences lacks the mutual trust and the *esprit public* that is necessary for its own survival (Ricoeur, 1987, 1992, 1995, 2010). The flaw in the pragmatist position is that it does not see that, in the long run, compromising, even if one is on the winning side, is to one's advantage if properly understood.

Ricoeur's approach towards compromises also has implications for other issues currently under dispute. It makes clear, for instance, why and how there are differences between compromising in national and international settings. In both settings the (Pragmatic) concern for a peaceful solution of conflicts has its force, and in both, the recognition of others as human beings counts. In the national setting, however, there is the extra motivation following from the responsibility for the existing common project. If international cooperation intensifies, this distinction, of course, will dissolve.

Ricoeur's understanding of political responsibility in this context can also help to answer the question of whether political representatives should be more compromise-minded than ordinary citizens (see, e.g., Bellamy, 2012). One's responsibility for the fragile increases means one is actually more able to effectively contribute to its safety. As decision-making and compromising opportunities are in the hands of politicians, it follows that they have a special responsibility in this field.

A last issue to be addressed here is the question of when exactly compromising is appropriate or why a compromise is to be considered good or bad? Ricoeur does not offer any rules or principles to decide whether a compromise is rotten or not or which persons or groups cannot be partners in a compromise. What he does offer, however, is the concept of *critical phronesis* as an understanding of what it means to deal with hard questions in political practice (Ricoeur, 1992: 290). *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, refers to the capacity for good judgment, as Aristotle described it: taking all relevant aspects into consideration in a specific situation to decide on the proper action, thereby keeping a keen eye on the goal of that activity. In political activity, that goal, Ricoeur explains, is living the good life together with others under just institutions. In the way that Ricoeur specifies this latter aspect of political action, he differs from Aristotle. Good political judgment, according to Ricoeur,

means that one puts one's intended action to the test of a Kantian sieve (the *critical part*): Does my intended line of action contradict the human dignity of others?

Critical phronesis does not provide any clear rules, neither on compromising nor on any other hard political choice. It is not a matter of deduction under general rules, nor is it cleverness or expediency. Its Kantian element, however, does allow for a general guideline. Employing the sieve means that intended lines of actions that in some way neglect the value of others as human beings must be discarded. This aspect of Ricoeur's critical phronesis offers support for Margalit's prohibition of rotten compromises (Margalit, 2009).

Typical of phronesis or practical wisdom, similar to any Aristotelian virtue, is that it can and must be developed. It is not an inborn capacity, nor can it be learned by theoretical study. Becoming expedient demands experience; it means ongoing involvement in practical matters of decision-making under conditions of disagreement. Learning from others and following exemplary behavior is also important. This is, of course, all the more difficult in times and circumstances in which compromising, by many, seems to be taken as something inherently bad that must be avoided.

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