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Sensible Compromise as Political Resolution: Resolving Conflicts Beyond the Demand for Consensus

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ABSTRACT This study develops the concept of sensible compromise as a viable method of political resolution under conditions of diverse and conflicting interests. Sensibility enables conflicts to be resolved without appealing to either political moralism or purely conflictual accounts. Its normative force does not derive from moral principles but consists in constraints internal to political practice itself that govern viable ways of resolving conflicts. On this account, sensible compromise expresses a distinctively liberal mode of resolution and is examined in relation to other prominent liberal theories, particularly William Galston's comprehensive liberalism and John Rawls's political liberalism. By critically engaging these models, the paper argues that liberal values are neither exempt from the process of compromise nor grounded in a moral or consensual foundation, but are subject to minimal compromise, demonstrating that these values function as internal political elements that sustain political relations under disagreement.
KEYWORDS Sensible compromise; political resolution; liberal pluralism; political normativity; disagreement; political liberalism

RESUMO Este estudo desenvolve o conceito de compromisso sensato enquanto método viável de resolução política em condições de interesses diversos e conflituantes. O compromisso sensato permite resolver conflitos sem recorrer quer ao moralismo político, quer a conceções puramente conflituais. A sua força normativa não deriva de princípios morais, mas consiste em constrangimentos internos à própria prática política que regulam formas viáveis de resolução de conflitos. Segundo esta perspetiva, o compromisso sensato exprime um modo de resolução distintivamente liberal e é examinado em relação com outras teorias liberais proeminentes, em particular o liberalismo abrangente de William Galston e o liberalismo político de John Rawls. Ao envolver-se criticamente com estes modelos, o artigo argumenta que os valores liberais não estão isentos do processo de compromisso nem se fundam numa base moral ou consensual, mas estão sujeitos a um compromisso mínimo, demonstrando que estes valores funcionam como elementos políticos internos que sustentam as relações p
PALAVRAS-CHAVE Compromisso sensato; resolução política; pluralismo liberal; normatividade política; desacordo; liberalismo político

1. Introduction: Sensible Compromise and the Source of Its Normativity

What makes a compromise *sensible* in politics? This question invites us to reconsider the relation between conflict resolution and viable political relations under disagreement. Conflicts among diverse perspectives are a persistent feature of political relations, yet they rarely end in moral reconciliation. Their persistence, however, need not collapse into political antagonism. It is at this point that the notion of sensible compromise becomes necessary. It denotes a political form of resolution that allows disagreement to be sustained as part of ongoing political relations. It is "sensible" not because it constitutes a moral virtue, but because it operates as a political practice that keeps political engagement possible without collapsing into domination or exclusion. Sensibility thus becomes relevant when the task is to sustain political engagement effectively under conditions of disagreement, without relying on moral justification or reducing politics to mere stabilization.

Political normativity, as it takes shape within sensible compromise, does not derive from moral principles but consists in the constraints internal to political practice itself that govern viable ways of resolving conflicts. These constraints are not grounded in prior moral agreement, nor do they aim at producing consensus, but arise within practices that sustain political relations among agents who continue to disagree.

Sensibility positions liberal values as required conditions of political interaction, while leaving their interpretation and application open to disagreement (see Section 3). Certain familiar liberal values, such as freedom of political expression or personal autonomy, play a role here, yet not as prior moral imperatives but as conditions that keep the possibility of compromise open under disagreement. They are not exempt from political compromise; rather, their role as conditions of political interaction requires their revisability within political practice. In this sense, what matters is not the evaluation of outcomes, but the conditions under which parties can continue to participate as political agents. These conditions are not guaranteed, but maintained—or lost—within ongoing practice. Under conditions of sensibility, coercion does not disappear but becomes a less necessary mode of securing compliance. The point, however, is that the normativity of sensible compromise does not derive from coercion. The normative force of sensibility derives from this tension: coercion remains

possible, yet agents continue to engage as political actors, and the viability of political relations depends on sustaining them under disagreement.

In this paper, "moral" applies not to liberal ethical commitments, such as personal dignity and the recognition of both one's physical and symbolic wholeness, which are presupposed for political agency and interaction, but to evaluative stances that resist compromise through absolute moral conviction. The sensibility proposed here introduces a non-moral yet normative orientation that arises from the political conditions of agency and interaction rather than from moral justifications. In this sense, viable political resolutions denote not mere functionality but the capacity to sustain political relations under conditions that preserve political agency without appeal to comprehensive moral consensus. This conception departs from both moral theories of agreement and realist accounts of power relations.

