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Personal Value, Biographical Identity, and Retrospective Attitudes

Camil Golub

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Abstract

We all could have had better lives, yet often do not wish that our lives had gone differently, especially when we contemplate alternatives that vastly diverge from our actual life course. What, if anything, accounts for such conservative retrospective attitudes? I argue that the right answer involves the significance of our personal attachments and our biographical identity. I also examine other options, such as the absence of self-to-self connections across possible worlds and a general conservatism about value.

Keywords: personal value, biographical identity, regret, affirmation.

1 The puzzle

We routinely make judgments about how good our lives are, or could have been. And when we judge that certain lives would have been better or worse for us, this usually supports retrospective attitudes like regret and affirmation that align with those judgments. Sometimes, however, we judge that certain lives would have been better for us, all things considered, and yet do not regret having missed out on those lives. Indeed, we affirm our actual lives when comparing them to those better alternatives.

Here is an example:

France Suppose that I justifiably believe that, if my parents had emigrated to France when I was a child, my life would have been better, according to my actual standards for a good life. Nevertheless, I do not regret having missed out on this better life.¹

¹This is inspired by a discussion I once had with my father, in which he revealed his regret for not having emigrated to France shortly after the 1989 Romanian Revolution, when he and my mother

How can we make sense of this combination of attitudes?

Note that FRANCE cannot be diagnosed as an instance of the familiar conflict between moral concerns and self-interest or prudential value: the setup is not that, had my parents emigrated to France years ago, the world would have been better from an impartial point of view.² Nor is it that my life in France would have been better from a self-interested point of view, but I prefer my actual life for moral reasons. Rather, the tension arises between self-regarding retrospective attitudes. I judge that a certain life would have been better *for me*, and yet I affirm my actual life *for my own sake*. This is what makes the case so puzzling.

This conservative bias is pervasive in our retrospective outlook. There are many better lives we could have had—e.g., lives in which we would have grown up in better neighborhoods, gone to better schools, or made wiser decisions in our youth—and which we nevertheless do not regret, even upon careful reflection. How can we account for such conservative attitudes?³

Before exploring this question, some clarifications are in order. First, I understand regret and affirmation as retrospective preferences: for instance, to regret that one did not go on vacation last summer is to wish that one had gone on vacation. I will have little to say about the emotions that often accompany such preferences, like bitterness or nostalgia. Secondly, I will assume that we can regret states of affairs over which we had little or no control, such as the fact that World War Two happened, or that one did not win the lottery.⁴ Finally, I will focus on regret and affirmation with respect to entire life courses. We can, of course, regret certain aspects of our lives while affirming others, but this is not the kind of attitude I will be talking about. I am interested in the answers to such questions as: am I glad that my life went as it did, all things considered, or do I prefer retrospectively an alternative life course?

were still relatively young and I was a young child. I remember thinking that I would have probably had a better life growing up in France, rather than in the poor and unstable Romania of the 1990s. And yet I did not regret that better possible life; I was glad that my family had stayed in Romania.

²Compare with the main question discussed by Wallace (2013): how can we affirm the value of many things in our lives, and even our existence as such, given that this seems to entail affirming past events that made the world objectively worse? If, say, the Rwandan genocide had not taken place, many events that have shaped my life would not have happened either: for example, I probably would not have met my spouse. If I believe that it is overall better that I did meet my spouse, then it looks like I am committed to affirming features of the world that are objectively lamentable. Here the following diagnosis seems plausible: from a moral standpoint, I should recognize that it would have been better for the Rwandan genocide not to have happened and thus for me not to have met my spouse, but from a self-interested point of view, it is rational not to regret the things I value in my life. This diagnosis is not available for cases like FRANCE.

³Of course, people often do regret better lives they could have had. The right account of conservative retrospection should allow that such attitudes are rationally permissible.

⁴Perhaps the term *regret* is typically used in relation to states of affairs for which one is at least partially responsible. But it is also used to refer more broadly to retrospective preferences for states of affairs, whether or not those states of affairs involved our agency: for instance, to regret that one did not win the lottery is to wish that one had won the lottery. This is the kind of retrospective attitude I will be talking about, following e.g. Harman (2009) and Wallace (2013).

