

# MORE REGRETS<sup>1</sup>

*“What if I forgave myself? I thought. What if I forgave myself even though I’d done something I shouldn’t have? What if I was a liar and a cheat and there was no excuse for what I’d done other than because it was what I wanted and needed to do? What if I was sorry, but if I could go back in time I wouldn’t do anything differently than I had done? What if I’d actually wanted to fuck every one of those men? What if heroin taught me something? What if yes was the right answer instead of no? What if what made me do all those things everyone thought I shouldn’t have done was what also had got me here? What if I was never redeemed? What if I already was?”*

– Cheryl Strayed, *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*<sup>2</sup>

As my title suggests, this paper is a kind of apologia for regret. Regret is not only compatible with affirming one’s life and one’s attachments, it is a constituent part of affirming one’s life. In outlining the conditions, function and value of “reasonable” or “warranted” regret; I aim to show why we have reason to embrace - rather than evade - reasonable regret.<sup>3</sup>

First, I will present a sketch of regret, offering the following (not successively but in tandem): (1) a definition of regret; (2) certain challenges to and normative constraints on regret; and (3) some remarks about the function of regret and its relation to valuing, affirmation and agency. Next, I will discuss Parfit’s famous “teenage mother” case, proposing revisions to how philosophers conceptualize regret with respect to this example.<sup>4</sup> Finally, I will conclude with

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<sup>1</sup> I extend special thanks to my summer 2014 Carleton undergraduate Research Assistant, Benjamin Strauss.

<sup>2</sup> Strayed 2013. Contra Fulkerson 2013, I am not sure that the modern attitude toward regret is any more tolerant than the ancient attitude.

<sup>3</sup> I will be departing from Wallace 2013, who argues that we “unconditionally affirm” our attachments – a stance that is fundamentally incompatible with regret.

<sup>4</sup> Parfit 1984 discusses the teenage mother case in connection with the “Non-Identity Problem” – i.e., why it is *wrong* for the 14-year-old girl to conceive a child, even though it would not make her *actual child* worse off (351-

some positive consequences of my analysis of regret; namely, that (a) the standard object of regret implies human agency; (b) it is reasonable to regret the necessary historical conditions of what we wholeheartedly affirm; and (c) regret is part of affirming our lives.

## I. Regret: Components, Constraints, Challenges and Value

In this section I will define regret, an emotion directed at the past.<sup>5</sup> Regret is complex; and the philosophical literature reflects this fact. Philosophers commonly identify four components of regret:<sup>6</sup>

- (1) Doxastic component (beliefs or judgments)
- (2) Orectic component (desires or preferences)
- (3) Phenomenal component (subjective feel)
- (4) Imaginative component (imaginings)

### 1. Doxastic Component

Part of regretting some past *X* is *judging X to have been bad or suboptimal*<sup>7</sup> (in at least some respect<sup>8</sup>). We regret a past *X* only if we represent *X* as bad or suboptimal in some way. If our negative, past-directed judgment (NPJ) is false (i.e., *X* was in no way bad or suboptimal), our regret is unreasonable. Regret is normative in this way: we ought not to regret good things; the

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380). I follow Wallace 2013 and Harman 2009 in taking it for granted that her decision was unjustified, exploring instead whether or not her subsequent lack of regret is reasonable.

<sup>5</sup> It might also be possible to be in a regretful *mood* – i.e., a kind of generalized regret that attaches to one’s entire existence – e.g., the Underground Man in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*. See Rorty 1980, 490 for this example.

<sup>6</sup> (3) and (4) receive far less attention, with the exception of Rorty 1980.

<sup>7</sup> If *X* is judged to be *morally bad*, then the subject experiences “moral regret” – i.e., remorse. See Taylor 1985. For the time being, I am tabling a discussion of remorse, though some of the cases I examine could be construed as moral regret.

<sup>8</sup> For example, I might regret giving a particular presentation, in virtue of certain *elements* of the presentation, which I judge to have been bad; I need not judge that the *entire* presentation was bad.

proper object of regret is either some objectively bad/suboptimal past X or (barring objective value ascriptions<sup>9</sup>) a past X we judge to be bad/suboptimal on the basis of true beliefs about X. For example, if I regret taking the medicine because I falsely believe it was noxious and worsened my condition, then my regret is unreasonable; I *shouldn't* regret taking the medicine. Thus, I will introduce the following normative constraint on regret:

**True Judgment Constraint (TJC):** A subject S reasonably regrets some past X only if her judgment that X is bad/suboptimal is grounded in true beliefs about X.

## 2. Orectic Component

An NPJ is necessary albeit insufficient for regret; an NPJ may occur in isolation from an emotion or else partially constitute a different emotion (e.g., grief). However, unlike grief, regret involves a *past-directed desire*<sup>10</sup> (PD). I regret some past X only if I desire, on balance,<sup>11</sup> that X had not come to pass or had come to pass fundamentally differently. So, for example, while I may *mourn* my 120-year-old grandmother's peaceful death, I am unlikely to *regret* her death – i.e., to desire that the circumstances of her death had been fundamentally different. After all, she died peacefully, in ripe old age.

