

Agent-Regret, Finitude, and the Irrevocability of the Past

Abstract

In ‘Moral Luck’, Bernard Williams famously argued that “there is a particularly important species of regret, which I shall call ‘agent-regret’, which a person can feel only towards his past actions”. Much subsequent commentary has focused on Williams’s claim that agent-regret is not necessarily restricted to voluntary actions, and questioned whether such an attitude could be rationally justified. This focus, however, obscures a more fundamental set of questions raised by Williams’s discussion: what is the role in our moral psychology of evaluative attitudes that relate essentially to past exercises of our agency—occurrences which, by their very nature, cannot be repeated?

On a standard conception, regret is directed principally towards actions that resulted from suboptimal deliberation. On this view, the main point of regret is to guide us away from similar poor decisions in the future. But Williams’s key insight in ‘Moral Luck’, I argue, is that there is a mode of evaluation of one’s past actions and decisions that does not track considerations one could and should have been responsive to at the time, and is for this reason essentially retrospective. From this perspective, the full significance of regret cannot be captured in terms of a disposition to deliberate better in the future. Rather, the particular kind of painful consciousness of the past embodied in regret amounts to a reflective, and essentially backward-looking, insight into the contingency and finitude of our own agency—that I am a particular person leading a particular life, and that the possibility of leading a different life is now gone forever.

I end by making some speculative comments about the intractable question whether it is ultimately good or desirable to be disposed to regret one’s past mistakes.

In ‘Moral Luck’, Bernard Williams famously held that ‘there is a particularly important species of regret, which I shall call ‘agent-regret’, which a person can feel

only towards his past actions.’ He distinguishes this from a more general notion of regret, which ‘can in principle apply to anything of which one can form a conception of how it might have been otherwise, together with consciousness of how things would then have been better.’ With agent-regret, ‘the supposed possible difference is that one might have acted otherwise, and the focus of the regret is on that possibility, the thought being formed in part by first-personal conceptions of how one might have acted otherwise.’ (Williams 1981a, p. 27)

Two central themes characterise Williams’s discussion of agent-regret. The first is that agent-regret is a paradigmatic moral emotion, one connected with the evaluation of one’s actions over time and of one’s life as a whole, and that our susceptibility to such emotions is a central part of what it is to be a moral agent in a broad sense—a person with an ethical outlook, and a sense of what is important in life and makes it worth living. The second is that, in leading a life, one is unavoidably exposed to the risk of such regrets—a theme expressed in Williams’s insistence that agent-regret is not the same as remorse, and is not restricted to voluntary exercises of one’s agency. In making these two claims, Williams is setting himself against certain conceptions of rational agency, such as Rawls’s, on which it is both feasible and desirable to run one’s life in such a way that one would never have cause to reproach oneself for one’s decisions, even those that turn out badly. More grandly, the discussion of agent-regret is a key front in Williams’s assault on what he called the ‘morality system’; and specifically the idea, associated above all with Kantian morality, that the most fundamental kind of moral value is not subject to the contingencies of the causal order, and hence is absolutely immune to bad luck.

Williams sought to offer in place of the morality system a more realistic, or naturalistic, moral psychology. To say a moral psychology should be naturalistic, for Williams, is not to say it should be reductive, for instance in the sense of dealing only in concepts sanctioned by the natural sciences. Nor is it to say that it should invoke some fixed notion of ‘human nature’, justified perhaps by speculative appeals to natural selection.¹ It is rather to say, first, that it should aim to be faithful to the realities of lived moral experience, and not misread them by interpreting them in

¹For Williams’s scepticism about the latter of these, see (Williams 1995c).

terms of categories shaped by the demands of one or another normative theory.² In particular, Williams accused the morality system of operating with excessively purified and idealised notions of voluntariness, blame, and practical deliberation, in a way that tends to distort moral experience and thereby blocks from us a true understanding of ourselves and of what is important in human life.³ And this points to a second sense in which Williams wanted a moral psychology to be realistic: it should allow us to attain, or at least aspire to, a clear-eyed and truthful view of ourselves and of our nature as finite, historically conditioned agents, unswayed by the seductive fantasies of unconditioned freedom and perfect justice offered by the morality system, in particular by Kantian morality.

Much subsequent discussion arising from 'Moral Luck' has been driven by a programmatic interest in the morality system, and has focused on the connection between (absence of) agent-regret and retrospective (un)justification. One effect of this focus is that less attention has been paid to the role of agent-regret in Williams's positive vision for a realistic moral psychology. This contribution will pick up one strand of this. One fundamental question raised by Williams's discussion, I suggest, is: what is the point at all in having attitudes, such as agent-regret, that are specifically directed to past exercises of our own agency? These are, after all, events in the history of the world that are now past, and as such will never come again. Yet we do seem to take a special kind of interest in them, not simply as matters that are dear to our heart, but as bearing on our nature and status as agents. The distinctive kind of pain one feels, for example, on being reminded of cruelly breaking a childhood friend's toy, or of making a sexist joke as a gauche undergraduate, can hardly be understood in terms of how that past episode might reflect one's current

²See for example (Williams 1995f), where he discusses Nietzsche's critique of the distortions inherent in a psychology of the will shaped by the demands of Christian morality.

³See, for example, the final pages of (Williams 1985). Something these pages bring out is that Williams's critique is directed not only at the morality system considered as a *philosophical* theory of the moral emotions and of moral value, but rather as a set of concepts and values that are to some extent endemic to post-Enlightenment Western culture. Accordingly, the demand for a realistic moral psychology is not just a demand for moral philosophers to do better in their theorising, but is also a call for a better set of culturally shared hermeneutic resources for understanding human life and its difficulties. For an illuminating recent discussion of Williams's critique of the morality system, see (Queloz 2022).

outlook and dispositions, nor as a general sadness that these unfortunate things happen. What is painful is the thought “I did it; *that was me*”, even if I might now thoroughly disavow the motives or dispositions behind it.

