

Anticipated Emotions and Emotional Valence

Dan Moller

University of Maryland

© 2011 Dan Moller
<www.philosophersimprint.org/011009/>

I WANT TO ANSWER TWO QUESTIONS. The first is this: Do anticipated emotions like regret, pride and guilt — emotions of first-personal assessment — have independent reason-giving force? That is, when we make decisions about what to do, does the mere fact that we will, after the fact, experience these emotions give us a reason to act that is over and above the reasons we have arising from the value of the act itself and its (other) consequences? This question matters, I believe, for several reasons. One is that anticipating or dreading these emotions plays an enormous role in our deliberations, as we can see both in anecdotal appeals and in social science research sketched below. The rational warrant of such appeals is thus important to address. In addition, explaining the role of these emotions in our practical deliberations sheds light on the emotions themselves. I will argue that these after-the-fact emotions should carry little weight, and that to the extent that such appeals are a commonplace, there may be an interesting confusion between the heuristic and intrinsic significance of anticipated emotions. A central focus throughout will be the case of regret.

The second question concerns emotional valence — how desirable or undesirable we find the experience of guilt, pride, or regret. What is it that determines the valence of these feelings? Come to think of it, what determines the valence of feelings in general — of pain, for instance? I will argue that how attractive or repulsive these feelings are to us is a function of the sensations they involve. This isn't as obvious as it may seem, because of such phenomena as dissociation: the sensation of pain isn't always awful (when under nitrous oxide, for instance), and sometimes experiencing gut-churning terror is attractive (when on a roller-coaster). Serious argument is thus required to address what fixes the valence of our emotions.

These two questions are connected in an interesting way. For, as I will argue, the main reason to reject the view that anticipated emotions have significant independent force is that the sensations involved are simply too trivial to generate strong reasons for action. This claim in turn leads to the natural response that emotional

valence isn't a straightforward function of the sensations involved, which entails confronting the second question.

1

Notice, to begin with, that appeals to anticipated emotions of assessment play a frequent and significant role in our practical deliberations. It may be useful to collect some typical examples:

You are a woman who feels forced to choose between career-advancement and having children. There are arguments on both sides, but your anticipated regret is asymmetrical: you feel confident that you will always regret not having had children, but not that you will regret having given up on the career. ("If only I'd not given birth to my daughter and pursued professional development instead" sounds farfetched to you.) So, in part for reasons of regret, you decide to start a family. Similarly for the chance to spend a semester visiting Bhutan vs. doing important but mundane office-work ("If only I'd spent more time on quotidian office tasks"), and other once-in-a-lifetime opportunities.¹

You enjoy making complex sculptures that take many months to construct and then often get exhibited at the local civic center. One reason for making these sculptures is that you feel compelled to express yourself through art. Other reasons involve the sensuous

1. For empirical evidence on the choice between career and children, including social science documenting the regret issue, see Sylvia Hewlett, *Creating a Life* (New York: Miramax 2002); and also her sobering "Executive Women and the Myth of Having It All", *Harvard Business Review* 80 (2002) Issue 4, 66–73. The exotic-trip example is based on one from Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson in "Regret and Irrational Action", in *Reasons for Action*, ed. David Sobel and Steven Wall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). I should note my general obligation to D'Arms and Jacobson's stimulating piece; several of the arguments discussed below in section 2 are canvassed in one way or another by them.

Anticipated Emotions and Emotional Valence

pleasure of working with your hands and the opportunity to connect with other artists. But among these reasons, an important consideration is that you get a deep sense of pride in your work following completion. Were there no such feeling, you think you would have significantly less reason to make your sculptures.

You promised to meet your friend for dinner. Now a more exciting opportunity has come up. You are tempted just to skip the dinner and claim that you forgot. There are many reasons not to do so, especially moral reasons. But one crucial reason that should feature prominently in your deliberations, you decide, is that you will feel quite guilty about it later.

The emotions involved in these scenarios are feelings of first-personal assessment: in standard cases they involve registering how we have fared in some respect. Feeling pride in an action means (roughly) registering that we have managed to do something of value whose accomplishment is comparatively impressive; regret means registering a mistaken decision; guilt, that our actions fail our own normative standards. The question is whether placing significant weight on anticipating such emotions is defensible. I wish to deny this: it would be a mistake to place much weight on the fact that one will later realize that one has accomplished something impressive or made a bad choice. What gives us our reasons are things like the accomplishment itself or the things that made the choice a bad one in the first place. But of course emotions like regret aren't only states that register how we have performed; they also feel a certain way. And once this phenomenal aspect is taken into account, my denial may look rather strange.

To make the issue clearer, take the case of pain. Pain also involves a type of assessment: its general function is to register some

problem, alert us to the need for corrective action.² True, nerve fibers can randomly fire and we can experience “meaningless” pain that doesn’t register anything at all. But in the typical case pain has a quasi-perceptual character in disclosing to us something important about ourselves or our relation to our environment. (One’s head is bleeding; the hand is burning on the stove.) Suppose you’re considering a long jump, likely to break your leg. If you do, two things will happen. First, your leg will break, which is objectively bad in the sense that its badness isn’t just a matter of how it will feel. (Though the badness of having limited mobility, missing a vacation, and so on is partly a function of how *that* will feel.) Second, you will experience pain, which is also bad. We obviously treat both of these things as reasons not to jump. In a philosophical mood, or amongst thoughtful zombies, the second reason might seem a little peculiar: if the pain is simply registering the fact that your wellbeing is threatened, why does that give you an independent reason not to jump? That can sound like claiming there are two reasons to tie our shoes: first, so that the shoes stay on; second so that we can see that our shoes are on. This is double counting. But of course, what the zombie neglects is the qualitative dimension of pain. Since it feels so awful to be in pain, it has independent reason-giving force, and so you have two reasons and not just one not to jump. (Symmetrically, you may only have one reason to eat bland tofu, and one reason to eat cotton candy, but two reasons to eat a delicious and healthy mango.)

In fact, I think we should concede that there is this hedonic dimension and that the pleasurable or painful sensations associated with occurrent pride and regret can provide us with reasons for action to that extent. But these reasons are, I contend, quite trivial — nowhere near strong enough to rest important decisions like child rearing on. To make the case, I review four overlapping arguments against the independent-reason view, several of which strike

2. See below for detailed discussion and further references on the topic of pain.

me as compelling. To save words, I will often focus on regret, which has deservedly received a great deal of attention in writings on decision-making. But most of what I say will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to pride and guilt as well. I will then make an alternative suggestion about the role anticipated emotions could play in our prospective reasoning. Responses to these arguments will be left to Section 3.