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<sup>9</sup> Following Foot 2001, I think we can make good philosophical sense of objective value. I am also sympathetic to Wolf 2010; there is good reason to accept some objective value ascriptions absent a fully satisfying philosophical account of objective value. However, my analysis of regret is neutral with regard to these issues.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Moral Luck* uses the language of “wish;” while Harman 2009 and Wallace 2013 use the language of “preference,” so as not to suggest that regret involves a blind urge or impulse. In this paper I assume the “directed-attention” interpretation of ‘desire’ defended by Scanlon 1998: “A person has a desire in the directed-attention sense that P if the thought of P keeps occurring to him or her in a favorable light, that is to say, if the person’s attention is directed insistently toward considerations that present themselves as counting in favor of P” (39).

<sup>11</sup> Here “on balance” rules out conflicting desires; to desire X “on balance” is to desire X and to not desire  $\neg X$ .

The scope of things about which we can express PD's is vast, including not only actions and decisions, but also character traits, temperament and states of affairs beyond our control (e.g., natural disasters). For this reason, some philosophers have introduced a category of *non-agent regret*. The object of non-agent regret does not implicate the subject's agency. Examples of non-agent regret include regretting a tsunami or the passing of summer. Certainly, human beings are not at all casually responsible for tsunamis or the passing of summer; human agency is not part of the causal story. In contrast, the object of agent regret implicates the subject's agency; the subject regrets something *she* played a (voluntary or involuntary) causal role in.<sup>12</sup>

Some philosophers recognize only agent regret,<sup>13</sup> while others, recognizing both non-agent and agent regret, nevertheless maintain that agent regret is primary.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, we sometimes appear to report feelings of non-agent regret (e.g., "I send my regrets"); however, I hesitate to call this genuine regret. (Similarly, not every exclamation of "sorry!" constitutes a genuine apology.<sup>15</sup>) Can I really *regret* a tsunami? While I will not press the point here, once the function of regret becomes clear (in particular, its role in conditioning future decisions), I will return to this point.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. Phenomenal Component

One of the reasons I have chosen to characterize regret's orectic component in terms of 'desire' is that desire more accurately captures the subjective feel of regret. Regret feels like a

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<sup>12</sup> So, the lorry driver who involuntarily runs over a child experiences agent regret, even though he *involuntarily* runs over the child; his agency is still causally implicated. His regret will latch onto his own causal contribution(s) to the tragic event.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Burks 1946 and Bittner 1992.

<sup>14</sup> See Williams, *Moral Luck*. Cf. Rorty 1980 and Taylor 1985 for the distinction between agent and non-agent regret.

<sup>15</sup> For example, we often say, "I am so sorry!" as an expression of empathy, not apology.

<sup>16</sup> One prima facie reason for skepticism regarding non-agent regret is that there is no form of non-agent *moral* regret (i.e., remorse).

pang, a stab, a wave or multiple waves;<sup>17</sup> it is an expression of loss and of longing. The subject not only mourns the loss of (better) alternative futures, she also longs or desires to *alter* the past – i.e., to bring these better alternative futures about.<sup>18</sup> Because she cannot change the past in the desired way, her desire is frustrated. Thus, regret is painful – a sharp desire puncturing a dull sorrow.

### *Sunk Cost Challenge and the Value of Regret*

As we have seen, emotions are unreasonable when they are partially constituted by false judgments (hence the need for TJC). But emotions are also unreasonable when they make the subject *worse off*. (Emotions are like desires and unlike beliefs in this way; a belief is reasonable so long as it is true and justified, irrespective of whether it benefits or harms the subject.) However, given that regret is painful and directed at the past, it is not clear that it can meet this additional normative constraint. In effect, the “Sunk Cost” challenge calls into question the reasonableness of regret:

**Sunk Cost Challenge:** Regret is always unreasonable, because it exacts a cost (painful emotion) counterbalanced by no benefit (the past cannot be changed).

In essence, the challenge is that regret is too “costly” on balance (and hence unreasonable); we ought to eradicate it, lest we make ourselves “twice miserable,” adding the pain of present regret to the pain of past misery.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rorty 1980, 496

<sup>18</sup> Velleman 2008, 241-242 argues that it is irrational to regret that my interests are less fulfilled than that of my “possible self,” who is inaccessible to my self-concern (because I am not on first-personal terms with her). I have to think more about this challenge.

<sup>19</sup> See Bittner 1992 for an in-depth articulation of the Sunk Cost Challenge.

In answering this challenge, I do not deny that some regret tokens are, on balance, harmful to the subject. (Timoleon's regret might be on balance harmful to him; I will discuss this case momentarily.) However, such cases merely highlight the need for an additional normative constraint on regret (to be added to TJC):

**Worse Off Constraint (WOC):** A subject *S* reasonably regrets some past *X* only if her regret does not make her on balance worse off.

