

# The Many Flavours of Regret

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## *Abstract*

Daniel Jacobson (2013) has argued that regret is a single sentiment, defined by a particular intentional content and a particular set of motivational effects. Its function, he claims, is to motivate remedial action if possible, but at any rate, to prompt policy change; he concludes that regret is concerned specifically with *mistakes*. In this discussion, I present an alternative account. Extending a suggestion made by Daniel Kahneman (1995, 1998), I argue that regret is not a single sentiment, but comes in a range of emotional flavours, distinguished by their phenomenology and by their cognitive and motivational effects. As a result, different flavours of regret have different fittingness conditions and contribute to our lives in different ways.

## *Keywords*

Jacobson, Williams, regret, emotion, motivation, action, mistake, luck.

## **The Many Flavours of Regret**

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Regret is a slippery phenomenon. Fundamental questions about its fittingness conditions and functions have yet to be settled.<sup>1</sup> Here, I offer a diagnosis of regret's slippery character. Extending a suggestion made by Daniel Kahneman (1995; 1998), I argue that regret comes in a range of emotional flavours, distinguished in the first instance by their phenomenology. While regret has received some attention from philosophers, its varied phenomenology has not been investigated. Yet the varied phenomenology of regret is significant: it reflects further variations in its cognitive and motivational effects. As a result, I argue, different flavours of regret have different fittingness conditions and contribute to our lives in different ways.

In Section I, I offer a preliminary sketch of regret and introduce the questions that drive my discussion. In Section II, I introduce regret's different flavours. In Section III, I investigate their contrasting cognitive and motivational effects, with a view to determining their functions. In Section IV, I investigate what this implies concerning regret's fittingness conditions – and, in particular, what constitutes a regrettable action.

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term 'fittingness conditions' to refer to the conditions under which the intentional content of an emotional response is correct; that is, the conditions under which things are as the response represents them to be. When these conditions hold, the response can be said to fit the situation or be licensed by it.

Regret is a painful emotion. In paradigm cases, regret is elicited when someone recognises they have acted in a way that has deprived them of something they care for, even though they could have chosen to act otherwise. In these paradigm cases, regret concerns both past and present; and it concerns both how things are and how they might have been.

Regret is also a personal emotion: an action is regrettable when it thwarts the subject's own preferences or concerns: in this respect, regret contrasts with moral emotions such as guilt or remorse. That is not to say that one cannot regret behaving unfairly or unkindly: after all, one might care about someone else's good or about being a certain kind of person. But regret is not *particularly* concerned with immoral actions: it concerns actions that deprive us of things we care for.

This preliminary description of regret does not capture all cases. For one thing, it overlooks cases of anticipated regret. More controversially, some theorists have suggested that regret sometimes concerns, not actions, but facts or states of affairs. Certainly, we do *talk* in this way: I might say, for example, that I regret that Mars is so distant, or that my neighbour is so fond of nettles. Some theorists take these expressions at face value (White 2009; Munoz-Dardé 2016); others hold that they are not genuine expressions of emotion, but only of a wish that things were otherwise (Jacobson 2013). I shall not take a stand on this here. Rather, I shall focus on paradigm cases – cases in which someone regrets some past action of theirs. When I use the term 'regret' in what follows, I am always referring to cases of this kind.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams (1981, 27) uses the term 'agent-regret' to refer to cases in which someone regrets something they have done. Agent-regret, as Williams defines it, implies taking

My primary question concerns the fittingness conditions of regret. In particular, I want to determine what constitutes a regrettable action. Consider some possible candidates:

1. Culpable mistakes. These are cases in which I deliberated badly, or acted hastily or ineptly. In future, I could take more care.
2. Unwitting mistakes. These are cases in which I chose badly, not because I was foolish or careless, but because I was (blamelessly) ignorant of some relevant feature of the situation. In future, I will know better.
3. Unlucky choices. These are cases in which my choice turned out badly because of some chance combination or turn of events. Clairvoyance aside, I could not have predicted the mishap; hence there is nothing I can learn from my experience that will help me to avoid a similar mishap in future.<sup>3</sup>

Bernard Williams (1981, 28) argues that even unlucky choices can license regret. He gives the example of a lorry driver who accidentally knocks down a child who has suddenly run into the road. The accident results in part from something the driver has chosen to do – that is, drive down that particular road at that particular time. Nevertheless, he has done nothing foolish or reckless; nor is there anything he could learn from the event that would

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responsibility for the action and a desire to make amends. Because Williams' term presupposes a particular account of regret, I shall avoid using it here.

