

### *Puzzles of Regret*

Evaluative attitudes often reflect our temporal relation to what happens. Jay Wallace's *The View from Here*<sup>1</sup> focuses on two responses to our temporal perspective of elements of our lives and happenings in the world: regret and what he calls, 'affirmation'.

Wallace suggests that regret is puzzling: does it really make sense for us to feel pain now at what is past and beyond our control? Wallace seeks answers in the form that valuing takes. This leads him to ideas of *all-in regret* and *unconditional affirmation*. Making sense of our attachments, suggests Wallace, requires of us an attitude where we affirm not only what is of value to us, but also those conditions that were necessary, even causally necessary in the circumstances, for the valuable thing's existence. This, Wallace suggests, presses on us the 'bourgeois predicament' in which in order to hold on to our sense of what matters in life, we must affirm certain unjust conditions that make our pursuits possible.

Wallace's exploration of famous examples such as Williams's Gauguin and Parfit's teenage mother provides a new perspective on the questions about the significance of a life. For Wallace, the requirement of unconditional affirmation lies at the heart of making sense of the distinctive temporal perspective we take on what matters in life. Here I'll raise questions about what explains perspective in valuing, and whether we really do embrace the commitment of Wallace's unconditional affirmation.

### *Perspective*

1. Wallace's discussion is inspired by Bernard Williams's elusive discussion of moral luck.<sup>2</sup> Williams focuses on what he calls 'agent-regret'. Wallace agrees that valuing here is perspectival, but he denies that agent-regret is the key. For Wallace, the heart of the puzzle lies with agent-relative aspects of the situation, ways in which our attachments give us distinctive reasons to value certain things and to regret others; agent-regret is at most a special case of the distinctively perspectival aspect of valuing coming from attachment and agent-relative reasons.

In emphasising the perspectival character of valuing, one may focus on the objects of valuing, or we might instead focus on the valuing itself. On the object side, Wallace is surely right that which people and objects get to play a distinctive role in one's life turns on idiosyncratic facts, notably what attachments one has formed. But is the perspectival character of valuing best explained in terms of the structure of attachments? Perhaps we need a richer story about our psychology than furnished by talk of attachment.

Compare relief. A.N. Prior thought that the fact that, 'Thank goodness that's over!' is a natural expression of relief only after a visit to the dentist and not before tells against some views of time.<sup>3</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> R. Jay Wallace, *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret*, Oxford University Press, 2013. (Hereafter VFH)

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams, 'Moral Luck', in *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 20 – 39.

<sup>3</sup> Prior, A.N., 'Thank Goodness That's over', *Philosophy*, Vol. 34, No. 128 (Jan., 1959), pp. 12-17.

stressed that one is not relieved that the date of the conclusion of the operation is Friday, June 15 1954. Prior supposes that the only salient explanation of this must be given in terms of the nature of time and the significance of tense.

But the issue here is really one concerning the nature of affect and motivation. Prior is right that there is a relief one can feel only after the dentist has finished. But it is much less obvious that the distinctive character of this relief is picked out in terms of the fact that one is relieved at. Both, 'Thank goodness that's over!' and, 'Thank goodness that's *now* over!' could be used to express a relief which is essentially retrospective. But the latter could certainly express relief which need not be retrospective. Suppose that Prior had a meeting with a difficult colleague at 4.30pm, and was concerned that the anaesthetic should have worn off in time. When the dentist assures him that he will finish exactly at 3.10pm, Prior might then feel the loss of anxiety and the onset of relief well before his difficult encounter. Told this at 2.55pm, Prior might express the relief indifferently with the sentences, 'Thank goodness it will be over at 3.10pm' or 'Thank goodness it will then be over'. And he may continue to articulate that relief at 3.10pm with the words, 'Thank goodness that's now over'. We could happily agree that the sentences, 'Thank goodness that's now over' and 'Thank goodness that is over at 3.10pm' don't mean the same thing. But it doesn't follow from that that there is no state of relief which is as equally well expressed by the one sentence as by the other.<sup>4</sup>

