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La Révolution est un bloc? Wallace on Affirmation and Regret

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The two world wars of '14-18 and '39-45 were terrible things. An ocean of suffering and death overwhelmed Europe and much of Asia. It would be better if they had never happened. And yet it is perhaps difficult seriously to wish for that. Here is a safe bet. These wars had the effect of massively disrupting and displacing the lives of enormous numbers of people. In so doing they had a huge effect on where people, especially young adult people at the age people typically marry and start families, were living and when, whom they met, when they married, when they had children. These disruptive effects were plausibly so huge that, at least in Europe, a huge difference was made to the identities of people now alive. But for these devastating wars most of us would never have existed and other, quite distinct people would have existed instead. So in wishing these wars had not occurred I am, in effect, wishing that I (very probably), and all or almost all of those I love and care for, had never been born. But I surely do not wish that.

I learn that you have been doing me some grave wrong. Perhaps you have been supplying my teenage son with class A drugs. I fly into a rage and rush from the house to find and confront you. Just after I leave the house it explodes. (Gas leak. Who knew?) I might have been cross with you for selling my son heroin but now look, it is only because of you doing that that I am alive now. Shouldn't I be grateful? If I welcome the fact that I survived the explosion then, given that that fact depends on the fact that you have been selling little Kevin drugs, shouldn't I now welcome the fact that you have been selling little Kevin drugs?

Jay Wallace's rich and fascinating new book *The View From Here*[1] is largely devoted to wrestling with just such puzzles as these . More precisely, the book is largely about two attitudes Wallace calls *affirmation* and *regret*. It is important to be quite clear what these are. To affirm an action is to prefer that it have been performed. To affirm a situation is to prefer that it obtain and to take an attitude of affirmation to a person or thing is to prefer that it exist, with all the qualities it actually has, rather than not. But Wallace wants to stress that, as he conceives them, such attitudes of affirmation are "intention-like" (66) insofar as an attitude directed at the past and not necessarily to an action can be intention-like. In the case where what is affirmed is an action and an action of one's own, we can understand affirmation as "something like the persistence of the original intention that originally led one to perform it." (66) So I woke up today with a positive attitude to travelling into work that amounted to an intention. We can't call it that now that I've gone and done it, but I haven't changed my mind about that positive attitude, it has merely taken on a new shape as affirmation. We could think of it as a kind of hypothetical willing. If I wake up now and discover it is still last night and what seemed like today so far is all a dream, I'll get up and travel to work as planned, just in virtue of this state of mind. This way of thinking about affirmation (and regret) matters for Wallace because, to get his central argument off the ground, he needs affirmation (and

[1] Oxford: OUP, 2013. All page reference s are to this book unless stated otherwise.

regret) to be subject to just the same coherence constraints as intentions are and mere wishes, pretty plainly, are not. You cannot, Wallace insists, affirm something that you also regret at least when by regret we understand what he calls "all-in" regret. To all-in regret an action is to prefer, in the same committed way, that it not have been performed. To all-in regret a situation is to prefer that it not obtain and to take an attitude of all-in regret to a person or thing is to prefer that it not exist . These attitudes of affirmation and regret, he writes, cannot be coherently combined (70) towards the same objects.

Of course they can be coherently combined towards *different* objects. So long, he writes, as "the objects that are distinguished are conceptually and causally independent from each other, to a degree sufficient to enable us to form counterfactual thoughts about one object without the other." (70) But we cannot, he goes on to insist, do this in cases where the things we would distinguish are necessarily connected either conceptually or causally. If X is a causally necessary condition for Y, then we cannot affirm the one and all-in regret the other.

Except when we can. For there is a further qualification. There are cases of conditional affirmation or regret where the past circumstances that caused what we affirm are "screened off" in the appraisal of individual actions

> because actions are themselves responses to a set of circumstances that confront the agent as a matter of facticity. At the moment of the action, certain things have to be taken as given, insofar as they are no longer under the agent's power to affect one way or another, the fact that the house is on fire or that a promise has been made. The deliberative task is to select among the options that it is now open to the agent to perform given the fixed circumstances that constitute the deliberative context. We therefore screen off those fixed consequences in retrospective assessment of the action, focusing on the question of whether the action was or was not worthy of affirmation, given the circumstances that define its immediate context. (74-5)

This happens when I am able to admire the heroism of the firefighter occasioned by the fire which itself I do not of course affirm.

