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**VALUE IN THE GUISE OF REGRET**

Abstract

According to a widely accepted philosophical model, agent-regret is practically significant and appropriate when the agent committed a mistake, or she faced a conflict of obligations. I argue that this account misunderstands moral phenomenology because does not adequately characterize the object of agent-regret. I suggest that the object of agent-regret should be defined in terms of valuable unchosen alternatives supported by reasons. This model captures the phenomenological varieties of regret and explains its practical significance for the agent. My contention is that agent-regret is a mode of valuing: a way in which the agent expresses and confers value.

It seems an unfortunate fact about human life that there are so many occasions to feel regret. It is a matter of contention whether regret is a significant practical phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> Most philosophical accounts hold that regret is interesting and justified when the agent committed a mistake, or she could not determine by deliberation what to do. In this paper, I argue that these accounts misunderstand moral phenomenology because they do not adequately characterize the object of agent-regret.

I suggest that the object of agent-regret should be defined in terms of valuable unchosen alternatives supported by reasons. This model captures the phenomenological variety of regret and explains its practical significance. My contention is that agent-regret is a mode of valuing: a way in which the agent endorses a reason for valuing an unchosen path. It is a way of expressing concern and of conferring value. To this extent, regret is not just an unfortunate fact about human life, but an important practical capacity.

## 1. The Varieties of Regret

When considering whether regret is practically justified, one is considering what it is that the agent regrets, or what is the proper object of regret. Different objects seem to qualify as 'the proper object of regret'. Consider the following examples.

A) Augustine decides to steal a pear from a tree; he knows that stealing is morally wrong, but he cannot overcome the temptation.

B) Alan is a school bus driver who decides not to check the brakes on his bus because he is in a rush. The road is snowy, the bus slides off the road and some children are injured. Alan knows that this accident happened because of his negligence.

C) Joan is a physician who decides to treat a pregnant patient suffering from nausea with drug y. This patient has a miscarriage, but Joan has no reason to believe that this event is connected with taking drug y. A few years later, further scientific evidence proves the drug to be a cause of miscarriage. Joan then realizes that her patient had a miscarriage because of her prescription.

In all these cases, it seems appropriate for the agent to feel regret, although for different reasons. Augustine's case suggests that regret is appropriate when the agent is akratic. In case B, Alan intentionally ignored a good reason to check his bus' brakes; his regret is appropriate because he misjudged the situation, and he is culpable of negligence. Contrary to A and B, in case C the agent cannot be accused of a moral failure since the relevant information was not available to her. Joan's regret is justified by the unforeseen tragic consequence of her misinformed decision.

In these three examples, the agents commit different kinds of mistakes, and are responsible in different ways and to different degrees for the outcome of their deliberation. Augustine's mistake concerns his ability to be determined to action by his own best judgment. Alan is culpable of negligence. Joan's deliberation is mistaken insofar as it is misinformed, but such a mistake is not imputable to her, as it is not the

result of the inaccurate investigation of the relevant facts. One might be tempted to conclude that regret is justified insofar as it is elicited by the acknowledgment of a mistake in deliberation. Many have indeed drawn this conclusion.<sup>ii</sup>

Such a conclusion cannot easily be extended to the following cases in which regret seems nevertheless appropriate.

D) At Aulis, Agamemnon decides to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, in order to please the gods and free his fleet. His tragic decision is grounded on his best reasons.<sup>iii</sup>

E) Antigone is torn by a moral dilemma: either she honors her brother Polyneices and thus violates the law, or she obeys Creon's decree and becomes disloyal to her brother. She has to choose between incommensurable loyalties; she does wrong whatever she decides to do. She decides to be loyal to Polyneices, although her decision is not based on an overriding reason.<sup>iv</sup>

F) Jackie is equally talented and equally interested in modern dance and architecture. Both careers are appealing and are not incommensurable: they are, rather, on a par. Jackie makes up her mind, and decides to become an architect.

In these latter three cases, it is doubtful whether something went wrong in the agent's deliberation. It is even more doubtful that these agents would be prepared to undo what they have done. Agamemnon's action was justified as the best action at the time of choice, and since then no change has occurred in his representation of the situation of choice. Admittedly, his choice brought about something horrible, but this is not enough to claim that it was mistaken. The working assumption is that Agamemnon knew what was best to do because he could compare and fully rank his reasons for action. His decision is justified by an all-things-considered judgment that states that he has an overriding reason to please the gods. That is why on reflection he would not undo what he has done.<sup>v</sup>

Yet, there seems to be a puzzle. If Agamemnon was completely justified in sacrificing Iphigenia, should not we conclude that his regret is misplaced? Or, if not misplaced, does his regret have practical significance? Similar quandaries arise for Antigone. She

faced a genuine moral dilemma, a conflict of obligations and loyalties for which there was no resolution. Her regret cannot be an indication of a failure in her deliberation: she did not have a better alternative to choose. Hence the question arises whether Antigone's regret is practically significant.

The force of this line of questioning depends on the implicit acceptance of a *cognitivist* model of justification for emotions. According to this model, an emotion is justified only if there is a cognitive basis for it: only if a correspondent belief is justified. In particular, regret is justified if it is justified the belief that 'something went wrong', a mistake occurred. That is also to say that regret is always justified as a sort of 'remainder'. It shows that deliberation left some kind of 'residue': e.g. a moral obligation went unfulfilled, a value went forgone in deliberation, or one good trumped another one. The first three cases of regret are *residual* in this sense. They suggest that the agents mistakenly brought about an undesirable state of affairs.

By this cognitivist standard of justification, the examples of Agamemnon and Antigone are cases of *emotional dissonance*. Agamemnon acted upon his best judgment. The cognitive basis of his regret cannot be that something went wrong in his deliberation. Thus, his regret does not match his judgment about his own action. Shouldn't we disregard his emotion as misplaced? As for Antigone, she regrets despite the fact that she had no better alternative. Shouldn't we dismiss her as merely emotional?

