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Regret and Affirmation

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Jay Wallace's *The View from Here* defends the importance of recognizing two different agential perspectives from which we can evaluate actions and states of affairs. Are we deliberating about what to do, in which case justification should be our focus, or are we retrospectively contemplating past actions or states of affairs and the shape our lives have taken as a result, in which case regret and its opposite affirmation are the focus. Wallace argues that confusion about these two temporal perspectives and how they relate to each other lies behind some important mistakes in moral theory and in applied ethics.

The book draws our attention to the structural similarity of a set of cases, many of which have received sustained but largely independent philosophical investigation. Consider the case of a minor who decides to have a child even though, being so young, she is in no position to provide for it as well as she should; or of a person born with a disability whose disability activism comes to gives their lives meaning; or think about Williams' Gauguin whose artistic project as it actually unfolded rests on abandoning his family; or again, of those seemingly bad choices that we make or lamentable situations we face, but from which life takes an unexpected turn, bringing with it new relationships and engagement with new values and leaving us the better for the change. What these and other like cases have in common is that a decision that seemed unjustified at the time, or a state of affairs that seemed at the time

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lamentable turns out to be a precondition for important and valuable future attachments. What should we say about these cases?

Let's focus on cases involving what at the time are seemingly unjustified decisions. We could say that the later outcome provides retrospective justification for the action, so that, for example, the young mother's love for her child and the child's love of its own life come to justify her deciding to have it. There are two ways of cashing out this thought. Firstly, we might say that what happens at the later time changes the justifiability of the earlier action; what was unjustified at time t_n becomes justified at time t_{n+1}. However, this approach seems to posit reverse causation, with successor events changing the evaluative properties of earlier events. How could successor events change the non temporally-relational[1] non-evaluative properties of earlier events? Given the direction of causation, and given evaluative properties supervene on non-evaluative properties, this looks like an unattractive position. Alternatively, we could say that, even though the decision seemed unjustified at time t_n, it is, was, and always has been tenselessly true that the decision was justified at that time, appearances notwithstanding. In some cases, such as that of the young mother, the fact that the decision would bring about the situation that is putatively justifying could have been predicted; but in other cases, such as Gauguin, it could not. This option is unattractive for two reasons: First, if the justifiability of our actions depends on things to which we cannot have cognitive access at the time of acting, then justification parts company from rational criticism, when it seems that the two concepts should co-travel. Our decision might turn out to be unjustified despite our being invulnerable to rational criticism at the time of making it; or alternatively, our decision might turn out to be justified despite our being vulnerable to rational criticism at the time of making it. Second, this approach comes at the cost of preventing us from saying something that we want to say; namely, that the original decision is unjustified, that the outcome doesn't make the earlier objections to it go away or cease to be objections. The young mother did something she had most reason not to do.

Wallace offers a way of letting us say both that the decision is unjustified and that it is impossible for the agent, viewing that choice in hindsight, to do other than affirm it. In so doing, they do not make the evaluative mistake of claiming it was justified, but rather adopt the attitude – affirmation – that is expressive of their current attachments. The point of view from which this retrospective positive assessment is made does not exist at the time of the

[1] Why "non temporally-relational"? What happens at time tn+1 can change temporally-relational properties; for example, a mass extinction event that affects the trajectory of future evolution can make it the case that a dinosaur species was the largest species, ever.

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choice, being the result of historical contingencies set in train by it. Thus, for an important class of cases, regret does not track justification and our inability to regret a choice is no guide to its justifiability.

These two perspectives on the one event or state of affairs have the potential to sit uneasily with each other. We can, claims Wallace, find ourselves committed to affirming states of affairs or events that we recognize are evaluatively problematic, or even horrendous. Wallace refers to this as "the dynamic of unconditional affirmation" or, for short, "the affirmation dynamic" (77). It is the foundational idea of the book and the basis for some its more astonishing claims. Its workings are traced through a range of cases with the general structure previously outlined. In some cases, the verdict it grounds seems intuitively plausible (the young mother). In other cases it grounds verdicts that are deeply unsettling (that our lives as philosophers commit us to affirming the unjust social relations that make elite academies possible and so can at best be lived with deep moral unease). In yet other cases it is used to ground verdicts that seem so outrageous that something must surely have gone wrong somewhere (that we are committed to affirming the historical events that made the lives of our loved ones possible, which in my case would demand affirming the Great Irish Potato Famine, the genocidal Maori land wars, and probably much else in the house of historical horrors that I'm unaware of). From the affirmation dynamic, Wallace draws nihilistic lessons about our human condition. It is important to us that we should live lives that are worthy of our unconditional affirmation, but once we realize what is involved in such affirmation, we recognize that we are precluded from achieving this ideal. This is no mere bourgeois predicament, for few of the actual individuals who exist in this world (certainly no white person whose ancestry presupposes the colonial projects that created the so-called New World) and so could be the objects of our love and affection would exist except for the result of chance meetings made possible by abhorrent events.

