

# Retrospection

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THE THIRD VOLUME OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY ends with a passage some have found mystifying:

I can still see the hedge of hazel trees flurried by the wind and the promises with which I fed my beating heart while I stood gazing at the gold mine at my feet: a whole life to live. The promises have all been kept. And yet, turning an incredulous gaze toward that young and credulous girl, I realize with stupor how much I have been swindled. (Beauvoir 1965: 658)<sup>1</sup>

This is the final sentence of the book.

The passage raises a question that suggests, almost immediately, too many answers: How could one be swindled by the keeping of promises? Because the promises were foolish ones, the projects they anticipated not worthwhile; because they were exhaustible; because they have been exhausted. In the *Paris Review*, Beauvoir was asked to clarify her intent.

People [...] have tried to interpret [the final sentence] to mean that my life has been a failure, either because I recognize the fact that I was mistaken on a political level or because I recognize that after all a woman should have had children, etc. Anyone who reads my book carefully can see that I say the very opposite, that I don't envy anyone, that I'm perfectly satisfied with what my life has been, that I've kept all my promises and that consequently if I had my life to live over again I wouldn't live it any differently. (Gobeil 1965: 36)

Not failure, then. Still, looking back inspires a feeling of loss. I want to make sense of that. What, if anything, justifies retrospective discontent with a life well-lived?

1. Originally published as *La Force des Choses* in 1963. I have altered the final sentence to avoid the offensive 'gypped' for the French 'flouée'. The passage is quoted in Neiman 2014: 1, where I first encountered it.

Part of the interest of this question lies in its antithesis. As well as disappointment in a good and happy life, there is room for satisfaction and the absence of regret in a life that is less fulfilled, less happy, than it could have been. In recent work, philosophers have urged that attachment to the particulars of one's actual life can be a counterweight to frustration, a rational check on the otherwise unlimited desire for the best.<sup>2</sup> I find this puzzling.

My aim is to do justice to both questions, to the force of retrospective sadness when life is no worse than it could have been, and to the prospect of rational acceptance when it is. Resolving these puzzles of midlife retrospection shows something general, and quite deep, about the rational response to reasons, when we know what they are, and when we don't.

## I

Some more autobiography, this time less evocative. I have wanted, at various points in my life, to be a poet, a physician, a philosopher. I have had the good fortune to make a living in philosophy, and for that I am profoundly grateful. But...

Alive in my reflection are the lives I have not led. When I think about them, when I imagine them vividly, I can be gripped by something like regret: a sense of loss. I do not believe I would have lived a better life in poetry or medicine; most likely, worse. And yet I feel dissatisfied with how things are. I look back with envy at my younger self, options open, choices not yet made. He could be anything. But I am committed: course set, path fixed, doors closed.

Part of this phenomenon has a standard explanation.<sup>3</sup> It turns on the plurality of reasons or values. A simple example: Suppose you have to choose between going to the theatre tonight or going to a concert. The play looks wonderful, the musician is brilliant; each is here for one night only. You may be frustrated that you cannot do both. But

2. See, in particular, Adams 1979; McMahan 2005: 159–61; Harman 2009, 2015; Wallace 2013.

3. For an early discussion, see Williams 1963: 173–4.

even if you abstract from that, comparing realistic options, concert or theatre, and deciding on the first, it makes sense to feel ambivalence or unsatisfied desire, to experience something like regret that you did not choose the play. Other cases are more painful: suppose you must choose between saving one stranger and saving three. You decide to save three and you do not think you have made a mistake. Still, it is rational to feel regret, or sadness, that you did not save the one. There is no compensation for her death.

Not all decisions are like this. If I had to choose between fifty dollars and a hundred, I would choose the hundred, and while I might wish that I could have more, it would make no sense to feel dismay or disappointment at my decision. Likewise, if I could experience a longer or a shorter pleasure, and the pleasures were otherwise much the same, I would choose more over less, and I would not feel regret. In cases like these, my loss is fully compensated by a greater gain.

As Thomas Hurka notes, we do not need pluralism to make sense of frustrated desire in choosing the greater good, if that means appeal to values or reasons of substantially different kinds (Hurka 1996: 562–4). When I save three instead of one, the reasons on each side are similar; it is just that more of them point one way. But as he also notes, the issue is partly terminological (Hurka 1996: 564–5). As I use the word, it is sufficient for pluralism that weaker reasons or lesser values have residual force as grounds for partial regret.<sup>4</sup>

4. I disagree with Hurka on one point. He argues, plausibly, that regret should be proportioned to modal proximity. It is irrational to feel profound dismay that I am not an Olympic athlete; it would be more rational to feel that way if my Olympic dream were realistic. According to Hurka, "when a good does not obtain, the degree of love appropriate to it depends on the degree to which its obtaining is a close possibility" (Hurka 1996: 559–60). But Hurka also claims that proximity fades with time (Hurka 1996: 560). That seems wrong. There is no statute of limitations on regret, though the intensity with which it is felt may rationally diminish. When I regret what happened at *t*, the modal proximity that matters is what was possible at *t*, not what is possible now. When I think of mistakes I have made, my desire to have done otherwise is not weakened by temporal distance alone. It is crucial here not to be misled by the force of attachment discussed in section II, a force that is quite different from, though it may correlate with, the passage of time.

