

## CONFERENCE

# COMPROMISE AND DISAGREEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

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### **“Compromise, Value Pluralism, and Democratic Liberalism: A Trilemma”**

Compromise, long recognized as part and parcel of politics, is back on the agenda of political theorists. Their interest in the topic may reflect the disillusionment about global and eternal liberal peace and the disappointment with ideal theory characterizing the beginning of our century. But recognizing the unavoidability of political compromise is not the same as giving a justification for it. What exactly makes compromises in democratic politics not only numerous and necessary but also rightful? One prominent answer to this question points not just to the contingent variety of moral positions in modern societies, but to the deep structures of morality *per se*. Several political theorists (notably Bellamy, but others, too) have argued that compromise is intrinsically linked to, and indeed justified by, value pluralism.

Value pluralism is a meta-ethical idea, promoted by Isaiah Berlin and by ‘neo-Berlinian’ liberals (Galston, Crowder, Bellamy) and not-so-liberal others (Gray, Kekes, Talisse). As of many philosophical ideas, there are thicker and thinner conceptualizations of value pluralism. Most comprehensively, it can be understood as a cumulative construct of five claims, stating that there is a plurality of different values, that are objective, inherently conflicting, even incommensurable, and that this demands trade-offs or other tragic choices. Now, what Bellamy *cum suis* argue is that the painful choices necessitated by value pluralism should, in liberal democratic politics, preferably be compromises. Other possibilities, such as trading, trimming, and segregating values, or radical decisionism, are not only less desirable, but also do less justice to the incompatibility and incommensurability of values. In short, value pluralism justifies compromises. This argument is widely accepted, but its cogency is questionable. My paper critically examines the relationship between value pluralism and compromise and concludes that it is neither intrinsic nor unproblematic. To make this argument, I first offer a careful reconstruction of the argument forging this relationship. Next, its problems are shown, particularly by focusing on the role of the assumption of the incommensurability: is compromise really possible if values are not just incompatible but ‘of different orders’ altogether? Broadening the discussion, I subsequently discuss the role played by (democratic) liberalism in many value pluralist defenses of compromise, because this appears in fact a much more important source of justification – albeit, I argue, a problematic one at that, too. Having thus (negatively) loosened the link between compromise on the one hand and value pluralism and democratic liberalism on the other, I argue (positively and more controversially) that political compromise is at least as compatible to and justifiable by certain kinds of value monism and non-liberalism. I conclude we are facing a trilemma: one cannot have compromise, value pluralism, and democratic liberalism simultaneously without inconsistency or without sacrificing at least one of them. Putting compromise high on our agenda thus reopens the debate on other widely shared assumptions as well.