2

The first argument arises from the simple point that regret is just the realization that you made a mistake, and so anticipating that realization is just another way of seeing that a decision will be a mistake. Of course, we have reason not to make decisions we think are mistaken, but what provides the reason is the fact that the decision will be a mistake, not our later realization of that fact. But this argument assumes that it cannot be the regret itself that makes the decision mistaken. If it could, then we might anticipate realizing a decision would be a mistake, and what might make that true was the later regret. And in that case we would have an independent reason from regret. Could, then, regret itself render a decision mistaken, rather than merely constituting the recognition of that fact? If it could, that seems to open the possibility of regret alone swaying our decision, and that in turn may seem paradoxical: how can you recognize something is a mistake in regretting it, and then have it turn out that the only thing that made it a mistake was the very fact of regretting it? Regret, one wants to say, needs some grist for its mill.

Now, one way of responding to this last point is to emphasize the painfulness of regret, as alluded to earlier.³ What makes regret potentially decisive isn’t the recognition of a mistake but its qualitative aspect. On this view, what makes the later regret reason-giving isn’t the fact of registering a mistake, but the sheer phenomenology of regret. However, I don’t believe this response can succeed.

3. D’Arms and Jacobson, p. 183.

The reasons flowing from the mere pleasant or unpleasant *sensations* involved in these cases are too trivial to matter much, as is obvious as soon as we attend to them carefully. The pangs of regret (or guilt, for that matter) consist of a slight nagging feeling that occurs intermittently a few times a day at first, perhaps, then tapers off, and gradually occurs less and less often (without necessarily being permanently extinguished). The hedonic element of pride, similarly, consists merely in a certain warm glow experienced transiently a couple times a day for a short while (typically), then less and less frequently. These sensations, of course, really are pleasant or unpleasant but they look fairly unimpressive. The narrow hedonic sensations can't be all that important to us when they only involve a slightly nagging feeling experienced intermittently for a few months (say) before tapering off gradually.

If this isn't obvious once stated, consider two additional points. First, try putting the relevant reason in the first person: "True, achieving my potential in my chosen career is really important to me, but on the other hand, I will frequently experience transient nagging feelings, sensations that are mildly painful and will occur from time to time for many years to come. So children it is." This sounds funny because of the philosophy-speak, but not *just* because of the language. It's just substantively strange to claim a major life decision is to be decided (and not just as a coin-flip breaking equipoise) on the basis of some nagging, slightly unpleasant sensations down the road. Second, what would it take to counter the slightly unpleasant sensations at issue here? Not much, evidently. Slight nagging sensations being what they are — unpleasant but no more so than the mild side-effects of some drug — they should be easily neutralized in our practical reasoning. For instance, if I were trying to persuade you not to quit your job and start a family, I should be able to neutralize your regret-concerns — the concerns related merely to the unpleasant sensations of regret — with superficial inducements: a few extra dollars, or a free dinner out once or twice a week. The fact that we don't seem easily moved by these trivial

countervailing considerations suggests that we can't rationally give significant weight to the mere unpleasantness of regret. So, the argument might be summarized, the only thing that could make sense of the otherwise paradoxical notion that the future regret itself gives us reason to act turns out to be the unpleasant sensations associated with regret, and these turn out to be trivial.

A second argument is from the possibility of extinguishing the later emotions. We can envision this either pharmacologically, with an anti-regret serum, or more prosaically, with a reliable anti-guilt or -regret therapy session. (With the advent of drugs blocking the formation of traumatic memories, presumably an anti-regret serum isn't too far-out to be worth discussing.)⁴ Either way, the issue is that if we give independent weight to the feelings, then we should conclude that such extinguishing devices remove the relevant reasons, and yet on reflection, the decision calculus seems unlikely to be affected. Imagine, once again, that you are considering quitting your job. This time, instead of offering you a free lunch, I offer you a serum: this substance, taken shortly before signing a ten-year work contract, ensures that you will not feel significant regret. You will, let us say, be capable of remembering the relevant events, but they won't have any unpleasant qualities; the nagging element in regret will be disabled, just as contemporary pharmacology seems able to allow memories to persist independent of the scarring quality that makes for post-traumatic stress disorder. The question, then, is whether someone making a decision about kids-versus-job is likely to find the regret serum a decisive consideration neutralizing the regret-related reasons. Now that there won't be the painful sensations, does the relevant reason disappear? My sense is that this would rarely sway people, indicating that the independent appeal to regret is misconceived. And the case of guilt seems even stronger. I try to tempt you to abandon your other friend whom you promised

4. See, e.g., J. Przybylski et al., "Attenuation of Emotional and Nonemotional Memories after their Reactivation: Role of Beta Adrenergic Receptors", *The Journal of Neuroscience* 19 (1999): 6623–6628.

to meet for lunch. You say that you'll feel terribly guilty if you do. I then offer free sessions with my therapist, Dr. Feelgood, who is highly successful at eliminating feelings of guilt. On the independent-reason view, this should significantly lessen your reasons for keeping your promise, but that hardly seems plausible.⁵

As noted earlier, to anticipate regret is to realize your decision will be a mistake, and so of course you will typically try to avoid your mistake. The third argument considers the class of cases in which you know that you will experience regret but plow ahead anyway. Let me first set the stage. There are two scenarios in which you might plow ahead despite anticipating regret. One is simply that you are behaving irrationally: you know getting back together with your ex is a bad idea ("I'm going to regret this"), but there she is, and you can't resist sheer animal attraction. Set these cases aside. The other possibility is that you factor in regret and decide that, all things considered, you still have enough reason to proceed. This would be possible if there were pro tanto regret. The idea would be that regret need not always be the feeling that a decision was mistaken all things considered, but might just involve the sense that there was something unfortunate about the decision in so far as it rendered certain goods inaccessible.⁶ Perhaps we can face regret dilemmas: whatever we do, we're going to regret it. If you get back together with your ex, you will regret it because she is cruel and vindictive; if you don't, you will regret *that* because she is brilliant and beautiful.⁷ Either way, you will pine for the goods that you

5. Compare the view that altruism is motivated by empathy in the "emotional contagion" sense (we feel what they feel). This view leaves unexplained why we help others rather than abandoning them, which will often be just as effective at minimizing our distress, as Sean Nichols points out (*Sentimental Rules* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], p. 37).

