

Long-term regret, perspective and fate

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Regret seems to be a familiar enough word in many different contexts. I want to focus on regret that is ‘long-term’ and ‘momentous’. By this I mean the regret of a decision made many years ago, where such a decision had a big impact on one’s life. Let me introduce two examples:

- A 21-year-old woman enrolls to study medicine, and eventually becomes a surgeon. At the age of 41, she is burnt out, fed up by the institutional bureaucracy and the sexism, by the exhausting workload, irritated by the ‘whiners’ and the ‘hypochondriacs’ among her patients. She can still do the job well enough, but her heart is not in it, and she is dismayed by the thought of spending the rest of her working life in it. She considers withdrawing from medicine, and surveys her options. She declares that she regrets having enrolled in medicine twenty years previously.¹
- A man and a woman get married when they are both 21 (but do not have children). Twenty years later, they have an ugly divorce. The 41-year-old man declares that he regrets having married the woman twenty years previously, that he “wasted the best years of his life” with her.²

First, a definitional stipulation. For the purposes of this paper, I will take regret to be *propositional* (I regret the fact that “I did X”), *first-personal* (I regret something about me and my life, rather than wishing that something else had happened), and something only appropriate to a *free choice* on a matter under personal control (I regret choosing X when I was free to choose Y). In other words, it is a judgement about a past choice (or series of choices that launch and develop a single project) which the protagonist now considers to have been mistaken. Regret is not a mood, or a feeling of disappointment;³ it is not nostalgia, or a sense of being stuck or of not feeling at home.

I am interested in choices made ‘long ago’. I will not try to specify a specific time period, but at least a decade, a period during which there are some clear changes in one’s life. In addition, I am interested in ‘momentous’ rather than trivial choices. Clearly the choice of marital partner and career probably had a big impact on these two people, not just on their lives (the options available at a given moment) but also on them as individuals, and on their understanding of themselves.⁴ They each enjoyed their marriage and their career in the minimal sense that they did not leave earlier. I want to ask: is regret only about the mistaken choice, or is it also about the “road not travelled by”, the counter-factual life-path running parallel, across the 20 years, to the true life-path? Does it involve an implicit (or maybe explicit) comparison to what I might have become by now (at age 41) if I had married this other

person or chosen that other career? And in addition to these questions about the past and the counterfactual present, what do such regrets entail for the future?

In exploring these questions, I am aiming at the following conclusion: my putative regret about momentous choices made long ago cannot be coherent. This does not mean that my regretful thoughts are nonsense, however. Instead, they express a something I tentatively want to call a *mode of being*, a kind of stance or orientation on one's life. This positive proposal will be little more than a gesture, for I do not have the space to work it out properly; but I think it is robust enough to set up some useful work for the future.⁵

Setting the scene

Since regret is such a familiar word, it is worth spelling out some further assumptions that need to be made in order to narrow the philosophical questions into something manageable.

- i. I will be speaking about *regret* and not about *remorse*. Remorse is when I regret doing something morally wrong.⁶ For my purposes, this would be an extra layer of complication, and so I am only discussing regret informed by the protagonist's understanding of her own self-interest. Self-interest I interpret in the broad sense: not just health and wealth and pleasure, but also things like the richness or meaningfulness of one's life. In taking this broader sense, however, I want to avoid the philosophically thorny concept of authenticity (of being 'true to oneself'), as in "I regret choosing X because it was not the authentic choice."
- ii. I shall distinguish between *regret* and *lament*. Under my 'propositional' conception of regret, I regret a choice that was within my control. Whereas I lament a situation that was or is outside of my control. I lament the earthquake that killed so many people; I lament that I am not taller. Whereas I regret betting on the horse Albert because I could have bet on any number of horses.⁷
- iii. When I regret a choice, I presuppose that I was free to have chosen differently, and I explicitly wish that I could 'un-do' the choice. In contrast, Gabrielle Taylor (1985 p. 99) gives the example of an employer 'regretting' the decision to sack an inefficient employee, even though she continues to consider the sacking to be "necessary and beneficial," and does not want to un-do it. I would call this 'lament' or 'feeling bad', not regret. Similarly, when a politician makes an unpopular budget decision to spend on X rather than Y, she might say that she 'regrets' the fact that she 'had to' make that decision. But if she does not want to un-do the decision, then she cannot really regret it in my sense of the word.
- iv. My understanding of 'freedom to decide' is fairly abstract, and I do not want to go too deep into questions of positive freedom and autonomy. So in my examples, I am taking the protagonist as being aware that she really could choose X or Y, even if she is strongly

attracted to X and not at all to Y. In my first example, of course, the protagonist might not have ‘chosen’ medicine, she might have simply drifted into it as the obvious thing to do; and the second protagonist might not have ‘chosen’ but seen herself as acting out of the necessity of love.

