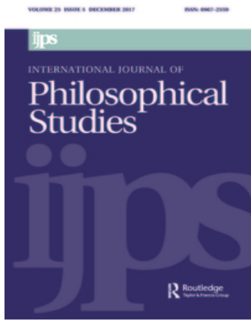

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More Than A Feeling: The Communicative Function of Regret

Benjamin Matheson

Department of Philosophy, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT
Rüdiger Bittner argues that regret is not useful and so it is always unreasonable to feel and express it. In this paper, I argue that regret is often reasonable because regret has a communicative function: it communicates where we stand with respect to things we have done and outcomes that we have caused. So, I not only argue that Bittner's argument is unsuccessful, I also shed light on the nature and purpose of regret.

KEYWORDS Regret; emotion; Rüdiger Bittner; Bernard Williams; communicative function; epistemic gap

'I've made a huge mistake.'
GOB Bluth, Arrested Development

1. Introduction

We are all familiar with regret. If I buy the earliest flight from a distant airport and getting to that airport will be extremely inconvenient for me, I will likely feel regret about that mistake.

While we are all familiar with regret, it is common to hear people claim that they have 'no regrets' or that they think people should have no regrets. As observed by some commentators such as Keller (2015) and Burkeman (2015), this is the kind of view expressed in films such as *Dead Poet's Society* (dir. Peter Weir, USA 1989) by their use of the term *carpe diem* (seize the day), contemporary use of the term YOLO (You Only Live Once), as well as in Ediaf Piaf's 'Non, je ne regrette rien' (whose English translation is 'no regrets'). The idea behind the 'no regrets' view, I take it, is that we will be happier if we consciously choose not to, or develop ourselves such that we don't, regret the things we do and the outcomes they lead to. In line with this common view, Rüdiger Bittner

CONTACT Benjamin Matheson benjamin.matheson@philosophy.su.se

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(1992) argues, following Spinoza, that regret is a useless indulgence that only makes a bad situation worse. The underlying rationale for the 'no regrets' view seems to be that regret is without a positive purpose or function. As a negative emotion, regret only makes things worse – e.g. by causing us pain and making us unhappier – so we should aim to expunge it from our lives.

In this paper, however, I argue that regret has a valuable *communicative* function. As such, regret functions to *close the epistemic gap between ourselves and others*. As human beings, we only have indirect and fallible access to our own and each other's minds. I argue regret, as with other emotions, helps to make clear, both to ourselves and other people, where we stand with respect to choices and decisions we make, actions we perform, and outcomes we cause. While regret has this communicative function, I also note that this is compatible with thinking that we shouldn't hold on to regrets. The account I develop helps us to see why regret is not something we should aim to be *completely* without because, while painful, it serves a positive purpose. The view I develop is inspired by and in the tradition of the one first sketched by Bernard Williams (1976).

In §2 I present the 'no regrets' view that I will argue against. In §3 I provide an account of regret. In §4 I argue that regret is valuable because it has a third-personal communicative function. In §5 I develop the communicative function of regret drawing on recent work by Coleen Macnamara (2015). In §6 I argue that regret also has a first-personal communicative function. In §7 I consider whether regret is necessary to communicate our quality of will to ourselves and to other people.

2. The 'No Regrets' View

Bittner (1992) argues that regret is never reasonable. His core argument, which he attributes to Spinoza, is this:

> it is not reasonable, because one did something bad, to go and make things worse. But that is what regret is, double misery, the second for the sake of the first. So, regret is not reasonable. (Bittner 1992, 265)

The idea, then, is that regret is merely adding a bad thing to another bad thing. Without further justification, we should never increase badness in the world. So, we should never feel (and subsequently express) regret. I submit that it is this kind of reasoning underlies the common 'no regrets' view that is often expressed in popular culture, such as the appeal to *carpe diem* in films such as *Dead Poet's Society* and the contemporary use of the term YOLO. Since regret seems pointless, and in fact counterproductive, such hedonistic philosophies promote expunging it.

We can make Bittner's argument clearer by specifying the sense of 'reasonable' at issue. While Bittner claims to be trying to capture the everyday use of 'reasonable', his use of the term is initially ambiguous between three readings. He might mean that regret is not *fitting*, that it is not *all-things-considered*

appropriate, or both. To say that an emotion (or attitude) is fitting is just to say that it represents its object properly. Fear fits something fearful simply because it properly represents the object as being fearful. As D'Arms and Jacobsen (2000) argue, however, just because an emotion is fitting does not mean that it is all-things-considered appropriate to feel that emotion. Let's suppose a dangerous spider is fearful and so fear is a fitting response to this spider. Even given this, we might have an overriding reason not to feel fear. It might be that if we feel fear we will cause something terrible to happen. Perhaps we will panic and crash the car we are currently driving, injuring many people. In this situation, then, while fear is fitting, it is not all-things-considered appropriate to feel fear. But there may also be situations where fear is not fitting and yet it is all-things-considered appropriate to feel fear. Perhaps an evil neuroscientist will torture our loved ones unless we feel fear. In such a scenario, we have reason to induce fear in ourselves even if there is nothing fearful in our presence – that is, nothing that our fear fits. Thus, as D'Arms and Jacobsen (2000, 71–72) argue, fittingness is neither necessary nor sufficient for all-things-considered appropriateness.

