

The ‘constitutive thought’ of regret

I

In one of the most quoted passages from one of his best-known essays, Bernard Williams proposed that ‘The constitutive thought of regret is something like “how much better if it had been otherwise”’ (Williams 1981: 27). The feeling of regret (and note that Williams did call it a *feeling*, despite characterising it by a thought) is applicable to ‘anything of which one can form some conception of how it might have been otherwise, together with consciousness of how things would then have been better’. On this view of it, regret is very wide in its scope, able to take a great variety of different objects, only some of which (although these form a particularly important category) concern acts or decisions of the subject herself. These Williams terms cases of ‘agent-regret’ and describes as involving a specifically first-personal sense of responsibility for causing a certain undesirable outcome. The regret felt afterwards by a speeding driver who knocked down a pedestrian is different in its psychological content and its expression from that of a spectator who witnessed the accident – though Williams notes that agents sometimes detach themselves from their own acts and attempt to look on them as a mere spectator would (1981: 27-29) (an attitude on which more anon). The thought that *I* caused a certain bad outcome has a peculiar sting to it because I do not like to see myself as a causal agent that has brought about harm to others; what I think and what I feel when I recognise that I have done so are different to the cognitive and affective responses of a spectator who lacks a causal role, no matter how deeply dismayed such a spectator may be. Even an agent who innocently causes a bad state of affairs (Williams’ example is a lorry-driver who causes the death of a child who suddenly runs out into the road in front of his vehicle) can be expected to feel agent-regret for his part in the outcome.

Regret, as Williams conceives it, involves a certain kind of counterfactual thinking. If I say, ‘I regret X’, I am envisaging some close possible world or worlds from which X is absent, and judging that worlds or worlds to be better than the actual world. In the case of agent-regret, I add the further thought that ‘I did/brought about X.’ (In this regard, the ‘constitutive thought’ of agent-regret has an additional element not present in other cases of regret, a point I shall take as

read in what follows.) The alternative possible worlds considered should be fairly close in logical space to the actual world or else the regret is in danger of becoming fantastical and unrealistic ('How I regret not finding Aladdin's lamp today,' 'If only an angel had swooped down and rescued the child') (cf. Draper 1999: 389). And in order for regret to be genuinely *agent*-regret, the subject must have played a determinative or decisive causal role in producing the unfortunate outcome. So 'How I regret not winning the lottery' is not a case of agent-regret for although I exercised my agency in buying a lottery ticket, the result of the competition was wholly outside my control. By symmetry, we might adopt the label 'patient regret' for instances where I am wholly non-responsible for something unfortunate that happens to me.

Williams' lorry-driver who knocks down the child through no fault of his own feels appalled not just at the death of the child but at being the cause, albeit the unintended and hapless cause, of the child's death. Most writers have rejected – correctly, I think – the idea that the driver should feel *guilt* for what he has done (Gabrielle Taylor is an exception: see Taylor 1985: 91). Guilt is appropriate only where an agent acknowledges she has acted *wrongly* – which, *ex hypothesi*, the lorry-driver has not. So it may seem that we cannot construe the generic constitutive thought of regret ('how much better if it had been otherwise') as taking, in cases of agent-regret, the more specific form, 'how much better if I had done otherwise', on the ground that an agent who has no missteps to reproach herself for does not recognise anything better that she might have done. But this is too quick. For while the lorry-driver may not be able to fault his driving, he can and probably will entertain such thoughts as, 'What a pity I decided to take *that* route today,' or 'If only I hadn't been on the road at just that moment.' What he did, after all, contributed to the accident. So a thought along the lines of 'how much better if I had done differently' still seems in order even if self-recrimination is not.

In this paper I want to examine in more detail the kind of thoughts we entertain when in a state of regret (whether agent-regret or otherwise), and to see what modifications, if any, need to be made to Williams' initial formulations. If this seems at first a rather dry way of exploring the nature of regret, I hope to show that it is actually a very revealing one, because it helps to show the scope and range of objects of regret, to pinpoint what is going on in regret and to show why regret is an important attitude. It is popularly said that someone who never made a mistake never made anything. It could equally well be said that someone who never feels agent-regret

must either never have done anything or done it in a singularly unreflective, even boorish manner. (Even God, in the Book of Genesis, is said to have had second thoughts about the wisdom of creating man, when he ‘saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth’ [6:5-6]. His response was to send the Flood.)

