

## Interview: The Political Philosophy of Avishai Margalit

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**Fiph:** Professor Margalit, your books „The Decent Society“ and „On Compromise and Rotten Compromises“ have made you a well-known author in Germany beyond academia. Both books are distinguished because they are not written from a detached point of view. Your acute analysis is weaved with and interrupted by history and stories. Are narrative elements an important part of your philosophy?

I make a distinction between two types of philosophers: explicators and illuminators; those who appeal to definitions and those who appeal to examples, between; i.e. – philosophers and e.g. – philosophers. I regard myself as an e.g.-philosopher. This is a matter of temperament rather than a matter of doctrine. I am a story teller and not a system builder. I do however have a strong preference for historical examples over stylized fictional examples, but I find myself using both.



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**Fiph:** Your works show some discontent with the philosophical discourse on justice. You do not write about the “just” but about the “decent” society, not about just war or peace, respectively, but about “compromise and rotten compromises”. What is your point against the debates on justice?

I draw a distinction between the normative and the prescriptive, between doing the best and doing better. Between a normative ideal theory which tell us what is the best, say, a just society, and a prescriptive theory which tells us how to do better, say, a decent society. Both accounts are needed. But here again, by temperament rather than by doctrine, I opt for a perspective, second best theory, rather than for a normative ideal theory.

**Fiph:** What makes the difference between a rotten compromise and one that is morally or politically acceptable?

A political rotten compromise is a deal that helps establish or maintain an inhuman regime: a regime which combines cruelty and humiliation. This is a compromise that we should morally avoid at all costs. Other kinds of compromises should be evaluated on the merit. On the whole there is a great merit in the very idea of compromise.

**Fiph:** You point out, that it is a mistake, only to ask for the conditions of just war but not for the conditions of just peace. Yet, you are also critical of the idea of just peace in itself. What is problematic with this conception?

I am not against just peace. I am against the idea that peace is just in and of itself. For example the peace between Sweden and Nazi Germany during the Second World War doesn't strike me as a just peace; Sweden can be excused for its peace but cannot be justified.

**Fiph:** Are religions rather a driving force for or a threat to the politics of compromise?

It is an empirical question and I don't know the general answer. There are some elements in the historical religions that seem to make them less amenable for compromise: absolutist notion of the holy which by definition is the thing the religion cannot compromise on. But at the end of the

day your question should be answered not on a-priori ground but empirically: we need statisticians not sages to answer this question.

**Fiph:** How should, in your opinion, a future political philosophy look like?

The political unit that was at the focus of modern political philosophy so far is the nation state. I am pretty sure that with globalization the unit for discussion will become more and more problematic. I still believe that in the foreseeable future the world will be an international world (a world of nation states) and not a cosmopolitan world. But the role of organizations “without borders” will become more and more important. Political philosophy should take it into account.

*The interview was conducted by Eike Bohlken and Jürgen Manemann, Research Institute for Philosophy, Hannover*