Two features of our conservative retrospective attitudes stand out. First, it seems that we can rationally affirm our actual lives in virtue of things of disvalue in our past, and not just things that are less valuable than what we could have had. For instance, someone born in poverty who experienced much adversity and hardship in her youth might affirm her actual life when thinking of lives from which those bad experiences would have been absent. Now, this might be because she finds some instrumental value in those intrinsically disvaluable things in her past: perhaps those painful experiences taught her important lessons about solidarity and justice, facilitated valuable relationships, or built her resilience and integrity in the face of hardship. But this need not be the whole story. She might also be attached to those disvaluable experiences as such, independently of their instrumental value, and such an attachment seems rationally permissible.

Secondly, the conservative bias in our retrospective attitudes typically gets stronger the more distant we are in time from the events that could have brought us a better life. If I judge that, had something happened yesterday, I would have had a better life, this gives me stronger reasons for regret than the better life I could have had in FRANCE. Any good theory of these matters should explain why regret tends to recede over time in this way.

Now, let me briefly put aside some possible responses to cases like FRANCE.

Someone might suggest that my lack of regret for the better life I could have had is desirable, because regret is generally harmful to oneself. Or that it is pointless to regret what might have been, because we cannot do anything about the past. This may all be true. But the question I am interested in is whether regret is nevertheless a well-grounded or fitting response in cases like FRANCE, putting aside any prudential considerations that might count against it.

A second response would go as follows: we often do not regret what might have been because we cannot really know that we would have been better off had things gone differently. Perhaps my lack of regret for the life I would have had in FRANCE similarly comes from my uncertainty about what that life would have looked like. But let us assume away such epistemic obstacles. Even if the value of my possible life in FRANCE is questionable, there are again many other possible lives that *would* have been better for me, and which I do not regret. I will keep the discussion focused on FRANCE in what follows, but the puzzle I am articulating is not tied to any specific possible life path, and has little to do with our epistemic limitations.⁵

⁵Setiya (2016) proposes a different epistemic diagnosis, centered on the idea of specificity: even if we know that some possible life would have been better for us, we usually lack access to the particular

Another possible reaction to FRANCE would be to say that it is rational not to regret a better life if one's actual life is *good enough*. But there are a few problems with this response.⁶ First, it does not account for any reasons we have to *prefer* our actual lives when comparing them to better possible ones, and I believe that we do have such reasons. Secondly, it does not explain the following asymmetry between our prospective and retrospective preferences: a good life that we *should* prefer prospectively can turn into a merely possible life that it is rational not to prefer retrospectively. Finally, in some cases regret does seem to be demanded by our circumstances, even if our life is good enough by any reasonable standard. (Think of the moments after botching a job interview.) We need an account that explains the difference between such cases and scenarios like FRANCE.

Someone might also try to redescribe FRANCE as a case where one's personal identity is at issue. For example, Leibniz thought that each of us only exists in one possible world. If this were true, then we could never regret the better lives that *we* could have had, because we only exist in the actual world. And other, less radical theories of personal identity might deliver similar verdicts.

This response touches on something important: our self-conception influences indeed our conservative retrospective attitudes, and the proposal I will defend is in part an attempt to articulate this thought. However, I will take it for granted that our personal identity, understood in an austere metaphysical sense, is not at stake in cases like FRANCE. I find it highly natural to say that the Camil Golub whose parents emigrated to France is numerically identical to me.⁷ So when I find myself not regretting that I did not have his life, this is not grounded in any insight into our metaphysical separateness as persons, but in something else.

Finally, the attitudes that I am talking about—the judgment that a certain life would have been better, combined with a preference for one's actual life—might be dismissed as irrational or confused. This skepticism might take various forms.

facts that make that life better, while we do have specific knowledge of the good things in our actual lives, and this provides support for conservative retrospective attitudes. However, whether we have specific knowledge of our merely possible lives does not seem to be a decisive factor in explaining the rationality of conservative attachment. For instance, I believe my lack of regret would remain reasonable even if I somehow learned everything there was to know about my possible life in FRANCE. The puzzle of conservative retrospection is best explored, then, by ignoring our epistemic limitations with respect to the better lives we could have had.

⁶The first two points are also made by Setiya (2016), fn. 15, p. 9.

⁷Of course, others might not find this as natural as I do. I do not mean to beg any question here against metaphysical accounts of personal identity on which a numerically different person would have taken my place in FRANCE. Rather, my point is that, for those of us who think that we *are* numerically identical to some possible persons with vastly different life paths, lack of regret in cases like FRANCE cannot be explained by beliefs about metaphysical identity.