Of course, to allow oneself to become paralysed by regret for past mistakes, so that one pulls in one’s horns and shuns future engagement in the world, is neither sensible nor virtuous. Agent-regret should not compromise agency but, rather, enable it to operate more effectively and wisely in future. Refusing, like Edith Piaf, to entertain any regrets and determining to look only to the future and not back to the past is an over-reaction to the danger of disabling regret, as well as posing a threat to the integrity of the person over time. Something like the Piafian view has been defended by Rüdiger Bittner, who, while stating the counter-case that a person who does not regret something ‘loses it in the sense that something that he actually did gets cut out from what he is as an agent,’ responds with the claim that we can retain our character and sense of self even though we disengage ourselves from our past acts. Thus we may say of some apparently regrettable deed, ‘True, I did that ... But I am no longer in it. You cannot find me there. That is history’ (Bittner 1992: 269, 271). Certainly we may change or reform so that we can truly say, ‘I’m not like that anymore and I would never act that way again.’ But such transformation could be expected to intensify rather than dismiss regret for former acts we now repudiate. Bittner’s view, which rejects regret in such cases, is unsatisfactory on both the moral and the psychological level. On the former, imagine how you would feel if someone who had done you a great injury in the past, while admitting the fact, told you that he didn’t now regret it, having moved on from what he was then, his present self being quite disengaged from his former self! And while Bittner claims that a sense of personal continuity can subsist even in the absence of the kind of identification with one’s former self that makes regret an appropriate attitude, that sense must be a very attenuated one if one cannot find one’s present self in the agent of the former act (which raises the question of exactly what one means by ‘I’ when one says ‘*I* did that’).

I shall here take for granted that the self is sufficiently identical over time for agent-regret to be both an intelligible attitude and also an appropriate one for subjects who are capable of passing value judgements on their own and others’ behaviour (and, more broadly, on states of

affairs). But before moving on, it is worth saying something about an issue that has troubled some philosophers, namely, whether regret should be thought of as a primarily cognitive attitude (characterised, perhaps by the ‘constitutive thought’) or as a feeling. I have already noted that Williams calls regret a ‘feeling’ even while he distinguishes a ‘constitutive thought’ for it. And as his discussion unfolds, he leaves no room for thinking that he conceives regret in purely cognitive or intellectual terms, as consisting in emotionless or affectless judgement alone. Regret – true regret, as distinguished from merely formal professions of sorrow (‘The Prime Minister regrets she cannot meet you to discuss your proposal for planting vineyards on Snowdon’) – is essentially *painful*. Admittedly, as Carla Bagnoli, among others, has pointed out, regret is sometimes construed (e.g. by decision-theorists) in an exclusively cognitivist way, as ‘a state of mind that you have when you come to believe that a previous decision involved an error of judgement, and was wrong at the time you made it’ (Bagnoli 2000: 169, citing Sugden 1985). But outside the sphere of decision theory, our understanding of regret is certainly not, she points out (though she thinks some philosophers have forgotten this), a purely cognitivist one, regret normally being regarded as a form of ‘emotional dissonance’ (Bagnoli 2000: 171), where something about a decision we have made or action we have performed now produces a greater or lesser sense of distress in us. Bagnoli rightly describes regret as ‘a painful experience originated by a kind of counterfactual reasoning, a thought experiment about what might have been’ (Bagnoli 2000:177), a view that nicely brings out, in a way that Williams would I think favour, the presence within regret of both cognitive and affective elements. Daniel Jacobson has recently defined agent-regret as ‘a sentiment concerned with the agent’s own errors’ (Jacobson 2013: 12), and while this is too narrow (as the lorry-driver’s case straightaway shows), it likewise draws attention to the fact that regret is a complex state – ‘syndrome’ is Jacobson’s own word – involving thought and emotion.

Vague feelings of dissatisfaction would not amount to regret, because they lacked something like Williams’ ‘constitutive thought’; yet the mere thought that it would have been better if things had been otherwise is not yet regret if does not strike its bearer painfully (though in trivial cases the pain may be slight). What has come to be called the ‘cognitivist theory of the emotions’ is actually a family of theories, of varying degrees of strength and plausibility, which distinguish type-emotions in terms of the thought or thoughts they ascribe to them. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the varieties and merits of cognitivist theories, but the