This doesn't tell at all against Prior's original claim: there *is* a state of relief which *could* only be felt after the passing of the event. The key to Prior's puzzle lies not in questions about the significance of tenses versus dates but in facts about our psychology which ground the difference between these two examples of relief. The issue here concerns motivation and dispositions to act. There is an aversive state present in the patient throughout the operation, a desire for the operation to end. This desire is not primarily focused on any particular time: as long as the operation continues, the patient simply wants it to end. When the operation does eventually cease, the patient is relieved that it has ended at just that time (thank goodness that is over *now*).

There is a state of relief that Prior could feel only at the end of the operation because there is an aversive desire whose satisfaction is revealed in that relief only at the end of the operation. Given the direction of causation, the relief can only occur *after* the cessation of the aversive state. Desire and relief get tied to specific perspectives in time when they are essentially tied to motivational dynamics. These dynamics require the psychological states to be causally related in some, and not other, ways.

Reflecting on the fact that there can be both temporally sensitive and temporally indifferent relief tells us we need multiple conceptions of desire. We have one way of thinking of desire as little more than preference: liking the world to be one way rather than another. Abstract preference, conceived as ranking things in terms of liking has no essential connection to time. If this were our only conception of desire, it would be mysterious why some relief can only be felt retrospectively. But we also have a conception of desire connected with motivation and action. Since the motivational cycle is an actual causal process in agents' lives, affective responses which are tied to that cycle will take on the temporal constraints such processes imply. Where frustration or relief reflect motivation, they will be essentially backward looking.

A similar moral holds for our current concern, regret. Wallace is surely right to focus specifically on backward looking regret: there is a centrality of the retrospective in our most paradigmatic images of evaluation. But notice that there are responses which we are happy to label ones of regret which are insensitive to the temporal perspective from which they are felt. An unusually prescient diplomat on the

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<sup>4</sup> Cf Higginbotham, 'Tensed Thoughts', *Mind & Language*, September 1995. See also M.G.F. Martin, ms.

culp of WW1 might regret that the six powers will not come to a settlement. It would be entirely reasonable for the diplomat to suppose the outcome to be out of his power. So there is no inconsistency between taking regret to involve the counterfactual preference, and yet the regret to concern a future state of affairs.

In such cases, there is little more to the notion of regret than a preference that the world be otherwise, and the apprehension that the world is not that way. One can feel regret that the world must be a certain way looking forward as easily as looking back. The point to note, as with relief, is that not all regret is like that. Some regret *is* essentially backward looking. And, as with relief, we can explain this through the connection with motivational mechanisms and the affect that arises from that. A regret which arises as part of the frustration of the motivational cycle will thereby be retrospective. This is the mirror to perspectival relief. With much of our basic behaviour, failure to achieve the end desired is consistent with continuing to strive to get what one wants. So frustrated desire is a kind of pain which can motivate the continued activity of trying to get. Ultimately, though, an agent may have to give up on an activity, and the distinctively motivating desires of that action end nowhere but in a frustration. That frustration is one which is only directed distinctively at a particular time given that that is when one's endeavours were finally frustrated. And it is this connection with the motivational cycle of drive, action, and internal reward which explains why the frustration can take the form it does only at some times and not at others. Regret will take on this essentially backward looking form where it inherits its character from the motivational cycle. Given our motivational nature, recognizing that an object is beyond control evokes the distinctive pains of this kind of frustration. Absent this, we are in danger of losing a grip on why temporal perspective matters.

