

Revelatory Regret and the Standpoint of the Agent

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of living with no regrets has found such broad popular appeal that it is often cliché. Regret has been put to various but often related philosophical ends by thinkers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, and more recently, Michael Bratman and R. Jay Wallace.¹ We can experience regret as we look back on our lives and we can anticipate regret for actions, whether in the past, present, or future.²

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche describes how a certain kind of person will not look back with regret on past actions: “A thinker sees his own actions as experiments and questions—as attempts to find out something. Success and failure are for him answers above all. To be annoyed or feel remorse because something goes wrong—that he leaves to those who act “because they have received orders and now have to reckon with a beating when his lordship is not satisfied with the result” (§ 41). That Nietzsche thought that one should embrace one’s life—the good and bad—in such a way that one does not have regret is further supported

1. See Nietzsche ([1882] 1974), James (1992), Bratman (1999; 2014), Wallace (2012; 2013).

2. Anticipatory or anticipated regret is sometimes ambiguous between two phenomena. It can refer to the current experience of regret for some anticipated action. It can also pick out one’s anticipation of future regret for some action, whether that action is in the past, future, or currently being considered. Although in some sense, the latter is not (yet) strictly speaking regret, this seems to be the notion of regret that Bratman (1999, 2014) has in mind in his description of the no-regret condition. For this reason, this type of anticipated regret will be my focus when discussing future-oriented regret. I will, however, note instances of regret for anticipated actions, even if the discussions are underdeveloped.

by his notion of the eternal recurrence.³ More recently, Bratman (1999, 2014) uses the notion of future or anticipated regret to examine our planning nature as agents. He thinks when one anticipates regret for an action, it not only affects the way one evaluates the action, but also, once one settles on some plan or course of action, anticipated regret for abandoning the course of action can give further reason to maintain the previous intention.⁴

Pace Nietzsche, regret—both anticipated and retrospective—often plays an important role in practical deliberation and motivation. Consequently, understanding it can help us better understand the contours of human agency. In this vein, we can ask at least two questions about the nature of regret: What does regret reveal about the agent? And, second, what does it reveal to the agent? I think there are two factors that can seem to make regret—perhaps especially anticipatory regret—not only a poor predictor of where the agent will be in the future but also an unreliable indicator of where the agent stands. First, in significant ways we can be ignorant about our desires, preferences, values, and the like. For example, I could think that the life of research and teaching is my true vocation, for example, when in fact I would be more fulfilled were I immersed in woodworking or artisan bread. If anticipatory regret depends on our awareness of our preferences and values, precisely what regret reveals—both about and to the agent—could be different than what we initially think.

Second, even if we know ourselves well, because we change over time, we can be wrong about what actions we will in fact regret in the future. I could anticipate regret for not publishing more articles and so spend more time writing only to find that I later regret the time spent writing at the expense of relationships with family or friends.⁵ Nevertheless, even if granting a certain authority to anticipated emotions like regret could be problematic given inaccurate self-conceptions and fallible self-knowledge, regret in both its prospective and retrospective varieties can yield important philosophical insight into the sorts of creatures we are, and practical insight into who we are as individuals.

The phenomenon of regret offers the chance to think through self-ignorance, personal change over time, and the distinction and potential gap between what we judge to be valuable and what we value, elements crucial to the complexity (sometimes messiness) of human nature and human agency. Many consider the capacity for self-awareness, the capacity to reflect on what we are like and what we want to be, to be distinctive of human nature. We are also, as Martin Seligman et al. (2016) suggest in *Homo Prospectus*, ineluctably looking and

3. Nietzsche's notion of the eternal recurrence is a subject of scholarly dispute, but a significant interpretive tradition understands it along these lines.

4. Dan Moller (2011), on the other hand, argues that anticipated emotions such as regret should carry little weight in practical deliberations.