So we do seem to have a certain special kind of concern for our own past agency, exemplified by agent-regret; but how should this concern be understood, and what wider role does this concern play in our psychological life, and our life together? It is only in the context of such questions, I suggest, that we can properly understand the point of Williams’s resistance to restricting agent-regret to the realm of voluntary actions. Beyond this, a more general theme Williams’s discussion of agent-regret raises is the way in which moral experience is temporally inflected: to have a moral point of view is, among other things, to apprehend the events of one’s life from a particular temporal point of view. This contrasts again with the idealised forms of evaluation characteristic of morality, which are, paradigmatically, objectively and impersonally applicable—“valid at all times for us and for everyone else”, as Kant said in a different connection. (Kant 2004, §18, p. 50)

In section §1, I review the main points of Williams’s discussion in *Moral Luck*, and in particular his claim that agent-regret is an ethically significant emotion and is not restricted to voluntary actions or actions stemming from some form of deliberative error. In section §2 I place Williams’s claims about agent-regret in the context of the questions about the point or function of retrospective evaluations in general, and regret in particular. I suggest that agent-regret has a distinctively impractical character, insofar as it does not ultimately serve to help the agent deliberate better when facing relevantly similar decisions in the future. Rather we should see agent-regret more simply as highlighting the fact that a certain act or choice lies in the agent’s past, and is now irrevocably a part of their personal history; and, more generally, as embodying the recognition that the agent is a particular historical individual living a particular life. Section §3 then aims to situate this point within a broader discussion of the patterns of valuing that place an agent’s actions in the context of a conception of their life-as-a-whole, with reference to some late critical remarks by Williams about the idea, associated with Charles Taylor and others, that we experience our lives in ‘narrative’ terms. Williams’s critique of the idea of life

as narrative draws out the point, implicit in his earlier discussions of agent-regret, of a fundamental contrast between the standpoint of retrospective evaluation and that of deliberation, and so further illuminates the sense in which the moral point of view is temporally inflected. Section §4 closes with some brief and speculative remarks on the question whether it would be ultimately feasible or desirable to live a life not exposed to regrets.

1 REGRET, REMORSE, AND THE VOLUNTARY

Williams distinguishes agent-regret from, on the one hand, a more generalised form of regret; and, on the other hand, from a philosophical conception of *remorse* that applies only to voluntary actions or decisions. This section will go over these contrasts and survey some of the surrounding issues.

Regret in general, Williams says ‘can in principle apply to anything of which one can form some conception of how it might have been otherwise’; things can in this sense be regretted, in principle, by ‘anyone who knows of them.’ (p. 27) This more general notion of regret is just a matter of somehow being disappointed by the world, when it fails (or when one believes it fails) to satisfy one’s preferences. One can be regretful, or disappointed, that Liverpool FC are in decline, or that most of the world’s wealth is owned by a handful of billionaires, or that no finite and consistent axiomatisation of arithmetic is complete. Agent-regret, by contrast, relates essentially to one’s own actions, and involves ‘first-personal conceptions of how one might have acted otherwise.’

The emphasis on ‘first-personal’ conceptions of how one might have done otherwise indicates that agent-regret is not just regret with a specific subject-matter, namely one’s own actions. To see the point, consider a simple example. You are offered a choice between three bets on the outcome of two fair coin tosses: £1 if both heads, £1 if both tails, £1 if they are different. Being rational, you bet on one heads, one tail; unluckily they both land heads and you win nothing. There is a decision-theoretic notion of regret, defined as the difference between the utility of the best available option given the actual state of the world and the utility of

the agent's actual choice given the actual state of the world. In this sense, 'regret' would be equal to the utility of £1. And indeed there is a perfectly acceptable intuitive sense in which you might wish you had chosen differently: if you had betted on both heads, you would have won. But this kind of regret is clearly consistent with having chosen well. In this respect, it does not seem reasonable to in any way reproach yourself for your decision.

In a sense, then, it is perfectly reasonable to regret that one made choices which turned out badly, yet without finding any fault or error in those choices. To this extent, though, one's conceptions of how one might have acted otherwise will not be 'first-personal' in the relevant sense. We might label these kinds of regrets, for decisions that turned out badly through no fault of one's own, *circumstantial* regrets. So one initial contrast is between general regret, including circumstantial regrets about the outcomes of one's choices, and agent-regret.

This contrast might suggest that the important thing for agent-regret is the thought that one's action or decision failed to live up to some internal normative standard which it might reasonably have been expected to meet. This is the standard contrast between regret and *remorse*. For instance, Marcia Baron writes, 'Remorse involves not just a judgment that it would have been better if one had acted otherwise...it involves the judgment that one could have acted otherwise, and, more important, that one should have.' (Baron 1988, p. 267)

The 'could' here is not just the 'might' of physical, or metaphysical, possibility; that much presumably also holds of the bet on the coin toss. The idea is rather something like the following: there were at the time relevant and accessible considerations against acting as one did, and it would have been reasonable to expect one to be responsive to those considerations. The exact content of these modal judgments is admittedly somewhat obscure. But the basic point is that remorse traffics in a conception of responsibility that is stronger than just the idea of a certain change being attributable to a person's agency, and which might have been otherwise, but is connected with the control an agent exercises through their sensitivity to reasons or deliberative rationality.⁴

⁴For related discussion, see Williams's remarks on the connection between blame and retro-

However, as noted previously, Williams is emphatic that the notion of agent-regret is broader than that of remorse. It is not restricted to voluntary actions, nor to cases where the action is traceable to some definite error in deliberation.

The case which has attracted the greatest controversy is that of accidental agency, and Williams's notorious example of the lorry driver who runs over a child through no fault of his own. A lot of ink has been spilled over the question whether it is reasonable or appropriate for the driver to feel regret for his involvement in the accident, and to undertake some kind of reparative action beyond material compensation. The general tenor of responses to Williams has been that, if the driver is genuinely not at fault, then he has nothing to regret about his part in the affair; what is regrettable is just the unfortunate circumstance that the child got in the way, and this kind of regret is accessible to anyone who cares about the child—for instance, the child's family—and not just the driver *qua* (unwilling) agent.⁵

I do not wish to enter at length into a debate about accidental agency. I will just note that, as a matter of fact, people who are responsible for accidental killing do indeed find it uniquely distressing in a way that seems totally different from, say, the grief of someone bereaved as a result of an accident. For example, here is a quotation from a *New Yorker* article interviewing a woman, pseudonym 'Patricia', who accidentally killed someone in a road traffic accident:

“Yes, it was an accident, and in a certain sense we were both to blame, but, at the end of the day, I hit him, I took his life,” she said. “No matter how much you want to dismiss it as an accident, I still feel responsible for it, and I am.” She cried, “I hit him! Why does nobody understand this?”⁶

It is abundantly clear that Patricia's distress about what happened is intimately connected with the fact that she was involved not merely as a bystander, but as an agent, and that this has fundamentally altered the character of her relations to the world: she is now a killer. These feelings are typical of accidental killing, and are entirely intelligible—indeed, as Williams notes, we might well be suspicious of someone who had no feelings of this kind, no matter how blameless they were in the matter.

spective advice in (Williams 1995b).

