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### Paper:

McQueen, P. (2017). When Should we Regret?. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 25(5), 608-623.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1381408>

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## When should we regret?

### **Introduction**

Many of our lives are infused with regrets; they form a major part of our emotional landscape. Indeed, regret plays an important role in making sense of who we are. It reflects who we take ourselves to be and how we feel about the lives we have led. Our decision-making is also affected by it. We often worry about whether we will come to regret a choice, especially one involving a major life decision. Given the prevalence of regrets in human life, it is important to consider what attitude we ought to adopt toward it. Imagine that you regret buying a second-hand car, going to see a terrible movie, drinking a second bottle of wine, having a child, marrying Michael instead of George, or choosing to change sex. Should you resist and simply shrug off some or all these regrets, or can it sometimes appropriate to accept them? What sorts of considerations and reasons can and should guide our response to our regrets?

In this paper, I develop and defend the “Justified Decision Perspective” (JDP) on regret. I claim that one should not regret a past decision that one has made so long as it was justified in relation to the kind of person one was at the time of acting. On this time-indexing account, judging a decision to be justified – at least for the purposes of assessing one’s regrets – is a matter of identifying the practical reasons that were epistemically available to the agent when she was deliberating about what to do. Accordingly, when responding to her regrets, an agent should not invoke (a) reasons that existed but were epistemically unavailable to her when she was deliberating; or (b) reasons that only came into existence after she acted. As will be shown, the JDP has important implications for prospective regret. In particular, it implies that we should worry less about experiencing regret in the future than many of us do. Thus, my overall aim is to show that we often have reason to reject our regrets, which means that regret should play a less prominent and painful role in our lives than it does currently.

### **What is regret?**

Regret is a complex emotion that resists easy description and reductive discussion (Landman, 1993). According to Williams (1981, 27), ‘the constitutive thought of regret in general is something like “how much better if it had been otherwise”’. Thus, regret is comparative: one judges two or more events in relation to each other and decides that the non-actual is/are preferable to the actual (Gilovich and Medvec 1995, 380; Van Dijk and Zeelenberg 2005, 152; Zeelenberg et al. 2000, 522). Regret has both an affective and a cognitive dimension: one must have certain feelings and make judgements in order to experience regret.<sup>1</sup> Hence, Landman (1993, 36) describes it as ‘an experience of felt-reason or reasoned-emotion’, whilst Gilovich and Medvec (1995, 379) note that ‘there is general consensus that regret is an unusually cognitively-laden or cognitively-determined emotion’.

Any event or occurrence can be the object of regret, as when one regrets the outcome of an election, the occurrence of a tornado, a nuclear disaster or the necessity of going to war. However, when philosophers discuss regret they normally have in mind a specific type, namely agent regret. It is this form of regret that is discussed in the paper and to which I refer when using the term “regret” (unless otherwise specified). Agent regret involves the thought that I wish that *I* had acted otherwise and hence involves a form of retrospective *self*-assessment (Rorty 1980). This can be contrasted with “impersonal” regret, in which one regrets events that are not the direct result of one’s agency.<sup>2</sup> Agent regret involves being *pained* by a decision, or set of decisions, that one made that one judges to be regrettable. This constitutes a form of *self-reproach* (Jacobson 2013, 104), wherein one criticises or blames oneself for acting as one did. The pain of regret is one reason why we try to avoid it.

In addition to the experience of regret itself, we are also able to adopt a “second-order” or “reflective” perspective on it: we can decide that our regret is appropriate or inappropriate, with the result that we either accept or reject our regrets. By “accept” I mean that a person acknowledges that she has good reasons for regretting what she did. Accordingly, she should not resist or struggle against her regret. A person who accepts her regret “holds onto” it as a painful reminder of her past action(s); she accepts that she is right to experience regret. She might do this so that her regret functions as a spur to help her to avoid making similar mistakes

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<sup>1</sup> As Hampshire (1959, 241) writes, the question “do you regret that decision?” is a question that requires me to *think* and to think practically about the decision, and not merely to inspect my feelings’.

