

II — RUTH CHANG

REFLECTIONS ON THE REASONABLE AND THE RATIONAL IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Most familiar approaches to social conflict moot *reasonable* ways of dealing with conflict, ways that aim to serve values such as legitimacy, justice, morality, fairness, fidelity to individual preferences, and so on. In this paper, I explore an alternative approach to social conflict that contrasts with the leading approaches of Rawlsians, perfectionists, and social choice theorists. The proposed approach takes intrinsic features of the conflict—what I call a conflict’s evaluative ‘structure’—as grounds for a *rational* way of responding to that conflict. Like conflict within a single person, social conflict can have a distinctive evaluative structure that supports certain rational responses over others. I suggest that one common structure in both intra- and interpersonal cases of conflict supports the rational response of ‘self-governance’. Self-governance in the case of social conflict involves a society’s deliberating over the question, ‘What kind of society should we be?’ In liberal democracies, this rational response is also a reasonable one.

What is a *reasonable* way to deal with practical conflict over political matters in a liberal democracy? Suppose that some citizens think that the government should provide health care coverage to all as a matter of right, while others think that health care is a commodity to be bought and sold according to market forces. Or that some members of the polity strongly believe that the nation has a moral duty to intervene in bloody civil wars in faraway lands, while others are certain that overseas interventionism is imperialistic. Or that some insist that everyone should be atheist while others are adamant that there should be state-sponsored support for every religion. How in general can such conflicts be reasonably resolved?

There are, broadly speaking, three kinds of answer to this question. Rawls famously argued, at least for conflicts over the basic institutional framework of society, that a reasonable way of dealing with such practical conflict is to sidestep individuals’ most deeply held moral and religious views and instead to attempt to achieve an

overlapping consensus on a set of general principles supported by reasons that everyone can share. It is in light of these very general principles, supported by reasons which no one can reasonably reject, that practical conflict is to be resolved. Resolution of conflict by principles that no one can reasonably reject is itself, according to Rawls, a reasonable way to resolve conflict because it achieves legitimacy and stability in the face of unavoidable practical conflict. For Rawlsians, then, the ‘reasonableness’ of a solution to practical conflict is understood relative to the values of legitimacy and stability.¹

Other philosophers have thought the Rawlsian view artificial or unworkable, arguing that it is inappropriate or impossible to suppress an individual’s reasons that depend on her most deeply held moral and religious views. Instead, a reasonable way of dealing with practical conflict is to allow the reasons that derive from individuals’ comprehensive moral and religious views to have full expression in the public domain and then to settle any remaining practical conflict by voting, deliberation, deliberative polling, or negotiation. In his interesting paper, Robert Adams (2009) proposes a view of this sort. In arguing for his view about how to approach conflict, Adams appeals to the values of justice, morality, and respect for persons, leaving open the possibility that reliance on one’s deepest views may achieve other values. For thinkers who take this approach ‘reasonableness’ is understood relative to a wide range of desiderata including legitimacy and stability but also going beyond, including morality, individual autonomy, cultural distinctiveness, diversity, and mutual respect.² It is reasonable to rely on comprehensive moral and religious views in resolving conflict because doing so achieves values worth having. We might loosely call these views ‘substantivist’ because they ground the reasonableness of their approach in a broad range of substantive values beyond the somewhat more formal values of legitimacy and stability.

Finally, there are the social choice theorists who offer ways of ag-

¹ My interest is in the reasonableness of adopting Rawls’s approach to conflict resolution, when it is informed by the values of legitimacy and stability, not the reasonableness of one’s thinking that others could reasonably accept a principle, which depends on principles of fair cooperation. Cf. Rawls (1971) and Rawls (1999, chs. 18, 20, 22, 24, 26).

² I include in this group pluralists, perfectionists, and some deliberative democrats. See, for example, Adams (2009), Raz (1986; 1994), Kymlicka (1989), Galston (1991), and Gutmann and Thompson (1996). Some deliberative democrats ground the appeal of their approach to conflict resolution not only in substantive values but also in (quasi-) epistemic ones. See, for example, Cohen (1989) and Niño (1996).

gregating individual rankings of alternatives within a mathematical framework for representing individual preferences or beliefs about the merits of alternatives. Although these theorists tend not to be explicit about how their views are to be understood, a value-theoretic interpretation might see them as working with an intuitive notion of reasonableness that guides their construction of social choice functions. On this interpretation, the leading idea might be that a reasonable choice function should somehow be a fair and faithful reflection of all individual choices, or that it should minimize dissatisfaction among individuals. Hence typical conditions on social choice functions include 'non-dictatorship', which prevents any one individual from always having her way, and the 'independence of irrelevant alternatives', which prevents individuals from expressing their preferences or beliefs in a way that allows them to manipulate the social outcome in their own favour. On this interpretation, social choice theorists understand 'reasonableness' relative to the values of preference satisfaction or fair and faithful reflection of individual judgements.

In general, then, philosophers have approached the problem of how to deal with political practical conflicts in liberal democracies by asking what is a reasonable mechanism for resolving them. 'Reasonableness', in turn, is always understood in terms of what makes sense relative to some evaluative desiderata that typically go beyond the values in the conflict itself. Thus it is reasonable to resolve conflict over, say, two environmental policies by appeal to general principles that no one can reasonably reject, because this ensures legitimacy and stability of the resolution and of the society at large. Or it is reasonable to resolve such a conflict by appeal to individuals' most deeply held moral and religious views, since this allows for the important value of autonomy or other moral values. Or it is reasonable to aggregate individual orderings of the relevant social outcomes in a particular way because it minimizes overall dissatisfaction or offers a fair and faithful representation of individual preferences or beliefs about what should be done.

But the question might be approached in a different way. Instead of asking what is a *reasonable* way of dealing with practical conflict, we might ask what is a *rational* way of dealing with such conflict. That is, is there anything intrinsic to the conflict itself that gives us reason to deal with it in one way rather than another? Instead of asking what approach to conflict resolution makes sense in light of certain substantive values worth achieving, we ask whether

features of a conflict itself recommend dealing with it in one way rather than another. Indeed, an alternative interpretation of social choice theory sees it as offering accounts of rational, rather than reasonable, conflict resolution. Perhaps some social choice theorists think that the distribution of individual beliefs or preferences that gives rise to the conflict in the first place itself recommends a certain resolution over others. In so far as that is the case, my exploration here is of a piece with their approach, though as we will see, our views of ‘rational social choice’ are rather different.

