

## COUSINS OF REGRET

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abstract: Regret is different from remorse is different from shame is different from guilt. At any rate, we can often make these distinctions. And we can often describe attitudes to our past less-than-admirable actions that do not fit easily into any of these categories. I shall attempt to characterize a range of emotions which includes the emotions we apply these words to, but in terms that do not presuppose that the distinctions between them are psychologically or morally very deep. In fact, I don't think they are. Not that there are not important distinctions to make here. I describe an alternative set of distinctions which suggests that the line between moral and non-moral is not well reflected in our attitudes to our past actions.

Regret is different from remorse is different from shame is different from guilt. At any rate, we can often make these distinctions. And we can often describe attitudes to our past less-than-admirable actions that do not fit easily into any of these categories. An essential preliminary question is how to individuate emotions. When one says that one emotion is different from another what does this mean? Rage is obviously different from sorrow, but

rage and anger could be thought of as different intensities of the same emotion. Obviously both are instances of some more general emotion, but then anger and excitement are also instances of a different more general emotion, which we might call arousal. There are many ways of subdividing any set of things.

The list that includes regret, remorse, shame, guilt and potentially many other emotions is not hard to characterize in a preliminary way. It consists of affect-coloured attitudes to past actions that one does not now endorse. The lack of endorsement is often moral: the emotion has an associated thought that one should not have done something. This is not always so, depending a bit on what one wants to include on the list. There is non-moral regret, in which one regrets not having learned to play an instrument as a child, or even regrets not having resisted one's scruples over a morally dubious possibility. And embarrassment clearly often has nothing to do with morality. (In some languages, for example Spanish, the same word is used for shame and for embarrassment. So if one is thinking in terms of such a language one would be inclined to say that there can be non-moral "shame".) But we need a rough characterization of this family of emotions in order to get started, so I shall take them all to be retrospective emotions of disapproval of oneself. Qualifications will follow, but pointing out how rough this description is should inject a note of warning about the ambiguities of what can be taken as morality.

There is an extensive discussion of these emotions in philosophy. My sense is that the contrasts between them are understood in roughly the same way by most writers, though different formulas are used to characterize them and the differences between them. Besides the writings of Bernard Williams, referred to below, important works are Taylor (1985), Dilman (1999), and Maibom (2010). Maibom is particularly well-informed psychologically. My contribution to the discussion is in Morton (2013). A broad connection between emotion and morality is found in Prinz (2007). Prinz's discussion makes moral questions almost a matter of taste; one might want to inject more objectivity by making the retrospective emotions more central. I think one could do this by adapting the arguments in Zagzebski (2003).

Take two intuitively different members of the family, for example regret and shame. How can we describe their differences? One way is in terms of associated thoughts. If you regret doing something then you think that you should not have done it (in a wide sense of "should", to cover non-moral regret). You can also regret not having done something, when the thought is that you should've done it. If you feel shame about something then you think that certain others will think badly of you in connection with it. (And typically you think that they will be correct in thinking badly of you.) These are different thoughts. But there is a problem about individuating the emotions entirely in terms of the thoughts. A person can have the emotion and not

have the thought as a belief, in fact not even as a thought that the person endorses at all. You can describe yourself as regretting having done something even though you realize on reflection that it was the right thing to do, but the regret just does not go away. Or you can describe yourself as feeling shame for something that in fact everyone praised you for. The looseness of the connection between emotion and thought is sometimes illustrated with the example of irrational fear: you can know that this tiny harmless spider is not going to hurt you, but still be terrified of it. For the connection with thoughts see Solomon (1993), Nussbaum (2001). Solomon and Nussbaum put thoughts at the heart of emotion, which most of us now think wrong. (For Nussbaum this identification of thinking and feeling is the Stoic account of emotion. While I am no expert on the topic, I find this hard to believe.) For spider-type examples see Greenspan (1989) and Tappolet (2010). These threads are pulled together in Goldie (2000).

This situation can arise when there is an associated thought but it is more complicated. This is true in some of the cases that interest Bernard Williams, where a person regrets doing something because of the moral price, but if given the same choice again would do the same thing again. (Typically, it is the lesser of two evils.) But not all situations where the thought does not characterize the emotion are like this. You can regret not having learned to play the saxophone as a teenager even though you realize that in developing your promising athletic skills rather than your inadequate musical skills you

made a good choice.