<sup>2</sup> Although see Jacobson (2013) and Wallace (2013, 33–45) for a critique of the agent / impersonal regret distinction.

in the future or because it is an important aspect of her self-understanding and her relationship with her past. Conversely, by “reject” I mean that a person “resists” or “struggles against” her regret. Thus, the person who rejects her regrets will try to shrug it off; she will tell herself *not* to regret what she did.<sup>3</sup> Again, there may be a variety of reasons why she would do this. A person’s evaluative relation to their regret is indicative of a general capacity and tendency to adopt attitudes toward our emotional states. We often tell ourselves (and each other) to accept or reject our guilt, anger, envy, shame, grief and the like.<sup>4</sup> I am interested in determining how one should decide what attitude to adopt toward one’s regrets.

Both the thoughts constitutive of regret itself (“if only I had studied harder for my exams...”) and the ability to accept or reject such judgements (“but I’m not going to beat myself up over it”) are guided by a person’s “evaluative framework”. This denotes the complex network of values, desires, beliefs and projects through which she makes sense of herself, her life and the world around her. For example, it is because I value academic success that I regret my failure to study harder; it is because I cherish family life that I regret spending so much time at the office. If I do not care about these things – if they are not part of my evaluative framework – then it is hard to see how I can have regrets about them.<sup>5</sup> This is one way in which our regrets reflect and constitute who we are: they highlight those things which have significance for us because we wish that they had gone better. As Wallace (2013, 46) writes, ‘The evaluative beliefs that regret normally involves focus on an object to which one ascribes value, saying of that object that things are in a bad way with it’. One question this raises, which I explore below, is how to make sense of our attitude towards our regrets given that our evaluative frameworks change over time, sometimes quite radically. My major claim is that people often invoke bad

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<sup>3</sup> I do not assume or imply that we will necessarily be successful in adopting these second-order attitudes. Deciding that one has good reason to reject one’s regret does not mean that the regret will automatically dissipate or even diminish. Our emotions can be recalcitrant and relatively cognitively impenetrable. For example, feelings of guilt can persist even when one believes that one is not responsible for what occurred. Nevertheless, it is still important to reject one’s guilt, if it is inappropriate. This can help to alleviate it, just as rejecting one’s regret can contribute to its diminishment.

<sup>4</sup> A cautionary note: in speaking of “accepting” one’s regrets, or other emotional states, I do not mean that one should *indulge* or become *obsessed* with them. There is a fine but important line between acknowledging that one should feel guilty or regretful, and becoming consumed such feelings. As Rorty (1980, 501) warns, regret ‘can become a self-indulgent attitude... A person can savor regret, even wallow in it, dramatizing its occasions... Confessions of regret can be disarming, even addictive... Eliciting sympathy can come to be the whole point of regret’. I can accept my anger and resentment with my colleague without spending every waking minute plotting my revenge. The person who accepts their regret is not the sad drunk in the bar who repeatedly informs people that he could have had a great career in music.

<sup>5</sup> This, I think, is why a common response to a person expressing regret about something they did is to tell them, “but it doesn’t matter” – we want the person to see that they should not *care* about what they did and hence that they should not regret their actions.

reasons for accepting their regrets (or, perhaps more accurately, for not rejecting them). Specifically, they tend to be guided by questionable conceptions of personal identity and justification for their actions that overlook the transformative nature of many of their decisions, the time-indexing of their evaluative frameworks and the epistemic situation in which they deliberate.

### **The Justified Decision Perspective**

The JDP states that regret is inappropriate, and thus should be rejected, if the agent who is subject to regret about an action, *A*, was justified in undertaking that action at the time it was made, regardless of how she later feels about *A*. By “justified” I mean “supported by reasons grounded in an agent’s practical identity that were epistemically available to her when she was deciding what to do”.<sup>6</sup> A person’s practical identity is, in short, what she has reason to do. This includes her reflectively-endorsed values, projects, social roles and normative commitments. Thus, for a decision to be justified, in the sense that I intend it here, is for it to be intelligible or coherent, given who I am (i.e. given my practical identity). If I value philosophy and desire an academic career, then I am justified in studying philosophy at university; if I value family life and caring for others, then I am justified in having a child. Accordingly, if one has made a decision that was justified at the time of acting – if it is intelligible / coherent, given who one was when choosing what to do – then one should reject (i.e. resist; repudiate) any feelings of regret about the decision that may arise later. I shall elucidate this position through several examples of common, everyday regrets.