So far, I've emphasised how the connection between agency and time illuminates the temporal restrictions on our valuing. But Williams's discussion shows this connects with what we value. He consistently stresses the authority that his reflective painter has in later life looking back on his achievements. In part this reflects what we said about regret. The kind of affirmation or regret that Williams is interested in will distinctively arise at a point at which the effort of shaping one's life is deemed to be over. One can feel the relevant affect only towards the end of the cycle. At the same time, Williams is concerned to get his reader to accept a point about the nature of value, and not just the nature of our psychology. He rejects a picture of life choices he attributes to John Rawls. On that, one can, so to speak, stand outside the flow of any life, and nonetheless accurately assess its worth choosing between the life of a cowboy or an astronaut, as one might choose costumes in a fancy dress store. Williams insists that life and its significance are not like that. Gauguin late in age has an authority about what makes his life worthwhile or significant for him in a way that his earlier self could not possibly appreciate.

If Williams is right about these matters, then elements of perspective bear on the nature of value in life and not just psychology. This would vindicate the claim that perspective raises questions about the nature of value. But it reverses the order found in Wallace's account. It is not that a certain feature of how value comes into relation with us, namely through attachment, then explains the rationale of the psychological states we enjoy. Rather, the constraints on the psychological states we enjoy make up the kinds of perspective we have on the world which in turn shape those distinctive values which are at the centre of human lives.

Of course, Wallace doubts that Williams is right to focus on agent-regret as a distinctive and special case of regret about which we should have concerns. (VFH, 34ff) And Wallace is quite reasonably sceptical whether Williams can really establish the claims he wishes to about the values in lives. Still, perspective, agency and value intersect in ways that Wallace underplays. Agency and motivation have

important roles in explaining ways that evaluation is perspectival. And this cannot be subsumed simply into the general account of how attachments matter.

### *Affirmation & Ambivalence*

2. Although our discussion so far has focussed on regret, Wallace's main target is elsewhere, on 'affirmation'. Affirmation, he says, is not itself an emotion (VFH, 65-66). Its importance is that it stands as the positive counterpart to regret: where backwards looking regret involves the counterfactual preference that things should have been otherwise, affirmation is principally the preference that they should have been as they actually were. (VFH, 66)

Affirmation is inconsistent with all-in regret directed at the same object, and affirmation is a way in which we can silence or relieve ourselves of regrets. The role of affirmation here is central to what Wallace calls 'the affirmation dynamic'. We form attachments to things of value in our life; this leads us to prefer on balance that they should exist rather than not; we recognize other conditions as having been necessary to the existence of these things; hence affirmation of the former leads us to prefer that these necessary conditions should obtain rather than not. In this way, events which otherwise might have been regretted are transformed into what we affirm as essential aspects of what we hold dear.

Wallace recognizes that there can be affirmation which fails fully to have this consequence, and so he distinguishes between *conditional* and *unconditional* affirmation. We hold up as heroic the acts of a firefighter. The heroic act could not have occurred without the life-threatening fire. However much we recognize the value of this act, we are not led to prefer on balance the occurrence of the fire. (VFH, 73-74) Unconditional affirmation is not restricted in this way: in affirming what is of value unconditionally we are committed to valuing whatever was necessary for its existence. Wallace admits that we may in fact fail to have the appropriate positive attitude. Unconditional affirmation lays down a requirement on what it takes for us to be rational, consistent, lovers of the good; it is a normative requirement. However, Wallace views pessimistically our chances of attaining it. This he elaborates in the final chapter on the 'bourgeois predicament'. He offers this verdict as a form of mitigated nihilism. He does not question the practice of valuing, the centrality and importance of values. But if we cannot attain unconditional affirmation of what we value, we cannot get all that we require from valuing.

What shows that we do have a commitment to unconditional affirmation? A key feature is the abolition of regret: as Wallace defines affirmation, it requires a preference contrary to that embedded in regret. At the same time, Wallace is clearly not endorsing that scepticism that takes regret to be a pointless pain. Wallace suggests that in aiming at unconditional affirmation we do not wish to avoid justified regret, but rather find ourselves in a situation in which we can rightly reconcile ourselves to what has been. What distances Wallace from the sceptic? I take it that it would be a misreading to see a substantive conception of the good life at work. As if, along the lines of *The Life of Brian*, we should always look on the bright side of life, thereby abolishing regret. No such beatitude is implied in Wallace. The role of unconditional affirmation must just flow from the general structure of value, attachment and valuing.