So, it might be that Bittner thinks that regret is never fitting, never all-things-considered appropriate, or both never fitting and never all-things-considered appropriate. Some of his remarks suggest that he thinks that regret is sometimes fitting. He writes:

> Spinoza is not uselessly advising never to have *grounds* for regret. The reasonable person without regret has done something bad, and for the sake of the present argument it should be supposed that we all agree with him on this. (Bittner 1992, 265: my emphasis)

Talk of 'grounds for regret' seems tantamount to talk about the fittingness of regret. In any case, I will first show that it is uncontroversial that regret is sometimes fitting – that is, regret sometimes properly fits its target, e.g. certain actions are regrettable. Consequently, the most charitable reading of Bittner's argument will be that regret is never all-things-considered appropriate. As we will see, I believe that the underlying reason why the 'no regrets' view seems to have any plausibility is that we have overlooked the communicative function of regret. Once we see this function of regret, we will see that regret is often both fitting and all-things-considered appropriate.

3. Regret

Before we can see the value of regret, we need an account of what regret is. In what follows I am only concerned with what Williams (1976) calls 'agent-regret'. Such regret is a form of *first-personal* regret. Such regret takes *doings* (decisions, choices, actions, omissions, and the like) that are either intrinsically bad or that cause (or will cause) bad *outcomes* (events, states of affairs, and the like) as its formal object, and takes the person herself as its particular object. For example,

when I regret buying the earliest flight from the most distant airport, I am the particular object, my decision to buy the flight is the formal object and it is regrettable because of the outcome it causes – namely me having to get up very early and travel very far to catch my flight.

Such first-personal regret must be distinguished from *third-personal* regret. Such regret takes outcomes as its formal object, and whoever is involved in that outcome as its particular object. Various names have been given to third-personal regret, such as simple-regret (Baron 1988, 264), event-regret (Rorty 1980, 496), mere-regret (Tannenbaum 2007, 45), evaluator-regret (Bagnoli 2000, 176), and regret of the spectator (Williams and Nagel 1976, 126). While the names differ, they each pick out the same phenomenon – namely the type of regret we feel about outcomes we have not been involved in bringing about. For example, upon witnessing a car accident we might express our regret about this outcome. We might send our regrets to the family of the victim by saying things like, 'I'm sorry this happened to you'. Again, I'm not concerned with such third-personal regret in what follows. For the sake of simplicity, I will drop the 'agent' qualifier, except for when I contrast agent-regret with spectator-regret. All the claims that I make in what follows, then, should be understood as claims about agent-regret.[1]

Regret is an emotion. But I am not concerned in what follows with what exactly an emotion is – that is, what part of the emotional experience counts as the emotion itself. This is a question that certain philosophers of emotion concern themselves with.[2] I follow others, such Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni (2011), who discuss a particular emotion and then look at a paradigmatic range of characteristics of that emotion without committing to a particular account of what emotions are. Among the several components that emotions are thought to have are a *cognitive* component, a *conative* component, and an *affective* component. The cognitive component is belief-like – that is, one that has a world-mind direction of fit. If I believe that the sky is blue, then my belief reflects what I think the world is like. It can be true or false based on what the world is actually like. The conative component is desire-like – that is, one that has a mind-world direction of fit. If I desire a coffee, then I am expressing what I want the world to be like (me with a coffee) and not necessarily what the world is like. What the world is like cannot make my desire true or false. It can only be true or false whether I actually have the desire in question. The affective component is the feeling of the emotion. Emotions are thought to have other components too, such as a motivational component – that is, the actions tendencies or actions that typically follow when the emotion occurs. For example, a paradigmatic action tendency of shame is hiding. For my current purposes, though, this and other components are unimportant so I will set them aside in what follows.

Regret is closely tied with *remorse*. According to Baron (1988, 267–268), regret and remorse differ only in terms of their respective cognitive components.

To fittingly regret a doing because it leads a bad outcome, we need not judge we are morally responsible for that outcome. Importantly, we need not also judge we are blameworthy for the doing that led to the outcome, because we can fittingly regret non-moral wrongdoings. On the other hand, to fittingly feel remorse about a doing we must judge that we are blameworthy for that doing, so we must judge it to be a moral wrongdoing. Bad outcomes that stem from our wrongdoings give us reason to feel regret as well as remorse about those wrongdoings. We need only judge that we are *causally* responsible for some bad outcome to fittingly feel regret about the doing – regardless of its moral valence – that led to that bad outcome. Williams' (1976, 124) example of the lorry driver supports this claim.