5. Regret could also be context-dependent. In the face of an impending deadline or if passed over for a promotion, one could regret time spent in quotidian tasks or socializing. But if one loses a friend or family member, one could wish they could trade time spent in the office for more time with the departed one in those trivial activities.

drawn forward. But we are also fallible in our self-knowledge and in our predictions of what the future has in store and what we will look like in the future. In both cases, these distinctive capacities are not only imperfect but potentially misleading. We are thus drawn to formulate self-theories but those self-theories may be consistently off and look forward with limited prospective capacities. And it could be that introspection and prospection tend to misfire when capturing key aspects of ourselves. For example, we may be prone to ignore and downplay characteristics that reflect poorly on us or we may underestimate the future effect of cares and desires when we wish we didn't have them. The tendency to look away from rather than address potential conflicts between what we judge to be best and what we find ourselves attached to, committed to, drawn to, or caring about, sometimes in spite of ourselves, impedes our ability to act in ways that promote our own good and, very often, the good of others. This is not to say that our unacknowledged or undesired attachments, commitments, or cares should carry the day. But insofar as they figure into our agential economy, our theories of agency (and our agency) are the poorer for our failing to properly consider them.

Carla Bagnoli (2000) argues that regret depends on and shows how we value other, unchosen alternatives. Sometimes we can regret something even when we have made the best choice, because we also value another, unchosen option. But self-ignorance and the possibility (or inevitability) of change over time, to say nothing of human finitude, make it likely that we will leave options we value on the table. The experience of retrospective regret can illuminate or reveal to us things we care about. In this way, retrospective regret can also play an important role in forward-looking, or prospective, deliberation in human agency. Bagnoli argues that Bernard Williams views "regret as a sign of value pluralism, rather than as an experience that is practically meaningful *for the agent*. Regret is elected as a significant element of the world of values, rather than as an attitude intelligible in the perspective of the agent" (175, emphasis in original). I largely agree with Bagnoli's emphasis on the agential perspective, but I wonder if she is too quick to separate these two perspectives. In some instances, the experience of regret can be a revelation, showing the person that she values something that, or in a way, she did not know, or, sometimes, that she is (or was) a different person than she had thought.

Experiences of revelatory regret, then, can blur the distinction between what regret reveals about the agent and what it reveals to the agent. In such cases, regret reveals something to the agent about herself as agent. Anticipatory regret is often thought to be valuable in helping the agent decide what to do. My claim is that retrospective regret can play an important role in helping the agent understand her own standpoint. Bagnoli suggests that regret is justified insofar as the agent still values the path not chosen. I would add that some instances of justified regret in this framework could be surprising to the agent. And, further, because agents can value things that they do not judge valuable and, conversely, can fail to value

things they judge to be valuable, regret can reveal an agent's values in a different way than an agent's prospective or even retrospective judgments of value. This can happen when one is unaware of things that one values or when one's values are in flux and so one comes to value something that one did not value before, or ceases to value something one previously valued. This article focuses on cases of self-ignorance and so the discussion of the relationship between shifting values, regret, and the agential standpoint will be underdeveloped.

Building on Bagnoli's claim that regret is a way of valuing some unchosen alternative, I examine two cases in which the agent seems to some degree self-ignorant. In the first, the experience of regret reveals what the agent values, not only to others but even to the agent himself. Such experiences can reveal that the agent in fact values something different (or differently) than he thought. In the second, the agent anticipates experiencing regret for some action but does not experience the regret, suggesting that the agent did not value the rejected alternative in the way she thought. Although anticipatory regret is clearly forward-looking, it is limited insofar as it tends to flow from one's judgment and one's prospection about oneself. It can play an important role in practical deliberation, but the experience of retrospective regret may better indicate where the agent stands, and that insight also feeds into practical deliberation. These cases highlight key aspects of human agency, showing how regret has significant practical value but also illuminates the rich and often messy business of being human.

II. THE CONTOURS OF REGRET

Regret comes in many shapes and sizes. We can regret that things are or were a certain way, even if we had no hand in bringing them about. I could regret, for example, that women could not vote for much of the history of the United States, even though I had nothing to do with it. But much of the time, we regret things that we have done.⁶ I could regret harsh words I say or the way I spend my time. And although we often focus on moral regret, regret need not be moral.⁷ We can regret betraying a friend or loved one, to be sure, but we can also regret not investing in a certain company, failing to exercise, or eating too much dessert. Regret may typically appear when we fail to do what we judge to be best. I could regret time spent mindlessly browsing social media when I could have been preparing for class or writing

6. See Williams (1981), Rorty (1980), and Baron (1988) for important discussions of agent-regret and how it differs from mere regret (in Williams and Rorty) and remorse (in Baron).