strongest versions that identify a certain constitutive thought as a *sufficient* condition for correctly being assigned an emotion are unlikely to be true. Weaker versions that locate a constitutive thought as a *necessary* but not sufficient condition for having an emotion of a particular type are more plausible and more compatible with the common understanding of emotions as having intentional objects. Thus I may regret a mistake, fear a lion, long for an ice-cream, be disappointed at failing my driving-test. It might be objected to even this weak version of cognitivism that one can feel vaguely depressed or sad without being depressed or sad about anything in particular. When in such states, one may not be thinking much at all, and to try to associate any constitutive thought with such states (e.g. ‘How tragic a place the world is’) seems merely *ad hoc*, a philosopher’s gambit; when a person is depressed, she may simply be feeling under the spiritual weather. Defenders of the weak cognitivist theory may respond that the states described are better called *moods* than *emotions*. But this presupposes that we can draw a clear line between moods and emotions, which is doubtful (note that one can feel sad or depressed about some specific object as well as in a more general way). However, I shall not pursue these issues further here since it is enough for our purposes that at least in the case of regret, it seems correct to posit both a thought and a feeling element. It might be proposed that in that case it would be more accurate to speak not of the ‘constitutive thought’ of regret – an expression which may seem to imply that the thought is all that there is to regret – and to say instead that there is a (typical or standard) thought which is part of the constitution of regret but not the whole of it. This latter is indeed the right way to understand the make-up of regret; but for simplicity’s sake and to avoid more prolix expressions I shall continue to talk of the ‘constitutive thought’ of regret.

II

The constitutive thought of regret as Williams states it (‘How much better if things had been otherwise’) is quite generic; in actual cases it is likely to be fined down to something more specific (‘How I wish I’d taken another road,’ ‘How I wish I hadn’t had that last drink’). These more specific thoughts can be regarded as instantiations of the generic thought; loosely, they can also be regarded as implying it. Because not all regret is first-personal agent-regret, one can

think how much better it would have been if some other agent or agents had acted differently, or if circumstances or outcomes had been different.

Philosophers have debated how wide the range of potential objects of regret is. Can simply *any* unfortunate event or state of affairs be an object of our regret? That is doubtful. To say that we regret Caesar's assassination or the Black Death of the fourteenth century sounds distinctly strained. The reason for this is *not* that we did not ourselves bring about the assassination or the onset of plague, for not all regret is agent-regret and we are often quite happy to say things like 'I regret that it's raining today, which rules out our picnic' or 'I regret the result of the latest decision by government.' What is the difference that makes the difference here? I suggest that in the last two cases we can consider ourselves interested parties, whereas in the case of Caesar's assassination or the Black Death we cannot. Regretting is not the same as feeling sorrow or sympathy: we can feel immense pity for the people who died in the Black Death or in a lethal bomb-blast that took place in Baghdad yesterday. Yet to say, 'I regret the fact that a bomb went off in Baghdad yesterday' also sounds odd, no matter how deeply we may feel for the victims, where we were not ourselves involved and the victims were strangers. To put it roughly, regret seems out of place in this case because the incident had nothing to do with us; we were involved neither as agents nor patients. Nor, I would add, as spectators, people who saw the incident or its aftermath up close and personal and on whom it made a profound impression (similar to that made on the witnesses of the lorry-driver's accident in Williams' example).

It would be a challenging exercise to determine with precision the kinds and levels of involvement that entitle a person to consider herself a suitable subject of regret. But it would also be a misguided one, because there is no good reason to think that the concept of regret is amenable to such Procrustean tactics, or that people will always agree on where the boundaries of 'legitimate' regretting lie. This does not mean that there is anything wrong with the concept of regret or with people's understanding of it. There is a tendency amongst philosophers nowadays to suppose that every concept has sharp edges or, if it hasn't, that they must supply some to help fix the sloppiness of ordinary speech. But as Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin emphasised long ago, ordinary language doesn't need fixing and the vagueness of the border-areas of many of our concepts should be seen not as a problem but rather as indicative of the

richness and variety of our thought and linguistic practice. In a forthcoming paper, Clare MacCumhaill remarks that the philosophical literature on regret is still ‘undecided’ about what the proper objects of regret are, ‘offering, among other things, states of affairs (Williams), blunders (Jacobson), valuable unchosen alternatives supported by reasons (Bagnoli), and objects of attachment, including one’s own life (Wallace)’ (MacCumhaill, forthcoming: 1). But why, given what people actually say they regret, should we want to confine regret within any one of these proposed boundaries? Perfectly good examples of regret – of what ordinarily informed speakers of English would recognise as cases of regret – can be found under all of these heads. Writers who pursue a philosopher’s stone of artificial precision would do better to heed Wittgenstein’s advice to see how language is actually used.