In this paper, I explore an answer to the question, ‘What is a rational way of dealing with practical conflict over political matters in a liberal democracy?’ My exploration will be largely programmatic, and I will help myself to some large ideas that will strike some, I hope, as intuitive, and others, I suspect, as in need of further explanation. My overall aim, however, is rather modest; I want only to sketch how an alternative approach to conflict resolution might go and to say enough to make it a going concern. Like Adams, and unlike Rawls, I allow that the right inputs to social choice will include individuals’ most deeply held comprehensive moral and religious views.

In order to shed light on the rationality of conflict resolution in society, I suggest we begin with the rationality of conflict resolution in the single person case. As I will try to show, there is a suggestive extension from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal case. Just as the intrinsic features of conflict within an individual give her reasons to resolve conflict in a certain way, so too the intrinsic features of conflict among a society’s members give that society reasons to deal with conflict in a certain way. Thus just as a person can be rational in how she faces conflict within herself, so too a polity can be rational in how it faces conflict among its members. Some approaches to conflict resolution within groups, then, will be warranted because they are *rational* and not because they are *reasonable*, that is, achieve some value like stability, maximal welfare for all, or fair and faithful reflection of individual beliefs and preferences.

As we will see, there is one kind of practical conflict in the intrapersonal case that demands, I suggest, a distinctive kind of rational response. This response is constitutive of what I will call the activity of ‘self-governance’. Self-governance involves creating one’s best rational self—as someone, for instance, who has most reason to spend her weekends tending her garden or spending time with her children or campaigning on behalf of a political candidate. Our best rational

selves don't just happen to us; we make them out of the practical conflicts we face in our lives. If practical conflicts are lemons, then self-governance is lemonade. The same goes, I suggest, for the interpersonal case. When a society faces the inevitable conflicts among its members as to what should be done, most of those conflicts—and the most important ones, I suggest—will be of a kind in which it is rational for the polity to respond by self-governing. In a liberal democracy, self-governance in the face of conflict is not only a rational but also a reasonable way to deal with conflict. In this way, the rational and the reasonable concerning conflict resolution dovetail in liberal democracies.

I

The Rational and the Reasonable. But first a further word about the distinction between the reasonable and rational. The distinction I have in mind is not the one Rawls introduced under that name. For Rawls (1993, pp. 48–54), reasonableness is what makes sense in light of certain substantive values like legitimacy and fairness, while rationality is a peculiarly narrow notion covering the norms of means–ends reasoning, and in particular, the instrumental reasoning involved in the collection of primary goods with no regard for the welfare of others.

Rationality, as I understand it here, consists not only in the norms governing means–end reasoning but in all the objective norms that govern the intrinsic well-functioning of an agent's deliberation.³ So,

³ They are *objective* in that their normativity does not essentially depend on the agent's actual attitudes; they tell the agent what attitudes she should have or actions she should perform, perhaps when she has certain attitudes, but not because she has those attitudes. They are *deliberative* in that they are norms that can guide an agent's deliberation rather than norms to which an agent can only conform. Norms of rationality can be divided into those that take subjective antecedents (such as 'If you want *E* and believe *M* is a necessary means to *E*, do *M*) and those that do not (such as 'If *A* is all-things-considered better than *B*, do *A*'). As we will see, the norms of rationality of interest here are based on the 'structure' of a situation, and structure is a subjective notion. Some philosophers deny, largely on the basis of bootstrapping considerations, that there are any rational norms with subjective antecedents. They think, for example, that the principle that one should take the means to one's ends is no rational norm at all. Those who think that norms of instrumental reason are a 'myth' will likely think that the norms of rationality based on structure are also a myth. But in so far as there is a genuine practical need to know what one should do on the basis of certain subjective inputs, there are, intuitively speaking, norms of rationality in at least this 'thin' sense. Indeed, the case of social conflict makes especially vivid the need to know what it is rational to do given certain subjective inputs, namely the beliefs of members of the society.

for example, ‘Take the necessary means to your ends’, ‘Do what you believe you have most reason to do’, ‘If *A* is better than *B* in the respects relevant to the choice between them, do *A* instead of *B*’, and so on, are all norms of rationality. Unlike some objective norms that are grounded in substantive values like morality and prudence (sometimes also called norms of rationality), the norms of rationality in the sense of interest are grounded in what it is to be an intrinsically well-functioning deliberator. We might say that they are grounded in ‘reason itself’. Norms of consistency and coherence are paradigmatic examples of such norms, but there are many more besides. In a way, this paper can be seen as an exploration of some less familiar norms of this kind.

Reasonable approaches to practical conflict seek to achieve substantive values that typically go beyond those at stake in the conflict itself, while rational approaches seek to conform to the norms governing intrinsic, well-functioning deliberation. Suppose you and I disagree over whether abortion should be legally prohibited. The values at stake in the conflict, say, are religious ones having to do with the sanctity of God’s creations and secular ones having to do with a woman’s right to control her own body. A way to resolve this conflict is *reasonable* if it makes sense in light of further substantive values such as political legitimacy, morality, or fair representation of individual views. A way to resolve the conflict is *rational*, by contrast, if it makes sense in light of ‘reason itself’, where these norms grounded in reason have to do with how to respond to features of the conflict. In this way, what one should rationally do in the face of conflict depends on facts about the conflict itself.

II

Intrapersonal Conflicts. An individual agent faces a practical conflict when, after reflection on the merits of the alternatives, she concludes that, all things considered, no alternative is better than the others. And yet there is something that must or should be done. Thus an agent may face a practical conflict even if one alternative ‘really’ is better than the others but she fails to realize it.

Our focus here is on value-based practical conflicts, and in so far as all practical reasons are underwritten by values, the conflicts of interest are all the practical conflicts there are. Many philosophers

think that deontic reasons are fundamentally distinct from value-based ones, and so value-based conflicts cover only a portion of the conflicts there are. Some, for instance, have thought that Rawls's approach to conflict is unworkable because the reasons based on substantive values cannot be combined with the reasons based on duties. Thus it cannot be reasonable to ask people to accept general principles which, by the lights of their comprehensive moral and religious views, are *wrong* or violate what they take to be their *duties*. My own view is that those who insist on a fundamental divide between duties and values have a theoretically-driven, overly narrow view of the nature of values, but I won't be defending that claim here. In any case, if value-based conflicts cover only a portion of all practical conflicts, then the discussion of this paper should be appropriately narrowed in its scope.