Imagine a lorry driver is driving around. This lorry driver is driving as safely as he ought to be. Indeed, we might even imagine the lorry driver is taking precautions above and beyond the call of duty. We cannot, then, fault the driver for any of his doings. All of a sudden, a child runs in front of the lorry. The child is killed. In such a situation, it seems natural for the lorry driver to feel regret. Moreover, Williams (1976, 125) claims it would be an 'insane conception of rationality' that ruled that regret was not fitting here (or 'rational', as Williams puts it). The fact that a doing (or set of doings), which were not faulty in any way, led to a bad outcome makes that doing (or set of doings) a fitting target of regret. It seems quite plausible that the lorry driver would think, 'if only I hadn't driven down that road, at that speed, on that day…'. The unfortunate bad outcome of the driver's perhaps even supererogatory doings makes those doings regrettable nonetheless.

We might worry, though, that we are mistakenly inferring that regret is fitting here because other negative emotions are fitting, such as grief, horror, or shock. Jacobsen (2013, 116), for example, thinks that dismay is fitting here but regret is not. While I ultimately agree with Williams that regret is fitting for the lorry driver, the fact that dismay, horror, grief, and shock are also fitting might be clouding our intuitions. What we need is a simpler case – that is, one where these other emotions do not seem fitting (or not as fitting) and so we can get clearer on whether regret is intuitively fitting or not. Let's consider such a case.

Suppose that you are visiting an acquaintance. She proudly tells you about the ornamental vase that she has just bought. You don't have particularly strong feelings about the vase but you can tell how much your acquaintance values it. She then asks if you would like a drink, you accept her generous offer, and then she leaves the room to prepare it. You are now alone with the vase. Suddenly, you become worried that you might break the vase. In order to ensure that you do not, you start to move backwards to a safe distance. As you do, something happens to you that has never happened to you before: your arm spasms. You watch as your arm moves without your direction and your hand knocks the tip of the vase, moving it slightly off balance. As this happens, you notice your acquaintance is entering the room holding two drinks, one for her and one for

you. She sees your arm move and your hand knock over the vase. You see the horror in her eyes. You can tell that she thinks you are moving intentionally. The vase falls to the floor and smashes into pieces.

There are two details of this case that I must emphasise. First, it seems *to your acquaintance* that you have acted intentionally and given that you intended a bad outcome, that you are acting maliciously and wrongly. Second, it is clear *to you* that you are not morally responsible for the bad outcome. An unpredictable spasm is not something you can be morally responsible – and, in this case, blameworthy – for. It is something that happens to you, and not something that you do. There are a range of responses one might have in response to this outcome. The two opposite poles seem to be: (1) apologise for breaking the vase, or (2) stare stony faced at your friend confident in the knowledge that you are not morally responsible for the outcome you have caused.

I can't speak for anyone else, but I would definitely apologise here. I would apologise profusely. While I know I am not morally responsible for breaking the vase, I also know that it doesn't seem that way to my acquaintance. Here's the thing: it's not enough for me to go through the motions of an apology – that is, say 'I'm sorry' but not feel anything – I also need to be genuinely apologetic. A genuine apology must express either regret or remorse. Why must I genuinely apologise rather than *appear* to apologise? Well, for the same sorts of reasons that I must genuinely care for my friends rather than just appear to care for them. There would be something missing from our friendship – indeed, arguably, we would not really be friends – if I just pretend to care for them. Likewise, I must feel regret and express it through my apology in order to properly and convincingly convey where I stand with respect to the bad outcome I have just caused.

To be clear, I think that what we ultimately regret is a doing that was crucial or important to the vase being broken, such as our standing near the vase or our failing to move earlier. This doing becomes regrettable in virtue of the bad outcome it (at least partially) leads to – namely the vase being broken. Our apology expresses our regret for the (non-wrong) doing that led to the bad outcome. We need not be morally responsible for the bad outcome to fittingly feel regret about the doing that led to that outcome.