7. Many have made this distinction, among them Williams (1973, 1981), Baron (1988), and Solomon (2007). And even when regret is specifically moral, it need not accurately track the moral worth of the action. In Huck Finn's case, due to incorrect moral views, Huck could deeply regret doing what is in fact the morally right action. See, for example, Arpaly (2015).

this article on regret. But we do not always regret doing something that we do not think is the best.⁸ I could think it better to not have an extra dessert or to order a salad instead of fries but not really regret that extra cookie or the tasty fries. For various reasons, some think we can even regret doing things that we would do again and that in some sense we think were the best thing to do, given the circumstances.⁹ Or we could regret not doing something that we would choose not to do again, if the same situation presented itself. I could regret not cultivating an interest in the opera, even if, given the chance to change, I would neglect to cultivate that appreciation again.

Some regret thus seems an inevitable consequence of human finitude and psychology in a world full of valuable pursuits and objects (Rosati 2007). Bagnoli (2000, 70) uses the example of Jackie, who is deciding between careers in modern dance and architecture. She finds the options equally appealing and is equally talented in both areas. Insofar as she values both options, there will be some regret regardless of what she decides. Even if she affirms her decision to be a dancer, she could continue to value architecture and regret not being able to pursue it in a more robust way. There are other regrets, however, about which we do not have ambivalence. Wallace (2012, 2013) describes all-in regret as occurring when “a person experiences a stable reaction of sorrow or pain about a past action or circumstance” (2012, 177). Even if I had reasons for making some harmful comment, I could experience consistently negative reactions to having made them. In such cases, unlike the Jackie case, the agent does not have conflicting reactions to the decision. Regret, then, can indicate that we feel we have made some mistake—perhaps some moral error or a failure to act prudentially—but it can also simply be a consequence of finitude. I could regret not learning some instrument or language, but not think that I have made some mistake in failing to do so. I could affirm my life while still in some sense regretting things I have not done.¹⁰

Wallace (2013) describes regret as looking backward, with feeling. And regret typically involves a negative reaction to some past event or action. In agent-regret the agent could judge and feel that she made some mistake,

8. In *The View from Here*, Wallace (2013) argues that given the role that attachments play in constituting our practical identities, a certain kind of “affirmation dynamic” (5) may lead us to unconditionally affirm things that, were we not attached to them, we would regret.

9. Connie Rosati (2007) argues that in some instances of regret, regret is not so much the result of some perceived mistake as the experience of the loss of some good, even if it is in pursuit of some other good. I may regret not volunteering for a certain organization because my time is limited between family and work commitments, even though I would likely choose the same path. Bratman’s (2007) own description of the world being one full of value, inevitably leading to choices to pursue some things of value at the expense of others, gives a framework for this kind of regret.

10. For a rich discussion of these sorts of questions, see Wallace (2013).

whether moral, prudential, or otherwise. Or she could feel that she did something (perhaps morally) bad even if she did the best thing.¹¹ Or, when the decision involves two valued options, she could experience the loss of some valued and unchosen alternative, whether or not she feels she chose the better option. Each of these options can be explained by Bagnoli's claim that regret involves valuing some unchosen alternative. The way and the extent to which the alternatives are valued can explain some of the different varieties of regret. The experience of backward-looking regret often plays an important role in forward-looking practical deliberation. Having experienced pangs of regret for some action can make us avoid relevantly similar actions in the future.

As one would expect, anticipatory regret can also play a major role in our practical deliberations about whether to do (or not do) something.¹² The "no-regret" condition plays an important role in Bratman's (1999, 2014) analysis of our reasons to persist in some previously settled intention. I could, for example, be tempted to sleep in, skip a workout, or have an extra brownie (or more) when I have made commitments to get up at a certain time, or exercise more regularly, or limit sweets. Anticipatory regret can be a key factor in maintaining a commitment to exercise and to have a moderate amount of dessert.