- v. There are a number of borderline phenomena that are *partly* in my control, and therefore a matter partly of regret, partly of lament. I have in mind things like character traits ("I regret not having been courageous enough to challenge him") or self-deception ("I had a sense that something was wrong, and I regret not facing it"). For the sake of simplicity I will start by ignoring such cases, but they will become relevant later on.
- vi. I am interested in protagonists who are *in the middle of their lives*. That is, they not only have to make sense of the past, but also of their future; and this prompts the question of the best way to use the past to make decisions about the future. One obvious example of long-term regret is Tolstoy's Ivan Illyich, but I will not discuss him because in one sense he gets off too easily. If I may put the point rather brutally: sure, he regrets his career choices, but, knowing that he is dying, it is enough for him to say "OK, I was wrong" – and then to die. He does not need to *live* or *deal* with his regret. Whereas my protagonists face an indefinite future where they have to come to terms with their ‘failure’ and their regret in one way or another.⁸
- vii. I do not want to broach the normative question of whether a person *should* regret a past decision. I want to start with an example of someone who *does* regret their decision, or who is wrestling with the temptation to regret the decision. It is perfectly coherent for someone to *refuse* to regret a decision, especially a decision that ended up annoying or disappointing a lot of people, where such refusal could be a matter of Edith Piaf-style defiance and bare assertion of authenticity.⁹ Alternatively, there are some who do not want to regret, who see no point to regret, but they nevertheless find that they are *assailed* by their regrets.¹⁰

A first paradigm: short-term trivial regret

Given my understanding of regret, I now want to examine what I mean by ‘long-term’ and ‘momentous’. Let me approach these questions negatively, by way of a comparison with the regret one might feel over a ‘short-term’ and ‘trivial’ decision, such as a horse bet. Earlier today I went to the bookies and put money on Albert for the 3.45 at Cheltenham; here I am at Cheltenham, the race has just finished, and – damn! – Barbie won. I know I could have bet on Barbie, I was free, but I chose not to. I now regret my decision because Albert lost and I’m out of pocket. If I had bet on Barbie, I know exactly by how much I would be richer than I am now. I wish I could un-do my decision: I can easily imagine myself, that morning, placing the bet the other way. My frustration arises from just how ‘close’ Barbie, and the extra winning stakes, were to me at the time.

Even with this simple and familiar example, we face two inter-related problems that incline one to scepticism about the coherence of the mental experience of regret, regardless of the verbal expression. The first problem has to do with the fact that the *past is the past*, what's done cannot be undone,¹¹ no good crying over spilt milk etc. The second problem has to do with my understanding of the situation *at the time* (this morning at the bookies'). Yes, I was physically able to bet on Barbie, but I didn't because the situation appeared to me as such-and-such, and I approached the situation with this and that mental state (what I knew and believed and understood, as well as what I didn't know and didn't believe and didn't understand), and *given all these facts* about my mental states and about the interaction between me and the situation, then I *had to* bet on Albert. (If I went back in time, I would go back to that same situation and that same set of mental states, and I would bet on Albert all over again.) This second problem was famously summarised by Sartre when he said "when I deliberate, the game's up."¹² When one deliberates, one only has the illusion of freedom; instead, one's deliberation and decision will be determined by what reasons present themselves to one, with what relative salience, and how such reasons 'fit' with the rest of one's being. This could be used to mount a challenge to free will, but I don't want to go down that road.

However, even if I assume I was free back then, we're still left with a problem about the meaning of my regret in the horse-betting scenario. One answer to this problem is to say that regret is not really about wanting to *change* (un-do) the past, but about *learning* from the past in order to choose better in the future. Call this the 'instrumental' conception of propositional regret. I lost money on Albert this time, but at least I know to keep away from Albert the next time. The skilled horse-better plays the long game, gets to know the horses and the jockeys and the tracks. Maybe she still wins some and loses some, but her bets get more informed and less risky, and after several dozen bets, she comes off richer.

A second paradigm: long-term trivial regret

Let's say I am now 41 years old. When I was 21 years old I bought a bunch of IBM shares. I could have bought Apple shares, but I didn't, and now (at age 41) I regret that, considering what the shares of Apple and IBM are now worth. This would be the same as the horse bet except for the timespan, which adds a further reason for scepticism about the coherence of regret; for here we might be tempted to say that my 21-year-old self was a *different person*.

I hasten to emphasise: I'm not advocating a radical metaphysical claim here. Obviously my 21-year-old self is *me-at-41* in virtue of tracing out a single path through time and space without splitting or merging, in virtue of my present experiential memories of doing what that 21-year-old self did, in virtue of the bank holding me to the mortgage contract I signed when I was 21, etc. – in virtue of leading a single life. But we might be tempted to say that the 21-year-old is a (somewhat) different person in the sense of my present *bewilderment* in understanding how 'he' could so frivolously invest

in IBM shares when it was already clear back then that Apple was on the rise. "What the hell was I thinking?" I now ask rhetorically. (The same bewilderment might assail me when I read the diary written by my 21-year-old self, immersed as 'he' was in all sorts of deep anxieties.) We might be tempted to put it in terms of maturation and authenticity. Back then I was young and ignorant, I was distracted by surfaces, I hadn't found my core values. Now, at 41, I know who I am and no longer have to search or pretend.

In this 'bewilderment' sense of personal *discontinuity*, I could then conclude that I *cannot* regret buying the IBM shares then because I cannot sufficiently identify with the person who bought those shares in the first place. Someone else bought the shares, and I am stuck with the consequences. All I can do is *lament* the fact that I am not as wealthy today as I would have been if I/he had done my/his due diligence back then. (But of course I/he would not have done the due diligence because I/he was lazy and ignorant etc.)