There are, however, says Wallace, cases where "affirmation assumes a different and unconditional form". Here: "One does not merely affirm those objects, given that the necessary causal conditions for them obtained; rather one is glad on balance that those objects are in fact part of the history of the world, taking into account the totality of things that they involved." (75) This sort of unconditional assessment is, he says, "extremely important". It is extremely important because "[i]f we are attached to an individual or project, then we will typically affirm the direct objects of our attachments in a distinctively unconditional way."(77)

I'd pause here to say first off that I don't think this at all obvious. Suppose I love you. That is a very common, natural and certainly very important state of mind. I am glad, I say, that you exist. But this might mean more than one thing. It might mean I prefer your existing to your never having existed. But it might also mean, something different, I want you to continue existing and perhaps, again something different, that I am glad you have continued to exist thus far. These different things can come apart as is easily seen in the case of one's own life. I might unconditionally affirm my life and be very happy I came into being without having any desire to remain in being if, for example, I am

old and ailing and lonesome and think that, while I have had a wonderful life, the stuff that made it wonderful is all now in the past. Or of course I might cling stubbornly to a disappointing life that I see little reason to affirm. I rather worry that it is because Wallace rather runs these things together (see esp. pp. 187-197; p. 255), especially wanting X's existence and wanting X's continued existing, that he perhaps overstates the importance of the very particular sort of affirmation that concerns him.

Like perhaps most people who have given the matter much thought, I have mixed feelings about the French Revolution. I'm pleased that France rejected Bourbon absolutism, abolished feudalism and embraced the democratic and liberal ideals that have informed and inspired much of what seems to me best in subsequent European political culture.. But I am appalled by the September Massacres and the Terror and the current of ghastly fanaticism that chillingly adumbrates the way more the idealism of more recent, twentieth century revolutions has so often been poisonously corrupted into murderous madness. Just such ambivalence was challenged by Georges Clemenceau, speaking in the French Chamber of Deputies in 1891. There Clemenceau attacked those who would say, on examining the Revolution, "J'accepte ceci, et je rejette cela!" and goes on to claim: "Messieurs, que nous le voulions ou non, que cela nous plaise ou que cela nous choque, la Révolution française est un bloc."[2] The thought is very much in the spirit of Wallace on affirmation, as his developing argument makes clear: it's a package deal, you affirm or reject the whole thing. Perhaps the understanding of affirmation as intention-like helps again here. Consider a more extravagant variant on my dreamt travelling to work example above,: a fantasy scenario where a powerful supernatural being has set back the clock to the beginning of 1789 (cf. 63) and placed you, well-briefed, let us suppose, in modern history, before a switch that will, as if magically, allow you to determine whether the familiar Revolutionary chain of events is to unfold as you have read it described or whether it is to simply be disappeared from history. Of course it would be impossible here to know what you should do because you can't know anything about alternative history of the counterfactual Revolution-free world. (Shit happens. And it's a safe bet that, when that shit doesn't happen, different shit happens instead.) Be that as it may, the point here is that, when we contemplate this scenario, the Revolution is indeed a block, to be chosen or refused as a package deal. And there is certainly such a mental state as the state of affirming a thing in a sense that commits one to some such counterfactual intention. But again I think we can legitimately be sceptical about attaching any very central importance of that very particular kind of affirmation. Other brands are surely available that allow us to make abundant sense of the sort of eminently sensible affirmatory cherry-picking Clemenceau deplored.

2.

Wallace holds that affirmation and regret can come apart from moral and other normative judgements. For Wallace (see esp. chapter 4) it is quite possible for someone to think:

> I ought not to have done that but I'm awfully glad I did.

[2] ("I accept this and I reject that"; "Gentlemen, whether we like it or not, whether it pleases or shocks us, the French Revolution is a block.") Quoted, "Georges Clemenceau (1891) : "La Révolution est un bloc " (29 janvier 1891)" at the website of the Assemblée Nationale (http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/decouvrir-l-assemblee/histoire/grands-moments-d-eloquence/georges-clemenceau-1891-la-revolution-est-un-bloc-29-janvier-1891)

That might seem puzzling in the way clear-eyed akrasia seems puzzling. For sincere and serious normative judgement might seem to entail some kind of intention-like commitment of the will of just the sort that Wallace appeals to in characterising affirmation and regret. At pp. 173-174, Wallace raises this kind of concern but in a way that suggests it is only a problem for expressivist understandings of the normative. I'm not sure if that's right, and even if it is, it won't do much to tame the worry if, as I am disposed to believe, expressivist understandings of the normative are true.