If this applies to desires that turn on defeated reasons, it applies, too, when the reasons for one choice are no stronger than the reasons for another. And so it applies to me. Philosopher, poet, physician: these lives realize different values; the reasons to want them are not the same. While the case for being a philosopher may not outweigh the reasons to prefer those other lives, it is good enough. I do not regret my choice if that means thinking I made a mistake, at least compared to these alternatives. (They may all have been mistakes, compared to a life more selflessly given to helping others.) But I feel unsatisfied desire for the lives I could have led, for the loss of valuable activities, replaced but not repaired by philosophy. This is what the pluralist predicts.

So far, so familiar. But something has yet to be explained. It is not just that I feel a sense of loss about the lives I have not led, but that the sense is retrospective. And it is not merely retrospective because its object is an event, or series of events, that took place in the past, but because it involves a retrospective attitude to myself. I look back with envy at my life at seventeen, at the unmissed opportunities, the open roads. The question is *why*. And the answer is not pluralism, at least not by itself. For it was just as true back then that I could not have everything, that some of my deepest desires would go unfulfilled. My prospects were no better. Nor was I ignorant of this, naively projecting some synthesis of poetry, medicine, and philosophy. I knew I would have to choose. But I remember with nostalgia the time before I did.

An obvious, perhaps irresistible, thought is that there is a temporal dimension to this response. As Derek Parfit showed, when their objects are patterns of experience, our preferences are “biased towards the future” (Parfit 1984: 165–7). In Parfit’s example, I wake up with amnesia and I am told that I am one of two patients. Patient A had a long and painful operation yesterday; patient B will have a shorter painful operation today. Although I will have had more pain overall, I hope that I am patient A. The converse holds for pleasant experiences. I would prefer to have a briefer pleasant experience today than to have had a longer pleasant experience in the past. No wonder, then, that if

my life goes relatively well, I prefer to have more of it to come. And so I envy my younger self.

There is a more nebulous temporality in Beauvoir’s account of how she was swindled.

When one has an existentialist view of the world, like mine, the paradox of human life is precisely that one tries to *be* and, in the long run, merely exists. It’s because of this discrepancy that when you’ve laid your stake on being — and, in a way you always do when you make plans, even if you actually know that you can’t succeed in being — when you turn around and look back on your life, you see that you’ve simply existed. In other words, life isn’t behind you like a solid thing, like the life of a god (as it is conceived, that is, as something impossible). Your life is simply a human life. (Gobeil 1965: 37)

There are many ways to read this passage. Does it reflect a sense of the unreality of the past? Or a longing for one’s life, and the things one does in living it, to have an enduring presence that the completion of any project, the final satisfaction of any desire, frustrates? I have explored the second idea elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> And there may be more threads to unravel. Still, whatever is true of Beauvoir, I do not think my own nostalgia is exhausted by temporal concerns. There is more to it.

A symptom of this is that nothing so far connects the temporal aspect of nostalgia with value pluralism. Imagine that I make an irrevocable decision, at eighteen, to pursue philosophy. Nothing explains why it is the time before the decision I envy, not the time right after it. Either way, my life lies in the future, my projects incomplete. And either way, there is the fact that I will miss out on some of what I most desire. Why does the decision itself bring regret, a sense of loss not about the past but about the future?

5. In “The Midlife Crisis” (Setiya 2014b).

In order to make sense of this, we must take up a neglected fact about the way in which reasons work. The fact is that there is a great difference between knowing the existence of reasons for a certain attitude and knowing what the reasons are. It is one thing to be told, and to believe, that there is reason to want what is behind the curtain, another to know what is there and to see what is good about it. My desire in the second case is more intense. We can put the point in modest but general terms:

SPECIFICITY: It can be rational to respond more strongly to a fact that is a reason with a certain weight than to the fact that there is a reason with that weight.

When the fact that  $p$  is a reason for you to  $\phi$  it can be rational to respond more strongly to knowledge that  $p$ , knowledge that specifies the reason, than to knowledge that there is a reason of this kind. In the first case, you are in a position to reason from the fact that  $p$ , to be moved by the reason itself; in the second case, your relation to the reason is mediated or indirect. According to Specificity, this can make a rational difference: your motivational or affective response may be stronger in the first case than the second.

Specificity explains how the time before I choose the philosophical life differs from the time when the choice is made. At both times, I know that there will be reasons to regret my choice, to desire another life, and that these reasons are no weaker than my reasons to choose philosophy. Some of my desires will not be met. Before I choose, this knowledge is abstract and general. Once I make the irrevocable choice, Specificity kicks in: I know what the reasons are. And now I feel regret, for the verse I will not write, the lives I will not save. That is one reason why it is so hard to decide, to let go of valued possibilities: one anticipates this regret, even if one is sure that one will make the right decision. And it explains the sense of nostalgia. Part of what I envy in my younger self in the time before the decision was made is that he did not know what he would be missing.

Some clarifications may be useful here. The first is that, while I envy my younger self in one respect, it does not follow that I prefer his circumstance, all things considered. Being seventeen was no picnic, in part because it involved so much uncertainty about the future. Still, there is something enviable about it. At the same time, it is rational for my younger self to look forward to making the decision, since then he will know — though not for certain, and not in much detail — what the future holds.

The second clarification is especially urgent in light of what is to come. When I say that, before I made the decision, I did not know what I would be missing, I don't mean that, in making it, I learned more about life as a philosopher, as opposed to the alternatives I gave up. What I learned is something new about my life: that I would not be a poet or physician. It is knowledge of these facts that justifies regret.

