

Replies

By R. Jay Wallace

The View from Here looks at a range of retrospective attitudes that humans take toward things that have happened in the past.¹ Some tendency to react emotionally toward past occurrences, I contend, is an ineluctable concomitant of investment in the ongoing world of value. Thus to value or cherish someone or something is, *inter alia*, to be disposed not only to anxiety when it is threatened and to satisfaction when it fares well, but also to sadness or distress when it is damaged or destroyed. The book focuses primarily on two extreme forms of retrospective attitude that stand in opposition to each other, which I call all-in regret and unconditional affirmation. I suggest that the second of these distinctive attitudes is characteristic of attachment: the kind of emotional investment in persons and projects that typically gives our lives meaning and personal significance. To be attached in this way is, I suggest, to be prone to affirming unconditionally both the objects of one's attachments and the historical conditions of their existence, in ways that preclude all-in regret about those very things. The upshot is that we can be committed, in virtue of our attachments, to affirming past decisions that may have been unjustified at the time when they were taken, and even monstrous historical conditions that cannot possibly be thought to be worthy of being affirmed.

These themes are illustrated by an example, originally from Derek Parfit, that figures centrally in the argument of VfH. This is the example of the teenager who decides to conceive a child when she is far too young to attend responsibly to its needs and development. I join most commentators in thinking that this is something that the young girl ought not to have done;

there are compelling reasons, of both a prudential and a moral nature, against bringing a human being into existence at a point in time when one has barely begun to get one's own life sorted out. Still, having taken this fateful step, the young girl will naturally form an attachment to her child, of a kind that will preclude her regretting that she acted as she did. Looking back on the decision, she cannot wish on balance that she had acted otherwise, because doing so would have had the consequence that the child she now loves does not exist.

Reflection on this example, I argue, can help to bring several important themes into focus. One of these is the perspectival character of our retrospective attitudes. We look back on things that have happened from a particular point of view, one that is conditioned importantly by the attachments that we have then formed. The young girl, as she grows older and looks back on her adolescent decision to conceive, thinks about it as someone who now loves the person that the earlier decision brought into existence. Insofar as our attachments evolve through time, it follows that rifts may develop between the standpoint of decision and the standpoint of retrospective reflection, with sometimes surprising effects. Thus, in the case of the young girl's child, the mother may find that she cannot regret her decision to conceive, even though it was the wrong thing to have done at the time. There are decisions that were not justified that in this way become inaccessible to regret on the part of the agent who took them.

A further aim of the book, and part of the original motivation for writing it, is to elucidate central arguments of two of my philosophical heroes, Bernard Williams and Friedrich Nietzsche. In his influential paper "Moral Luck", Williams famously questions whether we always ought to do the thing that is morally required, using an example that is based on the biography of the historical Gauguin. In Williams's development of this case. Gauguin wrongs

his family when he decides to leave them behind in Paris to pursue his artistic calling in the South Sea islands. Furthermore, he cannot know, at the time when he made this decision, whether it would turn out to be the right thing to do, because he cannot then know for certain from what standpoint he would eventually come to look back on the decision. Williams argues that, if Gauguin succeeds in his artistic projects, then he will not be able to regret fundamentally the moral wrong that he did to his family, since—as I would put it—that immorality was a condition of the attachments from which he later reflects on his earlier life. And he argues, further, that this inability to regret the earlier decision constitutes an *ex post facto* justification of it, thereby revealing limits to morality's rational authority for us, as agents who live complex lives of attachment to projects and to people.

One of my objectives in VfH is to highlight some of the tacit assumptions that are at work in the central argument of Williams's "Moral Luck" (an argument that, strangely, has not received much sustained analysis in the voluminous literature that the paper has inspired). What is the nature of the regretful attitude that Gauguin allegedly cannot take toward his earlier, immoral action? And why does Williams think that this attitude is not available to the successful Gauguin? My suggestion is that it is all-in regret that the successful Gauguin is not able to experience: not merely a pained consciousness of the past decision, but a wholehearted wish that he had done otherwise at the earlier time, which has something of the character of an intention for the future. I suggest, further, that Gauguin is unable to regret the decision in this way because it was the necessary historical condition of his present attachments as a successful artist, in a way that is analogous to the relationship between the young girl's decision to conceive and the child to whom she is later attached as a mother.² Once these assumptions are

spelled out, however, we can also see the flaw in the central argument of “Moral Luck”, which is that Gauguin’s inability to regret his earlier, immoral decision does not constitute an *ex post facto* justification of it. As in the case of the young girl’s child, there are things that an agent ought not to have done that they are not able to regret on balance, in virtue of the evolving attachments that condition the later point of view from which they look back on their earlier actions.