⁵This is, for instance, the line taken by R. Jay Wallace in *The View from Here* (Wallace 2013).

⁶<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/18/the-sorrow-and-the-shame-of-the-accidental-killer>

It might, of course, be responded that the important question is not whether people do feel this way about accidents they have caused, but rather whether it is appropriate or reasonable for them to do so. There is at least something to be said for the idea it is not—after all, a friend or counsellor to someone involved in accidental killing might hope to convince them that they ought not to feel that way, precisely because they were not at fault. But I suggest it would be a mistake to read Williams as claiming that the lorry driver in some heavyweight sense is *required* to feel regret, or is morally obliged to offer some reparative gesture beyond material compensation. The point of the example is rather to prepare the reader for the idea that we do have a concern for our past actions, and for how we might have done otherwise, that is not just a matter of circumstances turning out badly through extrinsic bad luck, but equally is not traceable to any deliberative error or defect; and that this concern is an important part of our natural ethical endowment. From the naturalistic perspective of Williams’s quest for a realistic moral psychology it would be perverse simply to dismiss as just a bug or quirk of our psychological makeup of no further ethical significance, like the tendency of consumers to prefer displays with attractive products located on the left (Rodway and Schepman 2020).

The significance of this concern comes out in Williams’s treatment of a different class of cases, namely those of what might be called ‘big decision’ regrets: regrets for decisions, very much deliberately taken, which fundamentally shape the course of one’s entire life. Williams’s own examples are the fictional one of Anna Karenina leaving her marriage and child to be with Vronsky; and the semi-fictional one of Gaugin abandoning his family to pursue his vocation as a painter in Tahiti. Both of these cases introduce complexities of their own. Discussion of the Gaugin case, in particular, has tended to focus on Williams’s apparent suggestion that Gaugin’s decision to abandon his family might be justified, or excused, by his later success as an artist. Commentators have typically responded by insisting that abandoning one’s family is a morally indefensible thing to do, and baulked at the idea that the moral demand of caring for one’s family might be somehow counterbalanced by the fruits of successful life as an artist.⁷

⁷E.g. (Heuer and Lang 2012; Wallace 2012).

Again, I think that a significant part of the interest of Williams's discussion here is missed, or at least distorted, by a programmatic concern for the morality system. As I read 'Moral Luck', Williams's fundamental point is that the kind of evaluation embodied in agent-regret need not track considerations one could and should have been responsive to at the time, and yet despite that reflects a special concern for an action or choice that only the actual agent of that action or choice could have. This point is, I suggest, separable from the claim that specifically moral demands do not always trump other concerns, such as the demands of an artistic vocation, and that *prima facie* immoral acts, such as abandoning one's family, can be retrospectively justified by later artistic success.⁸

To disentangle this point from concerns specifically about morality, it will be helpful to focus on a less fraught example. As part of a recent series of features for the *Guardian* on people's biggest regrets in life, the author Megan Nolan describes her ambivalence around her decision to leave Ireland for New York:

I could handle the downsides of leaving if I didn't also harbour the suspicion that these sacrifices will reveal themselves, ultimately, to have been in service of absolutely nothing. Many people leave their home country with specific, meaningful goals. They work hard and establish enough of a new foundation to feel the loss is justified. But how can I justify my losses?

Yes there has been much laughter, a couple of novels, but also the harrowing morning panic that nothing I do has any weight; the suspicion that I have failed to become a real human being and now it's too late. I won't know for certain until the end of my life, but, for now, I fear that the things I left behind will never be offset on the balance sheet of life – that I will be left thinking only of what I chose to eschew, not what I chased after.⁹

Clearly, Nolan is not just worried that various concrete things will go badly for her in New York—that she will get ill and be inadequately served by the US healthcare system, for instance. She is afraid that, in some hard-to-define sense, the entire project of a life in New York, and away from her roots in Ireland, will turn out to be a mistake, or a 'chasing after' of something not ultimately worthwhile. Although this is not explicitly stated, it seems to be implied that the kind of failure here is connected with her sense of who she is, and in particular her identity as Irish, and

⁸In a later postscript, Williams identifies these as separate concerns (Williams 1995e).

⁹<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2023/mar/28/my-biggest-regret-was-it-a-mistake-to-leave-ireland-for-new-york>

the way in which that identity informs her sense of what is important in life.

This dynamic is strikingly similar to what Williams says about Gaugin (indeed, one wonders if Nolan has been reading him!) Here is how Williams describes the choice Gaugin faces:

...it is clear that the decisions we are concerned with are not merely risky ones...The outcome has to be substantial in a special way—in a way which importantly conditions the agent's sense of what is significant in his life, and hence his standpoint of retrospective assessment...With an intrinsic failure, the project which generated the decision is revealed as an empty thing, incapable of grounding the agent's life. (*Moral Luck*, p. 56)

Thus, with regrets about decisions of this kind, the agent is unable to comfort themselves with the thought that one made the best decision one could with limited information. At the same time, these regrets are not necessarily traceable to any definite deliberative error. No matter how well we deliberate, certain decisions in life, on Williams's thought, necessarily expose one to the possibility of later regrets that one's decision was fundamentally misguided. This is exactly Nolan's concern: the idea of a life in New York will turn out to be a chimera, an 'empty thing', incapable of grounding her decision or giving her life meaning—she will have 'failed to become a real human being'.¹⁰

I said that the point about agent-regret not tracking deliberative error is independent of Williams's scepticism about the supremacy of moral demands. It is, however, relevant to Williams's concern with morality and the morality system in a less direct way. Williams's broader concern is to cast doubt on the idea that morality might be a guide to life: that, as long as one heeds the demands of morality, one can be absolutely confident of a life lived well, and thereby protect oneself against bad luck. The point about big decision regrets is that one's whole sense of one's life as worth living is contingent on the success of one's projects, so that if things go badly, one will neither be able to comfort oneself with the thought that one lived a

¹⁰As a reviewer pointed out, there are of course important differences between Nolan's situation and Gaugin's, in addition to the fact that Nolan does not face any specifically moral complaint parallel to Gaugin's. In particular, there is no suggestion on Nolan's part that her project of moving to New York would be undermined if her creative career; rather, it seems to be something rather harder to define, along the lines that she will never really belong in New York or gain a deep sense of fulfilment from her career as a writer.

morally upstanding life, any more than with the thought that one chose as well as one could given limited information.