Can our attachments really force our affirmation to reach back and embrace horrendous events? That depends on whether there is an affirmation dynamic, whether its retrospective reach is as extensive as Wallace claims, and whether its existence is a mere brute psychological fact or something capable of being warranted, or even demanded, by some normatively significant consideration, such as it being a presupposition of having the kinds of attachments that make our lives meaningful. If the affirmation dynamic is to reveal something normatively important about our human condition it must be more than a brute fact that we are subject to it, else we could just refuse to go in for the kind of reflective thinking it presupposes, or, should we find ourselves in the grip of it, dismiss the resulting thoughts as a

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kind of evaluative illusion, analogous to a perspectively induced visual illusion. Wallace sometimes speaks of the affirmation dynamic as though it were brute psychological fact; however, he needs the stronger claim that there are genuine reasons for making such affirmations, that there's something making them gets right, evaluatively speaking. Even though their perspective is one-sided and incomplete, and even though there are reasons which justify the more impersonal comprehensive evaluative judgment that we make when recording our condemnation of the injustices that are the preconditions for our attachments, still, we would – somehow – be the poorer if we did not make them. This is the claim I want to challenge; doing so will require getting to the heart of the workings of the affirmation dynamic.

"Affirmation" is a term of art, defined in opposition to regret, so the place to begin in understanding the dynamic is with regret. Regret is an affective state "of present pain or distress, occasioned by an event or situation that lies somewhere in the past … conceptualiz[ed] in negative terms, as something that is unfortunate or lamentable along some dimension or other" (18-19). Our vulnerability to regret is partly constitutive of our valuing things. Valuing is distinguished from merely judging valuable by constitutive patterns of emotional response: if we care about someone or something, we will be disposed to feel joy when it flourishes, anxiety when it is vulnerable, anger when it suffers unwarranted harm, and so on. Regret might seem pointless: since there is nothing we can do about the past why add suffering to past misfortune by inflicting the pain of regret on ourselves? The point of regret can only be understood when vulnerability to it is seen as part and parcel of our being valuing creatures and of living lives of emotionally invested attachment to values and to people who matter to us; that is, of living meaningful lives (24-32). So far, so good. However, we have only established the importance of being vulnerable to "regrets;" that is, to affectively laden evaluations of past states of affairs as unfortunate along some dimension or other. To find the notion of regret that contrasts with affirmation, we need a notion that is "all-in" rather than partial, and settled rather that fluctuating or ambivalent. This attitude is "all-in-regret" and is defined as the combination of a stable negative reaction of pain or sorrow plus a single on-balance preference that things should have been otherwise (52-3). The preference constitutive of all-in regret is understood by analogy with intention insofar as both represent where the agents stands – in the case of intention, where they stand with respect to the question of what to do, and in the case of the on-balance preference about the past, where they stand with respect to the questions of whether things should have been otherwise (55).

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Why bother to form these preferences? Why take a stance on whether things should have been other than they were? It is not constitutive of valuing people and projects that we should form these on-balance preferences, for we can be valuers without being especially reflective counterfactual thinkers (60-61). Thus Wallace cannot, and does not, say that we should form such attitudes, only that we sometimes engage in the kind of reflection that gives rise to them. When we engage in the activity of forming on-balance preferences, the attitudes we form can "be considered as the spontaneous expression of our concern about the objects to which we are attached" (60). It looks as if forming such attitudes is simply something that reliably happens to us when we engage in the right kind of reflection. This reading is given further support by remarks such as "we are *lead …naturally* to form intention-like attitudes to the effect that things should have been otherwise in the respects that affect the objects of our attachments. Indeed, our concern for those objects might well be such that we *cannot help* taking a stand on the counterfactual question once it has been raised for us in thought." (61).