Finally, although I believe that nostalgia for lost alternatives is explained by Specificity, I don't think it accounts for every form of retrospective suffering. I am less troubled by the death of a friend in prospect than after the fact, not because it is suddenly more specific, but because it has come to pass. The shift here is temporal, though it is not an instance of future bias in Parfit's sense. It turns on attachment to my friend and the consequent desire that he persist. Nothing like this holds for the loss of options, which are not objects of attachment whose extinction we should mourn. (Section II will dwell on the distinctive worth of people, the value of their existence, in contrast with the value of other things.)

That nostalgia has an epistemic origin is confirmed when we divorce the condition of ignorance from its temporal baggage. Suppose, for instance, that I am struck by retrograde amnesia. I know that I am at midlife, that I am a philosopher, poet, or physician, but I do not remember which. I feel a certain excitement, an urgent curiosity. I know, in the abstract, that I am living only one of these lives, but I cannot feel regret, or loss, of the sort I actually feel. While I would be happy to learn that I am a philosopher, I would be disappointed, too. Oddly enough, there is a way in which I envy my amnesiac self that

coincides with nostalgia for the time of opportunity in my earlier life. I envy not his future but his relative freedom from regret, a freedom that is explained by Specificity.

The same point holds in less contrived examples. Suppose I learn that I will get tickets to the concert or the theatre. It has already been decided which, but I have not been told. As in retrograde amnesia, I am not in a position to feel disappointment, yet, about missing the musician or the play. That changes when the tickets are revealed. Now I feel a sense of loss, and a corresponding envy of the time before I knew.

Specificity is at work in a phenomenon that has drawn recent attention in value theory. The phenomenon is that different values, or reasons, are often only imprecisely comparable. This might apply to the case I have just described, in which you get tickets to the concert or the theatre. The reasons to want one set of tickets may be no stronger than the reasons for the other, so that it is rational to be indifferent between the outcomes. But the reasons are not equal in strength. If they were, it would be irrational to prefer one outcome to the other: to prefer the concert to the play, or the play to the concert. Yet this is rational, too; indifference is not the only option.<sup>6</sup>

In Ruth Chang's terminology, the relation between your reasons to want tickets to the concert and your reasons to want tickets to the theatre is one of normative parity: not equally strong, but also not outweighed (Chang 1997). Parity is pervasive when reasons or values are diverse. And parity relies on Specificity: the idea that one's response to a fact that is a reason with a certain weight may rationally outstrip one's response to the fact that there is a reason with that weight. If all you knew was that reasons to want two outcomes, A and B, were in a relation of normative parity, it would be irrational to prefer A to B or B to A; indifference would be the only option. That changes when we specify the outcomes, for instance as tickets to the concert or the theatre. It changes through Specificity.

6. This way of thinking about imprecision is explored in Setiya 2007: 77–9 and Setiya 2014a: §3.

Suppose that we admit all this. While disappointment in a life well-lived derives from the plurality of reasons or values, there is more to the experience of nostalgia. It is not a temporal but an epistemic phenomenon; and it is explained by Specificity. The truth of Specificity is confirmed by reflection on cases of normative parity.

Two questions remain. The first concerns the scope of Specificity. How far can the rational response to reasons diverge from the rational response to facts about their existence and relative weight? The other is about the opposite of loss. I have been asking why you should feel regret about making the right decision. But the reverse is possible, too: you can fail to regret your mistakes. You may affirm your actual life, and the events that made it possible, even when you think you would have lived a better life if things had gone otherwise. Can this be right? I will argue that these issues are connected: the scope of Specificity and the limits of regret. If retrospective affirmation is rational, it is explained by a radical application of Specificity. I will develop this argument gradually, asking how, and how far, we can hope to extend a recognized antidote to regret.

## II

Begin with a much-discussed case.<sup>7</sup> You have a condition that will affect any child you conceive in the next two months. The effect of the condition is that the child will be born with a serious, incurable disorder, which affects his quality of life. It might be a heart abnormality, recurrent migraines, chronic joint pain. There is no urgent reason to conceive a child now, and your decision will not affect the number of children you eventually have. Like most, I think you should wait to have a child.<sup>8</sup> But suppose you do not wait, and instead conceive

7. Inspired by Parfit 1976.

8. Philosophers have been perplexed about why. After all, the child you have if you refuse to wait would not have been better off if you had waited: he simply would not exist. If you wait to conceive, you will have a different child instead. It may seem to follow that the child you have if you do not wait cannot be harmed by your decision. And then it is unclear what the objection to conceiving him could be. This is the "non-identity problem", which has led to

and give birth to N, who has the expected condition. His life goes well, on the whole, though marred by medical intervention, or predictable suffering, from time to time. Should you now regret your decision? It is tempting to say no. While the decision was a mistake, one you should not have made, it is now rational to be glad that you decided not to wait. You love N, who is happy to be alive, and he would not have existed if you had waited to have a child.

We can describe the shift here in terms of preference. Before you conceive N, you should prefer to wait. When N is born, you should prefer that you did not.<sup>9</sup> It is at least rational, now, to prefer the worlds in which you do not wait to the worlds in which you do. The existence of your child thus insulates you from regret – if not entirely, then to some degree. That N exists is a reason to be glad that you did not wait, even though it remains true, throughout, that you should have waited, and that you should have preferred to wait, back when you could.

