Reasonable Regret

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1. Introduction

I have frequently run into people who claim that they "live life with no regrets." I have always found this puzzling, for I live a life filled with regrets. Perhaps, though, I have too many. There might be times during which I feel regret unreasonably, or perhaps I would be behaving both more reasonably and ethically if I refrained from regretting. On the other hand, I suspect that those who truly live their lives with no regrets are skipping over those that they ought to have. There are likely instances in which these individuals would be behaving both more reasonably and ethically if they did feel regret for things they currently do not.

This paper is a philosophical investigation into the abovementioned issues. I believe that both common moral intuitions and reflected reasoning suggest that not all regret is created

equally. Indeed, there are instances in which ethical persons with properly functioning emotions *should* feel regret. But there are other instances in which those same individuals *should not* feel it. Hence, both the presence and absence of regret can be reasonable or unreasonable, moral or immoral.[1] This paper aims to distinguish between these instances in systematic ways. Although this is a philosophical investigation, I rely heavily on the scholarship of psychologists. Morality is ultimately inseparable from our psychology (i.e., our thoughts and attitudes), and thus philosophy is improved when it is grounded in the empirical science of psychology and cognition.

My paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 analyzes the emotion of regret and subsequently describes its identifying features. I explain how guilt differs from regret and how some seeming cases of regret are only pseudo-regret. This definition will serve as a point of conceptual reference for the discussion that follows. In section 3, I start with basic intuitive cases where most people would likely agree on the reasonableness of regret. This is followed by a discussion of their opposite: instances in which regret is intuitively unreasonable. The aim is to compare these cases so we might glean some features of regret that are reasonable and moral making and other features that are unreasonable and immoral making.

To delve a bit further into what has already been said, throughout this paper I will refer back to the aforementioned terms: reasonable, unreasonable, moral, and immoral. Philosophically, I wish to refrain from taking a contentious theoretical position on what I mean by them. Rather, I hope to work with a broad intuitive notion that latches on to how we use these terms in common conversation. A reasonable action is one that most adults can make sense of (if they really tried) and also an action that can be understood and "approved of" in the sense that it falls in line with the way an informed, intelligent, and consistent person might act. To be unreasonable, then, is to be the opposite of this. An unreasonable action is one that does not seem to make sense in the situation and would cause people to wonder whether or not the agent was uninformed, lacked intelligence, or was perhaps under the influence of mind-altering substances. A key part of the definitions just offered is "if they really tried." Because all of us have a lot going on in our lives, and because we often lack pertinent information about others, we may pay little attention to unreasonable acts and not even recognize them as such. However, if we were to take the time to sit and think deeply about the acts of another, and if we had full information about a given situation, then we would recognize the agent as being unreasonable.

I take a moral action to be one that most community members (given a community of informed and intelligent persons) would deem as either praiseworthy or morally neutral (i.e., an action that is at least morally acceptable given community standards of ethical behavior).[2] An immoral action is one that breaks these community standards and makes one worthy of blame and perhaps punishment. I will assume that the overwhelming majority of immoral acts are ones that do wrong to others. If an action wrongs another, then it is appropriate for the wronged individual to make a complaint against the wrongdoer and demand that the person cease to behave immorally. Sometimes, it may even be appropriate to demand that the wrongdoer compensate the wronged party. At the very least, individuals who behave immorally are worthy of negative judgement from fellow members of the community (members who together uphold the commonly accepted moral standard). Extrapolating from this, a feature of an act is moral making if it contributes to upholding ethical standards of the community, and it is immoral making if it does the opposite. Lastly, as is the case with reasonable and unreasonable acts, the average person often lacks both the time and information to aptly judge an act as moral or immoral (even if it really does warrant such a label).

Identifying these features provides a framework when trying to understand less intuitive categories of regret. Section 4 will discuss the more difficult cases, that is, *membership regret* and *interpersonal regret.* These cases are controversial because both types of regret involve actions that the regret holder herself did not commit. *Membership regret* occurs when a person who is a member of a group regrets the group's action despite the member having no direct involvement. *Interpersonal regret* occurs when an agent regrets the actions of another individual with whom she holds a close relation. I will argue that while something may seem initially strange about both membership and interpersonal regret, both types can be reasonable given the right circumstances.

2. What Is Regret?

2.1 Regret as a Cluster Concept

In the introduction, I hinted at an understanding of regret when I called it an emotion. It might not be obvious to all that regret is an emotion rather than a judgement. And while I will argue that regret involves a judgement, the concept of concern is more than just a form of rational recognition. We frequently, in common parlance, use the phrase "feeling regret." Consider, for instance, a headline from the *Washington Post*: "Bully *feels* regret for lashing out

at tormentor" (Hax 2017; emphasis added). A brief survey of contemporary publications will show that regret is frequently treated as something that is *felt*. This paper takes such cases of regret as the standard.