I will now show how regret can meet WOC. The Sunk Cost challenge assumes the following: (1) the pain of regret constitutes harm and (2) the *only* way for regret to confer a benefit would be to eliminate or alter its object, which is located in the past.<sup>20</sup>

First, (1) is not at all obvious. There is a way of thinking about pleasure and pain (inherited from Plato and Aristotle<sup>21</sup>), according to which the source or context of pleasure or pain is relevant to assessing its value or disvalue; pleasure and pain derive their value or disvalue *in connection with* the activities and/or states of mind or character that they are hooked to. Before I bring this point into sharper focus with regard to regret, consider this excerpt from a recent New York Times Opinionator article. Psychologist Patrick O'Malley recounts his interaction with a patient, Mary, who had just told her story of losing her baby to SIDS seven months prior:

At this point in her story Mary finally began to weep, intensely so. She seemed surprised by the waves of emotion that washed over her. It was the first time since the death that the sadness had poured forth in that way. She said she had never told the story of her

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<sup>20</sup> Thereby satisfying the PD that partially constitutes regret

<sup>21</sup> See especially Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* I and X and Plato's *Philebus*.

daughter from conception to death in one sitting. “What is wrong with me?” she asked as she cried. “It has been almost seven months.” Very gently, using simple, nonclinical words, I suggested to Mary that there was nothing wrong with her. She was not depressed or stuck or wrong. She was just very sad, consumed by sorrow, but not because she was grieving incorrectly. The depth of her sadness was simply a measure of the love she had for her daughter. A transformation occurred when she heard this. She continued to weep but the muscles in her face relaxed. I watched as months of pent-up emotions were released. She had spent most of her energy trying to figure out why she was behind in her grieving. She had buried her feelings and vowed to be strong because that’s how a person was supposed to be. Now, in my office, stages, self-diagnoses and societal expectations didn’t matter. She was free to surrender to her sorrow. As she did, the deep bond with her little girl was rekindled. Her loss was now part of her story, one to claim and cherish, not a painful event to try to put in the past. . . . “All sorrows can be borne if you put them in a story or tell a story about them,” said the writer Isak Dinesen. When loss is a story, there is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is no pressure to move on. There is no shame in intensity or duration. Sadness, regret, confusion, yearning and all the experiences of grief become part of the narrative of love for the one who died.<sup>22</sup>

When grief (or regret) is an expression of love, such emotional pain is not wrong or dysfunctional. To love or value something is to be emotionally beholden to it *in just this (painful) way*.<sup>23</sup> Put simply, grief and regret are modes of valuing and expressions of attachment; they are part and parcel of the underlying “stances” that define our passions, commitments and character.<sup>24</sup> If I love my dog, I deeply regret leaving him behind in a natural disaster; and this deep regret expresses my love for my dog. Likewise, if I am committed to animal rights, I deeply regret eating factory-farmed meat; and this deep regret expresses my commitment to animal rights. If I am (in general) an honest person, I deeply regret telling an unnecessary lie; and this deep regret expresses my honest character. (In contrast, an absence of regret would – in each case - suggest the contrary about me.) Insofar as regret is an expression of attachment to those whom we love, the ground projects that imbue our lives with meaning and the ideals that are

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<sup>22</sup> O’Malley 2015

<sup>23</sup> See Kolodny 2003 and Scheffler 2004 for this view of love and valuing, reiterated in Wallace 2013. Also, given that regret is partially constituted by judgments of badness, it is unsurprising that it expresses values.

<sup>24</sup> See especially Wallace 2013, 30-31.

central to our practical identities,<sup>25</sup> it is not obviously something we ought to anesthetize ourselves against, even if we could. To be emotionally invulnerable in this way would be to undermine the very attachments that make life meaningful and worth living.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, we would do better to not act in ways that necessitate subsequent regret; however, to not feel regret in such cases is to *truly* be “twice miserable” – i.e., to undermine *what* we are attached to, in addition to *our attachment itself*. This introduces a further normative constraint on regret:

**Reasons Constraint (RC):** A subject S reasonably regrets some past X only if X threatens or undermines some Y that S has (agent neutral or agent relative) reasons<sup>27</sup> to protect, promote or pursue.

My regret can be partially constituted by a true judgment (thereby meeting TJC) and nevertheless fail to meet RC. For example, suppose I recognize, third personally, the value of skiing<sup>28</sup> but am not at all first personally attached to skiing; skiing is of no personal value to me. Thus, I have no “agent neutral” or “agent relative” reason to ski – i.e., it is not the case that *everybody* has a reason to ski (in virtue of the kind of thing skiing is); nor is it the case that *I* have reason to ski (in virtue of my personal attachment to skiing).<sup>29</sup> Thus, my regretting not buying the ski lift ticket

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<sup>25</sup> See Williams, *Persons, Character and Morality* for the notion of a ‘ground project’ and Korsgaard 1996 for the notion of a ‘practical identity.’ Our ground projects and practical identities are rich sources of reasons and make our lives worth living.

<sup>26</sup> See Wolf 2010 for the view that meaning in life makes life worth living – i.e., that meaning is a central source of value, derived from our love of “objectively attractive” objects.

<sup>27</sup> See Parfit 1984, 143 and Nagel 1986, 152-159 for the distinction between agent neutral and agent relative reasons. Agent neutral reasons are reasons for everyone or anyone; they “can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it” (Nagel, 152-153). In contrast, an agent relative reason need only be a reason for the agent; it may not be a reason for others. The general form of agent relative reasons does include an essential reference to the agent.