There is a lot to say about this case, though it is not my principal topic. My account of it is close to that of Elizabeth Harman (2009) and R. Jay Wallace (2013: 80–96). But I want to mark two differences. First, unlike them, I doubt that the reason to prefer that N exists, now that he does, is specific to his mother, or that it rests on parental attachment. As I have argued elsewhere, there is impersonal reason to affirm the existence of those who now exist (Setiya 2014c). Second, Wallace holds that when we are attached to another person, or to our own existence, it becomes an object of “unconditional affirmation”:

One does not merely affirm these objects, given that the necessary causal conditions for them obtained; rather, one is glad on balance that those objects are in fact part of the history of the world, taking into account the totality of things that they involved. In a case with this

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serious disputes about the nature of harm. (See, along with Parfit, Woodward 1986, Shiffrin 1999, and McMahan 2005: 144–7.) I will set this problem aside. Whatever the explanation, I assume that you should prefer to wait.

9. I take no stand on when, exactly, the change occurs between conception and birth, or on related issues in the ethics of abortion.

structure, one’s affirmative attitude spreads backward from its immediate object, as it were, encompassing as well the historical conditions that were necessary for the existence of the thing that one affirms. (Wallace 2013: 75)

I doubt that I affirm my own existence or the existence of those I love in this unconditional way. As I understand it, the test for unconditional affirmation is to consider in turn each causal antecedent of N’s existence, and to ask: What do I now prefer? That it took place, leading to N’s existence? Or not? Would I rewind time and change the past if I could? When I affirm N’s existence unconditionally, I must always answer, “No, I prefer to leave things as they are.” Wallace draws what seem to be alarming consequences.<sup>10</sup> If the Holocaust is in the causal history of my son’s birth, in that he would not have been conceived if it had not occurred, unconditional affirmation of my son’s existence commits me to affirming the Holocaust: preferring that it happened, so that my son would be born, than that it should not have happened. At best, I can be conflicted to the point of incoherence, preferring that the Holocaust have happened while also wishing that it had not.

Does that ring true? It depends on what would have happened otherwise. If there would have been a great reduction in human suffering and injustice, I do not think I can prefer that the Holocaust have taken place, so that I and my son exist. With regret but without incoherence, I prefer that it had not. If the alternative is some other atrocity, this may change. Either way, these questions of counterfactual history seem quite distant from any ordinary sense in which I am attached to my son and thus affirm his life. I suspect that, as Wallace defines these terms, my affirmation of my own existence, and that of everyone I love, is thoroughly conditional.<sup>11</sup> Nor do we need the idea of unconditional affirmation in order to make sense of the original

10. See Wallace 2013: Ch. 6.

11. Wallace suggests that unconditional affirmation is typical of attachment and that abandoning it would not be easy (Wallace 2013: 77, 255); but he does not argue for these claims.

case, the one in which you decide not to wait and so conceive and give birth to N. All we need is that your son's existence is a reason to prefer that you did not wait. Considering that particular antecedent of his coming to be, you now prefer that it took place. Though your decision was a mistake, you would not rewind time and change it if you could.

My interest is less in this particular case than in the phenomenon it illustrates. It can be rational not to regret a bad decision, a decision you should not have made, even when its consequences are just what you would expect. More generally, it can be rational not to wish that some past event had not occurred, even though you should have preferred this at the time, and this fact about your earlier preference does not turn on misconceptions about the future. This can happen when the decision or event leads to the existence of a particular person who would not have existed otherwise. How far does this phenomenon extend? Can attachments of other kinds play a similar role in limiting regret, making it rational not to prefer what you concede, at the time, there was most reason to prefer?

The question is not academic. My thinking about it has been shaped by Andrew Miller's work on Virginia Woolf. In a lyrical essay, Miller draws out a similar theme in Woolf's reflections on her own life as a novelist (Miller 2012). Woolf's diaries are intermittently preoccupied with her decision to remain childless and with the divergent life of her sister, Vanessa Bell. From an entry dated January 2, 1923:

We came back from Rodmell yesterday, & I am in one of my moods, as the nurses used to call it, today. And what is it & why? A desire for children, I suppose; for Nessa's life; for the sense of flowers breaking all around me involuntarily. [...] Years & years ago, after the Lytton affair, I said to myself, walking up the hill at Beireuth, never pretend that the things you haven't got are not worth having; good advice I think. At least it often comes back to me. Never pretend that children, for instance, can be replaced by other things. (Woolf 1978: 221)

In Woolf's case: by novels. Six years later, *Orlando* is praised as a masterpiece in the *Manchester Guardian*, and Woolf reflects again.

Orlando is recognized for the masterpiece that it is. The Times does not mention Nessa's pictures. Yet, she said last night, I have spent a long time over one of them. Then I think to myself, So I have something, instead of children, & fall comparing our lives. I note my own withdrawal from those desires; my absorption in what I call, inaccurately, ideas: this vision. (Woolf 1980: 217)

An actual life is not a thought experiment. A sister is not a counterfactual self.<sup>12</sup> But Woolf is raising the question I want to ask: whether and how attachment to things other than people, to activities or objects, like *Orlando*, masterpiece that it is, can change what it is rational to want, so that one is sheltered from regret. Woolf's life does not present a perfect case for answering this question, in part because it is not clear that she made a mistake in not having children, or that she thinks she did, in part because her achievements as a novelist are too great. It will take work to separate the various factors that might explain and justify a shift in retrospective preference, so as to bring my question into view. I will do so by considering other cases, altering them step by step to isolate the contrast between attachment to persons, activities, and things.