<sup>3</sup> The distinction between culpable, unwitting and unlucky missteps is a matter of degree. Hence, to the extent that the fittingness conditions of regret turn on this distinction, the fittingness of regret will be a matter of degree too.

help him avoid a similar accident in future.<sup>4</sup> Even so, Williams argues, the driver might fittingly regret injuring the child.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Daniel Jacobson (2013) argues that regret is concerned only with mistakes: hence, while the lorry driver should be dismayed by what he has done, he has no cause for regret. Jacobson does not explicitly distinguish between culpable and unwitting mistakes. However, Paddy McQueen has recently argued that regret concerns only culpable mistakes (McQueen 2017; see also D'Arms and Jacobson 2009, 192).

There is a fourth candidate to consider:

4. Uncomfortable choices: these are cases in which I must make a difficult choice: whatever I do, I will lose something I care about. I stand by my choice, but feel bad about sacrificing something that matters to me.

Suppose I have been offered a wonderful job opportunity; but to take it, I must sell the home I love. I choose to take the job, believing (correctly, as it happens) that this is the right choice overall. Nevertheless, I regret selling my house. Does my regret fit the situation? If regret is concerned only with mistakes, as Jacobson suggests, the answer is 'no', for my choice was not mistaken (Jacobson 2013, 97). However, Williams holds that uncomfortable choices can license regret: it is enough that my choice has left me worse off in some respect (Williams 1981, 31; compare Bagnoli 2000, 179; White 2009, 229).

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<sup>4</sup> It may be that, before the accident, the driver did not fully appreciate the riskiness of his profession; but if so, this is something he could take account of in future. If so, his decision to drive his lorry that day will constitute an unwitting mistake, rather than an unlucky choice.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most straightforward case of an unlucky choice is choosing a losing ticket in a lottery. However, I focus on Williams' example here as it is the target of Jacobson's (2013) argument, which I explore in what follows.

This question about mistakes, mishaps and uncomfortable choices cuts across a second question about regrettable actions. Psychologists have debated whether regret is more intense when the subject perceives an opportunity to put matters right (the ‘future opportunity’ view) or when the subject envisages no opportunity to do so (the ‘lost opportunity’ view).<sup>6</sup> While this debate concerns the conditions that *elicit* regret (an empirical question), it points to a further question about its fittingness conditions. Is regret licensed only when there is an opportunity to put things right? Or only when any such opportunity has been lost? Or might it be fitting in either case? I shall not offer a sustained discussion of this question, but I shall return to it later.

How can we determine the fittingness conditions of regret? Jacobson suggests that the issue depends on regret’s *function*:

The function of regret is to focus us on our ends and to help us avoid temptation and distraction. The regretful agent recalls his action painfully and without bidding; his regret motivates him to undo the action if possible, and to change policy for the future. This gloss of regret locates its concern in putative mistakes (Jacobson 2013, 111).

Hence, Jacobson suggests that regret has two functions:

1. Where possible, to motivate the agent to undo the action. (I shall call this ‘remedy’.)

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<sup>6</sup>Roese and Summerville (2005) defend the future opportunity view, while Beike et al. (2009) defend the lost opportunity view. More recently, Summerville (2011) has proposed a dynamic account: when people envisage future opportunities to put things right, they experience less immediate regret, but feel more regret in the longer term.

2. In all cases, to prompt the agent to adopt a different policy for the future ('policy change').

This, he suggests, implies that regret concerns only mistakes, for it is only when someone has made a mistake that they have reason to change policy. In the case of an unlucky choice, there is nothing to be learned from the situation; while someone who has made an uncomfortable choice has made the right choice overall, so has no reason to act differently in future (Jacobson 2013, 111; 119). This might suggest that regret concerns both culpable and unwitting mistakes: for in both cases, there is something to be learned from the situation. However, McQueen (2017, 615) limits the function of regret to a particular *kind* of policy change: what the subject learns, he argues, is to deliberate more effectively in future. Hence regret is needed only when the subject has made a culpable mistake.<sup>7</sup>

These arguments turn on a particular assumption: that the fittingness conditions of regret depend on its function. This is an assumption I share. Elsewhere (Price 2015), I have developed a teleosemantic account of emotional intentionality: such an account begins from the premise that the fittingness conditions of a given type of emotional response depends on its function(s) – or, more precisely, on the function(s) of the psychological mechanisms that produce it. Hence, I have no quarrel with this part of Jacobson's account.