Suppose we accept Williams's claim that there is an important species of regret, agent-regret, which genuinely attaches to one's past actions or decisions, and essentially trades on one's role as agent, yet is not restricted to deliberative error, and thereby inevitably exposed to luck? What is the point in having these attitudes to our past agency—what do they do for us, and would we be better off without them?

2 THE USES OF RETROSPECTION

I want to tackle this question by setting in the context of a broader one: What is the point of having attitudes that are specifically directed at past occurrences at all? This is a question that has been raised recently in debates about the evolutionary function of episodic memory. There is a *prima facie* puzzle here insofar as, while it clearly benefits organisms to be able to keep track of regular processes in their environments, it is less clear what the benefit is of retaining information about unique, one-off events that cannot be repeated. As Teresa McCormack and Christoph Hoerl put it: 'While learning about the general characteristics of the world (and retaining such information for future use) is clearly beneficial, of what benefit is it to the individual to be able to remember particular past events as such, given that those particular events will never come again?' (Hoerl and McCormack 2016, p. 241) Impressed by this thought, some psychologists and philosophers have speculated that the capacity for episodic memory is an evolutionary spandrel: a byproduct for a more general capacity for simulating non-present events, whose main advantage is to prepare us better for the future by enabling us to vividly imagine future events on the basis of past experience (De Brigard 2014; Suddendorf and Corballis 2007).

Similar questions arise for attitudes to the past that are evaluative in nature: what might be the point of a disposition to evaluate past events, such as our own actions, in a certain way, if not better to prepare us for relevantly similar future situations? In particular, what might be the point of a tendency to feel the negatively valenced emotion of regret towards one's past decisions?

An influential idea in behavioural economics and social psychology has been that regret plays an important role in decision-making. This idea is the central element of the ‘regret regulation theory’ of Zeelenberg and Pieters (Zeelenberg 1999; Zeelenberg and Pieters 2007), which posits that people make decisions according to a principle of ‘regret aversion’: basically, people act in such a way so as to minimise decisions that they are likely to regret. The simplest way in which this mechanism could work is by association: if an agent regrets the outcome of a decision they made, the feeling of regret gets associated with that decision. Given the negative valence of regret, the association acts as a signal and a motivator to avoid similarly regrettable decisions in the future.

Clearly, this form of regret aversion will only work if the agent is likely to encounter choice situations in the future which are relevantly similar to the regretted one. On the face of it, many regrettable decisions are not like this. The kinds of big life decisions from the last section are just one prominent example: deciding whether to move permanently to another country tends to be the kind of decision that only comes up once or maybe twice in one’s life. If a decision of this type comes up more than once, the circumstances are likely to be sufficiently different that any regrets, or lack thereof, about an earlier decision are unlikely to be a very useful guide to the next one.

So *de facto* one-off decisions call for a more sophisticated mechanism of regret aversion. In their discussion, Hoerl and McCormack suggest that we should see *anticipated* (as opposed to ‘experienced’) regret as playing a distinctive role in these decisions. They explain: ‘decision-making in the context of major life choices, in particular in cases in which the subject is faced with a choice of a type she has never faced before, often involves reasoning about anticipated regret. That is to say, the subject’s deliberations turn on whether, in looking back on her choice, she will come to feel regret when comparing it with the other choice(s) she could have made.’ (Hoerl and McCormack 2016, p. 256)¹¹

¹¹A related idea is the way in which avoidance of regrets has been appealed to in justifying the standard causalist response to Newcomb’s problem; and in the various refinements of causal decision theory developed to deal with yet more *recherché* problem cases. E.g. (Arntzenius 2008; Joyce 1999).

An obvious difficulty for this suggestion, which Hoerl and McCormack acknowledge, is that it is not obvious how anticipating future regret could actually help an agent with a difficult decision. If it is not clear what one should do now, then presumably it is similarly unclear which decisions will be regretted. Of course, it may be that someone will have good reason to think that they will come to regret something that at present is what they want to do, if they are reflective enough to anticipate that their motivations will change—as with Parfit’s famous Russian nobleman (Parfit 1984), or the various forms of time-discounting studied in behavioural economics (Elster 2000; Frederick, Loewenstein and O’Donoghue 2002). But in these cases the question is why exactly the agent should be inclined to give greater weight to their anticipated future preferences than to their present ones.

Answering this difficulty means finding a way in which the future perspective of anticipated regret might be seen as somehow *authoritative* with respect to one’s present decision-making situation. And here we can see the attraction of a conception of regret as remorse, tracking deliberative defects or failure to attend properly to considerations which were available at the time of one’s decision. On this conception, a propensity to regret poor decisions, and to anticipate regret, might be part of a general strategy for cultivating good habits of deliberation (and perhaps also ‘executive’ virtues, such as the ability to stick to a plan without getting sidetracked or succumbing to temptation.)¹² If one anticipates that one may regret a decision as rash, impulsive, or intemperate, the prospect of later regret can serve as a motivator to reflect more carefully on the considerations that bear on the decision in the here and now. So, even for decisions that have no relevantly similar precedent, one’s decision-making can still be informed by regrets at having made poor decisions in the past, such as short-sighted or weak-willed decisions.