There are deeper questions of identity here. Although I am accepting metaphysical continuity that would be sufficient for me (now, at 41) to agree without hesitation to pay the mortgage payments, I might still have a *choice* about how much to identify with my 21-year-old self in *narrative* terms: I may choose to reject that individual, or I may choose to embrace him as the person living out an earlier chapter in a single life story, *my* life story, where there is real narrative coherence from chapter to chapter, right through to my present self-conception as being on the way from the determinate to the indeterminate. I will return to this choice-to-embrace later on, as my examples get more complicated. For the moment I am still talking about a *trivial* project, by which I am referring to the question of mere wealth – I do not mean 'trivial' in reference to the questions of identity, which are not trivial at all. I am assuming that I am otherwise comfortably off, and that if I were a little wealthier in virtue of owning profitable Apple shares now, this would not make a serious difference to my life.¹³

Long-term momentous decisions

Now I want to move to the central class of cases: I regret a *momentous* choice of many years ago, something that had a deep impact on my life and on me.¹⁴ My opening examples were about regretting one's choice of career and one's choice of spouse.

As part of my definition of 'momentous', let me spell out three important ways in which momentous choices differ from trivial choices. First, the resulting commitments are highly time-consuming, and highly ramified. They have an impact on many different parts of my life, and are essentially unpredictable over the longer-term precisely because of this variegated impact. To put it another way: if I choose to study medicine (rather than law) at 21, then this choice will open up new options which I did not have before, and each chosen option will open up further options, to the point where, once I am 41, I have rejected not just a lot of options, but also a lot of alternative life-paths.¹⁵

Second, momentous choices (or series of choices¹⁶) do not just change my options; they change *me* in unpredictable ways as well. They are not a separate discrete project; instead, I am invested in them to such a degree that it is hard to say where 'I' end and the project begins. With horses or IBM shares, I can contemplate them from a distance: I would almost certainly still be me whether or not I had invested in IBM. After 20 years of *working* as a doctor, however, I can't help *becoming* a doctor (or at least a certain kind of doctor) to a certain extent, identifying with the job, with the hospital, with the health service, with the profession.

This means, however, that the past person, the non-doctor who made the initial momentous choice to go into medicine at age 21, is *even more* different from me (the doctor) now at 41, and this would seem to justify even more scepticism about the coherence of regretting such long-ago choices. I would be even more inclined to lament rather than regret the 'other' person's decision to study medicine, landing me with the consequences twenty years later.

Third, one's present regret about past momentous choices requires a certain *context of present anxiety*. Before one can articulate present regret, one first has to reach an appropriate position of disharmony in relation to one's present career (or spouse). Obviously, if everything's going well and the future is golden, one won't be regretting anything! But even if things are not going well, I may simply not think about it, I may take my present momentous commitments as given. So I am already choosing people who have gone further in articulating their anxiety in terms of a regret of a momentous choice. Importantly, my protagonists cannot console themselves with the thought that "that was all right for a bit, but now I'm bored and it's time to move on." The doctor finds herself unable to 'close' the medicine 'chapter' and to start a new chapter without regret. For when she faces the future, the regrets assail her, not only because of her sense of being stuck because of the past, but also because of her pained awareness of the opportunity costs of her career (or marriage) over such a long period. Of course Edith Piaf will tell her not to regret, but the doctor can't help it. And so she turns to the philosopher to help her make sense of that regret in a spirit of self-discovery.¹⁷

Counterfactuals and perspective

Let's say I'm the 41-year-old doctor of the opening example. I regret choosing at 21 to study medicine, since I see that as launching a certain momentum that led to the career in medicine. Part of my regret is that I did not choose another subject at university -- let's say the law -- and that I regret that my university studies did not generate a momentum toward a career in law.

Before I continue discussing the regretted career, I need to say something about imaginative *distance*. If I am a 41-year-old GP, it would be fairly easy to imagine myself as a dermatologist, and therefore it would be a lot easier to regret not having specialised in dermatology back in my late twenties. (Indeed, at the age of 41, there would still be plenty of time in my career to re-qualify as a dermatologist.) Here the distance is too close to be interesting. In contrast, if I am a 41-year-old

doctor who has been brought up and worked my whole life in the UK, it would be very hard to imagine myself as an Afghan Mujahidin; the distance would be too great. So I am deliberately choosing an alternative career that is both familiar and unfamiliar.

When I regretted betting on horse Archie, I re-imagined myself that same morning placing the bet on horse Barbie, and then I imagined myself travelling along the parallel path to the counterfactual present where I am better off than I am in fact. In the same pattern, my regret at studying medicine involves re-imagining myself back to my 21-year-old self, then choosing the law, and then imagining the 20 years of a legal career that would bring me to my counter-factual 41-year-old self, a self who *become* a lawyer in virtue of *having been* a lawyer for the previous 20 years. However, such imaginative time-travel is much more difficult and unreliable in the momentous career case than in the short-term horse bet case. If my 21-year-old self is perplexing to the point of imaginative inaccessibility, then how much less accessible is the 41-year-old counter-factual self: surely this is the stuff of pure fantasy, because it bears such a tenuous connection to *my life*, that is, the determinate life that I have lived through, the life that has produced *me*, a doctor, here and now at 41 years of age.¹⁸

