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**Article:**

Holroyd, J. (2017) On Regretting Things I Didn't Do and Couldn't Have Done. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 34 (3). pp. 403-413. ISSN 0264-3758

<https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12246>

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## On regretting things I didn't do and couldn't have done

### Jules Holroyd

One of the lines of investigation opened up by Wallace in *The View from Here* concerns the notion of regret: what it is, what it is rationally constrained by, and what are the proper objects of regret. A distinctive feature of Wallace's view is that regret is an intention-like state, which, whilst backward-looking, is bound up with our future directed practices of value. In this commentary, I set out Wallace's claims on regret, its rational constraints, and its objects, and raise some worries about Wallace's position on each of these three issues.

#### 1. Wallace on regret: what it is, what it is constrained by, and its objects

##### a. Regret

What is it to regret something? This is a notion we are familiar with, no doubt: regretting that missed opportunity, or regretting not having made more efforts to sustain that friendship. As Wallace sees it, to 'all in' regret some action is to have a negative emotional reaction to a past action (23), and have an on-balance preference that the action or event should not have occurred, insofar as it harmed or damaged the things one values and cares about.<sup>1</sup> In particular, this preference is to be construed as something analogous to an intention, albeit backward-looking: 'one takes a definite stance on the question as to whether things should have been otherwise' (56). Regret involves a commitment that it should not have happened, insofar as it thwarted the things about which one cares. In construing regret as an intention-like state, Wallace sets his view apart from views according to which regret is a wish, or desire, that something not have happened.<sup>2</sup> Why construe regret in this way?

We might be tempted to see regret as characterised as a desire that something not have occurred (that the friendship not have lapsed). But we don't always stand behind our desires. Consider the future-directed case: I may desire something, whilst holding that I should not in fact pursue it (55). Alternatively, we might see regret as distinguished by backward-looking negative affect. But this overlooks the fact that we might have mixed feelings towards an event that we hold should not have, on balance, occurred (54).

An understanding of regret in terms of something analogous to an intention-like state better characterises the commitment involved in regret as involving a more decisive stance that it should not have happened. It is akin to a conditional commitment: 'one has resolved for oneself what one would do, as regards a past state of affairs, under the counterfactual supposition that it was open to one to make a difference in the matter one way or another' (57). This characterisation of regret has two corollaries worth remarking on in particular.

First, Wallace holds that construing regret in this way helps us to understand the point of such backward-looking attitudes, which might otherwise seem self-indulgent. Such attitudes are bound up with our practices of valuing and attachment (23-33). If I

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1 This is in contrast to the idea of 'having regrets', which is not an all things considered attitude.

2 For writings which construe regret as a sort of wish, see e.g. Hare, 2011; Baron 1988 (who sees some but not all kinds of regret as involving a wish that things had been otherwise), Barnum-Roberts 2011 (who suggests this wish is essential to regret). For an overview of distinct positions on regret, see Baron 2013

value friendship - and \*this\* friendship in particular - then I am committed to regretting - to feeling bad at the thought that it should have been otherwise than - that I let that friendship lapse. Regret is construed as a conditional commitment: were it possible that I could do it again, I would do it differently. But it also entails certain forward-looking stances: to avoid similar behaviour in future, or to act so as to remedy the bad way the relationship has proceeded (31), for example. Thus, construing regret as an intention-like state is important for capturing the sort of commitment - backward-looking and conditional, as well as forward-looking - involved in regret (59-60). It shows how regret enables us to resolve to act in conditional conditions, were we to confront such circumstances again.

Second, intention-like states will be subject to a different sort of rational commitment than mere wishes or desires. It is not irrational to have conflicting wishes or desires - this merely raises the issue of which to satisfy. But it is irrational to have conflicting intentions, and likewise to have an intention-like state that some action both should and should not have occurred.

## **b. Constraints**

There are constraints on our engagement in the practice of valuing in general; and constraints internal to the practice, on the attitudes that we are susceptible to on the basis of our participation in that practice. Regarding the practice, Wallace observes that having attachments is itself valuable - indeed, it is what gives our lives meaning. And, insofar as we have some attachments this renders us vulnerable to the attitudes of retrospective assessment - regret or affirmation. It is simply not feasible to have such attachments and to be invulnerable to such attitudes of retrospective assessment and their attendant affective states (in particular, pain or sorrow, in the case of regret).<sup>3</sup> To suppose we could value without such emotional engagement, Wallace maintains, is 'minimally coherent, [but] hardly seems worthy of serious attention' (27). This is what it is to have attachments, and to be engaged in the practice of valuing.