But how deep is the problem? Consider two of Wallace's own examples. In the first (110ff) someone cashes in their life savings and goes on a gambling spree. Against all the odds they get lucky and are able to retire with considerable wealth. They can then perfectly coherently think, that what they did was horribly stupid, something they really should not have done and at the same time, be immensely pleased that they did it. That's easy because the normative judgement here, in a context like this where we are concerned with normative appraisal, is properly supposed to be subjective, relative to the epistemic circumstances of the agent. Given what I knew before I did what I did, what I did was almost certain to end in disaster. So I was a fool to do it. But it didn't end in disaster. So thank heaven I did it. That looks perfectly coherent. In the second example (98ff) you promise to drive me to the airport.[3] You don't. You don't show. You break your promise and let me down and have precious little to say in your defence when I quiz you as to why. But thank goodness you did. Because you broke your promise I never boarded the plane. And the plane went on to crash, killing everyone on board. Again this is surely straightforward enough. You are blameworthy for breaking your promise which you ought not to have broken (in that subjective sense that is most appropriately relevant to contexts of appraisal and blame). But thank goodness you did: you saved my life. You were wrong to act as you did, given what you then knew, but, had you known what we now know, you would plausibly have been right. And we do now know what we now know so we are all jolly pleased you let me down, though of course we may, consistently with that, think less well of you as a consequence. In both cases new information about the consequences of what is done make it sensible to affirm in retrospect actions that it would have been – and was - stupid or wrong to affirm at the time.

Compare the second of the two examples with which I began. Because you have supplied my child with hard drugs, I find myself with a reason to leave my house just before it explodes. It was quite wrong for you to supply my child with hard drugs given the information available at the time. How about given the information available now? Well, then it was *still* quite wrong. Because for you to supply my child my drugs was really quite terrible even if probably less terrible in its consequences than for him to lose his father in an explosion. Had you known my house was about to blow up, you could have got me to leave by supplying drugs to my boy and contriving for me to find out just at the right time to have me rush out of the door before the explosion. But that would be a ridiculous way of achieving that result which you could just as easily have achieved in countless other, far more innocent, ways. That's why, while you have saved my life, I won't be very grateful.

I am glad you saved my life, I want to say. And I deplore what you did. In fact I want to say more. I want to say that I can affirm that I got out the house in time and also regret that you did what you did to my boy. Surely that is right. And surely it is not a problem even when we are concerned with

[3] Unsurprisingly none of Wallace's examples are about me (JL) or you (whoever you are) but he often sets them up in terms of notional people he calls "you" and "me" and I follow him in that.

unconditional affirmation and all-in regret. It is not a problem because ""the objects that are distinguished are conceptually and causally independent from each other, to a degree sufficient to enable us to form counterfactual thoughts about one object without the other." I'm glad I was saved and sorry you supplied my child with drugs and this is fine because I can form the perfectly coherent wish that I had been saved by some other means without your having done that, as might very well, in some counterfactual circumstances, have happened.

The crucially slippery thing here is surely talk of what is causally *necessary*. Your supplying my son with drugs was causally necessary for my being saved: the conditional, "Had you not supplied my son with drugs I would not have been saved" is true. But it is *contingently* true. So I might have been saved without you doing as you did. If we read Wallace as claiming that the affirming of one thing and the regretting of another is only possible where the one is not causally necessary for the other as involving the strong form of causal necessity that demands a *noncontingent* causal linkage, it doesn't apply to a case like the house explosion. But that does not seem to be how Wallace reads it. For Wallace pretty clearly does think the problem arises in cases like the broken promise-crashed plane case and here too the causal connection is evidently *contingent*. There are countless ways the desired outcome of my missing the plane could have happened without your having broken any promises. Here and elsewhere, Wallace seems to be adopting the weak reading where it is enough that the conditional, "Had X not happened, Y would not have happened" be true. But that being the case seems perfectly consistent with our having enough independence in play "to enable us to form counterfactual thoughts about one object without the other" as indeed I have just been doing.

3.

It all gets much trickier when we turn to one of his central examples. The example is already famous from Parfit's discussion of the so-called non-identity problem[4] A 14-year old girl choses to conceive and have a child. This, let's agree for argument's sake, she should not do. It is wrong to bring a child into the world when one lacks the maturity to raise it as well as one should. This is not only wrong prudentially, it is wrong morally. Of course the child is not worse off than had he never existed and so is not harmed and may have no complaint because his very existence depends on the wrong in question but there is still plausibly a wrong done, just as we would plausibly do a wrong if (the other famous Parfit example[5]) our descendants live difficult and harsh lives because we have despoiled their environment even if their very identities depend on our having so despoiled it.