Regret is a complex and varied phenomenon. Regret is complex because it involves both affective and cognitive elements. Paradigm cases involve not only a negative feeling but also the judgment that some action was wrong or, in instances of nonmoral regret, less good in some way. And one could even experience moral regret for some action that, although not wrong, is still morally bad in some sense.¹³

One reason for the varieties of regret is the distinction between moral and nonmoral regret. We can regret doing something (we judge to be) morally wrong. But we can also regret doing things that are not morally wrong, such as prematurely quitting piano lessons or investing in a failing venture (or failing to invest in some profitable venture). Williams (1973, 170) argues that regret is a practical but not necessarily a moral attitude. The proper object for regret, he thinks, is what "was missed," not some moral wrong (*ibid.*). A second reason for variation in regret is that we can regret some actions because they are inconsistent with who we are (or perhaps who we take ourselves to be). But we can also regret something that is consistent with who we are (and take ourselves to be) if we wish that we were different. In *Homo Prospectus*, Roy Baumeister (Seligman et al. 2016, 213) notes

11. Elizabeth Harman (2016) discusses this option at length.

12. Moller (2011) examines whether anticipated emotions, such as regret for an action, should have weight in an agent's practical reasoning, over and above the reasons for or against doing the action.

13. See Harman's (2016) "Morally Permissible Moral Mistakes" for more on this possibility.

a commonly accepted distinction between guilt and shame, with guilt being a bad feeling about an action and shame being a bad feeling about one's entire person. I propose a parallel distinction between two types of regret. On the one hand, one could regret some action because it is inconsistent with one's practical identity. This would typically include instances of weak-willed action and cases generally in which one fails to live up to the values one has consciously endorsed. On the other hand, one could regret being, or having been, a certain way (or having some practical identity) and thus regret actions flowing from that identity. A third reason for variation in regret is that although we often think of regret in backward-looking ways, regret can also be future-oriented. We can regret anticipated future actions. And even in instances of retrospective regret, there is often a significant prospective element. We look backward with regret with an eye to the future.

In addition, whether or not we regret something can change over time. We can come to regret some decision as time plays out—perhaps things go worse than we'd anticipated or we come to see the short sightedness of our action. But we could also regret some decision at one point only to not regret it at a later point. Someone could regret choosing a path that required certain sacrifices at one point only to come to a different assessment at a later point. But experiences of regret could be even more inconstant than that. The experience of regret can shift, not only depending on our fortune but also on the circumstances in which we look at our choices (see Rosati 2007, 237). This volatility could be taken to indicate the unreliability of regret. If experiences of regret are too susceptible to change, maybe regret does not track our judgments, attachments, or commitments very effectively. Taken from a different angle, however, this proneness to change may be a strength rather than a shortcoming of regret. Regret both shapes and is shaped by our engagement with the world, so the variability could be an indication of the multifaceted and shifting nature of valuing. It could be a problem if certain regrets were too constant. Depending on the context, different factors become salient and what seemed to be a good decision at one time could appear seriously mistaken in another. The decision (or tendency) to stay late to finish an article could seem like a very good idea if or when one receives a prestigious fellowship as a result of one's work. The same decision, however, could seem misguided down the road if one realizes it led to the weakening of relationships one cared about and the work completed during the fellowship seems like just more treading on the scholarship treadmill. One could reverse the scenarios with similar results. If I choose to come home early in order to be with my children, that could seem like a good decision when thinking of my family relationships. But that same decision could later seem shortsighted if it comes at the expense of meaningful work or of some advancement or a prestigious award or accolade.

We can regret doing something that goes against who we are. Other times, however, we regret an action because it reveals to us things about ourselves that we do not like. We can feel the pang of regret not only when

we act wrongly based on who we are, but also when we act consistently with who we are and it bothers us to see ourselves in that way. Similarly, we can regret acting contrary to something we care about. But regret can also reveal to us what we care about. For example, finding ourselves unexpectedly distraught at the ending of a relationship in ways can suggest (to us) that the relationship (or the person) may have mattered to us more than we thought it (or they) did.

III. BACKWARD AND FORWARD: THE TEMPORALITY OF REGRET

Whether and the degree to which we experience regret for some action can thus change over time. But regret already stretches across time in various ways. We typically think of regret as retrospective—looking backward on some past action—but regret can also be prospective—we anticipate regret for an action we are contemplating doing (lying or betraying someone) or not doing (exercise or work). And retrospective regret often shows up as one is contemplating some future action or path. There are many examples of both retrospective and prospective regret, both in art and life, and we will look at one example of each distinct temporal variety of regret. As an example of retrospective regret, I will discuss Mr. Stevens from Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1988). For anticipatory regret, I use the example of Emily, the PhD student from Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue* (2003).