Let's consider three worries. First, is this apology necessarily expressing regret? Second, given that regret is a 'reasoned-emotion' or 'felt-reason' (Landman 1993, 36) and 'an unusually cognitively-laden or cognitively-determined emotion' (Gilovich and Medvec 1995, 379), isn't it more plausible that along with or part of our apology we express shock and embarrassment rather than regret, because one's reaction is immediate and thus does not allow time for one to *decide* that what happened is regretful? Third, doesn't it make more sense to say that *spectator*- rather than *agent*-regret is fitting here?[3]

First, as I have claimed, to be a genuine apology, an apology must express either regret or remorse. We might imagine a version of the vase case where a

person uses the language of apology in order to be *merely* excused. In my view, no regret or remorse is being expressed here. This way of speaking only uses the language of apology as a way to convey a plea to be excused. In the case I have in mind, the person does seek to be excused but she also *takes responsibility* for the bad outcome she has caused. This means she is willing to be treated *as if* she is morally responsible for that bad outcome. Taking responsibility for doings and outcomes one is not morally responsible for is an important part of relationships, and we might imagine that this person wishes to cement the bonds of budding friendship with her acquaintance. In taking responsibility for the bad outcome, we express agent-regret. One who only seeks to be excused does not take any responsibility for what she has caused. Such an 'apology', then, at best expresses spectator-regret.[4] Indeed, if one avoided using the language of apology but stopped short of staring stony faced at one's acquaintance, then one's behaviour would at best express spectator-regret. The problem is that such responses express a kind of defiance to not take responsibility for what one has caused, albeit unintentionally.

Second, while we may immediately express shock and embarrassment in response to breaking the vase, I think it is plausible that shock and embarrassment in this situation may both express regret. While it might be odd to say, 'I regret this!' immediately after breaking the vase, I don't think this oddness subtracts from the plausibility that regret is being expressed here. Sometimes *saying* we feel a particular emotion isn't appropriate when we are feeling it. I ought not proclaim my love for a person to her for the first time if she is currently performing brain surgery. I ought not say I am afraid out loud if I am currently hiding in the bushes from a killer who has been stalking me. Thus, I don't think the oddness of saying one regrets breaking the vase immediately after breaking it or the expressions of other attitudes or emotions takes away from the plausibility that regret is being expressed here.

Relatedly, one might worry that we would not yet have had the time to form the judgement that the outcome is regrettable. But I do not see why judgement about an outcome being regrettable cannot be formed immediately after the event has been noticed by the agent. We might not *realise* we judge that something is regrettable and that we regret it until much later on, but this doesn't mean that we do not judge it regrettable and feel regret at the earlier time. Sometimes we feel sad or depressed about something immediately after it happens, but it is not until later (sometimes much later) that we realise we felt (and perhaps still feel) sad or depressed about it. Our minds are often opaque to us and, as I discuss later, it is through the expression of emotions that we get clearer on where we stand on various things.

Third, in situations where spectator-regret seems fitting, we are in no way involved in the production of the outcome. In the vase case, while the outcome was unintentional, we are still intimately involved in its production. Indeed, though I do not intend this to commit me to a counterfactual account

of causation, the outcome is still counterfactually dependent on our presence. If we had not been there, the vase would not have broken. Moreover, we are an insufficient but necessary part of an unnecessary but sufficient condition for the vase being broken. If Mackie (1965) is correct, then this means we count as a cause of the vase being broken. While the vase being broken results from a spasm of ours – that is, something that happens to us rather than something we do – it would therefore be a mistake to conclude that *we* were not the cause of the vase being broken. After all, intentionality is not required for causation. We may not have intended to break the vase, but it seems clear that we are a cause of it being broken.

Before moving on, let's briefly consider the conative and affective components of regret. Consider my regret about booking the earliest flight at the most distant airport. It seems that what partly constitutes my regret is the *wish* I hadn't decided to buy the earliest flight at the most distant airport. It would be too strong to say that I *desire* I hadn't made the doing that led to the bad outcome, because to desire something seems to imply that it is physically possible that I can satisfy that desire. Since my doing is in the past and so unchangeable, it seems I cannot desire to change what I have done. Wishes, while desire-like, are not so constrained. We can wish for things that are not even metaphysically possible, such as a wish to change the past (which seems to be metaphysically impossible). Of course, as Williams (1976, 127) discusses, moral dilemmas force a revision of this conception of the conative component.

Suppose Sophie must choose to save one of her two children from being killed whilst in turn letting the other die. If regret expresses the wish that she had chosen otherwise, then this implies that she wished she had saved her other child and let the child she saved die. But it doesn't seem that her regret stems from the choice she made, but rather from the fact she had to make that choice at all. As Williams (1976, 123) holds, the 'constitutive thought' of regret is the wish that things could have been otherwise, and not just that one had done otherwise. While I agree with the spirt of William's remark, I don't wish to make as strong a claim as Williams. I don't think that the wish that things could have been otherwise is *constitutive* of regret, though I do think that it is *partly* constitutive of it. One reason to prefer my understanding is that Williams' constitutive thought does not help us distinguish between agent- and spectator-regret. While he might have been making a point about regret *in general* when he made his remark, it's worth refining this when we are only talking about agent-regret. I think we can be slightly more precise than Williams too, since the wish that things had been otherwise is a little ambiguous. I suggest, then, that we say that regret involves the *wish* that our doing did not happen or did not have to happen.[5]