Central to the operation of these processes of occlusion is what I call the affirmation dynamic. This is the tendency of unconditional affirmation—the kind of attitude we take toward the most profound objects of attachment—to spread backward onto the historical and normative conditions of that which is affirmed. This is the tendency that leads the young mother to endorse the decision to conceive the child that she now loves, and that allegedly leads Williams’s Gauguin to affirm his earlier abandonment of his family. But if the affirmation dynamic represents a genuine attitudinal commitment, it seems to me that it will have further consequences that philosophers since Nietzsche have not, for the most part, faced up to. In particular, it will potentially commit us to affirming the most deplorable historical events and circumstances in the recent and less recent past, since they may well have been conditions for the existence of the people and projects to which we are now attached.

Thus we have very good reason to believe that some of the projects to which we are attached would not so much have been possible without certain lamentable historical processes. The elite academic institutions that sustain philosophical practice in Europe and North America, for instance, would arguably not function in this way without the conditions of oppression and inequality that shaped their origin and development through time; this is an

example of the “bourgeois predicament” that is discussed in chap. 5 of VffH. Generalizing still further, for any historical or natural calamity in the more distant past, we cannot know for certain that the objects of our present attachment would have existed in a world in which those calamities had not taken place. In this way, the attachments that ground our affirmative attitude toward the lives we have led potentially commit us to affirming virtually anything, including events and states of affairs that cannot possibly be regarded as worthy of being affirmed. There is an element of what I call modest nihilism in this conclusion, insofar as it reveals us to have attitudes that don’t fully make sense, given the nature of their objects. But it might provide a way of understanding Nietzsche’s provocative idea that the affirmation of life requires the affirmation of the totality of world history. Since we don’t know, for any calamitous historical occurrence, whether our actual attachments would have been possible in its absence, the notion of the eternal recurrence of the same might function as a kind of regulative ideal. Only if we are prepared to will that the totality of events in the historical past should recur can we face up to the commitments that are potentially latent in our attitudes toward the people we love and the projects that give our lives personal significance.

These conclusions, discussed in the final chapters of VffH, are highly provocative; Thomas Nagel describes them as occasionally “outrageous”, and I think that this is a fair characterization.³ I present them in the book, all the same, because I do not see how to resist them if one accepts premises that in application to other cases strike me as highly plausible (such as the assumption that the young girl’s attachment to her child, once it is born, commits her to affirming rather than regretting the unjustified decision to conceive it). The book may be regarded as a challenge to readers to reflect on the range of retrospective attitudes that it

discusses, and to offer alternative interpretations of them that will, if possible, preserve what may be plausible in my position while avoiding what is certainly outrageous. I am very grateful to my three commentators for their willingness to take up this challenge. They raise a series of important questions about the interpretations I have presented, and suggest some ways in which the more extreme conclusions of the book might be resisted. I have learned from their objections and responses, even if I remain unconvinced by them in the end; in what follows I shall explain why I stubbornly cling to my theses in the book, addressing three sets of issues in turn.

1. *Regret, Affirmation, and Intention.*

As noted above, the argument of VfH rests on a distinctive interpretation of the retrospective attitudes of regret and affirmation, one that treats them as akin to intentions for the future. I do not believe that all retrospective attitudes have this character. But sometimes, I suggest, our retrospective attitudes assume a more committed quality. We take a definite stand on the question of whether things should have been otherwise in a certain respect, where this in turn may be thought to involve a volitional element that is akin to a conditional intention for the future (albeit one with an impossible antecedent). Thus, in the case of what I call all-in regret, one definitely would bring it about that things were otherwise, if, contrary to fact, one had it in one's power to do so.

Jules Holroyd offers some thoughtful reflections on this suggestion, raising the question of whether I have pushed the analogy between regret and intention too far. There are, in particular, at least three distinct issues that are touched on in her discussion: first, whether there

are good reasons to interpret regret, in any form, as an intention-like state; second, whether there are significant continuities between regret that takes an action of the subject's as its object, and regret about impersonal states of affairs that do not concern the subject's agency; and third, whether the attitudinal commitments of regret should not be taken to resemble the commitments I ascribe to unconditional affirmation.

On the first issue, Holroyd enumerates some ways in which ordinary intentions for the future might come apart from intention-like attitudes toward past states of affairs (Holroyd, sec. 2), raising the question of whether regret is in any case plausibly interpreted as an intention-like state. An alternative would just be to treat it as the reflection of an "endorsed desire" that is bound up with one's values, and that might lead one to be sad or troubled when thinking about past circumstances in which the endorsed desire is not satisfied (Holroyd, sec. 2).