Toward the end of *The Remains of the Day*, Mr. Stevens, an aging English butler, recounts how his heart breaks as Mrs. Benn (formerly Miss Kenton) tells him that she has sometimes wondered what a life with him would have been like. Earlier in the novel, in keeping with his understanding of proper butler behavior, Mr. Stevens refused to consider a relationship with Miss Kenton, who was his co-worker at the time, even as Mr. Benn started to court her and she all but asked him to do the same. Time has passed and Mr. Stevens is in a very different working situation—now working for a wealthy American who bought the estate from Lord Darlington, his aristocratic employer who later fell into disrepute for his political (and moral) misadventures with the Nazi party. And it may be these changes that allow him for the first time to recognize his regret and to see the way in which he values (and valued) his largely lost relationship with Miss Kenton. The shape of Mr. Stevens's narrative makes it unlikely that he would explicitly express his regret for ignoring Miss Kenton's earlier entreaties. But, at least on one understanding of Mr. Stevens and the concept of regret, it seems Mr. Stevens could regret his earlier failure to pursue what could have been a meaningful relationship with then Miss Kenton. The situation is complicated because his earlier decision not to do so was in line with some of his explicitly endorsed professional values—he saw pursuing a romantic relationship with a co-worker as falling short of the dignity proper to a good English butler. But another interpretation of this reaction is that in this case, there could be a gap between his consciously endorsed values and the values that, at least in hindsight,

guide his emotional and practical outlooks. And if this is right, the way he experiences regret could reveal what he values, not only to the readers but also to himself. The key for our purposes at this point is that Mr. Stevens looks *back* with regret on his actions. To be sure, this experience of regret could alter what he does in the future. But the action is in the past, and in this case, there are limits to what he can do in response.

Emily, as Arpaly (2003, 49) describes her, is a PhD student in chemistry whose “best judgment has always told her that she should pursue a PhD in chemistry.” As she goes on in her graduate program, she “starts feeling restless, sad, and ill-motivated to stick to her studies.” Yet, because of her judgment that pursuing a career in chemistry would be best, instead of seeing these feelings (accurately) as triggered by factors that are good reasons to leave the program, she interprets them as part of a temptation to abandon the course to which she has committed. In such a situation, if Emily were to contemplate leaving the program, she would likely anticipate regret for what she now sees as weak-willed behavior. Her anticipation of regret for choosing not to finish the PhD program plays an important role in her decision to stay as long as she does. Sometimes agents can anticipate future regret for decisions that may be in line with things they desire right now. Someone could anticipate regretting failing to study the appropriate amount for a critical exam even though he may, right now, prefer to spend the time in leisure or on vacation.

With these cases of a backward-looking English butler and a forward-looking PhD student, we see some of the different ways that regret can play out. We can regret past actions, sometimes unexpectedly. We can anticipate regretting future actions. In addition to illustrating the retrospective and prospective varieties of regret, these cases also illuminate two further challenges facing accounts of regret. We will now turn to one challenge that faces accounts of regret, particularly anticipatory regret, that of self-ignorance. We may not know important aspects of ourselves very well. In particular, our judgments about ourselves and about what we value are unreliable. We will briefly discuss the way in which this can be exacerbated by the fact that we cannot foresee the ways in which we will change. But even minimizing these worries, the worry of self-ignorance gives us reason to be judicious in the weight we give to our anticipated regrets that stem from our judgments about our values and about the future.

IV. REGRET AND SELF-IGNORANCE

We often choose careers, partners, and lifestyles not entirely on the basis of what we take our current preferences to be, but also with an eye to our future desires and interests. Someone may choose to pursue a career in medicine because they anticipate helping others and enjoying a certain kind of life in the future and not only because they enjoy the subject or long hours of study. But in many of these cases, we don’t know how we will change over time or what our preferences will be in the future. L. A. Paul (2014)

explores these issues in depth in *Transformative Experience*, in which she gives an account of (among other things) how to make decisions about experiences that are epistemically and personally transformative. Other times, we may suspect how we will change, but then there are a host of other challenges as Derek Parfit (1984) illustrates in *Reasons and Persons*, with the example of a nineteenth-century Russian nobleman who fears that he will change in ways and so do things that will undermine his current commitment to certain ethical and political ideals.¹⁴