We can start with a variation on the case of waiting to conceive a child discussed by Elizabeth Harman. She imagines parents of a child born deaf considering cochlear implants. She stipulates that the child would benefit, overall, from receiving the implants: his life will be worse without them. The parents should prefer the operation, but they decide against it. Years later, looking back on this mistake, Harman argues that it may be rational for the parents not to feel regret, even though, "as things actually are, they are impersonally worse, worse for

12. Compare Miller (2012: 169): "To desire someone else's life, to be someone else...." These are not the same.

the parents, and worse for their child than things would have been if their child had been cured" (Harman 2009: 186).

The deaf child's parents could grant that things would have been better if their child had not been deaf. But things would have been *very different*. They feel that they would have then had a *different child* — not numerically a different child, but a child with a completely different personality, character, and sense of self from the child they actually have. In loving their child, they love who he has become. They are glad he has become who he is, they value him as he is, and they cannot prefer that he had come to be so different — indeed, they prefer things as they are. Surely these preferences are utterly reasonable. (Harman 2009: 185)

These preferences may be reasonable, but they seem very different, and much more puzzling, than your preference not to have waited, now that N exists. In the earlier case, you are attached to, and care about, N, who would be no better off if you had waited. He would not then exist. In Harman's case, it is assumed that the child would both exist and be better off with cochlear implants. Does it really "make sense to prefer one's twenty-year-old deaf child *as she is* because one loves her *as she is*", weighing your attachment to her distinctive character more strongly than her own well-being (Harman 2009: 187)? Shouldn't parental love be more selfless than that?

A complication here is that the parents' preference is, in part, vicarious. It is consequently vital to their retrospective attitude, and its justification, how their son feels about his own life. Harman's claim is much more plausible if the son himself prefers being deaf and does not wish the operation had been performed. If he resents his parents' decision, it is hard to see how their attachment to him as he is could absolve them from regret. Before asking about the parents, we should ask what it is rational for their son to prefer.

Consider, then, the life of a deaf person, as it appears from her own perspective. In a path-breaking article, Robert Adams took up the remarkable case of Helen Keller, arguing that she should not regret her childhood illness.<sup>13</sup>

Would it have been reasonable for Helen Keller, as an adult, to wish, for her own sake, that she had never been blind or deaf? I think not. Let us suppose that she would have had an even better and happier life if her sight and hearing had been spared (though that is not obviously true). But whatever its excellences, that life would not have had one day in it that would have been very like any day of her actual life after the age of 19 months. Her actual life — in its emotional as well as its sensory qualities, in its skills and projects, and doubtless in much of her personality and character — was built around the fact of her blindness and deafness. That other, happier life would have contained few of the particular joys and sorrows, trials and triumphs — in short very little of the concrete content — that she cared about in her actual life. Her never having been blind or deaf would have been very like her never having existed. Why should she wish for that, given that she had reason to be glad she existed? (Adams 1979: 60)

Again, this is not a case in which someone else would have existed if things had gone otherwise. Not being blind or deaf would have been like nonexistence for Helen Keller only in being very different from existing as she did. We are asked to assume that she would not only exist but be happier that way. The claim is that she may still prefer her actual life. Perhaps that is true, but again it is puzzling. Why not wish for the best?

13. For similar claims, see Wallace 2013: 124–8; Harman 2015.



Once more, there are complications. As Adams acknowledges, it is far from obvious that Helen Keller would have lived a better and happier life if her illness had not left her deaf and blind. Her life was extraordinary. Even with lives that are less exceptional, there is substantial controversy about the status of disabilities, like being deaf or being blind, as net harms.<sup>14</sup> According to the “mere-difference” view, while the life prospects of those born deaf or blind may be worse, as things stand, than the life prospects of others, we should treat these conditions as forms of human diversity akin to race, gender, and sexual orientation. If particular conditions generate hardship, that is a social problem, not a mark of human defect.

I take no stand on the mere-difference view, but I want to sidestep this dispute. We can do so by engaging in some counterfactual autobiography. Near the beginning of this essay, I told you of my conflicting desires, to be a poet, physician, and philosopher. Suppose, however, that I lied about a crucial fact: I was convinced that I ought to be a doctor, that this was the better choice, more meaningful, less selfish than philosophy. And yet, scared of the sight of blood, I was unable to follow through—and so I took philosophy instead. My discomfort with blood was not enough to justify my choice, nor did I think otherwise. My action was akratic. But it shaped my future in pervasive ways. I know a great deal about life as a philosopher, the highs and lows of teaching and research, the collegiality and frustration. I know much less about medicine. Now I look back on my decision. Life in philosophy has been good, overall. But I still think I made a mistake: I should have been a doctor. Is it rational to be glad that I made this mistake? What could make it rational?<sup>15</sup>

14. Here I am indebted to Barnes 2014.

15. We cannot appeal to “satisficing”: choosing a good enough option when you know that it is not the best. While it may be rational to choose an inferior option when you do not know what the best option is, it seems irrational to prefer an option you know is not the best when you know, of some specific alternative, that it is better. That is what happens in my case. Moreover, if satisficing is rational, it is rational before you decide as well as after. Even if we grant the rationality of satisficing preference, we have no explanation of

There are two final complications to set aside. The first is risk aversion. It may be rational to prefer the certainty of a good life to the likelihood of a better life with a risk of one that is worse. When I was deciding at eighteen, there was risk either way. But when I look back now and think about rewinding time to the point of decision and becoming a doctor, I must factor in uncertainty about the outcome, weighing that risk against the knowledge of my actual life. If I am risk-averse, I may prefer the status quo. We need to abstract from this, stipulating, however artificially, that I am certain that a life in medicine would have turned out well.