<sup>28</sup> I.e., I can see why it is of personal value to others. This recognition will generate agent-relative reasons for me not to interfere with another person’s pursuit of skiing.

<sup>29</sup> See Nagel 1986, 152 for the terminology of “personal value” and “impersonal value;” the former generates agent relative reasons, and the latter generates agent neutral reasons.



would be unreasonable, given that I have absolutely no reason to ski (at all). Put simply, I lack reasons for regretting my failure to purchase the raffle ticket *in virtue of* lacking the requisite attachment (to skiing) that *generates* agent relative reasons to purchase the raffle ticket.

Contrariwise, one acquires agent relative reasons for regret in virtue of attachments that generate reasons for regret.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, one has agent neutral reasons for regretting X, where X threatens or undermines something of impersonal value (e.g., health). For example, we have an agent neutral reason to regret having done something that compromises our health; each and every individual has reason to regret having done something that compromises her health.<sup>31</sup> Thus, *ceteris paribus*, it is always reasonable (for everyone) to regret having done something that compromises her health.

RC also nicely illustrates the tight connection between regret and valuing; personal and impersonal value generates reasons to regret undermining the sources of such value. Thus, to reasonably regret something is to be rightfully responsive to these sources of value and reasons; as such, regretting is itself a mode of valuing.

In showing how regret constitutes a mode of valuing, I have put pressure on a crucial assumption underlying the Sunk Cost Challenge; namely, that regret constitutes harm (in virtue of its painfulness). However, even if we grant that the pain of regret constitutes harm,<sup>32</sup> the

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<sup>30</sup> This will become important in the teenage mother example.

<sup>31</sup> Here I understand ‘reason’ in the sense articulated by Scanlon 1998, 17 (i.e., “a consideration that counts in favor of”) and not in the internalist sense articulated by Williams, *Internal and External Reasons*. In any case, my account can be amended to accommodate internalism about reasons.

<sup>32</sup> The thought would be that our susceptibility to emotional pain (e.g., regret) is nonessential to valuing – that it is isolatable from the larger complex of valuing and can be evaluated (as harmful) on its own terms. I do not think that we can grant this, however. Consider Wallace 2013: “It is the investment of things with personal interest and importance that renders one susceptible to both of these forms of affect; the positive and negative tendencies are thus two sides of the same coin, constitutively connected to each other as different aspects of a single underlying syndrome or stance. So it isn’t a real option for us to attempt to retain the positive dispositions that the syndrome

second key assumption underling the Sunk Cost Challenge – i.e., that the only way for regret to confer a benefit would be to eliminate or alter its object – is surely false. In showing that it is false, I will also show how regret can meet WOC. My strategy will be to show that regret can benefit the subject by improving her future decisions.<sup>33</sup> Appreciating this aspect of regret requires considering its fourth and final component; namely, its imaginative component.<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Imaginative Component

Desiring that the past be different and mourning the loss of (better) alternative futures requires us to consider what *actually* happened (i.e., the object of regret) in juxtaposition with what *could have* happened. In other words, to regret something is to appreciate what could have been; this requires (sometimes extended) imaginative engagement with elements of one's past, in which we imagine alternative courses of action and alternative futures. Often, this imaginative engagement actually intensifies one's pain and one's desire to change the past, which, in turn, prompts *more* imaginative engagement with the past (and so on). In this way, the regret cycle can have an obsessive quality. Often, the only way to silence obsessive regret is to seek to mitigate the past wrong or to choose differently in the future.<sup>35</sup> So, for example, I am less likely to obsessively regret not studying for my last exam, if I obtain permission to retake the exam and/or study harder for the next exam. Lastly, the pain of regret is itself a kind of deterrent; having

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involves while jettisoning the vulnerability to retrospective sadness" (25-26). Wallace adds: "Our experiences are more textured and complex in virtue of containing these forms of emotional reaction; they help in these ways to enrich our lives, at least when they reflect a truthful understanding of the events that occasion them and a proper valuation of their objects" (28). This is not to deny that there might be certain painful emotions (e.g., jealousy) that we can and should eradicate. However, it is less clear that jealousy is a mode of valuing. If it is, it is likely also an expression of undesirable character traits (e.g., insecurity and covetousness).

<sup>33</sup> See Bittner 1992 and Zeelenberg 1999 for the suggestion that regret could be "functional" or "reasonable" (and hence defensible) on account of improving future decisions.

<sup>34</sup> Oddly, this component of regret has been neglected in the literature. Only Rorty 1980 gives it sustained consideration.

<sup>35</sup> See Rorty 1980 for these remarks about the "obsessive quality" of regret and ways of mitigating it.

experienced painful regret, one is less likely to make the same poor choice in the future (so as to avoid re-experiencing the pain of regret). I am more likely to study harder for my next exam, so as to avoid the future pain of regretting not studying hard enough. To the extent that regret can positively condition our future choices, regret is of great practical utility. Regret prompts us to engage in a series of imaginative experiments that can improve our future decisions by (a) awakening us to the array of better courses of action; (b) enlivening our desire to make better choices in the future; (c) intensifying the pain of regret (thereby making us averse to choosing the same regrettable course of action in the future); and (d) providing an opportunity to “simulate” or “practice” (in imagination) choosing better courses of action.