The explanation of these cases in terms of emotional dissonance is rather appealing. It seems to avoid a more dangerous charge: the charge of deliberative irrationality. The underlying cognitivist model of justification I described implies that the appropriateness of agent-regret depends on a corresponding axiological claim that because of the agent's mistake in deliberation something regrettable was brought about. Agent-regret is justified only insofar as its cognitive basis is justified. But in cases D and E this cognitive basis is not justified, since the agents did not commit any mistake. Emotional dissonance is supposed to explain why they feel regret, despite the fact that they did not commit any mistake in deliberation: they could not act otherwise, no less regrettable

alternative was available to them, and the states of affairs brought about could not or should not have been prevented.

The explanation in terms of emotional dissonance seems particularly appropriate to account for Jackie's case (F). Compared to the other cases, her case is anomalous because it is not 'residual': it does not involve a mistake, a change in view, a tragic choice or a dilemma. Jackie does not regret her choice or what was brought about by it, and does not express any discontent with her deliberation.<sup>vi</sup> Jackie's regret may strike us as an odd sentiment, and its apparent oddness may encourage us to accept the explanation in terms of emotional dissonance. This explanation appears less problematic for Jackie than it does for Antigone and Agamemnon. This is because it is unclear whether Jackie's regret qualifies as a practical attitude, since it is unclear what its object is. According to the cognitivist model of justification, these reasons suffice to disregard Jackie's emotional reaction as inappropriate. By regretting without detecting any mistake in deliberation and without complaining about the deliberation's outcome, Jackie faces the charge of incoherence. Her regret might easily be dismissed as irrational and misplaced. Or else, Jackie's regret can be read as a sign that she is just a morally deficient agent, a narcissist malcontent.<sup>vii</sup>

It seems to me that the question is not why apparently unjustified regrets survive reflection and deliberation, as cognitivism claims. The question is, rather, why the agent has reason to retain them. By shifting the burden of proof I mean to question the plausibility of the cognitivist account of regret.

## 2. Regret and Practical Imperfection

The philosophical interpretations of regret have focused almost exclusively on the notion of *residual* regret that emerges from the acknowledgment of a mistake in deliberation.<sup>viii</sup> This is because philosophers have been mainly interested in the question of the social functions of regret as an indicator of social reliability.<sup>ix</sup> The question I am interested in is, rather, what function regret fulfills from the point of view of the agent.

The perspective of the agent is at the core of C. Korsgaard's conception of moral reasoning. Such a conception focuses on residual regret, but it is capable of vindicating the phenomenology of tragic choices. On Korsgaard's view, a moral failure is something that must be perceived from the perspective of the agent who is capable of morality. Moral failures are explained and accounted for in terms of practical limitations of moral agency. We operate in non-ideal circumstances, we find ourselves obligated to undertake an action that we would not have to undertake were we under ideal circumstances. This is not only because of our own mistakes and shortcomings, but the non-ideal circumstances of our actions.

Because of these practical limitations, regret can be said to be appropriate 'even if we have done what is clearly the right thing'.<sup>x</sup> Agamemnon is confident that he had to sacrifice his daughter. If the world were not ruled by such tyrannical gods, his repugnant action would not be required. The moral agent regrets not the action undertaken, but having had to undertake such an action:

We will regret having to depart from the ideal standard of conduct, for we identify with this standard and think of our autonomy in terms of it.<sup>xi</sup>

The agent's regret is the expression of her fallibility and of her moral aspiration. The agent conceives of herself as aspiring to perfection, but perfection cannot be attained in this imperfect world. Regret is typical of the virtuous agent who struggles to live up to her moral ideal. It shows that the agent understands and suffers the gap between an ideal world of perfect moral interactions and our own imperfect world. Thus, the *proper object of regret is the discrepancy between a regulative ideal and our normal conditions of deliberation*.

Korsgaard's account of regret makes sense of a crucial feature of agent-regret, namely, its emergence through a reflective path and its justification by rational endorsement.<sup>xii</sup> This model, however, does not account for Jackie's case. Although there are many occasions for regret, regret is always residual. Jackie's case may be compared to the case of an agent that initially had conflicting reasons for action but resolved the conflict

by deliberation. It would be irrational for such an agent to regret the action justified by a sound deliberative procedure: an action justified on the basis of an all-things-considered judgment. Her regret has to be discounted as 'inappropriate and obsessive'.<sup>xiii</sup> Jackie seems to face the charge of irrationality. Her regret is not merely misplaced, nor is it a sign of her being admirably oversensitive. Rather, her regret shows that she is not capable of thinking morally, she does not correctly understand when and how her moral principles apply.

### 3. Regret and Value Pluralism

One might suggest that Korsgaard's model is not equipped to treat Jackie's regret simply because such a regret is not a *moral* sentiment. If so, Bernard Williams seems to provide an interesting alternative. For Williams, regret is a practical (not necessarily moral) attitude that is appropriate also when we entertain conflicting desires and we are under the pressure to decide between incompatible options.<sup>xiv</sup>

Williams elects regret as the phenomenon that marks the boundaries between the practical and the theoretical domain. In the case of moral and practical conflicts, the decision that a particular desire or a particular obligation should not be acted upon does not imply that that desire or obligation should be eliminated. It only means that they are not taken to be decisive in deliberation. Then, the proper object of regret is not a moral failure, but 'what was missed' once the agent realizes that there are no substitutes for that desire or that the opportunity for satisfying that desire is irrevocably gone.<sup>xv</sup>

By arguing for the interpretation of regret as residual and yet not a sign of the agent's failures, Williams intends to attack Moral Realism.<sup>xvi</sup> Realism is bound to adopt an epistemic conception of moral rationality and, consequently, it characterizes moral conflict as an instance of epistemic conflict.<sup>xvii</sup> The resolution of a moral conflict so conceived amounts to the erasure of the mistaken moral belief and initiates a coherence-driven revision of the system of moral beliefs that ensures that that type of conflict will never occur again. For a realist, no rational regret is possible after a resolution of moral

conflict; it would be like regretting the false belief that the moon shines of its own light once one has found out that such belief is false.

Williams rightly objects to realism that logical coherence is not the problem, and that coherence-driven revision is not the solution of moral conflicts. To think otherwise, Williams argues, is 'to misplace the source of the agent's trouble, in suggesting that what is wrong is his thought about the moral situation, whereas *what is wrong lies in his situation itself*.'<sup>xviii</sup> This is a statement of enormous consequence for the question of the proper object of regret.