Even so, Jacobson's argument is open to question. For one thing, we might question the assumption that regret always has the *same* function. Why not suppose that regret has different functions in different situations? If so, it might yet turn out that regret is not *always* concerned with mistakes. Jacobson, however, has a response to this objection: regret, he argues, is not only an emotion, but what he calls a 'sentiment'. A sentiment, in Jacobson's sense, is a natural psychological kind. It is defined by a particular intentional content and a

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<sup>7</sup> Compare D'Arms and Jacobson 2009: 191.

particular set of motivational effects. Anger, he suggests, is a sentiment in this sense: someone who is angry represents the situation in a specific way (they take themselves to have suffered an undeserved slight); and they are motivated to respond in a specific way (to retaliate). Dismay, in contrast, is not a single sentiment, but can take different forms: anger, sadness, horror, shame, and so on. Hence dismay can involve a variety of ways of representing the situation and a variety of motivations and behaviours (Jacobson 2013, 103–104). Regret, Jacobson argues, is a single sentiment: it concerns a specific type of situation – one in which the subject has made a mistake; and it always has the same motivational effects (Jacobson 2013, 104–105).

Even if we were to grant all this, there would remain a gap in Jacobson’s argument. According to Jacobson, regret has a *dual* function: it prompts policy change and, if possible, remedy. While policy change makes sense only when the agent has made a mistake, this is not true of remedy: if I make an unlucky choice, I should undo my action if possible. It looks as if Jacobson is giving policy change a special status as the essential or defining function of regret.<sup>8</sup> The thought might be that regret *always* promotes policy change, but only sometimes motivates the subject to undo their action.

In what follows, I develop a different view of regret. Regret, I suggest, is not a single sentiment: like dismay, it comes in a range of emotional flavours. The different flavours of regret have important features in common; but there are also significant differences between them – differences that bear on their functions and their fittingness conditions. As a result, the questions raised in this section do not have simple answers: the answers depend on which flavour of regret we have in mind.

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<sup>8</sup> In an earlier discussion, co-authored with Justin D’Arms, he describes policy inculcation as ‘regret’s central role’ (D’Arms and Jacobson 2009: 191).

## II

My account is supported primarily by phenomenological considerations, but I am also drawing on the psychological literature. Daniel Kahneman (1995) has distinguished two forms of regret. ‘Hot regret’, he suggests, has an intense, searing quality: the hotly regretful person kicks themselves for what they have done. ‘Wistful regret’ is less intense: it is ‘associated with pleasantly sad fantasies of what might have been’ (Kahneman 1995, 391–392). Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Husted Medvec have proposed a third form of regret, marked by feelings of emptiness, sadness and despair – a proposal accepted by Kahneman (Gilovich, Medvec and Kahneman 1998, 603–5). I shall also adopt this threefold distinction, though with a caveat I shall mention below. Moreover, I shall suggest that there are at least two further flavours of regret.

The differences between hot, despairing and wistful regret can be highlighted by contrasting some fictional cases:

Hot regret: Yesterday, Holly reject an emailed invitation to speak at a conference, without properly reading the email. Today, she realises she has turned down a career-changing opportunity. Holly wails and clutches her head: her regret involves feelings of agitation, frustration and urgency.

Despairing regret: Des recently lost his sister in a car accident. He had not seen her in the months before she died: he had been too busy with work and domestic worries, and had postponed a trip they had planned. He now profoundly regrets that he did not find time to take the trip with her. His regret involves feelings of misery, sorrow and emptiness.

Wistful regret: Winnie once had an opportunity to study art in Italy, but was too timid to take it up. She now regrets her decision: she yearns for the missed opportunity, and

she often fantasises about how things might have been, had she been bold enough to go.