Political compromise, as grasped in this paper, serves as a viable method for resolving conflicts when it conforms to the features outlined above. Sensible compromise identifies political resolutions that involve non-arbitrary trade-offs between operating values and ends. It provides criteria for assessing compromises as viable and, in this sense, as fair without appealing to moral frameworks. Section 3.1 examines the "Three-Fifths Compromise" as an example of this, while the concluding section analyzes the Good Friday Agreement as a positive example of sensibility in practice. These examples are not intended as empirical case studies but as a means of concretizing the idea of sensible compromise.

Developing the distinction between moral and political conceptions of compromise, the discussion elaborates on sensibility as a political approach that embraces diversity and seeks non-exclusionary forms of resolution. Through critical engagements with liberal theories, especially William Galston's liberal pluralism and John Rawls' political liberalism, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on how political resolutions can remain fair and viable without relying on moral consensus.

2. Political Sensibility and Fair Political Resolutions

This paper approaches conflict through political compromise, particularly sensible compromise. Here "conflict" refers to disagreements among various values and ends as they arise within political relations. When such disagreements are reduced to relations of power, a view central to hegemonic theories of politics, they are taken to culminate in agonistic politics (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1999, 2000, 2005). In this view, "the political" is understood as inherently agonistic, and attempts at consensus or compromise are regarded as undermining its very condition of possibility.

However, sensible compromise begins with accepting that even within agonistic conditions, reciprocal restraint is a political must. In this sense, compromise is not the negation of agonism but a political expression of sensibility that keeps asymmetrical relations viable and non-coercive without presupposing moral consensus. Other contemporary democratic theorists explore similar reconciliations between agonistic politics and forms of compromise, including what some label "agonistic compromise" (Dalaqua, 2019; Westphal, 2020). Seeking to resolve disagreements, parties must nevertheless engage in political action to convey their aims, which often results in the need for compromise. Thus, my account here does not contradict agonistic pluralism's commitment to conflict without exclusion; rather, it endorses a liberal normativity through its emphasis on freedom of expression and non-coercive asymmetry in action, proposing a normatively oriented conception of sensible compromise as a condition for seeking viable political resolutions.

Where conflicting goals cannot be fully reconciled, the only way to move forward (without suppressing diversity) is through compromise. In politics, parties can have one of two attitudes when approaching political conflicts: compromising or non-compromising. If they rigidly attach to principles and insist on fully realizing them, they simply fail to make compromises. Such strict adherence to fixed principles not only hinders political engagements but also fails to acknowledge the inherent pluralism of politics. In contrast, a compromising stance, which relies on adaptable values and ends rather than rigid principles, effectively captures this pluralism by positioning itself in relation to diverse per-

spectives. Walzer's idea of "critical engagement" exemplifies this stance, which critically evaluates traditional values' relations to modern values rather than categorically rejecting them (Walzer, 2015, p. 32). A different argument contrasts compromising and non-compromising political stances, focusing on how compromise operates within democratic deliberation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2010, pp. 1127–1128). A compromise, therefore, is politically valuable not because it resolves all conflicts, but because it preserves the conditions within which disagreement can continue without reducing political relations to domination or exclusion.

Compromise may be considered to involve rational elements, particularly when it is expected to harmonize parties' interests within a rational agreement. Related to this consideration, Martin Golding discusses two approaches to compromise. One approach is viewed negatively as "irrational" and morally questionable, while the other, more positive approach aims to achieve a rational agreement (Golding, 1979, p. 5). The former sees compromisers as lacking virtues such as strong will and honesty, thus tends to exclude compromise from the field of resolution. The latter emphasizes the "reasonable" aspect of compromise, suggesting a sense of "fairness" and, thus, a degree of sensibility. Golding notes that despite their contradictory positions towards compromise, both views criticize politicians for making compromises even though political compromise is part of their role (Golding, 1979, p. 5). Benditt exemplifies a moral outlook by referencing Martin Golding's view, which states that compromises are regarded as desirable if they satisfy, at least partially, the conditions of ethical validity, that is "moral legitimacy" (Benditt, 1979, p. 28). In other words, parties' interests are evaluated and ranked on a moral scale before being considered subject to compromise. The present analysis challenges this moral approach and evaluates politicians' role not in terms of moral or rational agreement but in terms of the political conditions under which their preferences can be held within ongoing disagreement. Preferences that rely on domination or the marginalization of other agents fail not because they lack moral legitimacy, but because they undermine political engagement. Accordingly, the significance of compromise does not stem from legitimacy or stability, but from what sustains political relations under disagreement, namely constraints internal to political practice as expressed through sensibility.