By dissociating regret from the idea of a mistaken deliberation, Williams reinterprets the moral importance of tragic cases, like D and E. In both cases, the agent's resolution leaves some remainder or some residue because she had to choose between incompatible values. In both cases, the outcome of the action is morally repugnant, but the agents do not regret their choice and would not undo what they have done. Williams' argument implies that Antigone's and Agamemnon's choices are alike in that their regret is justified by the peculiar context of choice. Genuine regret is residual and insofar as it stands for a value. *The proper object of regret is a value forgone in deliberation*. If so, regret is justified insofar as the agents acted under the condition of value pluralism: they could not trade off values without remainder. It is the variety of values that justifies regret; this variety is to be preserved and cherished. But that is to say that this kind of regret is practically interesting insofar as value pluralism is true. Regret is justified only if a value (or a desire) is sacrificed in deliberation.

This idea is further developed in "Conflicts of Values".<sup>xix</sup> There Williams considers some special cases of moral conflicts, namely, moral dilemmas:

The agent can justifiably think that whatever he does will be wrong: that there are conflicting requirements and that neither of them succeeds in overriding or outweighing the other.<sup>xx</sup>

This seems to suggest that Antigone has reason for feeling regret because her deliberation to bury Polyneices does not eliminate the obligation she has to obey Creon's decree. However, Williams points toward another direction:

In this case, though, it can actually emerge from deliberation that one of the courses of action is the one that, all things considered, one had better take, it is, and it remains, true that each of the courses of action is morally required, and at a level at which it means that, whatever he does, the agent will have reasons to feel regret at the deepest level.<sup>xxi</sup>

On this model, Agamemnon's tragic choice is not different from Antigone's dilemma: their decisions do not show that the obligation not acted upon has been eliminated. But Antigone's and Agamemnon's tragic choices *are* different. Sophocles' Antigone says: 'By suffering I recognized I did wrong';<sup>xxii</sup> but Aeschylus put different words in Agamemnon's mouth when he resolves to action: 'May it be well'.<sup>xxiii</sup> For Antigone there is no moral resolution to be found, while Agamemnon resolves his problem according to the best (overriding) reason. Agamemnon proves that choosing the best is something that can be done *regretfully*; his choice is tragic, but it is not a moral dilemma. For his moral problem did have one correct resolution, which was endorsed through a correct procedure of deliberation. Antigone, on the other hand, faced a genuine moral dilemma; there was no right answer to her moral problem. Thus, Agamemnon's regret is not 'residual' in the same sense as Antigone's regret.<sup>xxiv</sup>

My claim here is not simply that Williams' model does not account for the variety of the objects that agent-regret might have. Rather, I contend that on this reading Antigone's and Agamemnon's regret is made dependent on an axiological claim about value pluralism. I want to argue that this is not a fruitful strategy for understanding the practical significance of regret. Williams privileges the question as to what regret tells about the structure of values, rather than the question of the practical purposes that regret serves from the agent's point of view.

In my view, by misconstruing the proper object of regret, Williams also misunderstands its practical significance: his account does not make sense of regret as a significant attitude for the agent. This contention might sound extraordinarily unfair to Williams, since he is constantly at pains to argue for the centrality of integrity and agency. I certainly do not intend to deny that Williams provides a powerful argument for valuing emotions as practically significant. Rather, I purport to show 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.

In inquiring about moral conflicts that appropriately elicit regret, Williams argues that the problem does not lie in the agent, but in the world. His argument revolves around the claim that one misunderstands the source of the moral problem 'in suggesting that the wrong is [the agent's] thought about the moral situation, whereas *what is wrong lies in his situation itself*'.<sup>xxv</sup> Let us consider the impact of this thesis on Williams' conception of agent-regret.

The notion of agent-regret is defined in contrast to *evaluator-regret*, a kind of regret that anybody acquainted with the situation would be able to sincerely express.<sup>xxvi</sup> The proper object of evaluator-regret is some state of affairs of which the evaluator knows. One might suggest, then, that the distinction between agent-regret and evaluator-regret is primarily drawn in terms of subject matter: the agent regrets his actions or his deliberation, the evaluator regrets some state of affairs brought about by somebody else. While Antigone regrets something about her own past actions, the chorus judges the matter and expresses its regret from an external or third person perspective. But so stated the distinction between agent-regret and evaluator-regret does not make sense of cases like Agamemnon's and Antigone's where the agents do not really regret what they have done, even though they wish that things had been otherwise.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Furthermore, agent-regret is not fully captured by saying that the agent regrets her own past actions because an agent can look at her own actions as if she were a bystander.<sup>xxviii</sup>

This third kind of regret is intermediate between evaluator-regret and agent-regret

because it is felt by an agent who considers her actions as if she were not the agent; we can call this *spectator-regret*.<sup>xxix</sup> By distinguishing between spectator-regret and agent-regret, Williams wants to show that agent-regret is not merely defined in terms of its proper objects (the agent's own actions and what could have been otherwise), but rather by 'a particular kind of expression'.<sup>xxx</sup>

Williams's point is that in order to understand the practical relevance of agent-regret we must accept that the sphere of agency extends outside the boundaries of the 'voluntary' and of the 'chosen'.<sup>xxxi</sup> For example, he says, Anna Karenina's regret is justified because her relationship with Vronsky turned out to be unsuccessful and harmful. However, the success of her relationship is largely independent of what was actually under her control and thus cannot be considered her fault. Anna Karenina is justified in feeling regret even though other elements contributed to the failure of her life plan.

My point is that the exclusive attention to the question whether Anna Karenina's life plan turns out to be successful or not has the undesirable consequence of making her life regrettable for anybody acquainted with its outcome. If 'the situation' is to be blamed, how does Anna Karenina's regret differ from the regret (that things not be otherwise) expressed by a sympathetic writer or by the chorus? What distinguishes her attitude when she reconsiders her life as her own from the moment when she contemplates it as a spectator?