If our lives are structured by these attachments which make us vulnerable to such emotions, so too are there internal constraints, which structure the attitudes - of regret and affirmation - to which we are susceptible on account of these attachments. Accordingly, I cannot at the same time take up attitudes of all-in regret (commitment that the event should not have happened) and unconditional affirmation (a commitment that it should have happened) towards the same past actions or events: 'these are contrary attitudes that cannot be combined' (69). This follows from the fact that regret involves this intention-like state that commits the agent to a definite stance on whether the event should have happened. Let us summarise this constraint as follows:

(C1) that the same action or event cannot both be affirmed and regretted - one cannot take up the definitive stance that it should and should not have happened.

As such, regret and affirmation must have distinct proper objects. This is not to say that we may not perform the 'parsing maneuver' (70-72) and regret some event (e.g. the natural

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3 For the skeptical challenge about the point of regret to which Wallace responds here, see Bittner 1992

disaster) whilst affirming some distinct parts of it (the heroism of the rescue team). But this is only possible where the relationship between the events to which we take up these distinct attitudes is not one of conceptual or causal necessity (72-73). In the latter case, if we affirm some relationship or pursuit, then we are committed to affirming the necessary causal antecedents of its existence or pursuit: 'one's affirmative attitude spreads backwards, as it were, encompassing as well the historical conditions that were necessary for its existence' (75).<sup>4</sup> This is the 'realism constraint' on our affirmative attitudes, which does not permit us to deny the necessary preconditions for those things about which we care. Let us summarise this constraint as:

(C2) if one unconditionally affirms some event, one is committed to affirming the necessary conceptual and causal antecedents to that event (the 'realism constraint').

Interestingly, Wallace seems not to suppose that such a realism condition applies to regret; there is no suggestion that if we regret some event - hold that it should not have happened - then we are committed to regretting its causally necessary antecedents. We may wonder why this is, and shall return to it below.

Finally, we should note that the rational constraints on regret (and affirmation) are implicated in the forward looking role of such retrospective attitudes. Indeed, were contrary attitudes to be held towards the same object, we can also see that the forward-looking role of regret would also be undermined. The continuity between the conditional commitment not to have so acted, and to in future avoid so acting in similar conditions, means that our future-directed conditional commitments would also be inflected by conflict. We would be resolved both to act and to not so act, under future conditions in which the objects of our cares are implicated. This sort of conflict of commitment - of our practical resolutions about how to act - is paradigmatic of practical irrationality; we could not successfully pursue those things we value if beset by such conflict.

### **c. The objects of regret**

About what is it appropriate to take up these commitments, that things should have been otherwise? Most naturally, we hold this attitude towards things in which our agency was implicated; our own actions or omissions: I should have done more to sustain the friendship, say. But Wallace also seeks to extend the scope of regret to events beyond our own agency - beyond the scope of our own lives, even. Insofar as the things about which we care might be thwarted by events beyond our control, we might regret such events, and in so doing take up a definitive stance that this event not have occurred. In these cases, the counterfactual thoughts involved in the resolution that the occurrence not have happened are, Wallace claims, 'more complex, involving elements of fantasy' (64). In a central example, articulating the idea of regret for events, Wallace describes a case in which a natural disaster is regretted. In regretting the tsunami that caused great devastation, and loss of life, I undertake the following suppositions: that I might 'unspool the film of time' to the point where I might intervene (64); that I might have it in my power to at that point in time intervene; that these powers are sufficient to preserve those things for which I care

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4 For further concerns about this parsing maneuver and the limits of application, see Lenman, this volume.

(the lives otherwise lost, the property and projects otherwise devastated). This might require the supposition that there were 'some mechanism in place, that could have been deployed ... [which might involve] fantastic machines or god like beings ... and that it was in my power to activate the mechanism' (64). In this way our conditional commitments (continuous with future directed commitments that promote our values) are activated in application to events beyond the confines of our own lives - just as those things we value often outlive our own lives.