A first target for skepticism could be the judgment of value on its own. Someone might argue that, while it may be reasonable to think that some possible life would have been better in some respect or other, it is futile to ask how good that life would have been, *all things considered*, let alone to compare its overall value to the value of one's actual life—say, because it is impossible to aggregate and compare the different kinds of value involved in a typical human life.

Now, I concede that assessing the overall value of a life is a difficult task. And my evaluative judgment in FRANCE is not based on any particular theory of what makes a life good, or any solution to worries about the incomparability of values. Nevertheless, I find myself making such global evaluative judgments about my life and other lives I could have had, and I doubt I am alone in this. The mere fact that we make such judgments is enough to give rise to the puzzle, whether or not these judgments can withstand philosophical scrutiny: how is it that we prefer retrospectively our actual lives to lives that we think would have been overall better for us?

A different kind of skeptic would claim that, insofar as we make global judgments about the value of lives, these judgments are revealed in our all-things-considered *preferences*. If this were right, then the combination of attitudes espoused in FRANCE would be psychologically impossible, or would need to be reinterpreted: perhaps what I took to be my all-things-considered judgment about the value of my possible life in FRANCE concerns only the betterness of that life in certain salient respects, while my retrospective attitude of affirmation reveals my true judgment about overall value.

Here too, I can only rely on my phenomenology in a case like FRANCE, and the hope that others will resonate with it. The judgment that I would have had a better life in France presents itself as an assessment of global value, while the preference for my actual life does not: even upon reflection, I would resist the claim that my actual life is better for me, all things considered. Rather, I am glad that I had this life even though I think of my life in FRANCE as overall better. I find it implausible that, as this second kind of skeptic would have it, the content of both my evaluative judgment and my retrospective preference are opaque to me.

The third type of skepticism may be the most corrosive. Someone might concede that our overall judgments of value can come apart from our retrospective preferences, but dismiss those preferences as mere instances of status quo bias, or of what behavioral economists call *the endowment effect*—people's tendency to value what they have more than what they could have.⁸ If we assume away all the pragmatic,

⁸See Thaler (1980) on the endowment effect, Eidelman and Crandall (2012) on status quo bias, and Kahneman et al. (1991) on the connections between the two phenomena and loss aversion.

epistemic and metaphysical issues mentioned above, the thought would be, it is irrational to affirm our actual lives when comparing them to lives that we think would have been better for us.

Now, I believe that such conservative attitudes are rationally permissible, and my goal is to provide an account that makes sense of this. But I do not hope that this account will convince those who do not already see these attitudes as rational. Perhaps, though, even the skeptics might find interest in my project: it could offer them an error *theory*—an explanation of why some people have misguided attitudes about the past.⁹

In what follows, I will examine two possible accounts of cases like FRANCE—David Velleman’s (2015) idea that we cannot regret what might have been because we are not psychologically connected in the right way with the persons we could have been, and G.A. Cohen’s (2012) general conservatism about value—and will explain why I find these accounts wanting. Then I will isolate two sources of support for conservative retrospective attitudes: our personal attachments to people, projects, and other particular valuable things, and a commitment to our biographical identity.¹⁰

2 No selfhood relations?

Velleman (2015) has a radical take on regret for what might have been. On his view, regret is metaphysically confused in scenarios like FRANCE, because such cases do not allow for genuine self-concern. This is not because we are numerically different from the persons we could have been. We *are* metaphysically identical to those persons, Velleman says, but they are not *selves of ours* in the sense that makes intelligible self-regarding attitudes like regret and affirmation.

This view relies on a conception of selfhood developed in Velleman (1996). According to that theory, self-to-self connections obtain just in case one can reflexively pick out in memory or anticipation a past or future self: for instance, I am on “first-personal” terms with my seven-year old self because I am psychologically connected

Note that the standard way of understanding status quo bias and the endowment effect is that they influence both our evaluative judgments and our preferences. But if we are to find here a skeptical diagnosis of our conservative retrospective attitudes, these psychological phenomena would need to be reflected in our preferences but *not* in our judgments of value in the relevant cases.

⁹Even if the best psychological explanation of conservative retrospection is different from what I describe in my account, the skeptics might still be interested in how people like me *rationalize* their conservative biases.

