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## Review

# A theory of regret

Brian Price

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Brian Price's new book – an inspiring exhortation to embrace regret as a political posture – features an unlikely starring cast. There is an infamous war criminal; a customer seeking answers about a billing error; an academic advisee; and a drifter who, in cahoots with his girlfriend, kills her husband. These characters all had the opportunity to feel, and to express, regret – and yet carried on in Édith Piafian defiance.

Price's definition of regret – we can only regret something if we had the option to act otherwise – is informed by Aristotle's distinction between nonvoluntary and involuntary relations. Nonvoluntary relations occur when it is really impossible to do otherwise. Involuntary relations occur when we *could* have done otherwise, but for some reason – probably ignorance – we did not. Many relations that may seem nonvoluntary – climate change, or, to Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucracy – are not, but their seeming so provides an alibi for 'both the one who wishes to deceive and the one who is all too eager to not know' (p. 39).

From his opening comparison of regret to thinking (as opposed to 'stupid' adherence to first principles), Price ushers us into a world of provocative juxtapositions (pp. 42–55). He unfolds analogies before our eyes in dizzying array: Regretting is like mourning, not regretting is like melancholia. Regretting is a 'staying with,' not regretting is a radical break (p. 128). Regretting puts us in touch with emancipatory visions of what can come as opposed to established modes of 'sustained seeing' that prevent change (p. 113). Lastly, one of his most striking alignments: descriptions of thinking resemble descriptions of bureaucracy.

Through such comparisons, Price claims regret as an emotion capable of enabling 'genuine conversation' among the politically polarized (p. 30). Regret:

- (1) is a looking back upon what passed;
- (2) displays before our mind's eye both what happened and 'what should have happened' (p. 63), producing a mental superimposition of images;



- (3) involves an awareness that what passed did not necessarily have to fall out just the way it did – thus it ‘brings us into attunement with the contingency of things’ (p. 60);
- (4) demands an additional awareness that we can never restore what went wrong in the past since the events of the past will never transpire again in exactly the same way or within a parallel constellation of elements;
- (5) is transformative, and in this sense forward-looking, because it ‘should prepare us for the contingency in whatever else arrives and should prevent us from expecting that whatever does arrive will look exactly like what passed’ (p. 131).

What troubles Price are contingent acts masquerading as necessary ones – which he claims ‘occur more rarely than we suppose’ (p. 38). One of Price’s core assumptions is that when involuntary situations are perceived or misrepresented as nonvoluntary, we see no room for the exercise of our will, leaving us feeling (wrongly) helpless, and, perhaps most detrimentally, gradually blunting our sensitivity to contingency (as the events we witness begin to take on a fixed quality). Because we can only feel regret if we had a choice to act, feeling regret must entail, first, distinguishing an involuntary from a nonvoluntary relation, and, in turn, recognizing that what has passed could have been otherwise if we had acted another way. And herein lies regret’s emancipatory potential for Price: to recognize that we could have done otherwise in the past means to be thoughtful about how to change our relationships with each other, with our institutions, and with our habitual ways of acting in the future.

Price’s first chapter disentangles regret, which he conceives of as a feeling that encourages thinking, from logical reasoning and preference rankings. The latter two allow us to rationalize our past behavior and avoid a deeper reckoning with our past action or inaction. Price then recommends regret following frustrating experiences with unhelpful customer service representatives. Our easy anger, and the automatic assumption of bureaucratic stupidity, Price warns, rob us of the opportunity to see the bureaucrat as part of a flexible institution. When we slam the phone down in rage, putting an end to dialogue, we become as inflexible and stupid as we take the bureaucrat to be. Our self-righteous indignation reinforces our version of how things ‘really are’ and strengthens our conviction that the bureaucrat and the institution are locked in an immutable relation.