In defining the emotion of regret, I am not attempting a conceptual analysis that gets at the one true answer of what regret really is. I doubt there is an answer. I suspect there are a variety of cluster concepts used across languages and cultures. Instead, I am going to offer a definition of one of these cluster concepts while admitting that there are probably others. I am satisfied if what I loosely define as regret matches many (rather than all) instances of the way we use the term in common parlance. Most importantly, I aim to identify an emotional state/affective attitude that can be more and less reasonable and moral in a variety of circumstances.

2.2 Defining Regret (Casually, loosely, broadly, etc.)

Like many emotions, what I am calling regret involves both a phenomenological "feel" and a cognitive judgement. I will refer to these as the feel aspect and the cognitive aspect throughout the paper.[3] An individual who has a purely rational judgement with no emotional component is not experiencing what I am calling regret. For instance, imagine a very well-designed robot who has been programmed to learn what behaviors are socially acceptable and what are not. Suppose further that this robot knows hurting others is considered wrong and then accidently hurts someone via its robot arms hitting the person on the head. This robot may have a computational reaction that judges its movement as wrong and calculates data to avoid such movement in the future. But however close this robot regret might be to human regret, it is *not* human regret because it lacks the necessary emotional component.

While there are notable limitations to the extent to which we can describe the phenomenology of emotions, one thing we can do is reference them in comparison to other emotions and descriptive terms. For instance, regret is neither a feeling of happiness nor sadness, yet we can say that it is closer to the latter. Similarly, regret is closer to a negative emotion than a positive one. A reasonable word to describe the feeling of regret is *discomfort.* The idea that regret consists of a negative, uncomfortable, emotional experience is indeed supported by psychological science. According to one recent study, the "signature" of regret is "an *unpleasant* emotion triggered by knowledge of the rejected alternative's outcome" (Camille et al. 2004, 1168; emphasis added). Understanding the *reasons* for the discomfort associated with regret will

be central to understanding the *cognitive* component of the emotion. For now, let us focus on the "unpleasant" feeling. From the philosophical side of scholarship, Rorty (1980, 496) has described regret as "a particular type of painful feeling, a pang, a stab, waves of stabs."

With all this in mind, let us offer a general definition of *regret's emotional phenomenology*: Regret is a negative and uncomfortable feeling that is specially directed at a past occurrence.

In addition to an uncomfortable feeling of sorts, regret has a cognitive (or rational) component that is more specific than many other emotions. As Gilovich (1995, 379) has noted, "Judgement is more central to the experience of regret than . . . the experience of jealousy or anger." For example, whatever rational judgement (if any) accompanies the phenomenological feeling of happiness, it is not as specific as regret. Regret involves not only a judgement, but a judgement of a certain kind.[4] Take ten happy persons: each can have reasons for happiness that are entirely unique. Regret is a thicker concept, and if two persons are feeling regretful, the rational content of that feeling must share important conceptual features. "Thick" and "thin" are terms often used in the virtue ethics literature. Thin concepts are vague ones and their definitions lack specificity. For instance, the term "good" is generally considered a thin concept because its definition is quite vague. A thick concept would be "jealousy" because describing jealousy is not a vague task. It requires mentioning a specific emotional mind-set. Hence, there could be great variation in two persons who are both described as good but less variation in two persons who are described as being jealous. Similarly, because regret is also a thick concept, two persons who are described as regretful will have quite a lot in common (likely more in common than two persons described as being happy).

Let us now make a first attempt at describing the content that unifies regret across time and people. Regardless of who is feeling regret or when and where that person is feeling it, such instances of regret seem to share the important similarity of *regret's rational content*: The desire that some past occurrence with which the agent identifies had turned out differently than it in fact did.

Looking at the above statement, two unique features of regret are salient. First, some emotions, such as excitement, fear, and dread, are primarily focused on the future. Regret is the opposite of these, and its primary focus is the past. Only from this perspective does the emotion look toward the present or future. For instance, because Tom regrets what he has done, he might

commit to future states of affairs being different. Although he has a set attitude regarding the future, a separate attitude inspired by regret and directed at the past was foundational to its inspiration.

In addition to looking toward the past, regret's cognitive content is *identifying.* Here is what I understand an *identifying emotion* to be: An emotion whose cognitive content relates to self-perception and personal character assessment.

Identification (as I am understanding it) incorporates responsibility. As psychologists Camille et al. (2004, 11687) noted in their study, "Contrary to mere disappointment . . . regret is an emotion strongly associated with a feeling of responsibility." The identification I describe is a specific sense of responsibility. It is feeling responsible for something because your sense of self is tangled together with the object of your responsibility. For example, if I regret failing to make the basketball team, my identification as an athlete explains why (in my eyes) I should have done better and made the team. If I did not identify as an athlete, I might be sad *sans* regret if I didn't make the team. While most emotions can be identifying given the right circumstances, unlike regret, most emotions are not of necessity identifying. For instance, consider happiness. Jane might feel happiness when watching a random act of kindness between two strangers. This type of happiness has nothing to do with how Jane views her own character. Simply by virtue of having regret, however, we are making a judgement concerning our own behavior and character (viz., that some past occurrence does not fit well with our view of ourselves). An emotion just like regret but without the identifying feature is not in actuality regret at all and would be better described as disappointment or sadness.[5]