The problem is that as her life continues with her son, both she and her son will want to affirm his life. But how can they if they are to deplore, as it seems they should, the decision to conceive and raise him? And here there is a worry as the causal link is at least arguably less contingent. The woman could have had a child by waiting till she was in a better position to be a mother, but she could not have had *that* child the son whose existence she now affirms. To have *that* child she would have had to become pregnant just when she did. (Of course that can be disputed. Claims about the necessity of origin take us onto extremely vexed metaphysical waters which I won't try to navigate here.)

[4] Derek Parfit: *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: OUP, 2984), 357-361.
[5] Ibid, 361-364.

Crucially though, the manoeuvring of epistemic perspective that helped in other cases won't so clearly help here. Once the child is born and living his life the mother loves him and will want to affirm his life as indeed will he. She is glad, profoundly glad, that Martin exists and so is Martin himself. At the time of conception she did not yet have this *de re* attachment to him of course. But she knew that she would. Or could at least be very confident. Things can go wrong here. "You all want to know something? Well, I don't like Leo. My very own son and I don't like him." declares Birdie Hubbard in Hellman's "The Little Foxes", understandably enough, of her horrible child.[6] But mothers are famously good as loving often even offspring others find it hard to love so we can take it as a fairly safe bet that the young girl will affirm her son's existence once he exists. And her having this advance knowledge didn't make what she did any less wrong. For of course she would have had a similar *de re* attachment to the other children she might instead have had at later times.

The case is not like the air crash case in that we cannot claim there is new information on the table that has changed everything. But there is *a new attachment* and might it not be plausible to treat that as having comparable significance. It may help here to consider a case which is similar in structure but which doesn't raise vexatious issues of non-identity.

Consider a strange imaginary race, the Strangers. Among us Strangers, we marry strangers. Perhaps we post profiles on the internet and when we see one that interests us we negotiate and investigate through family members without our ever meeting or directly communicating before the wedding where we will meet and talk for the first time. Surprisingly perhaps, this works rather well for these folk. Almost everyone who gets married in this way forms a strong and lasting loving attachment to their partner. Now here I am wondering whether it is a good idea to marry Bertha. I know that if I do so I will most likely come to love her. And that will be a reason, later on, retrospectively to affirm having married her, if I do. But it is not now a reason to marry her rather than someone else. For I know I will acquire, with equal likelihood, a similar retrospective reason for affirmation of my marriage to anyone else I might marry instead. Plausibly it seems to me, the fact that I will love Bertha if I marry her, does not count as a reason, before I marry her, for my doing so; but does very much count as a reason, after I have married her: my present and actual love for her then gives me a very strong reason retrospectively to affirm my having done so. So new attachments, new emotions, have the capacity to transform the normative situation no less radically than do new facts.

Can the young girl affirm, in Wallace's sense, the existence of her child while not affirming, in the same sense, her having begun his life when she was so very young? We'll come back to the question how much this matters. But even if it does, there may be more room for manoeuvre than Wallace allows. At one point in his discussion of her case, he writes:

> The young girl's decision to have a child is a necessary condition for this object of affirmation, because the individual person simply wouldn't have existed if the girl had decided to postpone conception by more than a few weeks. At least this is the case so long as we abstract from the possibility of deploying techniques of assisted reproduction, such as the cryopreservation of the young girl's fertilized egg cells, techniques which we can reasonably assume not to have been real options for the girl in this particular scenario. (144)

[6] Lillian Hellman: *Six Plays* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 205.

That little complication is quite interesting. For while we may very credibly build into the imagined situation the unavailability of cryopreservation that would have made it possible for that very child to have been raised from birth by a biological mother mature enough to raise it better than her teenage self could, quite literally by putting him on ice, that unavailability is plausibly not going to obtain by *metaphysical necessity* in the way that child's having been conceived by that girl at that time might be thought to obtain by metaphysical necessity. So the counterfactual thoughts we need *are* available. It is wonderful that Martin exists, we all think, but if only some technique had been available to let his mother raise him later on when she is an adult. If only that had been the case, he could have come into the world without her doing something wrong. So we can deplore what we need to deplore and affirm what we need to affirm and it is all fine.[7]

4.