If I am right that regret functions to condition our future choices, then it is perhaps unsurprising that we do not normally regret natural phenomena (e.g., tsunamis). Imagining that the tsunami did not occur does not improve my future decision making; the practical utility of such imaginative experiments is far from clear. I suspect that it is for this reason that regret standardly attaches to objects that imply *our own* agency.<sup>36</sup> In the event of natural disasters or death we commonly experience regrets; but those regrets are focused on elements of the calamity that imply human agency (especially our own). A particularly striking instance of this occurs in Clint Eastwood’s film, *Mystic River*. The character of Jimmy, played by Sean Penn, remarks about his choice (as a child) to not get into the rapists’ car and the (much later) murder of his daughter Katie:

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<sup>36</sup> Regret may sometimes attach to objects that imply the agency of *others* – i.e., when we regret that so-and-so performed a particular action and imagine scenarios in which so-and-so had made a different decision. This “sympathetic” or “empathetic” regret may also improve our own future decision making, in virtue of providing imaginative experiments in which we put ourselves “in another’s shoes.” The agent regret/non-agent regret distinction does not accommodate this form of regret, and I think this is a mistake.

You ever think how one choice can change your life? I heard Hitler's mother almost aborted him but bailed at the last minute. You know? ... Say you or me got in that car instead of Dave Boyle. If I'd got in that car, life would be a different thing. My first wife, Marita, Katie's mother? She was beautiful. Regal. ... And she knew it. You had to have balls to even go near her. And I did. Eighteen years old, the two of us, and she was carrying Katie. Here's the thing, Sean, if I had gotten in that car, I most likely would've ended up a basket case. I never would have had the juice to ask out Marita and we never would've had Katie. And Katie, then, would never have been murdered. You see what I'm saying?

Instead of imagining what life would have been like *had Katie not been murdered*, Jimmy imagines *not conceiving Katie at all!* Jimmy views Katie's conception, not her murder, as an event *he* brought about, through a series of choices reaching back into *his* past. In his grief Jimmy could run any number of imaginative experiments, and yet he imagines a world in which he, Jimmy, chooses different courses of action. Given that regret functions to condition our future choices, this tendency to run imaginative experiments involving our own agency makes perfect sense.<sup>37</sup>

I have been careful to say that regret *can* prompt (and often does prompt) imaginative experiments. But regret – even reasonable regret - need not prompt imaginings (salutary or otherwise). Sometimes we are simply incapable of imagining better courses of action. Sometimes it is impossible to imagine a better course of action; *we had to do what we did*, and still we regret it. This last scenario is a feature of tragic decisions, in which every available course of action is suboptimal. In such cases the subject will desire that she had chosen otherwise, *even though* it was impossible for her to do so; in effect, she will desire to have pursued an impossible course of

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<sup>37</sup> In this instance, Jimmy's regret is unlikely to improve his future decisions. His imaginative experiment is a very bad one. But this is no coincidence; by the end of the film, Jimmy is forced to confront the harsh truth that *his choices* ultimately led to Katie's death – that by murdering the father of Katie's murderer, *he* set into motion a chain of events that terminated in Katie's death (and his own murder of his friend Dave). By the end of the film Jimmy is radiating regret and running imaginative experiments that make more sense, in light of his improved epistemic situation. In fact, the film invites us to feel empathetic regret and to run our own imaginative experiments.

action. Thus, if she could go back in time, she would make the very same choice.<sup>38</sup> A good example of a tragic decision comes to us from Plutarch's *Lives*. In chapter 6 of *The Life of Timoleon* Plutarch describes Timoleon as "regretting" (μεταμέλεσθαι<sup>39</sup>) his actions.<sup>40</sup> Chapter 4 recounts Timoleon's tragic decision:

After this [Timoleon saving his brother, Timophanes, in battle], the Corinthians, fearing lest they should suffer a second loss of their city through the treachery of their allies, voted to maintain four hundred mercenaries, and put Timophanes in command of them; but he, without regard for honour and justice, at once took measures to bring the city under his own power, and after putting to death without a trial great numbers of the leading citizens, declared himself tyrant. At this, Timoleon was greatly distressed, and considering his brother's baseness to be his own misfortune, he attempted to reason with him and exhort him to renounce that unfortunate and mad ambition of his and seek to make some amends for his transgressions against his fellow citizens. But when his brother rejected his appeals with scorn, he took his kinsman Aeschylus, who was a brother of the wife of Timophanes, and his friend the seer whose name according to Theopompus, was Satyrus, but according to Ephorus and Timaeus, Orthagoras, and after waiting a few days went up again to his brother; and the three, surrounding him, besought him even now to listen to reason and change his mind. But Timophanes first mocked them, and then lost his temper and was violent, whereupon Timoleon withdrew a little space from him and stood weeping with muffled head, while the other two, drawing their swords, speedily despatched him.

After slaying his brother and bearing the heavy load of public and private scrutiny, Timoleon is despondent, grief-stricken, confused and regretful; once a respected general and statesman, he subsequently retreats from public life, attempts to starve himself and lives as a hermit and a

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<sup>38</sup> See Williams, *Moral Luck*, 31; Williams, *Ethical Consistency*; and Rorty 1980, 495 for tragic choices. Rorty cites the example of a regretful employer who, due to budget cuts, must fire a nice man with five children, an ailing wife and a senile father. If the employer "had it to do over again," he would still fire the employee; nevertheless, he regrets firing the employee. Cf. Taylor 1985 for a discussion of this case.