The way I have been describing regret thus far is importantly similar to Williams's brief but famous description of *agent regret.*[6] But despite the similarities, I will argue (in contrast to Williams) that we can feel regret even when we have had no direct involvement in the action. Hence my biggest disagreement with Williams (2002, 27), which will influence my account of reasonable regret, is with his claim that "a person can feel [agent regret] only towards his own past actions (or, at most, actions in which he regards himself as a participant)" (parentheses in the original). Contrary to Williams, I argue that what matters is not participation in the relevant act but *identification with the act.* Because we can identify with groups and their actions, it is both possible and reasonable to feel a deep type of personal regret (Williams's agent regret) for actions in which you were not a participant at all. This collective regret directed at occurrences in

which you were not directly involved is more than a "I wish that hadn't happened" feeling and instead is a feeling associated with deep responsibility and self-blame.[7]

2.3 Impossible Regret

Having just described regret in general terms, let us turn to some examples that can illuminate instances when regret is possible and when it is not. Here is a first test case:

Tom is reading a book about Timothy McVeigh and immediately regrets McVeigh's decision to murder so many innocents.

Let us assume that Tom is just a regular guy: a fifty-year-old African American dentist. While there might not be anything *immoral* about Tom's feeling of regret, something about his response just seems off. Upon reflection, it is easy to understand what is so unfitting about Tom's response: Tom had nothing to do with the bombing—he did not do the action himself, and he bears no connection whatsoever to those who did. Regret is an emotion that has an object. When we feel regret, we feel regret *toward something*. The something in Tom's case is the bombing by McVeigh. But this makes little sense because the second criterion of regret has not been met in Tom's case: Tom lacks identification with McVeigh's evil deed.[8] Hence, it seems safe to say that regret is not merely unreasonable in this case but *impossible.*

Now, Tom might be having a phenomenological experience identical to regret, but this is not enough. Regret is a thick emotion that requires both a phenomenological feel and cognitive content. Because Tom lacks the proper cognitive content, including identification, what he is feeling is at best pseudo-regret. Pseudo-regret occurs when one has an emotional (phenomenological) experience identical to an emotion but lacks the cognitive content of that emotion. Suppose, for instance, that jealousy involves a specific feel. In other words, there is a characteristic feeling involved in "feeling jealous." Imagine that after getting hit in the head, Toby suddenly feels a strong pang of jealousy. Yet he has no idea why he feels this way. (It has something to do with his injury.) Because there is no sense in which Toby is really jealous of something, what he is feeling is pseudo-jealousy. Likewise, when one has the feel of regret while lacking the matching cognitive content, one is experiencing pseudo-regret.

Before moving on from the above example, however, let us consider a twist to our story. Suppose that for whatever strange reason, Tom does identify with McVeigh. Perhaps he has been fascinated with the Oklahoma City bombing story since childhood, and this fascination has bred a strong sense of identity. If Tom did have this identification, his regret would be possible; but

his regret would also be unreasonable. Even though Tom identifies with McVeigh, his reasons for identification are themselves unreasonable, which makes his regret unreasonable. We can identify with all sorts of people and groups for unreasonable reasons, and when we do, the regret that follows from such identification is itself unreasonable. This is similar to feeling deep grief over the death of a celebrity with whom we bear no actual relation. Such grief is clearly possible, but because the relationship is entirely contrived, the emotion is unreasonable: Grief is fitting when it is directed toward those who we really knew and loved, not those we only wish we had known. Likewise, regret is fitting when it is directed at events with which we bear some real identifying connection (i.e., not a mere psychologically fabricated identification).

I do not mean to suggest that we can never feel reasonable regret nor grief over someone we have never met. However, the identification must be both real and appropriate. For instance, if Sam is a musician who was greatly influenced by a professional musician's work, not only might he feel real grief at the celebrity's death but he might feel regret over being profoundly influenced by a musician who was later revealed to have stolen all of his music. Identification is not a cut-and-dry concept but a spectrum, and the reasonableness of certain cases will fall on the border of apt and inapt. What swings something toward the apt side is both the existence of identification and the fact that such identification is founded on a meaningful connection.

2.4 Guilt vs. Regret

Guilt and regret are very closely related moral emotions, perhaps as close as empathy and sympathy or kindness and beneficence. I agree with the psychologists Gilovich and Medvec (1995, 393) that when an individual feels regret, such an experience is "likely to be tinged with guilt." This paper is focused on regret, but because it is a moral emotion so similar to guilt, it makes sense to say a few words about how they relate. As mentioned, I am not trying to get at the one true definition of regret, nor do I believe one exists. Thus, I will say the same about guilt. What exists is a class of cluster concepts, and speaking generally, we can delineate the conceptual differences between the concepts labeled as guilt and regret. Both emotions involve a negative feeling focused on a past event with which the agent can identify. Regret, however, is a broader concept.[9] I can regret forgetting to pick up cornflakes at the grocery store, but guilt for doing the same would be unreasonable. In usual circumstances, forgetting cornflakes is not a moral failing, yet insofar as I love eating them for breakfast, *it is* a personal failing. The first difference between guilt and regret is that the latter concept is broader. Regret can be directed at

personal failings that have little to do with morality. The very feeling of guilt, on the other hand, seems to have moral connotations.