Chapter Two is a counterintuitive discussion of advice, insofar as we might assume one seeks advice to gain perspective, to better critically and reflectively examine the options available as others see them. But Price argues that advice shrinks the horizons of our future actions by tethering us to what has only been possible before, such that we cannot imagine new paths forward. Price takes Frank from the film *The Postman Always Rings Twice* as a representative example of a



man whose acceptance of advice ‘commits him to an order of appearance and a way of understanding’ such that Frank cannot see the contingency in what lies before him (p. 67). Frank submits to his death, as the moral consequence for killing his girlfriend’s husband, following the advice he receives from the DA. ‘Frank takes the advice of the DA...because he does not know how to live with indecision’ (p. 67). We seek advice to avoid regret and, if we are successful in avoiding regret, we maintain the status quo. Advice gives us an easy way out – it prevents us from thinking for ourselves and from coming to terms with uncertainty.

Price does not flat-out reject advice, however. Better to ‘pause’ and stay with it a while (p. 104). In Chapter Three, he recommends putting forward the appearance of agreement all the while thinking of other options. Price then makes a shocking move, likening the DA to the academic advisor, and Price advises us to say to our mentor, advisor, or DA: ‘I don’t know,’ or better yet, ‘You know more than I know’ (p. 101). This is not only a way to stall for time, but espousing this credo is also a way to, as Price puts it, ‘insist on not knowing’ (p. 71), thereby keeping in play other paths forward, ways we might not even yet see, thereby simultaneously inviting them to say the same to us. ‘[T]here is nothing much to lose in remaining in at least putative agreement with an ill-intentioned bureaucrat or an altruistic advisor – that we acknowledge his capacity for thinking so that he might begin to acknowledge our own’ (pp. 127–128). Price thus puts an epistemological spin on the old adage, you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.

I marvel at the argument and the intricate conceptual architecture of the book. This is an incisive, exciting, and very welcome meditation on the power of regret to make us more thoughtful human beings. Price’s regret is not, however, an emotion I recognize. This is not only because Price freights regret with many pedagogical demands, but also because Price never mentions regret’s fellow-travelers. Emotions such as sadness, for example, often come on the wings of regret. On Price’s rendering, regret seems cleansed of all its negativity. It involves clear-headed consideration of what went wrong in the past and the action we can take in the future. Rather than being a messy emotion, regret is a pair of magic spectacles we raise to our eyes to bring to view the unforeseen vistas ahead.

I also wonder if, both in championing reflection – which often goes hand in hand with responsibility (as Henry James said, ‘being finely aware and richly responsible’ [cited in Nussbaum 1990, p. 84]) – and in his belief that most every relation can be seen, after reflection, as involuntary, Price might burden the subject with too much accountability. Victim-blaming is a common way nonvoluntary relations are judged to be involuntary. Sometimes, what at first blush seems involuntary later reveals itself not to be. Consider those accused of witchcraft in seventeenth-century Salem, who may have suffered from hallucinations consequent to eating contaminated grains. Or the case of homicidal sleepwalking. Or Miss Otis – the eponymous hero of the Cole Porter standard – who ‘regrets she’s unable to lunch’ after shooting her lover in a fit of rage and being lynched by vigilantes. The



law recognizes distinctions between murder and manslaughter, and so we might at least want to distinguish between the degree of agency and regret being attributed and advocated here. Sometimes, it is beyond our ken to know for certain what is involuntary and nonvoluntary. It seems to me, rather than search out the involuntary in everything and claim that this is politically emancipatory, it might be better precisely to politicize our decision about that distinction.

Another of Price's dichotomies, that between reflection and certainty, might not always hold. Some values do deserve to be accorded the status of first principles, such as standing against prejudice, and these convictions can be arrived at *through* thoughtfulness, advice-gathering, and consciousness-raising. Perhaps there are more rooms in the house of first principles than the one occupied by the Trump- or Brexit-voter, who refuses to listen to others. And perhaps, sometimes, thoughtfulness and dialogue can serve anti-emancipatory ends. Conspiracy theorists, for example, are thoughtful in a way that often leads to a paralyzing cynicism about institutional change. In discerning the analogies between seemingly disparate concepts, Price might overlook the contingency in some of the antitheses he sees.

## Reference

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Katherine Goktepe  
University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9YL, Scotland, UK  
k.goktepe@ed.ac.uk