Abandoning a moral conception of legitimacy in the process of compromise may be objected to by arguing that if the moral characteristics are removed, only the stronger party benefits. However, the present analysis responds to these objections by arguing that moral components are not necessary for seeking fair political resolutions; moreover, to be political in the sense used throughout this study, they must be capable of functioning independently of moral characteristics. Thus, the notion of fairness in "fair political resolutions" is not to be evaluated within a moral framework, even though the opposite view is common. This moral interpretation is often grounded in consensual agreement and the pursuit of the common good, as seen in Gauthier's conception of compromise, which seeks to justify fairness as part of a moral agreement (Gauthier, 1986). For an alternative view, Wendt (2019) offers a defense of unfair compromises that do not rely on moral justification. Second, compromises can be beneficial and valuable, making them desirable for both stronger and weaker parties if made sensibly. In contrast, some accounts argue for moral limits on political compromise, especially in cases involving racial equality (May, 2018) or shape desirable compromises within norms such as reciprocity and consent, emphasizing moral justification (Rouméas, 2021). The conception of sensible compromise does not impose moral limits on political compromises, as it is already not "unguarded" while enabling politically viable and non-arbitrary resolutions. Regarding the possibility of achieving fair resolutions among diverse power relations, Wendt argues that there is no "conceptual necessity" for the stronger party to exploit their power, even in compromises made on non-moral grounds (Wendt, 2016, p. 18). He emphasizes that it is incorrect to assume that such exploitation is inevitable without moral restrictions; compromises cannot be conceptually bound by moral frameworks. Rather, he suggests that the limitations on exploitation arise "naturally" from the same moral norms that guide ordinary human action (Wendt, 2024, pp. 253–263).

If one seeks a safeguard against the stronger party that may exploit compromise outside a comprehensive moral framework, political sensibility offers an alternative. This alternative outlook does not rely on a fundamental moral conception of human action and treats any conceptual necessity, whether based on moral norms or evaluative ideals, as contingent. From this perspective, fair political resolutions become possible under pluralistic conditions, not because parties are morally

bound, but because they act within sensibility that keeps political association ongoing.

3. Liberal Values within Political Sensibility

This section clarifies how sensibility informs the role of liberal values, particularly political liberties, in the process of compromise. A compromise is sensible when it preserves the political conditions that make disagreement and political relations viable. Among these conditions, liberal values—particularly political liberties such as freedom of political expression and the basic rights that preserve personal dignity (Rawls, 1999, p. 53)—occupy an important place. These values function not as moral imperatives but as limits internal to political interaction. In this sense, sensibility requires treating such liberties as elements subject to minimal compromise within political relations, since they constitute the very conditions within which parties can continue to disagree and cooperate.

Freedom of political expression, among other liberal values, plays a typical role here because it directly enables the communicative space in which compromise becomes a viable form of political action. As Carens (1979, p. 125) similarly observes, while theoretical reasoning may seek certainty, political action often proceeds under conditions of uncertainty, where compromise becomes a workable political means of maintaining cooperation and decision-making. Freedom of political expression is an integral aspect of such uncertainty; if arbitrarily compromised when confronted with illiberal claims that seek to suppress it, the motivations for political engagement and dispute diminish. Liberal values therefore serve not as evaluative ideals but as political requirements for preserving viable disagreement and the possibility of compromise.

To elaborate on the idea of sensibly balancing liberal values with the practical concerns of political governance, an imagined policy example discussed by Gutmann and Thompson (2010, p. 1128) from Obama's 2008 campaign will be evaluated. While they argue that successful presidential campaigns in the U.S. may strategically resist compromise to appeal to voters, they also emphasize that effective governance requires a greater space for compromise. In the imagined scenario, Obama, despite his personal position, proposes a policy allowing for compromise on

federal subsidies for abortion coverage. This policy would permit states to block federal funding for insurance plans that cover abortion, while ensuring that federal and private funds are strictly separated to guarantee that only private funds are used for abortion services.

On one hand, the abortion policy example aims to balance opposing views by allowing local restrictions; on the other, it attempts to preserve individual liberty by maintaining access to abortion through private means. If, however, the policy makes abortion access unreasonably difficult (due to financial or logistical difficulties), it would fail the sensibility test because of unguardedly compromising individual liberty.