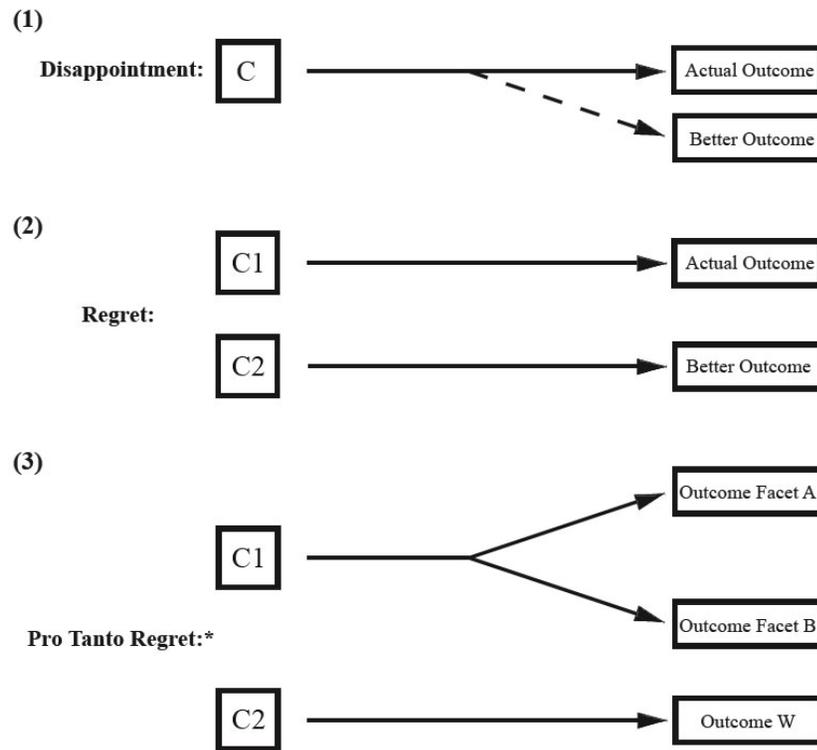
6. For discussion of something like this notion and further references, see Thomas Hurka, "Monism, Pluralism and Rational Regret", *Ethics* 106 (1996): 555–575, esp. the "proportionality view" in Sec. 1.

7. Bernard Williams discusses moral conflicts and what I am calling pro tanto regret in "Ethical Consistency", in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

weren't able to realize. In these dilemma situations, it can't be said that the decision was, all things considered, a mistake, since there was no way out, which makes the regrets involved what I am calling pro tanto regrets.

Now, this notion of regret strikes me as peculiar, since one normally thinks of regret as essentially involving the idea that one ought to have done things differently. "I deeply regret doing that — but of course I'd do the exact same thing over again if given the chance" sounds incoherent. (Compare politicians forced into grudging apologies: "I regret any pain my remarks may have caused." Part of the impetus toward these politicians' fake regret is, I believe, its very incoherence, since it combines the appeasing connotations of "regret" while subtly implying the overall decision was a good one, since there is no suggestion of having made a mistake.) Pro tanto regret, to my ear, just amounts to the recognition that one can't have it all, which is different from the distinctive feeling of having blown it. The regret dilemma, on this view, is better seen as either a simple case of wistful yearning for unattained goods, or else a more complex case of sincere but misguided regret, motivated by our tendency to focus on current difficulties and to neglect the distant counterfactual difficulties that would have ensued had we done things differently. We should also bear in mind the technical distinction economists make between disappointment and regret — the one being the gap between how things turned out and how they might have turned out on a given choice; the other, the gap between how things turned out on this choice versus how they would have turned out on some other choice altogether.⁸ We can summarize these various points about our (many) disappointments and regrets as follows, using "C" for "choice" and dashed lines for potential but unrealized outcomes:

8. See, e.g., Graham Loomes and Robert Sugden, "Regret Theory: An Alternative Theory of Rational Choice Under Uncertainty", *The Economic Journal* 92 (1982): 805–824.



*Where $A \& B > W$, A = goods captured by C1, and B = goods left unrealized by C1.

But of course there's no point squabbling over words. If we like, we can simply trace out two distinctive notions, one that involves wishing we had done things differently, and one that involves pining for unrealized goods. The important point for our purposes is just that even on the pro tanto view, plowing ahead with a decision one knows one will regret but rightly regards as best, all things considered, won't yield non-trivial reasons of regret. For on the pro tanto interpretation, all that regret amounts to is the idea that there are goods that won't be realized if one pursues the relevant option, and to the extent that this provides one a pro tanto reason to avoid that option it is in virtue of

those specific goods. There is, once again, the issue of the sensations of regret, but presumably these are balanced by symmetrical sensations on the other side. Thus, the argument concludes, you can't have non-trivial reasons from regret in cases where you (rationally) proceed to act in full light of those regrets.

At the risk of belaboring a trivial conceptual point, let me indulge in one last comment on what regret really is, since it strikes me that there are two distinct components that are not always distinguished. On the version that seems natural (and useful) to me, regret is rooted in the notion of having made a mistake. But this is ambiguous. On one reading, "mistake" means that the decision was a poor one given what was known at the time. On another reading, it means things would have turned out better had one chosen another option. Both strike me as important components of regret, at least in most cases. To see the first element, notice that it's strained to talk of regretting not having bet on a horse one had never heard of in a race one didn't know was on. Things would have turned out better had one thus bet on a winner, but the notion of regret seems misplaced, since there was no reason at all to make such a decision at the time. To see the importance of the second element, notice that you usually don't regret having made a crazy gamble that worked out in the end — you're unlikely to regret running an absurd risk that resulted in making millions and finding love and happiness.⁹ (There is an important exception to this, though. Sometimes we regret actions for their intrinsic character, not for their downstream consequences. Violations of moral duties are one example: we can regret a drunken drag race the next morning even if we luckily avoided hitting pedestrians. The two-component analysis only applies to cases where the act itself is evaluated on the basis of how things turned out.) What makes this a useful, interesting concept, then, is that it allows us to single out cases where we messed up in a way that turned out badly for us, or that were so intrinsically terrible that

9. "You cannot regret a decision you see as maximizing your overall payoff" (Roy Sorensen, "Rewarding Regret" *Ethics* 108 [1998]: 528–537). I'm grateful to a reviewer for pointing out the exception that follows.

later gains couldn't make up for them. For obvious reasons, these are especially important cases since they hold the potential for important corrective action. (Though that isn't to say we can regret only those things that we can correct. The skydiver who forgot his parachute can experience regret in his terminal plunge.)¹⁰