It might help to introduce the metaphor of a *perspective*. In its original ‘geometric’ use, the idea is that what I can see of the world will depend on where I am located and on what direction I’m facing. From this perspective I can see the sea, but if I take two steps to the right I cannot because there’s a building in the way. By analogy, at any one moment in my life, I look out on the world (and on myself in that world) from within a determinate perspective (or orientation, or stance): given various things about me, about my life hitherto, and about my antecedent understanding of the world, I *notice* certain things and do not notice other things; and among the things I notice, I am *bothered* by certain things and not by other things, based on something that could be loosely called my ‘values’.¹⁹ I cannot look at the world ‘cold’, I have to look at it from within the perspective. There are certain characteristic (for me) ways of thinking, of feeling, of remembering, of hoping, of fearing, certain spontaneous inclinations etc. To a certain extent I can perceive some elements of my perspective, and sometimes correct for them: to take a banal example, the tofu on my plate does not look or taste good, but I force it down in the knowledge that it’s good for me. Sometimes my perspective will change, and I do not notice the change: but as a result of the change in perspective I may come to notice different things in the world. Note that the metaphor of perspective implies a way of seeing; but I stress that I am taking it in a wider sense to include all aspects of experience, including the value-laden: the aversions and longings, the ways of remembering and hoping (fondly or desperately), and including character dispositions.

So we can say: a good deal of my present perspective has been shaped by my momentous commitments in the past. Many elements of my perspective might not be surprising to others, as when they chide me: “you would say that, you’re a doctor!” As a result, I find myself, at this age, with this professional background, looking at and thinking about the world from within *this* perspective.

Importantly, it is *from within this perspective* that I also remember my past, that I evaluate my past momentous choices as mistaken, and that I imagine the counterfactual life-paths I might have chosen. In other words, my regret necessarily expresses the values that partly constitute the perspective from within which I look at the world and at my own life.

As such, when I try to imagine *another* life-path in another career, one at a certain distance from reality (as law is to medicine), I cannot reliably predict what sort of perspective I would have ended up in, what sort of values I would have had, and therefore what sorts of regret judgments about the past I would have been inclined to make as a 41-year-old lawyer. This is yet another reason for scepticism about any robust meaningfulness of regret.

And because of the problems of identity across time, and of perspective, I will probably find that I have very little to *learn* from the past, in the way that I learned from the mistaken bet on Albert the horse. Now that I am 41, I will never again face the same momentous choice that my 21-year-old self faced. Any decisions I face now, at 41, have an entirely different significance because they are ‘located’ at a different position in my life, and understood from within a different perspective. I should qualify that: I will learn *some* ‘life lessons’ from my unsatisfactory marriage. Maybe I married more out of greed than out of love, and, twenty years later, I now regret that; and I *use* that regret instrumentally to help me to make a better marital choice henceforward. But how much can I use, really? It will be like a taxi driver who moves from Paris to Rome, intent on doing the same job. Certainly there are some mistakes she made in Paris that she will be careful not to repeat in Rome: very drunk customers often throw up. But all of her determinate knowledge of the Paris *terrain* is useless in Rome. Insofar as I can learn from a bad marriage based on greed, such learning invokes a very thin notion of regret, and I have been exploring a deeper notion. Who is to say whether the marriage failed *because of* the greed? Who is to say whether a counterfactual marriage based on love, at 21, would have been better or worse than the greed-based marriage I actually had? Indeed, who is to say whether a marriage based on greed, but to someone *else*, at 21, would have been better or worse? As such I’m not sure I can learn anything from my marital decision at 21: even if that had been the same person as me now, he was in a different perspective.

Our interim conclusion, then, runs as follows. The idleness of such counterfactual speculation would seem to drain all meaning from my long-term regret. Perhaps all I can do is *lament* my present job and my present marriage, while struggling to make the best of it, or indeed while plotting new departures and beginnings into the future. Despite this sceptical conclusion, I think there is still something to be said for using the word ‘regret’ in my scenarios, as an expression of one’s “mode of being” -- and I will develop this in the final section.

Perspective, fate and character

Before I can explore this new interpretation of long-term regret, I need to develop the metaphor of perspective a bit further by invoking the concept of *fate*. Fate is a bit of a dirty word in philosophy, I realise.²⁰ On the one hand it has connotations of metaphysical or social determinism – neither of which I would accept: part of the distinctive experience of regret, I have been claiming, is precisely that there was a choice, that I made it, and that I was sufficiently free to have chosen something else. If a natural disaster had befallen me, entirely determined by the laws of nature, that would be unpleasant but there would be no sense that it was my fault, and that I ought to regret a decision. On the other hand, fate has connotations of divine meddling, and my account has been strictly secular up until now. I am interested in people making decisions in their lives, consulting their friends and family, seeking more or less information, and then deciding. (Perhaps some of the more religiously-inclined might consult a priest for advice, but I have been assuming that the final decision rests very much with the individual.)