In this context we can begin to appreciate more fully the implications of Williams’s contention that the most fundamental regrets we are exposed to in life do not track the contours of any deliberative process. Here is how he puts it:

For many decisions which are part of the agent’s ongoing activity (the ‘normal science’, so to speak, of the moral life) we can see why it is that the presence or absence of regrets is...conditioned by the retrospective view of the deliberative pro-

¹²This connection is a theme in the work of Michael Bratman; e.g. (Bratman 2014).

cess...Oneself and one's viewpoint are more basically identified with the dispositions of rational deliberation, applicable to an ongoing series of decisions, than they are with the particular projects which succeed or fail on those occasions. (*Moral Luck*, p. 132)

The 'viewpoint' of the agent, in these cases, is identified with something inherently general, a set of deliberative dispositions that can be applied both to past and future decisions; thus, a wish to have done otherwise can express itself in terms of a wish, or resolution, to do better in the future. So far we have not departed from the deliberative conception. 'But,' Williams continues,

there are certain other decisions...which are not like this...In these cases, the project in which the interests of which the decision is made is one with which the agent is identified in such a way that if it succeeds, his standpoint of assessment will be from a life which then derives an important part of its significance for him from that very fact; while if he fails, it can, necessarily, have no such significance in his life.

Williams's point here is that human agents do not most fundamentally identify themselves simply with a set of dispositions to rational deliberation—a set of dispositions which in some sense we all share as rational beings, regardless of contingencies of fate or upbringing, and which is the proper locus of evaluation of our actions.¹³ Rather, people identify themselves most fundamentally with the particular plans and projects that they shape their lives around, so that their deepest evaluations of themselves as agents, and their sense of what makes their life as a whole worthwhile, are hostage to the success or failure of those projects.¹⁴

And, as I read Williams here, 'particular' here does not just mean specific or idiosyncratic, but rather indicates that an agent's project is a dated, historical enterprise—a part of the particular life of that particular agent, and so something essentially unrepeatable.

So the kind of risky decisions we are concerned with are not just one-off decisions in the sense that they are of a kind one is *de facto* unlikely to encounter once—like deciding what to order on a once-in-a-lifetime visit to a very exclusive

¹³See, for example, Williams's remarks on the 'featureless self' at (Williams 1992, pp. 158–160).

¹⁴This point is subject to a further distinction Williams draws between the 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' failure of a project, the former being attributable entirely to some external misfortune; and the latter being in some way attributable to the agent, and involving the sense that the project itself was somehow ill-conceived or chimerical. See n. 19 below

restaurant with a decades-long waiting list. It is rather that the peculiar significance and weight of the decision resides in the way it uniquely determines the shape of one's life as a whole. Consequently, the particular kind of pain involved in big-decision regrets essentially involves a consciousness that that particular occasion can never be revisited—that it was a unique and defining moment in one's life, and the time for doing it differently is now forever past.

The kind of retrospection involved in these regrets, then, has a distinctly impractical character. It is not just that one learns something from one's mistakes which one is unlikely to be able to apply in the future. It is that there really is nothing to be learned which could even in principle be applied to a future decision. Whatever insight one might have into one's past decision is of a particularistic nature—it concerns that very decision, which as a matter of necessity will never come again. The wish to have done it differently cannot be translated into a wish for the merely improbable eventuality of a relevantly similar decision coming along again, so one can choose better next time. It is the wish to have back that very decision. (And, of course, this wish is incoherent: in wanting to have back the past and do it all again, one wants to have it with the benefit of hindsight so one can choose better. Yet, if one had the benefit of hindsight, one would not really be reliving the very same past.)

At one level, this elaboration of Williams's claims only sharpens the puzzle about the point of regret. If regrets of this sort really are essentially retrospective, in a way that contrasts with regrets that concern errors of deliberation, what are they good for?

At another level, though, it points a way towards a certain kind of answer: regrets, especially lifelong regrets, sensitise us to the fact that our personal past is over and done with and cannot be relived or improved, no matter how much we resolve to do better in the future. And this is in turn connected with the recognition that I am a particular person with a particular history: that my agency extends beyond the sphere of my deliberations, as a part of the causal history of the world. It is because I fundamentally identify myself as a particular historical individual, whose life is shaped around particular plans and projects, and not with a set of de-

liberative dispositions, that I am exposed to such regrets. Conversely, it is because my regrets are directed at my actions themselves, in all their particularity, rather than the dispositions or decision procedures behind them, that they can embody this recognition.

Heard in one way, the recognition that I am a particular person living a particular life might seem like a fairly trivial accomplishment. The key point is the way in which this recognition engages with a person's sense of their life as worth living, as containing value and meaning—and as potentially failing to. The next section will attempt to unpack this mode of valuing in a little more detail, with reference to the idea, criticised by Williams, that we experience and value our lives in 'narrative' terms. Examining this idea and Williams's critique of it will then help to cast further light on the sense in which this mode of evaluation is distinctively retrospective, in contrast to the standpoint of practical deliberation.

3 LIVING A LIFE

The reflections of the last section pointed to the idea that, in certain fundamental regrets, acts and decisions get their significance in terms of how they contribute to the course of the particular life one is living, rather than in terms of how they reflect ongoing dispositions that might equally be manifested in future actions.

The idea that actions have meaning in relation an agent's life-as-a-whole is sometimes put in terms of the idea that we experience our lives in distinctively 'narrative' terms—as stories of which we are both the protagonist and narrator. Here, for instance, is a characteristically suggestive passage from Charles Taylor—a theorist with whom Williams has important affinities, as well as differences:

I don't have a sense of where/what I am...without some understanding of how I have got there or become so. My sense of myself is as a being who is growing and becoming...as a being who grows and becomes I can only know myself through the history of my maturations and regressions, overcoming and defeats. My self-understanding has temporal depth and incorporates narrative. (Taylor 1989, p. 50)

Taylor's comment about narrative and temporal depth has a certain affinity with Williams's idea that our lives are shaped around particular *projects*: complexes of

desire, value and commitment which structure an agent's actions over time, which give our lives meaning and which, as Williams once put it, 'propel us into the future' (Williams 1981c, p. 13). Yet Taylor's invocation of narrative suggests something more than this: that not only are people's lives in fact organised around particular projects, but that people self-consciously understand their lives as so organised, and derive meaning in the light of that fact. And a question this raises is what form this understanding takes: what does it mean to say that people are reflexively aware, not only of the particular projects they are pursuing, but of how those projects contribute to the overall shape of their lives?