People disagree about the value of anticipated emotions, but it is common to think anticipated regret not only does play an important role when we decide what to do but is justified in doing so. But anticipatory or future-oriented regret would seem to be affected by the possibility, or inevitability, of personal transformation, by the fact that our preferences, attachments, and situations, and so our reasons for action, shift.¹⁵ These changes can be subtle or dramatic. They can be intentional or the result of experiences that unexpectedly reorient our perspectives on the world. We could avoid some action because we anticipate regretting it on the basis of our current beliefs, preferences, dispositions, or values, only to later regret our previous decision because we have changed in the interim. Bratman (2014) has recently argued that, given our nature as planning agents, there is some reason to give preference to our current values. And, of course, there is something to be said for maintaining our commitments and being true to our values. If taken too far, however, this approach could lead to a worry that parallels one Cheshire Calhoun (2016, 123) raises in her analysis of integrity. She claims that sometimes the way we analyze integrity ends up reducing integrity to staying the same person. Similarly, a certain understanding of regret—again, particularly of the role of anticipatory regret in practical deliberation—could lead us to privilege courses of action that privilege the status quo.¹⁶

14. The case of Parfit's Russian nobleman is complex. For one, he seems to currently regret an anticipated future action, which is different from anticipating regret for a present or future action. Indeed, part of his worry is that his future self will not regret such actions because he anticipates that as he inherits wealth, he will change in ways that will lead him to endorse actions that go against the ethical and political principles he now holds. As a result, he goes to great length to bind his future self to act according to his present commitments. There is something to be said for the self-binding mentioned by Parfit and elaborated later by Christine Korsgaard (2009) in her discussion of self-constitution, but there are a couple of worries that arise. First, given the possibility of self-ignorance, anticipatory regret may not be a reliable indicator of one's actual values and so may be a problematic basis for such preemptive agential interference. And second, even if anticipatory regret were a reliable indicator for one's values, it could *predict* but would fail to sufficiently *respect* the transformative nature of human beings. Thanks to Monique Wonderly for help in articulating these points.

15. Rosati (2007) discusses the fact that our "feelings of regret and our assessments of our choices are liable to change" (235).

16. Paul (2014) analyzes various issues stemming from scenarios in which one must decide whether to undergo some transformative experience.

When one is deciding whether to have a child, for example, one does not (indeed, cannot) know whether one will prefer having a child to not having a child. One reason for this is that one's preferences can be transformed through the experience. For example, the life of a parent could seem unappealing to someone who nevertheless decides to have a child only to have her dispositions and preferences change in such a way that she feels deeply satisfied as a parent and feels she made the right decision. Conversely, even those who enjoy spending time with children and have always wanted to have children may find out that having children of their own is quite different and less enjoyable than they anticipated and could find themselves regretting the decision to have children.

As we change, we may regret things that, on balance, made sense to for us to do earlier, given the values we had then. In such cases, we regret what we did, yes, but in some sense, because the action was consistent with who we were or who we took ourselves to be, it is more accurate to say we regret who we were at the time. In his discussion in *Homo Prospectus*, Baumeister (Seligman et al. 2016, 214) notes research that suggest that our predictions of future emotions—or affective forecasting—is often inaccurate. Even so, Baumeister thinks that the risks of inaccurate prospective emotions like regret are outweighed by the practical advantages, say, of one anticipating personal success in a given pursuit (220–21).¹⁷

But in addition to the uncertainty of how the future will play out and our ignorance about the sorts of people we will become, there are reasons to doubt that we know even our present selves as well as we might think. We often think that we regret actions when we do something that betrays our true self, but what we take to be our true self could be quite different from the self that appears to others. One might say after harsh words, “I really regret what I said. That’s not the sort of person I am. Please forgive me and know that that is not me.” This captures something important about our experience as agents. But I also think regret often reveals who we are and what we really care about. It can grant us insight into the things we value, care about, and the sorts of people we are. So even when we satisfy the no-regret condition at t_2 and do action A in part because we see no basis for regret at some future t_3 , we could be surprised to find at t_3 that we do in fact regret the action. Recall the example of Emily, who anticipates regretting deciding to quit her PhD program even though, were she more attentive to herself, she would see that graduate school and the academic life do not align with her preferences.