We do sometimes reconcile ourselves to past misfortunes by reflecting on the good that has come from them. Initially frustrated at missing the flight, one feels relief when one learns of its crash, even if tinged with survivor's guilt. One of the lessons Wallace underlines is that this reconciliation with the past does not lead us to revise our attitude towards the correctness of decision. Relieved at the missed flight, one doesn't thereby take the breaking of a promise to be the right thing to have done, even if the failure in question is responsible for missing the flight. The child does not suppose it were better that she

had never been born, yet she can recognize the foolhardiness of her mother's rush to parenthood. What these examples underline is that such reconciliation does not focus on our past actions as actions, or our past decisions as matters of correct decision. Rather, our concern with them is as causes which lead to the present.

For example, suppose the teenager mother had gone to a chastity summer camp to reinforce her resolve to avoid pregnancy; but there ended up pregnant. In this case the quality of her decision need not be a concern: the decision is part of the causal process. And the very same occasion of decision might here be the target of reconciliation: had the teenager not decided to avoid pregnancy and so not gone to the chastity summer camp, the child would not be here. Yet the course of events that one affirms is not any course of events that had been *planned*.

Does the fact that we can reconcile ourselves to the past in this way show that we are committed to unconditional affirmation? Wallace highlights at the outset that we do not treat all past disasters in that way. His example of the firefighter is precisely such a case. Isn't that sufficient to show the variety: that on some occasions we project back reconciliation with past causes and on other occasions we fail to? Wallace disagrees, and instead suggests that there are different forms of affirmation: conditional along with unconditional affirmation. Unconditional affirmation is still the ideal. What is missing in conditional affirmation, though? Nothing need be lacking in our warmth for the firefighter. All that is absent is our endorsement of the causes necessary for heroism. And that is just to resist the spreading step that Wallace sees as definitional of unconditional affirmation. Why ought we to spread our endorsement?

This returns us to the question of moral luck, and the re-interpretation that Wallace offers of Williams's story of Gauguin. Wallace sees affirmation as playing a distinctive role in explaining how old Gauguin can refuse to regret his earlier decision. On Wallace's retelling, Gauguin becomes attached to the artistic products of his successful painting career. Given that attachment, he cannot prefer that the world be otherwise. And given that his existential decision is a necessary cause of this life, he now cannot regret the decision made long in his past. On this reading, if we have no commitment to unconditional affirmation, then there can be no explanation of why Gauguin can now rationally evade regret. Though Wallace does not put things this way, one can find implicit an argument that we are bound by the norms of unconditional affirmation: we recognize that later goods can revise our attitudes to past decisions. Past decisions are causal conditions of these later goods. But without a commitment to endorse the necessary conditions of that to which we are now attached, the fact that these things brought about so much good ought to leave us cold in further evaluation of earlier mistakes.

Should this move us? One complication here is that Wallace's diagnosis of the case of Gauguin is explicitly at odds with Williams's own take, as Wallace himself underlines. For Williams, but not for Wallace, it is important that *agent-regret* is in play and that this is a special case of evaluating the worth of one's life as a whole. It matters for Williams that this is a singular and existential choice. Wallace, on the other hand, takes the case to tell us something general about attachment and value.

Someone who stuck with Williams's own morals could avoid any appeal to unconditional affirmation in explaining Gauguin's self-vindication. The issue is not one of attachment, but simply that of a superior perspective of someone who has lived the life on there being enough significance in it. Endorsing this story doesn't require Wallace's unconditional affirmation.

