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Splitting the Difference: Compromise and Integrity in Ethics and Politics

Martin Benjamin

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Politics is often characterized as the "art of compromise"—the implication being that compromise is desirable and that insight, imagination, discipline, and skill are all necessary for a satisfactory and successful compromise. Compromise in ethics, however, is quite another matter: there, it is usually regarded as a sign of weakness or lack of integrity. From Socrates and Sir Thomas More to Gandhi, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Martin Luther King, Jr., we revere these men and women not only for the nature of their convictions but also for their unwavering refusal to compromise.

Does this point to an important difference between politics and ethics? Martin Benjamin here explores, in the first book-length treatment, the surprisingly rich and complex notion of compromise and integrity in ethics and politics. With wide-ranging examples drawn from Tolstoy to Ralph Nader and from a variety of medical and bioethical cases Benjamin presents in a clear, straightforward fashion an examination of the interplay between compromise and integrity.

In the process, Benjamin tackles tough questions—the relationship between practical and theoretical ethics, what compromise means for ethical theory, how moral judgments affect compromise, and whether it is possible to compromise without being compromised. In the final chapter Benjamin explores the possibility of political compromise in a matter of great ethical significance—abortion.

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