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Is What Is Done Done? On Regret and Remorse

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Often, regret implies the wish not to have performed certain actions. In this article I claim that this wish can to some extent be fulfilled: it is possible, in a sense, to influence the character of actions that have already been performed. This possibility arises from combining a first person perspective with an outlook on actions as expressions of tendencies, where tendencies are identified on the basis of a *number* of actions. The idea is specified within the framework of Carnapian reduction sentences, but this technique is in no sense mandatory: it can be formulated in other vocabularies as well.

Keywords: regret, actions, retroactivity

Feelings of regret and remorse seem to be universally human. It is true that some people say that they never regret anything, but such claims are generally to be understood more as stylistic hyperbole that as literal fact. Criminals lacking all remorse are as rare as they are horrifying; at any rate they can count on much less understanding than can a contrite wrongdoer. A person for whom the phenomenon of regret is foreign, who has never experienced it, is fit for the psychiatrist.

Moreover it seems that feelings of regret and remorse are typically human. Admittedly, animal behaviour exists that we might be inclined to call remorseful, in particular if it is displayed by our beloved pets. Ethologists assure us however that such behaviour expresses not remorse but rather fear of punishment. When your favourite poodle creeps on his belly to you after having stolen a steak from the kitchen, he is actually attempting a reconciliation with the aim of diminishing his punishment — there is not a whimper of remorse in his canine mind (De Waal, 1996; Vollmer, 1977).

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Assuming that regret is felt by all humans, and only by humans, it is scarcely surprising that psychologists and philosophers have waxed eloquent on the matter. It is striking, however, that most psychological and philosophical studies on regret are of a decision–theoretic nature. In the 1980s in particular a plethora of articles appeared about how people try to avoid future regrets by anticipating their possible occurrence. Some of these studies, for example the regret theory of Loomes and Sugden (1982), developed Savage's (1951) minimax regret rule further, and in this sense they may be regarded as being refinements of the classical theory of the maximization of utility. Where decision theory is flaunted, phenomenology seems often like a poor relative. Phenomenological studies of regret are indeed but sparse in psychology, Janet Landman's (1993) being a rare example. In philosophy, the meagre phenomenological analyses of regret have a predominantly ethical flavour; and, in the wake of Bernard Williams (1976), many philosophers see regret as a "moral remainder," an unfortunate but unavoidable byproduct of moral dilemmas or other situations in which we are forced to choose between displeasing alternatives.

In this paper I propose to analyze regret from a somewhat different perspective. I shall not be concerned at all with preventing feelings of regret (as in decision theory), and neither with the question as to what regret actually is (as in phenomenology). Much less shall I ask whether remorse is rational (see Betzler, 1999; Dancy, 1993, Chapter 7; Hurka, 1996), or reasonable (see Bittner, 1992), or functional (see Zeelenberg, 1999). Similarly, I shall ignore the much-discussed topic of the cognitive content of feelings of regret, and also the query as to whether regret is actually necessary or even possible (if we really have good reasons for a choice, there is no need or reason at all for regret). Rather, I am particularly interested in the problem how, once feelings of regret have arisen, they can be *reduced* or even *removed*. I shall first claim that regret is accompanied by the desire for a world different from the actual one; in particular I shall defend the thesis that regret implies the wish not to have performed certain actions. After this hardly surprising contention, even if it is not accepted by everyone, I hope to make acceptable something that is less obvious, namely that this wish can to some extent be fulfilled: it is possible, in a certain manner and to a certain extent, to "undo" actions that have already been done.

First a terminological matter. Regret is sometimes distinguished from guilt, remorse, and repentance — all of them moral remainders. Without wishing to deny that the distinctions are valid in certain contexts, I shall not make them here: as will appear in the sequel, the form of regret that I discuss will lie very close to guilt, remorse and repentance.[1]

[1]However, I do assume that regret often differs relevantly from two other moral remainders, namely shame and disappointment, although this assumption plays hardly any consequential

Regret About What You Yourself Do

Regret is a relation-concept: you can only have regret for or about something. Linguistic usage is tolerant concerning the question what this "something" might be; in particular it does not stipulate whether this something happens to you or whether you caused it yourself. If you say "I am sorry that the downpour flooded your cellar," you express your regret about an incident in which you had no part at all: you think it is a pity that the catastrophe occurred, but you could not do anything about it, you are free from blame. The matter is different when you yourself bring about an event. Then regret is transformed into remorse, guilt, and perhaps repentance. Here it is that the phenomenon acquires that typically tragic force that is so often described in certain psychological novels. For whoever has remorse about what he himself has done is, as it were, doubly the victim: through what happened and by the fact that he caused it to happen.