We may still be troubled by my opening example of the connection between our own existence and the two world wars. Or by the other Parfitian case where our descendants owe their existence to our despoiling the world. These are both particularised versions of the case Wallace closes with, which is a more general thought that all of our lives are embedded in what he calls "the larger world of lamentable processes". The causal histories that led to my birth and to yours are, when we let our imagination loose on the question, vast and in large measure inscrutable, going back a long way, all the way back to when there was no back. And over those long histories, a lot of very bad stuff has happened, including plausibly some stuff that is unaffirmably bad – perhaps in the way the child torn to pieces by dogs in The Brother Karamazov is, we might take Dostoevsky to be suggesting, unaffirmably bad.[8] This forces us, he argues, into the tragic, as he has it, nihilistic, "recognition that the affirmative attitude we assume by default [to our own lives] is not one that ultimately makes sense."(256)

I'm not too troubled by this. There is a possible thought I could want to have which is the thought where I affirm my own life and with it the whole calamitous causal history of the world that has finally issued in it. I am happy enough to accept that I can't really affirm *that* but I'm not sure if I care. Wallace writes: "Anxiety about meaning, on this interpretation of it, derives from our recognition that the deep aspiration to live lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation may not be realizable at the end of the day." (257) But I'm not sure by now I have this aspiration to go in for this very specifically characterised attitude to my own life, or, if I do, that it is very deep, the more so as Wallace's own discussion only makes clear how odd this attitude would be. I deplore, to be sure, the awfulness of all the awful things in human history albeit in the rather idle and impotent way which is all most of us can manage in the face of something so huge and, to a great extent, so remote from us. But that doesn't preclude the possibility of my affirming my life in many of the ways we have distinguished and it's far from clear to me that that isn't affirmation enough. I can be glad I am alive in the sense that I want my life to continue and am glad it has continued hitherto. I can be pleased with my life in the sense of being pleased at it having going well compared to other ways it might have gone. I can take moral pride in how I have lived. I can be glad I came into being rather than the various other things that might have happened around the time of my birth, vis a vis who

[7] Of course the counterfactuals involved here while metaphysically possible, are far-fetched and unlikely. But Wallace seems happy with implicit reference to far-fetched an unlikely counterfactuals (cf. 63).

[8] Fyodor Dostoyevsky: *The Brother Karamazov* (many editions and translations), book 5, chapter 4.

did and did not come into being around then. I can do all this without feeling any pressure to revise my judgement that the Carthaginian Wars (say) were a pretty horrendous business, consistently with recognizing the last 14 billion years or so having been the ghastly and lamentable catalogue of misfortune that it has. There may be a sense of "affirmation" where affirming my own life or the lives of those I love requires me to take the same stance to such remote historical events but that very requirement seems to warrant considerable scepticism about how essential that rather special attitude really is to make sense of either my positive evaluation of my own life or my loving attachments to others.

It helps here to recall here another possibility, noted above, that Wallace himself raises in the opening chapter and perhaps insufficiently pursues in those that follow. We affirm what the firefighter does while deploring the fire because, "because [his] actions are themselves responses to a set of circumstances that confront the agent as a matter of facticity." (74-5) Quite. And in a footnote Wallace allows: "One can, however, also conditionally affirm things that are not actions." In just this way surely, history in all its lamentable nastiness, confronts us all "as a matter of facticity"

It is abundantly possible for those who find themselves facing life in the aftermath of wars or environmental catastrophe or just the whole long bloody lamentable mess of history to see themselves as confronted with a challenge to which they hope their lives can be, among other things they may want them to be, an honourable and intelligent response. Living lives that rise well to that challenge will surely leave them with plenty to affirm without feeling much pressure to lapse into nihilism.

I'll end with a final, speculative example. After the appalling Great Chemical War of 2051-2060, there were many big toxic lakes of chemicals left around from the terrible weapons that had wiped out huge populations. Living on among the ruins, I and some of my fellow survivors figure out a clever way of harvesting these chemicals and using them to make stuff that we can use to vaccinate the children against the terrible disease that everyone has been dying off since the war ended. This is good work in which we take some pride. Of course had it not been for the great chemical war we would not be doing this and the GCW was really properly horrible. But can we and do we nonetheless want to affirm what we are doing and the lives we devote to doing it? Well, yes.[9]

[9] I am grateful to Christopher Bennett, Helen Frowe, Jules Holroyd, Miranda Fricker Anca Gheaus and an audience at the Centre for Ethics, Law and Public Affairs at Warwick for comments on an earlier draft.