This understanding of regret also has implications for how we distinguish different kinds of regret. Famously, Williams identified a distinctive sort of regret - 'agent-regret' - as fitting in those cases in which our own agency is implicated, albeit non-culpably, in some harmful or tragic incident.<sup>5</sup> His famous example of the lorry driver - who despite exercising all due caution, tragically kills a child that runs into the road - illustrates the paradigmatic case in which this sort of regret would be appropriate: sorrow at an event in which one's agency has been implicated, albeit non-voluntarily. On Wallace's view, this class of cases is not notably distinct; the regret of the driver is not, he thinks, importantly different from the regret of the parents of the child. Both have their values and attachments seriously thwarted by the event. And since regret encompasses the decisive stance that something should not have occurred regarding both our own agency, and events beyond it, there is no natural or psychological kind preserved for those retrospective attitudes directed towards our own agential involvement.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the important category - which captures the driver's and relatives' responses - is that of personal regret, not that of agent regret. These are cases in which one is personally involved in the regrettable circumstances, either in virtue of one's agency, or in virtue of one's attachments, which are set back by the regrettable circumstances. *Personal* regret 'constitutively involves an appreciation of the special reasons that one's experiences and attachments provide for feelings of pain and distress' (40). It is distinguished from *impersonal* regret only by degree - of involvement, and typically of corresponding emotional intensity of response.

#### d. Summary

In sum, we have seen a distinctive feature of Wallace's view of regret - that it is characterised as a state analogous to intention, and thus commits the agent in a stronger way than mere desire-based views of regret. This has implications for understanding the function of regret - as a constitutive feature of our practices of valuing that also has a role in our resolutions to act in future circumstances. And this construction of regret has import both for the ways in which regret is constrained (rationally prohibiting contrary regrets, or affirmation and regret directed towards the same object), and for what the proper object of regret is - events beyond our agency and even our lives, as well as those in

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5 Marcia Baron (1988) notes that cases in which William's notion of agent regret is appropriate are those in which, were one's agency voluntarily implicated, one would be culpable and guilt the appropriate attitude. I take it that Wallace disagrees with this correspondence, since he rejects the idea of agent-regret, as we will see.

6 One of the key reasons Wallace cites for rejecting the distinction between regret and agent regret is that 'our we-like history ... extends in two directions, involving nonvoluntary causal influences on us as well as nonvoluntary causal effects [such as the lorry driver's killing] that are brought about through our own agency' (38). Nonetheless, the possibility of seeing events beyond the scope of our control and agency as properly objects of regret is accommodated by the view of regret as involving the definite stance as Wallace characterises it.

which our agency - intentional or otherwise - are implicated.

## 2. Regret and intention

The idea that regret is this intention-like state is novel and interesting. Should we accept it? In this section I raise some worries about this move. First, we might wonder about the propriety of such a state with respect to events that are beyond the remit of our agency. Wallace suggests that one way of understanding such retrospective evaluations is as (in the case of affirmation) 'the persistence of the intention that originally led one to perform it' (66). So, I intend to visit the museum, and once that event is in the past, my attitude (that the action should occur) persists but is transformed into a backward looking state, affirmation (the action should have occurred). Regret then might involve the persistence of some definitive preference that I not perform some action. I intend not to let the friendship lapse; it lapses; my attitude that this should not happen persists, but becomes backward looking.

There are three ways in which there is something unnatural about extending this analogy to regret, though. First, the cases in which I intend not to do something, then do it, with the persistence of my intention not to so act, are most naturally understood as cases of akratic action (where I act against my intention),<sup>7</sup> or as cases of mistake - where my action misfires, and I fail to do as intended. But regret is surely not restricted to these cases, nor are they paradigmatic of regret. Rather, I might clear sightedly choose a course of action - I decide to eat the delicious dinner (hold that it should happen), knowing it will make me extremely full - yet later regret so doing (take the decisive stance that it should not have happened). In this case, there is no continuity of the intention prior to, and after the action, such that it is not apt to see the retrospective assessment (that I should not have eaten) as continuous with the initial intention (that I should).