I do not wish to insist that regret should in all cases be understood as an intention-like state. As noted earlier, there is such a thing as having regrets about something that has happened, which might well be interpreted as grounded in something like Holroyd's endorsed desires; in these cases, the emotions that one experiences may simply involve a pained or sorrowful apprehension of the past events that occasion them. But my starting point is the idea that not all regret can be interpreted in this way. There are cases in which we seem to take a more definitive stand on the past circumstances that are regretted, and in which the attitude we adopt has more structure than is present in cases of mere endorsed desire. Thus, in the young girl's child case it seems that the mother's love of her child commits her to affirming the child's existence, and that this in turn precludes a certain kind of regret that she decided to conceive when she did. Commentators on this case take these assumptions to be virtually self-evident;

and yet they would not so much as make sense if regret were merely a reflection of the endorsed desires that are connected to our values. There is nothing whatsoever that would preclude the mother from regretting, in the sense of having a pained consciousness of it, her decision to conceive, even if her attachment to her child commits her to affirming that decision when she looks back on it.

The intention-like state of all-in regret that is sketched in VfH is meant to capture our intuitions about cases such as this one. There is a form of regret that seems incompatible with affirmation toward one and the same object, and the interpretation in terms of conditional intention helps us to understand why these two attitudes preclude each other. One can be ambivalent about whether one would or would not conceive the child again if one had it to do over again; but if one definitely affirms the decision from the later point of view, one *eo ipso* does not regret it, in the sense of committing oneself to do otherwise if one could. There is a generic counterfactual question that is intelligible, and that we sometimes return a definite answer to, which is: "Would I bring it about that things were otherwise in the past in a certain respect, were it in my power to do so?" My suggestion is that returning a definite answer to this intelligible question is similar to what we do when we form a familiar conditional intention for the future (such as the intention to run along the river if the weather is still pleasant at 5 p.m. this afternoon). Here, too, forming the intention is settling the question of what one would do if the specified condition obtains.

Holroyd seems prepared to concede that there might be an intention-like state of regret that takes as its objects past actions of the person who is subject to the attitude. But she doubts whether attitudes of this kind are really intelligible in application to impersonal states of affairs

that do not involve our own agency. In the agential cases, we settle the counterfactual question of what we would do if we could unspool the film of time and redeliberate an earlier decision that we have taken, thinking about this question from the perspective of our present attachments. In impersonal cases involving the past, by contrast, the question we address is doubly counterfactual; we ask, in these cases, what we would do if we both were able to unspool the film of time, and were in possession of powers and capacities that enabled us to intervene in the course of natural events (stopping the tsunami before it strikes land, for example).

Holroyd fixes on this second element in the impersonal cases, noting that it involves attitudes toward the performance of actions that, “given facts about the world and laws of nature, are [not] metaphysically possible for the agent to perform” (Holroyd, p. 5). She suggests that attitudes toward actions of this kind will play no practical role in structuring the agent’s future plans and decisions, and that they are therefore not plausibly interpreted as intention-like in any sense. The upshot, if I understand her position, is to concede that regret may be an intention-like attitude in application to past actions of the person subject to it, but to question whether we regret impersonal circumstances in the same way (or perhaps at all).

I agree with Holroyd that there are some important differences between the personal and the impersonal cases; indeed, as Holroyd acknowledges, I myself highlighted some of the differences between them in my book (see sec. 2.3 of VfH). But I do not accept that these differences between the cases block the application of the conditional intention model to both of them. In ordinary conditional intentions, we settle plans for circumstances that, for all we know, might or might not actually obtain. But once we are in the business of forming attitudes of this

kind, it is only a small further step to settle questions about circumstances that we know, as a matter of historical and fact, will not arise. We can ask whether we would conceive the child again if we had it to do over again, or whether we would make it the case that the tsunami did not strike land if it were in our power to produce that outcome. My suggestion is that our attachments sometimes lead us to return definite answers to these questions, even though the circumstances that they contemplate are contrary to fact. In settling such questions, we are forming attitudes that are like conditional intentions not insofar as they will actually structure our future agency (since we know that the circumstances they pertain to will not arise), but in their nature and content.⁴

Holroyd prefers to restrict regret, in the form that is like intention, to cases involving one's own past agency. She connects this preference to the issues raised in my critical discussion of Williams on agent regret (from VfH, sec. 2.2). In "Moral Luck", Williams famously argues that it makes sense for a faultless lorry driver to experience a kind and intensity of regret about the death of the child who runs in front of the vehicle that it would not be open to a mere bystander to experience. This is not remorse about some voluntary lapse on the part of the lorry driver (since by hypothesis he has done nothing wrong), but regret about an event, the death of the child, that stands in a causal relationship to his exercise of agency in driving the lorry. Against this suggestion, I propose in VfH that what I call "personal regret" might be the more fundamental category of retrospective attitude; this is regret about an event or circumstance that implicates the objects of one's attachments, in a way that gives one special reasons for distress that it has occurred.