What I am suggesting is that the perspective Williams adopts in accounting for regret is not the perspective of the agent. The appeal to the features of the situation (value-pluralism and to the success of a life) does not suffice to explain what is distinctive of agent-regret. Rather, it makes the phenomenon of agent-regret unintelligible by inadequately describing its proper object.

I have introduced Williams' model as a promising candidate for making sense of the kind of regret that is not generated by a moral failure. Does it make Jackie's regret intelligible? One may venture to say that Williams could easily account for Jackie's regret as appropriately elicited by the frustration of the desire to become a dancer.

However, it seems to me misleading to treat Jackie's in this way. In fact, Jackie's case is more similar to a case of moral conflict than to a case of conflicting desires.

Here is another way to read her story. Jackie endorses a Kantian ideal of perfection: she thinks that she ought to develop her own talents. In deliberating about a rewarding profession, she is trying to figure out how to fulfill her moral obligation to develop her talents. In her Kantian perspective, the obligation to develop her talents is imperfect, that is, not determinate. Jackie does not have any obligation to become either a dancer or an architect. In particular, she does not have any reason to think that becoming an architect is a better way of developing her talents than becoming a dancer. Her decision is not grounded on an overriding moral reason, yet it is not simply the expression of a desire. The alternatives she contemplated were both morally permitted: her regret is not residual. She seems to be entitled to regret, even though she did not commit any moral mistake. The question is how we should understand the object of her regret?

#### 4. Regret and the Unchosen Valuable Alternatives

My argument has been that if we qualify the object of regret in terms of mistakes, failures and losses of value, its phenomenology becomes unintelligible. In this section I propose a characterization of the proper object of regret that is designed to account for how the agent experiences it.

My main aim is to consider what regret means for the agent. In general, regret is a *counterfactual emotion*.<sup>xxxii</sup> It is a somewhat painful experience originated by a kind of counterfactual reasoning, a thought experiment about what might have been instead. *Agent-regret* needs to be qualified in a further way. From the perspective of the agent, the counterfactual emotion does not highlight mere possibilities, which did not materialize. Rather, agent-regret concerns what *for the agent* is a valuable alternative, even though she did not or could not choose it.

Suppose that, in a tragedy, the chorus has full knowledge of the situation; the proper object of its regret is a state of affairs brought about by the character's actions. The

chorus laments 'how badly things went'. The chorus' perspective does not focus on whether things could have been otherwise: it concentrates on 'how badly it went'. That is because the point of view of the chorus is evaluative and not deliberative. The chorus is not preoccupied with the process of deliberation that preceded and justified the action; it is only interested in whether the outcome was laudable or regrettable. By contrast, the agent is concerned with how things were decided and what could have been, had she decided otherwise. Her concerns arise from the appreciation of the constraints that structured and shaped her deliberation.

However, the reference to the agent's decision and deliberative process does not confine the notion of agency to voluntary agency. Rather, the proper object of regret is the reasonable and valuable alternative passed up, the path not chosen. The agent laments that she could have followed other valuable venues. Only in the perspective of the agent is this lamentation possible and only in this perspective does such a lamentation carry practical significance.

I propose to characterize the proper object of agent-regret as a *valuable unchosen and not necessarily overriding alternative*. This characterization makes sense of the substantial differences among the examples I presented in section 1.

An alternative is valuable insofar as there are reasons to value it. Reasons for valuing may provide overriding reasons for action, that is, they require the agent to act. Augustine and Alan had an overriding reason for action that they disregarded. These are the simplest cases of agent-regret: there were overriding reasons to act that the agent unconscientiously ignored or did not act upon. The object of their regret is a valuable alternative that they should have taken as overriding and acted upon.

However, reasons for valuing do not always provide overriding reasons. For example, Agamemnon has reason to value his daughter's life, but does not have reason to consider such a reason overriding. In moral dilemmas, there are not overriding reasons; Antigone could not determine which reason was overriding because she faced a dilemma.

Moreover, practical reasons are not necessarily action-guiding. That is, to say that something is valuable does not imply that the agent has any reason to bring it about. That I believe painting is a valuable activity does not mean that I have to paint. Holding a value does not commit one to bring about any instance of that value, it does not provide one with a reason to realize that value.

This qualification is very important to capture the varieties of agent-regret. The characterization in terms of valuable alternatives accounts for Jackie's sentiment as genuine and justified agent-regret. The proper object of her regret is the valuable alternative she did not choose. The agent that experiences regret is an agent that considers an alternative valuable path that was not necessarily supported by an overriding reason.

The varieties of regret can be explained by explaining what counts as an overriding reason.<sup>xxxiii</sup> By deliberating the agent tries to establish what count as a practical reason and attempts to determine the relations among practical reasons, so that she can justify her decision. *Overridingness* is a relation between practical reasons that is established by deliberation. In cases A and B, the agents disregarded the overriding reason, and that is the origin of their regret. However, to say that a practical reason is overriding does not imply that it is capable of canceling the authority of the countervailing reasons. For example, Agamemnon could justify his action by saying that his reason for sacrificing Iphigenia overrode his reason to spare her life. His regret reveals that he retains a reason for cherishing an alternative scenario in which Iphigenia's life is respected.

It might seem that Joan's case cannot be characterized in this way because at the time of choice she did not have any better (more valuable) alternative. However, the thought that she did not know the best valuable alternative should not make her feeling better. On the contrary, it is precisely that thought that demands her regret. Joan's lack of information excuses her action, and makes her immune to blame, but does not make her immune to regret. Thus, to say that the object of regret concerns one's valuable yet non-overriding alternative, does not imply that those alternatives were known to the agent at

the time of choice. It only signifies that the agent who feels regret is aware of it, or  
the  
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reason. Their regret is thus justified and intelligible as the experience of contemplating  
the non-overriding but valuable alternative. Antigone takes into consideration an  
*incomparably* valuable alternative, while Jackie takes into consideration an *equally*  
valuable alternative.