¹⁰Adams (1979) and Harman (2009, 2015) endorse similar claims about the sources of conservative retrospective attitudes, and explanations in terms of personal value can also be found in McMahan (2005) and Wallace (2013). But there has been no systematic discussion of why the right account of conservative retrospection must involve both personal value and our biographical identity, and how this account compares with its rivals.

with him, and thus I can refer to him and his experiences in an unmediated way simply by using the pronoun *I*.¹¹

Such first-personal connections cannot obtain between actual and merely possible persons, Velleman argues. In going back to the common starting point of two possible life paths and then up on a merely possible one, we lose the right kind of internal communication between selves. This rules out genuine first-person reference, and thus the intelligibility of first-personal attitudes like regret (2015: 96):

The person who might have been better off today if I had done differently in the past (...) is inaccessible to my self-concern. Of course, he is who I might have been—that is, who could have been a future self of my past self (...). But (...) selfhood is not transitive: another future self of my past self is not a self of mine. The fate of a merely possible self of mine is no more pertinent to me than anyone else's, since I can only imagine undergoing that fate.

Therefore, on Velleman's view, I can never regret what I could have had, because no self of mine could have had it.

Now, let us put aside any worries we might have about Velleman's conception of selfhood, for instance whether it can characterize the causal and informational connection between selves in a substantive, non-circular way. For our current purposes, the main problem with his view is that it is far too radical: it makes *all* cases of regret for what might have been irrational or confused. But such regret is often reasonable.

Here is just one example:

Admission Sonya applied for several PhD programs in economics, but was not accepted to any of them. Months later, she is working in an administrative job that she does not find enjoyable or fulfilling. Thinking about what might have been, Sonya regrets that her graduate school applications were unsuccessful.

Velleman would issue the same verdict here as in FRANCE, and for the same reason. Sonya's regret is metaphysically confused, because she cannot think of the possible Sonya that was accepted to graduate school as a self of hers. She can perhaps *envy* this merely possible Sonya, but only in the way that she can have such attitudes towards others.

¹¹Psychological connectedness, in Velleman's sense, does not require any *resemblance* between the two connected selves (e.g., any shared memories, desires, or personality traits), but only a causal and informational relation that makes possible direct first-personal reference.

This is wrong. In cases like *ADMISSION*, it is perfectly intelligible to regret the better lives that we could have had, even if we are not psychologically connected with the people we could have been.

Velleman does have something more to say about such cases in which regret for what might have been seems rational. His proposal is that we can feel *vicarious* regret on behalf of our *past* selves, who were deprived of a better future (2015: 96):

When I complain, “I could have been better-off,” I don’t mean, “I have a better-off possible self”; I mean, “I (in the past) had the chance of being better off in the future”.

This diagnosis is also supposed to explain the time-sensitivity of regret: as the distance in time between us and our past selves grows, we become more detached from their interests, and thus our reasons to feel vicarious regret on their behalf get weaker.

However, this explanation does not do justice to the phenomenology of regret for what might have been or to the natural ways in which we articulate and justify such regret to others: we think of some possible individuals as our more fortunate selves, and wish that we were living their lives instead of our actual ones. The right theory of these matters should allow that it is intelligible to conceptualize regret in this way, without any circuitous reinterpretation of our attitudes.

Moreover, we should look for an account that allows for the rational permissibility of regret even in cases like *FRANCE*, where there is a vast difference between one’s actual life and the relevant better life. Regret does not always recede over time. Some people may find that the passage of time leaves their regret intact, or even strengthens their reasons for regret. We should try to make sense of our conservative retrospective attitudes without claiming that people who are less conservative than us must be making a mistake.

Velleman is onto something important.¹² Our self-conception can play a crucial role in opposing regret when we contemplate better lives we could have had: in preferring our actual lives, we often exhibit a commitment to our own identity, in a sense that is distinct from an austere metaphysical notion of personal identity. But the notion of identity that helps make sense of conservative retrospection is not one that conceptually rules out all regret for what might have been. It is something we can weigh against the value of better possible lives, or the disvalue in our actual lives, and neither regret nor affirmation is rationally *required* as a result of this weighing, at least not in most cases. The proposal I will defend makes good on these ideas. Before

¹²This is why I believe his view is worth discussing, despite its implausibility.

getting there, however, let us look at another potential account of our conservative retrospective attitudes.