The mere claim that we do, or even cannot help but, form such preferences in ways that reflect our attachments is insufficient, however, for perhaps we should try to stop and if we can't we can always treat the resulting verdicts as of merely psychological rather than normative significance. Wallace seems committed to a stronger claim, something along the lines of: If we go in for this kind of reflection, then our verdict ought to be constrained by our cares and concerns. It is constitutive of being a valuing creature of the kind we are that our verdicts be constrained in this way. This claim is dubious, however. Even if we grant that the things we value give us agent-relative reasons for adopting the attitude of all-in regret when those things are harmed, as Wallace claims (61), that supports only the claim that such reasons must be taken into account in forming all-in verdicts and not that they are the only reasons that ought to be taken into account. If we are not vulnerable to feelings of regret when things go badly for our loved ones, we can rightly be charged with not caring about them at all – this even a familiar, commonsensical charge. It might be thought that, if when considering whether a state of affairs is all-in regrettable we do not take into account its effects on those we care about, we are likewise vulnerable to a charge of not really caring about them – albeit a charge unlikely to be made, given the form of reflection our all-verdicts presuppose is both abstract and inward-looking and its result unlikely to be evident to others. Let's grant this. However, it is not constitutive of our being valuing beings and of the being able to live meaningful lives shaped around attachments that we should form all-in verdicts based solely on agent-relative reasons. We might form them on the basis of a combination of agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons, or, once we see that these two classes of reasons pull

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in opposite directions, we might refrain from forming an all-in verdict and settle for the more partial verdict of regret in some respects, not in others. It seems to me that there is no argument from the fact of our being valuing creatures to the need to form yes/no all-in preferences reflective exclusively of those attachments. Recognizing that ambivalence or all-in verdicts grounded in a combination of agent-neutral and agent relative reasons is compatible with giving our deep attachments an appropriate normative place in our lives, including our reflective lives undercuts the normative significance of the affirmation dynamic, as will become clear once we understand the relation between regret and affirmation.

Affirmation is regret's contrary. To affirm an action, state of affairs, or person is to judge that thing valuable in some respect and to have the on-balance intention-like preference that it should not be otherwise (65). Unlike regret, affirmation does not require positive affect, such as joy or satisfaction, and its constitutive preference can be willed. Affirmation drives out regret and regret drives out affirmation because they are characterized by contradictory on balance preferences. Regret can co-exist with affirmation only insofar as they are directed at distinct aspects of the same total set of events under consideration. One can affirm having gone boating, while preferring on balance that the weather had been better (69-71). But this parsing move is possible, claims Wallace, only when the objects of our affirmation and regret are independent, both conceptually and causally. A realism constraint on affirmation forces us to affirm the necessary causal conditions of the thing we affirm, or at least it does, claims Wallace, when it comes to the kind unconditional affirmation that is the characteristic expression of our attachments (75-79). Unconditional affirmation reaches back through open-ended time to embrace the necessary preconditions of that which we affirm. Not all affirmation is unconditional. We can affirm actions against a background taken as given: for example, we can deplore the fire, but affirm the firefighters' bravery (72). When it comes to people we love, we embrace their existence in unconditional affirmation and with that embrace we embrace whatever parts of history were necessary for them to come to be (77). And so we arrive at Wallace's seemingly outrageous conclusion.

But are we really forced there? That depends on whether there is good reason for us to make these trajectory-devouring affirmations. As in the discussion of regret, Wallace is not as forthcoming, or as consistent, as he could be on this central question. Sometimes he writes as if this were simply something that we are "lead" to do, or something we "have to do", or something we "typically" do (all at 77). He also offers the thought that "There is no psychological space for affirming the object while regretting on balance its necessary

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conditions, so long as one is clear that the conditions really are necessary for the thing that one affirms" (73). But the incredulity with which many will greet the conclusion suggests that such psychological space is easily found and that forming such attitudes is most certainly not something that we, as matter of psychological fact, typically do. Wallace will say that in finding the space to affirm the fact that our loved ones exist while refusing to affirm the necessary conditions for their existence we engage in a kind of evasion, or are ignorant, or confused (73), or perhaps normally just refuse to think about it (Chapter 5). It seems to me, however, that finding this space is commonplace not because of these failings, but because it reflects how we think about our close attachments and the reasons they provide. My love for you gives me reason to do more than prefer on-balance that you exist, it gives me reason to take joy in the fact of your existence. Doing so is constitutive of having that kind of relationship. But it is not similarly constitutive of loving another that, should one go in for forming on-balance preferences of the kind required for affirmation, they must extend in the way supposed. Our lovers can make no complaint of insufficient attachment to *them* should we refuse to let our affirmation reach back to these other events. Our lovers we must view through the lens of our attachment, but that fact provides no reason to view the trajectory of the history of their coming to be through that same lens. Our love is not in question should we retain more impartial verdicts on that history.

Taking attachments seriously commits us to certain ways of going of forward, and commits us to certain retrospective attitudes, including regret, though if I'm right not to all-in regret as often as Wallace thinks and not to the kind of unconditional affirmation he claims. At any rate, I'd like more argument as to why it does, and what we would lose or be mistaken about if we refused to take such stances or refused to take them seriously as reflecting something important about ourselves and the world of value, for it seems to me that we can continue to be the kind of emotionally invested valuers who find meaning through attachment without taking them.

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