The second complication is personal attachment. One way in which my life would have been different if I had been a doctor is that I would have met different people. I would have had different friends, a different wife or child, or none at all. It may be rational to form attachments to particular people in which one would prefer a relationship with them at some cost to one’s own well-being over a similar relationship with others. Imagine comparing two options in prospect, not having met either N or M. Option 1 is friendship with N and a life of moderate flourishing. Option 2 is friendship with M and a more successful life. You should prefer option 2. But suppose you find yourself in option 1. It may be rational, now, to prefer that option. To rewind time and replace option 1 with option 2 would be to inhabit a world in which you never know N, to whom you are now attached. You would not give that up for a better life.<sup>16</sup> Again, at the price of artificiality, let us stipulate that I will have relationships with the same

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the change in what it is rational to want. Nor can we explain why it is rational not just to be content with what is worse but to prefer it to the better outcome.

16. This is argued by McMahan 2005: 159–61. We may wonder how far it goes. What if the cost of the relationship affects not you but N? Option 1 is friendship with N, who is doing fine, as is M. Option 2 is a similar friendship with M, who is doing fine, and a more successful life for N. Prospectively, you should prefer option 2. But suppose you find yourself in option 1. Is it now rational to prefer that option? You must weigh your attachment to N against his well-being. Is it plausible that the former wins out?

people whatever I choose, though the character of those relationships may change.

We have, at last, a pure case to consider, one in which the only difference between my situation before and after is engagement with a particular life, as a philosopher, that I rightly judged inferior. There have been no surprises on that front, nor am I attached to people I would not have known if I had been a doctor instead. Does it make sense to be attached to other aspects of my life, to the activities that make it up, some of them shared with friends, or to the objects with which I interact, in a way that justifies a retrospective shift in preference? Is it rational to treat the occurrence of these activities, the existence of these objects, as you treat the actual existence of N? Adams, Harman, and Wallace answer yes.<sup>17</sup>

What we are attached to in ourselves, in a reasonable self-concern, is not just our bare metaphysical identity, but also projects, friendships, and at least some of the most important features of our personal history and character. If our lives are good, we have the same sort of reason to be glad we have had them rather than lives that would have been even better but too thoroughly different, as we have to be glad that we exist and not better and happier people instead of us. (Adams 1979: 64)

For these philosophers, actual projects are like actual relationships or actual people: their existence alters the landscape of reasons, changing what it is rational to want. Thus Harman (2015) writes of our “reasonable attachment to the actual”, as if it were a pervasive orientation to what matters. I am sceptical. Wallace may be right that “[actual] human beings [...] make claims on us [...] that merely possible people do not” (Wallace 2013: 89). But projects, activities,

17. The quotation is from Adams; it is echoed by Wallace (2013: 77), in the stronger terms of unconditional affirmation, and by Harman (2015).

things? If there is a case against regret in connection with these, it is different from the case of your relationship with N.

Begin with artifacts, like Woolf’s *Orlando*. Does their actuality affect what it is rational to want? I do not think it does. Imagine two paintings, A and B, as vividly as you can, that have the following property: if neither existed, and there could be only one, you should prefer the existence of B. Perhaps A is Matisse’s study for *Dance*, while B is *Dance* itself—though examples are always contentious. You are in the hypothetical circumstance in question: neither A nor B exists, and you prefer the existence of B. Suppose you learn that A exists and B does not. Does this affect what it is rational to want? Could it tip the balance, so that you now have sufficient reason to be glad that A exists? Shouldn’t you prefer to rewind time, if B would then exist instead of A? I would say so. Now imagine that you know nothing about A and B, except that they are paintings and that B is more beautiful. Prospectively, you prefer the existence of B. Again, you learn that A exists instead. Should you be glad that things turned out this way, out of a reasonable attachment to the actual? Surely not.

We must not be distracted, here, by the conservative attitude embraced by Jerry Cohen in his “defence of existing value” (Cohen 2011). Cohen’s conservative declines to replace existing valuable things—institutions, works of art, etc.—with ones that would be slightly better, in that we should prefer the replacements to what actually exists if we were starting from scratch. This attitude may be rational, but it is not what we are considering. The issue raised by conservatism is whether to preserve existing things or to destroy and replace them. We compare two futures, holding the past fixed, and ask which there is reason to prefer. My question is different. It calls for a comparison of two world-histories including changes in the past whose effect is that an object would never exist. One could value preservation and so be averse to trading up without being attached to what is actual so that one prefers the creation of A to the creation of B in retrospect. If A now exists, I might not prefer its destruction and replacement by B, but I should prefer that B existed all along.

What if we turn from artifacts to activities or projects, including creative acts, like writing *Orlando* or painting *Dance*? It is a commonplace in the philosophy of action that intentions place constraints on practical thought. When you intend to do A, there is rational pressure to follow through, to intend what you know to be the necessary means. But it is also a commonplace that there are serious obstacles to conceiving this pressure in terms of the provision of reasons.<sup>18</sup> Suppose I am deciding whether to do A or B. That I now intend A does not provide me with a new reason to do it, or to take appropriate means. If it did, we could engage in illicit bootstrapping: an irrational decision could transform an action I should not perform into one that I should by tipping the balance of reasons. That is not possible. Nor is the point specific to reasons for acting. The actuality of a project does not give reasons for preference or intensify the reasons that were already there. It would be another form of illicit bootstrapping to defend a retrospective preference for doing A over doing B, when I should have preferred B, by appeal to the fact that I am actually doing A. This is quite different from explaining why you are glad you did not wait to have a child by appeal to the presence of N.