There is a second difference between guilt and regret worth mentioning: Guilt seems more about personal inadequacy than about the past occurrence itself. If I feel guilty for failing to donate money to the homeless, my main focus seems to be my own moral shortcoming. If I regret failing to donate money to the homeless, my focus seems directed at the fact that the homeless were not helped. To take words from Zeelenberg et al. (2000, 532), "Regret is associated with a tendency to blame oneself for having made the wrong decision, a focus *on the regretted event* with a view to undoing it or preventing it from happening again in the future" (emphasis added). This focus on "undoing [an event] and preventing it from happening in the future" seems more central to regret than guilt. While guilt might lead to a person behaving differently, the emphasis on taking steps toward making things different is more salient in the case of regret.

Although different emotions, the similarities between regret and guilt are significant, and because of this we should keep in mind that we can likely learn a lot about one by studying the other.

3. What Is Reasonable Regret?

3.1 The Easy Case of Moral Regret

Emotions can be reasonable or unreasonable, moral or immoral. Although some might find this controversial, this line of thinking goes as far back as Aristotle, who argued that we can be too angry or not angry enough, or be angry at the wrong time or for the wrong things.[10] Emotions impact our behavior and are an important part of our moral life; emotions say a lot about our character—or so I will assume and many agree.[11] If we want to be good people, we should take care to feel the right emotions in the right circumstances to the right degrees.

It is hard to create an exact formula for ethical behavior. Philosophers have been arguing with one another over morality for upward of three thousand years. Ethics, morality, right and wrong, virtue, good and bad: This is difficult stuff. Due to the nature of the subject, then, I want to start out with "easy" cases: instances in which regret is *clearly* reasonable and other instances in which it is *clearly not.* By beginning with a point on which many people can agree, I hope to glean insights to help us analyze more difficult cases where opinions are initially less unified. The goal is for us to know that, speaking generally, circumstances that have feature *F* are those

in which regret is reasonable and circumstances that lack *F* are cases in which regret is unreasonable.

Let us start with an example of the former: Tom promised his sister he would watch his nephew. However, Tom is invited to go golfing and decides to leave his nephew (four years old) home alone. His nephew trips into the pool and nearly drowns while Tom is gone. Tom thinks back on what he has done and feels deep regret.

In this instance, we have a clean case of regret that seems to be the moral emotion to have in such a circumstance. It would say something negative about Tom as a person, if, having learned about what had happened to his nephew, he felt no twinge of regret. An example such as this brings out what is wrong with those who proclaim they live life with no regrets, namely, at times we do things that are *worthy* of regret. If Tom's bumper-sticker life motto stopped him from feeling regret, it would be a sign of selfish disregard for his sister and his nephew. When we do something that is a wrong against others, or harms them in some way, it is disrespectful to go on as if nothing has happened. Regret is a form of showing respect, insofar as regret owns up to a wrongdoing. Regret is a way of suggesting, "I had no right to treat you that way." Because regret need not be expressed, it does not always "show" respect. Yet silent regret is a private expression of respect. Much like, for example, how unexpressed admiration is still admiration. Lacking regret altogether suggests callous disregard toward the possibility of doing a harmful thing in the future. Indeed, the inability to feel regret is associated with antisocial behavior. In the words of psychologists Baskin-Sommers et al. (2016, 14438), "Psychopathy is associated with persistent antisocial behavior and a striking lack of regret for the consequences of that behavior." This addresses the perception. However, the truth might be a bit more complicated, and the aforementioned authors argue that while psychopaths are able to experience the phenomenological discomfort of regret, for them it provides no motivating force. Notwithstanding, there remains a strong link between antisocial behavior and a nontypical regret experience.

Why is regret a sign of respect? Looking at the lose definition offered earlier, we can spell out the why of what seems fairly intuitive, that is, lacking regret sometimes is disrespectful while the presence of regret can be the opposite. The first part of regret we described is its uncomfortable feel. Let us think of that feel in respect to our example with Tom. Tom did something that endangered his nephew. When he reflected upon the danger that he had inflicted,

it makes sense that he felt uncomfortable. Indeed, discomfort is an apt response to putting his nephew in danger. It is respectful to his nephew, for it is his nephew's worth as a person that merits the feeling of discomfort. *Perhaps* Tom would be able to judge what he did negatively and make a commitment never to do it again *absent* the emotional feel of regret, but such a situation still seems to fall short of the best response. Humans are emotional creatures, and our emotions influence our actions.[12] The emotional experience of regret is a sign of respect toward those we have wronged and also a motivational component of avoiding future bad behavior. To return to the study of Camille et al. (2004, 1167), "Regret has a profound impact in decision making . . . and is a powerful predictor of behavior because people's choices are often made to avoid this highly unpleasant emotion."[13] From the above examples, then, we can come away with two features that speak in favor of regret's reasonableness and morality. The presence of these features might not *always* mean regret is moral, all things considered. However, because they are in themselves morally valuable features, they speak strongly in favor of it. The relevant features associated with moral regret are the following:

- It is directed toward a behavior that should be avoided in the future.
- Its presence displays respect toward any persons wronged or harmed by the regrettable occurrence.