While abortion policy concerns individual rather than political liberties, it serves here as an illustrative case for understanding how political sensibility evaluates compromise in policy-making contexts: a non-arbitrary adjustment of competing claims without requiring moral agreement. Although compromise is related to political pluralism and diversity, the conception of non-arbitrary compromise developed here does not primarily refer to moral consensus or principled agreement. Rather, it points to a form of sensibility that positions liberal values within political practice without relying on shared moral grounds. In this sense, sensibility refers not just to balance, but to fairness as an effect of sustaining political relations under these conditions. This point becomes particularly significant in cases where a policy is widely considered morally wrong. The challenge here, then, is to offer a form of criticism that is not expressed in moralistic terms, but in terms that are publicly accessible and non-arbitrary, consistent with the diverse political interests involved in political resolution.

3.1. Evaluating the Three-Fifths Compromise as a Non-Moral Sensible Approach

Unlike morally prescriptive solutions, which can be less accommodating of compromises, sensible political compromises resolve conflicts in a viable manner by realizing multiple ends without relying on moral assumptions. However, compromise may still be permissible within a moral framework if the concept of morality is interpreted in a more flexible way. For instance, Benjamin (1990) argues that compromise does not inherently harm one's moral integrity. Similarly, Hoffmaster and Hooker (2017) propose a shift from a principle-based to a value-based approach

to morality, allowing for multiple and context-sensitive reasons in deliberation. They illustrate this approach with the example of women deliberating whether to have children with a probability of genetic conditions, where communicative reasoning facilitates compromise.

One may reasonably hold that even sensible compromises can be morally objectionable. In other words, a compromise may be politically viable, or, within the scope of this paper, sensible, yet still regarded as "morally wrong." This objection can be addressed by noting that political actions guided by sensibility, as defined here, operate within limiting conditions rather than moral imperatives. In this sense, sensibility transforms personal moral convictions into a political perspective in which parties act as political agents rather than moral judges when seeking resolution. Their consent to a compromise, therefore, reflects not moral endorsement but the effort to sustain political relations under disagreement, without which political agency itself cannot be maintained. In this respect, sensibility identifies criteria for politically viable—and in this sense fair—resolutions. To illustrate this, the "Three-Fifths Compromise" from U.S. history will be examined.

Made during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, the compromise specified that three out of every five enslaved individuals would be counted for the purposes of taxation and representation in Congress. This compromise was intended to resolve the conflict between Northern and Southern states on how the political influence of slaveholding populations should be determined. It gave Southern states more representation than if enslaved people had been entirely excluded, but less than if they had been fully counted.

From a moral standpoint, the Three-Fifths Compromise is clearly objectionable because it institutionalizes slavery. However, from a political point of view, such compromises may demonstrate practical efficiency. As Kateb (2006) points out, these constitutional compromises can be seen as "necessary" for forming a Union that included slave states, and, eventually, for enabling the abolition of slavery when the temporal conditions allowed it. A related but distinct view is offered by Lepora and Goodin (2013), who argue that political compromise must meet a minimal moral criterion, such as a "responsibility threshold," while acknowledging that even compromises made with wrongdoers may be justified if they bring about positive outcomes. Such justification, however, does not rest on a mere consequentialist outlook; instead,

the value of sensible compromise lies more in its capacity to encourage ongoing political interaction. This capacity serves as a minimal political condition under which fairness can emerge. Against the background of moral conceptions of compromise, sensible compromise emphasizes practically effective resolutions that are not in themselves sufficient to sustain fair political relations, without aiming for moral perfection, even though it upholds key considerations: although the practical efficiency of the Three-Fifths Compromise is noteworthy, it fails to meet these key considerations of sensibility, namely the conditions that sustain participation and ongoing engagement.

Practical efficiency alone is not a sufficient criterion to consider a compromise sensible. However, its insufficiency does not necessarily require appealing to a purely moral conception of compromise either. As I have argued, political compromises, while not always morally ideal, can still achieve normatively valid resolutions without relying on coercion and thus qualify as sensible, provided that this non-coercion includes recognizing everyone's capacity for political action within a conception of sensibility that facilitates plural political relations. In the case of the Three-Fifths Compromise, however, the exclusion of enslaved individuals from participation in political practice as agents indicates that it failed to sustain the conditions necessary for political agency and thus ceased to be politically sensible.

Additionally, Southern states' rigid opposition to the abolition of slavery reflects a subjective stance because it is driven primarily by economic interest. A sensible resolution cannot be subjective when it comes to realizing diverse political ends, thus it must go beyond a narrow focus on economic concerns. Furthermore, by prioritizing specific economic interests and stability over broader concerns of political participation, the Three-Fifths Compromise undermined the conditions required to sustain such participation as a relation among agents. This prioritization indicates that while compromises like the Three-Fifths Compromise can be practically beneficial for a short while, they often fail to contribute to viable political resolutions if they neglect the plurality of competing ends and perspectives involved.