But even setting aside the worry of self-transformation and the fact that we do not know how we will change and so, by extension, may not be able to count on the reliability of our anticipatory regret, there is the further worry that we may not be the best judges of our preferences, values, and

17. Gilbert et al. (1998) suggest that people tend to overestimate the duration of negative affective reactions to negative events, and Baumeister (Seligman et al. 2016) thinks that this sort of inaccuracy does not undermine the practical value of using anticipated emotions in our deliberations about what to do.

the like. Bradley Pearson, the narrator of Iris Murdoch's (1973, 11–12) *The Black Prince*, puts it the following way: "I am aware that people often have completely distorted general ideas of what they are like. Men truly manifest themselves in the long patterns of their acts, and not in any nutshell of self-theory." There are various claims going on in this passage, and I will not engage with them all here. But the idea that we could have distorted ideas of what we are like and that our self-theories are unreliable has been argued in various contexts. In different ways and coming from different backgrounds, theorists such as Robert Roberts (1995), Timothy Wilson (2002), John Doris (2015), Eric Schwitzgebel (2008; 2012), and Quassim Cassam (2014) have argued that some kind of self-ignorance is common, some think inevitable, for humans. We may think of ourselves in a certain way but be mistaken about the sorts of people we are. Whether that error is the result of consciously motivated self-deception or less conscious self-ignorance, there can be a gap between our consciously endorsed values and the characteristics we think we have, on the one hand, and those values and characteristics that in fact guide our actions, on the other.

Let's turn to Mr. Stevens in order to speculate on the impact on regret of a certain kind of self-ignorance, or perhaps self-deception. Mr. Stevens was deeply and explicitly committed to a certain kind of professionalism—dignity—which, as he describes it,

has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. ...The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and to inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They will wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. (Ishiguro 1988, 42)

Mr. Stevens aspires and makes efforts to be such a butler of dignity, working to maintain his professional persona—one of deference and self-abnegation—to a fault. Over time he develops a close working relationship with his co-worker, Miss Kenton. There seems to be potential for more than a working relationship, but when Miss Kenton subtly opens the door for such, Mr. Stevens is careful to maintain his "dignity," since, as he sees it, such relationships will surely distract from the smooth running of the estate.

But what if this earlier Mr. Stevens was self-deceived about his values or the degree to which his relationship with Miss Kenton matters to him? He could have convinced himself that maintaining his professional dignity was more important than any interest he had in a relationship with Miss Kenton. Or, perhaps stronger, he could have convinced himself that he had no interest in such a relationship. But even with less robust self-ignorance, it is possible that Mr. Stevens was unaware of the extent to which he cared for Miss

Kenton. And if he saw a certain kind of care for her as impeding his work, then it's possible that he would have needed even more work to see his caring for her for what it was.

If thus Mr. Stevens acts on his professed and consciously endorsed values, however, he opens himself to poignant regret. He could find himself self-consciously acting in ways that undermine his cares and values about which he is self-deceived or self-ignorant. At the least, he opens himself to live in ways that will lead to the heartbreak he describes at the end of the novel. But it seems entirely possible that he could look back on his excessively self-controlled life with deep regret. The enthusiasm with which Mr. Stevens takes up his deferential life is probably distinctive. But the idea that we could be unaware of some of our core desires, cares, and values does not require one to live a servile or deferential life.

For a variety of reasons, we could be confused about what we really value, consciously endorsing things merely because they have been emphasized by influential others or through subtle societal cues instead of things that matter more to our core, if often partially tacit, values. In some of these cases, an individual could pursue a course of action in keeping with consciously endorsed values only to later experience the pang of regret when that course conflicts with other, perhaps more central, cares and values. In such instances, regret (or its lack) could reveal the inadequacy of one's self-conception, an inadequacy that highlights the unreliability of anticipatory regret as speaking for the agent.

Arpaly's Emily, for example, could anticipate regretting quitting the program and be surprised at the lack of regret after she quits in what she experiences as an impulsive, potentially weak-willed moment. Down the road, lack of regret for the now unchosen alternative of completing her PhD could reveal that she did not in fact value the degree or that life path in the way she thought. Our self-conceptions and our self-consciously endorsed values can significantly, sometimes problematically, affect what we anticipate regretting. These influences can continue after decisions have been made, of course, but insofar as regret depends on unchosen alternatives, the pang, or the affective element, of regret seems likely to be sharper to the extent that the unchosen alternative becomes genuinely unavailable.¹⁸ If we want to understand an agent's regrets, we may be better served looking at the way in which their lives play out after certain actions than to ask them to self-report on their actions.

