

On Regret

David Charles argues we should not regret our decisions, but take responsibility for our decision-making processes.

The decision tree of life is colossal. While physicists and metaphysicians explore the possibility that the multiverse grows larger at every decision, it is the ethicist's lot to consider the paths chosen. That is to say, ethics is generally concerned with the build-up to a decision point. But what happens afterwards? And how do our choices influence our future decision-making?

After a decision has been made and acted upon, the person who made it may be satisfied with the intention, the process, and the outcome. Alternatively, they could be dissatisfied or they could be indifferent.

I wonder if being happy after a decision is the least interesting of these states? This attitude seems almost transactional: Was the objective achieved? Tick. Smile. Move on. On the other hand, being merely nonchalant about the outcome could reflect any of several mentalities, from perceiving the decision as insignificant, to a healthy detachment, to an unhealthy detachment. But perhaps the most nuanced and philosophically rewarding state to examine is dissatisfaction. The feelings stimulated by recognising a decision to have been bad can be intense, difficult to shake off, and complexly woven. There are subtly yet distinctly different possibilities within this set: dissatisfaction itself, disappointment, regret, grief, and potentially, remorse. The way we process any of these emotions will be due to our personal history, and can change our future behaviour.

However, as has been intuited by some philosophers and evidenced by modern neuroscientific research (see for example 'Neural Foundations for Regret-Based Decision Making', *Revue d'Economie Politique*, 118:1, p.63, Angela Ambrosino et al, 2008), the most powerful of the post-decision emotions appears to be regret.

Some of the bolder thinking on regret, by Spinoza and Nietzsche, followed the idea of *amor fati* or love of fate. The negative aspect of regret is unnecessary and even irrational, they said, because we ought to embrace the undulations of life.

Any such attempt to make rational thinking override naturally-occurring reactions seems a little too idealistic in our modern world of nuanced psychology. However, Spinoza's argument is focussed less on a desire to feel good about destiny and more on a desire to omit grief from the domain of regret. And as Rüdiger Bittner explores in a 1992 paper, 'Is it Reasonable to Regret Things One Did?' (*The Journal of Philosophy* 89:5), the resolution to stop grieving over past actions allows for the examination of one's actions with greater clarity.

Bittner himself promotes the view that grief is a distraction from the real purpose of regret. If we can put grief about decisions aside and focus instead upon remembrance and understanding, then we can consider our actions and their outcomes in relation to our responsibilities rather than in relation to our

responses, which is far more constructive.

Bittner observes, "we are the agents we are not just by having done what we did. We are the agents we are by accepting these doings as ours." I agree, but I think that the concept of agency demands a much stronger sense of ownership than mere acceptance that we have chosen or done certain things. When we regret, it is because we are somewhat aware of the hypothetical outcome that didn't occur because of our action or inaction. That is, we grieve for the lost opportunity, and we also grieve for our selves that we must endure the new path. Here I'm not talking about the traditional idea that what one regrets most is the things one *didn't* do – the exciting paths in life that one didn't take. That's about contemplating new actions, new branches in the decision tree. By contrast, I'm talking about taking a retrospective view of our actual actions, and saying that we should not burden ourselves pointlessly by imagining modifying those actions. But I'm also not talking about not regretting at all, or about resolving to 'never do that again'. Instead, I want to suggest that *good* regret is not about the action itself, but about regretting the lack of prior consideration that might have changed our action and prevented its harmful consequences.

This can best be seen from a process perspective: If you did something with planning and forethought, then you might regret not planning *better*, but you will not regret the planning you actually did. Alternatively if you did something spontaneously, then rather than regretting the action itself, it might be better to regret not having taken a moment to think before acting. In this sort of sense, I propose that we shouldn't regret *actions in general*, because actions are deliberate, based on reasons, knowledge and circumstances at the time of the action. We can, however, regret not taking particular *cognitive* actions, such as thinking a bit harder, planning better, and so on, which might have prevented a subsequent bad choice of action. This is about accepting not only the deed, but also the responsibility for the consequences that fall on one as a result of one's status as an aware agent. While the grief must remain, accepting responsibility for the decision-making process forces an examination of that process. One needs to learn to accept that one could have taken more responsibility and planned better, or self-nurtured better. More than just despairing over the failings of an action and its consequences, then, healthy regret is about owning one's agency. That means firstly in the sense of acknowledging that the action came from you as an agent, and that you *chose* to act in that manner. Secondly, in the sense that you're choosing to reflect upon what could be improved about your choosing; upon how you could have chosen differently, or been a better agent. Here my argument progresses from Bittner's by expanding and enhancing the ownership of responsibility which agency offers. It's not just about accepting the act: it's about

reflecting on the potential for improvement.

We can look at the counterpoint for extra clarity. If you don't accept the action you've taken – if you regret the *action* rather than the process of choice – then you undermine your own agency, without this yet helping you improve in your decision-making in any way. This is something probably most of us have done at many points in our lives. However, even if you accept the action and *don't* regret it, because you don't take responsibility for the consequences of a decision in order to learn from them, you could be accused of an even greater disingenuity than if you had simply rejected the results of the choice.

So is there an obligation to take responsibility for our choices? And should we employ regret and grief in order to become better moral agents?

I can offer evidence from two neuroscientific studies that demonstrate a benefit to the self (if not explicitly to others) from following this type of regret-processing approach. According to Sacha Bourgeois-Gironde in 'Regret and the Rationality of Choices' (*Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences* 365:1538, 2010), undertaking this process of reflection about the deed, the outcomes, and one's agency, can actually serve to reduce

the sense of regret felt because "regret is sensitive to the way the disappointment occurs." Theoretically, the more responsibility one has in a decision, the more regret that can potentially be felt if the outcome is perceived as negative. However, that regret is somewhat tempered by the sense of being an autonomous agent. So it seems that developing a stronger sense of control and thoughtful responsibility can serve to reduce the unpleasant experience of regret. Or, in the paper I cited earlier, Ambrosino *et al* found that reflecting on the outcome of a decision, as well as on the feeling of responsibility concerning that choice, "promotes behavioural flexibility and exploratory strategies in dynamic environments."

These two studies support the idea of embracing agency and taking time to reflect upon its workings in your choosing. This can be beneficial, among other things, in terms of providing a feedback mechanism for our personal ethics. More generally, if we invest in ourselves in this manner – making the regrettable consequences of a decision inform our future choice-making – then we can learn to better navigate the decision tree of life.

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David Charles is what?