I have suggested that the constitutive thought of regret is generally fined down into more specific thoughts in particular situations of regret, e.g. ‘How much better if I’d taken another road, or ‘How much better if it hadn’t rained.’ In all such cases some counterfactual thinking is involved, wherein we envisage an alternative state, or states, of affairs which we judge would have been preferable to the actual state. To be able to regret things, therefore, requires a subject to have the imaginative capacity to represent alternatives before her mind’s eye. Of course, the constitutive thought should not be read as meaning that *any* alternative to the actual act or event regretted would have been better; for some alternatives might well have been worse. It may sometimes happen that we are unhappy with what has occurred but have difficulty in envisaging how things could reasonably have been better (that is, have been better in any close possible world). If this is merely a difficulty in seeing how a better alternative could practically have been brought about this is no impediment to regretting what actually happened; but if we cannot without indulging in wild speculations imagine what a better alternative would look like then our state might better be described as dismay rather than regret.

Jacobson has objected to Williams’ account of the constitutive thought that it is not sufficient to distinguish regret from certain other states, such as ‘guilt, shame, sorrow, and anger’ which, he claims, share the same thought (2013: 97). In his view, this goes to show the deficiencies of the cognitivist account of emotions in general and of regret in particular, and it indicates the need to look for the true *differentiae* between these different emotions in their phenomenological and motivational qualities. According to Jacobson, ‘The defining-proposition

methodology of cognitivism threatens to obscure matters by conflating some importantly different emotions' (2013:97). In fact, this argument would only be forceful against a strong version of cognitivism that reduces emotions wholly to thoughts, and it is quite compatible with a weaker version that holds that emotions involve thought but not thought alone; for that view leaves open the possibility that a number of different emotions involve the same thought but differ from one another in their phenomenological and motivational aspects. However, Jacobson's claim that a number of different emotions share a common thought with regret cannot withstand much scrutiny. Granting that regret may be considered a member of a kin-group of feelings that also includes remorse, guilt, shame and others, and further granting that these feelings can sometimes occur together and/or be difficult to tell apart in practice ('Is it regret or remorse or shame I'm feeling now?'), the characteristic thoughts that can be associated with them differ nonetheless.

What are these characteristic constitutive thoughts? I suggest that they are typically on the following lines.

Regret: 'How much better if it had been otherwise.'

Remorse: 'How I wish I hadn't done that wrong [*or* bad] thing.'

Guilt: 'I acknowledge that I've done a wrong [*or* bad] thing and I wish I hadn't.'

Shame: 'I degraded myself by performing that act.'

Repentance: 'I shall endeavour never to do anything of this wrong [*or* bad] kind again.'

One could debate the fine details of these characterisations of the thoughts involved in these feelings but even this brief sketch should demonstrate the falsity of Jacobson's assertion that they all involve the same thought. So too, he claims, do sorrow and anger, but it is far from clear that anger belongs in this kin-group or that what angry people are usually thinking is 'How much better if it had been otherwise.' (More probably they will be thinking something like, 'How I wish I could do damage to X.')

The term 'sorrow' is trickier to deal with, and it could be argued that in ordinary parlance it is close to being a synonym of 'regret'. If that is so, then sorrow and regret may be held to share the same constitutive thought, but only for the uninteresting reason that they are the same feeling under different names. Certainly there are many instances where

we can equally well say ‘I am sorry that ...’ as ‘I regret that ...’ The lorry driver who kills the child through no fault of his own may feel not only the sorrow for the death of the child that others will also feel but also sorrow at being the agent of the child’s death, this sorrow being identical to what we have been calling ‘agent-regret’. Colloquially, ‘sorrow’ is the name we tend to reserve for the deeper or more painful instances of the feeling that, in its lesser manifestations, we term ‘regret’. The death of a beloved parent or partner causes us a sorrow (more specifically, grief) that goes beyond ‘mere’ regret. Yet someone who feels merely mild regret at the death of a parent or partner may not differ in the thought that informs their attitude. Here the difference is phenomenological rather than cognitive, the thought that it would have been better had the death not occurred being common to both cases. Should we therefore conclude that, the constitutive thought being the same, the sorrow and regret felt in this pair of cases should be accounted the same feeling? Although I am sympathetic to this view, it is more than I want to argue for in this paper, since much more would need to be said in order fully to justify the claim that type-feelings cannot be distinguished from one another on purely phenomenological grounds. Nevertheless, the view that sorrow and regret are the same type-feeling and differ in intensity rather than in kind is made plausible when we consider particular cases that we would bring under one label or the other. The person who feels sorrow for the death of a parent does not feel something different (in the sense of having a different type-feeling) from the person who regrets a lost parent but is not profoundly moved by it, but the feeling is more intense in the former’s case than in the latter’s.