The claim that regret can take these different forms strikes me as plausible. However, I have a caveat about Kahneman's account of hot regret. Kahneman associates hot regret and self-recrimination: he might be read as holding that hot regret involves a kind of self-directed anger. In contrast, I do not think that self-recrimination is a *necessary* feature of hot regret.<sup>9</sup> While Holly may well be kicking herself, it is also possible that her attention is wholly consumed by the magnitude of her blunder. Conversely, self-recrimination is not confined to hot regret: Des might bemoan his poor priorities; Winnie might sigh over her timidity. Self-recrimination is not a marker of one particular flavour of regret: rather, its presence or absence is a further respect in which experiences of regret can differ.

Plausibly, there are further flavours of regret. Consider the following cases:

Sickened regret: Simon, who chairs a local community association, has used his casting vote to kill a proposal for a community campaign against a road scheme – the only remaining opportunity to scupper the scheme. Later, he reads the papers more carefully, and realises that the scheme will wreck his own home. He feels sickened by what he has done; when he recalls announcing his decision, he recoils from the memory.

Bitter regret: In her youth, Billie rejected a major role in a film that turned out to be an unexpected hit. She often broods over her decision, bitterly imagining the wealth and acclaim she could have had – as if she envies her counterfactual self. She

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<sup>9</sup> Not, at least, where 'self-recrimination' implies *censuring* oneself for one's poor choice.

However, regret always implies a recognition that one is responsible for one's loss.

vacillates between feelings of resentment at her past self ('What a fool!') and exculpating self-pity ('How was I to know?').<sup>10</sup>

These regretful experiences have something in common. They are all responses to a certain kind of situation or scenario. This scenario is characterised by four features:

1. The subject has acted in a way that has deprived them of something they care for.
2. The subject could have acted otherwise.
3. Had the subject acted otherwise, they might now have the good thing they have lost.
4. The situation has yet to be resolved: their action has left them with 'unfinished business' in some sense.<sup>11</sup>

In each of the cases described above, the subject takes the situation to have these four features. Holly and Des, for example, both feel that they are responsible for their loss; that they could have avoided it, had they acted otherwise; and that their action continues to have troubling consequences. It is this sense of personal responsibility that distinguishes Holly's hot regret from mere frustration, or Des's despairing regret from misery at a hopeless situation.

As we have seen, however, the phenomenologies of these different regretful experiences differ in important ways. Nevertheless, it might be questioned whether these phenomenological differences necessarily imply that Holly and Des are experiencing

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<sup>10</sup> I am not claiming that every episode of regret comes in a single flavour: Holly's feelings might switch between hot and sickened regret; Des's regret might fade from despairing to wistful. Nor do I exclude the possibility that there are yet other flavours of regret.

<sup>11</sup> Compare Bagnoli 2000: 185; Beike et al., 2009: 389.

different kinds of regret. An alternative explanation is that they are each experiencing a combination of regret and some other emotion: Holly, perhaps, feels a mix of regret and frustration; while Des feels both regret and despair. But if so, this prompts a question: what is the phenomenology of pure regret? Is regret a sad emotion, perhaps? If so, we should expect Holly to experience a *mix* of sad and frustrated feelings. But this looks wrong: on the face of it, Holly's regret is hot through and through. Perhaps pure regret is akin to frustration or disgust. But Winnie's wistful regret does not seem to involve feelings of these kinds. Hence it is far from clear that these different regretful experiences share a common phenomenological core.

Does this show that regret is not a single sentiment, in Jacobson's sense? This does not immediately follow: Jacobson takes sentiments to be defined by their content and motivational effects, not by their phenomenology. Still, the phenomenology of an emotional response does not float free: it reflects the bodily, cognitive and motivational changes the subject is undergoing. Hence, where experiences of regret have different phenomenologies, we should expect them to differ in these respects too. If so, this may well have a bearing on their functions and fittingness conditions. I explore these issues further in the next section.

### III

What explains the contrasting phenomenologies of these different experiences? In this section, I shall investigate this question. The details of my account will necessarily be speculative: certainly, they require empirical investigation. But if nothing else, I hope to establish the importance of attending to regret's variable phenomenology if we are to pin down its slippery character. I shall focus mainly on the functions of different flavours of regret. But I shall start by considering their attentional effects.