For the affective component, we can appeal to our experiences of regret. I think that Amelie Rorty (1980, 496, my emphasis) sums this up fairly well when she writes that regret is 'characteristically *felt* as a particular sort of painful

feeling, a pang, a stab, waves of stabs, relatively low keyed in comparison with remorse'. While I think Rorty gets things almost right, I don't think it's correct to say that regret is relatively low-keyed in comparison with remorse. In the case where I book a bad flight, I might only experience low-keyed regret. But suppose I mistakenly do something of extreme significance. Suppose I flick a light switch that releases a deadly toxin that kills thousands of people. The regret I feel about deciding to flick the light switch will be much worse than the regret I feel about booking a bad flight. So, it seems that the intensity of regret depends on the *significance* of the bad outcome that stems from a doing. For less significant outcomes, we will not feel too bad. For more significant outcomes, we will feel terrible. Following this, we can say that regret is characteristically *felt* as a particular sort of painful feeling, a pang, a stab, waves of stabs, that varies in intensity depending on the significance of the regret-grounding bad outcome. It also seems that affect felt with remorse depends on the significance of our bad doing and the bad outcome it leads to. When I do something bad that is lower in significance, I will not feel as badly as I would for doing something that is higher in significance.

This completes my working account of regret. Regret involves a *judgement* that one is causally responsible for some bad outcome, a *wish* that the doing that led that outcome did not happen or did not have to happen, and is characteristically *felt* as painful depending on the significance of the regret-grounding outcome. There's surely more to say about regret, but what I have said so far is sufficient for my current purposes. Note that regret is fitting when the formal object of regret is regrettable. And regret is unfitting when the formal object of regret is not regrettable. What makes a formal object of regret – namely a doing – regrettable is either that it is intrinsically bad or it is made bad by virtue of causing a bad outcome *and* it is better that the outcome not have happened or not have had to have happened. In other words, one's regret accurately represents the formal object of regret has having certain evaluative features (see D'Arms and Jacobsen 2000, 66–67).

4. Regret's Communicative Value

The vase case helps to expose the positive function of regret – namely, it's communicative function. It *directly* communicates its representational content – that is, regret's cognitive and conative components. As long as you also do not concurrently express remorse, one's regret communicates that you judge that you were merely causally responsible for a bad outcome and yet wish it didn't happen or didn't have to happen. In turn, one's (remorseless) regret *indirectly* communicates that you didn't manifest malice or express ill will in the doing that led to that outcome or the outcome itself, and so you are not at fault, culpable, or blameworthy for either the doing or the outcome.

In the vase case, you have broken your acquaintance's vase and while it is clear to you that you are not morally responsible for this bad outcome, you are aware (on some level) that your attitude with respect to the outcome is not clear. Indeed, you are aware that your acquaintance is forming, or has formed, the impression that you have acted maliciously – in other words, you are expressing ill will through your behaviour and the in the outcome that follows from it. By feeling and then expressing regret *immediately* you minimise the time during which your acquaintance might think badly of you. You make immediately clear that no malice was intended and no ill will was expressed. If you didn't react immediately then, given your acquaintance's evidence, it would have been reasonable for her to believe that you did intend malice and that the doing and its outcome express ill will. And that would, other things being equal, make it reasonable for her to blame you for breaking her vase. So, regret is valuable because of its communicative function.

We can make this clearer by considering a species of hypothetical beings with telepathic powers. These creatures are just like human beings except that they have direct and infallible access to each other's minds. Thus, they immediately know whether an individual intended malice or expressed ill will. Consider how two them, Ben and Jerry, would interact in the vase case. Jerry breaks the vase whilst Ben is returning with drinks (that Ben didn't even need to ask if Jerry wanted). Ben becomes immediately aware there is no malice or ill will expressed by Jerry in the outcome. There is therefore no need for Jerry to feel and express regret. Regret has no communicative function for these beings, and so expressions of regret do not have communicative value *for creatures like them*.

This is not to say that regret is not fitting for Jerry. It still seems like it is. This also doesn't rule out that Jerry has other reasons to feel and express regret. Perhaps we are obliged, required, or expected to feel regret in certain situations. And perhaps this is true for both the hypothetical telepaths and creatures like us. I don't consider these further claims here. My claim is only that regret has no communicative value – and therefore no positive purpose on that basis – for the hypothetical telepaths I have just discussed.

5. How Regret Communicates

One might worry that in the vase case, we would not *intend* to communicate anything when we express regret, because our apology, which expresses our regret about the outcome, is automatic such that we have no time to form the intention to communicate anything. We can overcome this worry by divorcing regret's communicative function from the regretter's intentions. I propose to do so in the same way that Macnamara (2015) divorces the reactive attitude's communicative function from the expresser of the reactive attitude's intentions. After outlining the relevant aspects of her account, I will suggest that something similar is true of regret. That is, regret communicates that one is causally

responsible for the bad outcome one caused and that one wishes that the doing it stemmed from had not happened or had not had to happen.