Consider first an instance of what I shall term “action regret”, which is agent regret about a specific decision that one has made:

#### *Culinary misfortune*

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<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, a large, complex debate about justification for one’s beliefs and actions. Roughly, externalists hold that something is justified if there exists a reason for it, regardless of the agent’s epistemic relation to that reason. Conversely, internalists hold that justification is tied to what the agent actually knows or believes. I am assuming that internalism is the right way to think about justification, at least in relation to regret. I cannot offer an in-depth defence of internalism here, but I do offer some reasons in support of it in the next section.

Sam is the kind of person who values new culinary experiences, which reflects a more general disposition of hers to seek out novelty and to take risks. She goes out for dinner with some friends. Perusing the menu, she decides to try an exotic food that she has not had before. Unfortunately, Sam has a negative reaction to it and is soon throwing it up again. She deeply regrets her decision and admonishes herself for choosing as she did.

The JDP states that regret is inappropriate if one's decision was justified at the time it was made. This is the case with Sam. Given Sam's practical identity, she should have chosen the dish. Furthermore, knowledge of what it will be like to taste the exotic food in question is inaccessible to Sam *until* she has tasted it (relying on her friend's description of what the dish tastes like will not be sufficient for Sam). Within this epistemic context, and given her practical identity, Sam had good reasons to eat the food and hence she was justified in doing so. Accordingly, she should reject her feelings of regret. Note that this is compatible with Sam's taking steps to make herself feel better, which could include a resolution never to eat that dish again. Furthermore, rejecting her regret is compatible with expressing frustration at her ignorance of the effect that the food would have on her. Sam might even be able to wish that she was not such an adventurous person. The key point, however, is that she should not reproach herself for, or be pained by, the decision that she made; she should resist her regret.

Contrast this with an example of action regret involving an unjustified decision:

*Bad date*

David typically avoids alcohol because he does not like its taste and he reacts badly to it. He gets intoxicated quickly, is an annoying drunk and has terrible hangovers. He goes on a first-date with someone that he finds attractive. His date orders a very alcoholic cocktail as an aperitif. In a bid to make a good impression, and against his better judgement, David orders one too. Soon after drinking it he is making inappropriate jokes, telling boring stories too loudly and generally making a very poor first-impression. Waking up the next morning with a throbbing head, David strongly regrets his decision and angrily rebukes himself.

David should accept his regret, for he lacked good reasons to make the decision he did. He knows the negative effects that alcohol has on him. Furthermore, his chances of making a good impression on his date were always likely to be hindered by the decision he took, given his tendency for negative reactions to such food. Crucially, all this information was available to David when he acted as he did. By accepting his regret, David can use it as a spur to improve his decision-making in the future.

*Culinary misfortune* and *bad date* represent straightforward examples of everyday, relatively minor instances of regret. The object of the regret is a single, inconsequential action. However, many of our regrets focus on significant aspects of our lives and our character. Call this more complex type of regret “existential regret”. This form of regret has a much greater import for one’s ability to affirm one’s identity and the life that one leads. Although existential regret involves reflection on my past actions, I may not be able isolate any single decision or action as the object of regret. Rather, the object of my regret is the cumulative effect of a series of decisions that have strongly shaped, and represent, who I am. Consider:

#### *Career dissatisfaction*

Kim is 48 years of age. She is a successful investment banker who has, until recently, enjoyed her career. However, she now finds herself deriving little to no value from her work and yearns for the life of an eco-activist. Not only does investment banking lack any real meaning for her, but she also finds the life that supports it dissatisfying. She is also troubled by the vast profits of her company, and her own large salary, in a world riven with economic inequalities and poverty. All in all, she deeply regrets having become an investment banker and thus wishes that she had lived a different life. If she could turn the clock back by thirty years, then she would tell Kim-at-18 not to study economics at university but instead to seek work with an environmental NGO. Her current life would be much better, she reasons, if she had followed this alternative path. She thus reproaches herself for the decisions she has made and she is pained by thoughts of the road not taken.

I take this to be a common type of regret, one which many of us have been subject to (whether it be about career choices, romantic relationships, or how we spent our free-time). What sort of attitude should Kim try to cultivate toward her regret – should she resist or accept it? The

JDP states that Kim's attitude toward her regret should be guided by whether her choices at past time  $T$  were justified in relation to the kind of person that Kim was at  $T$ , rather than who she is at the present moment  $M$ . In *Career dissatisfaction*, Kim at  $M$  regrets the decisions that she made at times  $T$  prior to  $M$ . However, Kim is clearly a different person at  $M$  compared to many past times  $T$ . Kim-at-25 did enjoy the world of finance and thought that it was a highly valuable, meaningful way to spend a life. It is Kim *now* that no longer feels this way. The key question, then, is whether the decisions that Kim made in the past are ones that she has reason to regret, *given who she was then*, rather than *who she is now*.