But Holroyd is not convinced. She invites us to consider a traffic engineer whose professional project involves lobbying for lower speed limits in the area in which the lorry accident happened to occur (Holroyd, sec. 4). This person, she suggests, might have grounds for personal regret in my sense, but we would not expect her reactions to be comparable in kind or intensity to those of the lorry driver or the parents of the accident victim. She argues, further, that this difference is connected to the role of agency in the thoughts of the latter parties, who will wonder what they might have done differently, in recognition of the role of their own actions in bringing about the unfortunate outcome.

This is an interesting example, but I do not share Holroyd's reactions to it, for several reasons. First, it strikes me that it would equally be open to the traffic engineer to wonder what she might have done differently (to question, e.g., whether the accident might have been averted if she had lobbied harder or more effectively for reduced speeds in the relevant area). Second, Williams's agent-regret is in any case precisely not supposed to be regret about something that the agent has done (since by hypothesis the lorry driver was not at fault in any way), but about an event or circumstance that was caused by the driver's agency. My alternative suggestion is that implication in a person's projects and attachments is a much more serious basis for a distinctive form of regret about an event of this kind than its causation through the person's faultless exercises of agency. Of course, Holroyd's traffic engineer also has a project that is implicated in the accident. But the ways in which her project is implicated differ sufficiently from the ways in which e.g. the parents' attachments are affected that we can explain in these terms in the differences in their emotional reactions to the untoward event. Thus the object of the parents' attachment has been killed, bringing to an abrupt end their

continuing involvement in their child's life; whereas the engineer's project may continue after the child's death, and even, perversely, be advanced by it (since the accident might provide an impetus for a renewed and more successful campaign to reduce speed limits in the relevant area).

A final issue that is raised by Holroyd's discussion concerns a disanalogy in my treatments of affirmation and regret. With unconditional affirmation, as Holroyd rightly notes, I argue that one's attitude toward the object one affirms commits one to affirming, as well, the necessary historical conditions for the object's existence. Thus the young mother affirms the decision to become pregnant when she did, because she affirms in this distinctive way the child who would not have come to exist if she had acted otherwise. But Holroyd notes that I do not, similarly, say that all-in regret commits one to regretting the necessary conditions for the event or circumstance that is immediately regretted (Holroyd, sec. 3). Why this difference in my accounts of affirmation and regret?

In the case of affirmation, there is a certain structure in the attitude that is built into my interpretation of it as an intention-like state, and that renders the attitude subject to norms of rationality and coherence that do not apply (e.g.) to mere desires. Thus it is a commonplace that to intend an end is, *inter alia*, to intend the means that are necessary to bring the end about. Drawing on this idea, we can readily see why the unqualified intention-like state of affirming an individual or a circumstance should commit one, as well, to affirming the necessary historical conditions of its existence; a failure to affirm the necessary condition, in full awareness of its necessity relative to the object one affirms, would call into question one's unqualified commitment to that object's existence.

But these points do not carry over to the case of regret. The intention-like attitude of all-in regret is, as we have seen, an attitude through which the question is settled of whether one would have it that things were otherwise in a certain respect, if it were in one's power to bring that about. To intend that things should have been otherwise, in this way, commits one to willing similarly that the necessary conditions should have been in place for things to be otherwise. But this is not the same as regretting the necessary historical conditions of the proper object that one regrets. To take a concrete example: if I regret the fire that destroyed a lovely building in the center of my city, I am not committed to regretting all of the necessary conditions of the destructive fire. I do not need to regret, for instance, the fact that the building was constructed in the first place, even though that was necessary for the destructive fire that I now wish on balance had not occurred. What I am committed to regretting, it seems, are those conditions that, under the circumstances, were sufficient rather than necessary for bringing about the object that I regret, such as the act of arson that proximately caused the conflagration to occur. Realism requires us, in regretting the destruction of the building, to be prepared to identify some set of historical antecedents that, under the actual circumstances, sufficed to bring about that result, and to wish on balance that those antecedents, too, had not been in place. But we can satisfy this condition without regretting all of the necessary conditions for the object that we properly regret.