Macnamara (2015, 553) argues that reactive attitudes are communicative entities that have a kind of 'non-intentional purposiveness'. This means that the reactive attitudes are communicative without the agent needing to intend to communicate anything. They are, by their very nature, communicative – in other words, reactive attitudes are constitutively communicative. She distinguishes a communicative entity from a communicative *act*. Examples of the latter include: spoken words, written words, gestures, and so on. Given that reactive attitudes are sometimes unexpressed, they cannot be essentially communicative acts (though, of course, *expressions* of the reactive attitudes are essentially communicative acts). What makes a reactive attitude a communicative entity is that it has 'representational content and the function of evoking uptake of this content in a recipient' (Macnamara 2015, 548).

Consider an unsent email. It contains words meant to convey a particular message. The email still has this message even though it has not yet been sent. In the same way, a privately held – that is, unexpressed – reactive attitude still contains the message that an expressed reactive attitude would convey. And, as noted, the message is the representational content of the reactive attitude. What representational content do reactive attitudes have? When it comes to negative reactive attitudes, their content is that the formal object of the attitude (e.g. the thing a person is angry about) is morally wrong. For the recipient of a reactive attitude to take up its content is for the recipient to come to see the action as morally wrong. Whether or not a reactive attitude is expressed, it remains that it has the function of evoking uptake in its recipient, just as an unsent email still has the function of evoking uptake of the message contained within that email. For example, an email might read: 'Please switch your computer off before you leave.' The email represents the recipients' computers being switched off before the recipients leave. If the content of this email were taken up, then its recipients would switch off their computers before leaving. Regardless of whether the email is sent or not, the email still has that function.

But an individual need not always intend to communicate a particular message when she engages in a communicative act. As noted, on Macnamara's view, communicative acts, as expressed communicative entities, have 'a kind of non-intentional purposiveness'. Communicative acts are 'intrinsically directed towards the end of eliciting a response where that response amounts to the uptake of the message by a recipient' (Macnamara 2015, 553). She notes that talk of 'non-intentional purposiveness' might seem mysterious, but she dissolves this mysteriousness by appealing to the teleological account of function ascription. On this view, 'X is a function of an item just in case (1) X is an effect of past tokens of the type and (2) this fact in part explains why current tokens of the type exist' (Macnamara 2015, 553). For example, a function of hearts is pumping blood. We can ascribe this function to hearts because there are

currently hearts as a result of earlier hearts, and this partly explains why there are currently hearts in existence.

As Macnamara (2015, 558–559) discusses, substantial empirical evidence exists that supports the thesis that emotions evoke emotional responses in others, which suggests that these emotions function to elicit uptake of their representational contents. For instance, evidence suggests that distress elicits sympathy (Eisenberg et al. 1989), that anger elicits fear (Dimberg and Ohman 1996), and that fear elicits fear (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994). Macnamara notes that there is less evidence about the reactive attitudes themselves. Nevertheless, she points out that there is still intuitive data that suggests that the reactive attitudes aim to elicit uptake of their representation contents. Consider resentment or indignation. As with other emotions, these reactive attitudes have, as discussed, a particular object and a formal object. In this case, the particular object is a person and the formal object is them having done something morally wrong. When we resent someone, our resentment's representational content is that a person has done something morally wrong. If our resentment elicits uptake in the object of our resentment, then this person will come to feel guilt or remorse.

And we can see how past tokens of the reactive attitudes have led to the existence of current tokens of the reactive attitudes. This is because the reactive attitudes contribute to the creation and development of the moral community that we find ourselves in. As Macnamara (2015, 560–561) writes:

> Moral communities are not just collections of individuals. Rather, their members are bound together in a network of relationships. Such interconnection, though, is not an immediate consequence of either geographic or normative collection. Community must be built, and kind acts help to build it. In other words, the formation and growth of the moral community depends on the continual turning of the circle of kindness …
>
> While gratitude and approval help bind us together, resentment and indignation help keep us together. Existing relationships are not immune to damage. Wrongdoing creates rifts in relationships, straining the bonds we have built. If the community is going to stay together, these rifts needs to be repaired. Repair happens when wrongdoers inhabit their fault: feel guilt and give it its natural expression in apology and amends. Thus, insofar as resentment and indignation elicit guilt in wrongdoers, they catalyse the reparative work that is so essential to healing the bonds we work so hard to build

Because the reactive attitudes have led to the formation and growth of the moral community, we have plausible story about why reactive attitudes function to elicit uptake of their representational contents.