Williams himself raises this question in a late lecture, 'Life as Narrative'. As he puts it: 'a fundamental question arises, of what the relation is supposed to be between the coherence of my life and my way of living it. How does the final story of my life stand to the questions I ask myself and the reflections I make in the course of living it?' (Williams 2009, p. 309)

Williams makes two main sceptical points on this score. The first, which I will largely set aside, applies principally to Alasdair MacIntyre's development of the idea of life as narratively understood, and concerns his over-reliance on literary and fictional narratives as paradigms. As Williams observes, literary narratives introduce specific paradigms of plot, style and genre that it is surely tendentious to regard as capturing anything essential to most people's own self-understanding.

The more interesting point concerns the temporality of narrative understanding: the sense in which a narrative presents a life as a 'completed whole', in a way that contrasts with the dynamical unfolding of a life as an open-ended, developing process. Williams writes: 'The given whole of a fictional character does present us...with a peculiar unity, which consists in its end being there with its beginning; just for this reason, that unity is not available to us.' (p. 312) This should not be understood as an ontological claim—perhaps introducing two separate entities, the completed whole of a life and the process of living it.¹⁵ The point concerns a contrast between two standpoints one can occupy on the particular historical reality of one's life: the perspective of retrospective reflection and sense-making; and the

¹⁵For criticism of the coherence of this idea, see (Bacharach 2021).

embedded, engaged perspective of actually living it.

The point is not just that people do not often go in for much reflection on the overall direction of their lives. Of course most of the time people are too busy trying to make ends meet, care for their loved ones, and so on, to have much thought for the question what kind of life they are living. But such questions are inevitably at least sometimes raised, in moments of crisis perhaps, like the breakdown of a relationship, or the diagnosis of a serious illness, or a choice between two divergent career paths. The point is that, even in such rare moments of reflection, the object of reflection cannot be one's life considered as a completed whole, because, from one's first-personal point of view as the person living it, it is never yet complete.¹⁶ The standards by which one judges what is most significant or worthwhile in one's life may yet depend on things one is yet to do—things which one necessarily regards as at this moment still unsettled.

Part of this is simply that one's sense of who one is and what is important in life is often deeply shaped by extrinsic and unpredictable contingencies—chance meetings, accidents and lucky escapes, unintended consequences of actions, and so on. But even setting such contingencies aside, when it comes to one's own future actions, there is a kind of practical incoherence in treating these as a fixed point in one's deliberations—as something that could be settled prior to and independently of settling the deliberative question, “What should I do?” As Williams puts it, ‘how am I supposed to know what stories I belong to, except by deciding what I am going to do? If it is my story, that is the way in which I decide how to continue.’ (Williams 2009, p. 310) Similarly, the question “What kind of a life is it that am I living?” cannot be answered prior to the practical question “What kind of life shall I live?”—or, more simply, “What shall I do?”¹⁷ So the point is that, even if Taylor

¹⁶Of course this point requires qualification: the elderly and terminally ill may well regard their lives as for all intents and purposes over and done with. But then again, they may not. The distinctive modes of autobiographical thinking associated with the end of life is of course a rich topic in itself, which I do not want to get into here.

¹⁷This point is to some extent parallel the idea that self-attributions of belief are ‘transparent’ to the world our beliefs are about: one settles the question “do I believe *p*”, canonically, by settling the question “is *p* the case?” (Boyle 2019; Moran 2001). Transparency imposes certain constraints upon self-knowledge, the most stark of which is the incoherence (though not inconsistency) of the Moore-paradoxical conjunction, “I believe *p* yet *p* is false.” More generally, the idea of transparency

and others are right that agents have a concern to make sense of their lives as a kind of temporal unity, and to evaluate their actions in terms of their place in that unity, this cannot, or cannot exclusively, be the way in which agents deliberate over their future lives. In deliberation, at least in the primary case, one is simply guided by the goals and attachments that are constitutive of one's projects, rather than by any reflexive sense of how those projects contribute to the story of one's life.

Despite Williams's scepticism, we can extract something basically correct from the idea that we experience our life in narrative terms, and which connects with concerns present in 'Moral Luck' and elsewhere. As complex and conflicted agents, navigating a world of potentially conflicting values and demands, we have a need to find meaning and coherence and in our lives. Yet for most of us—especially in our socially fragmented and pluralistic modern society—there is no overarching highest goal that can consistently and unproblematically serve as the leading light of one's life. (Or, if there is, this might only emerge in retrospect.) The way we seek meaning in life is not by striving after a highest good, or living out a preexisting life-plan, but by tracing connections, in a particularistic manner, between disparate moments in life and trying to discern in them a coherent progression or trajectory. This stance, I have suggested, is not reducible to an interest in one's past decisions insofar as they exhibit procedural virtues or vices, with a view perhaps to exercising them better in future decisions. It is an interest in one's life as it has actually played out, as a unique constellation of particular, historical occurrences which, in their particularity, cannot now be revisited or improved upon.

This brings us back to 'Moral Luck', and in particular our vulnerability to big decision regrets. Confronted with such decisions, part of what is at issue is precisely what kind of life one is to live. Whether a decision of this kind is later regretted or not will depend on whether one can view it as having contributed to, or else as hav-

introduces a contrast between knowing one's beliefs through the activity reasoning and making up one's mind about extra-mental matters of fact, and the activity of reflecting on how one's beliefs fit into the causal unity of one's psychological life, hanging together with such things as possible non-rational motivations for belief, general character dispositions, social identities, and so on. These activities in some sense tend to oppose one another or cancel one another out, so that one cannot coherently adopt the same stance at the same time with respect to the same specific belief. I am suggesting something like the same contrast obtains between practical deliberation and autobiographical reflection.

ing stymied, one's pursuit of a meaningful life. Yet, in confronting such decisions, one is necessarily still in the process of working out what kind of life it is one is living, and so what it would be for an action or choice to contribute meaningfully to that life.