Of course, Wallace does not claim that unconditional affirmation is our ordinary lot: it is at best an evaluative ideal for us. We are more likely to find ourselves in the situation of *deep ambivalence*, he argues: holding on to the things that seem to give our lives a proper significance, and yet unable to

reconcile ourselves to the commitment of the existence of their unjust necessary means. Suppose Wallace is right. Does this give us another route to explaining the commitment to unconditional affirmation?

Take a concrete case. Consider the *mezquita* of Cordoba. Today's visitors to what had been the principal mosque of thirteen century Andalusian Spain find themselves immersed in a sea of exquisite but austere Moorish columns. Suddenly, they are confronted in the very centre of the mosque with a monumental Renaissance cathedral with its choirs, stalls, and high altar. Thirteenth century Christian conquerors had preserved the mosque and its minaret instead of demolishing them. But the emperor Charles V, who had never visited the *mezquita*, agreed for the central part of the mosque to be taken down and for a cathedral to be built on that space.<sup>5</sup> The encounter of this island of Christian art in the middle of the mosque is at once fascinating, magical, and yet deeply disquieting. The visitor who admires it can only experience a deep ambivalence, for it would not exist but for the destruction of part of what is still recognized as one of the most stunning and important mosques in the world. Yet, even for the atheist visitor, part of the magic of the *mezquita* lies in the juxtaposition of Moorish and Christian art, each emphasizing the exquisiteness of the other.

There are of course different aspects to feel ambivalent about. But the most significant here lies in our aesthetic reactions themselves. We are faced with the sublime interaction of the two different religious architectures. The beautiful Renaissance church is both something to treasure and yet something that seems to involve a desecration of the original Moorish architecture. It is not just that the magical effect that one now enjoys could not have existed without that desecration. The singular aesthetic effect of the cathedral in that setting is partly *constituted* by the inappropriate juxtaposition. Solely at an aesthetic level it is difficult to avoid both celebrating and being repelled by what one takes in.

On the negative pole of this, we have something which has something in common with the preference Wallace finds in regret, that things really shouldn't be that way. On the positive pole, we have something in common with affirmation, a strong attachment to what is excellent in the building. Neither of these attitudes overcomes or cancels out the other. Does this give us a reason to recognize the need for unconditional affirmation? Does the reservation in this ambivalence show us that the ideal situation would be one in which we felt unconditional affirmation?

The *mezquita* is an example of experiencing deep and yet *stable* ambivalence; there is no oscillation between preferences so flatly contradictory that one cannot rest in both attitudes at the same time. If the positive and negative elements are present together, then we cannot really see them as reducible to verdictive preferences for or against the existence of an object. Wallace's unconditional affirmation is defined by such a verdictive preference. So even if we recognize that deep ambivalence is part of our lot, and even if we did have a deep preference for a world without such ambivalence, that on its own is not yet enough to show why we should take unconditional affirmation as so central to our conception of attachment and valuing.

Deep ambivalence is a central aspect of our evaluative responses to the world around us. I am uncertain whether we are in any way committed to a world in which we did not or could not feel ambivalent in that way. So I am uncertain whether Wallace could derive any general commitment to unconditional affirmation. If we could restrict ourselves just to cases of forward decision making or retrospective re-evaluation of decision, something like unconditional affirmation seems to be forced on us: we cannot genuinely will some outcome without having willed the means to it. But the point that

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<sup>5</sup> See Kroesen, Justin E.A., 'From Mosques to Cathedrals: Converting Sacred Space During the Spanish Reconquest' *Mediaevistik*, Vol. 21 (2008), pp. 113-137.

Wallace underlines about retrospective evaluation is that it spreads well beyond agentive concerns. He wants to hold on to the idea that affirmation parallel with regret retains a verdictive element. Perhaps in this we find the fundamental reason for affirmation to be unconditional. Yet need this move us? Seeing that it is mere fancy that I should take responsibility for past events which cause the present, why should I not decline to take on a commitment to willing the world be that way? Wallace's verdict is that we should find this stance unsatisfactory, but as it stands his case seems incomplete.