So what does a typical case of intrapersonal practical conflict look like? Suppose you are a single father contemplating whether to raise Junior as a Catholic or as an atheist. You believe that, in some respects, raising Junior as a Catholic is better than raising him as an atheist and, in other respects, it is better not to raise him as a Catholic. You might also believe that in some respects the options are equally good or incomparable, or that in certain respects one is infinitely better than the other. You might have other beliefs that are not strictly comparative in form; you might believe that one alternative trumps, silences, excludes, cancels, or brackets the other in certain respects, or that one of the alternatives fulfills your duty to God, or that it would be courageous to raise your child one way rather than the other, or that Junior would bring important benefits to the world were he raised one way rather than another, and so on. Suppose that after reflecting on everything you think matters to the choice, you conclude that neither alternative is better than the other. But you must do something. Your beliefs constitute a practical conflict over how to raise your child.

Different practical conflicts will be constituted by different sets of beliefs. But typically a practical conflict will be constituted by a set of 'component' beliefs concerning how alternatives compare with respect to component values of what matters to the choice and an all-things-considered conclusion that neither alternative is better than the other. A simple version of a typical case of conflict might be represented as follows:

The simple form of intrapersonal practical conflict

$$\text{Bel}_X (A >_{v_1} B)$$

$$\text{Bel}_X (A <_{v_2} B)$$

$$\text{Bel}_X (v_1 \text{ and } v_2 \text{ are the component values of atc})$$

$$\text{Therefore, Bel}_X \neg[(A >_{\text{atc}} B) \vee (A <_{\text{atc}} B)]$$

where v_1 and v_2 are the ‘component’ values the agent, X , believes are the only values relevant to the all-things-considered choice between A and B .

In the simple form of practical conflict, the agent believes that option A is better with respect to some of the things that matter to the choice, that option B is better with respect to the other things that matter to the choice, and on that basis concludes that, all things considered, neither is better than the other.

Taking this simple form as our model, we ask, ‘What is it rational to do in the face of conflicts with this form?’

III

The Structure of a Conflict. The rationality of a response to a choice situation turns on what I will call the *structure* of the situation. The structure of a choice situation is given by the maximally informative truth about the all-things-considered relative merits of the alternatives *conditional on the beliefs that constitute the situation*. In the case of practical conflict, the structure of a conflict is the maximal objective fact about how the alternatives compare, all things considered, *on the condition that the beliefs that constitute the conflict are true*.

We can think of a conflict’s structure as the closest an agent could get to the objective truth about the all-things-considered relative merits of the alternatives, given the contents of her beliefs. So, for instance, it might be that with respect to what ‘really’ matters in the choice between A and B , say v_1 and v_4 , they are ‘really’ equally good. This might be the judgement God makes about A and B . The agent, however, has to work with her beliefs. She believes that v_1 and v_2 comprise the relevant values to choice and, given those beliefs, neither alternative is better than the other. Taking all the evaluative facts consistent with these beliefs, what maximally informative truth could there be about how the items compare overall? Put an-

other way, if God were constrained by the agent's beliefs but otherwise had access to all the evaluative facts, what judgement would he make about the overall merits of the alternatives? This judgement gives the structure of the conflict.

What it's rational to do in the face of conflict is a matter of what it's rational to do in the face of a certain structure. Thus the norms of rationality of interest have the general form: 'If the structure of a situation is such-and-such, do X.'

Now what we rationally should do when confronted with a certain structure plausibly piggybacks on what we rationally should do when that structure describes the objective facts. That is, the norm 'If the structure of a situation is α , then do X' plausibly derives from the norm 'If objectively the situation is α , then do X'. So, for example, if there is a rational norm: 'If A is all-things-considered better than B , do A instead of B ', then there is plausibly a corresponding rational norm: 'If the structure of a situation is that A is all-things-considered better than B , do A instead of B .' The latter norm tells us what to do in the face of facts about the relative merits of A and B conditional on the agent's beliefs, while the former tells us what to do in the face of the corresponding objective or unconditionalized facts. One advantage of working with the latter norms is that their application is epistemically less demanding than application of the former.

So what could be the structure of conflicts of the simple form? Given the truth of the beliefs that constitute the conflict and the evaluative facts consistent with them, what could be the maximal all-things-considered truth about A and B ?

One possibility is that the agent's beliefs in conjunction with the evaluative facts yield an inconsistency. Perhaps not all the beliefs of the simple form can be true in conjunction with the evaluative facts; it might be, for example, that the belief that A is better than B with respect to v_1 is inconsistent with the belief that neither alternative is better than the other with respect to v_1 and v_2 because if A is better than B with respect to v_1 , the evaluative facts make it the case that A must be all-things-considered better than B . This might be because v_1 is much more important to the choice than v_2 even though, by hypothesis, both matter to the choice. In this case, there is no maximal all-things-considered truth about how A and B relate, and the conflict is one without a structure. Norms of rationality based on the structure of conflict have no application in such cases. We can set to one side such outlier cases.

Assuming that a conflict with the simple form has a structure, what could that structure be? There are three possibilities: (1) the alternatives are all-things-considered equally good, (2) they are all-things-considered incomparable, and finally (3) they are all-things-considered ‘on a par’. These three distinctive structures, I believe, underwrite three distinct rational responses to practical conflict.⁴

Let us consider each possibility in turn.