Sometimes, of course, an agent may find themselves in a decision situation where, in a rare moment of clarity, the right path reveals itself—the most stark illustrations being those when an agent faces a point of no return, and senses that, however difficult, they *must* take a certain path.¹⁸ In these cases it may be that the agent really is insulated from future regrets if and when things do not go well. Typically, though, things are not so simple. In particular, it is highly unusual that the course of one's life, and the factors that determine one's ability to find meaning in it, are set by one fateful decision, rather than a series of interconnected decisions over time. The kinds of projects which people pursue, and which give their lives meaning, necessarily take time, and so require fresh acts of renewed commitment, and the negotiation of new conflicts and obstacles, as they develop. Whether a project seems significant and worthwhile enough to ground the agent's sense of their life as meaningful therefore depends not just on their commitment to it at any one time, but on the pattern of choices they make, including sacrifices and trade-offs with other projects and attachments. For this reason, the process of shaping one's life around a particular project is an inherently risky endeavour: we may always come to find our projects to be ridiculous or empty, or that we cannot go through with them, or that they leave us cold.¹⁹

This conclusion might be thought to point towards a kind of fatalism—that, because there is no ideal way to make the decisions that determine the shape of our lives, there is an important sense in which we ultimately lack agency or control over our lives, and cannot do anything but blindly let things play out as they will. Yet this is a conception of what it is to act freely that Williams fundamentally opposes.²⁰ The sense in which we are free to shape our lives is not the philosophers'

¹⁸See (Williams 1981d); and ch. 5 of (Williams 1992).

¹⁹The difference between case in which one finds a project to be empty or unappealing, and the case where it simply fails due to unforeseen contingencies, is related to Williams's distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic failure, mentioned in n. 14 above.

²⁰E.g. (Williams 1995a); see also (Russell 2022) for a helpful discussion of Williams's views on

and moralists' fantasy of ultimate rational control, but is rather the freedom to create novel forms of value through becoming a particular individual, who finds value in their life through engaging in the particular projects they are committed to. In this respect, many human decisions—even deeply significant and carefully deliberated ones—have a kind of spontaneous, even improvisatory, character: they come from within us, to be sure, but they are part of an ongoing process of open-ended self-realisation, rather than following from a prior and fixed conception of who I am and where I am going.²¹

4 LIFE WITHOUT REGRETS?

Discussions after Williams of agent-regret have tended to focus narrowly on the question whether it is reasonable or appropriate for agents, like the lorry driver, to feel (agent-)regret for actions they are not morally blameworthy or culpable for. I have suggested that asking this question prematurely tends to obscure the wider point Williams is making about the role and significance of regret in our moral psychology, and the way in which our sense of what is valuable or meaningful in life is fundamentally exposed to contingency. Nevertheless, commanding a clearer view of Williams's point about regret, it is possible to ask: is a disposition to regret in this way good for us or desirable; or would we, as Williams famously said of the morality system, be 'better off without it'? This is the stance taken, for instance, by Rüdiger Bittner, who exhorts: 'That we did what is bad cannot be undone. The promise of liberation through regret is a false promise. We should free ourselves, not of the burden of the deed, but of the idea that the deed is a burden.' (Bittner 1992, p. 268)

This is a question about the good life: it is not the same as asking about the justifiability of regret in any individual case (such as the lorry driver); nor is it reducible

freedom.

²¹This discussion has been focused on individually made decisions and later evaluations; but this of course abstracts away from the respects in which our freedom to shape our lives is exercised together, in dialogue with one another; and the role of other-directed moral emotions, such as blame, in expressing that freedom. For this aspect of Williams's conception of freedom, see (Fricker 2022).

to questions about the evolutionary function of regret. The question is, given the kinds of lives most of us lead, in which we do take big decisions and undertake projects where we cannot foresee how they will ultimately turn out, what is the point of adopting a later evaluative stance in which the possibility of (agent-)regret is a live one? Would it not be better just to accept our past decisions, and limit ourselves to disappointment when circumstances beyond our control fail to turn out well? Given the above, this is closely related to the question: what is the point in taking a retrospective evaluative stance on one's life in narrative terms? Would it perhaps be better to live 'episodically'—as Galen Strawson (Strawson 2004) advocates—and take the rough with the smooth?

Insofar as this is a question about the good life, it might seem overweeningly ambitious to try to answer it. Perhaps some people are not disposed to feel agent-regret, or to value their life in narrative terms—who is Williams, or anyone else, to tell them how live?

The endpoint of the preceding discussion suggests a further kind of answer. (Agent-)regret has a distinctive *revelatory*, as opposed to practical, function: regret sensitises us to the fact that each one of us is a particular person with a particular past, existing at a particular point in history. Regret brings us face to face with the reality of our past lives: in regretting my actions, I thereby recognise elements in the causal nexus of human history that are distinctively myself, and which make up who I am, not in virtue of exemplifying my moral character or rational nature, but simply by being an actual part of the particular life I have lived. Part of the value of regret, then, consists in its contribution to a moral psychology that is realistic in the second sense identified at the beginning of this contribution: a moral psychology that allows us to truthfully recognise and express our nature as finite, historically conditioned individuals.

Someone might respond that this cognitive achievement of self-recognition is, at least in principle, separable from the disposition to regret or any other emotion. Could one not recognise past actions as one's own, yet without taking any particular affective or evaluative stance on them?

I think that this response underestimates the obscurity and difficulty of the re-

cognition, internal to agent-regret: *that was me*.²² How could we explicate the content of this identity? There are of course various reductionist accounts of personal identity over time available: that was the action of someone bodily continuous with the me-now; or the action of someone continuously psychologically connected with me-now. But about any of these, it is possible to ask the Moorean ‘open question’: “Yes, but was it *me*?”²³ And the sense of this question is fixed in part by the distinctive pattern of concern associated with the use of the first person; among other things, a concern for the success or failure of particular practical projects understood as one’s own.

Perhaps, though, this response assumes an overly rigid view of what is involved in identifying oneself as a particular historical individual. Perhaps it is necessary to have *some* affective dispositions regarding one’s past agency, but need these take the specific form of agent-regret? Would it not alternatively be possible to affirm, in a Nietzschean manner, all of one’s past apparent missteps and failures?