Back to the arguments. The fourth argument says that feelings of assessment like regret are only reason-giving if they are warranted.¹¹ Irrational feelings of regret or guilt or pride that are unmotivated by the circumstances can't provide reasons for action. But for regret to be warranted, there have to be other things that make the decision bad and then it will be those other things that provide reasons to avoid some option. We might wonder, though, whether this argument depends, again, on the sensations' themselves being trivial. If they aren't, then the unpleasantness of guilt and regret may be reason-giving however unwarranted. But consider, first, the case of pride. Do we have reason to pursue unwarranted feelings of pride? Flattery can survive the realization that one is being flattered, even if slightly diminished. That is why flattery is often such a good strategy: its effect can survive its detection (though undetected is even better), since the mere fact of people telling us we are brilliant and beautiful has an automatic pleasing effect only partly under our control. If there were independent reason to pursue feelings of pride, we would have reason to do things that would elicit people's flattery. Suppose I can produce crummy art that I know my servile underlings will feel compelled to praise to the skies just to keep in my good graces. Do I have reason to pursue such art? Here, the fact that the feelings are unwarranted seems to undercut the reason for pursuing them, even if they are pleasant in themselves.

However, negative feelings can produce the opposite intuition. Dread can be irrational, if for instance elicited by circumstances that

10. "The ideal drop is from an aircraft, your muscles relaxed, your pilot puzzled, your packed parachute shuffled off, cast off, shrugged off — farewell, *shootka* (little chute)!" Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 598.
11. Bernard Williams makes a related point arguing against utilitarianism. See his and JCC Smart's *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 101.

pose no threat to the agent's interests. But think of lecturers who read from a script rather than speaking spontaneously from notes or slides. There may be good reasons to do so, but the neurotic professor does so because he knows that he will experience dread leading up to his lecture. (He agrees, that is, that things would go better if he spoke from slides, but doesn't because of his dread.) Moreover, the neurotic professor has overwhelming evidence that if he were to try speaking more spontaneously, he wouldn't forget his subject matter, as he fears. (He forgets his script from time to time and does all right.) So to avoid the agonies of dread leading up to the lecture, he foregoes the benefits of spontaneity, even though he has good evidence his fears are groundless. This scenario strikes me as both fairly common — people dread public speaking even when they're reasonably good at it — and a clear case of responding to unwarranted feelings in a rational way. That is, the fear is unmotivated since nothing dangerous is on the horizon, but given that the dread leading up to the lecture will involve intense agony — picturing, over and over, the improbable spectacle of forgetting the main idea of the lecture, being laughed at, etc. — it is reasonable to adjust by writing out a script, even if this means incurring costs and even if the fears at stake are totally groundless. Similarly, it might seem, it makes sense to act to avoid regret even when it is unwarranted. To put it succinctly: a feeling can be irrational without the corresponding act of avoiding that feeling being irrational.¹²

In light of these conflicting responses, what should we say about regret? The issue is a complex one I don't want to try to resolve here. Perhaps we are loath to support the active acquisition of delusional states like unwarranted pride, but willing to countenance maneuvers to avoid them, as in the case of deciding to avoid unwarranted feelings of regret. If so, the point would be not whether we have grounds to take seriously unwarranted attitudes, but whether we are trying to

12. This point is related to the broader issue of how the "fittingness" of an emotion relates to our broader reasons to seek or avoid it. See Justin d'Arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61 (2000): 65–90; and Wlodek Rabinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen, "The Strike of the Demon", *Ethics* 114 (2004): 391–423.

acquire or avoid them. In any case, I propose simply to grant that in at least some cases the fourth argument will, once again, turn on the triviality of the sensations, with the addendum that it seems even stranger to put much weight on those sensations in those cases in which they are unwarranted.

With these arguments in place, let me complete the initial sketch by suggesting an alternative interpretation of anticipated emotions. This is to read them as heuristic devices. The idea would be that we often ask ourselves how we will feel about some choice we are about to make because we think those after-the-fact assessments can help us sort out prospectively whether they're good choices or not. So instead of appealing to such emotions as giving us reason to change our minds, we would be using them as a circuitous method of figuring out whether those decisions would be good ones or not (on other grounds). This may sound strange: why go through the extra loop of asking ourselves how we *will* feel if those feelings are merely heuristic? The answer, I think, is that it can often seem more obvious how to evaluate a choice in retrospect. This is especially important given our tendency toward inter-temporal discounting. The sculptor must begin with a lot of unpleasant, mundane tasks, perhaps, perform laborious research, hack away at the stone, and so on. The valuable accomplishment is far off, obscured behind a mountain of tedium and sweat. As these proximal bads loom into view, adopting the retrospective view helps access the distal goods and put them in proportion. The same is true of guilt and regret. If I am tempted by the immediate lure of breaking my promise, focusing on how I will feel afterwards can help smooth out the timeline and the exaggerations our "bias toward the near" introduces.¹³

The idea, just to be clear, isn't to deny that we in fact do treat future feelings as having independent reason-giving force. That's an empirical question that most psychologists and the rest of us take for granted, and which I see no reason to deny. To name just one striking piece of experimental evidence, subjects will hold on to a lower-odds lottery

13. As Derek Parfit puts it in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Part II.

ticket when given the choice to trade it in for one with higher odds because they anticipate regret if the original ticket were to win.¹⁴ Here it is obvious that the issue is not one of heuristic but of direct appeal (however irrational) to future feelings. My point has been the normative one that such appeals make little sense. Whatever trivial reasons they produce aren't strong enough to rationally sway our decisions in important matters. The point of the alternative would be to provide a function for such appeals that didn't succumb to the normative arguments. The alternative I have described does seem to succeed on those terms.

There is, however, one last wrinkle. Appealing to anticipated feelings as a heuristic device may avoid rational criticism on the grounds canvassed so far, but that doesn't show that it is rational tout court. In particular, we might wonder (a) how good our predictions of our later emotions are, and (b) how reliable our feelings are as assessments. There is actually substantial evidence that our predictions of our future emotions are quite poor, and that this is therefore a lousy heuristic.¹⁵ For example, experiments show we are easily misled by what is salient to us at the time, by neglecting our emotional "immune system", and so on. This leads to large misjudgments in predicting how we will feel about major events mere minutes into the future, as in experiments with pregnancy tests, where women fail to predict accurately how they will feel about the result, even when that feeling is seconds away. I won't pursue this further, but if it were true, then it wouldn't be obvious how *any* interpretation of our appeals to anticipated emotions could be reasonable.¹⁶ But at least the heuristic approach allows

14. C.M. Bar-Hillel & E. Neter, "Why are People Reluctant to Exchange Lottery Tickets?", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70 (1996): 17–27. Cited in B. Mellers and A. McGraw, "Anticipated Emotions as Guides to Choice", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* vol. 10, issue 6 (2002): 210–214.