This negative claim — that actual projects provide no further reasons — might be qualified in cases of parity, where there is no more reason to do A, or B, and the reasons are not precisely equal. Maybe one's decision can tip the balance from sufficient to decisive reason.<sup>19</sup> It cannot tip the balance from decisive reason for preferring B to sufficient reason for preferring A, as when I decide to be a philosopher, not a physician.

Again, it is crucial to distinguish the phenomenon I am rejecting, which concerns one's retrospective preference, from a merely prospective shift. There is the idea that, once you have invested time and effort in project A, it is rational to persist, rather than give up and start over with B, even when you should prefer B to A, going

forward.<sup>20</sup> The latter idea is akin to Cohen's conservatism: it involves a conservative attitude to one's existing projects. This may reflect concern for the integrity of one's commitments or the narrative arc of life, and it may be rational. But again, it is not what we are considering. Concern for narrative would make sense of a desire to complete one's existing projects, not abandon them, going forward. It would not justify a retrospective preference for the past as it is, pursuing A rather than B, when I should have chosen otherwise. If I am doing A, I might prefer not to quit and try B instead, but I should still prefer a life in which I pursued B all along, a life that does as well as mine by narrative lights.<sup>21</sup>

In neither case, then — that of artifacts or that of activities — does actual existence have the significance it does when you conceive and give birth to N. In Kantian terms, while human lives have dignity, activities and artifacts have price: their value can be replaced. It is the dignity of human life that explains why you should not prefer to rewind time, erase your son, and try again. Nothing like this applies to the activities that make up your life and the artifacts that engage them. In saying this, I do not reject outright a preference for one's actual life over lives that would have been better in prospect, a rational attachment to its particular, determinate shape. But I doubt that it is explained by the rational significance of actuality. Can it be justified in some other way?

We can make progress by noting that, ordinarily, two things go together: actuality and specific knowledge. When I have to choose between two options, A and B, such that B is better and A is what

18. A classic discussion appears in Bratman 1987: §2.5.

19. This is argued by Ruth Chang (2009).

20. For a defence of this claim, see Kelly 2004.

21. This argument bears on the rationality of "adaptive preference change", in which one ceases to desire activities or outcomes in response to their being unfeasible. In a seminal discussion, Jon Elster argued that adaptive preference change is rational when and only when it is intentionally induced; he called this "character planning" (Elster 1983: Ch. III). I am sceptical. It is rational to adjust one's *intentions* to changes in feasibility, and it is rational to avoid preoccupation with the failure to get what one prefers; but a preference that is otherwise irrational cannot be justified by shifts in feasibility, as such.

actually comes about, I typically end up knowing more about what happens in A than about what would have happened in B. When I become a philosopher, I end up knowing an awful lot about what is involved in doing philosophy; I know much less about life as a doctor. The arguments above abstract from this. Thus, in comparing painting A to painting B, I had you vividly imagine both, or know nothing about either, and I had you learn that A exists without gaining any further acquaintance with it. In each version of the case, your knowledge of the reasons to prefer A is equal to your knowledge of the reasons to prefer B. One effect of equalizing knowledge in this way is that Specificity gets no purchase on your preference. Recall the principle above:

SPECIFICITY: It can be rational to respond more strongly to a fact that is a reason with a certain weight than to the fact that there is a reason with that weight.

Comparing A and B, you know that there is decisive reason to prefer B, and you know as much about the reasons on one side as you do the reasons on the other. You should prefer B prospectively, and you should still prefer it when you learn that A exists.

The temptation to think otherwise derives from Specificity. Suppose you imagine two paintings, A and B, and you know you should prefer B, but learn that A exists instead. One effect of seeing A is that you come to know much more about it. You are intimately acquainted with its colours, its brushwork, its emotional impact. It is no longer clear, at least to me, that it would be irrational for you now to prefer A, if the reasons to prefer B in prospect were not much stronger. If anything makes this rational, it is Specificity. You respond more strongly to facts that are reasons to prefer A, facts of which you have detailed knowledge, than to the fact that there are stronger reasons to prefer B, about which you know much less.

My conjecture is that attachment to particulars other than people is a function of Specificity, not actuality.<sup>22</sup> It is a matter of being more strongly moved by reasons than by the fact that they exist. As with nostalgia, the phenomenon is fundamentally epistemic, not temporal. It turns on the extent to which we know the pros and cons, not the passage of time, as such. The two are often correlated: as time goes by, we learn more about one of the options, the one we took, than we do about the others. But Specificity can operate in prospect. Imagine a single painting as vividly as you can. Suppose that it does not exist. I tell you that there is decisive reason to prefer the existence of another painting, which you have not imagined. You believe me. Which painting do you want to exist? Again, it is not obviously irrational to prefer the painting you imagined, if the reasons to prefer it are almost as strong. Your desire for the imaginary painting, like your desire for A, goes beyond your desire for what there is most reason to want.

This is not just a point about strange counterfactuals. Specificity would explain why the circumstance of deaf parents deciding about cochlear implants for their child is quite unlike that of parents with typical hearing. The deaf parents are in a position to engage prospectively with reasons to value life as a deaf person that the hearing parents can access only in retrospect and in part. Even if the parents agree about the weight of the reasons there are — for instance, that there is sufficient reason not to perform the operation — it may be rational for them to respond in different ways. For instance, it may be irrational for the hearing parents not to choose cochlear implants for their child, since they cannot feel the force of the reasons against that choice.