Although not discussed in detail here, I have elsewhere discussed how arbitrary compromises, such as those prioritizing short-term goals over pluralistic liberal values, lead to non-viable resolutions, which is exemplified by the Munich Agreement of 1938. A well-known defense of

moral limitations in political compromise is offered by Margalit (2010), who argues against what he calls "rotten compromises." However, as demonstrated by the evaluation of the "Three-Fifths Compromise" through the lens of sensible compromise, this criticism is not always warranted. The political approach I present here captures the complex role of the "Three-Fifths Compromise" in conflict resolution more widely than moral approaches can: it neither denounces this role altogether nor overlooks its failure to provide enduring political outcomes.

To summarize, the distinction between moral and sensible approaches is important because moral approaches often criticize non-moral (political) frameworks, arguing that they may allow for unfair and unintended outcomes. In this respect, the political approach I propose offers advantages over moral frameworks. Concerning political resolution, each claim is treated as a political one, meaning that it is open to compromise and shaped through engagement with competing claims. This openness expands the possibility of sustaining political relations under disagreement within a normatively oriented conception. Addressing conflicts between diverse interests and ends in political terms is thus promising, not only because it encourages meaningful engagement but also because it facilitates the use of sensible compromises, which moral frameworks alone cannot evaluate or implement.

Moreover, moral approaches fall short in capturing the nature of political action. Political actions are guided by a variety of political considerations rather than dictated by moral reasoning. Despite their strategic characteristics, political actions must still aim for sensible resolutions to remain viable. Sensible compromises, unlike unguarded ones, fulfill this condition by resolving conflicts in a politically viable, pluralistic, and fair manner without relying on moral concepts.

4. Sensible Compromise in Liberalism and Comparative Critique

As this paper primarily concerns conflict resolution in a politically viable manner, its method of sensible compromise is not derived from arguments found in traditional liberal thought, nor from the recent liberal theories linking pluralism and compromise. Yet, its application unfolds within the liberal framework insofar as it treats liberal values

as enabling practical requirements for fair political resolutions—rather than as moral or foundational principles, as discussed earlier. In this matter, two illustrative liberal views that have shaped contemporary understandings of pluralism will be the focus of this section: William Galston's comprehensive liberalism and John Rawls's political liberalism. Both address the challenge of political normativity within pluralism, yet they do so by grounding it in moral or consensual premises that sensibility deliberately avoids. The following sections examine how Galston's and Rawls's frameworks include or exclude these features of sensibility, clarifying where political sensibility converges or diverges from their models.

4.1. William Galston's Liberal Pluralism and the Comprehensive-Political Distinction

Political compromises are integral to various liberal approaches that seek to realize certain liberal values, particularly those promoting diversity. William Galston (2002, p.20) argues for liberal pluralism that aims to accommodate diverse forms of "the good" as extensively as possible. Within this conception of liberalism, accommodating diversity necessitates a strict adherence to core liberal values, such as the liberty to choose or, as Galston conceives it, "expressive liberty."

Galston endorses expressive liberty as the core value of a liberal society, though he acknowledges that it is not boundless. He argues that citizens can realize this value only if they respect others' ability to exercise it without imposing unnecessary restrictions (Galston, 2002, p.102). This implies that sensible compromises on expressive liberty are possible, provided that they do not undermine its critical role in supporting diversity (e.g., the freedom of parents to raise their children according to their chosen values). To this extent, Galston's liberal framework appears to support expressive liberty primarily for its practical role. However, he also prioritizes expressive liberty within a comprehensive liberal account to preserve diversity: Galston endorses expressive liberty as a principle of "maximum feasible accommodation of diverse legitimate ways of life" to limit the state's interference (Galston, 2002, p.119). This endorsement also brings another liberal value, namely tolerance, into cooperation with expressive liberty as two fundamental principles in a

diverse society. In other words, expressive liberty is not defended solely for its practical role but also for its intrinsic moral significance.

This comprehensive foundation of Galston's liberalism leads to an important implication: certain values protecting diverse conceptions of "the good" and human dignity cannot be defended as compelling principles without relying on a moral premise. Galston's liberal pluralist framework is grounded in value pluralism, an ethical stance that holds, against monism, that values are plural and irreducible to any single fundamental value (Galston, 2002, pp. 8–9). On this stance, his liberalism allows for compromises, so long as they do not only conform closely to fundamental liberal values but also support a comprehensive pluralist approach that prioritizes them. For instance, Galston claims that both individual liberty and negative liberty, as fundamental values, require an ethical claim like value pluralism. He thus bridges value pluralism and the prioritization of liberal values through a comprehensive liberal framework, which prioritizes expressive liberty and toleration to achieve maximal accommodation of diversity. This framework only permits limited compromises and constrains practical resolutions through a normative foundation grounded in value pluralism.