<sup>39</sup> Literally, "after care"

<sup>40</sup> Plutarch (author), Perrin (translator) and Goold (editor) 1918. Plutarch remarks "For repentance [μεταμέλεσθαι] makes even the noble action base; whereas the choice which springs from a wise and understanding calculation does not change, even though its results are unsuccessful." See Fulkerson 2013, Introduction and Chapter 9 for Plutarch's views on regret; according to Fulkerson, Plutarch conceives of regret as a problematic symptom of inconsistency of character. However, there is no reason to suppose that Timoleon would actually *do* otherwise, if given the chance. For this reason, I choose to use this example as an instance of tragic regret.

wanderer for nearly twenty years (so Plutarch tells us).<sup>41</sup> But if he had it to do over again, he would have to choose the same course of action (or else not be the great soul that he is).<sup>42</sup> Even so, he is wracked with regrets. This form of regret – what I will call “tragic regret” – will be essential to my analysis of the teenage mother case, which I now turn to.

## II. The Teenage Mother Case: Reconciling Regret and Affirmation

Parfit describes the teenage mother case as follows:

Consider the 14-Year-Old Girl. This girl chooses to have a child. Because she is so young, she gives her child a bad start in life. Though this will have bad effects throughout this child’s life, his life will, predictably, be worth living. If this girl had waited for several years, she would have had a different child, to whom she would have given a better start in life.<sup>43</sup>

Philosophers generally agree that the 14-year-old girl’s decisions was unjustified;<sup>44</sup> nonetheless, philosophers maintain that the girl will subsequently (in adulthood) not regret her choice (assuming she loves her child) and that her subsequent lack of regret is *reasonable*; her *love of*

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<sup>41</sup> Plutarch (author), Perrin (translator) and Goold (editor) 1918, chapters 5-7

<sup>42</sup> For this reason, I reject the attempt of Wallace, 2013 to analyze regret in terms of “conditional intentions.” See Wallace 2013, 55-65 for the notion of a ‘conditional intention.’ According to Wallace, regret is partially constituted by an intention-like state of the following form: *if I could go back in time, then I would do something different*. Wallace admits that this analysis is “more strained” as applied to non-agent regret, where the conditional intention would have to take the following form: *if I could go back in time and if I could do something to change things, then I would* (63-65). In any case, tragic regret shows that regret need not be constituted by conditional intentions. Nevertheless, we do sometimes express our lack of regret in terms of a lack of the relevant conditional intention (but *in order to* express the lack of the relevant PD); see, for example, the Strayed quote at the beginning.

<sup>43</sup> Parfit 1984, 358

<sup>44</sup> While disagreeing about *why* it is unjustified. See footnote 4. Using the example of Gauguin’s decision to abandon his family to pursue painting in Tahiti, Bernard Williams suggests that unjustified decisions can receive retroactive justification (possibly even a *moral* justification), in virtue of the future success of the project that motivates the decision. See Williams *Moral Luck* and Williams 1995. Cf. Nagel 1979 for varieties of moral luck. While I do not deny that the quality of the child’s life (largely a matter of “luck”) does affect the moral valence of the young girl’s choice, I would not go so far as to say that his ‘happening to have a very good life’ retroactively *justifies* the young girl’s decision. In any case, because I am not dealing directly with the Non-Identity Problem, I need not settle this matter here.

and *attachment* to her child provides powerful reasons for “affirming” her child’s existence – i.e., for desiring or preferring (on balance) that he had come into existence – that things had not been otherwise with regard to his existence.<sup>45</sup> And since conceiving at 14 is a necessary historical condition of her beloved child’s existence, the loving mother also has reason to affirm (and hence not regret) her decision to conceive at 14.<sup>46</sup> Roughly, the logic looks like this:

### **Reasonable to Not Regret Conception (RNR-C)**

1. The adult mother has reasons of love<sup>47</sup> to affirm the existence of her child, whom she conceived at age 14.
  2. Affirming X requires not regretting the necessary historical conditions of X.
  3. The adult mother has reasons of love to affirm the necessary historical conditions of the existence of her child. (1, 2 Modus Ponens)
  4. Conceiving her child at age 14 was a necessary historical condition of the existence of the adult mother’s child.
- ∴ The mother has reasons of love to not regret conceiving her child at age 14. (3, 4 Substitution)

Before revealing the faulty logic implicit in the RNR-C argument, one should note that, given what I have said about the function and value of regret, the conclusion of this argument is worrisome. In not regretting her unjustified decision, the mother robs herself of opportunities to

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<sup>45</sup> There is something odd about introducing desires or preferences for past states of affairs, which have already been achieved. In contrast, desiring something that one cannot bring about (in this case, changes to the past) is not odd. In contrast to intention, the object of desire need not be achievable. Is Tantalus’ desire for food and water unreasonable, because its object (the water and fruit the gods taunt him with) is unachievable?