So characterized, Jackie's case sheds some light on the other cases of agent-regret and  
put them in the right perspective. Reflecting on the states of affairs brought about is  
distracting, I have argued.<sup>xxxiv</sup> It prevents us from looking at the real source of regret, at  
the reasons why it makes sense for the agent to regret. Jackie's case cannot be  
distracting in this way because she does not express discontent with the world, with her  
choice, or with the states of affairs brought about by her choice. She is content with  
being an architect; she just reconsiders how valuable it would have been to be a dancer.  
Her counterfactual emotion is not originated by any recrimination. Her regret is,  
however, justified insofar as she still values, after deliberation, the path not chosen.  
Regret signifies that the non-overriding alternative still matters to her, although her  
deliberation is well grounded and her life plan is successful.

Jackie's regret might also signify that she would have liked to have *other* options. This  
is not to say that she can blame the world for that. Rather, this is to say that regret  
makes her sensitive to the range of possibilities that could have been open to her as an  
agent. If Jackie inhabited a world in which being an architect and being a dancer were  
not incompatible life prospects, she would rather have them both. The incompatibility  
of these life plans is contingent, yet it is felt and appreciated as an inevitable constraint  
on the agent's deliberation. That is why, as for Antigone, Jackie's deliberative process  
does not establish that one reason overrode the other: in absence of any justification,  
these agents simply made up their minds.<sup>xxxv</sup>

As I have mentioned commenting on Joan's case, to say that regret concerns a valuable alternative does not imply that such an alternative was available to the agent at the time of choice. Even though the agent did not have better alternatives at the time of choice, feeling regret is not just a masochistic exercise. Its practical function is quite important: by calling attention to the alternatives the agent did not have, the agent may be pushing the boundaries of what she thinks possible for her to do. Our perception of what is possible for us to do, of what is a valuable alternative may be significantly changed by endorsing counterfactual reasoning. In this case, counterfactual reasoning is a way of questioning the ineluctability and necessity of some of our deliberative constraints.

Moreover, to say that the agent that feels regret considers an alternative path as valuable does not mean that her attention is fixed on a particular option. On the contrary, agent-regret can be a more comprehensive attitude. The experience of agent-regret may invest the entire representation that the agent has of herself. In this case, to say that the agent regrets a valuable alternative is to say that she regrets another possible story for herself, a possible self.<sup>xxxvi</sup> This kind of regret is what Anna Karenina experiences: she regrets being who she is, she contemplates another valuable possible life.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Another example of this kind of regret is Jackie's. Contrary to Anna Karenina, however, Jackie does not regret who she is, she regrets who she is not.

My argument is intended to restore the agent to a privileged position. A further merit of my proposal is that it calls attention to the agent while it diverts attention from the axiological context of choice under which the agent chooses. The characterization of the context of choice is not the starting point of the agent's deliberation, but its outcome.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The aim of deliberation is to provide the agent with a practical understanding of the situation. Understanding a situation from a practical perspective means conceiving it according to a grid of practical reasons. Thus, deliberation does not start with a descriptive view of the context of choice: the configuration of the context of choice is not a mere data to register. Rather, the context of choice has to be constructed from the agent's point of view, through the relations that she establishes by deliberation. In this sense, deliberation starts from the consideration of the constraints that the agent

appreciates as relevant. Consequently, the valuable alternatives are not merely descriptive features of the context of choice, but the outcome of the agent's deliberation.<sup>xxxix</sup> Agent-regret is intelligible as emerging from the appreciation of the constraints that conditioned the agent's choice.

That is precisely what explains how the phenomenology of agent-regret differs from the phenomenology of evaluator-regret. More importantly, that is what makes agent-regret functionally different from evaluator-regret.<sup>xl</sup> My characterization provides an alternative way of connecting the origin of regret to agency. Such characterization individuates the very source of regret in the constraints of agency. Our choice is constrained in many ways. Like Augustine and Alan, we are sometimes driven to ignore our best judgment. As for Joan, our cognitive resources are limited: we often do not know some relevant piece of information. Most importantly, as for Antigone, Agamemnon and Jackie, our values constrain our choice and generate a normative map of options that make some alternatives incompatible. All these constraints can be explained by the fact that we are situated and located. Regret is a way of appreciating this fact by giving consideration to all these constraints. These deliberative constraints should not be considered as defects or limitations, but as the very conditions of practical agency. If we were omniscient and logically infallible, if we had a perfect will and did not have to act in time, we would not have to engage in practical deliberation at all. To the extent that we have to choose under constraints, we are exposed to the possibility of regret. Regret then is not a sign of imperfection, but a sign that we are capable of practical reasoning.<sup>xli</sup>

## 5. The Practical Significance of Regret

To provide an account of the significance of regret is to provide an account of what regret means *to* the agent. As I have argued, the conception of the practical significance of regret is determined by the conception of its proper object. I have cast the proper

object of regret in terms of reasons for unchosen yet valuable alternatives. My final aim in this paper is to elucidate the different practical functions of agent-regret.

My contention is that *the capacity for regret is a practical capacity*.<sup>xlii</sup> The agent capable of regret is an agent capable of reconstructing the process through which a valuable alternative, supported by good yet not necessarily overriding reasons has not been chosen. This reconstruction involves the capacity to understand and appreciate the practical significance of alternatives. This appreciation is the result of practical reasoning: the agent reconstructs her past action by reviewing her practical reasons and by giving consideration to the constraints that bear on her choice. For example, Alan reviews his reasons for not checking the brakes on his bus, considers the outcome of his negligence, understands his mistake, and regrets it. By feeling regret, Antigone shows respect for Creon's authority. Jackie imagines what an alternative life as a dancer might be like, and through this act of imagination, comes to feel regret. Regret is a *practical response* generated by the practical understanding of the constraints that bear on the agent's deliberation.

That regret is a practical response does not mean that it is a deliberate attitude. The agent does not 'decide' to regret. Regret is not produced by a sudden act of endorsement, nor is it a strategic behavior. Rather, regret is a spontaneous attitude elicited by the practical reconsideration of one's valuable unchosen alternatives. It is because the agent is capable of practical reflection that she is capable of feeling regret. Although regret is not 'decided' or 'chosen', it is justified by practical reasons. The reasons that justify regret may be the same ones that supported the alternatives not chosen as valuable alternatives to be taken into consideration. Reasons for valuing emerge or *re-emerge* in the guise of regret.