The first condition above speaks to the relevance of regret and control: The more control we had over our past actions, the more likely regret is reasonable. Indeed, Zeelenberg et al. (2000) confirmed in a series of experiments that the more control an agent had over an outcome, the greater her regret.[14] Now, it need not follow that regret is never reasonable in instances where we lack control. The claim is only for the converse: When we do have control over a "bad" action of sorts, this fact speaks in favor of regret's reasonableness. Regret is a psychological sticky note reminding us not to do the same thing in the future. Just like real-life sticky notes, regret is not always a successful reminder, and we may again do the thing that was regrettable. Nonetheless, regret is morally advisable because making an effort to avoid immoral action (even if such effort fails) is morally superior to taking no such action at all. Moreover, this motivational aspect of regret is an additional way in which it manifests respect: An effort to change behavior that harmed *S* is a sign of respect toward *S*.

3.2 When Regret Goes Wrong

Let us move on to examples where regret seems clearly unreasonable or immoral. When we compare these cases to the previous ones, we can glean some information about regret's reasonable-making features. The consequent challenge is to then apply them to more difficult cases involving membership and interpersonal regret.

- **Case 1:** Jenny's father beats her whenever she does not please him. Eventually, Jenny finds the courage to move out and move on. However, she feels constant regret that she was unable to please her father.
- **Case 2:** Jack stands up for a female co-worker who was sexually harassed. He puts himself on the line and testifies to witnessing the harassing actions. Since doing so, Jack has suffered serious career and social consequences and hence regrets helping his co-worker.

Both of the cases above are instances where many would agree that regret is not the best response.[15] Let us try to analyze each in turn.

- **Case 1:** The object of the agent's regret (Jenny not pleasing her father) is *not* a moral failing.
    - There are no morally important changes to be made in the future. (Jenny is under no moral obligation to change her behavior.)
- **Case 2:** The object of the agent's regret (standing up for a co-worker) is *not* a moral failing.
    - There are no morally important changes to be made in the future. (Jack is under no moral obligation to change his behavior.)

It should be noted that in both cases, the regret is directed toward a morally admirable action.

Earlier we identified morally worthy traits of regret, such as displaying respect toward wronged agents and serving as a motivational impetus for change. What the above cases of regret have in common is that their features are nearly the opposite of these. Rather than show respect, regret in these instances shows *disrespect.* Jenny's regret shows disrespect toward herself and her own self-worth. If Jenny had proper self-confidence, she would not regret her inability to please an overdemanding and immoral father. Jack's regret is disrespectful toward his female co-workers. Regret in this instance is a sign that he values his own career goals more than the proper treatment of his female colleagues.

Neither Jack nor Jenny are experiencing moral regret, and there is a common consequence to this similarity. Both of their types of regret *inhibit cooperative life with others*. Jenny's lack of self-respect, if a consistent problem, will make it harder for her to navigate life in a social community. She is unlikely to stand up for herself when the situation demands it, and because of this, she gives those with antisocial habits a willing victim. In Jack's case, it is even more obvious how his regret inhibits cooperative social life: Disrespecting your fellow community members is a detriment to a well-functioning communal life. All things considered, we can say this: *Reasonable regret promotes cooperative life, and unreasonable regret inhibits it.*

As long as we are understanding regret as a moral emotion, the above statement is not at all surprising. Moral psychology concerns how our emotions, attitudes, and mental states influence our moral lives, and under most understandings of morality, interactions with others are an important part of them. Cases of unreasonable or immoral regret seem to stem from two ways in which regret might serve to do nearly the *opposite* of moral regret. These cases can be identified by the following features:

- Regret does *not* display respect toward ourselves nor anyone else deserving.
- The object of regret is neither a moral nor a personal failing.

When we look at our exemplar cases, each has at least one of the above features. Jenny's regret, if it displays respect at all, displays it toward her undeserving father. This inability to please her father is not an objective failing of any sort. Her regret is hence not moral regret, although it is not necessarily immoral either.[16] Most people would probably look upon Jenny with sympathy. Even though her regret is not reasonable, it seems most of us would not blame her for feeling that way. We can contrast our hesitancy to blame Jenny with the much different attitude we may intuitively hold toward Jack. It appears that Jack *is* morally blameworthy and that his regret goes past the "not moral" line and into the *immoral* classification.