We can easily imagine how this could be the case. For example:

### *Parental pressure*

Joe very much wanted to study music at university but, out of deference to his parents' wishes, and contrary to his preferences, he chose to study physics. Despite forging a successful career academic career, Joe cannot help thinking about what his life would have been like if he had become a classical musician. Now, looking back over his life, he regrets succumbing to his parent's wishes and failing to pursue a career in music.

In this scenario, Joe's regrets are appropriate because his decision did not reflect his core values and preferences at the time of acting. He knew that he preferred to study music and, we can assume, he wanted to be able to resist the pressure applied by his parents. Rather than trying to reject his regret, Joe should accept it as an important lesson that will help him to make better decisions in the future. For example, if Joe has children, then he will be more sensitive to their own wishes when they deviate from what he thinks would be best for them (whereas if he rejected his regret he could be more likely to force his children down undesired career paths).

Such reasoning is not available to Kim. She did enjoy economics when she was younger and she wanted to study it. There was nothing questionable about her chain of decision-making relative to who she was when she was younger. The problem in *Career dissatisfaction* is that Kim is using her current evaluative framework to assess her past decisions. Given that one's evaluative framework is always relative to the type of person one is at a certain time, Kim should not use her current sense of self to assess the justifiability of the decisions that she made



in past. Her interests, desires and beliefs are all sufficiently different to foreclose the possibility of using her present evaluative framework to judge the decisions made by her younger self as regretful.

Kim can, of course, say that she should have acted differently in the past *knowing what she does now*. However, it is precisely this knowledge that was inaccessible to Kim-at-18 or Kim-at-31. Thus, such information cannot count as a reason against the justifiability or rationality of Kim's past decisions, at least when one considers them within the normative and epistemic context that they were taken. Crucially, Kim had *no* reason at *T* to assume that she would become the kind of person she is at *M*. Kim could *not* have known at *T* what kind of person she would be at *M* and thus at *T* she could not have known how, at *M*, she would feel about her decisions made at *T*. Accordingly, she should not criticise her younger self for making the decisions that she did, for there was nothing to criticise at *T*. Furthermore, she should not now be pained by the choices that she made back then.

The JDP does not imply that Kim should stick with her current career. Given her current dissatisfaction and desire for an alternative career, she has good reason to change jobs. Nevertheless, she should not *regret* the life that she has led up to now. She has no reason to reproach or blame herself for the decisions that she made and she should not be pained by them. It is perfectly consistent to say that (a) one's past decisions do not give one grounds for regret; and (b) one's current dissatisfaction with the outcome of those decisions gives one reason to change the relevant aspects of one's life. The key point is that one should not use one's current frame of assessment, grounded in one's identity, to assess one's past decisions. For the purposes of determining one's attitude toward one's regrets, justification for one's past actions should be tied to who one was back then, not who one is now.

### **Supporting the Justified Decision Perspective**

Several points can be offered in support of the JDP. First, consider the commonly expressed idea of / wish for turning back time. Because Kim and Sam were justified in their decisions, given their respective epistemic situations when choosing what to do, neither of them could have made a better decision at the time. There was no further information that they could have had considered – at least within reasonable practical limits – that would have caused them to

choose differently. Perhaps a biochemist with an extensive knowledge of Sam's body and the food she was eating could have provided information that counted against trying the dish, but this should not be considered as "available" to Sam in any relevant sense of the term. Furthermore, even if Sam was equipped with this information, then she may still have been justified in choosing to eat the dish because she wanted to know what it *tasted* like and that is something that she *necessarily* cannot know until she has eaten it. Thus, both Kim and Sam should reject their regrets.

Contrastively, David and Joe do have good reasons to choose differently, were they able to relive their respective situations. This is because relevant information about their reasons for action was available to them at the time. The situation simply required them to deliberate more carefully and/or to exert more will power. Hence, it is appropriate that David and Joe regret their decisions: they should accept, rather than reject it. As noted, we can also see how David's and Joe's respective regrets will be useful insofar as it will motivate them to avoid making the same mistake again. Conversely, neither Kim nor Sam would benefit from regretting their decisions precisely because each choice was the right one to make *at the time it was made*. The justified decision perspective thus fits well with the beneficial effect that regret has on one's decision-making. When I make a decision that was unjustified, the painful experience of regret is a useful spur to make sure that later decisions are more consistent with who I am (as was the case with David and Joe). However, in cases where the decision was justified, then there is no need to improve my decision making and hence regret is neither useful nor required (as was the case with Kim and Sam).