Bernard Williams uses the term "agent regret" in a way that I find rather confusing. I think he is trying to avoid distinguishing between different retrospective emotions with a moral content while distancing them from regret for something that did not turn out well for oneself. I find this to be at odds with a vague aim of many of his writings, that of distancing moral considerations from adherence to a determinate set of rules. This issue is very hard to make precise, and Williams is never explicit about it. See Williams (1973a), Williams (1973b), Williams (1981), Williams (1985), Williams (1993). The same stimulating and ambiguous view on both retrospective emotions and the nature of morality is discernible in all of these. See also Rorty (1980). I have defended a position a little like one reading of Williams on morality in Morton (1996) and with a very different argument in Morton (2006).

Another problem about characterizing emotions in terms of thoughts is that the bare thought is possible without any emotion at all. For an extreme example imagine a very calculating psychopath who realizes that various important people would be appalled by an action, and that he really should not have done it, intellectually speaking, but feels no shame about having done it. Related to this is the fact that desires are as important as beliefs. Regret is connected to the desire to act differently in future, and shame to

the desire not to be noticed or discovered. ("I could have sunk through the floor".) For emotions we need thoughts, wants, and feelings to be unified, and not simply to coincide.

My response to this need for unity will be to look for a unity in the various effects of an emotion. The strategy will be to get a formulation of what the effects of a particular emotion have in common, to find some psychological feature that is linked to it, and then to individuate emotions in terms of this feature.

### **points of view**

The articulating feature that I will make central is that of an imagined point of view. I'll get to it in several stages.

The thoughts that accompany retrospective emotions concern what it would have been better to do. (As already stated the thoughts may not be fully endorsed by the person and they may not centre on a characteristically moral conception of the value of acts.) These thoughts fit with corresponding desires, which may also be described as intentions or resolutions. (For a general connection with desire see Tappolet (2010).) They are largely directed at doing things differently in the future. A regretful person vows not to make that mistake again; an ashamed person vows not to be in a position

where they can be caught that way again; a remorseful person vows to change their character. As with the thoughts, these may not be fully endorsed by the person.

The combination of the thought and the desire motivate particular actions, though these may not be performed because other thoughts and desires are more dominant. (The connection between emotion and motivation is discussed in Tappolet (2000), (2016), and Brady (2015), with more emphasis on value-directed action in Tappolet and more emphasis on information-directed action in Brady.) A regretful person has some motivation to act differently in similar circumstances; an ashamed person has some motivation to avoid situations where their misdeeds or incompetences are visible, whether by not performing them or by performing them less visibly; a remorseful person has some motivation to take their life in hand and change some fundamental aspects of it. To repeat, the person may not do any of these actions, since the motivation may be weaker than the motivation to do incompatible actions. But there is a *pressure* to do them, which the person may choose to resist, and often ought to resist. This is a difference between the motivations that stem from retrospective emotions and those that stem from non-dominant beliefs and desires. In the latter case it is usually not difficult to resist doing something when you really have a stronger motive to do something else. But emotions are always there pressing, even when the pressure does not correspond to what you officially think.

This pressure is the affective side of the emotion. The person finds reactions and the general direction of their thinking influenced as part of what it is like to be that person at that time. An irrational and disavowed fear of a tiny harmless spider makes you have fantasies of the spider attacking you and makes you identify possible routes of escape. Your heart rate increases and your breath comes short, just as it would if you were really planning a sudden exit. Similarly for the feeling of, say, remorse. You find plans for reforming your life occurring to you, which exert a pressure to carry them out although you may also have reason to resist the pressure. You find yourself weary as if from the deep self-examination this would require, even if you are not conscious of any such self-examination.