Second, consider that, except in the cases where I have set some deliberative option aside, we do not often form explicit intentions *not to* bring about some event. I eat all of the delicious dinner, but do not explicitly intend that in doing so, I should not make my friend sad when it turns out there is no dinner remaining for her when she later arrives home. Nonetheless, if it turns out that she is so dismayed, I regret not only eating all of the dinner, but in particular causing her upset. Since I did not form the intention to not upset my friend, my later definitive stance that this should not have happened cannot be continuous with an earlier future directed state.

Third, we don't usually form intentions of any kind about the occurrence or non-occurrence of events beyond our agential control. This is not surprising, since our intentions concern how we will act (or refrain from acting). As such, (returning to Wallace's example) I do not ever intend that the tsunami not occur, since whether it does or not is never something within my control (as natural disasters are not). Again, in this case, when I regret the occurrence of the tsunami, the definitive stance I take that it should not have happened cannot be seen as continuous with a prior intention that it should not occur.

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<sup>7</sup> See Holton (1999) for this characterisation of akrasia (as compared to weak will, construed as over-ready revision of intention).

This is not to say that the attitude of regret should not be seen as an intention-like state - perhaps the model that fits so well in the case of affirmation still helps us to understand the attitude at issue, even if it is not so easily understood as continuous with prior practical attitudes in the case of regret. However, there are further worries with constructing regret as an intention-like attitude.

Wallace himself notes that in cases where what is regretted is an event that does not involve an individual's agency, 'the analogy with intention is somewhat more strained' (65). As we have seen, these cases - which may involve fantastical imaginings about the god-like mechanisms I would deploy to hold back the tsunami - involve 'remote counterfactual conditions ...[which] makes them less like ordinary future-directed plans than are the preferences' which we find in cases of regret focused on the agent's own actions (65). Let us consider the ways in which regret for events differs more fully. Most obviously, as Wallace notes, the attitudes take as their object not actions of an individual, but events.<sup>8</sup> This means that the counterfactual thoughts involved in regret concern what one would do, but not in any close possible world, or indeed any future scenario in which we might find ourselves. Rather, they concern what one would do if one were quite differently positioned, and had quite different powers (e.g. around at the location of the tsunami, and with the god-like powers to prevent it from happening). As such, any conditional commitment to the event not happening, should similar circumstances obtain, will not have a role in structuring our future action, since the sorts of actions they commit us to are not feasibly within our power to in fact perform. Should a tsunami occur in future, I will not be engaged in supernatural acts of intervention, alas! Rather, any conditional commitment I might form will surely involve donating to aid agencies, or, if suitably placed, participating in the relief effort itself. If regretted events beyond our agency were to involve conditional commitment that structured our future action, they would surely be resolutions of this sort, rather than those involving powers of supernatural intervention. As such, we might suppose that a constraint on such resolutions, insofar as they are analogous to intention, is something like the following:

(C3) the conditional commitments involved in regretting some action or event E must concern actions that, given facts about the world and laws of nature, are metaphysically possible for the agent to perform, were she to do it again, or face similar circumstances in future.

Alternatively, we might resist this constraint, and agree with Wallace that such attitudes still have some future directed role - they affirm our commitment to certain values. But it seems they cannot have the future directed role that characterises intention-like states which might structure our future action, insofar as they may involve actions that are not metaphysically possible for beings like us. We may then consider such attitudes not as akin to intention, but as something else. Wallace suggests that the challenge is to articulate what other sort of attitude such a state would be: it would have to be some sort of 'whole hearted attitude of the agent's that represents a ground of choice, rather than a resolution

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<sup>8</sup> Perhaps these events may include actions of agents other than the individual subject to regret? This might have some strange implications, but I set aside this concern for now.

or volitional commitment of some kind' (footnote 39). But as we have seen, it is a little misleading to consider such attitudes as resolutions for *action*, or volitional commitments to *doing* certain things, since the conditions under which such resolutions would be enacted are not ones that would ever materialise, given their fantastical contents. Why not consider such attitudes, then, as some sort of endorsed desire - a desire that one stands behind, and which is bound up with one's values - which is not so much a conditional commitment to *act*, as intentions are - yet may serve as a ground of choice. Wallace suggests he is skeptical of such proposals, but does not explain their deficits. Yet as we have seen, there is reason to suppose that the analogy with intention is stretched rather too far in the case of regret for events beyond our agency. There are three options for Wallace here, it seems:

1a) one option is to give different analyses of regret according to whether the attitude takes as its object an action of our own (in which case the attitude is intention-like), or an event beyond the scope of our agency (in which case the attitude is more like an endorsed desire);

1b) another option would be to stick with an account of regret in terms of intention, but limit cases of regret to those which involve our own agency, and see events as cause for sorrow or sadness, but not regret per se.