III

The lorry-driver who, through no fault of his own, runs over the child may wish he had taken another road that day or reached that particular spot at a different time. Such counterfactual thoughts about how *he* might have acted differently appear not merely expressive of his agent-regret but in some sort constitutive of it, in the sense that if he does not have some thoughts of that kind then it is not clear that the regret he feels (if any) is *agent*-regret as distinct from regret of the more external variety that spectators of the accident might also feel. What, though, if the driver thinks not about what *he* might have done differently but about other casual antecedents in whose absence the accident would not have occurred? ‘If only the lorry had broken down this

morning,' he reflects, or 'If only the child had not been allowed to run onto the road.' There clearly are close possible worlds in which these alternatives are realised and it is perfectly in order for the driver to consider various 'what ifs?' that do not concern his own agency. Here the character of his regret is indistinguishable from that of a spectator of the accident, who might equally regret that the child had not been at school that day or been under better parental control. The driver's regret may thus be a compound affair, consisting of agent-regret for what he did plus a more external form of regret for the other circumstances that contributed to the tragedy. Agent-regret centres on things that *he* might have done differently, and not on alternative potential causal antecedents over which he had no control. Since many causes contribute to bringing about any event, agents who are too prone to self-recrimination and to taking the blame for things ought to remember that there may be other causal antecedents that deserve to be considered as well. Of course, this line in self-exculpation could be taken too far. An agent who focuses overmuch on the 'external' circumstances and plays down his own agency in causing a tragedy risks that he may fairly be charged with cowardice or self-deceit. Refusing to recognise when the buck, or a significant part of it, stops with oneself is unworthy behaviour, lacking in virtue.

Williams remarks that where a person has the constitutive thought of regret about his actions, he may not always judge that he should have acted differently. For he may have faced some very unpalatable options, each of which would normally be morally inadmissible, and had to select what he considered to be the least bad one. In this predicament, whatever he did will be liable to generate agent-regret, even where he considers that the choice he made was the best he could in the circumstances (Williams 1981: 31). Williams' story of Jim and the Indians, told in another of his writings, provides a now famous illustration of the kind of dilemma he has in mind (Williams 1973: 98-99). Jim is an explorer who in a South American village is offered the choice between killing one innocent Indian hostage himself or standing by while twenty innocent hostages are killed by a posse of soldiers. This is a no-win situation for Jim, who is forced to choose between killing an innocent person himself and failing to avert the deaths of a larger number of equally innocent persons. Either way, he will look back afterwards with regret on his own causal role in a tragedy. Williams thinks that Jim probably ought to shoot the single hostage to save the others, deeply though this goes against Jim's moral grain. If Jim agrees with this and does shoot the hostage, he will later look back at his choice as the right albeit a terrible one. He

may not think afterwards, ‘How much better if I had done otherwise’ but he will still think some fined-down version of the constitutive thought: ‘How much better if things could have been otherwise.’

Whether Jim should feel *guilt* as well as agent-regret at having made this choice is a more difficult question. He has acted against his moral values and done something that he would normally abhor doing. At the same time he has acted, as he judged, for the best, in a terrible situation. It may seem that there should be something alongside mere agent-regret that he ought to feel here, to mark the fact that he is not quite as ‘innocent’ in his role in the incident as is the lorry-driver in our earlier example. Jim’s shooting of the hostage is a deliberate act whereas the lorry-driver’s running down the child was not, and this should make a difference. Yet ought Jim to feel guilty if he believes that he made the right decision, choosing the lesser of two evils? This was after all a constrained choice, and one that he hated making. (Had he instead relished the opportunity to express his sadistic tendencies and kill a fellow human-being, he certainly would have something to feel guilty for afterwards.) One option is to ascribe to Jim a form of enhanced agent-regret, something which goes beyond what the lorry-driver would (or should) feel, and which is appropriate when a morally-minded agent is constrained to do something that goes against his or her moral values. Maybe, with Richard Hare, we could call this attitude *compunction* and distinguish it from guilt, although it is debateable whether common usage assigns such a distinct meaning to that word (see Hare 1980: 172-75). (Often ‘compunction’ seems to be a mere synonym of ‘guilt’.) Etymologically, ‘compunction’ means a pricking or a stinging, and it could be expected that Jim’s conscience will continue to prick or sting him in a manner that the lorry-driver’s conscience will not, for all his agent-regret for causing the child’s death. The constitutive thought associated with compunction thus understood will be something like: ‘How much better if I hadn’t had to act against my values as I did.’ Of course, Jim should not take all the blame for the death upon himself: he is an unwilling participant in a cruel game set up by others. He is quite entitled to think such thoughts as ‘If only the soldiers had not put me in this position’ alongside others concerned with his own acts (‘If only I hadn’t come on this expedition’). Compunction is accompanied by resentment that he was forced to act as he did.