There is a way of representing the pressure in the special case of retrospective "moral" emotions, that is quite revealing. Moral judgement is made by people judging their own or other people's actions, but in the case of emotions the judgement may not be endorsed. It is as if someone else were making it, someone else to whom one can have a variety of attitudes. There is the simple case where a person thinks that she has done wrong, and the subtler case where she thinks that someone she imbues with authority thinks that she has done wrong. Even in the first case inasmuch as the attitude represents itself as moral it claims a certain objectivity: someone with sufficient knowledge or authority or who had given the issue enough



reflection would take the action to be wrong. There would be a very literal pressure in that this person would be trying to make ones acts or personality different.

A number of writers have made connections between emotions and imagined points of view. See the essays in Nichols (2006), including Morton (2006). Gendler (2011) is a comprehensive account of imagination in philosophy, and Harris (2011) argues, with a lot of data about small children, for its fundamental role in psychology. There is a very general discussion of the role of imagination in moral epistemology in Gibert (2012).

This suggests a tidy formulation. The person considers or imagines a point of view from which the action would be condemned. She imagines a person to whom she has some variety of deference who has a negative attitude to the action. This is very general, as we can fill in the particular deference and the particular character of the negative attitude to fit the different retrospective emotions.

Standard labels for emotions in the retrospective spectrum can be interpreted in these terms. In shame a person imagines an observer who finds the action less than admirable. The observer may represent a moral consensus, in which case the sense of appearing unworthy approaches the sense of actually being worthy. (Though one may think that the consensus is

wrong.) Or the observer may represent a vivid attitude that the action is undignified or even comic. Then shame fades into embarrassment. The person who feels ashamed may not agree with the imagined point of view, but inasmuch as she feels ashamed or embarrassed she senses the pressure from this possible attitude. In regret the person imagines a knowledgeable and authoritative point of view from which an alternative action was preferable. The preferability may be moral, generating that particular variety of regret. Or it may be practical, representing what the person might have chosen if they had known then what they do now and had time to think over their options.

In remorse, when contrasted with other similar emotions, the person imagines a point of view that focuses on the effects of the action on some other person, and bases its judgement on the situation of this victim. The "victim" may in fact not disapprove of the action, but inasmuch as the emotion is of remorse it imagines how that person might have or perhaps should have disapproved. (You help a friend obtain a dose of an addictive drug. The friend is grateful. Later he dies of an overdose and you feel remorse for having helped him.) And in guilt — the emotion of feeling guilty, not the state of being culpable — a person imagines an authority figure who condemns them for performing a particular action. The imagined figure need not exist, and even if they do exist they may not have the authority that imagination bestows on them: it is the respect that justified authority would

confer, that is imagined.

The imagined points of view may not be those of any real people or collectives. The machinery can also individuate emotions which do not have tidy labels in English, or for that matter emotions that are not acknowledged in the conventional repertoire. In the following two sections I describe two of these.

### **remorse that does not present itself as moral**

An emotion can have much of the force of a moral sentiment without the person having the thoughts that one might think would go with it. An example is given by Jonathan Bennett's famous case of Huckleberry Finn, in Bennett (1973). Huck has helped the slave Jim to escape, and realizes that this goes against the moral code in which he was raised. He is depriving Jim's owner of her property. Bennett quotes Mark Twain as attributing the following thoughts to Huck

(a) I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. ... I tried to make out to myself that I warn't to blame, because I didn't run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn't no use, conscience up and say, every time: 'But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody.' That was so—I

couldn't get around that, no way. That was where it pinched.

(b) I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get started right when he's little, ain't got no show. ... Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on—s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you feel better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad—I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no rouble to do wrong ... . So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.

In (a) Huck is telling himself that he has done wrong, violated conscience and made himself blameworthy. Moreover he feels a form of guilt: "that was where it pinched." In (b) he describes himself as incurably immoral, and as taking the easiest and most self-centred course. He admits to himself that he would "feel bad" (meaning not "feel like a bad person" but "have a nasty feeling") if he were to do the right thing. So he has a choice of retrospective emotions: the one that he identifies with morality and the one that corresponds to his deeper feelings. He is torn between them.