2. Perspectival Assessment and Historical Contingency.

According to my proposal, retrospective affirmation does not entail that the action or decision that is affirmed was justified. One can, from the perspective of one's later attachments, find

oneself unable to regret on balance that one abandoned one's family or conceived a child, even while thinking that these were not things that one ought to have done.

In reflecting on Williams's own treatment of his Gauguin case, I at one point take up the question of why he might have overlooked this to my mind natural way of understanding it (VfH, 173-4). I suggest, speculatively, that there might be an implicit expressivism that leads him to understand the Gauguin case as he does. Thus, suppose one interprets the retrospective normative assessment of the earlier decision as expressing Gauguin's later non-cognitive attitudes, including the attachments and commitments that constitute his "stand-point of assessment" when he looks back on the earlier decision. With this assumption in place, it seems that there is no room for Gauguin to judge that he ought not to have left his family behind back in Paris. The artistic attachments that shape his later point of view, and determine him to affirm the earlier decision, would also determine him to conclude that he was right to have abandoned his family when he did.

Jimmy Lenman takes issue with this line of speculative reconstruction. He notes that it is perfectly open to an expressivist to hold that judgments about the subjective "ought" are implicitly relativized to an agent's epistemic situation. Thus, one might think that, given what Gauguin knew or could have known about the outcome of his action at the time when he decided to abandon his family, it was something that he definitely ought not to have done. But given knowledge of how things actually turned out for him, Gauguin himself might consistently think, from his later point of view, "thank goodness I acted as I did" (Lenman, sec. 2).

This is an interesting suggestion, albeit one that requires careful handling. Note, in particular, that the fact that Gauguin will look back on the earlier decision with satisfaction, from his later perspective of improved knowledge, does not in itself provide support for the kind of relativization that Lenman officially supports. His expressivist proposal, if I understand it, is that the actions we approve of an agent's performing depend, at least in part, on the *agent's* epistemic situation. But the example of relativization he uses to illustrate his proposal involves dependence of a judge's approvals on shifts in the *judge's* epistemic situation (Lenman, p. 4). Thus, even if Gauguin is satisfied with his earlier decision from the later perspective of improved knowledge, he should still judge, of the agent in the earlier epistemic situation, that the agent did the wrong thing. One simply ought not to abandon one's family under circumstances of uncertainty about the outcome of such an action (which are precisely the circumstances Williams postulates in "Moral Luck"), even though a similar action might be justified if the agent knew, at the time, that embarking on it would lead to his becoming an epochally-significant artist.

I agree with Lenman that the subjective "ought" is in this way conditioned by the agent's epistemic point of view, and also that it is formally open to an expressivist to accommodate this kind of relativization. If we develop an expressivist position along these lines, however, then attributing the position to Williams will do nothing to render intelligible his treatment of the Gauguin case. The puzzle, to reiterate, was to explain Williams's apparent assumption that the mature Gauguin, who is by hypothesis satisfied with his earlier decision, will therefore judge the decision to have been justified by the events that it set in motion. My speculative suggestion was that this assumption might make sense if we attribute to Williams

an expressivist view, according to which the judge's normative verdicts reflect the very attitudes that incline the judge to be satisfied, from the standpoint of improved knowledge, with the way that things have turned out. But Lenman's more nuanced expressivism, as we have just seen, relativizes the subjective "ought" to the agent's epistemic situation rather than to that of the judge. For an expressivist of this stripe, there is nothing whatsoever to prevent the mature Gauguin from thinking that his earlier decision was wrong, even if he is unable, from the standpoint of his later attachments, to regret that he made it. Lenman's proposal therefore sheds no light on the interpretative question that I was concerned to answer in the passages from VfH that are under discussion.

At a different point in his discussion, Lenman takes issue with my treatment of unconditional affirmation. I interpret this as a kind of affirmation that spreads backward onto the constitutive and historical conditions of that which is immediately affirmed. When it comes to historical conditions, however, Lenman contends that it is important to distinguish between those that are necessary and those that are merely contingent. In the case of the young girl's child, for instance, it was contingently true that had the girl not conceived her child when she did, that very individual would not have existed. But this is not true as a matter of metaphysical necessity. As I myself observe in VfH, there are possible worlds in which the girl's child comes to exist without her having become pregnant when she did and carried her child to term; the fertilized egg from which the child emerged, for instance, might have been frozen and implanted in the young girl's womb at a later stage in her life, when she would have been better able to manage the challenges of motherhood. Lenman suggests that this gives us plenty of resources for affirming the individuals we love while rejecting the unlovely but contingent

historical conditions that gave rise to them. “So we can deplore what we need to deplore and affirm what we need to affirm and it is all fine” (Lenman, p. 7).