15. For an overview, see G. Loewenstein and D. Schkade, "Wouldn't it be Nice? Predicting Future Feelings", in *Well-being*, ed. D. Kahneman, E. Diener, and N. Schwartz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

16. This leaves open the even larger question of whether regrets in general make sense — whether we should regret our own disposition toward regret, and

an interpretation that may, at least in individual cases, vindicate such appeals. And it shows that we can, in principle, make sense of appeals to anticipated emotions without according them any non-trivial independent reason-giving force.

3

There is much that might be said by way of resisting, in various ways, each of these arguments. For the sake of focus, though, I want to concentrate exclusively on addressing the alleged triviality of the relevant sensations. As we saw, the first and third arguments hinge on this issue. That still leaves the second and third arguments, from the possibility of extinguishing the anticipated emotions and from the incapacity of pro tanto regrets to ground independent reasons. But the latter point is only relevant on a particular conception of regret that I have argued we shouldn't hold in any case, and the second argument, though to my mind potent, rests on thought experiments some may reject.

Turn, then, to the issue of how important the sensations involved in our emotions of assessment are. Recall that the crucial point was that the independent-reason view can appeal to the sheer unpleasantness of regret or guilt, or the pleasantness of pride, to make sense of how anticipating such emotions might in itself influence our decisions. Against this, I claimed that the sensations involved were too trivial to carry significant weight. But the triviality claim can be countered in two ways. The first is to raise doubts about how trivial the pangs of guilt or regret really are. Since there isn't any clear way of settling this point, I will simply reiterate my doubts; the simple pangs seem to be the kind of thing easily trumped by a little extra money or a fine lunch. I suspect that those who resist this are inferring from their strong aversion to

states like regret and guilt that the sensations involved *must* be significant. But this neglects the possibility that our regret aversion is explained by other means, such as the heuristic model offered just now. (Compare the callow altruist: "The pangs of guilt *must* be agonizing, for otherwise why would I be so strongly motivated to help people in need?") This leads to another, much more interesting response, which also brings us to the second main question of the paper, concerning emotional valence:¹⁷

The reason-giving force of regret, guilt, pride and the like isn't a function of the *sensations* involved, narrowly conceived. It is rather a function of the broader *feelings*. 'Sensations' here refers to the phenomenal qualities of our experience, and especially the physical changes we register — the quickening pulse, the sinking stomach, the burst of adrenaline, sheer pain, and so on. 'Feelings' is a broader category that encompasses sensations but also the cognitive attitudes that are involved — the belief that we have made a mistake, the desire for a different outcome, etc. What we are averse to are the broader feelings or emotions, which are a species of feeling. This means that appealing to the triviality of the sensations misses the point. Sure, the registration of changes in one's pulse-rate or the unpleasant knot in the stomach is relatively insignificant. But the valence of emotions like regret isn't a simple function of the sensations involved, and the broader constellation of attitudes-cum-sensations isn't trivial at all. To support this view, notice two things.

what the ideal attitude toward losses and mistakes should be. I discuss the case of resilience in the face of the death of a spouse in "Love and Death", *The Journal of Philosophy* 104 (2007): 301–316. For a disturbing attack on regret with an eye toward Nazi Germany, see Ruediger Bittner, "Is it Reasonable to Regret Things one Did?", *The Journal of Philosophy* 89 (1992): 262–273, and contrast Bernard Williams' view in "Moral Luck", in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

17. I'm grateful to Georges Rey for helping me to see the force of the following line of argument. The general strategy can be found in Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981), pp. 484ff: "Is it hair-splitting to say: joy, enjoyment, delight, are not sensations?...The horribleness of fear is not in the sensation of fear." It is more fully explored in Daniel Dennett, "Why You Can't Make a Computer that Feels Pain", in his *Brainstorms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981).

1. *The badness of pain as a model.*¹⁸ If any feeling were bad because of the raw sensation it would be pain. But even pain is bad only because of the broader cognitive states. The mere sensation of pain isn't in itself undesirable. Under diverse conditions, dissociation of pain sensations and pain-aversion is possible. These conditions include: drug effects (opiates and nitrous oxide, under which patients report feeling pain but not minding it), hypnosis, enculturation (childbirth isn't perceived as significantly painful in various tribal cultures), whether pains are voluntary or forced, relative expectations (soldiers report not feeling pain with great wounds that others find to be agonizing; people seeing something that looks painful — a meat-hook caught in their jacket, but without penetrating the skin — often report agony). These cases make clear that what makes pain awful isn't the sensations involved but a broader constellation of attitudes. The same is true of emotions like regret.

2. *The relativity of sensation — other cases.* The experience of fear is horrible when the novice must give a public speech. But a kind of fear, or terror even, is prized by patrons of roller coasters. It makes no sense to explain the aversion to dread of the public speaker by referring to the bare sensations — the knot in the stomach, the raised blood pressure — when the same sensations are interpreted so differently in the roller coaster case. The difference is simply the constellation of attitudes involved — the voluntariness of the experience, the confidence in the outcome, etc. These are precisely what make the one an experience of dread and the other one of piquant amusement.

18. Here I follow Richard Hall, "Are Pains Necessarily Unpleasant?", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 49 (1989): 643–659, and Valerie Hardcastle, *The Myth of Pain* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), pp. 101–107.

This is even clearer when we contemplate induced sensations. Parallel to the extinguished regrets, we can imagine stimulating the sensations experienced on a roller coaster ride. But no one welcomes the mere sensations of terror. No one would pay for a pill that would induce the physical sensations of an adrenaline spike, say, dissociated from the broader mental states involved with roller coaster rides.

So the valence of regret, guilt, pride and the like aren't a simple function of the sensations involved. Even if these were trivial, we still regard the broader emotions as terrible (or wonderful) and so are justified in taking action based on what we anticipate feeling.

This is a powerful challenge to the central claim I have been making. And I think there is much that is important and right about this objection; I have no wish to reject the basic distinction between narrow sensations and broader feelings or the well-established point that interpreting our sensations plays an enormous role in the experience of our emotional states, as the attribution-theory literature shows.¹⁹ Nevertheless, I believe the core reasoning here to be mistaken. I will organize my remarks in three parts, focusing respectively on the relationship between sensations and emotional valence, pain as a model, and examples like the roller coaster and induced sensations.

First, although I take it to be obvious that there is more to emotions like pride or guilt than sensations, I don't see any reason to deny that the valence of emotions — how desirable or undesirable we find them — depends on the sensations they involve.²⁰ That is, when the

19. For an overview, see Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett, *The Person and the Situation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Chapter 3.

