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ISRF Early Career Fellowship (ECF3)

Project: “Compromise with Character: An Integrated Framework to Assess the Moral Quality of Political Compromises”

Dates: January 2016 – June 2017

Final report

The project

The starting point of my project was the observed difficulty among academics (ethicists and political theorists) as well as practitioners (politicians, journalists, citizens) to conceive what ‘good compromise-making’ could be like. Particularly in times of polarization and populism, it seemed quite urgent, however, to get this more clear. So my goal was to develop an ethical framework that pays attention not only to the moral quality of compromises as outcomes, but also to the process of reaching them. To achieve this goal, I proposed a virtue-ethical approach to complement existing approaches, informed by the empirical study of concrete cases of actual compromise-making in Dutch national politics since 2002.

During the project, two things became clear very quickly. One is that, despite growing attention for (moral) compromise in contemporary political theory, the exact meaning of compromise and its relation to other concepts (such as bargains, modus vivendi arrangements, and democracy) remains contested. The other early finding was that, so far, the notions of compromise and virtue (ethics) have not been related to each other; virtue-ethical reflection on the topic is close to non-existent. So I realized that my project took place in a conceptual and moral minefield and that it proposed a direction into what is essentially *terra incognita*. Instead of scaring me off, these findings have energized me to make contributions on both sides. This means, however, that the empirical project will take longer than expected. Nonetheless, one particular case-study has been conducted, namely that of compromise-making by particularly ‘uncompromising’ (viz., orthodox Protestant) politicians in Dutch parliament.

The ISRF fellowship has enabled me to devote myself to studying the expanding literature on political and moral compromise and to participate in ongoing discussions about the topic in an international network of ‘compromise experts’. I have been able to share my developing thoughts on the subject with many academic colleagues, groups of students, and professionals in or close to political practice. Through these studies and conversations, I feel I am currently in the position to publish some of my major theoretical results and to shift considerable emphasis to the case-study research. A series of papers (detailed hereafter) and ultimately a monograph are planned to be published in the next few years.

Research activities

During the project period and after, I have mainly worked on four papers.

The first inquired whether arguments in favor of a ‘politics of compromise’ could be based on value pluralism, as argued by Richard Bellamy and others. My negative answer to this question was published as a chapter in an edited volume (Routledge).

The second paper is an exploration of concept of compromise itself. It offers a framework delineating its required elements and its conceptual limits. This paper has in part been published as an encyclopedia lemma (Springer) and it is currently elaborated into a full paper, to be submitted at a political theory journal.

The third and for me most important paper provides the outlines of a virtue-ethical approach towards (political) compromise. Developing such an approach was the express aim of the ISRF project. Drafts have been presented (Copenhagen, Braga, Lausanne) and a completed version will soon be submitted at a major ethics or political theory journal.

Finally, I have drafted a paper about the ways in which orthodox Protestant theological ethicists and politicians in the Netherlands interact in dealing with compromise in theory and practice. A short version of this particular case-study has already been published in a Dutch philosophy magazine; a full paper in English will be submitted to a political science journal.

Besides writing and presenting these papers, I have held interviews and talks about the practice of political compromise-making with (former) Dutch politicians and journalists. A student assistant has prepared several case-studies for further exploration. Two applications for follow-up research projects, one small and one very large, were unfortunately not successful, but I am confident I will find ways to continue my research on political compromise in the coming years.

Change of position

Just over half the project period, in September 2016, I switched jobs, moving from Leiden University to Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. This move has been beneficial for my career and development in many respects, but it meant that, due to my new responsibilities in teaching and coordination, I was unable to continue the project full-time. I am very grateful to ISRF for its cooperation in changing my contract and allowing me to do the remaining months part-time. Thanks to Stuart Wilson, in particular, the transition went very smoothly.

Outputs

Academic publications

- Overeem, P. (2018). Compromise, value pluralism, and democratic liberalism. In C. Rostbøll, & T. Scavenius (Eds.), *Compromise and Disagreement in Contemporary Political Theory* (pp. 115-129). Abingdon UK/New York: Routledge.
- Overeem, P. (2016). Compromise. In A. Farazmand (Ed.), *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance* Cham, CH: Springer. DOI: [10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_2773-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_2773-1)

Professional publications

- Overeem, P. (2017). Compromis en christelijke ethiek. *Sophie*, 7(2), 38-41.

Conference papers

- Overeem, P. (2018). *Compromise and virtue in democratic politics: A neo-Aristotelian view*. Paper presented at the workshop 'How do Compromise and Democracy Get Along?', April 26-27, Lausanne, Switzerland.

- Overeem, P. (2018). *Aristotle and good compromise-making*. Paper presented at the 'III Braga Colloquium in the History of Moral and Political Philosophy', February 1-2, Braga, Portugal.
- Overeem, P. (2017). *Bridge-building in stormy times: Restoring compromise in hyperdemocracy*. Paper presented at the conference 'Compromise and Representation', December 12-14, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Overeem, P. (2016). *Thou shalt not compromise: The interplay between orthodox Protestant theology and politics in The Netherlands*. Paper presented at the conference 'Putting Truth in the Second Place: On Compromise, Religion and Politics', December 6-7, Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Overeem, P. (2015). *Compromise, value pluralism, and democratic liberalism: A trilemma*. Paper presented at the conference 'Compromise and Disagreement', May 26-27, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Talks/lectures

- Overeem, P. (2018). *Compromise: A new theoretical framework*. Talk at the 'VU-EIPE research day', April 17, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- Overeem, P. (2016). *Giving in with integrity: Towards a virtue ethics of compromise*. Talk at the seminar 'Political Compromise' (other speaker: Richard Bellamy), May 12, Copenhagen, Denmark.