IV

Three Structures of Conflict. First, the evaluative facts might be such that, given the agent’s beliefs, the maximal truth about how the alternatives compare is that they are equally good. In this case, the structure of the conflict is that *A* and *B* are equally good. What should you rationally do when the structure of a conflict is given by equality? If, as we’ve suggested, what you should rationally do in the face of a certain structure derives from what you should rationally do when that structure describes the objective truth, then a natural answer is that you should flip a coin—or employ some other genuinely randomizing procedure—to choose between them. It is plausible to flip a coin between alternatives that are equally good because, with respect to everything relevant to the choice, each alternative is as good as the other. When the structure of a conflict is given by equality, we can only randomly ‘pick’ rather than choose between them.⁵

Second, the evaluative facts might be such that, given the agent’s beliefs, *A* and *B* are all-things-considered incomparable. In this case,

⁴ It might be thought that a fourth possible structure is that it is *vague* whether *A* is all things considered better than *B*. But conflict, as I am understanding it here, precludes vagueness as a possible structure. Conflict arises when the agent believes that neither alternative is better than the other, all things considered. On the natural assumption that believing that *p* entails believing that definitely *p*, conflict entails that the agent believes that definitely neither alternative is better than the other, which is incompatible with most forms of vagueness. In any case, if one wanted to understand conflict or vagueness in a way that allows for the possibility of vague conflict structures, the account here could be extended to cover such cases.

⁵ There may, of course, be reasons not based on the structure of the conflict to do something else. If an evil demon promises that employment of any randomizing procedure to choose between *A* and *B* will result in the deaths of my loved ones, then clearly I have *most reason* in the face of conflicts with the structure of equality *not* to employ a randomizing procedure to select between them. In short, while it may always be rational randomly to pick when the structure of conflict is given by equality, it may be unreasonable to do so. The same considerations apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to cases in which the structure is given by incomparability or parity.

the structure of the conflict is that *A* and *B* are incomparable. What should you rationally do in conflicts whose structure is given by incomparability? If alternatives are, objectively speaking, incomparable, there is no positive normative relation that holds between them with respect to everything that matters in the choice. It follows that there are no norms of rationality based on the objective relative merits of the alternatives that offer guidance as to what to do in such cases. Rationality is simply silent on the question of what you should do. Thus in conflicts with this structure, rationality fails to answer the question of how one should respond. When the structure of a conflict is given by incomparability, we can only ‘plump’ rather than pick or choose, where ‘plumping’ is understood as a non-rational response to the conflict.

Third, it might be that the evaluative facts consistent with the agent’s beliefs yield the conclusion that, all things considered, *A* and *B* are on a par. In this case, the structure of the conflict is that *A* and *B* are on a par. Most important practical conflicts, I believe, have this fourth structure. Sometimes *A* and *B* are not equally good and yet are determinately comparable. I have called the normative relation that holds under these circumstances ‘parity’ (Chang 2001; 2002; 2004).

A summary of the main features of parity can be briefly given. When two alternatives are all-things-considered on a par, they stand in a normative relation of comparability, but neither is better than the other, nor are they equally good. Being on a par is a ‘positive’ relation, like ‘better than’ and ‘equally good’, in that it describes how the items normatively relate rather than how they fail to normatively relate, in contrast, for example, to ‘not worse than’ and ‘incomparable with’. Being on a par is irreflexive, non-transitive and symmetric; its logical properties differ from those of the usual trichotomy of positive relations, ‘better than’, ‘worse than’ and ‘equally good’. Every positive relation can be analysed along features of the differences they describe between two items. ‘Better than’, ‘worse than’ and ‘on a par’ all describe differences with non-zero magnitude, but only in the first two does this magnitude have a direction or bias in favour of one item over the other. ‘Equally good’ and ‘on a par’ both describe differences that are unbiased, but only in the first is the magnitude zero. Parity holds of items whose evaluative difference has non-zero magnitude but is nevertheless unbiased towards one of the items over the other. Intuitively, items are on a

par when they aren't exactly equally good, one isn't better than the other, and yet they are comparable. There is an evaluative difference between them that is non-zero, but it doesn't 'favour' one item over the other. I believe that this is how things are between many evaluatively different items that are roughly in the same league in their respective domains of excellence. So, for example, it's hard to believe that Mozart is a greater or lesser creative genius than Michelangelo or that they are exactly equally great. Nor does it seem right to say that they cannot be compared with respect to creative genius. I suggest that they are on a par.

Now my aim here is not to convince anybody that items can be on a par. There are, however, good reasons to think that parity is a possible, and indeed common, structure of conflict. As a consequence, I'll be developing my argument on the assumption that parity is possible. A quick, schematic summary of the intuitive line of argument for parity is worth laying out before moving on to the next section. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that those of a sceptical frame of mind can, for the most part, replace references to 'parity' with 'equality' or 'incomparability' for the remainder of the paper.⁶

Suppose that neither *A* nor *B* is all-things-considered better than the other. If we improve *A* slightly to *A+*, does it necessarily follow that *A+* is now all-things-considered better than *B*? Return to your quandary about how to raise your child. You have a good handle on the merits of each alternative with respect to the relevant values but subsequently learn that raising Junior as a Catholic will in fact be slightly better than you previously thought with respect to one of the relevant values, and thus, suppose, better overall. It does not necessarily follow that this improved version of *A*, *A+*, is all-things-considered better than *B*. If this is so, then we know that *A* and *B* are not all-things-considered equally good, for if they were, then any improvement in *A* with respect to the values that matter to the choice would make *A+* better than *B*. This is the 'Small Improvement Argument', which aims to show that there are some items for which none of the traditional trichotomy of relations, 'better than', 'worse than', and 'equally good' holds.

⁶ One cost of denying parity is that there will no longer be a tidy correspondence between three distinctive structures of practical conflict—equality, incomparability, and parity—on the one hand, and three distinctive rational responses to conflict—picking, plumping, and self-governance—on the other.

Are *A* and *B* incomparable? Suppose we can improve *A* in successive steps, keeping the values relevant to the choice fixed, until we reach super-*A*, which is clearly better than *B*. Suppose too that we can detract from *A* in successive steps, keeping the values relevant to the choice fixed, until we reach sub-*A*, which is clearly worse than *B*. It is then plausible to think that *A* is comparable with *B*, for how can we go from a souped-up version of *A* being better than *B* to a downgraded version of *A* being worse than *B*, through a series of successive improvements or detractions in *A*, by passing through a case in which *A* is supposedly incomparable with *B*? It does not seem plausible, for example, that we can switch from a super version of raising your child as a Catholic, which by hypothesis is better than raising him as an atheist, to a very poor version of raising your child as a Catholic, which by hypothesis is worse than raising him as an atheist, through a version of raising him as a Catholic that is incomparable with raising him as an atheist, when the only difference between that version and the others is given by successive improvements or detractions with respect to the very same respects relevant to the choice. If this is right, there is good reason to think that *A* and *B* are comparable. This is the ‘Chaining Argument’, which aims to show that for at least some cases in which the Small Improvement Argument holds, the items are comparable.⁷

If *A* and *B* are comparable, and yet neither is better than the other nor are they equally good, they are on a par. In so far as alternatives can objectively be on a par, so too the structure of a conflict can be that the alternatives are on a par. Note that the beliefs of the simple form are consistent with the evaluative facts supposed by both arguments for parity. Since the beliefs of the simple form are consistent with the evaluative facts appealed to in the arguments for parity, it follows that the wider the scope of application of these arguments, the wider the scope of practical conflicts whose structure will be given by parity.