But I think the concept of fate might help us develop this metaphor of a perspective. Robert Solomon, one of the few philosophers who has written about fate, offers (2003 p. 440) the example of a man and a woman married to one another for many years. Let's align the example with the ages of my other examples: they met when they were both 21, married soon after, and are now 41. Solomon says that it will be natural to speak of their first encounter at 21 as a matter of fate. Of course the husband and wife both appreciate the massive undetermined contingencies of that first encounter, as well as the contingencies of attraction and logistics that allowed their meeting to lead to a relationship and then to lead to a wedding and then to survive the kids and the seven-year itch and the myriad other stressors, up to the point now, at 41, when they are both looking back at their first encounter from the vantage point of a long and successful marriage. But Solomon claims that there is no contradiction in appreciating the massive contingency *and* seeing the first encounter as fated, precisely because the husband and the wife look back on the encounter, at 41, *from within a joint perspective* which has itself been heavily shaped by the series of events launched by that first encounter; just like there is no contradiction to see the original decision to wed as entirely free but nevertheless fated. The fact that they have already made it through many years of marriage to reach this point means that they are, as it were, implicated in the marriage; implicated to a degree of not being able to imagine themselves out of the marriage. This kind of imaginative inability is what makes the first encounter fated, not in some objective deterministic sense, but fated within the structures of meaning that comprise the perspective from within which the enquirers contemplate – and must contemplate – the past.²¹

This has the interesting corollary that the events of one's recalled life become less fated as one moves closer and closer to the present, because they are less and less influential in shaping the perspective. This 'waning influence' conception of fate is to be contrasted with the 'waxing influence' conception

that structures many biographies: the youngster experimenting, distracted this way and that, until she finds a job she likes, where she excels and rises and grows, and it becomes more and more clear that she is *fulfilling her destiny*.

Perhaps a better way to understand this sense of fateful necessity that grounds the origin of a perspective is to consider the hot-housed prodigy in sport or music. Spotted at six with unusual talent and determination (and blessed / cursed with ambitious parents), she is intensely coached through to international success at eighteen. A key component of the perspective with which she looks out on the world, at 18, is precisely her highly-developed talent. But for her to achieve international success at 18, it was necessary that she be hot-housed from an early age; without it of course being necessary *simpliciter* that the parents chose to hot-house her. (In contrast, it would have been impossible for her to choose at 17 to achieve international success a year later.) And because her talent and success are such major parts of her life and perspective, she cannot coherently imagine what her life would have been like without the hot-housing childhood.²²

Another important component of perspective is character. I have in mind the minimal sense in which the generous person tends to notice opportunities for generosity, and tends to respond appropriately and unreflectively to such opportunities. The stingy person does not notice the opportunities *as* opportunities; and when such opportunities are pointed out to her, the stingy person will ignore them or rationalise her non-response.²³ Insofar as character is under one's control, it is only under one's indirect control, and very unreliably, and over the long term. While one can try to 'habituate' oneself, in an Aristotelian vein, toward greater generosity ("fake it till you make it"), there can be no guarantees here. As such it makes even less sense to regret one's character traits at 41 than it makes sense to regret one's long-ago career and marital choices: one simply finds oneself 'in' one's character at 41, and the only meaningful choices will be about habituation attempts into the future, (within the limits of the increasing psychological rigidity of character as one ages). Of course part of one's attempted career-regret will be precisely that it brought out the worst in me.²⁴

However, there are important limits in regretting not having done something long ago in the past, because it comes too close to *making excuses* for present lamentable traits. The best response to such a temptation is Sartre (1946), and it is worth quoting at length:

For many have but one resource to sustain them in their misery, and that is to think, "Circumstances have been against me, I was worthy to be something much better than I have been. I admit I have never had a great love or a great friendship; but that is because I never met a man or a woman who were worthy of it; if I have not written any very good books, it is because I had not the leisure to do so; or, if I have had no children to whom I could devote myself it is because I did not find the man I could have lived with. So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which

endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions.” But in reality and for the existentialist, there is no love apart from the deeds of love; no potentiality of love other than that which is manifested in loving; there is no genius other than that which is expressed in works of art. [...] In life, a man commits himself, draws his own portrait and there is nothing but that portrait. (Sartre 1946)²⁵

So I remain with my scepticism about whether long-term regret about past momentous decisions is sufficiently coherent to take seriously, however tempting it is as a response to leading a human life. The only way to ‘save’ regret, I will argue, is to reinterpret it as something very different; something which I can only adumbrate in the next and final section.

Regret as a ‘mode of being’

‘Mode of being’ is a loosely Heideggerian notion,²⁶ and starts with an extension of the metaphor of perspective. In the above, I was already stretching the metaphor beyond the perceptual to encompass all aspects of experience, but this left intact the distinction between the experiencer and the experience. ‘Mode of being’ continues the development even further, to speak not just of experiencing but of being: about one’s place in the world, one’s relationships with significant others, and one’s relations to the past and future (i.e. more than just one’s *beliefs about* one’s place in the world, about one’s relationships with others, and about one’s relations to the past and future). In addition, I want to call regret a ‘bi-directional’ aspect of being, by which I mean: regret not only *reveals* one’s mode of being to others and to oneself; but it also partly *constitutes* one’s being in the world. To experience regrets about momentous decision of long ago, to take such regrets seriously, is to *be* a certain sort of person.

For most of this paper I have been speaking of regret as a kind of personal problem, something that imposes itself oppressively on the protagonist (as if from outside), and which the protagonist has to solve or at least neutralise. Indeed, perhaps the protagonist would go to therapy to seek help in dealing with her regret, perhaps by ignoring it, perhaps by re-interpreting it, perhaps by defying it, perhaps by ‘atoning’ or ‘compensating’ for it (however she might define such acts). However, to see regret as a mode of one’s being is to lose this sense of a problem that needs to be solved, and to accept it as something importantly *primordial*, in the sense of something that underlies and organises all of one’s current experiences. Precisely because regret is essentially backward-looking and personal, it reveals one’s identity across time, the very identity one must presuppose in order to live coherently *as* an agent, and *as* a particular agent, from one part of one’s life through to another. I am not merely the sum of my present properties and relationships; I am also the sum of my ideals about the future that guide my present, and I am also the sum of my past accomplishments – and of my regrets about past failures. My regrets partly express my essentially diachronic existence across time.