Both Jack and Jenny lack the moral-making features of regret, so we will have to dig deeper to understand why Jack's regret seems so much worse than Jenny's. One important distinction between them is that Jack's regret is directed not toward a morally neutral occasion but rather something that is either morally required or morally admirable. Jack not only gets things wrong: He gets things *completely backward*. The act he regrets is one that shows respect toward his female colleagues, and to regret showing respect is itself disrespectful in the most

salient of ways. Jack's selfish motives show that he cares more about his own career than the safety of his female colleagues.

4. The Hard Cases: Membership and Interpersonal Regret

4.1 Regret via Proxy

From looking at the paradigm cases (both the good and the bad) we were able to glean a few key features of regret that contribute to its moral reasonableness:

- Moral regret is directed at a past moral wrong. Via regret, the agent acknowledges that a wrong was committed and that the person wronged was undeserving of this offense. This acknowledgement displays respect toward the wronged individual. (It is similar to saying, "You did not deserve to be treated that way.")
- Unreasonable or immoral regret is directed at a past event that is morally admirable or at least morally neutral. Via regretting something morally admirable, the agent is suggesting the moral act normatively should not have occurred.

Given the moral-making (and -unmaking) features now identified, we can turn to the tough cases involving group (membership) and relationship (interpersonal) regret. It might seem odd for people to regret the actions of a group because regret connotes responsibility and a group member might have had no involvement with the group's actions. Thus, if the member had no involvement, how could the individual in question be responsible? And if the member is not responsible, why would the person feel regret? Psychologists, however, have long recognized that group members can feel *guilt* for actions in which they had no part.[17] Because regret is similar to guilt, it should not be surprising that membership regret functions in a similar way as membership guilt. Let us return to our discussion earlier where I explained that *identification* allows for the ascription of personal responsibility. Regret is an emotion in which agents feel responsible not because (or not essentially because) they performed or took part in the regrettable action, but because they identify with it in some way. For example, Mary might deeply regret that her university discriminated against women even if she herself has not experienced such discrimination.

Something similar to group regret occurs concerning individuals with whom we bear a close relationship. For example, if Jack's husband insults his friend, Jack might feel regret even though Jack was not the one who did the insulting. Because Jack's own identity is wrapped up in his husband's, he feels responsibility, and then regret, for something he did not do. Although

membership regret and interpersonal regret are similar, I will discuss each in turn to emphasize the distinctions.

4.2 Membership Regret

Let us consider two different cases of membership regret and see how they fare when judged according to the moral-making features articulated earlier. Each example is a token of a type of group regret.

1. Jamie has been working at her university for over twenty years and deeply regrets its recent decision to deny admission to atheists.
2. Jack is an openly gay accountant and regrets that many in the gay community organize parades. He believes parades distract from the important truth that gay persons are just like everybody else.

Let us stipulate that the above agents experience the necessary phenomenology of regret. The cognitive component of regret is also met because we can suppose that each agent personally identifies with the relevant group. In the words of one social-psychological study, "the behaviors and attributes of other group members have implications for the self" (Lickel 2005, 147). The strong way in which human beings connect to other members of the same group makes it possible for us to identify with group actions we have not been directly involved with. However, simply because regret is possible, it does not follow that regret is morally reasonable. To answer that question, let us recall regret's moral-making features:

- The regret displays respect toward the persons who were harmed or wronged.
- The regret serves as recognition that a past circumstance should not have occurred.

Jamie's regret seems straightforward and easily meets the demands of moral regret. She believes that the university's decision is a mistake, and her regret displays that recognition and is a sign of respect toward atheists. Her display of respect (via regret) is a small way of mitigating the disrespect displayed by the university. Her regret is also a recognition that the university should have acted differently. Hence, her regret includes both moral-making features.

The second example is perhaps more contentious. Whether Jack's regret is moral depends on whether his belief that pride events harm the gay community is reasonable, thereby representing a situation worthy of moral concern. If his belief is not reasonable, Jack has real regret that is unreasonable and immoral. And there is an additional factor that makes this example controversial. For regret to be "real," an agent must identify with the party responsible

for the object of the regret. Yet sometimes people identify with a group that does not identify with them. This mismatch of identification does not change regret into another emotion. For instance, Max can be sad when his favorite professional athlete is injured even if Max really bears no actual relationship with the athlete. Perhaps his sadness is built on a psychological fabrication of a relationship, but it is still sadness. Likewise, Jack can feel regret over the gay community's behavior whether or not the community accepts him. However, if Jack is not part of the relevant gay community, his regret is likely unreasonable insofar as it is founded upon an unreasonable sense of identification.