But is it all fine? I agree completely with Lenman that the metaphysical possibilities to which he refers leave room for coherent wishes regarding the past that have their basis in our present attachments. The young girl will naturally think, when she looks back on her life, how much better it would have been if she had given birth to her child—the actual individual whom she now loves—when she was older and more mature. Even if there were no technologies of cryopreservation in existence at the time when she in fact conceived her child, she can think that it would have been better if such technologies had existed and if they had been deployed to postpone by several years the time when her child was implanted as a zygote in her womb. There are possible worlds in which these things are the case, and she can coherently wish that they had been actual.

But there is a different line of thought that can be pursued in retrospective reflection about the historical circumstances that conditioned the objects to which we are attached. We can ask, specifically, what would in fact have happened if those circumstances had not obtained. This is a familiar form of reflection about the causal structure of the past, and as I argue in VfH, it is properly subject to a “realism condition” (VfH, p. 72). In reasoning about what would have happened if the young girl had not conceived her child when she did, we are not allowed to indulge in fantasy or willful ignorance of the ways of the world, but should think as realistically as possible about how things would have turned out under that counterfactual scenario. And given the conditions that then obtained, it is overwhelmingly plausible that the young girl’s child would not have come to exist. To express the point in a familiar idiom: even if there are

possible worlds in which the child eventually is born, despite the mother's decision not to conceive when she did, all of the possible worlds closest to the actual world in which the young girl makes that decision are ones in which the child never exists.

This true counterfactual articulates a necessary condition for the existence of the young girl's child. As Lenman notes, it is not a metaphysically necessary condition, in the sense of a condition without which it would not have been so much as possible for the child to exist. But it is a causally necessary condition, one in whose absence the child would not in fact have existed under the other historical circumstances that obtained at the time. We can then pose a new question that takes this fact about the causal structure of the past as its basic premise, asking, of the young girl, whether she prefers on balance that she should have conceived her child when she did, or whether she wishes that she had done otherwise; and taking it as given in both cases that the child to whom she is now attached would not have existed if she had not then become pregnant. My suggestion is that her love of her child will commit the young girl to affirming her decision in response to this question, in the style of unconditional affirmation, even if it also leads her to wish that she could have had her child at a stage in life when she was better able to attend to its needs. But if this is true in the young girl's case, it will equally be true in other cases involving necessary historical conditions of the objects to which we are attached, including cases in which the conditions we are committed to affirming are ones that cannot possibly be deemed worthy of being affirmed. That is the modestly nihilistic predicament with which my book concludes, and it is precisely not one in which "we can deplore what we need to deplore and affirm what we need to affirm and it is all fine."

3. Attachment and Conditional Affirmation.

What other strategies might be adopted for resisting this pessimistic conclusion? One possibility would be to place temporal restrictions on the operation of the affirmation dynamic. Perhaps attachment involves a commitment to affirm the immediate historical conditions of its objects, but the commitment diminishes as the chains of historical causation reach back into the remoter past.⁵ This would rescue us from the unnerving thought that we might be committed to affirming distant historical calamities and disasters without which (for instance) the people we now love would not have come to exist. But this strategy seems to me unsatisfactory: once the affirmation dynamic is set in motion, it is arbitrary to block its more unpalatable commitments by postulating a “statute of limitations” on its operation.

Lenman and Karen Jones propose a more radical way out, questioning whether we affirm anything in the unconditional way that sets the affirmation dynamic in motion in the first place. As both of them note, there are a variety of attitudes that we can adopt that acknowledge the values with which we are involved, and that apparently do not involve commitments to affirm unpalatable conditions in the past. We take pride in our accomplishments, are happy that our lives have gone reasonably well from the moment of our birth, and fervently hope that this will continue into the immediate and more distant future, all without the peculiar retrospective stance that I call unconditional affirmation. Jones develops this point with particular force and detail, observing that there is nothing in our engagement with value that requires us to take a stance on the peculiar counterfactual questions about the past that structure the argument of my book. One can engage appreciatively with worthwhile projects and relationships, and work intensively to nurture them and sustain them into the future, without taking a stance one way

or another on whether they should have come into existence in the first place. Isn't this enough? And if it is enough, then aren't we off the hook?

This is perhaps the central question that is raised by my book, and I am grateful to Lenman and Jones for pressing it with such force. I have to confess that there are moments when I am tempted to agree with them that we should just do without the curious retrospective attitudes that seem to get us into trouble when they are traced to their logical conclusion. But I'm not yet convinced that we can so easily let them go; I shall conclude by briefly explaining my reasons for resisting the way out that they have offered.