### (a) Regret and attention

Different flavours of regret affect attention in different ways. In despairing, wistful and bitter regret, the subject's attention is directed primarily to what has been lost. We would expect Des, for example, to dwell primarily on what his behaviour has cost him and the gap left in his life. In wistful regret, the subject's attention is focused primarily on the lost alternative, which has become an object of fantasy and yearning; while for the bitterly regretful subject, it is an object of brooding comparisons and covetous longing. In hot and sickened regret, however, the subject's attention is more strongly focused on the regrettable *action*. In sickened regret, for example, the subject is sickened, first and foremost, by what they have *done*.

It is important not to take these claims too far: in any emotional experience, the subject's focus of attention can vary. In particular, as mentioned earlier, any flavour of regret can involve self-recrimination, which inevitably focuses on the regrettable action. The difference, then, is one of degree. Nevertheless, the distinction is strong enough to justify grouping despairing, wistful and bitter regret as especially *ruminative* forms of regret.

It might be thought that these ruminative responses are more likely to endure over time, while hot and sickened regret are typically short-lived responses, lasting only while the subject faces up to what they have done. There may be some truth to this, but it is not the whole story. In particular, there are reasons to suppose that hot regret is often enduring (and fittingly so). I shall come back to this later.

### (b) Regret's function

As we have seen, Jacobson (2013) suggests that regret has a dual function: to motivate the subject to undo the action if possible, and in any event, to prompt a change of policy. Moreover, Jacobson seems to treat policy change as the *defining* function of regret,

which determines what constitutes a regrettable action. I have no quarrel with Jacobson's claim that regret functions to prompt both policy change and remedy.<sup>12</sup> However, my account departs from his in two respects:

- (i) While I agree that policy change (in broad terms) is an important function of all flavours of regret, I think there is more to say. Policy change is not just one thing: different kinds of regretful experience are apt to prompt different kinds of policy change.
- (ii) More importantly, I think that Jacobson has too narrow a view of regret's remedial functions. Regret can perform a range of remedial functions, and these differ from flavour to flavour. These differences help to explain the distinctive phenomenologies of hot, wistful and bitter regret. On the other hand, despairing and sickened regret appear to lack a remedial function.

(c) Regret and policy change

The relationship between regret and policy change is clearest when regret involves self-recrimination: engaging in self-recrimination means recognising one is at fault, prompting one to act differently in future. However, even when regret does not include self-recrimination, it will involve a painful recognition of the subject's responsibility for their

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<sup>12</sup>It may be that regret has further functions. It has been argued that expressions of regret function to repair social relationships damaged by a regrettable action (Matheson, 2017; Sussman 2018). I take it, however, that this is because they indicate the subject's readiness to remedy the situation or change their ways. To perform this social function, then, an expression of regret must presuppose either that remedy is possible or that policy change is needed. Hence, this is a secondary function, which has no independent bearing on regret's fittingness conditions.

loss. This by itself should be enough to prompt the subject to change tack, if appropriate. Hence, any flavour of regret can function to prompt policy change.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that ‘policy change’ can refer to different things.

Consider the following possibilities:

1. Hotly regretting rejecting the conference invitation, Holly decides to read her emails more carefully in future.
2. Sickly regretting booking an expensive holiday with a company which (it now emerges) has terrible customer service, I vow never to use that company again.
3. Sadly regretting postponing the trip with his sister, Des resolves to give his family relationships greater priority in future.

In the first case, Holly reconsiders her *deliberative* policy. In the second, I change a *practical* policy (using a certain travel company), because I now have information I lacked before.<sup>14</sup> In the third, Des reconsiders his *priorities*. In each case, the subject’s policy concerns something different.

Moreover, different flavours of regret seem apt to prompt different kinds of policy change. Earlier, I suggested that some flavours of regret incline the subject to ruminate about their loss. These ruminations foster a kind of self-knowledge: Des’s regretful ruminations, for example, draw his attention to the importance that family relationships have for him.<sup>15</sup> Hence,

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<sup>13</sup> However, this is not to imply that regret performs this function in every *case*. This is a different question, which we shall consider later.