How to describe these two emotions? It is not extremely unusual to have simultaneous emotions that tend in opposite directions. (The normality of

this is defended in Zimmerman (1993).) One can be attracted to and afraid of the same object, for example. Huck's first emotion is essentially shame: he feels how disapproving the community of his upbringing, which he identifies with, would be of what he has done. There is an element of remorse, also, because he can feel the potential condemnation of Jim's "owner". It is a special kind of shame, though, because at some level he also imagines a point of view which would disapprove of frustrating the escape plans of slaves. This manifests itself in knowing that he would feel bad at turning Jim in. (And in fact he does feel bad just thinking about it.) But this point of view is not consciously available to him. It is potentially available, at most as a reconstruction of a pattern of reactions that is more consistent than he realizes. So he imagines a point of view which is appalled at his action and he also imagines a point of view on that point of view which is appalled at it. But this second imagining is unconscious and implicit. The essentials are that he has a meta-emotion of remorse directed at a first-order emotion of shame, and that the meta-emotion is less articulated and less available to his conception of himself. (Emotions about emotions are discussed in Mendonça (2013).)

There is another striking feature of his shame. It is shame in that he is condemned from a conventional point of view, but his attitude to this point of view is very mixed. As explained, some of his other emotions undercut the authority of this point of view, although he realizes it is the attitude of

parents and elders, and other people he looks up to. So it is in a way rather embarrassment-like. A similar emotion would be that of a moral philosopher who disapproves of an action as a result of thinking it through from the theories that she accepts, although it fits with her unreflective and unofficial intuitions about action. (Or the opposite, an action that she intellectually finds acceptable and even to be encouraged, but which something in her recoils from.)

It would help to have a label for emotions like this. I shall refer to them as "undermined shame". Undermined regret would also be possible, for example in the case in which you think and correspondingly feel that your action was a mistake, but you are also glad that you did it. Perhaps you have married somebody and now realize that this will frustrate many of your plans and commitments, as this person will cost you a lot of money and come between you and some of your friends and mentors. So you take it to be a mistake. But there is still real love, in spite of the quarrels over practical matters, and one of the reasons for the love is an attraction to this person's attitude to life, which is very different from the one that you think you have.

### **retrospection and psychological damage**

We come now to an emotion that seems to me to belong in the retrospective family, but which I have difficulty classifying as a form of shame, regret, or

remorse. I shall make psychological assumptions, which are not at all obvious. But I shall assume them, and readers who have doubts can substitute the weaker assumption that such things are possible, and then consider whether the emotions I describe would be plausibly ascribed.

People undergo various traumatic experiences which have long-term effects. Dramatic examples are abuse in childhood, rape, and violence, and less dramatic examples are demeaning parents, not being taken seriously because of one's gender or orientation, or threats. Years later they can suffer many symptoms of damaged self-respect. The symptoms are from a narrowly rational point of view puzzling, because the experiences from which they stem do not provide anything like evidence that the person is incapable or unworthy. Among the effects of damaged self-respect is a tendency to feel that things are one's fault. This can focus on the experience in question, and notoriously children do not report abuse by adults because they think that they had somehow been responsible themselves. And fantasies of guilt are quite common in long-term reactions to nasty experiences. But the scope can be much wider. The person can acquire a disposition to think that unrelated developments have occurred because of their faults. So we are dealing with a disposition to retrospective self critical emotions whatever their objects. (There is an opposite pathology, also, of people who are immune to self-critical emotions. That is also not unknown but digresses from our topic, although I suppose there is a connection in the form of people who cannot

allow themselves the tiniest bit of self-criticism for fear that it open the floodgates to an enormous sense of inadequacy.)

Assume that this happens. There is evidence for the phenomenon, although I take the unity of its causes still to be properly established, in Bernstein (2015) Kashdana, Todd, and others (2006), and Orth and R. Robins (2013). I make a connection with emotions of self-ascription in Morton (to appear) and Morton (2017). The associated emotions do not have a particular action of the person as their target, but rather the value of the person in some general way. So it is a kind of disposition, a standing mood or trait of character, always ready to take the person as being at fault. But, if you'll forgive the slight psychoanalytical tone, it also has a particular object, the traumatic event itself. Without identifying this as the focus of the emotion, the person has an attitude to it, that in some unspecified way it is her own fault, and this generates a sense of worthlessness that is at the root of the many occasions when the person has a particular case of regret, remorse, or shame.