Lexical dictionaries take this difference clearly into account. In the Oxford English Dictionary, for example, regret is described as a sort of sorrow that can take on one of two forms. The first is "sorrow or disappointment due to some external circumstance or event," the second is "sorrow or pain due to reflection on something one has done or left undone." In this article I shall limit myself to this second kind of regret. Regret about "some external circumstance or event" will be discussed only in a derivative sense, and the same applies to a kind of regret that one could see as an intermediate form between the two already mentioned. This is the remorse or guilt you feel, not for a natural disaster, nor for your own behaviour, but for the behaviour of others. Your compatriots who voted massively for Jörg Haider, for Jean-Marie le Pen, or for Pim Fortuyn, your director who cooked the books, your grandfather who was a Nazi sympathizer during the war: all these matters can give you a feeling of guilt and shame, even if they happened long before you were born. There are even people who feel guilty because they are part of the fallen human race. In the Calvinistic faith, with its notion of original sin, such collective guilt might perhaps be deemed fruitful; nonetheless, as I said, I shall leave this matter aside.

As with other forms of sorrow, regret implies the wish that reality had been different from what it actually was: those who live in the world of their dreams have nothing to wish for and lack all occasion to be sorrowful. What distinguishes regret from other types of sorrow is the idea that reality easily *could have been different*. As has often been observed, regret is characterized

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role in my argument. For the differences between regret and shame, see Benedict, 1934; Piers and Singer, 1953; Rawls, 1971, Chapter 8. For the distinction between regret and disappointment, see Zeelenberg, 1996, Chapters 2 and 7, and Gerritsen, 1998.

by "what might have been." "The constitutive thought of regret in general is something like 'how much better if it had been otherwise,'" claims Williams, "and the feeling can in principle apply to anything of which one can form a conception of how it might have been otherwise" (1976, p. 27). The more one feels that the world could easily have been different and better, the greater the regret. But also: the more one feels that it is one's own act that could have been different and better (and not just that of your grandfather, your compatriots, or Mother Nature), the more the regret hurts and gnaws. Frijda (1986, p. 201) speaks in this context of "painful self-evaluation due to some action evaluated negatively and for which the person holds himself responsible." The consequences of this self-evaluation are well-known: "mere suffering, wringing one's hands, and beating one's head" (p. 201).

How to evade such painful feelings? You can try to repress and not feel them, but such an attempt is merely palliative. There is only one way in which regret for your own action can be combated satisfactorily, and that is to undo the action.[2] But precisely that seems impossible. Apart from a few trivial cases (I steal 100 Euros from your piggy bank and, overcome by guilt, replace them before you notice the theft) what is done is done. Yet I shall argue that there is a sense in which we can be said to influence our actions after they have been performed. This sense reveals itself when we combine a first person perspective with the focus on actions as symptoms of tendencies.

The First Person Perspective and Actions as Symptoms of Tendencies

Imagine that I am a member of a football club which is continually in straitened financial circumstances, and meetings are scheduled every Saturday to discuss money matters. I enjoy football but I hate administration and very often I invent an excuse to shirk these tasks. During one of the weekly meetings at which I have once more absented myself, it is decided to revoke my membership, since it seems all too obvious that I seek only the pleasures and will not shoulder the responsibilities of a club member. Now there are at least three reasons why I can regret my absenteeism. I can regret it because it has led to my expulsion, or because it is inconsistent with my duty as a member of the club, or because it is symptomatic of one of my bad habits, namely the tendency to let other people do my chores. The first form of regret is that of the utilist, the second relates to duty ethics and the third to virtue ethics. Of course the one form does not exclude the others. Mixed reasons are possible and even common: an unmixed utilist reasoning is as rare as are pure duty or virtue motivations. What I want to argue here is that feelings of regret of the

[2]Frijda mentions another way, namely suicide: "Since the self has caused the pain, only removal of the self can end the pain." This option is indeed effective, if a trifle severe.

third type, namely those pertaining to considerations of virtue, can in some cases be reduced. That is to say, *insofar as* an agent regrets her own action as a potential symptom of a fault or other objectionable tendency, it can sometimes be "undone" in a nontrivial sense.