⁷ This argument looks suspiciously like a sorites. More generally, there is the question of whether parity is nothing more than a matter of vagueness in our language or concepts. I argue against these worries in Chang (2001; 2002; 2004). In any case, it is implausible to think that, for example, a society’s quandaries over political matters would disappear if only we had determinate concepts.

V

Self-governance. What should you rationally do when faced with conflicts whose structure is given by parity? Is there some response to the structure of a practical conflict beyond flipping a coin and there being no rational response at all? Thinking intuitively about practical conflicts, it seems pretty clear that many important conflicts are ones in which flipping a coin or just ‘picking’ is not the rational thing to do. Similarly, it seems implausible to think that for many conflicts there is nothing rational to be done and so ‘plumping’ is one’s only option.

It might be thought that in the face of practical conflict, a rational thing to do might well be something reasonable. That is, the rational thing to do might be to decide on some values worth achieving and to resolve the conflict in the service of those values. That this seems like such a plausible rational response perhaps explains why political philosophers tend to focus on what might be a reasonable way to resolve practical conflict, overlooking what might be a rational way to do so. But this is to fail to take seriously the distinction between reasons of rationality and those of reasonableness.

I want to suggest that one very common rational response to practical conflict is not to do something reasonable *as such*, but to engage in a particular rational activity—self-governance. Self-governance is the rational activity of defining one’s ‘rational character’ or ‘rational identity’ through choices made in the face of practical conflicts. When the structure of a conflict is given by parity, a rational response is to self-govern.⁸

To see what self-governance involves, return to our case of child-rearing. The evaluative facts in conjunction with your beliefs make it the case that raising your child as a Catholic and raising him atheist are on a par—or at least have some structure in which it makes sense now for you to make yourself into the sort of person who raises his child as a Catholic rather than an atheist. Your decision to raise your child as a Catholic constitutes something about you, about your rational character or identity. By deciding to resolve the conflict one way rather than another, you forge your rational identity; your ‘taking a stand’ in the face of conflict is how you build your

⁸ Further remarks can be found in Chang (2009). For related ideas, see Bratman (2007) and Frankfurt (1988).

distinctive rational self. You're the kind of person who in the face of conflict raises your child to be a Catholic instead of an atheist, lives in the city rather than the country, takes a job that allows you to have a balanced life rather than one that requires you to be a workaholic, and so on. I might take a different stand in the face of such conflicts, and by doing so I make myself into the rational agent I am who differs in rational character from you. The key idea we need to work with is the, I hope, intuitive one that in many cases of practical conflict, the rational thing to do is to take a stand and put yourself behind one option rather than the other.

It is important to note that this activity of taking a stand in the face of conflict is a *rational* activity, indeed arguably an essential part of rational agency. A person who works out the reasons she has and then acts on them is not a fully fledged rational agent; after all, a sophisticated machine could successfully perform these tasks. What makes humans distinctively rational is our ability in the face of conflict to take a stand and put ourselves behind certain alternatives. This is agential activity beyond simply determining what reasons we have and then following them. If this line of thought is correct, then practical conflicts are not only, as Adams rightly points out, important in allowing individuals to test themselves against those with whom they are in conflict, such as children against their parents, but also essential to our becoming fully fledged rational agents in the first place.

VI

The Interpersonal Case. If the preceding is right, there is a structure of intrapersonal practical conflict in which a rational response is to self-govern. I now want to see how this idea might be extended to the interpersonal case. The interpersonal cases of focus are those involving members of a polity or civil society who disagree over political matters. I leave to one side interpersonal conflicts that might arise between smaller groups within a society over non-political matters, which in some cases raise further issues.⁹

Suppose a polity is faced with the question of whether to use tax-

⁹ Some interpersonal conflicts within a society are between people who, taken as a collective, do not have sufficient unity as a group for self-governance to be appropriate. Two strangers, for example, might have a conflict over who should get the last seat on the bus.

payer monies to support religious education or the arts. For simplicity, suppose the polity consists of just Alfred and Betty. Each makes all-things-considered judgements about whether using their tax dollars for religious instruction, *A*, is better than using it to fund the arts, *B*. Their judgements are judgements about what society as a whole should do overall, but the considerations they bring to bear in their judgements may be very different. Indeed, their all-things-considered judgements may reflect their most deeply held comprehensive moral and religious views. Alfred might be a devout Catholic who, thinking that the values relevant to the choice are religious ones, concludes that *A* is all-things-considered better than *B*. Betty, an atheist, might hold views about the importance of the arts to a flourishing culture, and bringing to bear only cultural values, concludes that *B* is all-things-considered better than *A*. What should the society consisting of Alfred and Betty do in the face of these beliefs?

By analogy with the intrapersonal case, we might posit a benevolent dictator who holds the place of the agent in the intrapersonal case. The benevolent dictator is the personification of the decision-making body of a society that represents the society as a whole. In liberal democracies, she might be regarded as the government of that society. The actions of the benevolent dictator represent the actions of society at large, and what it is rational for her to do is what it is rational for the society to do.¹⁰

What should the benevolent dictator do in the face of the beliefs of Alfred and Betty? As in the intrapersonal case, the rationality of her response will depend on the structure of the situation. But what is this structure?

We said the structure of a choice situation is the maximally informative truth about the all-things-considered relative merits of the alternatives conditional on the beliefs constitutive of the situation. There are two questions we need to answer before we can understand the idea of structure in the interpersonal case. First, there is the question of the ‘things considered’ in the all-things-considered truth that gives the structure of the situation. In the intrapersonal case, the ‘things considered’ are determined by what the agent believes to be relevant to the choice. But what are the things to be considered by the benevolent dictator?