I propose that something similar is true of regret. I have argued that regret communicates that one judges that they are causally responsible for a bad outcome – when they do not also feel remorse about the doing that led to that outcome, they also communicate that they are not morally responsible for that

outcome – and that they wish that the outcome had not happened or had not had to happen. Regret is a self-regarding emotion – that is, one whose particular object is the agent herself. The formal object of regret is not a wrongdoing, but rather an intrinsically bad doing or a doing that is bad in virtue of the outcome it causes. For another individual to uptake regret, it seems they must come to feel pity or sympathy with the regretter. In doing so, when remorse is not also taken up, the third-party recipient of regret (i.e. not the person who feels regret) comes to see the regretter as *not* at fault for the formal object of the regret (i.e. a doing). Following the teleological account of function ascription, we can ascribe regret this function because we can explain current tokens of regret in virtue of past tokens of regret having helped to close the epistemic gap between ourselves and others. Plausibly, then, regret has a communicative function. When there is no concurrent remorse, this message is that the individual is *not* morally responsible (in this case, blameworthy) for the outcome in question.

Obviously, this might not always happen. Just because someone expresses regret by no means results in others taking up that regret. Likewise, as Macnamara (2015, 559–560) notes, this is sometimes the case with resentment and indignation. Rather than eliciting uptake, these are sometimes responded to with resentment and indignation. It remains, though, that when we believe these emotions are fitting we internalise their content.

6. Regret's First-Personal Communicative Function

While regret is a self-regarding emotion, I have argued that it has a third-personal communicative function. That is, it functions to communicate the representational content of our regret *to other people*. Given that we live in a world with other people, regret is valuable because of this communicative function. But suppose there were a world with only one person. Would regret still be valuable? I will now argue that it would be, because regret also has a *first-personal* communicative function. Just as our regret about some doing might inform others about where we stand with respect to that doing or an outcome it causes, regret might also inform *us* about where we stand with respect to a particular doing and the outcomes it causes. In other words, just as there is an epistemic gap between ourselves and others, there is also an epistemic gap *within ourselves*. And just as emotions, such as regret, help break down the epistemic gap between ourselves and others, it also helps to break down the epistemic gap within ourselves.

Consider the vase case again. The fact that you express regret in this situation may even be a surprise to you. It may, then, be teaching you about yourself. It may teach you that you value your acquaintance, even though you are not actually friends yet, and so you have a special reason to care about their private property. We might also imagine a variation of the lorry driver case. The driver

may never have considered that he values other people's lives. Perhaps he considers himself a misanthrope who cares about no one else except himself. His reaction to killing the child – the deep and foreboding sense of regret – make clear to him that he does not want to be, is not, or is no longer the misanthrope he thought he was.

In both cases, the regret felt seems to communicate something to the regretter. By directly communicating the representational content of one's regret (i.e. its cognitive and conative components, i.e. that one sees oneself as merely causally responsible and that one wishes that the outcome had not happened or had not had to happen), this indirectly communicates the regretter's quality of will. According to Shoemaker (2015), one's quality of will is constituted by one's values and cares.[6] In the modified lorry driver case just sketched, the lorry driver's regret communicates to himself one of three things: (1) that he has conflicting values: he is a misanthrope but he also has values that cut against that; (2) he mistakenly believes he is misanthrope when he is not in fact and never has been; (3) he mistakenly believes he is misanthrope when he is in fact no longer a misanthrope. On any variation of the case, the feeling of regret indicates to the lorry driver that his perception of himself is at odds with what he is really like. Here we can distinguish between one's *actual* self and one's *perceived* self – that is, between what one is actually (or deeply) like and what one believes one is like. In (1) there is a conflict in, at least, the driver's actual self. In (2) and (3) there is conflict between the driver's actual self and his perceived self. Regret has first-personal communicative value because it indicates when one's selves are out of alignment and can consequently provide the impetus for bringing them back into alignment. In (1), noticing that he regrets the death of the child will hopefully make the lorry driver develop himself such that he loses his misanthropic values. In (2) and (3), the driver will come to have a more accurate self-conception, which seems to be a prima facie valuable outcome. Among other things, it might prompt positive changes in his deliberation and subsequent behaviour.

7. Communication Without Regret?

We might wonder why we must feel regret in order learn about our values. Bittner (1992, 272) presents something like this challenge. He writes:

> It is not evident that one could not see, in full clarity but without grief, what one did wrong. In fact, the contrary may be true: that with grief one could not see in full clarity what one did wrong. After all, to see such a thing is itself an achievement and, hurt, torn, and dejected by regret, we may not be capable of doing it. However this may be, the case for the necessity of regret for recognizing one's failing has not been made.