Often a single act is insufficient to allow one to claim that a particular tendency is present. For a tendency is normally manifested in several actions. In this connection, Ryle (1949, pp. 43–44) spoke of "higher-grade dispositions," Hempel (1965, p. 472) of "broadly-based dispositional traits," and Carnap (1936–1937, p. 444 ff; 1956, p. 64) of "multiple dispositions." Carnap particularly exerted himself to provide a good definition of these multiple dispositions.[3]

The typical characteristic of multiple dispositions is their multifarious manifestation, depending on the situation. To take a familiar example: the magnetization of an iron bar can be manifested by the fact that iron filings attach themselves to the bar's ends, but also by the fact that one end attracts the north pole, the other the south pole of a compass needle, and equally by the fact that, if the bar breaks in two, both halves retain the same properties. In Carnap's analysis, each of these manifestations is described in a so-called reduction sentence. There are well-known difficulties connected with this procedure, arising from the fact that, according to Carnap, reduction sentences are material implications. In principle, however, it is possible to model reduction sentences in another way, for example as indicative or as counterfactual implications, whereby the most intransigent problems are avoided. My concern here is not the precise form of a reduction sentence, but rather the fact that each manifestation of a disposition must correspond to a reduction sentence. For this means that every multiple disposition is described by a *sequence* of reduction sentences, and also that different sequences can partially overlap. If the dispositions are behavioural ones, the latter property allows us, by acting in a particular way, to continue an arbitrary sequence in a specified manner, with the consequence that earlier reduction sentences become part of one, and not another sequence.

The idea can be illustrated clearly by means of behavioural dispositions that we experience on the one hand as being very different, but on the other hand as having considerable overlap as far as their manifestations are concerned. Bravery and recklessness, for example. If I am brave, I will react under certain circumstances in a particular way, but equally so if I am reckless. It is not possible to ascertain if I am brave or reckless on the basis of just

[3]Attempts, such as those of Carnap, to *describe* dispositions should not be confused with attempts to answer the question whether dispositions must have bases or grounds. The latter concern the *realization* of dispositions in *properties*, categorical or not, the former the *manifestation* of dispositions in *observable behaviour*. The two things are clearly different: a disposition can be realized in several different ways and manifest itself in one way only, or it may instead manifest itself in different ways, while having but one realization.

one act, and even a number of acts may be insufficient, the problem being that the manifestations of these two dispositions resemble one another so greatly. Just as people in the Middle Ages had difficulty in deciding whether someone was possessed by the devil or had been touched by God (for the behaviour in the two cases often was thought to be largely the same), so we often cannot tell from a single action if someone is brave or merely reckless, miserly or simply prudent, self-conscious or only vain. The lesson is not that we ascribe dispositions to someone on grounds other than her verbal or non-verbal behaviour, but simply that we must observe *more* of her behaviour before we can conclude precisely which dispositions she has. Sometimes only by observation of someone's later behaviour can we determine the tendency that was expressed in her earlier deeds. But also — and here the alliance with the first person perspective is made — sometimes we ourselves have the opportunity, through our future deeds, to determine what precisely was the character of our earlier actions. The reason we may have this opportunity is that many actions do not express a tendency aside from the set of which they are an element, and moreover we can take advantage of this from a first person perspective. Of course, all this assumes that someone's life shows a certain continuity, but such an assumption is surely unproblematical; it is rather a life history lacking all continuity that causes problems.[4]

Let me try to make the idea precise, keeping within the framework of Carnap, and not troubling myself with the difficulties of material implication. Take two multiple dispositions, D–1 and D–2. Each will be described in a sequence of reduction sentences of the form $M \rightarrow (S \rightarrow R)$ or $S \rightarrow (R \rightarrow M)$ where S is the circumstance under which the disposition is manifested, R represents the manifestation itself, and M is the disposition in question, in this case D–1 or D–2. The two sequences, let us call them V–1 and V–2, are typically open, this meaning for the early Carnap that they can be extended by the adjunction of new reduction sentences (Carnap, 1936–1937, p. 449), and for the later Carnap that neither sequence is long enough to give a complete description of M (Carnap, 1956, p. 67). In the first case the meaning of D–1 and D–2 is determined entirely by the reduction sentences, in the second case it depends partly on the theory we have about D–1 and D–2. For our purposes it does not matter which of the two interpretations we choose. It is however important that V–1 and V–2 have an overlap, and thus that they have a number of reduction sentences in common. This overlap does not need to be as large as it is in the case of bravery and recklessness, but it should be sufficiently great that, at a given time, it is plausible that either

[4]I do not deny that now and then, in a person's life, a discontinuity can occur. As with Saul/Paul, some people experience radical turnings, where there seems to be little connection between what they did in the past and what they are doing now.

D–1 or D–2 might be applicable to a given person. If t(1) is the latest time for which this plausibility holds, then t(1) is said to be a bifurcation point between two different extrapolation possibilities. This could be the case if the agent herself tries to continue the sequence of acts in such a way that it resembles V–1 more than V–2, so that finally D–1, and not D–2, is applicable to the agent. In this way the agent determines, through her actions after t(1), to which sequence the subsequence of actions before t(1) belongs.