In contrast, the liberal account developed here does not rest on a moral premise and does not define a comprehensive priority of values, though it does not endorse an arbitrary conception of political compromise. It instead emphasizes political compromise over toleration as the key political instrument for accommodating diversity and resolving conflicts in a politically viable way, so long as it is pursued sensibly. As Rostbøll (2018) observes, while toleration is often extolled as a foundational liberal ideal, compromise is typically regarded as a pragmatic necessity. In this regard, the criterion for comparing compromise to toleration lies in its active mode of political engagement, which goes beyond accounts of toleration that reduce it to mere non-interference or fail to engage with the persistence of disagreement. Properly understood, toleration does not amount to indifference but involves the continued disapproval of its object. The contrast developed here does not deny this, but emphasizes that compromise involves a different mode of engagement, one that actively shapes how disagreement is maintained as a political relation, rather than merely enduring it. Therefore, although both address political disagreement, their aims and normative roles differ significantly. When compared to toleration's status as

a foundational liberal ideal, sensible compromise emphasizes the conditions of political engagement that enable the inclusion of diverse values in political processes, provided that compromises on core liberal values remain minimal. This distinction highlights a significant nuance between comprehensive liberalism and the political approach presented here toward liberal values.

4.2. Rawlsian Political Liberalism and the Critique of Consensual Conceptions

Rawlsian political liberalism comes close to embracing sensible compromise but is limited by its specific political conception of diversity, namely "reasonable pluralism," and its emphasis on achieving an "overlapping consensus." Rawls (1996) argues that a consensual ground is necessary for establishing the foundational institutions of a just liberal society. These foundational institutions include constitutional essentials and political rights that are compatible with what he calls "the fact of pluralism" and "free public reason" (Rawls, 1987, pp. 19–20). He asserts that this foundational structure should not be derived from a single comprehensive doctrine or a metaphysical background but achieved through public consensus; otherwise, the diverse reasons of democratic citizens cannot lead to agreement. This position is further elaborated in one of his later essays, where Rawls reaffirms that reasonable pluralism sets the limit for acceptable political justification (Rawls, 1997, p. 766).

This public consensus requires citizens to affirm principles of justice through diverse reasons they can reasonably justify, while also acknowledging the reasons of others within a reciprocal political environment. Accordingly, the Rawlsian framework accepts such diversity insofar as it remains compatible with "reasonable pluralism," and within a consensual model that allows for pluralistic resolutions, except when deliberation concerns constitutional essentials. In this sense, reasonable citizens can deliberate and compromise on most policies, as long as they agree on foundational principles.

One aspect of Rawls's notion of reasonableness pertains to the responsibilities of reasonable persons, particularly in conveying their reasons for justifying their conceptions of "the good," as well as in evaluating one another's reasons (Rawls, 1996, pp. 54-58). Another aspect relates to the goal of fair cooperation among reasonable citizens who

accept coercive state power only insofar as it can be publicly justified, suggesting that diverse comprehensive views cannot be reduced to or repressed by a single doctrine (Rawls, 1996, p. 61). Taken together, these aspects seem to represent a pluralistic conception of the political sphere. However, whether Rawls's notion of "reasonable pluralism" genuinely accommodates diversity remains debatable. In this regard, I will examine Rawls's political liberalism on two points: first, although Rawlsian political liberalism thoroughly captures the features of a pluralistic society comprising various conflicting political conceptions, its capability to accommodate such variety in political practice remains limited. Second, a sensible approach can be preferable to Rawlsian consensual liberalism because it better captures the role of compromise in conflict resolution. The first point addresses the limitations of "reasonable pluralism," while the second critiques Rawls's notion of "overlapping consensus."