First, it is important to get clear about the alternative that Lenman and Jones are proposing. There is an intelligible question about the past that it is possible for us to pose, which is whether we prefer, on balance, that the conditions should have obtained that were historically necessary for the objects to which we are attached (the individuals we love, for instance, or ourselves). For the most part, Lenman and Jones appear to be saying that we can engage robustly with the world of value, in the ways that lend meaning to our lives, without taking a stand on this retrospective question one way or another. As Lenman at one point puts it, we can just regard the lamentable history that led up to and conditions our present attachments as "a matter of facticity" which it is not in any case open to us to change, and which we should therefore simply accept as a given (Lenman, p. 8). But this seems at tension with his separate suggestion that our attachments lead us to entertain coherent wishes about other aspects of the past. If the young girl can wish that she had had her child at a stage in her own life when she would have been better able to meet the challenges of motherhood, she is not regarding the fact that she gave birth when she did merely as a matter of facticity. And once

attitudes of this kind are formed, what is to prevent one from taking a stand on the different question of whether the necessary historical conditions of the objects to which one is attached should have obtained?

The burden of the argument of Lenman and Jones, I take it, is that there is nothing in our laudable engagement with value that *requires* us to take a definitive stand on this counterfactual question about the past. We can be valuing creatures who live lives of emotionally-tinged engagement, as Jones observes, even if we do not resolve for ourselves the question of whether the necessary conditions of our attachments should have existed (Jones, pp. 8-9). We might, for instance, simply be ambivalent about the obtaining of those conditions, experiencing mixed but unresolved feelings when we contemplate their obtaining. For the record, I agree completely with this conclusion. The mere fact of our engagement with value does not commit us, in itself, to affirming the necessary conditions of the values with which we are engaged. There is an intelligible outlook of discerning appreciation—we might call it the aesthetic stance—that goes together very naturally with ambivalence about the conditions of that which we thus appreciate, and that could in principle be adopted more broadly, toward the entire range of values with which we engage.⁶

What I call attachment, however, is a more existentially-committed stance. In being attached to a person or to a project, it seems to me that we are not merely appreciative of the things that make our relationship to them valuable, but invested in them, in a way that does commit us to wholeheartedly affirming their existence. Jones rightly notes that my argument would be disappointing if it rests on mere psychological contingencies about how we happen to regard the objects to which we are conventionally attached (Jones, p. 4). The challenge I need to

meet is to show that our lives would be the poorer if we did not adopt toward people and projects the stance that sets the affirmation dynamic into motion in the first place. The contrast I have just drawn, between discerning aesthetic appreciation on the one hand and existentially-committed attachment on the other, is meant to provide materials for an answer to this challenge. There are people that we have particular reason to love, and projects whose significance for our lives makes them fitting objects of attachment, and to relate to them in the ways that are thus appropriate is, I submit, to be committed to affirming their objects and conditions. The specific way in which our lives would be poorer without unconditional affirmation would accordingly lie in the absence of attachments of this kind. Having attachments in this sense may not be necessary for generic engagement with value, but it is typically necessary for the sense of personal significance that makes for a meaningful human life.

We have, then, a contrast between an aesthetic and a more existential stance toward valuable projects and relationships, and the quasi-empirical claim that the latter is bound up with the kinds of attachments that in fact give meaning to our lives. In support of the latter claim, the best I can do is to return to some of the examples that feature both in VfH and in this discussion of its central themes. Thus it is striking that all commentators I am aware of simply take it for granted that the young girl will love her child in a way that commits her to affirming the decision to conceive it, insofar as it was necessary under the circumstances for the child's existence. Indeed, Jones herself appears to concede that this is a "plausible" gloss on the young girl's overall attitude toward her child (Jones, p. 3). Note, further, that Williams seems to take a similar commitment for granted in his reflections on his reconstructed case of Gauguin, insofar

as Gauguin's relationship to his successful life project as an artist is supposed to preclude his regretting on balance that he left his family behind back in Paris. And Nietzsche, more extravagantly still, thinks that our attachment to life somehow commits us to affirming the eternal return of the entire world history of which it is a small part.