Second, the JDP does not tie the appropriateness of one's regret with unpleasant or undesirable outcomes. One should not regret a decision just because one does not like its results. Rather, one should regret a decision that one did not have good reason to make when deliberating about what to do, given the available information relevant to one's decision. This reflects the fact that many of the outcomes of a decision can be very hard, if not impossible, to predict – at least from our perspective as situated, fallible agents. Consequently, a bad outcome is not necessarily indicative of a bad decision. Bad outcomes can be more a matter of bad luck than poor decision-making; they can be caused by factors that one could not have taken account of at the time of acting (as was the case with both Kim). Thus, such undesirable outcomes ought not be used to reproach oneself for choosing as one did. To do so is to judge oneself in relation to an

unobtainable epistemic ideal and to generate a great deal more regrets than is necessary or useful.

Third, accepting one's regret about justified decisions with poor outcomes can be detrimental to one's future decision-making. Imagine that Sam goes out for dinner again and must choose between an exotic dish and something that she has had before. Let us assume that latter dish is not one of her favourites and that the exotic one will taste delicious and have no adverse effect on her. Were it not for her experience in *Culinary misfortune*, she would plump for the exotic dish. However, with her regret still strong in her memory, Sam chooses the known dish and thus has a less enjoyable dinner than if she had chosen the exotic dish. If she had rejected her regret, then she would have acted in a way that is more consistent with her practical identity. Hence, because her attitude toward her regret was guided by the bad outcome, rather than the quality of the decision itself, she ends up making a worse decision when faced with a relevantly similar situation.

It is instructive to contrast these observations with Wallace's account of regret. According to Wallace, to regret a past action is to form an intention to act differently if a similar situation arises or how, counterfactually, one would have acted if the situation could be replayed (Wallace 2013, 63). Crucially, this intention is 'a resolution that... is formed in the light of knowledge of what has actually happened in the interim' (Wallace 2013, 63). Thus, one's intention is shaped by hindsight: given what I know now, and given how I and my life have changed since, I would have done X instead of Y. This has the following implication. Imagine that Sam's negative reaction to her dinner means that she forms the intention not to have chosen the dish. Counterfactually, she forms the intention to have acted otherwise. The result is that Sam has the intention to act contrary to what she has most reason to do within the epistemic and normative context of her choice. This is because, as noted above, she cannot know, prior to eating the dish, how she will react. At the time of acting, she only knows that she enjoys eating exotic dishes and that she wants to know what the dish tastes like. To form an intention based upon hindsight, when that hindsight involves information that was inaccessible at the time of acting, can lead to intentions that contravene what the agent has good / most reason to do.

Fourth, the JDP can prevent one's regrets casting one's past life in a more negative light than is the case. Accepting one's existential regrets may lead to assume that one's past life was less

enjoyable than it was. For example, Kim may come to believe that she did not enjoy her life as a banker, thus letting her regret distort her recollections of her past. This may not necessarily occur, but it seems reasonable to assume that it becomes more likely if Kim accepts, rather than resists, her feelings of regret. If Kim were to struggle against her regret, then she will see that she was right to choose as she did. This can help her to view her past accurately, so that she acknowledges how much she enjoyed her past life whilst still confronting her present dissatisfaction.

Fifth, and finally, the JDP fits with Rorty's assertion that *akrasia* is intricately intertwined with regret (Rorty 1980, 499–500). That is, the JDP accounts for the fact that we do sometimes act “out of character” or without proper reflection on what we want to do. In such cases, regret is appropriate. For example, a normally cautious individual may make a spur of the moment decision to buy a second-hand car without first having it checked over by an experienced mechanic. When the car duly breaks down the person can justifiably regret their decision. Admittedly, this account requires that people obtain a sufficient level of self-awareness and critical reflection before making decisions for these decisions to be considered justified. However, this is in accord with common and reasonable assumptions about how people should act. It is part of being self-reflective, responsible agents that we are expected to reflect on what our beliefs, values and desires are, as well as what they give us reason to do. Failure to do so leaves us vulnerable to regret. Acting in accord with our practical identities is how we make justified decisions and, I am claiming, ensure that either we do not experience regret or, if we do, then we are warranted in rejecting our regret.