First, "reasonable pluralism" may limit the variety and efficiency of political reasoning. According to Weinstock (2017, p. 6), this limitation arises from a "vicious circularity," in which the reasonableness of conceptions of "the good" is determined by the principles of justice, which, in turn, are justified by the reasonableness of these conceptions. To address this problem, Weinstock proposes a deliberative model of compromise that avoids both moral consensus and mere power balancing by emphasizing democratic procedures such as voting (Weinstock, 2006, p. 246; 2017, p. 8). However, in another deliberative approach, the distinction between deliberation and compromise is drawn so sharply that it leaves little room for compromise: deliberation seeks consensual collective decisions, while compromise relies on temporary, diverse conditions and accommodates parties' interests without reaching consensus (O'Flynn & Setälä, 2020). When deliberation is defined too sharply against compromise, the latter loses its practical space. While Weinstock searches for an alternative model that avoids the limitations of political liberalism (and Rawlsian reasonableness), most deliberative conceptions of compromise tend to demand either agreement at the expense of genuine pluralistic disagreement or rely on already settled political institutions rather than treating them as open to ongoing compromise.

Despite the limitations of a uniform conception of public reason, Bohman (1995, pp. 255–256, p. 263) offers a pluralistic political liberalism in which political unity does not necessitate a single public reason. He links deep conflict to the difficulty of applying compromise and pro-

poses a form of non-consensual public deliberation aimed at moral compromise without full consensus (pp. 269–270). Yet this approach, even if not in the Rawlsian sense, risks reintroducing consensus as a repetition of a consensual framework within moral reasoning, thus blurs the distinction between consensus and moral compromise.

In contrast, a sensible political notion of compromise offers an alternative to both Rawlsian reasonableness and Bohman's moral compromise. As discussed in Section 3, this approach resolves conflicts without appealing to principled reasonableness or moralized deliberation. Whereas Habermas and, to some extent, Rawls emphasize the moral dimension of deliberative reasoning (Baynes, 2010, pp. 149–151), sensible compromise maintains a political, non-moral and non-consensual form of resolution. Liberal theorists following Rawls, such as Gutmann and Thompson, develop the notion of "reasonableness" as compatible with pluralism, thereby better suited to accommodating diversity in the political sphere (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). However, narrow conceptions of deliberative democracy, particularly in Rawls's and Cohen's accounts of "reasonableness" and reasonable consensus, have been criticized. Christiano (2009) offers a compelling defense of a broader conception of deliberative democracy that better accommodates disagreement.

Second, the limitations linked to reasonable pluralism extend to Rawls's notion of "overlapping consensus." Rawls uses this concept to secure a political conception of justice and to legitimize state power (Rawls, 1985; Weithman, 2010). However, two major difficulties arise. First, as Christiano (2009, pp. 30–33) argues, achieving an adequate consensus in a pluralistic society may be unattainable. Thus, the workability of reasonableness and the practical guidance of reasonable principles become deeply problematic. Second, as Abbey and Spinner-Halev (2012, pp. 125, 134) argue, Rawls's attempt to separate political from comprehensive liberalism is only partly successful, because of assigning the state a more demanding and comprehensive role than intended. This distinction becomes clearer when liberalism is conceived as a political framework grounded in the conditions of political practice that avoids reliance on moral justification and does not require consensual endorsement. Moreover, prioritizing consensus over compromise not only fails to accommodate and encourage diverse political conditions, but also undermines the ongoing practice of compromise, thus narrowing the space for future political compromises.

While Rawlsian consensus is required only within the public political sphere among representatives, reasonable citizens may compromise on any issue outside constitutional essentials. However, as argued here, restricting consensus-based reasoning to these essentials does not genuinely accommodate political pluralism. At the same time, a consistent yet entirely unguarded form of pluralism is not normatively desirable if the conditions for sustaining political agency are to be maintained. Thus, a more flexible conception is needed, which does not depart from political liberalism but critically reflects on the Rawlsian account of consensus. This conception enables minimal, functionally indispensable, and politically grounded compromises on liberal principles, treating them not as moral absolutes, but as politically necessary and adaptable requirements for political resolution. Unlike Rawls's overlapping consensus, which confines justification to consensus on constitutional essentials and excludes compromise from the justificatory domain, this approach allows for minimal but politically necessary compromises on liberal principles.

Sensible compromise also avoids reliance on mere power relations, a problem that Rawls highlights when rejecting peace derived from modus vivendi arrangements (Rawls, 1996). However, peace is expected to emerge through various forms of compromise. One example is Wendt's (2013) idea of "a compromise on non-violent coexistence." Yet, sensibility is not confined to these general conceptions. While Wendt (2013) brings together different conceptions of justice under an "ideal of peace," sensibility avoids ideals. It concerns only compromises that are sustainable in practice: it does not reduce diversity in favor of the stronger party's demands, and it avoids arbitrariness by recognizing liberal values and rights as enabling conditions for political interaction.