Consider this underlying emotion, that one did wrong in causing the events that damaged one. Call it "self-accusatory retrospection". We can take it as shame or as remorse. Shame is pretty simple to apply here. The victim imagines an observer who sees her role in the events critically (the imagined perception is of course itself imagined). This imagination is painful, no doubt



because it brings back the events themselves. So the victim wishes she was not so imaginable, that she should be invisible from any such point of view.

Remorse can also be applied, though it is rather peculiar. The victim imagines the perpetrator as harmed, as having their good character spoiled by the provocations of the victim. So the victim has harmed the perpetrator, and the perpetrator judges the victim harshly but appropriately for this.

Regret is hardest to apply. The victim would have to imagine a point of view that repeats her decisions and arrives at a better choice. Perhaps there was a safer course of action, the thought would be, that would not have resulted in the catastrophe. The alternative might be less encouraging, less vulnerable, more matter-of-fact or tougher: "It was my fault to have got into that situation in the first place."

However we decide to classify it, this self-directed accusatory emotion can generate regret, remorse, guilt, and other negative emotions towards the victim's acts on particular occasions. These can cover the range of such emotions: regret for this, remorse for that, guilt for a third thing. As I see it, we have a hard-to-classify core emotion that generates a disposition to a range of more tractable particular attitudes. These can be consciously held, although the core emotion almost never will be. People are often mistaken about their psychological dispositions, in part because the primary evidence

concerns the patterns of their behaviour, which it is easy to misinterpret. In addition, although people can attribute emotions to themselves on the basis of affect these attributions easily confuse emotions with others that have similar affects. And it is interesting that among the likely confusions are those of one retrospective emotion for another: for example, a person who does not want to admit that she has done something wrong may label as regret what in fact is better described as remorse. (So why think that it exists? Well, the disposition is generated by an attitude to the crucial events. And it is a charged, feeling-laden, thing. So if we are to take it as itself an emotion at all it must be something like what I have described.)

### **false remorse**

One last example of an emotion of retrospective moral self-condemnation that does not fit into the standard list is feeling guilt for an action that one did not in fact commit. The background is in classic work on induced memory by Loftus and others, as in Loftus and Ketcham (1996). This shows that suitable largely verbal intervention can cause people to have memories that do not correspond to real events. The objects of these false memories can be as varied as recent traffic accidents and long-ago sexual abuse. This should change our thinking on many topics. They include confessions in which accused people recall committing crimes that were in fact committed by others. A powerful journalistic account of one such case is in Aviv (2017).

The central person in this case is relevant to our issues because while knowing that she is innocent she still feels remorse for a murder that she was nowhere near and took no part in. Thoughts about it and images of her participation in it haunt her painfully. (A detailed psychological reconstruction of such real-world cases would be valuable. In this case it would focus on details of her interrogation and on things she and others did and said during her years of prison. There is a suggestion that psychological damage earlier in life may make one more susceptible to such things, though no one is immune to them. This would make a connection with some of the other remorse-like cases.)

I said that she "feels remorse". Is she remorseful? In an obvious way she cannot be, because she knows that she did nothing wrong, inflicted no harm on the victim. But what else could I have said? She has experiences which are like those of remorseful people and it seems likely that the psychological process has a lot in common with remorse. But there is a crucial difference, which we could describe as semantic: her crime does not exist. It is not hard to imagine cases with similar characteristics. Someone could feel remorse for hurtful behaviour in a dream, and could feel compelled to apologize for it. (The object of the harm might not exist, in which case the apology would have to be fantasy also.) Someone might feel shame for un-uttered and out of character racist remarks. (Perhaps they contained a very appealing pun. The most responsible humans have their infantile side.) And anyone could

easily feel something subjectively like regret at not having given in to an impulse — to insult a powerful pompous leader, to commit a hopeless and immoral act of passion — that would have been catastrophic. It is plausible that states like each of these can really happen. Relatively inconsequential instances, such as the final regret case, are probably much more common than the tragic real remorse case I began with.