In Augustine's case, regret reveals that the agent is capable of acknowledging a moral mistake, not in his judgment but in his motivation. Alan's regret shows that his reasons for actions were wrongly ranked, and thus exposes his inadequate practical reasoning. In virtue of a cognitive improvement, Joan has reconsidered her past choice; her regret shows that she is capable of appreciating the impact of her misinformed action over

other people. Regret reveals that Joan is capable of practical reflection and that she has acquired new reasons for action (although not necessarily different values). That is, her mistake might not have shaken her confidence in herself or in medical science, although the acknowledgement of that mistake implies that she has a new reason not to prescribe the drug again. Finally, Jackie's regret reveals the reasons she has for valuing being a dancer.

Notice that in Jackie's case, regret points at some reasons for valuing being a dancer, but it does not show reasons for valuing being a dancer *more* than being an architect. Similarly, Agamemnon's and Antigone's regret does not show that the unchosen alternatives were supported by *better* reasons that now surface in the guise of regret. Rather, their regret shows that the unchosen alternatives were valuable and still are. That is, the reasons that emerge in the guise of regret are not necessarily overriding. That is because regret is not necessarily the acknowledgment of a deliberative mistake and does not necessarily show any significant change in the rankings of values that justified the agent's decision.

However, for agents like Augustine and Alan, regret shows that they comprehend their mistakes. It is often argued that for such agents regret is an *internal sanction*, the aftermath of a moral failure.<sup>xliii</sup> As Korsgaard suggests, the agent that feels regret because of her moral transgression is an agent that comes to terms with herself. The purpose of regret is to provide a remedy for a breach of a moral obligation:

Someone who recalls failing to do what she was obliged to do will experience pain, and that is what remorse and regret are. (...) A person's own mind does indeed impose sanctions on her: that when we don't do what we should do, we punish ourselves, by guilt and regret and repentance and remorse.<sup>xliv</sup>

However, I argue, this reading cannot be extended to all cases of regret. Regret is not always to be intended as an internal sanction. More importantly, this is not its primary practical function. I contend that the primary practical function of regret is *to call*

*attention to*, and thus *to provide practical reasons* to the agent. Let me now substantiate this claim.

That regret provides practical reasons is no commonplace. When considering the practical relevance of regret and other negative emotions, philosophers have tacitly accepted a particular way of framing the practical question. They have considered whether regret inhibits or spurs action. That is, they have framed the practical questions in terms of action-guiding reasons. Within this framework, some philosophers have suggested that regret cannot provide practical reasons because it does not have an action component. In this perspective, regret is taken to increase moral sensitivity, but not to motivate.<sup>xlv</sup>

Others have suggested that in cases like A-B, regret provides the agent with an incentive to act morally, but have focused only on residual regret. Regret is a painful feeling and motivates the agent to follow morality in order to avoid such a pain. For example, Barcan Marcus has suggested that negative emotions (such as regret) provide reasons to avoid future conflicts of duties, which would occasion painful feelings.<sup>xlvi</sup> On this view, the experience of regret grants the agent with a prudential reason to act according to morality. The agent reasons strategically and tries to rationalize her commitments and projects so that she will be free of regrets.

Suppose that Alan decided to check the brakes on his bus just in order to avoid regret in case something goes wrong. Suppose that Augustine decides to resist the temptation to steal in order to avoid future regrets. These agents comply only because they fear a sanction. If they were provided with a drug that relieved them from the pain of regret, without making them oblivious, these agents would go on being negligent and stealing. The preoccupation seems to be that these agents are not properly motivated; they aren't morally motivated. But suppose that through a careful schooling of feelings, the motivational patterns of these agents become stable and reliable. Even though moral education is successful and morality becomes completely internalized, the question remains as to whether these agents act for practical reasons. Thus, the question is whether this is an account of the *practical* function of regret. Does it explain how regret

shows that the agent understands the situation from a practical perspective? It seems to me that this account explains the efficacy of a moral education to abide by the rule, but does not explain why practical reasons are authoritative. The normativity of practical reasons rests solely on the enforcement of sanctions in the guise of painful feelings, (e.g., regret); so that when the sanctions are not enforced, moral obligations lose their normative force. However, the moral agent thinks of morality as inescapable, not because it is sanctioned but because it is authoritative. In the case of a moral violation, the moral agent does not wish to be freed of regret; she wishes to have acted otherwise, to have chosen better or to have had other options. Thus, the practical function of regret cannot be cast in terms of reasons to avoid future pain. This objection can be raised also in those cases in which regret is not elicited by the acknowledgement of a mistake. It would be awkward to claim that Jackie values the life of a dancer if her motivation for dedicating herself to dance is the desire to avoid the pain produced by the frustration of her desire to become a dancer. That would make her regret unintelligible.

One more cautionary remark is needed at this point. As Amélie Rorty has wisely noted, regret has in-built dangers. It can be a self-indulgent attitude, a way of unburdening or excusing oneself, and of making exception in one's favor.<sup>xlvii</sup> It can be also a manipulative and egocentric attitude: a way of demanding attention and forgiveness, comfort and sympathy. In my view, these are cases in which the agent displays an attitude that can be mistaken for regret, but that is *phenomenologically* very different from regret. This behavior looks similar to regret only from the point of view of the spectator. It is intended for a spectator insofar as it is part of the strategic game that the agent plays with a spectator. Genuine regret, however, is not intended to solicit attention from others, but to pay attention to others.

In practice, it might be difficult or even impossible to distinguish genuine from spurious cases of regret. However, the question whether introspection or attribution may fail to point at genuine regret is of no interest. The question of the practical function of regret that we are addressing concerns what makes sense for an agent to feel. If regret is a practical response, as I have argued, its function is not merely to sensitize the agent to

salient traits of the situation. To claim that regret is a practical response implies that the agent that feels regret has a practical understanding of the situation and is sensitive to its salient traits. To this extent, regret is the outcome of the exercise of our practical capacities.