¹⁰ That the benevolent dictator is an agent for the polity raises large questions about the possibility of either representative or collective agency. I will assume that a government, personified in a benevolent dictator, can both believe and act on behalf of its people.

Second, there is the question of which beliefs are constitutive of a social conflict. The structure of a situation involves supposing those beliefs to be true. In the intrapersonal case, the beliefs constitutive of conflict are the agent's beliefs about how the alternatives fare with respect to component values of the maximal all-things-considered truth. In the interpersonal case, it might be thought that the beliefs constitutive of the conflict are the all-things-considered beliefs of individual members of the society, where the 'things considered' may vary across individuals. But not all such beliefs can coherently be taken to be true. Two individuals might take the same values to be relevant to the social choice but arrive at opposite conclusions about which alternative society should choose. So which beliefs constitute a social conflict?

VII

Social Value. Recall that Alfred, who, taking certain religious values to be relevant to the question of how to spend the tax surplus, believes that funding religious education is better than funding the arts, while Betty, taking certain cultural values as relevant, arrives at the opposite conclusion. Let us tweak the case a bit and add to the society Bob, Bertha, Boris, Betsy, Ben, ...—ninety-eight additional individuals who each agree with Betty in all aspects; they take the same cultural values as relevant to the choice and believe that funding the arts is better than funding religious instruction. What should the benevolent dictator rationally do?

Two possibilities naturally suggest themselves. The benevolent dictator might rationally do what she believes is objectively best for society as a whole. Perhaps she believes that with respect to the objective social good, the tax dollars should be spent on religious education rather than the arts. In this case, it would be rational for her to ignore the beliefs of her polity and to spend the tax dollars on religious education. The 'thing considered' in her rational choice is the objective social good.

In the alternative, the benevolent dictator might ignore what she believes to be best with respect to the objective social good and rationally follow the beliefs of her polity. In this case, since 99% of the people believe that funding for the arts is the correct social choice, she would (presumably) be rational in choosing to spend the tax

dollars supporting the arts. Social choice theorists can be seen as recommending that the benevolent dictator consider only the individual beliefs of members of her society in determining what she rationally should do. These theorists think that a rational social choice can be determined simply by aggregating individual beliefs, without appeal to any objective values.

It seems to me that each possibility fails to capture what rationality matters in social choice. I suggest that in determining what it is rational to do, the benevolent dictator should consider *both* the objective social good and the individual beliefs of the polity. Both factors are relevant to what she rationally should do.

Suppose the benevolent dictator believes that, with respect to the objective social good, funding religious education is better than funding the arts. Perhaps she has a direct line to the oracle of the objective social good, who tells her that funding religious education is better with respect to the objective social good. Should she ignore the fact that 99% of her polity thinks that funding the arts is the correct social choice? We can assume for now, a possibility to be defended below, that ignoring the beliefs of her polity will not in any way affect how the alternatives fare with respect to the objective social good. Does the fact that by funding religious education she will be going against the beliefs of 99% of her polity have any relevance to what she rationally should do? It is hard to believe that it is irrelevant. The views of the people seem at the very least relevant to what it is rational for her to do. They may not by themselves make it rational for her to do what is objectively socially worse, but they are plausibly part of what should be considered in making a rational social choice.

How are the individual beliefs of a society relevant to what the benevolent dictator rationally should do? By taking into account the beliefs of her polity, I suggest, a benevolent dictator shows *respect* for the *vox populi*. A benevolent dictator who ignores public opinion, except in so far as taking account of it conduces to the objective social good, does not respect the views of the people as such.

Suppose you and I are discussing where to go for dinner, and I take into account your views on the matter only in so far as they affect how much fun we'll have together. I don't respect your views *as such*. I respect your views as such if I take the fact that you have them itself to be normatively significant. I want Chinese, but I respect your views as such if the mere fact that you believe Italian is

the way to go matters to my choice. Put another way, if the fact that you disagree with me has normative significance for me, I respect your beliefs as such. Indeed, just as I can respect the beliefs of, say, Mother Theresa, without my respect being understood in terms of her objective individual good, the benevolent dictator can respect the beliefs of her polity without her respect being understood in terms of contribution to the objective social good.

I suggest that the rationality of a social choice is determined neither simply by the objective social good nor simply by the people's beliefs but by some combination of the two, what I will call the *social value*. Social value has two component values, the objective social good and respect for the views of the people as such. It is the 'thing considered' in the all-things-considered truth that gives the structure of a social situation.

Now exactly how social value puts together the objective social good and respect for the *vox populi* is a large and difficult question. For our purposes, we need only appeal to the plausibility of a notion of rationality that depends on some mix of the objective social good and the normative significance of individual beliefs without having to specify that mix. But a few suggestive remarks may be in order.

As we've already suggested, one way in which individual beliefs might contribute to social value is in the *distribution* of their contents. Even if, with respect to the objective social good, A is better than B, the fact that 99% of the society believes that the correct social choice is B over A can help determine how the alternatives fare with respect to the social value. The fact that individuals believe in the proportion that they do helps to determine what the benevolent dictator rationally should do.

Another way individual beliefs might contribute to the social value is by constraining which component values of the objective social good are relevant to the social choice. Suppose that what is objectively best for society is a matter of certain religious, cultural and environmental values, and that on the basis of these values funding religious education is better than funding the arts. This could be because funding religious education is better with respect to the relevant environmental values and so, overall, it is better with respect to the objective social good. If, however, no one in the society takes these environmental values to be relevant to the choice, it might be that funding the arts is better than funding religious education with

respect to the social value. Thus, *which* values individuals take to be relevant to the social choice can make a difference to the social value. The associated distributional fact may also matter. If the vast majority of members in a polity believe that cultural values matter to the choice, and only a handful believe that religious values matter, then perhaps cultural values will matter more than they otherwise would and religious values will matter less than they otherwise would.