3 Particular value

The next option I will consider is based on Cohen's (2012) conservatism about value. Cohen's discussion focuses on prospective attitudes: his goal is to articulate the reasons we have for preserving actual valuable things at the expense of new and better ones. But his view can be easily applied to retrospective attitudes as well.

According to Cohen, one major source of support for conservative attitudes is our attachment to *particular value*: valuing something "as the particular valuable thing that it is, and not merely for the value that resides in it" (2012: 148). If an intrinsically valuable thing actually exists, he says, this gives everyone reason to wish to see it preserved, at the expense of new and better things.

This idea can be extended to our retrospective attitudes. If Cohen is right, all particular valuable things in our past give us special reasons to affirm their value, when compared with better but merely possible things. This might explain cases like FRANCE.

Moreover, Cohen's view allows that the normative force of particular value may be overridden if the difference in value between actual things and their alternatives is large enough. This can explain the rationality of regret for what might have been.

Finally, Cohen's notion of particular value also captures the sense that, in cases like FRANCE, the explanation for our attitude of affirmation is not that we assign *more value* to our actual lives. Rather, we value our lives in a special way, when comparing them to lives that we acknowledge would have been *better*.

Despite these virtues, however, Cohen's view faces important problems in accounting for the conservative bias in our retrospective attitudes.

A first issue is that it seems reasonable to have robust conservative attitudes about the past—to affirm our actual lives when comparing them to many better lives we could have had—and yet be less conservative when it comes to preserving actual valuable things or replacing them with new and better things in the future. For instance, someone might be retrospectively attached to the city in which she has lived for a long time, and not wish that she had moved elsewhere years ago, and yet feel ready to move to a different stage in her life, including to a new city that better

meets her needs and aspirations. Cohen’s view seems unable to make sense of such a temporal asymmetry in our attitudes.

Secondly, particular value, as Cohen defines it, gives everyone equal warrant for conservative attitudes. But this does not seem right for the self-regarding attitudes we are interested in. It is implausible, for example, that everyone has equal reason to affirm *my* actual life when comparing it to the better life I could have had in FRANCE.

Finally, not all particular valuable things warrant a conservative bias. Cohen himself acknowledges this when discussing a counterexample to his view, proposed by David Wiggins (Cohen 2012: 160). Think of a rosebush that has intrinsic aesthetic value: there seems to be nothing wrong with replacing it with another rosebush that is qualitatively the same, putting aside any personal attachments we might have to it. In response to this and other challenges, Cohen concedes that perhaps only some things warrant a conservative bias, and notes that this concession invites “an interesting research program, into what forms of value demand preservation and what forms do not” (2012: 165).

I agree that this research program is needed, and it should cover our conservative retrospective attitudes as well: we need a deeper account of why such attitudes are warranted in certain cases, and why they are focused on certain things in our past. Merely appealing to the actuality of our life is not enough.

4 Personal value

I believe that the right account of our conservative retrospective attitudes has two ingredients. The first is personal value.

It is by now a common idea in moral philosophy that we can reasonably value certain things in a privileged way because of the relations we bear to them: for instance, that it is permissible, and perhaps even obligatory, to care more about our own children than about other people’s children.¹³ This idea that can be naturally extended to our retrospective attitudes: our attachments to certain relationships, projects, and other valuable things in our past make it rational for us to exhibit a conservative bias in our retrospective attitudes. For example, if my parents had emigrated to France when I was a child, I would have never met my spouse and would not have made the good friends that I have; I probably also would have ended up

¹³See Scheffler (1997) and Kolodny (2010) for canonical treatments of the special reasons for desire and action provided by our personal attachments. canonical treatments of the reasons for desire and action provided by personal attachments. Cohen (2012) also proposes personal value as a source of support for conservative attitudes.

doing something other than philosophy for a living. These facts give me reason to affirm my actual life course, when comparing it to a life from which my important relationships and long-term projects would have been absent.¹⁴

Importantly, the existence of personal value does not entail that our actual lives are *better* than merely possible lives in virtue of the fact that we are attached to certain particular valuable things. Rather, we can be reasonably attached to certain particulars in a privileged way, even while thinking that other possible objects of attachment would have been more valuable, or would have made our lives better.¹⁵

A personal value explanation can also account for the difference between cases like FRANCE and ADMISSION. The relationships and projects I have developed since childhood support my lack of regret in FRANCE, while in ADMISSION Sonya might not have had time to develop any meaningful attachments since learning that her graduate school applications were unsuccessful. Perhaps this is why she has little reason to affirm her actual life course when comparing it to a better life in which she got into graduate school.