### **Je ne regrette rien?**

My claim that we should reject many of our regrets strikes a chord with Bittner's discussion of regret. It is thus useful to contrast them. Bittner (1992) argues that it is *never* reasonable to regret what one did, as this only makes things worse by adding the misery of regret to the original misery of having acted badly. It is better, he claims, to acknowledge one's wrong and to move on *without* thereby suffering the added pain of regret. Thus, the entirely reasonable person would not experience regret. This does not mean that she denies that she has ever erred or wronged someone: she is not callous, amoral or indifferent to the effects of her actions. She is fully attentive to any mistakes that she has made, but she does not *feel* regret. Thus, she is

not *pained* by her past actions (Bittner 1992, 267). Indeed, Bittner (1992, 271–272) argues that we can ‘perhaps live better’ if we do not experience feelings of regret. This is because we may be able to reflect more accurately on our past actions if we are free from the clouding effect of regret, which can distort our assessment of the past.

Bittner’s position is provocative and compelling. However, one problem with Bittner’s argument is that it rests upon the assertion that regret does not play any useful role in our moral decision making and the self-assessment of our lives. That is, we could act and self-reflect just as well *without* experiencing regret. This deviates from the dominant understanding of regret, according to which regret is beneficial because it improves decision-making (Gilovich and Medvec 1995; Zeelenberg 1999; Zeelenberg and Pieters 2007). As Rorty (1980, 501) notes, because regret is ‘a painful feeling that agents are motivated to avoid, properly focused regret can conduce to agent responsibility, sensitizing a person to preventative and remedial measures’. Although regret may not necessarily help to focus our moral gaze, it does seem to help us to make better decisions, both because of the pain at recalling our mistakes and our desire to avoid it in the future. A person who rejected all their regrets would likely be less concerned about making mistakes, precisely because they would not worry about experiencing the pain of regret. This counts against Bittner’s claim that it would be *preferable* that people never experience regret and that we could *act better* if we free its allegedly distorting effects.

A second problem is that Bittner seems to cleave judgement from feeling, implying that the one functions independently of the other. We might wonder whether someone who did not *feel* regret about an immoral action genuinely judged, of fully appreciated, that they had acted wrongly. (Imagine someone apologising for the wrong that they have done, but informing us that they do not regret what they have done). The very judgement that one acted immorally or irrationally actions seems to have an affective dimension built into it that is inextricably intertwined with the judgement itself. Consequently, a person who feels the pain of regret – at least when it is appropriate to do so – is more likely to act in a more moral or practically rational manner. Bittner is correct that nothing is gained by accepting one’s regret when one’s decision was justified, but he is wrong to think that this generalises to *all* regrets. When one’s action was unjustified at the time of acting, then we want people to feel the pain of regret and it is appropriate that they do so. Whereas Bittner holds that there is *never* any point in crying over spilt milk, I am arguing that we should do so when it is our fault that the milk was spilt.

### Necessary regrets?

In opposition to Bittner, Williams (1981) asserts that regret is an unavoidable consequence of being a rational, responsible agent. To insist on a form of rationality that is entirely devoid of regrets would, Williams (1981, 29) claims, ‘suggest a large falsehood: that we might, if we conducted ourselves clear-headedly enough, entirely detach ourselves from the unintentional aspects of our actions... and yet still retain our identity and character as agents’. To fail to feel regret about the consequences of one’s actions (intended or otherwise) is to distance oneself from them and hence to fail to take responsibility for them. This extends to actions and events that we are causally but not morally responsible for. Williams’s famous example is that of a lorry driver who, through no fault of his own, runs over a child. Williams suggests that there would be something suspicious about the lorry driver if he failed to experience regret. For, although we would likely console the lorry driver about what he did (for he is not morally culpable), ‘it is important this this is seen as something that should need to be done, and indeed some doubt would be felt about a driver who too blandly or readily moved to that position [of being regret-free]’ (1981, 28). Thus, Williams seems to suggest that the lorry driver *should* feel agent regret about his actions, at least initially. The JDP differs significantly from Williams on this point. The JDP asserts that the driver should, ideally, feel no agent regret. If she does, then she should *reject* her regret. The differences can be brought out if we characterise the case in more detail than Williams provides. Consider:

#### *Careful driver*

Sarah is driving her lorry at an appropriate speed for the area she is in. She is alert and focused on the road. She can neither see nor hear any evidence of children playing (she is not listening to music, which could prevent her hearing this). Suddenly, a child runs out of the road in front of her. Sarah slams on her brakes, but she is too close to the child and knocks him down.

