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Commentary on: Philip Rose's "Compromise as deep virtue: Evolution and some limits of argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his paper "compromise as deep virtue: Evolution and some limits of argumentation," Dr. Rose contends that it is conceivable that geographically isolated communities of intelligent beings, exposed to divergent sets of environmental circumstances, could evolve argumentation schemes (presumably including moral argumentation schemes) that are incommensurable or incompatible. In this case, should representatives of these evolutionarily distinct populations come into conflict, it is supposed that a radical impasse might well be met—an impasse beyond which no further progress towards a resolution of the conflict is forthcoming by means of rational argumentation. And when reason no longer works as an effective method of resolving differences, parties may resort to physical force in order to settle their differences.

Rose suggests that should such an impasse be peaceably and reasonably breached, it would require that both parties to the disagreement exhibit the virtue of compromise, a virtue that is "deep" in the sense that it has an old evolutionary history, but more importantly, that its history is extensive—that is, that "the same function can be found within a wide range of peoples and places." The suggestion is that "compromise is a deep virtue that may well be coextensive with the conditions for the possibility of argumentation in general."

In order to provide an example that fits Rose's schema, if you'll indulge me, I'm going to use an example of argumentation from an episode of *Star Trek: TNG*, "Half a Life."

2. HALF A LIFE

The setting is starship *Enterprise*, whose crew has taken aboard one Dr. Timicin, a physicist from the planet Kaelon II. He has a plan to revitalize the dying sun at the center of his imperiled planet's solar system. Now, the Kaelon people are highly xenophobic and have very little contact with other intelligent civilizations. This isolation ensures that the Kaelons represent an evolutionarily divergent population, both biologically and culturally. As one might predict, they speak perfect English! (This feature of the example actually obscures a potential objection to Rose's position, for one could argue that incommensurability or incompatibility of

argumentation schemes between two isolated communities could well be a specific consequence of a basic language barrier.)

Timicin's plan is to configure the *Enterprise's* photon torpedoes to deliver a payload to the center of the sun, catalyzing increased nuclear fusion. The crew find an uninhabited solar system with a similar dying sun and conduct an experimental test of Dr. Timicin's theory to determine whether the method should work to restore the Kaelon sun. While initially promising results are obtained, the sun becomes unstable and detonates.

Meanwhile, Lwaxana Troi (Deanna Troi's mother) who coincidentally is also on board, takes a liking to Dr. Timicin. During one of their conversations, Timicin reveals that he will shortly be returning to his home planet to commit a ritual suicide called the "Resolution." The Resolution is performed by everyone from the planet at the age of 60, and alas, Dr. Timicin is quickly approaching that age. Now, this scientist has spent decades of research on solar rejuvenation physics and may be the only scientist on the planet with the skills, knowledge and intuition to devise a successful method for preventing the extinction of the Kaelon people. If he goes through with the Resolution, the planet's best hope for their future will be lost.

None of this escapes Mrs. Troi, who is incensed by this "barbaric" ritual, and attempts to argue Dr. Timicin out of his position on the necessity of his suicide. She argues that life may well have value for those over 60 years of age in general, and objects to the arbitrary nature of this number. She argues the point that should Timicin die, the future of the whole Kaelon II population is placed in jeopardy. Further, she argues that positive social change is possible if one courageous individual stands up for their beliefs and sets an example for others.

After reanalysing the data from the last test, and seeing a glimmer of hope for a viable solution to the solar reinvigoration problem, Timicin realizes Lwaxana may be correct—and requests asylum aboard the *Enterprise*, where he could continue his work to the save his civilization. At this point, Timicin has come to critically question the social norm of his world, under the influence of a foreign value system. This is a novel condition that has the seeds of a transformation of argumentative context for him.

Of course, the bureaucrats of Kaelon II are "deaf dogmatists" who will have none of this pernicious arrogance. They deploy their own space ships to challenge the *Enterprise*, threatening to fire upon it if it attempts to leave with Timicin.

In this example, we have two civilizations (the United Federation of Planets and Kaelon) who evolved radically different cultural notions of the value of life, the treatment of the elderly, and exhibit at least incompatible, if not incommensurable, value systems. As a result, the standards of cogency of moral argumentation are incompatible.