Moreover, this account correctly predicts that, if Sonya did build certain relationships and projects over time, there might come a moment when it would make sense for her to be glad that she was not accepted to graduate school in her youth.

Finally, unlike the particular value account, the personal value explanation does not entail that everyone has equal reason to affirm an individual person's life course. For example, the fact that I would not have met my spouse had my parents emigrated to France years ago might give the reader *some* reason to retrospectively prefer that things went as they did, but not the same reasons that I have for this preference.

A personal value account of conservative retrospection, then, has considerable explanatory power. However, it still leaves important things unaccounted for.

First, this account does not seem able to allow for a general asymmetry between our retrospective and prospective attitudes—a problem it shares with Cohen's conservatism. Someone can reasonably have strong conservative attitudes about her past, but a less conservative stance on whether to preserve or privilege her current relationships and projects in the future. Think again of the person who feels ready for a new stage in her life, and imagine her leaving behind not only a city, but also a

¹⁴In that other life I would have probably been engaged in different relationships, projects, etc., to which I could have been reasonably attached. But those possible attachments do not bear on what I can rationally value in a privileged way. Only my actual attachments do.

¹⁵Adams (1979) and McMahan (2005) were among the first to claim that personal attachments help explain the rationality of conservative retrospection (see especially pp. 159-161 in McMahan), and Harman (2009, 2015) defends a similar thesis. Wallace (2013: 80-96) also discusses the influence of personal attachments on our retrospective attitudes, but is primarily interested in cases where conservative attitudes are in tension with moral considerations.

long-term romantic relationship. Whatever her reasons might be for moving on—say, the weakening of the romantic bond, or a sense that she deserves better—this person need not think that those reasons warrant *regret* about the years she has devoted to that relationship: she may affirm her actual past when comparing it to a possible life in which she would have been romantically attached to a person that would have been a better fit for her, or to no one at all. Making sense of such a psychological profile might not be an insurmountable challenge for personal value theorists, but it looks like a difficult task.

Another problem is that it can be reasonable to affirm one’s actual life course even when comparing it to better lives in which one’s personal attachments would have been the same: think of a life in which you would have been involved in the same relationships and long-term projects, but some memorable moments in your past would have been replaced by *better* experiences. In this case too lack of regret seems rationally permissible.¹⁶

Perhaps most importantly, an explanation in terms of personal value cannot account for cases where we affirm things of disvalue in our past, and not just things that are less valuable than what we could have had.¹⁷ Again, we can find ourselves affirming intrinsically disvaluable things in our past, such as experiences of adversity and hardship, and this need not always be due to their instrumental value.¹⁸ But personal value theories require that the objects of our attachments be independently valuable.

In conclusion, personal value is part of the right answer to our puzzle, but something else is needed to fully account for the phenomenon of conservative retrospection.

5 Biographical identity

Biographical identity is the other ingredient that accounts for the conservative bias in our attitudes about the past. Certain experiences, relationships, projects, etc. in our past have shaped who we are, in a sense that is looser and thicker than bare

¹⁶Admittedly, personal value theorists can avoid this problem if they allow for a broader range of permissible objects of attachment, including discrete moments in one’s past.

¹⁷On Kolodny’s view, for instance, the agent-relative reasons provided by a relationship must resonate with the agent-neutral value of the discrete encounters composing that relationship. If those encounters are objectively disvaluable, the relationship does not give rise to positive reasons for partiality.

¹⁸Kolodny (2010, p. 181) tries to accommodate such cases by appealing to the alleged agent-neutral value of adversity. However, I find it implausible to assign any intrinsic value to adversity or hardship as such. I suspect that any lingering intuition to the contrary comes from the instrumental value that such experiences often have, e.g. their role in building our character, or in enabling valuable relationships and projects.

metaphysical identity, and a commitment to our identity thus understood can interact with judgments of value in guiding our retrospective attitudes.