At the beginning of the piece I *distinguished* regret from nostalgia, but in the context of this section there are useful similarities between the two. For nostalgia is something that one can feel keenly, but it is not merely a feeling, for it has a clear object. And yet it is not entirely about that object, it is also part of the protagonist's mode of being. In the simple sense, to ask someone about their nostalgia is to ask about the object, and to expect an answer of the form "I miss X because of A, B, C." However, it might also be quite inappropriate to then ask the protagonist why she does not *pursue* or *return to X* if she is so nostalgic about it. Indeed, it could be the height of insensitivity to suggest that in not pursuing or returning to X she has demonstrated that she is not truly nostalgic for X after all. My point is not to suggest that excuses can and should be found; rather, genuine nostalgia need not be linked to or validated by any future action. Indeed, nostalgia could be about something more generally amorphous to do with the broad, indefinite past.²⁷

By way of an *indirect* attempt to define regret as a mode of being, let me ask: what does it mean for one person to get to know another person, a stranger? I meet her at a party, I make (fallible, of course) judgements about her appearance, her age, her clothing, her accent. Initial conversation reveals something about her employment or her hobbies or favourite films or politics, where she comes from, where she's lived. As I get to know her better through the weeks and months that follow, I learn more about her tastes, her character, her fears, her ambitions and ideals – and her regrets. She might not articulate the regrets as such, I might have to infer them, more or less reliably. Indeed, she might not want to disclose something so personal to me. And she might not even have admitted such regrets to herself. If she does articulate the regret, the important thing is that she is *not* asking me for advice on how to deal with it, or even how to learn from it, or atone for it. She may not even be asking me for sympathy or reassurance. Rather, she is describing a very personal aspect of their life, of her perspective, of her being, of her understanding of fate in her unique life.

As I say, this is far from a complete account. Let me conclude with the example of Stevens, the butler in Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). Stevens has been an unmarried butler in a fine English mansion from his twenties to the present, when he is in his sixties. At one point during that time, he developed a conversational intimacy with a housekeeper named Miss Kenton, who left twenty years ago to get married and move away. As the story opens, Stevens is visiting Miss Kenton (now named Mrs. Benn) in Devon. Ishiguro uses the device of the unreliable narrator to split the story into Stevens's own recollections, on the one hand, and the story that we are meant to understand from between the lines, on the other. It is clear *to us* that at the time Miss Kenton was fond of Stevens, and made her fondness and availability known to him. He did not understand the situation, did not admit his own fondness, and tactfully pushed her away. During the final pages of the book, the two meet up. During conversation she eventually admits that her marriage has not been all good, and that she had even been tempted to leave her husband. She also admits that she had originally hoped to marry Stevens. It is only when he hears this that he understands how much he has lost. However, he does not

go so far as articulating regret for his earlier blindness and timidity. Rather, he has developed a sadder, but deeper, understanding of who he is now, as an intelligible product of his past. He certainly is not seeking to 'solve' the problem of his regret, to do anything about it, since he remains clear about how to spend his remaining years, employed in the same house as he has always been. He has accepted his fate and his solitude.

Is Stevens's new understanding necessarily sadder? In one sense of course it is. But if we take regret as a mode of being, then there might be just a bit more to it than that. Consider Tiffany Watt Smith (2015 p. 209):

More often than not, what at the time seems an inconsolable loss is not the end of the story. Perhaps we'll adjust ourselves to our regrets. Perhaps we'll learn from them. But unlike resignation or acceptance, regret is ultimately a kind of desire for something different to have happened. It makes the mind waver, it gnaws. And by allowing us to imagine the possibility of things ending differently, it contains, rather peculiarly, a little germ of hope.²⁸

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¹I will be making some general points about careers, so I do not want to be too specific. However, one classic example of regretting a career choice is that of the 1954 film *On The Waterfront*. Terry Malloy (played by Marlon Brando) was a promising young boxer who deliberately lost a fight so that his brother could win a lucrative bet. Eventually his boxing career failed, and the film opens with him, several years later, now working as a bodyguard among the corrupt longshoremen of New Jersey. In a famous scene, Malloy expresses his regret thus: "I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender, I coulda been someone. Instead of a bum, which is what I am – let's face it."

²The website *Coaching for Divorced Women* has a section responding to the claim that "I wasted the best years of my life on that man". The advice begins as follows:

Realize that you have not wasted years of your life and it was not all a lie. Feelings were real at one time. The experiences you had, both good and bad were real. The lessons you learned are real. It was your life, a part of your journey. You needed this journey, these exact experiences to become the person you are today.

My later discussion will invoke some of this advice.

<http://www.coachingfordivorcedwomen.com/wasted-years-life-man/> [accessed December 2017].

³Regret is sometimes confused with disappointment. For my purposes, the distinction hinges on control. I am disappointed when my expectations are frustrated, and that is typically out of my control. As Landman puts it (1993 p. 47), "The child is *disappointed* when the Tooth Fairy forgets his third lost tooth. The child's parents *regret* the lapse." The distinction is more fuzzy in the case of being disappointed with oneself: "I regret not trying harder" comes close to "I am disappointed with myself for not trying harder" – but in the latter case there is a sense of detachment, watching an event take place.