Deliberation aims at a practical understanding of the situation, at establishing relations among practical reasons. Practical reasons are reasons about what to do and reasons about what to feel.<sup>xlviii</sup> Practical reasons about what to do are action-guidingness. An agent that deliberates about what to do aims at arriving at a judgment that prescribes an action. The action justified by a practical reason counts as a practical response. If it is justified by an overriding practical reason such an action is obligatory. Action-guiding practical reasons are related to reasons to feel in important ways. This is not because the appropriateness of feelings and emotions depends on some judgment about action, as the cognitivist has it. Rather, this is because emotions and feelings are ways in which we are sensitive to the importance of our actions. They are ways in which we attribute value, we pay respect and attention, and we give consideration to some object.<sup>xlix</sup> In particular, regret counts as a practical response when the agent takes into consideration and values some alternative path. There are practical reasons to feel regret to the extent that the agent has practical reasons to reconsider and value an alternative path. On this conception, both actions and feeling are practical responses supported by practical reasons. That is, not all practical reasons are action-guiding.

This is not to deny that regret may have a strong motivational force. On the contrary, this is to clarify *how* such a force has to be understood. Regret may tell the agent that further deliberation is required. If Augustine regrets his action so much, maybe he should give the owner of the pear tree a fair compensation. If Jackie regrets not being a dancer, she can try to cultivate her passion on the side. Antigone's regret may be taken as the impetus to confront Creon, and Joan's regret as the resolution to contact her patient. Regret reminds the agent that some more work has to be done: she has to offer an apology or compensation, she has to provide an excuse or a justification, or she has to plea for forgiveness. The normative force of regret does not depend on the fact that

the agent wants to relieve her from enduring the pain of regret. Rather, it depends on her practical understanding of the situation: the appreciation of a residue that demands attention. That is, regret may have motivational force insofar as it provides the agent with a practical reason: it calls attention to a reason for action.

In calling attention to a reason for action regret can *initiate a new* deliberation. In this case, its practical function is to suggest to the agent that she has to deliberate further. Regret may be here conceived as a heuristic device: it is a sign that the agent has to survey her practical reasons. That regret is a heuristic device does not mean that it is consciously used as such. Rather, it is a spontaneous reaction elicited by practical reflection (which is not necessarily translatable into an explicit evaluative judgment). In this sense, regret does not merely parallel a pre-existing practical judgment: rather, it generates a new practical view. For this to be true, cognitivism has to be false. Against cognitivism, I argue that regret may be prior to the evaluative judgment that some alternative has value. By this I do not mean that regret might be epistemologically prior, but *practically* prior.<sup>1</sup> Regret does not mark a cognitive change in view, but a *practical* change in view. Through regret we may come to appreciate and to value what is valuable. We come to consider and value what we did *not* choose, and what it was not an option for us then. That is, via regret we may come to reconsider the range of valuable alternatives that we have.

While the agent is deliberating, regret might serve another practical function: it points at the reasons that were forgone in her past deliberation. In this respect, regret is a *practical marker*: a way of registering and recording unchosen alternatives that are still significant to the agent. To this extent, regret participates and contributes to the agent's practical reasoning. In further deliberative situations regret might function as a reminder for the agent of what she cares about. Regret works as a recorder of the practical significance that the agent attaches to her alternatives. It helps the agent in deliberating by calling her attention to what is salient to her, by tracking what deserves to be taken into account. That is what fully explains the motivational and normative force of regret.

It may provide reasons for action in so far as it interacts with our patterns of practical reasoning.

With the claim that regret is a practical marker I do not want to suggest that regret plays a merely heuristic or cognitive role, as a device for registering and recording relevant information.<sup>li</sup> Regret is a practical marker insofar as it is a practical response. It is a specific way of giving consideration and conveying attention to some alternatives. Paying attention and giving consideration are ways of valuing. Thus, regret is a mode *of valuing*. It is not only a way of expressing that we consider something as valuable, it is also a way of conferring value to something. To say that regret provides practical reasons is to say that reasons for valuing may emerge in the guise of regret.<sup>lii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> For example, Rorty acknowledges that there are norms of appropriateness for regret but claims that 'it is not in and of itself a practical attitude: its moral value comes primarily from its effects on the habits and dispositions of the agent', Rorty (1980), p. 502.

<sup>ii</sup> This model is largely accepted in moral philosophy and decision theory. Sugden writes that regret involves 'the state of mind that you have when you come to believe that a previous decision involved an error of judgment, that it was wrong at the time you made it', Sugden (1985), p. 79.

<sup>iii</sup> I use Agamemnon and Antigone merely as examples of different kinds of choices; I do not mean to propose any literary interpretation of these tragedies.

<sup>iv</sup> A moral dilemma is a case of moral conflicts in which the agent cannot arrive at a moral resolution justified by an overriding all-things-considered judgment. A tragic choice is a moral conflict in which the agent can arrive at a resolution justified by an all-things-considered judgment, even though such a resolution is repugnant. I argue for this distinction in Bagnoli (2000), chaps.3, and 5.

<sup>v</sup> On the same claim that regret does not entail the desire to undo what one has done, see Taylor (1985), p. 99, Rorty (1980), p. 495.

<sup>vi</sup> On the psychological credibility of this example, see Landman (1987), pp. 524-536.

<sup>vii</sup> For this suggestion, see Stocker (1990), p.321.

<sup>viii</sup> See Hare (1981), chap. 2, Gibbard (1990), O'Neill (1997), pp. 92-93.

<sup>ix</sup> Smith (1759), Nietzsche (1859), Mill (1861), chapter 3.

<sup>x</sup> Korsgaard (1996b), p.151

<sup>xi</sup> Korsgaard (1996b), p.151

<sup>xii</sup> Similarly, O'Neill writes: 'the demands of unmet, contingently unmeetable, *rationes obligandi* are often seen as requiring emotional and attitudinal responses: we pay price of unmet demands in residues and remainders such as regret, agent-regret and remorse', O'Neill (1997), pp. 92-93.

<sup>xiii</sup> Korsgaard (1996b), p. 158 n.

<sup>xiv</sup> Williams (1973), p. 170.

<sup>xv</sup> Williams (1973), p. 170.

<sup>xvi</sup> Williams (1973), pp. 187-205.