This proposal is inspired by R.M. Adams' (1979) response to the problem of evil. After arguing that we should not be angry at God for the evils that preceded our existence, because we would not have existed in their absence, Adams also argues that we should not regret many evils that happened after our birth or even evils that are part of our own lives, for reasons that also concern our identity, but not in a metaphysical sense. Strictly speaking, we would still have existed in the absence of such evils, he says, but our lives are shaped by those evils so profoundly that wishing that they had not occurred would be close to wishing that someone else had existed instead of us.¹⁹ Moreover, Adams applies this idea not only to cases where the existence of moral evil is at issue, but also to cases where different lives would have been better for us from a self-interested standpoint (1979: 60):

If our lives are good, we have the same sort of reason to be glad we have had them rather than lives that would have been even better but too thoroughly different, as we have to be glad that we exist and not better and happier people instead of us.

In other words, when we contemplate possible lives that would have been better for us but significantly different, and find ourselves affirming our actual life course, this can be justified by the fact that, although numerically identical to us, our merely possible selves would not have been *us* in a different, ethically loaded sense.

Elizabeth Harman (2009, 2015) defends a similar idea: we can be reasonably glad to have become the persons we are, and not wish to be different, even if the alternatives would have been better for us. The type of identity she describes is constituted by current psychological traits of the subject. On this picture, we can reasonably affirm our actual lives when comparing them to better lives in which we would have ended up having different personality traits or a different character (2009: 181). However, if we are to fully account for the phenomenon on conservative retrospection, we need to rely on a broader conception of identity, on which who we are is constituted, at least in part, by certain events, experiences, etc. in our personal history.

Such a biographical conception of identity can help explain why certain valuable things in our past are the focus of our conservative attitudes: because they have

¹⁹Adams (1979): "Even if I could, metaphysically or logically, have existed without most past evils and their consequences in my experience, I doubt that that existence could have been *mine* in such a way as to matter much from the point of view of my self-interest, because it would not bear what I shall call (...) 'the self-interest relation' to my actual life." (p. 56, my italics)

become part of who we are. For instance, the fact that I probably would not have been doing philosophy had my parents emigrated long ago supports my attitude of affirmation in FRANCE, while the fact that in that world I would have bought my shoes in different stores does not, because my history of doing philosophy, unlike my shoe-buying record, is part of my biographical identity.²⁰

The notion of biographical identity also helps us make sense of the potential asymmetry between our retrospective and prospective attitudes: while a commitment to who we are may influence our prospective attitudes—we may be moved to make choices that would fit our self-conception—our future biographical identity is still open, so we cannot be attached to it in the way that we are attached to our past.

Indeed, the interplay between biographical identity and retrospective attitudes seems to reduce the stakes when it comes to making major life choices, such as choosing a career. Insofar as our lives will be good enough, we can anticipate that, no matter what we now choose, we will likely find ourselves not regretting this choice in the future, and for good reason, because it will have shaped our biographical identity. This is not to say that our decisions should be guided by these expectations. In deliberating about the future, we should still aim for the best, and not for reasonable lack of regret. Nevertheless, the connection between biographical identity and regret should make the prospect of a bad choice less agonizing to contemplate.

Now we can also explain why reasons for regret tend to weaken over time: events that do not define us at a given moment may end up playing important roles in our life narratives, and thus turn into suitable grounds for affirmation later on.

It is important to clarify that, while ethically loaded, judgments about our biographical identity are not straightforwardly ethical judgments: there is a difference between judging that something is part of who we are, and *endorsing* that part of our identity. In some cases, the fact that a disvaluable thing in our past has become part of our identity may *strengthen* our reasons for regret. Think of the regret felt by someone who believes that a murder committed in his youth has come to define him. In this case, the fact that the object of regret is also part of who one is only makes things worse, rather than attenuate the regret.

However, in many cases, judgments about our biographical identity do support affirmation and lack of regret, and when they do so, there need be no intermediate

²⁰To be clear, I am not claiming that personal attachments *only* matter retrospectively insofar as they have shaped who we are. Our significant relationships and projects arguably give us reasons for conservative attitudes independently of whether they are part of our identity. Indeed, at least when it comes to relationships, it seems objectionably self-centered to think otherwise. But the fact that some personal attachments are part of our biographical identity is also relevant in explaining conservative retrospection.

step where we assign *value* to the relevant parts of our identity. What is required, again, is an endorsement of our identity, but this need not consist in an evaluative judgment: that is, in endorsing something in our past as part of who we are, we need not assign it any value that it did not already have.²¹

This is how we can make sense of disvaluable things in our past as objects of affirmation. Experiences of adversity and hardship, for instance, can become nodal points of the narratives of our lives just as much as the good things in our past. And this can give us reason to affirm them retrospectively, without thereby requiring us to think of those experiences as carrying any new type or amount of value.