4.3 Interpersonal Regret

We can regret the actions of an individual distinct from ourselves in a way similar to the way we regret the actions of a group. In both cases, identification makes the regret possible. While with group regret, identification comes via membership, with interpersonal regret, there is no membership but merely a sense of an interpersonal connection. We can turn back to social psychology to help us with this conceptual discussion. In the above case of membership regret, the identity involved is what social psychologists call a *shared identity*. Shared identity occurs when several persons share at least one common feature that each considers a deep part of their personal identities (Lickel et al. 2005). Catholics, for instance, share common features, and members of the Catholic church deeply identify with them. Interpersonal regret, on the other hand, does not involve a shared identity but rather *interpersonal independence.* Let me quote the work of Lickel et al. (2005, 148) to describe this unique type of collective identity:

> The degree to which individuals are perceived to have high levels of social interaction, possess joint goals, and have shared norms of behavior (e.g. Gaertner & Shopler, 1998, Hinsz, Tindale, & Vollrath, 1997; Lewin, 1948; Lickel et al., 2000; Rabbie & Horwitz, 1988; Wilder & Simon, 1998). An important aspect of interdependent associations is that the associated persons have the opportunity for shared communication and influence over one another's thoughts and behaviors.

With the above in mind, and having analyzed regret, perhaps we can now understand why what initially seems strange (regretting the actions of others) actually makes sense. Because we identify with those especially close to us (i.e., friends, family, etc.), we feel a sense of responsibility for their actions. When we are in very close communication with another, as Lickel et al. (2005, 148) note, we have "influence over one another's thoughts and behaviors."

It makes sense then that awareness of an interpersonal relation will cause us to regret another person's behavior: We know there is mutual influence between thoughts and actions, and hence we cannot help but identify with the regrettable act of a person with whom we share interpersonal independence. This is noticeable insofar as we express responsibility through apologies, the emotion of pride, and various social practices such as imposing blame and bestowing awards. People sometimes apologize for the actions of their children, their spouses, and even their parents. We also impose social blame on the parents, spouses, and children of "badly" behaving members of society. Moreover, it is common for a close relation to accept an award for an individual who is unable to do so. In such circumstances, there is social recognition that persons with close relationships can act on behalf of one another.[18] Regret for the action of another falls under the same category of social practice. Consider, for instance, the following instances of regret:

- Janice regrets that her husband has evaded taxes.
- Eddie regrets that his best friend was rude to his mother.
- Amy regrets that her (adult) daughter has been arrested for shoplifting.

We can judge the reasonableness and morality of these instances of regret in the same fashion that we have judged group regret. The cases above qualify as actual regret as long as the agent (1) genuinely identifies with a relevant individual and (2) experiences the cognitive and emotional components of regret. Whether the regret is reasonable will depend on (1) whether it makes sense that the agent identifies with the relevant person and (2) whether the regret serves the purpose of displaying respect.

The reasonableness of regret can be seen as a spectrum where some cases clearly fall into the "okay" range and others hit a murky area. Whether Janice ought to identify with her husband depends on the nature of their relationship. If he tricked Janice into marriage and thus their relationship was established under false pretenses, identification makes less sense than if she went into the situation with eyes wide open.[19] Provided that identification does make sense, there is an obvious way in which regret for her husband's actions displays respect toward her fellow taxpayers. In such a situation, Janice recognizes that someone with whom she identifies has acted disrespectfully toward the community. She wishes that her husband had acted differently, that he had not shown such disrespect, and she recognizes that she has failed to influence him in the right sort of way. This form of recognition (wishing that her husband had acted respectfully and

feeling regret over the situation) is itself a sign of respect toward those he has wronged. The role of regret is similar to an apology. In both cases (of apologizing and regretting), a certain act and/or expression serves to recognize a wrong and therein mitigate it. It makes sense for *me* to apologize when I wrong someone. It is not quite as reasonable, but it still makes sense, for my close relations to apologize on my behalf.[20] It is entirely unreasonable and makes little sense for strangers to apologize for me. (They do not bear the right type of relationship to the wrongdoer.) Similarly, the psychological experience of regret by a stranger (as opposed to a close relation) is unreasonable for the same reasons.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the moral and normative implications of the emotion of regret. I started with two key assumptions. First, regret is an emotion with both psychological and cognitive content. Second, emotions can be both reasonable or unreasonable, moral or immoral. A key part of uncovering the normative content of regret is gaining an understanding of regret itself. Hence, this paper began with such investigation. My aim was to arrive at a definition broad enough to fit the varied situations in which we use the term and garner the agreement of a wide class of individuals. Regret that is reasonable must be directed at past events that violated personal or moral norms, and the regret must display respect toward the persons wronged by such violations. While it is easier to observe these features in cases of regret that are intuitively reasonable, I showed how these moral-making features can be applied to more difficult cases involving membership regret and interpersonal regret. Indeed, in certain circumstances, it is both possible and reasonable for an agent to feel regret due to the actions of a group or an individual distinct from the agent herself.

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[1] I will proceed as though all regret that is moral is reasonable, and because of this reasoning, I will often use the terms interchangeably. However, it is important to note that not all reasonable regret is moral or even fits that category. We can feel regret over failing to meet our personal goals (e.g., by failing to maintain a diet or publish a paper). Such regret could be reasonable without fitting into the category of morality. This paper is mostly focused on moral regret, and the assumption will be I am discussing moral regret (which falls under the broader category of "reasonable") unless otherwise noted.