Both of these options move us away from a unified account of regret for actions and for events beyond our agency, and towards reintroducing the distinctive kind of agent-regret, that Wallace repudiated.

1c) Alternatively, one might seek to characterise regret as intention-like in both the cases of actions and events, and make good on this characterisation by placing some further constraints on the sorts of commitment involved, such as C3, above.

This latter option would preserve the idea that there is nothing distinctive per se about regret for those events which implicate our agency, and that the crucial distinction is between personal and impersonal regret. Let us next consider in more detail how such a constraint might figure in Wallace's account of the retrospective attitudes.

### **3. Regret and rational constraint**

As mentioned earlier, Wallace proposes the following constraints on the retrospective attitudes:

(C1) that the same action or event cannot both be affirmed and regretted - one cannot take up the definitive stance that it should and should not have happened.

Second:



(C2) if one unconditionally affirms some event, one is committed to affirming the necessary conceptual and causal antecedents to that event (the 'realism constraint').

I have also suggested that, insofar as it is constructed as an intention-like state, we should see regret as subject to some further realism constraint, concerning the sorts of actions are contained in the conditional commitments to act were one to encounter such conditions again:

(C3) the conditional commitments involved in regretting some action or event E must concern actions that, given facts about the world and laws of nature, are metaphysically possible for the agent to perform, were she to do it again, or face similar circumstances in future.

One issue that arises is whether we should endorse C2 (see Lenman, this volume, for discussion) and if so, why this the realism constraint does not apply to regret. If I regret some happening, P, am I not committed to regretting the necessary causal and conceptual antecedents of P, as with affirmation? In understanding what motivates the asymmetry between regret and affirmation, with respect to C2, that Wallace seems to endorse, it is worth noting that at some points, Wallace seems to take the necessary causal antecedents to be expansive. In articulating 'the bourgeois predicament' (chapter 5) he seems to suggest that we must be committed to affirming the necessary causal histories of those things we in fact now value. For example, I may affirm the life of a loved one, whilst recognising that this individual would not have existed had the history of the world been even slightly different (such that her parents had not met). Thus, if I affirm her existence, I am committed to affirming the fact that her parents had met. Our predicament is that this may well commit us to affirming some terrible events in the history of the world (e.g. the transatlantic slave trade) that are necessary causal antecedents for this meeting, and hence the existence of this individual. Our predicament, as Wallace describes it, is being thus committed to affirming causal histories that are most avowedly unworthy of affirmation.

However, if regret were similarly constrained, then insofar as an event is regretted, I would be committed to regretting the necessary causal antecedents of that event. For example, perhaps I regret forgetting the birthday of this loved one, taking up the definitive stance that this forgetting should not have happened. If C2 applied to regret, then I would be committed to regretting the necessary causal antecedents of that regrettable event. We can see why this would be an undesirable consequence of Wallace's account: since the same events may appear in the causal history of affirmed and regretted events, we may then be committed to affirming and regretting the same antecedent events. For instance, the meeting of the individuals who are responsible for bringing the loved one into existence is part of the same *de facto* and necessary causal history of my affirmation (the existence of the loved one), and the regretted event (my forgetting their birthday, which would have been impossible had that individual not been birthed). But, as we have seen, Wallace holds that we are rationally constrained such that regret and affirmation must not take the same object (C1). This would be a predicament distinct from that of affirming unworthy events; we would be in the predicament of practical irrationality in our

conflicting retrospective attitudes, committed to both regretting and affirming the same events. So, it should be important to Wallace's account that regret is not bound by the same realism constraint as affirmation. But Wallace gives no clear indication why such an asymmetry might obtain.