Nothing turns on these speculations. The point is that Specificity could explain the rationality of attachment to my actual life. Looking back on my mistake in deciding to take philosophy, I am moved not only by facts about the existence of reasons and their weights

22. Why not apply this to people, too? Because, in the original case of N, specific knowledge is irrelevant. When you know that the child is born, it is rational for your preference to shift, even if you know nothing else at all.

but by a richly textured knowledge of what is good about a life as a philosopher. I lack such knowledge of the reasons to be a doctor, something I know about only in general terms. It is not that, having decided on philosophy, there is new reason to prefer that life, as there is new reason to be glad that you did not wait once N is born. I do not believe that the balance of reasons has changed or that my earlier judgement, in favour of medicine, was wrong. The difference is in how I relate to the reasons there are. If it is rational to prefer in retrospect what I know to be an inferior life, Specificity explains why.<sup>23</sup>

I have said more than once that I do not find it obvious that this preference is irrational. But it involves an application of Specificity much more radical than those in section I. In cases of normative parity, it is rational to be more strongly moved by one consideration than another, despite your knowledge that it is not a stronger reason. You end up rationally preferring A to B—the concert to the play, perhaps—even though it is not the case that you should prefer A to B, and you know it. What we are now imagining is more extreme: the existence of cases in which it is rational to prefer A when you know there is more reason to want B: preferring what you know is worse. What makes this rational is ignorance of the reasons to prefer the better option.

In assessing the plausibility of this idea, it is important to stress how deep your ignorance runs. It is not just ignorance of which outcome will result from a choice, but of what the outcomes are. Here is an analogy: Think back to the choice of tickets and suppose that, as well

23. My argument draws a contrast between decisions that affect the existence of a person and ones that affect the existence of a project or a thing. What about decisions that affect relationships and their objects, but not the existence of those involved? What justifies a shift in preference here, of the sort we found in my friendship with N? Is it the actual existence of the relationship or specific knowledge of its features? This is difficult. On the one hand, I do not think the shift essentially depends on the qualities of my relationship with N or knowledge of these qualities. On the other hand, it may involve acquaintance with N, so that I am in a position to be moved by the fact of my relationship, specifically, with him. If we allow for reasons of this kind, we can model the effects of personal attachment with Specificity. But the model does not apply elsewhere.

as the concert and the play, there is an exhibit at the museum, again for one night only. Although the exhibit looks interesting, there is decisive reason to prefer the alternatives. I place tickets to the museum in box A, tickets to the concert or the theatre in box B. Would it be rational to take box A, moved by the attractions of the museum, rather than box B, since you do not know what it contains? Surely not. But our case is different. It is more like this: I place tickets to the museum in box A, and I tell you that box B contains tickets to something else, not the theatre or the concert or anything you know about. I give you a detailed description of the museum exhibit, vividly conveying its appeal, but add that there is decisive reason to prefer what is in box B. You believe me—the issue is not lack of trust—but I do not tell you what the reasons are. If Specificity makes attachment rational, it could be rational to prefer box A, so long as the reasons to prefer what is in box B are not much stronger. Your desire for A, unlike your desire for B, responds not only to the fact that there are reasons, but to reasons themselves: to what you know about the exhibit.

Does Specificity work this way? Here my thoughts give out. I am ambivalent about the power of Specificity to justify akratic preference.<sup>24</sup> What I have argued for is conditional: if there is such a thing as rational attachment to activities or objects, it is explained by a radical application of Specificity, not by attachment to what is actual, as such. Philosophers who treat these attachments in the way we treat attachments to other people are making a mistake.

### III

Is regret so awful? Should we devote such diligent reflection to avoiding or containing it? More to the point, should I?

I leave that question to you, though I enlist on my side Frank Bascombe, the sportswriter in Richard Ford's 1986 novel:

24. This sort of akrasia is quite different from that considered by Alison McIntyre (1990) and Nomy Arpaly (2000). They defend the rationality of acting (and so preferring) in ways that conflict with false beliefs about the balance of reasons; it is distinctive of our examples that the conflicting belief is true.

For now let me say only this: if sportswriting teaches you anything, and there is much truth to it as well as plenty of lies, it is that for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret. Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be ruined. (Ford 1986: 4)

Is that too strong? I have no way of knowing. For now let me say only this...

Regret of a certain kind strikes me as almost inevitable: the kind of regret exposed in section I, the regret of unsatisfied desire. Only blindness to much that is of value or a pathological narrowness of taste could save you from such regret, even in a life that is no worse than any other life you could have lived. It makes sense to envy yourself at the time when you had options, even if you knew that all but one of them would be foreclosed. Not knowing the future, you were not yet in a position to experience the sense of loss that midlife brings. That is the bad news. But the news is also good. For regret of this kind need not reflect a failure on your part, a mistake. Nor does it simply reflect the limits of human life. It turns on something wonderful: that there is so much there is reason to want, so much worth striving and fighting for, too much ever to exhaust.

And there is regret of another kind: wishing one had lived another life. Not inevitable, perhaps, but virtually so. How much of one's life is one compelled to regret? Must one regret in retrospect each and every mistake? What resources do we have for meeting Bascombe's challenge, in the face of our predictable failures? We have our attachment to people, to those who would not exist, or with whom we would have no relationship, if we had done otherwise. And we have, perhaps, a radical form of Specificity: our knowledge of the world as it is, of the reasons to welcome it, and our relative obliviousness to the

detail of alternative possibilities. Do not think about what might have been: "where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise."<sup>25, 26</sup>

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25. The final lines of Thomas Gray's 1742 "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (Gray 1966: 10).
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