Assume that Sarah feels deep regret about what she has done. Williams seems to hold both that she should do so and that she cannot but help do so (at least, if she wants to retain her identity as a responsible agent). The JDP states that she should not. This is because her actions were entirely justified at the time she made them. Knowledge that children were playing, and that

one of them was about to run into the road, was epistemically inaccessible to her. Such information may have been available to someone with greatly enhanced hearing or x-ray vision, but this is irrelevant to Sarah's situation. Equipped with the knowledge that she had, and could reasonably be expected to have, she should not have acted differently. Thus, she should resist and seek to overcome her feelings of regret. Furthermore, we should not expect her to feel regret or to blame her if she fails to do so. Finally, and crucially, Sarah ought not to alter her driving in the future (should she feel able to get behind the wheel again), for there was nothing problematical with it.

Imagine that Sarah not only already agrees with the JDP, but has internalised it to such an extent that she does not feel any regret about what *she* has done. She may be very sad, distressed, perhaps even horrified, that a child has been hit by a lorry, she may even be in shock to have witnessed the event at such close quarters. Indeed, she may feel deep impersonal regret about what has occurred. However, at no point does she reproach herself or beat herself up; she is not pained by thoughts of how she could have acted otherwise. This may strike us odd, perhaps even callous. Certainly, Williams thinks that we will and should react to Sarah in this way. Indeed, it seems he wants to argue that Sarah's response is psychologically impossible, or at least 'an insane concept of rationality' (Williams 1981, 29). However, what, precisely, is Sarah meant to be experiencing *agent* regret about? What is she meant to reproach herself for doing? What can we reproach or otherwise criticise her for doing? She can, of course, wish that she had had knowledge that was necessary unavailable to her when she was driving along the street. However, this is precisely what I am arguing that she should not do, for we should judge our actions in the light of what can be reasonably expected of us, given our epistemic, cognitive and sensory limitations. Contra Williams's claim, it is not clear that Sarah's reaction is rationally impossible or psychologically insane. Furthermore, it is hard to see why Sarah's failure to regret would undermine or destroy her identity as a responsible agent (cf. Bittner 1992). Indeed, it seems to me to be an eminently desirable reaction for her to have and one that we should expect her to have.

### **Prospective regret**

Not only do we often look back with regret on our past choices, we also worry (sometimes greatly, even pathologically) about coming to regret the decisions that we make now. The JDP

has important implications for such fears. Given that we should not regret decisions that were justified at the time of acting, then we should not worry about later regretting such decisions. This does not mean that the future is irrelevant to our attitude toward our regrets. Knowing how I will feel in the future about a decision that I make now can count as a reason for or against it. Imagine that I am sitting down to eat my supper. There is a large amount of food on the table. I know that I dislike the feeling of eating too much and that I always regret over-eating. Knowledge of my what my future feelings and preferences will be gives me a reason now to resist over-eating. If I do over-eat, then my regret will be appropriate: I knew I had good reason not to eat so much food. Because I know – at least with a strong degree of confidence, if not infallibly – how I will feel about my decision in the future, then this knowledge contributes toward the justification (or lack of) for my action. Consequently, it is useful to think about my future regret as it can help me to stop eating before I am too full.

However, there will be cases when I *cannot* know how I will feel in the future about a decision that I am making now. When this is the case, I cannot invoke my future desires and preferences as reasons for / against my present decision. They do not count toward / against the justification of my choice because they are unavailable to me when deliberating about what to do. Such cases arise when my evaluative framework – that is, my practical identity, consisting of my core values, preferences, desires and projects – is constitutively altered by the choice I make. In other words, I should not worry about future regret when my choice involves a “transformative experience” (Paul 2014). Transformative experiences change who you are; they ‘change your point of view, and by extension, your personal preferences, and perhaps even the kind of person that you are or at least take yourself to be’ (Paul 2014, 16). More specifically, a transformative experience ‘can fundamentally change your own point of view so much and so deeply that, before you’ve had the experience, you can’t know what it is going to be like to be you after the experience. It changes your subjective value for what it is like to be you, and changes your core preferences about what matters’ (Paul 2014, 17).