There are also cases in which someone chooses the least bad option but where no moral issues are involved. Should one sell the Rubens or the Rembrandt in order to pay the

inheritance-tax? One would strongly prefer not to have to sell either, but if one sells the Rubens and keeps the Rembrandt, one will regret the loss of the Rubens but not think one has acted against one's moral values. So compunction, in the sense defined above, would be inappropriate. If one decides to sell the Rubens, one may believe afterwards that one made the right decision (and so not regret that one did not sell the Rembrandt instead) yet still regret its loss – the fact that it is no longer hanging on the drawing-room wall. This is a regret that one may well expect to have before one sells the picture. But many regrets are unanticipated and arise when it dawns on us that we have made the wrong decision; they can also occur when we find that our act or decision, whether right or wrong, has been more emotionally costly than we had foreseen. Unanticipated regret may but does not always indicate that we were insufficiently thoughtful before we made the fateful decision; consequences may have been very hard to predict, or there may have been pro and contra considerations that were hard to weigh against one another, or it may have been difficult to anticipate our later emotional reactions.

Many of our acts and decisions produce mixtures of good and bad consequences, making it problematic to determine whether, on the whole, what we did was worthy of regret or not. R. Jay Wallace has introduced the term 'all-in regret' for that 'stable reaction of sorrow or pain about a past action or circumstance, taking into account the totality of subsequent events that [the subject is] aware of having been set in motion by it' (Wallace 2013: 51). To have 'all-in regret' is to have an 'on-balance preference that the thing one regrets should have been otherwise' (2013: 69), which is consistent with conceding that not every aspect of what one did or what happened, if independently considered, was regrettable. The subject of all-in regret entertains the constitutive thought of regret – 'How much better if it had been otherwise' – in its most straightforward form. Very often, however, Wallace thinks we find it hard to achieve such a stable position as this and realise that our attitudes are still conflicted. This is especially likely to happen where an act or event takes on a different moral valence when viewed from the perspective of different concerns. A particular situation, 'might for instance frustrate the concerns of a person one is attached to, even as it advances significantly an important professional project that one is involved in' (2013: 50). It can also happen that the degree of regret one feels for an act or event, or whether one continues to feel any regret at all, will vary over time as one's concerns come and go, change and develop. Wallace's book-length study of regret is provocatively called *The View From Here* with the deliberate intention of emphasising

that regret is frequently perspectival rather than ‘all-in’, so that what may be reasonably regretted by a person at one stage in her life may be less reasonably regretted by her at another, when her interests, projects, relationships and outlook have changed.

Relatedly, a number of writers, including Wallace himself and R.M. Adams, have raised the question of whether or not we should regret unfortunate or immoral necessary conditions of states of affairs for which we are glad. Adams remarks that he would not have existed had his parents not met in the context of that most regrettable of events, the First World War; but since he is glad that he is here, it could appear inconsistent to regret the War which was the necessary condition of his existence (Adams 2009: 2ff.). In similar vein, Wallace notes that the prosperous and comfortable conditions which most citizens of western countries enjoy today came about as a result of past unjust and exploitative institutions such as slavery and colonialism. How, therefore, ought we to feel about those antecedent conditions of our present advantages? From a moral point of view, we ought to deplore them. But can we in that case ‘affirm’ our own existence when we know on what evils it depended? To affirm something, explains Wallace, ‘is to prefer on balance that it should have existed, or that it should have had the features that it actually had’ (2013: 5) So if my existence is necessarily dependent on the former practice of slavery, does affirming my own existence imply that I also affirm the previous existence of slavery? Wallace terms this the ‘bourgeois predicament’ and he claims that we are most of us in it (2013: Ch.5). Monika Betzler, in an able review of Wallace, has objected that he exaggerates the extent to which our present advantages are the effect of former evils as distinct from more respectable attempts to better the human condition. She further appeals to something like Wallace’s own perspectivalism to alleviate the worry. ‘I do not see,’ she writes, why we cannot distinguish between our retrospective affirmation concerning our own attachments and the values connected to them and our regret with regard to their possibly objectionable causal conditions’ (Betzler 2015: 621). Thus we can, without moral or rational inconsistency, be glad about our own fortunate conditions and entertain the constitutive thought of regret in regard to slavery or colonial exploitation. Cheryl Chen has likewise suggested that in such cases we endorse the constitutive thought of regret ‘with reservations’, preferring one outcome according to one dimension of evaluation and a different outcome according to another (private communication). And perhaps this is the way to go with this problem. But it may still leave us dissatisfied. The trouble is that while we can indeed switch between perspectives when we consider our

advantaged existence and the deplorable factors on which it (in part) depends, closing our eyes to the one while we regard the other, assuming a *pro tem* blindness to its evil casual conditions while we bask with satisfaction in our good fortune, this is rather reminiscent of a Victorian mill-owner delighting in his wealth while he ignores the hardships of his workers who made it possible. Wallace's conclusion that in the end we are trapped in the bourgeois predicament, like Adams's sober recognition that he would not be here were it not for the First World War, remind us that the good and bad do not occupy distinct and discrete spheres within human life but are inextricably linked together.

