

Comment by Marvin Kohl on Kolenda Article

Professor Kolenda's paper raises two major questions: First, is it true that adopting a consensus in cases of serious moral disagreement is always better than declining or failing to do so? And second, to what extent is consensual global pluralism a realistic and effective way of harmonizing the diverse interests of the world's populations?

That consensus is a moral value is a proposition which can scarcely be doubted. That agreement is always better than the lack of it is, however, a proposition which has been both fanatically maintained and denied. But if we follow Kolenda's suggestion that consensual pluralism addresses itself only to "harm-creating disagreements" and not to intrinsically undesirable states of affairs, then the first question is not a difficult one. As a teleologist one may say that consensus is preferable to disagreement if and only if that state of affairs, or perhaps the rule under which it falls, produces or will probably produce a greater balance of good over evil. One may, for example, face a situation where negotiations are taking place between an open and a closed society. In the open society members have natural rights which are protected by law and the general moral sentiment. In the closed society individuals have no rights except those which the state gives them and members of non-Aryan groups are exterminated. The issue for the open society is whether to adopt the latter's code or to go to war. Now some

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may wish to argue that in some situations war is a mistake and that appeasement is the best alternative. But no teleologist can consistently maintain that—no matter what the consequences—agreement is always preferable.

The second question is more difficult because it raises some very large preliminary issues, which I can only touch upon briefly. (1) Even as a rule of thumb it does not seem to be true that "the more behavior-guiding principles a group shares, the more it functions as a moral community." Morality depends on the nature of the respective rules and not their quantity. (2) If full rationality necessarily involves being disinterested or impartial, then it is especially problematic in the political arena because the role of a politician is largely and almost always defined as that of representing one party more than the other. Like many philosophical approaches to politics, Kolenda seems to be appealing to disinterested rationality in a world where rationality is, in fact, almost never disinterested. (3) Kolenda points out that many populations reject the norms of parliamentary democracy. But if this is true, as I think it is, then it is difficult to understand why consensualism and pluralism, two underpinnings of political democracy, should prove to be ideologically more palatable for those populations. (4) And perhaps most important, although he describes several obstacles to world unification, Kolenda fails to mention two of the most serious: nationalism or the herd instinct which tends to overpower rationality and the love of power which is often eagerly accepted as its substitute.

Where nationalism and love of power are rampant, and this appears to be the normal course of international politics, it is difficult to see how the proposed method can be significantly effective. If we add to this scenario an ideological rejection of altruism, consensualism, and an almost horrified rejection of the idea of pluralism because it allows for departures from the "true faith"—as recently illustrated by developments in Iran—then the picture becomes grim. Indeed, one may be tempted to say that where the method is most needed, it is least effective. And even if we temper this criticism and say that the success of public policy does not turn on its ability to handle the hardest cases, we have to add that neither does it just depend on its ability to handle the easiest.