Such experiences are transformative in two ways: epistemically and personally. They are epistemically transformative because they provide you with knowledge of what something is like, which you could not have known prior to the experience. They are personally transformative because they change your evaluative framework, that is, your preferences, values, desires and the like. Examples of transformative experiences include having a child, undergoing major surgery, serious traumas, changing sex/gender, giving one’s child a cochlear



implant, moving country and changing career (for discussion of several of these, see Paul, 2014). When confronted with a transformative experience, one cannot know *prior* to making the decision (a) what it will be like have the experience itself; and (b) how the experience will change one's evaluative framework. One is faced with an unavoidable ignorance: 'ignorance about what it will be like to undergo the experience and ignorance about how the experience will change you' (Paul 2014, 32).

Imagine deliberating about whether to change jobs or to have a child. In either case, you cannot know in advance what the experience will be like and how it will change you as a person. This means that you cannot know whether you will regret having changed jobs or having had a child *until you have done so*. Assume, at time *A*, that Kim decides to give up banking and become an eco-activist. Later, at time *B*, she discovers that being an eco-activist is not what she imagined it would be like, despite her best efforts at researching this career and examining her feelings about the matter. Kim is deeply dissatisfied with her career and regrets her decision. This dissatisfaction counts as a reason against Kim's being an eco-activist. However, it does so at *B* but not *A*, for knowledge of her dissatisfaction was inaccessible to Kim at *A*. Kim's regret at *B* does not reach backwards in time to *A* – it does not count as a reason against her decision to change jobs when she is deliberating about what to do. It would if Kim could know how she will feel at *B*, but this is precisely what she is ignorant of.

Unlike the case of over-eating outlined above, when faced with a transformative experience I cannot know whether I will regret it later. Such knowledge is *necessarily* inaccessible to me at the time of acting. Consequently, when faced with such decisions, I should not worry about prospective regret. Furthermore, I should not consider the possibility of regretting my decision as a relevant reason against it. All that I should focus on are my present reasons for action, which do not include my future evaluation of the action because I cannot know what this will be. There is no way of bridging the epistemic and normative gap between one's pre- and post-transformative experience self. Just as we should reject our regrets about choices that were justified at the time we made them, so we should reject our worries about future regret when we have good reasons to make the decision at the time of deliberation.

There are practical benefits in adopting this perspective on prospective regret. We can readily imagine a person who worries a great deal about whether they will come to regret their choices. Such worry may become stultifying, with the result that it is extremely hard for them to make

any significant decision whatsoever. They agonise over whether to change jobs, to move cities or to start a family. The position developed in this paper can be used to try to convince the person that their concerns are misplaced. They should not fret about whether they will later regret decisions involving transformative experiences. What matters is what they have reason to do now, rather than what they might have reason to do in the future. If the person were to adopt the JDP, then it will have a therapeutic effect on them. It will help to alleviate their fears of future regret, at least when faced with major life decisions.

## **Conclusion**

Our lives are often littered with regrets. Looking back on our lives, we often reproach ourselves for acting as we did. Furthermore, we worry about coming to regret the decisions that we make now. Given the frequency with which we experience regret, what should our attitude toward it be? In this paper, I have outlined the Justified Decision Perspective as a means of determining when to accept and when to reject our regrets. I have argued that we should reject regrets that we have about decisions which we took that were justified in relation to our practical identity and epistemic context at the time of acting. Thus, we should not use our later knowledge or evaluative framework to judge the appropriateness of our regrets. When we know that an action of ours was justified when we made it, then we should resist any feelings of regret we may have about it.

The JDP has important implications for prospective regret. It shows that we ought not to worry about whether we will come to regret a decision to undergo a transformative experience. This is because we cannot know how we will feel about our decision until we have had the decision. Thus, we cannot invoke our future feelings, including possible regret, as a reason against our decision. Given the inaccessibility of our future evaluative framework, which is constitutively altered by the experience itself, we should not worry about regretting our decision. What matters is whether we have good reasons for making our choice at the time of acting. Adopting the JDP can help us to manage our regrets by providing a framework for determining when to accept and when to resist them. This, in turn, can contribute to a reduction in the prevalence and pain of regret within our lives.

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