The *feeling* of regret is closely linked to the *judgement* of regret. Although I am focusing on the latter, it is clear that the former is important evidence about the truth of the latter. Thus if I *claim* to regret choosing X over Y, but do not show typically regretful feelings about the regret, then an observer will have grounds for doubting whether I *really* regret choosing X over Y.

⁴One could also include as momentous those choices about *where to live*. Perhaps I move to an unfamiliar town or country (perhaps with an unfamiliar accent or language) because of a job or a marriage, and over the years I settle into the place (learn the language) to the point where it has become very familiar. And yet, even when the job or the marriage continue to go well, I might come to a conclusion that I do not and never will feel at home in this place, and that I regret moving here. Such a judgement is particularly relevant as one reaches "a certain age" and starts to think of where one would like to retire, grow old, and die.

⁵ This article has been strongly influenced by David Velleman's paper 'Persons in prospect' (2015), and especially its first section 'The identity problem', where he explores certain themes about personal identity first introduced by Derek Parfit in his *Reasons and Persons* (1984).

An important recent book about regret was Jay Wallace's *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret* (2013). However, Wallace has a fundamentally different starting point than I, and so I do not discuss him further. He takes two central examples of what I would call 'costly success', one of which is Bernard Williams's (1981) semi-fictional Gauguin. Gauguin is a painter who abandons his family because he feels that is the only way he can succeed as a painter: and succeed he does. In contrast, I begin with examples of *failure*, people who feel trapped in their life as a result of a decision long ago.

⁶The best discussion of remorse is from ch. 4 in Raimond Gaita (2004). A lot of what I will be saying is inspired by Gaita, although my ambitions are more modest than his. Discussions of remorse also raise questions of whether it is possible or admirable to *forgive oneself*; I will not discuss this possibility (partly because I am sceptical about whether it could ever be more than self-serving), and I will be more interested in the broader option of somehow 'dealing with' or 'accepting' the regret.

⁷One of the most famous discussions of regret in the literature is from Bernard Williams in 'Moral luck' (1981), which is the starting point for Wallace's (2015) book. I want to distinguish my terminology from Williams's on two counts. First, Williams writes: "The constitutive thought of regret in general is something like 'how much better if it had been otherwise'." I would say that such a wish constitutes a *lament*, whereas I am taking regret to be about my own free decision. Second, one type of regret, for Williams, is "agent-regret": "which a person can feel only toward his own past actions" (p. 27). However Williams uses this conception to capture a different phenomenon, and describes a lorry-driver (p. 28) who, without a trace of negligence or culpability, kills a child through sheer bad luck. Williams says the driver feels agent-regret because he caused the death, whereas I would not call this regret at all since the accident was not in the driver's control.

⁸ A striking example of regret soon before death is the song 'Hurt', written by Trent Reznor, but sung by Johnny Cash, with a moving video directed by Mark Romanek. The video was made in 2003, when the 71-year-old Cash already had visible health problems, and he died seven months later. In the song, Cash asks "What have I become?" Where Illyich explicitly regretted his career choices and the neglect of his family, Cash is not specific about particular life choices, but only regrets having become a certain kind of person here and now. Insofar as one's character is only partially under one's control, this will be an expression of part-lament, part-regret. It is a fascinating and poignant example, but one I cannot pursue in any detail here.

⁹ In 1959 Edith Piaf made famous the song written by Charles Dumont: 'Non, je ne regrette rien'. There is a separate question about whether people who take up this defiant stance do so as part of an elaborate self-deception or as part of an immature reluctance to understand their life, but I won't consider these possibilities here.

¹⁰ Rudiger Bittner (1992) asks whether it is *reasonable* to regret. Whatever the answer is, I am not sure this is a very interesting question. I think it is far more interesting to take people who *do* regret, and to explore what such regret amounts to.

¹¹ Lady Macbeth, in the sleep-walking scene (Act V scene i), says “what’s done cannot be undone.” She is referring to all the murders that have been necessary for her husband to ascend and retain the throne. There is always a challenge for the actor about how to say these words, whether they are words of past-oriented regret, or whether they are words of future-oriented pragmatism.

¹² Sartre JP (2003 / 1943) *Being and Nothingness* tr. Barnes, Routledge Classics, p. 473.

¹³ Again, strictly speaking, there was not a single choice to buy IBM when I was 21. There was an initial choice to buy them, there was a second and a third and a fourth choice etc. to keep them, all the way down to the present. But it still makes sense to say that I regret having undergone the extended ‘project’ of owning the IBM shares for so long: things would have been much better if I had bought Apple 20 years ago, it would have been clear year by year that I should keep Apple, and I would be better off today.

¹⁴ I borrow the word ‘momentous’ from William James’s classic 1896 essay ‘The Will to Believe’, although I am not using his discussion at all.

¹⁵ Throughout I am counting as an ‘option’ something that is genuinely open to me, in the abstract sense of freedom and autonomy described among my opening assumptions, i.e. the options available to me given my particular knowledge, abilities, character, connections etc. at the moment of choice. If I lack/lacked the 20-20 vision required to be a fighter pilot, then being a fighter pilot is not / was not an option for me. And so I therefore claim that I can lament but I cannot regret, later, not having become a fighter pilot when I was younger.