At this point, I should clarify one more issue to avoid potential misinterpretations. As Weinstock notes, there is a concern regarding circularity in Rawls's view. However, this may not be a significant problem, given Rawls's deliberate attempt to avoid grounding liberalism in metaphysical foundations and his freestanding political conception of justice. The absence of external justification may indeed create a form of circularity, one that also applies to sensible compromise. However, if this circularity does not hinder practical political resolutions, it does not necessarily constitute a problem. Any justification beyond the political sphere remains outside the scope of political compromise and is

therefore irrelevant to conflict resolution. My primary concern with Rawls's political liberalism is not its rejection of non-political justification, which is indeed a strength, but rather its commitment to a consensual approach within liberal democracies. This commitment narrows the space of compromise by prioritizing predefined liberal principles over open-ended political engagement.

Rawls's notion of reasonable pluralism limits the deliberative aspect of "the political" to the establishment of principles for a liberal democratic order; once determined, these principles define the limits of possible compromises. From the standpoint of sensibility, this conception is overly restrictive not because of its already well-known criticisms, but because it contradicts the sensible political logic this paper adopts: sensibility expands the justificatory scope of political liberalism without abandoning normativity; it preserves a standard of justification internal to political practice rather than external or predefined consensual elements.

5. Minimal Compromise on Liberal Values and the GFA as Sensible Political Resolution

Political sensibility, as discussed in Section 3, treats liberal values as conditions for the functioning of political relations rather than merely as liberal ideals. In this respect, liberal values such as intellectual autonomy are subject to minimal compromise insofar as they enable political agency and the possibility of meaningful interaction among diverse actors. Thus, their compromisability reflects a form of political rationality rather than an ethical anomaly. This view may share a practical insight with realist thinkers (such as Rossi & Sleat, 2014, p. 690), who acknowledge that politics may involve limited coercion under certain conditions, but it preserves a distinct form of normativity grounded in constraints that govern how disagreement is maintained, rather than in ethical foundations. These constraints cannot be reduced to stability alone, since forms of stability based on domination or exclusion erode the reciprocal conditions that make continued political engagement possible.

Without recognizing why liberal values are subject to minimal compromise, political actors cannot engage meaningfully in the practical

aspect of normativity. While this view shares with Alcázar's (2017, p. 741) political minimalism an emphasis on the primacy of political normativity, it departs from it by rejecting the moral standpoint as a parallel evaluative framework. This understanding of minimal compromise can be illustrated through a contemporary example that demonstrates politically viable resolution without moral consensus: the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

The Good Friday Agreement (GFA), reached between Northern Ireland's political parties (a multi-party agreement) and the British and Irish governments in 1998, exemplifies the successful application of sensible compromise, particularly in its approach to political conflict.

First, the agreement addressed long-standing political conflicts by recognizing Northern Ireland's diverse society and providing a foundation for today's workable political structure in terms of peace and cooperation. The GFA upheld a broad political framework within which Northern Ireland kept control over its internal affairs while maintaining relations with the British government on key matters.

Second, the GFA embodied the concept of sensible compromise by focusing on effective political resolutions rather than moral absolutes. The GFA realized reciprocal respect among different communities, recognizing their unique identities, and promoting political coexistence. It succeeded not by imposing a moral absolute but by relying on a pluralistic condition to facilitate cooperation between diverse religious and cultural communities.

Third, and most notably, the GFA treated liberal values as guiding principles rather than applying them within a predetermined comprehensive framework. For example, the agreement allowed a shift from a centralized government to a more locally controlled region, which required certain compromises on the part of the British government. This was a politically grounded and practically oriented way of resolving conflict while respecting the principle of autonomy in its political form. The minimal compromise of autonomy in this political sense also enhanced diverse engagement and agency by enabling more sustainable political resolutions. Thus, this example illustrates the nuanced dimension of sensible compromise compared to comprehensive moral approaches while sustaining political relations under disagreement and shows how sensibility retains a normative core not by appealing to moral consensus, but by preserving the conditions of continued political agency.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that sensible compromise offers a distinct and politically grounded alternative to both moralist and delimiting consensual approaches to conflict resolution. In this respect, it reconsiders political liberalism's relation to compromise: liberal values are not exempt from the process of compromise but are subject to minimal compromise in order to maintain the politically enabling conditions of diverse engagement and agency. In a world where the erosion of diversity threatens not only different expressions and ways of life but also the very conditions for sustaining political relations, it becomes crucial to implement policies that facilitate sensible compromise. Such policies are not only more politically workable than moralist approaches but also serve as viable means of resolution that sustain the very conditions of political agency.

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