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On compromise and rotten compromise. By Avishai Margalit. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2010. 232pp. Index. Hb.: £18.95. ISBN 978 0 691 13317 1.

In this work, philosopher Avishai Margalit pursues a simple argument: in general compromise for the sake of peace is a good thing, but we should not make rotten compromises that create or maintain an inhuman regime. This is an important topic and a promising place to start an examination of the moral issues involved in balancing the claims of peace and justice. Such questions are recurrent in world politics where the protection of human rights, the advent of international criminal trials, and changing norms of sovereignty and intervention push us to confront the dilemma of how far the pursuit of peace can be advanced at the cost of justice. While Margalit's book is timely and relevant, the intellectual payoff is limited. Pinpointing why it does not satisfy is not easy; it is engagingly written for a non-specialist audience, and Margalit consciously avoids abstract examples that can rob moral philosophy of practical impact. In the end, Margalit's analysis suffers from an overabundance of analytic distinctions that, while pursued with vigour, do not amount to a rigorous examination – this is not necessarily a bad thing, but the looseness and ambiguity it generates obscures rather than reveals.

The central distinction is between peace and justice, as Margalit argues that we should leave the greatest possible room for compromises in the name of peace. This is an essentially negative argument; he tries to identify those compromises that are disallowed, without suggesting that peace must always be pursued in favour of justice. Those compromises that are disallowed are *rotten compromises*, which he defines 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 human' (p. 2). This prohibition is based on the claim that such a regime undermines the shared humanity that is the basis of morality. While clearly inspired by Kantian morality, he further analyzes his injunction against rotten compromise in terms of a religious view of politics that supports a sacred understanding of the absolute principle against compromising with inhuman regimes. Along the way he contrasts each element: a religious versus economic view of politics, value based on scarcity or sacredness, absolute versus relative taboos, and the dichotomizing goes on. While some of these distinctions reveal important considerations – the tension within a religious view of politics, which allows us to rule out some compromises, but can also encourage the pursuit of justice at the price of peace – the extended argument does not really advance on the initial claim.

As we are introduced to examples of compromises intended to clarify the matter at hand the distinctions proliferate. The role of recognition, sacrifice, concession and coercion are introduced before Margalit examines the "Great Compromise" in the US Constitution protecting the slave trade. While he offers some interesting reflections, the analysis does not depend or build upon the concerns that precede it – instead we get a repeated injunction against undermining the possibility of morality. Further examples include the Yalta Conference, where Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to the transfer of Soviet war refugees to ensure their alliance with Stalin (a rotten compromise), and, the US and UK alliance with the USSR in WWII (which he argues was not a rotten compromise because Stalinism did not undermine the shared humanity necessary for morality, which Nazism did). Yet, however commendable

Margalit's use of historical examples may be, they only provide an ever-expanding analysis of the constituent parts of compromise, rather than a practical framework for evaluating current compromises.

Part of the difficulty arises from using historical examples with settled evaluations – World War II provides a plethora of extreme examples, but those examples underplay the ambiguity of judging when a compromise will lead to or maintain an inhuman regime in the present. It is disappointing that the analysis of rotten compromises is not conducted in the context of more contentious cases, which would go a long way to forcing us to put the myriad distinctions that Margalit draws to work. World politics provides numerous cases to examine, including the difficulty of establishing peace in Uganda between government and rebel forces, or the negotiations with Iran over nuclear weapons. Despite the limits of the study, Margalit does bring together the moral and political questions opened up by advocating compromises that may be justified without being fully just, which is an important advance and provides an opening for further consideration.

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