This possibility invites a further distinction between ways in which someone might lack a disposition to regret. On the one hand, someone might simply fail to recognise their own hand in the events of the past. Such a person would, I suggest, really be missing out on something of their historically conditioned nature. On the other hand, someone might begin with a disposition to regret, but *overcome* it, coming to see their failures and faults with clear eyes, accepting that what is done is done, yet without feeling in any way pained. As Bittner suggests: ‘it is with mourning and regret left behind that we may come to see what we did in the sharpest light. We should not suffer from what we did, we should face it.’ (Bittner 1992, p. 273) This possibility is quite distinct from the idea, attacked by Williams, that morality holds the key to a life free from regrets, and as far as I am aware he did not seriously consider it. But acknowledging this possibility is consistent with what I take to be the most important lessons of *Moral Luck*, and of Williams’s ethical thought more generally: that a concern for one’s past agency is an essential part of a human ethical outlook, and a realistic moral psychology needs to acknowledge

²²Compare T. Nagel’s puzzlement at the question: ‘What kind of fact is it—if it is a fact—that I am Thomas Nagel? How *can* I be a particular person?’ Nagel 1986, p. 54.

²³This is of course a theme in Williams’s earlier work on the self, e.g. (Williams 1973).

the ways in which this concern leaves us fundamentally vulnerable to contingency and luck.

REFERENCES

- Arntzenius, Frank (2008). 'No Regrets, Or: Edith Piaf Revamps Decision Theory'. In: *Erkenntnis* 68.2, pp. 277–297.
- Bacharach, Julian (2021). 'Are Events Things of the Past?' In: *Mind* 130.518, pp. 381–412.
- Baron, Marcia (1988). 'Remorse and Agent-Regret'. In: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13.1, pp. 259–281.
- Bittner, Rudiger (1992). 'Is It Reasonable to Regret Things One Did?' In: *Journal of Philosophy* 89.5, p. 262.
- Boyle, Matthew (2019). 'Transparency and Reflection'. In: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49.7, pp. 1012–1039.
- Bratman, Michael E. (2014). 'Temptation and the Agent's Standpoint'. In: *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 57.3, pp. 293–310.
- De Brigard, Felipe (2014). 'Is Memory for Remembering? Recollection as a Form of Episodic Hypothetical Thinking'. In: *Synthese* 191.2, pp. 1–31.
- Elster, Jon (2000). *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints*. Cambridge University Press.
- Frederick, Shane, George Loewenstein and Ted O'Donoghue (2002). 'Time Discounting and Time Preference: A Critical Review'. In: *Journal of Economic Literature* 40.2, pp. 351–401.
- Fricker, Miranda (2022). 'Bernard Williams as a Philosopher of Ethical Freedom'. In: *Morality and Agency: Themes From Bernard Williams*. Ed. by Andras Szigeti and Matthew Talbert. Oxford University Press, Usa.
- Heuer, Ulrike and Gerald R. Lang (2012). *Luck, Value, and Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*. Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press USA.
- Hoerl, Christoph and Teresa McCormack (2016). 'Making Decisions About the Future: Regret and the Cognitive Function of Episodic Memory'. In: *Seeing*

- the future: Theoretical perspectives on future-oriented mental time travel*. Ed. by Kourken Michaelian, Stanley Klein and Karl Szpunar. Oxford University Press, pp. 241–266.
- Joyce, James M. (1999). *The Foundations of Causal Decision Theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel (2004). *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science [with selections from the Critique of Pure Reason]*. Ed. by Gary Hatfield. Cambridge University Press.
- Moran, Richard A. (2001). *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge*. Princeton University Press.
- Nagel, Thomas (1986). *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, Derek (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
- Queloz, Matthieu (2022). ‘A Shelter from Luck: The Morality System Reconstructed’. In: *Morality and Agency: Themes From Bernard Williams*. Ed. by Andras Szigeti and Matthew Talbert. Oxford University Press, Usa.
- Rodway, Paul and Astrid Schepman (2020). ‘A leftward bias for the arrangement of consumer items that differ in attractiveness’. In: *Laterality (Hove)* 25.5, pp. 599–619.
- Russell, Paul (2022). ‘Free Will and the Tragic Predicament: Making Sense of Williams’. In: *Morality and Agency: Themes From Bernard Williams*. Ed. by Andras Szigeti and Matthew Talbert. Oxford University Press, Usa.
- Strawson, Galen (2004). ‘Against Narrativity’. In: *Ratio* 17.4, pp. 428–452.
- Suddendorf, Thomas and Michael C. Corballis (2007). ‘The evolution of foresight: What is mental time travel, and is it unique to humans?’ In: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30.03.
- Szigeti, Andras and Matthew Talbert, eds. (2022). *Morality and Agency: Themes From Bernard Williams*. Oxford University Press, Usa.
- Taylor, Charles (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Wallace, R. Jay (2012). ‘Justification, Regret, and Moral Complaint: Looking Forward and Looking Backward on (and in) Human Life’. In: *Luck, Value, and*

- Commitment: Themes From the Ethics of Bernard Williams*. Ed. by Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang. Oxford University Press, Usa.
- Wallace, R. Jay (2013). *The View From Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret*. Oup Usa.
- Williams, Bernard (1973). 'The Self and the Future'. In: *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1981a). 'Moral Luck'. In: *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. orig. 1976. Cambridge University Press. Chap. 2.
- (1981b). *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1981c). 'Persons, Character and Morality'. In: *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1981d). 'Practical Necessity'. In: *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Harvard University Press.
- (1992). *Shame and Necessity*. University of California Press.
- (1995a). 'How Free Does the Will Need to Be?'. In: *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1995b). 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame'. In: *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1995c). 'Making Sense of Humanity'. In: *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1995d). *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1995e). 'Moral Luck: A Postscript'. In: *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*. Cambridge University Press.
- (1995f). 'Nietzsche's Minimalist Moral Psychology'. In: *Making Sense of Humanity: And Other Philosophical Papers 1982–1993*. Cambridge University Press.
- (2009). 'Life as Narrative'. In: *European Journal of Philosophy* 17.2, pp. 305–314.

- Zeelenberg, Marcel (1999). 'The Use of Crying Over Spilled Milk: A Note on the Rationality and Functionality of Regret'. In: *Philosophical Psychology* 12.3, pp. 325–340.
- Zeelenberg, Marcel and Rik Pieters (2007). 'A Theory of Regret Regulation 1.0'. In: *Journal of consumer psychology* 17.1, pp. 3–18.