3. THE SUBOPTIMALITY OF ONE-SIDED COMPROMISES

At this point, we seem to have an impasse. The bureaucrats are unwilling to compromise, and they threaten physical violence rather than listen to reason. Indeed, they are so unreasonable that even if Timicin discovers a method to save his home world from certain doom, Kaelon will forbid its implementation. At this point,

Timicin realizes his resistance is pointless, and, incidentally, after listening to an argument from emotion from his daughter, he decides to play the “concessionaire” and go through with the Resolution.

So we *do* have compromise. Unfortunately, the compromise is asymmetrical: Timicin compromises, but the Science Minister does not—he resorts to *argumentum ad baculum*. So in the story, this one-sided compromise fails to yield the first of four advantages that Rose enumerates in his paper, owing to the lack of mutual agreement.

The unwillingness to compromise on the part of the bureaucracy, that is, their unwillingness to allow Timicin to continue his work, is shown to be maladaptive in the most extreme way possible—it dooms a planet’s sentient life forms to mass extinction. Wouldn’t it be better to have methods of conflict resolution that served to minimize disadvantageous outcomes, especially those involving plainly existential risks?

Consider if, instead, it was Timicin who didn’t compromise. Suppose he and the *Enterprise* eluded the Kaelon warships, successfully tested a solar rejuvenation technology, and then surreptitiously returned to Kaelon and deployed the photon torpedoes, restoring the Kaelon sun to health and saving his civilization, along with its ungrateful bureaucracy and one ashamed daughter. I would consider this a virtuous act, indeed, a heroic one. This is a context in which it is evidently the case that, as the saying goes, no good deed goes unpunished.

Again, the asymmetry of the compromise yields a suboptimal outcome. Rose is correct to insist that the minimization of disadvantageous outcomes requires that the compromise be mutually agreed upon.

In cases where there is a radical argumentative impasse, and one side or the other does not accommodate their opponent’s standpoint at all, a suboptimal outcome is unavoidable. Mutual compromise shows a way to dissolution of the immediate nexus of disagreement.

4. BENEFITS OF MUTUAL COMPROMISE

In section 4 of his paper, Rose lists four advantages of compromise. We’ve discussed advantage #1 already. Let’s take a “counterfactual” look at some potential compromises that could have yielded the other benefits Rose proposes.

Suppose, for example, that, after hearing the counterconsiderations, and adopting the Peircean principle of reasonableness, the Kaelon powers-that-be granted Dr. Timicin an additional five years to continue his work, on the condition that he return to his home world to undergo the Resolution at the end of his extension. This compromise would not concede the fundamental principle of the Resolution, only the details of its implementation. Likewise, Dr. Timicin’s acceptance of the cultural tradition of his people, while rejecting the arbitrariness of the extant age of demise, is a compromise that could well serve to help propagate some flexibility of the conditions under which the Resolution would thereafter be conducted within the Kaelon culture. In this case, gains and concessions apply to each party reciprocally, so this resolution can be construed as equitable. In other

words, the proposed compromise yields benefit #2 of the four benefits that Rose lists.

Should the Kaelon government compromise thus, it would demonstrate recognition of the unique value of Timicin's life and his right to seek an exemption from the otherwise strict rules governing the Resolution, and it may help to open the door to reasonable accommodations in similar circumstances. In other words, the proposed compromise yields benefit #3. And lastly, the compromise makes it more likely that the agreement could be renegotiated to cover, say, an additional five years in the case that Timicin's research fails to bear fruit during the first five year extension—thereby minimizing Timicin's risk of a premature demise, and the demise of his civilization. In other words, the proposed compromise would yield benefit #4, that of minimizing existential risk.

5. CONCLUSION

The *Star Trek* episode "Half a Life" supports Rose's contention that reasonableness is a transcendental condition for the possibility of argumentation in general. Why? This is so, because (assuming communication is possible between logical species) the willingness to resolve impasses by means of making concessions to one's starting position could be a manifestly life-affirming disposition, especially in the context of diplomacy or other type of negotiation.

Admittedly, this science fiction example is nothing more than a thought experiment to navigate the contours of Rose's proposal in the context of a merely conceivable state of affairs.

Perhaps if I were an anthropologist, I could provide a narrative related to a real concrete case involving the inhabitants of some more familiar planet. To this writer, at any rate, Rose's proposal might be more compelling if we could point to actual terrestrial examples of scenarios bearing some features of the types of interpretive and argumentative impasses Rose envisions.