Consider another example: Mark is very happily married to his second wife Margaret. But he would not be married to her had his first wife, Mary, not died. How should he think and feel about his first wife's death? According to Cheryl Chen, with respect to his love for Mary, he thinks of the nearby world in which she does not die prematurely as better than the actual world, whereas with respect to his happy marriage to Margaret, he considers that the actual world is better. Mark does not *wish* that things had been otherwise, but rather thinks that if they had been otherwise, it would have been better in a certain respect. But while Mark may indeed entertain both these thoughts by dint of changing his perspective, they still leave him conflicted in regard to which of the possible worlds is the better overall. Perhaps he should just refuse to consider that question. But that refusal to take the synoptic view may seem – not least to Mark himself – to be an evasion. The moral is that such thoughts as 'How I wish that it had been otherwise' and 'How glad I am that things are as they are' cannot always be entertained without reservation, qualification or inner conflict.

IV

Before concluding, I should like to take a look at a kind of regret – or what has been called 'regret' – which stands somewhat apart from the kinds we have been looking at so far. In the cases now to be considered, it is less obvious that the constitutive thought is on the lines of 'How much better if it had been otherwise.' In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante remarks that 'Nothing is sadder than to remember happiness when one is in misery.' And in *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes defines 'Regret' as follows:

Regret is also a kind of sadness, which has a particular bitterness inasmuch as it is always united to a certain despair and to the memory of the pleasure which gave us joy, for we regret nothing but the good things regarding which we rejoiced and which are so lost that we have no hope of recovering them at the time and in the guise in which we regret them (Part Third, Article CCIX; 1972: 425).

What I shall call ‘Cartesian regret’ focuses on *good* things that are gone rather than on the *bad* acts or events that have been the objects of the forms of regret surveyed previously. Cartesian regret would be without objects in the absence of anything on which we could look back with pleasure and approval. Phenomenologically it is very different from forms of regret in which we lament wrong deeds (our own or others’) and harmful or otherwise unfortunate past events. As Descartes says, it is a form of sadness focused on the loss of what we have loved – although we can also have happy memories of happy times and sadness is not the only emotion we can feel when we recollect pleasant experiences; sometimes, too, we feel a quite complex emotion combining sadness with joy in the recollection of happy times. As the line from Dante indicates, sadness is likely to be uppermost and overwhelm the happiness of memory especially where our present condition is much inferior to our former. Cartesian regret does not, however, appear to involve the kind of counterfactual thinking that is found in other cases of regret. The thought ‘How much better if it had been otherwise’ is evidently inapplicable where I reflect, for instance, on some happy experience of my childhood. Even if my recollection, while predominantly pleasant, is tinged with a certain sadness at what has gone beyond recall, there may be nothing that I now wish had been other than it was.

It might be suggested that Cartesian regret can be ‘brought into line’ with other forms of regret by ascribing to it the standard constitutive thought understood as directed on the misfortune of the *loss* of the regretted thing. Suppose that we think fondly but sadly of a summer picnic that we took long ago in the company of our grandparents. It might appear that what we regret is not, strictly speaking, the event of the picnic itself but the fact that it is gone with no prospect of return, as are our grandparents, our own youthful innocence and the fine summers of the past. ‘How much better if it could have been otherwise,’ we may therefore think, in a version of the regular constitutive thought. Cartesian regret may be a distinct species of

regret, but like the others it involves a counterfactual comparison between an inferior actual state of affairs and a superior imagined alternative.