However, we are in a position now to see one reason for which such an asymmetry would cohere with Wallace's account: if regretting events involves commitments to act in ways that are metaphysically fanciful involving god-like mechanisms, as Wallace suggests, then this attitude detaches itself from realism about the causal chains in which the event occurs. If we do not have to be realistic about the interventions that would have prevented its occurrence, why be realistic about what in fact brought it about in the first place? But I have suggested in the previous section that there are good reasons for Wallace to step back from such a view of regret for events, and to endorse something like (C3) - a constraint on the conditional commitments to act that such attitudes involve in order to better preserve the analogy with intention. But if that modification is accepted, then it is not clear what else does the work of blocking the realism constraint (C2) that pertains to the causal antecedents of the event from regret. It looks as though we have the following options:

2a) accept the realism constraint on regret as well as affirmation,

But as we have seen, this is to countenance the possibility that we are committed to irrationality - violating C1 - in virtue of affirming and regretting the same events in the causal histories of the events and actions we affirm and regret.

2b) reject the realism constraint on regret (C2), along with the constraint on the conditional commitments to act (C3).

Regret could then involve metaphysically fanciful resolutions to act, were one faced with the circumstances again, or similar ones in future. But this would then loosen once again the intention-like structure of regret for events, and therefore to face options 1a and 1b, from the previous section (seeing regret as involving different attitudes depending on whether it takes action or events as its object; or limiting regret to one's actions alone, respectively). Alternatively, one might insist that the asymmetry between affirmation and regret is correct, in which case there is further work to be done:

2c) provide further reason for which the realism constraint C2 does not apply to regret (even whilst the constraint C3 does).

One may hold that C2 does not hold of regret, since it is not a constraint on any of our retrospective attitudes (Lenman, this volume). But then the 'bourgeois predicament' of affirming unworthy states of affairs is not generated.

#### **4. The objects of regret revisited**

One reason for which Wallace seeks to give a unified account of regret for actions and

events is that doing so enables him to reject the claim, from Williams, that there is something distinctive about agent-regret. Rather, regret for both our own actions and events beyond our agency are of a piece, for Wallace, in a way that makes sense given the way such retrospective attitudes are bound up with our practice of valuing. I close by raising some doubts about whether Williams' distinction should be rejected - this has implications for which of the above options (1a-c, 2a-c) one might be inclined to take. Reconsider the lorry driver example. Both the lorry driver, and the parents of the child, Wallace suggests, have reason to feel personal regret, since their involvement in the event has significantly thwarted their attachments and projects. Indeed, Wallace suggests that 'if anything [the parent's] attitudes seem to have greater weight than those of the lorry driver, since their attachments seem more extensively affected by the unfortunate outcome than is the case with him' (43). Wallace's analysis, which sees personal, rather than agent, regret as the fundamental category of attitude - to be contrasted with impersonal regret - is true to this intuition about the propriety of the parental, and driver's, responses. And indeed, this intuition can be borne out by an analysis that sees regret for actions and events as all of a piece, bound up with our practices of valuing, and personal according to the degree that our attachments are implicated in and thwarted by our actions or by turns of events.

But there may be reason to preserve the notion of agent-regret (e.g. if one sees the appeal of options 1a and 1b above), and one might do so consistently with Wallace's intuitions about the lorry case. For consider an individual whose attachments and projects are strongly involved in, and thwarted by, the unfortunate outcome: an avid road safety campaigner, who has lobbied for lower speed limits in the area of the incident over many years. The values of this individual (road safety, avoidance of needless accidents) are themselves setback by the lorry driver's tragedy; her response is a candidate for personal regret. Yet it seems to me there is reason to suppose that we would not expect (and indeed, would be somewhat surprised to find) that this individuals' response be of a similar kind or intensity to that of the parent or driver. Yet her projects and values are similarly thwarted by the event. If we share *this* intuition, we will have reason to doubt that it is personal regret that really is the fundamental category of attitude at issue here. Moreover, that there is something distinctive about both the involvement of the driver and the child's relatives that may yet be captured by the notion of agent regret. After all, whilst the parents' agency is not directly implicated in the way that the driver's is, the relatives of the child (or those under whose guardianship the fateful afternoon was spent) will ask themselves 'what could I have done differently?' in recognition of the way their actions - including omissions - may be implicated in the tragic outcome. Indeed, as I have suggested in sections 2 and 3, there may be other reasons for preserving the distinction between the retrospective attitudes events in which our agency is implicated, and those concerning events beyond our agential involvement.

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