It is important to understand this point correctly. It is not that an act can be described in different ways, so that an action performed before t(1) acquires a new description after t(1). Neither is the point that often we only discover through later actions what the tendencies were that were expressed by the earlier acts. What is being contended has ontological implications, not merely semantic or epistemological ones. For we are not just talking about a fixed set of actions "out there" that can be described first such and then so, nor are we talking about a set out there with a determined character that is only revealed through later observations. What we are talking about concerns the adding, at an ontological level, of elements to a set, and hence the very creating of a set out there as we go along. There are cases in which, by acting in a particular way after t(1), I can establish that my acts before t(1) become a subset of another set of reduction sentences. In these cases I establish in retrospect which tendency is expressed by my earlier act, and I thus fix *post actu* the character of that act.[5]

This has consequences for our attitude towards regretting our own actions. The traditional, often religiously tinted reaction to such feelings of regret is to beg forgiveness, or alternatively to try to diminish your karma. In the first case you are dependent on somebody who imparts the desired forgiveness (whether it be God or another person), in the second case the idea is that your good deeds should outweigh your bad ones. Both cases are accompanied, if the agent is sincere, by the resolution "never to do it again," and in both cases it is assumed that the character of the regretted deed remains more or less fixed. It is precisely this last assumption, which is also implicit in Williams (1976), that is undermined. In our approach, we can combat our regret in the most effective manner conceivable, namely by annihilating, in a certain sense, the deed that we regretted. The possibility is made feasible

[5]Of course, it is always *possible* to take a semantical or epistemological view, just as it is always possible to be a hard-nosed skeptic, or to maintain an animistic outlook, or to regard all events as consequences of divine intervention. Those positions are tenable, in the sense that they are not inconsistent. But the relevant question is whether they are fruitful, and there I have my doubts. I think that there are actions that are better accounted for by saying that their character is *determined* by later actions, than by saying that their character *acquires a new description later on* or by claiming that their character *is revealed or discovered through the observations of later actions*.

thanks to the combined perspective that we have adopted, and thanks to the holistic and indeterminate character of "the mental." Insofar as we are sorry for our actions as potential symptoms of undesirable tendencies, we are able to influence the character of these acts by means of our future behaviour.

Let me give an example taken from Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. This novel deals for the greater part with music and musical history and the example, too, is based on musicological insights. The main character in *Doctor Faustus* is a German composer by the name of Adrian Leverkühn, whose tragic life story is told by his trusty friend Serenus Zeitblom. Zeitblom needs six chapters to relate Leverkühn's childhood and adolescence before Leverkühn himself, in Chapter 7, takes the stage. He explains to Zeitblom that the essence of music lies in relation (*Beziehung*) and in ambiguity (*Zweideutigkeit*). An arbitrary chord, for example the black keys F sharp, A sharp, C sharp, do not prescribe a definite key. It looks as though they are in F-sharp major, but if we add an E, the same chord belongs to B major, as its dominant. In this manner we imbue retroactively the notes that have already sounded with their key; thus we can shape, and in that sense change, the past. Let us listen to Zeitblom:

> To illustrate the meaning of the word [ambiguity], he played me chord-progressions belonging to no definite key; demonstrated for me how such a progression fluctuates between C major and G major, if one leaves out the F, that in G major turns into F sharp; how it keeps the ear uncertain as to whether that progression is to be understood as belonging to C major or F major if one avoids the B, which in F major is flattened to B flat.
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> "You know what I find?" he asked. "That music turns the equivocal into a system. Take this or that note. You can understand it so or respectively so. You can think of it as sharpened or flattened, and you can, if you are clever, take advantage of the double sense as much as you like." (Mann, 1947/1970, p. 49)

Leverkühn is a classical composer (Zeitblom compares his compositions to the works of Monteverdi, Mahler, Schönberg, and Alban Berg), but the principle that he refers to above must sound familiar to contemporary improvising musicians. In an interview on Dutch television in January 2004, the jazz pianist Louis Van Dijk gave the following answer when asked why he preferred improvised music:

> The nice thing about improvising is: you play a mistake, then you repeate that mistake eight times, and then not only have you legalised that mistake, but you even have elevated it to the point where it has become the starting point.

What Van Dijk describes here is that the nature of a particular note is often determined by the manner in which the musician proceeds. In this way, a note that was produced "by mistake" or "accidentally," can give rise to a new, interesting musical development (of course, the opposite can also happen: a

sequence of challenging or promising notes might not be picked up by the fellow musicians so that it perishes without trace). In this sense, then, the later behaviour of a musician may determine the character of what he did earlier — just as, to mention a non-musical example, my escapade last night becomes either a mere incident or the beginning of a long and secret affair, precisely because of my later actions.

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