Let me end by addressing two questions: what are the criteria for assigning something to our biographical identity, and how much weight should facts about our identity thus understood carry in our retrospective attitudes?

First of all, we should be wary of any attempt to offer a sharp criterion for what constitutes our biographical identity. Our judgments about who we are in a biographical sense are typically imprecise and shifty, and any good theory of these matters should reflect this.

That being said, while I do not have a theory of my own to offer, I suspect the right account of biographical identity will look much like the *narrative self-constitution* view defended by Marya Schechtman (1996) and David DeGrazia (2005).

The core idea of this theory is that we construct our identity by constructing stories of our lives, in which we assign a central role to certain events, experiences, etc. Crucially, Schechtman and DeGrazia argue that this view need not compete with other accounts of personal identity, like the view that we are identical to organisms. Rather, we should think of these different theories as answering different questions about identity. Thus, DeGrazia (2005) distinguishes between *metaphysical* questions about essence and persistence, and *ethical* questions about self-concern and what we care about in survival. He goes on to defend a biological theory of metaphysical identity, and a narrative account of personal identity in the ethical sense.²²

This pluralist approach to personal identity matches the way in which judgments about biographical identity interact with metaphysical and evaluative judgments in

²¹Judgments of value may well play a role in shaping our conservative attitudes about the past: perhaps there is a minimal threshold of goodness below which a life cannot be reasonably affirmed. But once this threshold is met, there need be no further evaluative judgment involved in endorsing one's identity and thereby affirming one's life.

²²Schechtman (1996) too distinguishes between *re-identification* questions about identity—e.g. “Is that person-stage identical to me?”—and *characterizations* questions, such as “Would that experience be *mine*?”, and proposes her narrative theory as the right framework for characterization questions.

I should mention that Schechtman's views on personal identity have changed in recent years: in Schechtman (2014), she abandons this pluralist approach to identity, and argues that narrative identity is part of a unified conception of identity that does both metaphysical and ethical work.

shaping our retrospective attitudes. Retrospective judgments about who we are arise against the background of settled facts about metaphysical identity. Moreover, they are too fluid to obey the logic of numerical identity, and can be weighed against judgments of value in a way that would be unsuitable for purely metaphysical verdicts. Thus, whether or not the narrative self-constitution view best captures the notion of identity involved in conservative retrospection, I believe it is on the right path.²³

What about the normative force of our biographical identity? Here too, we should allow for much indeterminacy and reasonable divergence between individuals. For instance, even though a commitment to my biographical identity makes sense of my attitude of affirmation in FRANCE, regret also seems rationally permissible in such cases, if the subject is not sufficiently attached to his or her biographical identity. In other words, we can explain why conservative retrospective attitudes are rationally permissible by appealing to the role played by our biographical identity, without thinking that such attitudes are rationally required for anyone in a similar position.²⁴

But why should we give *any* weight to our biographical identity in our attitudes about the past? There is not much I can say in response to this question. A life devoid of any retrospective attachment to who one is would be deeply alienated, I believe, and perhaps unrecognizable as a human life. But I do not expect that this will convince the skeptic who sees any commitment to one's identity as irrational. What I do hope is that I have offered here an illuminating account of conservative retrospection for those of us who find it reasonable to be attached to our own identity.²⁵

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Noûs 13:53–65.

²³This theory might face some independent challenges, e.g. how to resolve the tension between the idea of narrative identity as our own creation, and the sense that the narratives we tell ourselves can be deeply misguided. This tension is the main reason why I prefer the term *biographical identity*: it suggests more clearly that the explicit narratives we construct about our lives are meant to capture facts about who we are.

²⁴This is not an isolated ethical phenomenon. For example, something similar seems to hold for forgiveness: we can isolate certain facts that we can take as reasons for forgiveness without claiming that forgiveness is rationally required whenever those facts obtain, even if we hold everything else fixed. It is usually our *prerogative* whether to take those facts as reasons for forgiveness or not.

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