I don't mean to be simply arguing from authority here. Rather I would appeal to readers to reflect for themselves on whether their attitudes toward the objects of attachment have the character of unconditional affirmation that is described by these philosophers. At least in the central examples that involve our attachment to our own lives and to the individuals whom we love, I am struck by how naturally it comes to us to suppose that those attachments carry with them a commitment to affirm the existence of their objects. This is what leads even Jones apparently to agree that the young girl cannot regret the decision to become pregnant when she did, despite the fact that the decision was not justified at the time. My argument is that given that at least some attachments of this kind are in place, as central ingredients in a meaningful life, they will eventually commit us to affirming deplorable impersonal conditions that were similarly necessary for the objects to which we are thus attached. The affirmation dynamic, once it is set in motion, cannot be stopped.

Lenman and Jones emphasize correctly how much of what we admire in a life of engagement with value can be separated, at least conceptually, from this existential stance of unconditional affirmation. We can find joy in the time we spend with those we love, and throw ourselves into joint activities with them, without taking a stand on whether they should have come to exist or to have entered into our lives. And as Lenman notes, each of us faces the important challenge of responding honorably and intelligently to the whole bloody mess of

human history that has led up to our existence (Lenman, p. 8); this is a challenge that we could in principle rise to even while deeply regretting many of the historical circumstances that have come to shape our present predicament.

One might interpret Lenman and Jones as recommending that we trim and revise our attitudes and practices in response to my argument. Perhaps it is true, as a matter of fact, that we find ourselves with attachments that lead us to affirm their objects unconditionally, in the ways that pessimistic philosophers such as Nietzsche and Williams have tended to worry about. But these old-fashioned commitments could perhaps be jettisoned without significant loss, leaving us with a more aestheticized practice of engagement with value, going forward. This Bauhaus strategy, as we might call it, appeals pragmatically to our sense of order—if we have inherited embarrassing commitments that are in principle detachable from our ongoing valuable endeavors, why not just throw them overboard? But I think there is a real question of whether this strategy would leave us with attachments that are robust or deep enough to sustain our sense of the personal significance of the lives that contain them. Jones comments that “our lovers can make no complaint of insufficient attention to *them*” if we refuse to go in for the backward-looking structures of affirmation that I have sketched (Jones, p. 9). But while we might be attentive to them under these attitudinal conditions, I am not convinced that we would be sufficiently invested in them, as individuals. Do we really want lovers who take no stand on the question of whether we should have come into their lives in the first place, or who prefer on balance that the necessary conditions for our existence should not have been in place? Should we seriously aspire to forms of parental attachment that tolerate deep ambivalence or even regret about our role in bringing our children into the world? A world of projects and

relationships that lack the element of retrospective affirmation would, I contend, be significantly impoverished.

The response I favor is therefore different. I think we are stuck with the odd retrospective stance of unconditional affirmation, in virtue of its *de facto* role in connection with valuable forms of human attachment, and that we need to acknowledge the surprising commitments that are determined by this distinctive stance. It was my task in the book, following the path of philosophers such as Nietzsche and Williams, to trace these commitments and to reflect on their sometimes absurd implications. At the same time, however, I agree completely with Lenman and Jones in thinking that these backward-looking commitments are comparatively unimportant in the larger scheme of things. Maybe our attachments do not leave us indifferent about the past conditions that made possible their objects. But as Holroyd notes, these affirmative attitudes do not make much of a difference to our forward-looking intentions for the future. Awareness of our implication in the past should not prevent us from getting on with our lives and making something significant of the time that remains to us. We have to do what we can to sustain and nourish the values we have inherited and to honor the obligations that we have entered into, given the alternatives that it is concretely open to us to pursue; how we have met these agential challenges will be much more significant when we look back on our lives than our attitudinal commitment to variously deplorable features of the more distant past. But still, the retrospective commitments exist, and it is worth taking the time to reflect at least briefly on their sources, their structure, and their sometimes outrageous consequences.

¹ *The View from Here* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); subsequent references to the book will use the abbreviation “VfH”.

² The analogy is only partial, however. In the young girl’s child case, there is an extremely straightforward connection between the earlier decision to conceive and the immediate object of later attachment, whereas the connection between the earlier decision and the later attachments is more indirect in the Gauguin case. I take a stab at reconstructing these connections in sec. 4.2 of VfH.

³ Thomas Nagel, “An Invitation to Hand-Wring”, *London Review of Books* 36 (3 April 2014), pp. 25-26, at p. 25.

⁴ Compare Allan Gibbard’s account of normative judgment in terms of “hyperplans”, which extend even to counterfactual scenarios that are metaphysically impossible in the strongest sense, such as the scenario in which I am Caesar at the banks of the Rubicon; see Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁵ For this suggestion, see Nagel, “An Invitation to Hand-Wringing”, p. 26.

⁶ Compare the brief discussion of valuing and ambivalence on p. 233 of VfH, note 37.