Finally, *how* individuals believe what they believe may also be relevant. Some individuals may hold their beliefs with special emotional intensity or a high degree of credence, or their beliefs may reflect their most deeply held views or be related to their other beliefs in special ways. Perhaps beliefs that are connected to an individual's most deeply held views should affect the social value more than those that are not so connected. Indeed, the deepest kind of respect a benevolent dictator can show for her polity will arguably give special weight to individuals' beliefs that connect in the right way with their comprehensive moral and religious views.¹¹ If this is right, far from being illicit inputs to social choice, beliefs that issue from an individual's most deeply held comprehensive moral and religious views matter more to the social choice than beliefs from a more detached, neutral point of view.

These are just a few ways in which the individual beliefs of a polity can contribute to social value. A proper understanding of social value will rely heavily on an investigation of respect, and of the ways in which respect can be 'put together' with what's objectively best for a society.¹²

VIII

Social Conflict. So much for social value. When is there a social conflict? In the individual case, there is conflict when the agent concludes after deliberation that neither alternative is all-things-considered better than the other. Similarly, in the social case, there is conflict when the benevolent dictator concludes after deliberation that neither alternative is better than the other, all things considered—that is, with respect to the social value.

¹¹ Compare Adams (2009).

¹² I suggest a general framework for such an investigation in Chang (2004).

There are many ways in which the benevolent dictator might come to this conclusion, but I suspect that in the most simple and typical case, the benevolent dictator will believe that neither alternative is better with respect to the social value when she believes, first, that neither alternative is better than the other with respect to the objective social good, and, second, that there is a significant divide within the society over which alternative should be chosen.

Schematically,

The simple form of interpersonal practical conflict

$$\frac{\text{Bel}_{\text{BD}}[\text{Bel}_X(A >_{\text{atc1}} B) \wedge \text{Bel}_Y(A <_{\text{atc2}} B)] \\ \text{Bel}_{\text{BD}} \neg [(A >_{\text{obsocgood}} B) \vee (B >_{\text{obsocgood}} A)]}{\text{Therefore, Bel}_{\text{BD}} \neg [(A >_{\text{socvalue}} B) \vee (B >_{\text{socvalue}} A)]}$$

where BD represents the benevolent dictator; X and Y represent nontrivial numbers of members of the society; and *atc1* and *atc2* are the values that X and Y respectively believe to be relevant to the social choice.

Since the benevolent dictator is the representative of the individual beliefs in the society, she will believe there is a significant divide within the society over which alternative should be chosen whenever there is such a divide. I won't speculate here how she might arrive at beliefs about how the alternatives fare with respect to the objective good. If the decision-making body of a polity is quite literally given by an individual dictator or monarch, her views about the objective good are the relevant views. If she is a personification of a collection of individuals who form a government, as we have been supposing, then her views about which alternative is best with respect to the objective social good will be some amalgam of the views of individual government officials on the matter.

It is the beliefs of the benevolent dictator, then, that constitute a social conflict. Since social value is what matters to the rational choice between the alternatives, when the benevolent dictator believes that neither alternative is better than the other with respect to the social value, she is in a quandary over what she rationally should do.

IX

The Structure of Social Conflict. Now what the benevolent dictator rationally should do turns on the structure of the conflict. What is this structure? We said that the structure of a conflict is the maximal objective fact about how the alternatives compare, all things considered, *on the condition that the beliefs that constitute the conflict are true*. We have just seen that the ‘things considered’ are given by the social value and that, in the typical case, the beliefs that constitute a social conflict are the beliefs of the benevolent dictator of the simple form. So assuming the beliefs of the simple form are true, what is the maximal objective fact about how the alternatives compare with respect to the social value?

As in intrapersonal conflict, interpersonal conflict can have one of three structures: equality, incomparability, and parity. If the structure of the conflict were given by equality, then it would be rational for the benevolent dictator to flip a coin to settle what to do. It seems hard to believe, however, that this is a rational thing to do in any interesting cases of political conflict, such as whether abortion should be legally prohibited and whether the state should support religious education.

If, on the other hand, the structure of such conflicts is given by incomparability, then the benevolent dictator can have no rational response since the question of what she rationally should do has no application. Again, it seems hard to believe that many social conflicts are beyond a rational response. Moreover, if they were, there would be nothing *intrinsically* irrational about doing something in the face of one such conflict that undermined what one did in the face of another such conflict. For example, today the benevolent dictator might plump for funding the arts, but tomorrow, when faced with the question of whether to prohibit artistic expression to achieve political security, she might plump for prohibiting the production of works of art. Social conflicts, by their nature, seem to counsel against such self-defeating responses to them.

This leaves parity. I suggest that many—and the most interesting—social conflicts of the simple form have parity as their structure. Whether this is actually so will turn on how trade-offs between the objective social good and respect for public opinion work, that is, on the content of social value. But we can intuitively see how when neither alternative is better than the other with respect to the social

value, parity might naturally hold.

Return to our benevolent dictator. By hypothesis, with respect to the social value, funding the arts is neither better nor worse than funding religious education. We can fill out the details of these options such that a small but definite improvement with respect to social value in the religious funding option does not thereby make it better than the arts option. Thus, the options are not equally good. And in at least some such cases, the options will be comparable. For we can create a spectrum of successfully better—and worse—versions of the religious education option such that a super-version of that option is clearly better than the arts option and a very poor version of that option is clearly worse. Since it is implausible to think that we can move from comparability to incomparability and back again through a series of successively small but definite improvements or detractions in one of the alternatives, we have good reason to think that the original options are comparable. And if they are comparable but neither is better than the other nor are they equally good, then they are on a par.

If the structure of a social conflict is that the alternatives are on a par, then it is rational, as it is in the intrapersonal case, to respond by self-governing. But what would it mean for a society to self-govern?

X

Interpersonal Self-governance. Self-governance in the intrapersonal case is a matter of ‘taking a stand’ and ‘getting behind’ an alternative. It is the activity of ‘making’ one’s own rational identity. I suggest that the analogue of this activity in the interpersonal case can be understood deliberatively. When the structure of social conflict is given by parity, society can respond rationally by ‘taking a stand’. But taking a stand in the social case is a matter of confronting the deliberative question ‘What kind of society should we be?’ The activity of the benevolent dictator that constitutes self-governance, then, is her deliberation over the question ‘What kind of benevolent dictator should I be?’