To smooth cases like these into the multidimensional continuum of retrospective emotions I would suggest going back to the basic structure. One imagines a person to whom one has an attitude of a respectful kind — that's what makes the emotion moral — who has an attitude of a judgemental kind to one's performance of an action. The feeling of the emotion is a compound of the respect and the judgement. All the emotions I have discussed, and potentially others, can be fitted into this structure. In the cases in question — false remorse, false regret, and so on — the imagined judgemental person is imagined as themselves imagining an action, supposing that it actually exists. This imagined person may be the performer of the imagined act in their more knowledgeable state, but their imagination of the act is still vivid and produces an affect that can be overwhelming. It can exert considerable pressure on the person's future thinking and action. So it is subjectively and pragmatically of a kind with the other emotions of retrospective self-directed moral evaluation.

**conclusion**

It is generally accepted that there are a number of retrospective morally-coloured emotions. The standard distinction between shame cultures and guilt cultures is evidence for a weak version of this, as is the fact that many languages have an extensive vocabulary for distinguishing between emotions in this family. I have been claiming that there are potentially very many retrospective emotions, perhaps even infinitely many. The argument for this has been that we can make a classification scheme that the standard labels in English fit into nicely, and which also has room for many other types of these emotions. It is important here that the classification system comes with a way of individuating the emotions, to reassure us that items fitting into different boxes in the system are indeed different emotions.

These emotions are important because they have central roles in our principled behaviour towards one another. The pressure that they put on our motivation leads us to change our plans, our attitudes, and inasmuch as we are capable of it our personalities. They do this in different ways, regret being focused particularly on change of plans, shame on change of manner, and remorse on change of personality. The novel labels that I introduced also connect to changes in motivation. Undermined shame may allow Huck one day to make the transition from his childish shame-based morality to a more complex one shaped by regret and remorse. And it will often allow people to

play lip-service to a conventional code while actually operating at a more nuanced level. Self-accusatory retrospection, the victim blaming herself, can be powerful in buttressing social cohesion and in maintaining traditional respectability, though from an enlightened perspective it is perverse. A milder version of it can also serve a more benign function, curbing the overconfidence of those who while rarely breaking any explicit rules continually bring trouble on themselves and others. (A very sharp remark that I once heard a wise person make of a well-known philosopher: "it's never his fault, but it is always someone else who gets hurt.")

Of course, the retrospective emotions are not the only ones playing similar roles. The family of disagreement, disapproval, and horror, and the family of agreement, disapproval, and enthusiasm, among others, are also involved. No doubt there are parallels and connections between the families, and I would conjecture that these too have potentially more members than we have words for. So there is a truly monstrous classification system lurking in the background.

The point I want to end the paper with, though, is that the variety of moral emotions has implications for the unity, or not, of morality. (The Bernard Williams papers already referred to are relevant here, as are Morton (1996) and Morton (2009).) In cases like the Huck Finn example emotions in the same family conflict, and there are cases with much more familiar emotions

(Zimmerman (1993) again). It is for instance perfectly possible that someone feels shame about doing something which they would feel remorse about not doing. Standing up for their sexual identity in a homophobic culture would be an example. (The emotions could be distinct but consistent if whenever one applied the others did not. But it seems that the conflict is more direct than this. They are contradictories rather than simply contraries.) So suppose that someone is avoiding situations that might lead to any such retrospective emotion (they are all negative in affect), avoiding actions of types that have led to these in the past, also avoiding actions of types that the person disapproves of in others, and so on. Is there a single coherent pattern of behaviour, even by the standards current in a particular culture, that this picks out? Do the emotional underpinnings of moral behaviour determine a single style of action?

It seems unlikely, given what we have seen. There would have to be a gigantic coincidence, or some dominating extra factor, for all these factors to pull together coherently. Can Huck Finn be both a cooperative member of his society and a force for moral progress? Can one both punish the guilty in accordance with the guilt feelings that they ought to have, and be free of the remorse that follows from inflicting trouble on others? If the retrospective emotions play a large role in the psychology of moral behaviour — whether or not they are as important in general abstract accounts of what is right — then the best bet is that moral behaviour, acting decently, is a diffuse bundle

with many different aspects. We emphasize different tendencies in it depending on what matters to us at a particular moment.

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