¹⁶ Even when I make an explicit life-long commitment, for example, to be a spouse or a priest, I know that any number of things could induce me to leave the marriage or the priesthood. This does not mean that I contemplate such eventualities explicitly, of course, during the early stages!

¹⁷ I deliberately chose *medicine* as the career of my regretful protagonist, because I wanted to avoid the particular kind of regret that arises from the discovery of the *moral frivolity* of certain careers. Certainly, I could join the bank at 21 because I want the money, and then at 41, I come to regret the choice since I now wish I had spent my time and talent on something of greater moral value, e.g. of greater direct public service. But I want to include regret over careers with clear independent value, such as medicine. After all, one could take the line that *nobody* can regret a career in medicine since nobody can regret doing good. However, I am more interested in people who admit that: “of course medicine, in the abstract, is a good thing, it’s just that it wasn’t the right thing *for me*.”

¹⁸ Anna Gotlib has objected to this point as follows: surely one can imaginatively place oneself in a “lawyer” mode in order to articulate one’s regret about not being one, while *also* acknowledging the tenuousness of the imaginative link? In response, I can of course fantasise about how I would do in many alternative careers. My point is simply that I would only be imagining the external accoutrements of a lawyer, rather than imagining what *I would have become* -- internally -- after 20 years of being a lawyer. Such a fantasy is good fun, but I would argue it does not amount to meaningful regret. It just as fun, and just as meaningless, to imagine oneself as Spiderman.

¹⁹ The word ‘value’ is importantly ambivalent here between the experiencing subject and the object experienced. Some values are ‘in’ me, so that “based on my values I notice X” refers to my system of priorities, preferences, ideals, cares, projects etc. Other values are ‘in’ the world, so that I notice something *because* it is valuable: there is then the question of whether the object is valuable *simpliciter* (so that we all should experience it as valuable) or whether it is valuable *for me*, given who I am and given “my” values (the question of ‘fit’). There are then the meta-questions of whether I have the ‘correct’ values, and of whether a particular object ‘merits’ so much attention (or whether e.g. a friend might judge that it is “beneath me” to pay attention to that object) etc.. I am trying hard to avoid getting embroiled in these meta-questions, and am mainly interested in the questions of fit that contribute to the metaphor of perspective.

²⁰ I recall meeting another philosopher and telling her that I was interested in fate. She snorted “call yourself a philosopher?” And at that moment, we had revealed ourselves to one another: I saw her as an unimaginative technician, she saw me as a touchy-feely fantasist.

²¹ In this section I have been talking about a successful marriage. But in my opening example I was speaking about an unsuccessful marriage, one possibly heading toward a divorce. Everything I have said about fate would also apply in such a case. While the successful couple celebrates the day they first met, the unsuccessful couple rues the day -- or at least sees it in bittersweet terms, as the start of something pleasant that was not fated to last.

²² Note that I am introducing the hot-housing example to illustrate an extreme form of this kind of necessity – the example is less useful to understand regret since, as I have been understanding the term, the 18-year-old prodigy cannot coherently regret the hot-housing because she herself was too young to choose it in a sufficiently autonomous sense. She ‘lands’ in her perspective at the beginning of her adult life. Needless to say, she is not stuck there. While she may lament her restrictions in the present and lost opportunities in the past, she faces an open future, and sufficient freedom to choose her next momentous commitment.

One interesting example of such a prodigy ‘attempting’ to regret his hot-house training is the tennis player Andre Agassi. His father recognised his talent at an early age, and coached him mercilessly. Agassi went on to become world no. 1 in 1995. In his 2009 book *Open: an Autobiography*, Agassi confessed that he had always hated tennis, and at times had hated his father for the hot-housing.

²³ There is a philosophical debate about self-ascription of virtue terms, that is, whether the genuinely generous person can sincerely describe herself *as* generous, or whether such self-ascription automatically undermines itself and becomes pseudo-moral preening. I am remaining agnostic on this question. A virtue such as generosity would certainly be a component of perspective, but I am taking an agent who reliably and spontaneously reacts to the world in a way that would be considered generous by most unbiased on-lookers, regardless of the agent’s self-awareness during acts of generosity.

²⁴ An indirect kind of attempted character regret will be my regret at e.g. having been too cowardly to resist my parents’ pressure into pursuing a certain kind of career or marrying a certain person. However, I am still conceiving regret in terms of what I did or did not do, rather than in terms of what I was or was not. Insofar as I can regret my cowardice, then I am assuming that I could have and should have overcome it.

²⁵I have not supplied pagination because I have drawn from an on-line source.

²⁶ But I am emphatically not relying on the authority of a Heideggerian text here, for I am no expert. I have no clue of whether Heidegger would approve of my use of the term.

²⁷ Another related phenomenon is the loss of innocence. I do not mean the mere loss of sexual virginity. I mean, for example, the loss of idealism in a politician, the loss of ambition in a bureaucrat, the loss of patriotism in a soldier – all such losses irretrievable because one cannot reacquire the ignorance on which such innocence is based. In each case, the loss is felt as a loss of something good, and something that cannot be compensated for by the acquisition of experience and wisdom.

²⁸I am grateful to Carolyn Wilde and Paddy McQueen for discussion of this topic, as well as to Anna Gotlib for very helpful comments on earlier drafts.