[2] But what about moral disagreement among community members? A great deal of moral disagreement concerns dissent about factual issues. For instance, two persons who disagree about abortion likely also disagree about whether the fetus is a person or the mother has other plausible alternatives. While there might remain some disagreement if all factual issues were resolved,

there would be far less disagreement than we see today. In other words, there would be enough agreement to have clearer community standards than we see in many modern societies. When I talk about what is moral, I assume a community in which members are in epistemic alignment.

[3] In the literature on the philosophy of emotions, many theorists divide themselves between cognitivist and noncognitivist lines. It seems uncontroversial to me, however, to conclude that those who believe emotions are primarily one or the other are off base and to assert that emotions involve both a cognitive (judgement) and noncognitive (phenomenological "feel") component. For my purposes, it is simply not necessary to delve into the discussion of which feature (cognitive or noncognitive) is more primary or whether one is the result of the other. For those interested in this debate, a good starting point is Johnson (2017).

[4] Hampshire (1960) also emphasizes regret's demanding cognitive content when compared to other emotions (see especially pp. 240–242).

[5] The series of experiment conducted by Zeelenberg et al. (2000) show that when an agent believed she had control over an outcome, she felt regret, but when she lacked this control, the emotion was closer to disappointment.

[6] See Williams (2002, 27–33).

[7] In the beginning of his discussion of regret, Williams describes a very lose sense of the emotion, stating that "states of affairs, (that) can be regretted, in principle, by anyone who knows of them." I think what Williams describes here is just the sad recognition that a past event was a misfortune; this does not seem like regret at all.

[8] It is possible to describe a scenario in which Tom's regret is not unreasonable. For instance, if Tom felt regret for what McVeigh did specifically because both Tom and McVeigh are "Americans." In such a situation, Tom is identifying as an American and also identifies McVeigh as an American. There is hence a common link between them. However, in the scenario I provided, Tom is simply regretting McVeigh's actions as such, not as part of a group. Personal regret over the action of another is only reasonable when one bears a personal connection to the agent.

[9] Gilovich and Medvec (1995) draw a nice picture of how guilt is morally laden in a way that regret is not. The psychological experiments of Zeelenberg et al. (1998) focused largely on *moral* regret and the role it plays in social interaction. The authors show that regret can motivate pro-social behaviors such as apologizing and harm mitigation. Considered together, these studies

confirm my suggestion that guilt is of necessity concerned with morality, while regret can be a moral emotion but need not be.

[10] See Aristotle (Book IV, chap. 5–14).

[11] There are thousands of citations I might give to support the two claims I casually mentioned above (i.e., that emotions influence our behavior and are a part of moral life). Here I offer just a sampling. For a general overview of the psychology of emotions and behavior, see Johnston and Olson (2015). For an overview of the role of emotions in philosophy, see Goldie (2014). For a more specific focus on emotions and *morality* in the psychological discipline, see Parrott (2001), and for the discipline of philosophy, see Bagnoli (2015). For the philosophy of moral psychology, see Alfano (2016) and Nadelhoffer (2010). An informative book covering morality and the emotions from the combined perspective of neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy can be found in Sinnott-Armstrong (2008).

[12] For a great introduction to the philosophy of emotions, see Johnson (2017).

[13] There have been studies about the motivational import of regret in respect to rational choice theory going back to the 1980s. See, for example, Bell (1981, 1983, 1985) and Loome and Sugden (1987). More modern work on regret's impact on motivation includes Zeelenberg and Beattie (1997), Connolly and Zeelenberg (2002), Coricelli et al. (2005), Hayashi (2008), Khan et al. (2005), and Zinkevich et al. (2008). All these studies confirm (in various ways) that regret serves as a motivational impetus to change one's behavior in the future so as to avoid future regret.

[14] Interestingly, the reverse appeared to be true with disappointment, that is, the *less* control an agent had over an outcome, the greater her disappointment (Zeelenberg et al. 2000, 12254). The authors note that the correlation between regret and control has been confirmed in studies by Frijda et al. (1989) and van Dijk et al. (1999).

[15] Of course, not *everyone* will agree. My argument is meant for those who do agree. From this agreement, we can move forward and identify the features of each that explain these moral problems.

[16] By "not moral," I mean something like "not morally admirable" or "not morally advisable." One might argue that it is "moral" in the sense that *she herself* believes she did something wrong. However, this is a moral mistake and so is not something that would be "morally advised."

[17] To cite only a sample of scholarly work by psychologists on membership guilt, see Branscombe and Doosje (2004), Doosje et al. (2006), Lickel et al. (2005, 2001), and Wohl et al. (2006). On the philosophical side of things, Gilbert (1997, 2002) has written about a distinct but related phenomenon. However, Gilbert focuses on how the group itself feels guilty as opposed to group members. Nonetheless, guilt felt by individual group members is discussed.

[18] See Priest (2016).

[19] It depends, of course, on what the pretense is. Persons working in the Central Intelligence Agency could tell a lot of lies to protect their identities while still "being themselves." It is only when people truly hide who they are as individuals that identification becomes a pretense.

[20] Again, see Priest (2016).