20. Philosophical treatments of the emotions often stress the cognitive dimension, but few touch on the issue of how the cognitive features relate to emotional valence. For discussion of the debate about how cognitive the emotions

relevant sensations are eliminated or diminished or amplified, our aversion or attraction to these states seems to track the sensations. (There are limits, of course: more isn't always better.) This is compatible both with my earlier claims against the importance of anticipated emotions, and with the concession that emotions like guilt have an important cognitive dimension. It is also compatible with the claim that what we dislike about fear is the feeling as a whole, not merely certain sensations. As long the valence of the emotions goes up and down with the sensations, there is no objection here to my earlier claims. Nor does this point about sensation turn on some controversial, novel theory of the emotions; I'm simply pointing out relationships between certain properties of emotions on which all are agreed.

But how can the object of the like or dislike be the feeling as a whole while its valence is a function of sensation? This shouldn't come as a surprise. What makes eating ice cream nice are the sweet, cold, rich sensations. Of course, if we came to know that these were involuntarily induced by neural activators from the hidden lab of an evil genius, these sensations might not seem so desirable. But that doesn't show that diminishing the sensations (if you have a head-cold, for instance) wouldn't diminish the desirability of eating ice cream; it just shows that other things need to be in place for the pleasures of the palate to have their normal effect. The way to capture this, I think, is just to say that although we care about feelings as a whole, and although the cognitive elements are necessary background conditions to our welcoming or loathing various feelings, changes in the sensations nevertheless affect the feelings' valence. (My claim isn't that sensations are the only thing that can have any effect on valence.) Eating ice cream is no fun absent certain normal beliefs — but it's a lot less fun with the sensations dimmed by a head-cold.

Let's look at some more examples closer to home. Suppose you are

are, see Ronald de Sousa's *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) Chapters 2–3; Patricia Greenspan, *Emotions and Reasons* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Jesse Prinz, *Gut Feelings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1995).

wracked with guilt. Granted, the sensations have significance for us in the presence of various cognitive states, especially the belief that we have wronged someone who we wouldn't have otherwise. But suppose the sensations dissipate, so that you are disposed to form the belief that you did something wrong (years ago, say), but feel nothing when you form that thought. (It leaves you cold since it happened long ago and you've come to terms with it.) Whether or not we even deem this an emotional response at all, it would seem strange to claim that you have non-trivial reason to avoid such states. How bad can they be when you feel nothing at all? Suppose, next, that it is earlier, and that from time to time you still feel tormented by guilt. But suppose that the sensations are intermittent. You may be continuously disposed to avow that you did wrong (you have the non-occurrent belief), but the sensations are intermittent. Now ask, How awful is the guilt when the sensations are absent? And the answer, I take it, can only be "Not at all." This is the part of the Jamesian view of emotions that seems to me undeniable. Standard therapeutic methods overwhelmingly support it. Patients are treated for phobias, for instance, by confronting their fears in a state of deep bodily relaxation. The point of the relaxation is that as the patient works through an otherwise terrifying experience, like entering a confined space, "the bodily state of relaxation precludes fear."²¹ Whether we agree with this strong way of putting it or not, there obviously isn't anything awful about the cognitive states the patients enter absent the sensations. And this means we can hold on to our claim from earlier: the experiences of regret, guilt, and pride are usually too insignificant to carry non-trivial weight. What horrors there are, are connected to sensations, and these are intermittent, dissipate over a fairly short period of time, and aren't all that terrible even at their peak. (Again, weigh the intermittent, rapidly dissipating knot in the stomach, accompanied by the right kind of belief, against a slightly higher salary.)

What the objector fundamentally needs to be the case is that there

21. Martin Seligman, *What You Can Change and What You Can't* (New York: Vintage, 2007), p. 77.

be no interesting relationship between our sensations and the valence of emotion. The only way I can see for this to be true is if the cognitive dimension of emotions, in itself, greatly contributes to how pleasant or awful they are. But that looks deeply implausible. It would mean claiming that the state of belief, say, can be in itself unpleasant. But how can the mere fact of representing for oneself the world to be a certain way be unpleasant? (On other views, beliefs are construed dispositionally, functionally, etc., but none of these alternatives makes it any less obscure how we could mind the mere state of believing something.) Of course, beliefs cause lots of unpleasant other things — like knots in the stomach and so forth — but these are supposed to be off the table; we are focusing on the sheer fact of representing the world to be a certain way, not the downstream effects of such representations. Take the belief that one's child has died. It is, of course, awful to come to this knowledge, but it would be bizarre to claim that there are two terrible things here: the fact that one's child is dead and then, separately, *believing* that he is dead. (By contrast, it would make perfect sense to complain of the separate fact that one's knowledge has precipitated a profound despair, made sleep impossible, etc.) Similarly, we don't want to believe that our friends have betrayed us or that our theories are wrong, but not (even in part, as far as I can see) because of how awful being in those representational states is. To put it yet another way, in assessing someone's welfare, no one proposes that we pay careful attention to people's beliefs, except, perhaps, on the irrelevant grounds of assessing their attainment of perfectionist goods like knowledge and avoiding certain delusional states we might pity them for. Mere representational states are hedonically inert; it is no worse for us to be in one of them (no matter what the content) than for a picture or machine to be in one.

Second, focus on the case of pain, and let us contemplate how exactly the argument made in the response above seems to go. On the most plausible reconstruction, it seems to be something like this:

Anticipated Emotions and Emotional Valence

1. In normal cases of pain, we seem to be averse to the sensations involved (the sheer phenomenal quality of the experience).
2. When under nitrous oxide, however (or hypnosis, or in combat, etc.), the sensations come apart from our aversion response.
3. Therefore, as 2 shows, even in normal cases of pain it isn't the sensations that we are averse to.
4. Therefore, what we really mind must be something unique to the normal cases of pain.
5. The only plausible candidate for such a unique element is the set of attitudes we have in those cases, or else the sensation-cum-attitudes.

To see what is wrong with this, recall an old argument for sense data in the theory of perception:

1. In normal perception, we seem to perceive the sun.
2. When hallucinating, however, we see what looks like the sun but isn't.
3. Therefore, as 2 shows, even in normal perception, we are not really seeing the sun.
4. Therefore, we do not perceive objects directly in normal perception, but rather some object that is common to normal and deviant perception.
5. The only plausible candidate for such a common element is sense data.