Questions of this nature tend to arise at the junctures of constitutional crises, such as in the recent conflict in the United States over legislation that undermines civil liberties in exchange for greater se-

curity against threats from terrorism. Media pundits in fact turned to the self-reflective question, asking whether America wanted to be the kind of society that values security over certain freedoms or vice versa. My suggestion is that we, as a society, would be rational were we self-consciously to respond to many of our practical conflicts in this way.

In many societies, the self-reflective question of self-governance is ‘folded into’ its government’s institutional practices for determining which of two alternatives to choose. Thus a judge, in reviewing an abortion statute, might consider whether society should be one that regulates the internal workings of a woman’s body; a president, in deciding whether to veto legislation that compromises safety regulations in order to make manufacturing globally competitive, might consider whether society should be one that sacrifices human health for wealth and productivity; and a bureaucrat, in deciding how to apportion a department’s resources, might be guided by his beliefs about the value of being one kind of society rather than another. Indeed, ordinary citizens might take the value of being a certain kind of society as part of what matters to a social choice, and their beliefs about which alternative is best, all things considered, may reflect their beliefs that society should be one way rather than another. Arguably, citizens of the United States had the self-reflective question in mind when they recently went to the polls to oust the Republican Party from office. The question ‘What kind of society should we be?’ may play a role in an individual’s view about which of two alternatives a society should choose.

However, for a society to self-govern in a way that involves *making* its own rational identity, I suggest that it needs to confront the self-reflective question *self-consciously as a collective body*. This is because making one’s own rational identity requires continuity and coherence not only in the decisions a society takes in the face of practical conflict, but also in the justifications to which it appeals in making those decisions. Those justifications will concern the value of being a society with a certain rational character, and the justification in one decision must mesh coherently with the justification in another decision, even if the ‘meshing’ involves a change in the direction of the society’s rational character. Piecemeal appeal to the self-reflective question by individual members of a government or the citizenry will not ordinarily meet these conditions. For similar reasons, majority voting, which permits self-defeating cycles, is an

inappropriate means to self-governance. A society cannot create its own rational identity through majority voting on each issue of conflict that comes before it.

A rational response by the benevolent dictator to social conflict with the structure of parity, then, is explicitly to confront the question ‘What kind of benevolent dictator should I be?’ If, for example, with respect to the social value, spending tax dollars on religious education is on a par with funding the arts, then it is rational for a society to ask itself ‘Should we be the kind of society which spends its tax dollars on religious education or one which spends it on the arts?’ Exactly how a society engages in this question as a collective I leave open. My own suspicion is that theories of deliberative democracy have their most natural home not in accounts of reasonable responses to social conflict, but in accounts of self-governance as a rational response to social conflict.

Different subject matters of conflict enable a society to extend its rational identity in ways relevant to the issues raised by that conflict. The more varied the conflicts a society faces, the more richly textured its rational identity. In this way, the making of a society’s rational identity is an ongoing project that evolves through collective, successive confrontations of the self-reflective question in the course of the life of the society.

XI

The Rational and the Reasonable Revisited. Self-governance as a rational response to social conflict is an approach to social conflict that is different from the ‘reasonableness’ approaches of Rawlsians, substantivists, and social choice theorists in their value-theoretic moods. The rational response to many social conflicts is to self-govern, and the rationality of this response is grounded not in the service of any substantive values, but rather in what reason itself recommends in the face of conflicts with a certain structure.

It might be wondered how the suggestion that a polity self-govern makes any progress over the issues that drive the standard ‘reasonableness’ views about how we should respond to conflict. After all, deliberation over what kind of society to be raises familiar questions about whether individuals’ comprehensive moral and political views are relevant, whether this deliberation should be conducted in a

space of public reason according to principles forged by an overlapping consensus, and so on. Is the recommendation to self-govern in the end any different from the recommendations offered by ‘reasonableness’ approaches?

We’ve suggested that in the face of conflicts over what to do, a society rationally should turn to the self-reflective question, ‘What kind of society should we be?’ This turn to a distinctive substantive question offers a distinctive kind of response to social conflict. As a substantive matter, the recommendation to self-govern is different from the recommendation to do what achieves some substantive value. More importantly, the justificatory basis for this response is different. What justifies self-governance is not a substantive value that would be achieved if we responded to conflict in this way. Instead, self-governance is justified by norms of rationality that derive from reason itself. These norms tell us what it is rational to do when we face a choice situation with a given structure.

There is, however, a sense in which rational self-governance may not be a competitor to the more familiar ‘reasonableness’ approaches to conflict. There is the higher-order question of whether we should do what’s rational or what’s reasonable in the face of conflict. Perhaps this question is to be settled instrumentally; in so far as we want to achieve certain values, we should deal with political conflict in a way that is reasonable in light of those values, and in so far as we want to do what’s rational given the structure of the conflict itself, then we should, I have suggested in most cases, self-govern. Indeed, perhaps the reasons of rationality based on structure cannot be weighed against the reasons deriving from substantive values on which reasonableness is based; like epistemic reasons, reasons of rationality based on structure cannot be put together with reasons based on substantive values. In this case, we would have two distinct and autonomous normative domains.

Although the rationality of a way of dealing with conflict is distinct from the reasonableness of a way of doing so, in the case we started with—political conflict in liberal democracies—the two naturally come together. This is because the activity of self-governance is itself of substantive value, and thus it might be reasonable for a society to respond to conflict by self-governing. While it may not be reasonable for totalitarian regimes to self-govern in the face of conflict, it is arguably reasonable for liberal democracies to respond to conflict in this way.

A core ideal of liberal democracy is neutrality with respect to substantive values, but neutrality is compatible with a polity having its own rational identity or character. The United States, for instance, is a liberal democracy with an arguably adversarial, atomistic, individualistic, rights-protecting character, while, say, Sweden and Singapore are liberal democracies with an arguably more communitarian and less rights-based character. By collectively deciding to resolve conflicts in light of the self-reflective question, a society can *make* its own rational identity. The rational identities of today's liberal democracies, such as they are, are typically not *made* by those democracies but have passively grown out of the whirl of each social organism.

If, as I have suggested, conflicts with a certain structure are the basis on which it is rational to self-govern in both individual and social cases of conflict, then practical conflicts are essential to the rational lives of individuals and polities alike. Rather than being a blight on the human condition, practical conflicts make possible the exercise of our distinctive rational capacities to make ourselves into the rational creatures that we are and to create the rational polities in which we live.¹³

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