<sup>46</sup> Not only Parfit but also Harman 2008, 185 and Wallace 2013 analyze the case in this way (with Wallace giving the fullest articulation of this analysis).

<sup>47</sup> See Wolf 2010 and Kolodny 2003 on “reasons of love.”

imaginatively engage with her past in such a way so as to improve her future decisions.<sup>48</sup> In addition, she is arguably emotionally invulnerable to something she *should* – given her love of her child - be emotionally vulnerable *to*; namely, his wellbeing, which has been severely undermined by her unjustified decision to conceive at age 14 (a time at which she was unable to adequately provide for him). In effect, the mother undermines her own *love of* and *attachment to* her child by failing to regret giving him such an abominable start in life.<sup>49</sup>

In any case, let us examine a parallel argument of similar structure:

### Reasonable not to Regret Genocide (RNR-G)

1. The devoted peace activist has reason to affirm his ground project of eradicating or ameliorating genocide.
2. Affirming X requires not regretting the necessary historical conditions of X.
3. The devoted peace activist has reason to not regret the necessary historical conditions of eradicating and ameliorating genocide. (1, 2 Modus Ponens)
4. The existence of genocide is a necessary historical condition of eradicating or ameliorating genocide.

∴ The peace activist has reason to not regret the existence of genocide. (3, 4 Substitution)

Perversely, the peace activist who *devotes his life* to combatting genocide has reason to not regret the existence of genocide! If this argument is right, the peace activist has reason to be emotionally invulnerable to the very attachment that gives his life meaning.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Granted, she cannot again make the poor decision to become a teenage mother; however, she *can* avoid the poor decision to conceive when she is economically and/or emotionally incapable of providing for another child.

<sup>49</sup> Agreement with this claim will hinge on how one proposes to solve the Non-Identity Problem, and so I am prepared to give this claim up.

<sup>50</sup> Oddly, Wallace 2013, 238-239 recognizes this perverse effect and simply bites the bullet, marketing it as an “interesting consequence” of his view – i.e., part and parcel of the “Bourgeois Predicament” that “our unconditional affirmation of the people and projects to which we are attached can lead us to also affirm their necessary causal and



Of course, the non-agent regret skeptic might object to this argument, on the grounds that *nobody* has reason to regret genocide, so long as she is not causally implicated in genocide.<sup>51</sup>

Consider another argument of parallel structure to RNR-C:

### Reasonable not to Regret Rape (RNR-R)

1. The adult mother has reasons of love to affirm the existence of her child, whom she conceived upon being raped by her father at age 14.
2. Affirming X requires not regretting the necessary historical conditions of X.
3. The adult mother has reasons of love to affirm the necessary historical conditions of her child's existence. (1, 2 Modus Ponens)
4. Conceiving a child at a certain time and with a certain person are necessary historical conditions of conceiving him/her.

∴ The adult mother has reason to not regret being raped by her father at age 14. (3, 4 Substitution)

This conclusion is absurd; the adult mother has every reason to regret being raped by her father at age 14, even if she affirms the existence of her child, whom she deeply loves. This is another example of tragic regret; the devoted mother would, if she had it to do over again, relive the rape. Nevertheless, she deeply regrets the rape. It seems that (2) is the premise to unpack; consider an argument for (2):

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historical conditions, even in cases in which we know those conditions to be intrinsically objectionable" (11). Wallace would likely object by claiming that his argument only applies to "unconditional affirmation" and "all-in regret" – instances of affirmation and regret that *require* affirming and regretting (respectively) the necessary historical conditions that give rise to their objects. However, this simply pushes the problem further back; *why suppose* that the adult mother unconditionally affirms (in Wallace's sense) her child?

<sup>51</sup> I suspect that this objection would dissolve, if we appeal to sympathetic or empathetic regret, which attaches to human agents *other than the subject*. (See footnotes 36 and 37.) In other words, the peace activist can have empathetic or sympathetic agent regret.

### Argument for Amended Version of (2) (AAV2)

1. If S desires (on balance) that P had not been fundamentally otherwise, then S desires (on balance) that the necessary historical condition, Q, of P had not been fundamentally otherwise (where P and Q are in the past).
2. S desires (on balance) that R *had not been* fundamentally otherwise if and only if S affirms R. (**Definition of Affirmation**)
3. S desires (on balance) that R *had been* fundamentally otherwise if and only if S regrets R. (**Definition of Regret**)<sup>52</sup>

∴ **Amended Version of (2):** If S affirms (and does not regret) P, then S affirms (and does not regret) the necessary historical condition, Q, of P. (1-3, Substitution)

I want to examine (1), since it appears to undergird the entire argument. The motivation for (1) seems to be the following normative constraint on desire:

**Desiring Necessary Conditions of Desired Objects (DNC-DO):** If S reasonably desires (on balance) that P not be otherwise, then S desires (on balance) that the necessary historical condition, Q, of P not be otherwise.<sup>53</sup>

At this juncture I am at a loss. I am not sure how to motivate DNC-DO. If a slave desires (on balance) her freedom, then does she desire (on balance) the institution of slavery, the institution of slavery being a *necessary historical condition* of her being freed from slavery)? Returning to the rape example: If a mother desires (on balance) that her child exist, then does she desire (on balance) that the necessary historical circumstances of his birth (incest) had not been otherwise?