Note that Bittner talks interchangeably about grief and regret, treating them as two sides of the same coin. This doesn't seem quite right to me, as I noted

earlier, but set aside this concern for the moment. Moreover, as discussed earlier, wrongness is not required for fitting regret; as I argued, fitting regret requires a doing being intrinsically bad or that an outcome of the doing is bad. Still, we might easily translate Bitter's underlying point, which I take to be this. While we might think we need to feel regret in order to learn what we take to be bad, it is not clear that regret is necessary to learn such things. It seems possible that we could realise that a doing or outcome was bad – that is, that we don't value it or have a value that promotes such an outcome – without feeling regret. Given this, regret seems superfluous. This challenge can also be extended from the first-personal to the third-person context. Consider the vase case. Why can't we simply explain that we did not intend to break the vase and that we have no ill will? Since we can use our words rather than our emotions to communicate, it seems that regret is superfluous. In short, it seems that regret is not necessary to communicate where we stand with respect to certain outcomes.

It is true that regret is not necessary to communicate our values either to ourselves or other people. Some of us might be able to learn about our actual selves directly – perhaps by meditating deeply or through some other method of introspection. And sometimes our words might be enough to communicate our values to others. But, importantly, this not always the case. For many of us, our actual selves are hidden or not fully in sight. And even if we knew our actual selves at one point, we may not be aware of changes that may have happened to them over time. So, while we might have once had an alignment between our perceived self and our actual self, this may have changed. This gets even harder from other people's perspectives. Someone's words only count for so much. Expressions of emotions, such as regret, when done immediately and in response to bad outcomes are much harder to fake than our words. This is not to say that emotions cannot be faked – that is what professional actors attempt to do, after all – but they are typically a much better indicator of where someone stands than their words. Even if a person is speaking honestly, their perceived and actual selves may be out of alignment. So, a person might truly believe they are kind and generous, when in fact they are not. Expression of emotions are *one way* that learn about someone and they may even be the best way *for creatures like us*, but that doesn't mean they are the only way. So, while regret may not be necessary to communicate to ourselves and others where we stand with respect to an outcome we have caused, this does not take away from the fact that it is an important way to do so; that is, it does not take away from the fact that regret has communicative value. And it is its communicative value that means that regret has, at least for creatures like us, a positive purpose.

8. Conclusion

Contra Bittner, I have argued that regret is often reasonable. I argued that it is both often fitting and often also all-things-considered appropriate. It is often

fitting because many we the things we do and many of the outcomes we cause are regrettable. It is often also all-things-considered appropriate to (a) express regret because it helps to close the epistemic gap between ourselves and others, which gives regret third-personal communicative value, and (b) feel regret because it helps to close the epistemic gap within ourselves, which gives regret first-personal communicative value. I contend that Bittner's argument and the 'no regrets' view in general seem plausible because they overlook regret's valuable communicative function. Once we see that regret has this function, we can see that it is often reasonable – that is, fitting and all-things-considered appropriate.

A virtue of my account is that it is compatible both with the view that we ought not to hold onto regrets and the view that we have other reasons to feel and express regret than the communicative reasons I have identified. Consider the latter first. Just because regret is valuable because of its communicative function, does not rule out other reasons to feel regret. Perhaps we have some moral requirement to feel regret in cases like the lorry driver's. Consider the former now. Those who endorse the 'no regrets' view see regret as being purely negative. I have argued against this. While regret is painful and so *prima facie* negative, it has some positive purposes. Indeed, it may be central to our lives insofar as it is an important way to break down the epistemic gap between ourselves and others, as well as the epistemic gap within ourselves. But it remains that holding onto regret when it has communicated everything it can may be bad. This explains our tendency to tell people in situations like the lorry driver's that they shouldn't feel regret. What I take ourselves to be saying here is that *more* regret is not necessary; their regret has served its function because we now know where those people stand with respect to the outcome they caused.

Whatever else we think about regret, it seems clear that it has a communicative function and because of that regret is not a useless indulgence, but is rather a valuable and important way for us to navigate lives filled with epistemic hurdles, both within ourselves and between ourselves and other people.

Notes

1. As Bagnoli (2000, 176) points out, following Williams, it is possible to feel spectator-regret about outcomes we have caused. Thus, she distinguishes between evaluative- and spectator-regret on these grounds. On her view, the former concerns regret for outcomes we have not caused, whereas the latter is regret for outcomes we have caused but now conceive of those outcomes *as if* we have not caused them.
2. See Price 2015 for an overview.
3. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing these three worries.
4. I defend this conception of apology at greater length elsewhere. Elinor Mason (2017) develops an account of the importance of taking responsibility in personal relationships.
5. See also Bagnoli 2000, 173.

6. On Shoemaker's view, there are different qualities of will – namely character, judgement, and regard. It is qualities of character that he argues are constituted by values and cares, and it is this sense of quality of will that I focus on here.

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