Even if there were sense data, this wouldn't be the way to argue for them. Where does the second argument go wrong? The mistake comes in 3. It just doesn't follow from 2 and the general possibility of

dissociating perception from causal interaction with normal percepts that in the normal case we don't perceive objects. Since this is merely a suggestive analogy, we can just briefly remind ourselves that there are other options. For example, on one view (adverbialism), perception involves having a certain kind of experience — of “seeing goldenly”, for instance. When that experience stands in the appropriate causal relation to the right physical object, we can talk of perception; when we have similar qualitative experiences caused by hallucinogens, all that happens is that we have similar experiences (characterized by properties we might express adverbially) that are non-perceptual. What stays the same is the character of experience, not the object of perception. It doesn't matter here whether this view is right; the point is just that we can reject moves like 3 as long as such alternatives are available.

The same is true of the first argument. It doesn't follow from the fact that under nitrous oxide we don't mind pain sensations (a concession qualified below) that in the normal case it can't be the painful sensations that we object to. In fact, claiming that we don't utterly obscure what we do find so awful about pain in the normal case. Here is the clearest suggestion I know of:

Why don't we like pain sensations? Not because they have an intrinsic phenomenal quality of unpleasantness. There is no such quality, in my opinion. So why, then? Why do we find pains so unpleasant? Because they accompany nociceptual reports of bodily damage, and bodily damage isn't something we like to hear about. It is like the ruler who slew the messenger who brought the bad news; pain sensations are no more inherently bad than that messenger. Or consider a doctor who doesn't like the look of some red spots on her patient. Why doesn't she like the look of those red spots? Not because red spots are intrinsically unpleasant — on a clown's costume they would be quite pleasing to see. Rather, she doesn't like the look of them because here they are associated with disease and

illness. Like the messenger and the red spots, pain sensations are tainted with the badness of their underlying cause: bodily damage.²²

I find this incredible. The awfulness of putting your hand on a red-hot stove isn't like the awfulness of seeing a data report indicating a fatal disease! What's horrific about setting your hand on the stove is surely how it feels, not something purely cognitive. Moreover, the purely cognitive element is present in the deviant versions of pain and evidently doesn't seem awful to us. The nociceptual content isn't eliminated; the whole point of the dissociation cases was that they don't feel awful, not that they don't convey nociceptual information. So the proposed alternative doesn't actually seem to do the job it was intended for.

There is, in any case, no reason to accept the pure cognitive theory of pain-aversion. Just as with the visual experiences that aren't necessarily perceptual, we can agree that pains aren't necessarily awful without going on to agree that when they are it isn't the sensations that make them awful, just as we can insist that in normal cases of visual activity we really are perceiving the sun. We can do so because nothing about the normal cases follows from the non-standard cases. It is easy to demonstrate this by noting one possible story that accounts for the latter type of cases while leaving the common-sense view of the valence of pain intact (*i. e.*, one that explains its awfulness in terms of the searing sensation when placing one's hand on the stove). On this account, pain sensations involve at least two elements: nociception, which discriminates the location, degree, and duration of the pain, and, separately, the awfulness of pain. In fact, although no one should claim confidence in the final disposition of these matters, the best current science indicates something just like this. A typical summary:

The results of our activation study indicate that different functions in pain processing can be attributed to different brain regions; *i. e.*, the gating function reflected by the

22. Hall, “Pains”, *op. cit.*, pp. 646–7.

pain threshold appeared to be related to anterior cingulate cortex, the frontal inferior cortex, and the thalamus, the coding of pain intensity to the periventricular gray as well as to the posterior cingulate cortex, and the encoding of pain unpleasantness to the posterior sector of the anterior cingulate cortex.²³

An obvious explanation of the dissociation cases is that drugs and other factors can allow some parts of the brain's pain-processing to operate while inhibiting others. When they do, it would be a mistake to say we feel regular pain that just happens not to feel bad; this would be true only if the claim had been that pain is awful because of its discriminative, nociceptual dimension. In that case, the possibility of dissociation would be damning, since that dimension can have neutral valence. But as the science suggests, we should instead say that under dissociation we don't feel what we feel in the normal case at all. When the anterior cingulate cortical encoding has been inhibited (if current evidence holds), the sensations of pain — what it feels like to be in pain — just isn't the same, since one of its dimensions has been knocked out. Since things like nitrous oxide alter the sensation of pain, these can't serve to show that what makes pain so bad (in the normal case) isn't the sensation — how it feels. In the normal cases of pain, with the usual encoding activated, there is no reason to deny that it is precisely the sensations that make pain seem so bad. Since the mechanisms of enculturation, hypnosis, etc., are less well known, I won't try to address them here. (Clearly they raise interesting issue about

the relationship between pain and attention.) But I see no reason for thinking similar stories might not be told about them as well.

Third, let us turn to cases like the roller coaster. We should concede that the attractiveness of sensations fluctuates, and that we wouldn't be interested in having the nausea and vertigo of rollercoaster rides induced sitting at home. But, once again, that doesn't show that the ultimate valence of the state isn't a function of the sensations — that to the extent the sensations are weak or intermittent the feelings involved will be less desirable or undesirable. The exhilaration of the roller coaster would, I presume, be greatly diminished if cognitive states (*e.g.*, the belief that one is plunging down from a great height) were fully present but were accompanied only by dim or feeble sensations. This, again, invites an analysis along the lines of cognitive states enabling the goodness or badness of the sensations, while allowing that the valence of the emotions still varies with the sensations.

4

Now back to anticipated emotions. What I hope has emerged at this point is that we should reject the challenge to my claims that arises from distinguishing narrow sensations from broader feelings. We can take on board most of the challenger's claims without ceding the ground that motivates claiming anticipated emotions like regret should have little force in our decision-making.

But even those satisfied on that score may have lingering doubts. For one thing, my view may not seem to take seriously enough what a life racked with guilt or regret is really like. Suppose the regrets are persistent. Early in your marriage you had an affair that came out, and poisoned what was a happy relationship. Many years later, you're still together, but he or she still looks at you differently, and becomes tense whenever you travel for work. You can't shake the feeling, day after day: "If only I hadn't!" There is the persistent evaluative thought that you've made a hash of things, and not just trivially, but in a way that significantly affects how you see your life as a whole. Surely this

23. Thomas Tölle et al., "Region-specific Encoding of Sensory and Affective Components of Pain in the Human Brain: A Positron Emission Tomography Correlation Analysis", *Annals of Neurology* 45:1 (1999), 40–47, p. 40. See also Pierre Rainville et al., "Pain Affect Encoded in Human Anterior Cingulate But Not Somatosensory Cortex", *Science* 277, no. 5328 (August 1997): 968–971; Donald Price "Psychological and Neural Mechanisms of the Affective Dimension of Pain", *Science* 288:5472 (9 June 2000): 1769–1772; and Joshua Johansen et al., "The Affective Component of Pain in Rodents: Direct Evidence for a Contribution of the Anterior Cingulate Cortex", *PNAS* 98:14 (2001): 8077–8082.

could mar your life, and surely the anticipation of it would give you reasons to act.