Perhaps the way forward is to restrict DNC-DO to a special *kind* of necessary condition – i.e., that which obtains between a necessary means to a (desired) end. Returning to the teenage mother example: Since conceiving her child at 14 was a *necessary means* to the end she now

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<sup>52</sup> This might seem like a rather thin definition of regret, given that I have presented four components of regret. However, the orctic component arguably entails the doxastic, phenomenal and imaginative components.

<sup>53</sup> Premise 1 of AAV2 is the application of DNC-DO to the past. We might question this move, given the oddness of attributing desires to objects the subject has achieved. See footnote 45.

affirms and desires (that her actual child exist), the mother must desire that she had conceived her child at 14. So, we might amend the normative constraint on desire as follows:

**Desiring Necessary Means of Desired Objects (DNM-DO):** If S reasonably desires (on balance) that P not be otherwise, then S desires (on balance) that the necessary historical means, Q, of P not be otherwise.

However, the Timoleon case is a striking counterexample to DNM-DO; Timoleon desires to end the tyranny of Timophanes, but is averse to the necessary means – i.e., killing his brother, Timophanes. In other words, it is not a normative constraint on desire that one desires the necessary means, if she desires the end. (In contrast, it is a normative constraint on intention that one intend the necessary means, if she intends the end.<sup>54</sup>) To maintain this normative constraint on desire would be to deny the existence of tragic choices.

The failure of AAV2 renders RNR-R, RNR-G and RNR-C unsound (in virtue of the falsity of premise 2). Harking back to our original example: the mother reasonably affirms the existence of her child and reasonably regrets *conceiving him at age 14*; affirming his existence does not necessitate affirming *conceiving him at age 14*. The reasonably regretful mother will desire that she had not conceived her son so young (while simultaneously desiring that he exist); when she imagines conceiving her actual child later, she will mourn his losses and desire the imagined state of affairs. (It makes no difference that the imagined state of affairs is impossible.<sup>55</sup>) Such imaginative experiments are an important constitutive part of her regret; indeed, they are *evidence* of her regret. In other words, on my analysis of the teenage mother case, the adult mother reasonably regrets (rather than reasonably does not regret) conceiving her

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<sup>54</sup> If conditional intentions constituted regret, then affirming X would require not regretting its necessary historical conditions. However, there are serious problems with going this route. See footnote 42.

<sup>55</sup> And as I suggest on p. 15, such imaginative experiments have the potential to improve her future decision-making and should be evaluated on these grounds. (However, I am unsure about introducing normative constraints on imagining. I need to think more about this.)

child at 14. The desiderative and imaginative components of regret (as I have analyzed it) are likely to be present in the teenage mother case. That fact that the adult mother would not do otherwise (if she had it to do all over again) is irrelevant.

One might object that it *does* make a difference that the imagined state of affairs (here, conceiving her *actual son* at a later date) is impossible, on the grounds that we should not desire the impossible – i.e., that it would be *unreasonable* to desire the impossible. In other words, we might introduce the following normative constraint on desire:

**Realism Constraint on Desire (RCD):** S reasonably desires X only if X is possible.

I reject RCD for reasons similar to why I rejected DNC-DO and DNM-DO. RCD is incompatible with certain tragic circumstances. Tantalus' desire that he drink water and feast on fruit is reasonable and warranted (satisfying the desire would surely benefit him), even though its object (consuming the fruit and water the gods taunt him with) is impossible. Again, it would be unreasonable to *intend* to achieve the impossible; but why is it unreasonable (as opposed to tragic) to *desire* the impossible?

In sum, on my analysis the mother will, in regretting her premature conception of her child, be (properly) emotionally vulnerable to the son whom she is attached to; it will *matter* to her that he has been robbed of a good start in life. A lack of regret would, I think, be symptomatic of callousness – a blindness to error (moral or otherwise). In other words, the failure of AAV2 is a good thing, insofar as it does not commit the mother to affirming conceiving her child so young.

### III. Conclusion: Review of “Positive” Consequences

I will end my reviewing some implications of my analysis of regret. First, my emphasis on the role of imagination reveals how regret functions to condition our future decisions; so, in my view, it is no puzzle that regret standardly attaches to objects that imply human agency. In fact, my analysis predicts this. Second, by connecting regret to valuing, we begin to appreciate that regret is a constituent part of affirming one’s life, insofar as affirming one’s life involves affirming the values that are central to one’s existence. When Cheryl Strayed gazes backward in exalted affirmation, she *should* regret the past choices and actions that compromised her values; such regret is itself a mode of valuing the very attachments that lend meaning to her life. Moreover, given that it is reasonable to regret the necessary historical conditions of what we deeply affirm, the fact that often so much of what we affirm about our lives is entangled in circumstances or choices that are objectively lamentable does *not* require emotional numbness to or perverse embraces of such circumstances or choices (or nihilism, modest or otherwise<sup>56</sup>). I take this to be a happy (very un-Nietzschean) consequence of my view. But that is for the reader to decide.

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<sup>56</sup> See Wallace 2013, Ch. 5 on “modest nihilism.”

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