Retrospective regret, then, can reveal we valued something that we were unaware of, or that we valued something more than we thought we did. The loss of a friend or family member could help me realize how much I valued their friendship even though I didn't make the effort to develop a better relationship prior to the loss. In the case of Mr. Stevens, for example, it

18. This is certainly not always the case. If one foresees an impending decision between two valued alternatives, or between two inevitable and problematic options, the affective component of anticipated regret can be significant even when both options are very much still on the table.

seems that the degree to which he cares for Miss Kenton comes to dawn on him increasingly the longer she is Mrs. Benn. His regret about the unchosen relationship reveals things about Mr. Stevens, both to us as readers but also to Mr. Stevens. The regret is revelatory not only about Mr. Stevens, but to Mr. Stevens himself.

V. REVELATORY REGRET AND THE STANDPOINT OF THE AGENT

The idea that, because of self-ignorance, regret, perhaps especially retrospective regret, can be revelatory could make it sound as though there were some static fact of the matter about the agent that regret can reveal. Thinkers like Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre worry about the tendency to think about humans in the way we think about other things in the world. We are not merely passive recipients but also play an active role in determining the sorts of creatures we are. We are, as Heidegger (1927, 42) puts it, beings for whom their being is an issue. In this vein, Charles Taylor (1985) describes us as self-interpreting animals. When regret reveals things about us to ourselves, then, it is not the end of the story.

We are potentially unique as creatures because the way we think of ourselves can feed back into the way we live. Regret can reveal things about us to ourselves in ways that can then impact how we engage with the world. Regret being revelatory does not mean that we discover ourselves in the same way we discover some objects of scientific investigation. We still have the ability to take up what Heidegger calls our facticity (including things like our cares, commitments, and attachments that mold our responses of regret) in different ways, not only in terms of altering or maintaining the content of those cares, attachments, and commitments but also in how we relate to those elements. But regret also illustrates the way in which we do not have complete control over our experience. We do not have complete control over when and over what we experience regret. We can find ourselves with attachments, cares, desires, dispositions, and characteristics that shape our experience in pervasive ways but which are not entirely up to us. And these elements feed into when and the way in which we experience regret.

But this does not mean that we should simply persist in our current cares, beliefs, attachments, and the like. We may have good reason to change them. And regret can help us become aware of ourselves, including alerting us to blind spots, to our characteristics we are not fully aware of or to the things we desire or care about without being fully conscious of it. If we persist in a certain agential self-ignorance, it is unlikely that we will be able to intentionally change what we are like. Revelatory regret, then, opens the possibility for a certain kind of self-directed change. Even retrospective regret, then, is not merely a backward-looking method for self-discovery. It also plays a critical role in the way we look and move forward in our lives. I could be so repulsed by some past action that I no longer see similar actions as attractive or even as viable. But other times, it doesn't so much take away the

liveness of the other option so much as make alternatives much more salient. In such cases, the regretted action functions in the way it highlights the alternatives. Or I could long for some unchosen path in a way that makes relevantly similar paths stand out when they appear.

More broadly, this dynamic of regret is something of a microcosm for human agency. We find ourselves enmeshed in desires, cares, bodies, and relationships that are not fully of our making. These entanglements, however, simultaneously enable and set constraints on our agency; we are not passive bystanders. There are various options open to us given, to borrow John Martin Fischer's (2012) metaphor, the cards that are dealt us. Similarly, even when regret is revelatory to the agent, helping the agent understand her standpoint on the world, the agent then can take up that insight in different ways. The standpoint of the agent is constituted by both active and passive elements, and regret can not only make us aware and attentive to some things we care about and value, but it can further, or perhaps primarily, affect how future options appear and what we do with them. In *A Sketch of a Theory of Emotions*, Sartre (1994, 34) claims that "emotional consciousness is primarily consciousness of the world." In a similar vein, when regret is revelatory to us as agents, it does so primarily not through increasing our powers of introspection but in the way it attunes us the world. It highlights paths we wish we had taken, others we wish we had not, and some we see as worthwhile even as we go down others. In so doing, it can also make us sensitive to the gaps between how we see ourselves and the way in which the world appears.¹⁹

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