<sup>xvii</sup> Williams (1973), pp. 204-205.

<sup>xviii</sup> Williams (1981), pp. 74-75.

<sup>xix</sup> Williams (1979).

<sup>xx</sup> Williams (1981), p. 74.

<sup>xxi</sup> Williams (1981), p. 84.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, p. 929.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Aeschylus *Agamemnon at Aulis*, p. 217.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Consider that the notion of loss does not require postulating value pluralism. Agamemnon's regret can be accounted for also in a monist model; it can be explained and justified without postulating the plurality of values. Whether Antigone's regret implies such a postulation is, however, an open question. However, the question of value pluralism is not of my present concern. I just want to remark that the possibility of moral dilemmas does not depend on value pluralism; I argue for this thesis in Bagnoli (2000), chapter 5; see also Railton (1992), pp. 720-743, Bonevac - Seung (1992), pp. 799-814.

<sup>xxv</sup> Williams (1981), pp. 74 -75.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Williams (1981), pp. 27 ff.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Williams (1981), p. 31, see also Williams (1963).

<sup>xxviii</sup> 'There can be cases of regret directed to one's own past actions which are not cases of agent-regret, because the past action is regarded as purely externally, as one might regard anyone else's action', Williams (1981), p. 27.

<sup>xxix</sup> This term is mine, but the description of this emotion is provided by Williams, Williams (1981), p. 27.

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<sup>xxx</sup> 'The difference between agent-regret and regret felt by a spectator come out not just in thoughts and images that enter that sentiment, but in differences of expression', Williams (1981), p. 28

<sup>xxxi</sup> 'The sentiment of agent-regret is by no means restricted to voluntary agency. [...] Yet even deeply accidental or non-voluntary levels of agency, sentiments of agent-regret are different from regret in general, such as might be felt by a spectator, and are acknowledged by our practice as being different', Williams (1981), pp. 27-28. This marks the difference between agent-regret and *remorse*: the proper object of regret is confined to voluntary agency, while the proper object of agent-regret is not, Williams (1981), p. 30.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Kahneman and Tversky (1982).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> This allows for a complicated normative treatment of regret, which is not my present purpose. See Nozick (1981), pp. 556 ff.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> This is my complaint about treating regret as the key to understand moral conflict, and as showing something about the structure of the values, compare Williams (1965, 1979), Stocker (1990) p.119.

<sup>xxxv</sup> To this extent, their decisions can be regarded as 'arbitrary', that is, not justified by overriding reasons; for this notion of arbitrariness, see Nagel (1979).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The notion of 'possible self' can be defined as a *practical* representation of the self in currently unactualized states. This definition partly coincides with the definition of possible selves in terms of *cognitive* and *affective* representations defended by Markus and Nurius (1986), pp. 954-969. But the difference between these two definitions is crucial: in the practical representation of oneself cognitive and affective elements merge.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> This is what Rorty calls *character-regret*, see Rorty (1980), p. 498. Contrary to Rorty, I insist on the fact that this attitude does not have to be the expression of dissatisfaction with oneself.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is where my conception of regret most diverges from Williams (1979). A corollary of my thesis is that the incommensurability of values is the outcome of deliberation. I defend this view in Bagnoli (2000), chapters 7-8. See also Millgram (1997), pp. 151-184.

<sup>xxxix</sup> My claim here is that in order to make sense of the practical understanding of the situation, we should not separate cognitive and conative elements, descriptive and evaluative features of the situation. In this respect my view is inspired by Murdoch (1971).

<sup>xl</sup> This is not to say that evaluator-regret is not a practical response. Rather, this is to say that evaluator-regret has different practical functions from agent-regret.

<sup>xli</sup> This account of the constraints differs from Korsgaard's account of the practical limitations to the extent that it does not imply any specific normative conception of what counts as the ideal dimension of practical rationality. For me constraints are not necessarily defects or limitations: constrained agency is the only kind of practical agency we have. Notice also that on my account emotions (such as regret) are not merely psychological devices that make us *responsive* to morality. With a Kantian expression I might say that emotions are not only *incentives*. Rather, they are practical dispositions: this is established in the final section.

<sup>xlii</sup> On this issue I disagree with Stocker (1990), pp. 115-122, and especially Stocker (1990), p. 114 n 14.

<sup>xliii</sup> According to Gibbard, regret responds to threats to the agent's place in cooperative schemes by showing that the agent is reliable, see Gibbard (1991), p. 138, pp. 298-300. This reading could hardly be extended to cases where regret is not generated by the acknowledgment of a moral fault. But it is problematic also in cases like A and B. On this model, negative emotions (such as regret) are social because their origin is social and are regulated by norms to which we are socially answerable. Ultimately, they are directed to others, in the same sense in which apologies and excuses are directed to others, in order to restore the agent to her place in the cooperative game. My point is that if we are to explain the practical function of regret, we have to consider the matter *from the point of view of the agent*.

<sup>xliv</sup> For Korsgaard this is equivalent to the attempt to reestablish one's own practical identity; this is not a consequence that I am endorsing here. Korsgaard (1996), p. 151

<sup>xlv</sup> Rorty (1980), p. 501.

<sup>xlvi</sup> See Barcan Marcus (1980), pp. 121-136.

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<sup>xlvi</sup> Rorty (1980), p. 502.

<sup>xlvi</sup> The distinction between reasons to feel and reasons to act corresponds to the familiar distinction between evaluative and prescriptive judgments; see Skorupski (1999).

<sup>xl</sup> I hold that attention and respect are value concepts, not merely cognitive devices; see also Murdoch (1971).

<sup>i</sup> This marks a difference between my proposal and those that endorse the cognitivism of emotions. It also marks a difference between my proposal and those that reject cognitivism, but consider emotions just epistemologically prior to evaluations.

<sup>ii</sup> In this respect my view sharply differs from that of philosophers who distinguish between cognitive, expressive and practical roles of emotions. Compare Frijda (1987), Greenspan (1988), Sherman (1989), Stocker (1990), Stocker (1976), Mulligan (1998). I argue that the function of regret is complex and practical. I do not distinguish between cognitive and conative elements of regret.

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