This analysis, however, is faulty. For Cartesian regret, while involving a sadness that is rooted in the sense of what is lost or gone, does not essentially include the thought that it would have been better if what is lost or gone had not ended but continued (the obvious way in which in this instance to spell out the thought ‘how much better if it had been otherwise’). It is reasonable to regret the ending of a good or happy state of affairs if that is premature; but that is regret of a more conventional kind and not what Descartes sought to capture in his characterisation of regret as concerned with a more generic sense of sadness at the loss of good things. Cartesian regret also needs to be distinguished from cases in which regrets about present events or states of affairs are articulated by comparisons with previous ones. A farmer whose fields have been stricken by drought this year may look back fondly to the previous year, when rain was plentiful and the crops good. ‘How much better,’ he thinks, surveying his dusty acres, ‘if things could be like that again.’ His regret follows the standard pattern in so far as he wishes that things could be otherwise than they are right now. This is quite different to the sad sense of loss which Descartes writes of, which concerns the irrecoverable past.

The happy picnic with our grandparents is a past event that cannot be somehow removed from its temporal niche and transported into the present. We may try to imagine returning to the picnic site with our grandparents as we then knew them. But now we are adults; then we were very young. For that picnic to be repeated in the present, we would have to be children and adults at the same time: an evident impossibility. Would it not be good, however, if our grandparents were still alive? But would it really? What sort of physical and mental condition would they be in at some highly advanced age? Or do we wish that they were still at the age they were when we knew them? But what sort of a world would it be if (some) people did not age beyond a certain point – or never died? And how could we expect to sustain the same relations to our grandparents as those we fondly remember having towards them when we were children, now that we are of mature years? On the whole, it seems unwise to want to hold time back and to cling on to people, things or events whose day – even if it was a very good day – is done.

The thought, ‘How much better if it had been otherwise’ does not, then, appear very appropriate in cases of Cartesian regret, where we accept that the good things that have passed have gone for ever, leaving us with a bittersweet feeling. But what Descartes calls ‘*regret*’ (the word is the same in French) may be considered sufficiently different from all the other cases we have been considering to persuade us that it poses little threat to Williams’ claim about the constitutive thought of regret. Maybe we should find some other word altogether for regret in the Cartesian sense. Arguably it is more closely related to what we now call ‘nostalgia’ rather than ‘regret’ (although ‘nostalgia’ originally had the more specific meaning of ‘home-sickness’). At any rate, regret in general can be regarded as a feeling informed by a certain kind of counterfactual thinking which identifies a possible but non-actual state of things as being preferable to the actual state. And if I *regret* that I have not in this paper been able to put this conclusion quite beyond doubt, I hope that I have done enough at least to make it plausible. *

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Notes.

1. Bittner’s view might be more supportable were it linked with a more episodic view of the self, such as that taken by Galen Strawson (see, e.g. Strawson 2004 and 2011). Like the majority of philosophers, I suspect, I do not find this view of the short-lasting self to be compelling or intuitive, and its acceptance would have serious forensic consequences besides undermining our conventional ideas about agents’ moral responsibility. I shall here take the liberty of assuming it to be false.
2. This is not to deny that there can also be *abuses* of language. One often hears politicians, churchmen and other authority figures expressing their regret for such past occurrences as

the slave-trade or the Crusades. Such professions of regret for the sins of their predecessors raise questions about the *locus standi* of those who make them, especially when they are far removed in time and cultural context from the original actors. These cannot be expressions of *agent* regret, given the non-responsibility of current politicians or churchmen for the acts of their distant predecessors (and notwithstanding the institutional continuities that may link them). They may be intended to signify a ‘never again’ attitude by present actors who would in principle be capable of repeating the mistakes of the past, and who may on that ground be considered as interested parties in the sense I have outlined. While that may render them on some occasions useful and legitimate, the *bona fides* of those who offer them is questionable if their underlying intention is to make themselves look good in the eyes of the public. Expressions of regret can flow very glibly from the tongues of people who have no personal responsibility for the acts regretted. (I am less willing to allow that a current politician is in a suitable position to *apologise* for a former government’s part in the slave-trade, since I reject the propriety of vicarious apology, holding that only agents have the standing to apologise for their own acts. See Scarre 2011.)

3. A hard-bitten offender may plead guilty in a court of law without feeling any painful feeling of guilt in the sense here intended. In admitting his guilt, he accepts the description of himself as the doer of the illegal act but he has no feeling about what he has done.
4. I am highly indebted to Cheryl Chen for raising the questions about the scope of agent-regret that are discussed in this paragraph.
5. Or so says Wallace. It might be wondered, however, whether it is will ever be possible to banish entirely all traces of ambivalence of feeling in regard to a past act or event in which one finds some positive aspects, even though one may have reached a firm and stable judgement that, all things considered it would have been better if things had been otherwise. ‘All-in’ regret may be more of a *rara avis* than Wallace supposes.
6. ‘Nessun maggior dolore/ Che ricordarsi del tempo felice / Nella miseria.’ (*Inferno*, Canto V, 121-23.)

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