I have some sympathy with this concern, particularly as it draws support outside of formal philosophy. Think of the literary trope of, as it were, punishing a character through self-knowledge. Henry James, one feels, is constantly telling us that his characters are destined to suffer horribly simply in virtue of the knowledge of what they have done or become. In “The Beast in the Jungle,” for instance, Marcher’s tragedy isn’t so much the missed opportunity for love, but that he is doomed to live out his days in the full knowledge that his life has been a “sounded void” whose central purpose he failed to grasp. Or in a more popular vein, Don Draper in the television series *Mad Men* seems punished for his sins at the end of “The Wheel”, suffering in virtue of an epiphany of the loveless, uncommitted life he has made for himself. Here, too, it may be hard to shake the thought that these characters are in the grip of emotional syndromes they had strong reason to avoid.

As these cases are described, the people involved are made to seem similar to the acutely depressed or anxious, who feel so awful they may not want to live. But I think it’s important to distinguish between persistent moods like depression or anxiety, which can last for days or years and have an oppressive, smothering impact, and discrete emotions like guilt and regret, which rarely do. It’s rare that the raw feeling of regret is extreme and persistent the way depression can be; typically the sensations are intermittent and fade over time, until we’re left with the bare thought of what we’ve done. I concede, of course, that there could in principle be such extreme cases; probably people have killed themselves out of the sheer agony of experienced guilt and regret, though it’s hard to distinguish regret proper from other feelings like depression it might accompany. In such cases, clearly there were prospective reasons to act. But these cases are pretty unusual, and in the more typical (but still significant) decisions about having children or changing jobs, the heuristic approach still looks more plausible to my eye: anticipating a life of regrets matters because it suggests that there is a great value at stake. That the regrets will go on and on is

indicative of how significant that value is. That’s a powerful reason to pay attention when our friends warn us about future regrets, but the point isn’t how terrible it will be to feel such things. After a while it is overwhelmingly likely we won’t *feel* a thing, and it’s obscure why the mere having of the thought, “I made a hash of things,” evaluative and persistent though it may be, should make us tremble. All of us can easily call to mind things we did wrong decades ago that leave us cold now — how terrible is it to think those thoughts?

There isn’t space to take up the point about art in any detail, but let me throw out a conjecture. The objection implicitly suggests that characters like Marcher or Draper seem vivid to us because they’re true to life representations of the agony of regret. But there’s another possibility. Artists’ motivations aren’t always rooted in simple realism; sometimes it’s the audience response that matters. Punishing a character by investing them with an awful insight into themselves might be effective because it’s satisfying for us to know that the character realizes what they’ve done. Punishing a bewildered, ignorant wrongdoer is unsatisfying; what we want is that he *realize* how awful he’s been, that he grasp our own point of view. Strong expressions of regret or guilt serve that aesthetic purpose.²⁴

Finally, it may help to discuss one last case (*the* last case): the appeal to deathbed regrets. At some point or another most thoughtful people find themselves thinking about what they will leave undone, and how they will ultimately feel about such undoings. We picture, perhaps, lying in bed at the end, and reflecting, bitterly, on having failed to do much for others, or to take big risks like starting a business or trying to become an artist, and such pictures of anticipated regret often move us. Is such deathbed reasoning a good idea? I think this case is a revealing one, since it makes clear that what is at stake isn’t really the feelings we will have at the time. The point of appealing to how things will look from the later vantage point is not that, just

24. Cp. Robert Nozick’s discussion of the communicative theory of punishment. *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 370–380.

before death, there will be one more pain — the pain of regret — added to whatever other injuries or infirmities are prompting our demise. Or if it were, that could only seem trivial, on reflection. (“Darn it all, stomach cancer *and* the pangs of regret? If only I had done more for other people!”) Instead, the thought seems to be that the later self enjoys a kind of epistemic authority: his word should count more since he has the benefit of experience. His perspective carries special weight since he knows the impact decisions have had, and isn’t improperly influenced by temporal discounting or other distortions to our decision-making. This would, once again, be a kind of heuristic. So to the extent that these deathbed appeals make sense, they seem to make sense for the wrong reasons to bolster the claims of the independent-reason theorist.

However, it really isn’t clear whether, even so conceived, the appeal to anticipated regret is a good one. That depends on how reliable the deathbed perspective really is. And here we may have our doubts. Take charity and the taking of big risks, which feature prominently in such stories, and consider the two situations from the two perspectives, Young and Old:

If charity means a sacrifice by Young, he has a significant reason not to be charitable. But of course, the rewards of charity are many — he will feel better about himself, he will know he was living up to his ideals, etc. Benefits and burdens are both in the future for Young. But for Old, many of the benefits are still present — *e.g.*, he can take comfort in knowing Young made sacrifices to shape his life in a way Old feels satisfied with. So Young makes all the sacrifices while Old enjoys at least some of the benefits.

Taking risks means a potential cost to Young, for instance sacrificing a large salary, a comfy apartment, fancy dinners out, etc. Of course, there will also be potential benefits,

perhaps the success of starting a new business. Old, however, will make none of the sacrifices, while reaping at least some of the benefits, particularly the satisfaction of knowing he lived life to its fullest, exhausted his potential, and generally made a good showing of himself.

The worry, thus, is that this, like many of the other appeals to regret, is ultimately misguided, since the later perspective of regret is biased. It is a little like parents telling their children *not* to take risks, not to experiment with sex, drugs and rock-and-roll: the downside of the risks falls on the children but also very heavily on the parents, who will suffer horribly if their teenage daughter gets pregnant or their son drops out of school to start a band. But the upside goes entirely to the children: the exciting sexual experiences or adoring fans will massively benefit the children but not the parents. So it’s a tricky balancing act for the kids — plenty of drawbacks and rewards alike — but a no-contest decision for the parents. That doesn’t show that it’s a good idea for children to engage in crazy risks, but it means the perspective of the parents is biased in ways that need to be discounted for appropriately. I believe that something similar is true of appeals to the deathbed.²⁵

25. Thanks to Georges Rey, Pat Greenspan, and Rachel Singpurwalla for helpful comments and discussion.