<sup>14</sup> For empirical evidence that regret can promote this form of policy change, see Zeelenberg and Pieters 1999; O’Connor et al. 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Compare Landman 1996; Bagnoli 2000; White 2009: 226; Matheson 2017.

more ruminative flavours of regret are particularly apt to prompt a change of priorities. In contrast, in hot and sickened regret, the subject's attention is directed to their regrettable action: hence these flavours of regret are apt to highlight flaws in the subject's decision-making or gaps in their knowledge. As we saw earlier, this contrast is a matter of degree: I am not suggesting that hot regret never prompts a change of priorities or that despairing regret never produces a change in deliberative habits. Nevertheless, given these differences, the claim that policy change constitutes a single, unifying function of regret at least requires qualification.

#### (d) Regret and remedy

What about regret's remedial function(s)? According to Jacobson, regret functions to motivate the subject to undo the action if possible. Certainly, it is highly plausible that *hot* regret has this function. I have argued elsewhere (Price forthcoming) that this provides the most plausible explanation of hot regret's heated phenomenology. While Kahneman can be read as holding that hot regret involves kind of self-directed anger, I take this form of regret to be more akin to frustration: the hotly regretful subject construes their action as having thwarted some concern of theirs; as a result, they are now urgently motivated put things right. It is this urge that explains the heat of hot regret.<sup>16</sup>

This might be taken to suggest that hot regret only rarely fits the situation, since people are rarely in a position to reverse something they have done. However, putting things right need not be a matter of undoing the regrettable action. The subject may at least be able to limit the damage; or they may be able to compensate for it, by finding another way to satisfy their concern. Holly, for example, might finesse an invitation to speak at another,

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<sup>16</sup> When I say that hot regret motivates remedial action, I do not mean that the subject will necessarily *act* on this motivation, only that they feel an urge to do so.

similar conference later that year. Moreover, even if she cannot put things right immediately, she may envisage opportunities to do so in the future. This is why hot regret need not be short-lived: the hope of remedying the situation can endure.

In contrast, none of the other flavours of regret seem to motivate remedial action. Des's regret is despairing precisely because he recognises that his loss cannot be recovered: nothing can bring his sister back or compensate for the time he could have spent with her. Plausibly, the feelings of emptiness associated with despairing regret embody the subject's recognition that there is nothing to be done. In wistful and bitter regret, the subject merely yearns for the lost alternative – as something *out of reach*. In sickened regret, the irrecoverability of the subject's loss is characteristically one of its sickening features.

This picture challenges the claim that regret, *in general*, functions to motivate the subject to undo the action if possible. On the one hand, most flavours of regret involve no such motivation. Rather, it is only hot regret that motivates the subject to put the situation right – whether by undoing the regrettable action, by limiting its effects, or by compensating for it. On the other hand, in the case of hot regret, this remedial function is not merely an occasional extra: it is what distinguishes it from other forms of regret, and is key to understanding its phenomenology.

This bears on a question I raised earlier. Does regret presuppose that there will be an opportunity to put the situation right? Does it imply that any such opportunity has been lost? The answer, it now seems, depends on which flavour of regret we have in mind. Hot regret is defined by an urge to remedy the situation: when all opportunities for remedial action have been lost, this urge will serve no purpose. In this situation, then, there is no call for hot regret. Nevertheless, the situation might call for some other flavour of regret.

However, there is more to say about remedy: while wistful and bitter regret do not motivate remedial action, they nevertheless have a remedial function.

As we saw earlier, both wistful and bitter regret prompt fantasies and yearnings about what has been lost. By dwelling on the lost alternative, the subject may better appreciate the importance it has for them. However, these fantasises and yearnings have a further effect: by continually drawing the subject's attention back to the lost alternative, they ensure that the subject does not lose sight of its value. Admittedly, the wistful or bitter subject takes what they have lost to be out of reach. Nevertheless, their continued yearnings imply they have not despaired of it. These flavours of regret, then, leave it open that the situation might change. Perhaps Winnie might one day unexpectedly inherit some money, allowing her to pursue her studies after all. If so, her wistful regret will no longer fit the situation: it might instead morph into hot regret, as the painful recollection of her earlier timidity spurs her to seize this new opportunity (Price forthcoming); or it might simply give way to excitement. In the meantime, however, her wistful regret has ensured that she has not lost sight of her goal.

In contrast, sickened regret focuses the subject's attention on the regrettable action and its immediate implications: it does not involve yearnings for what has been lost. For this reason, it does not seem well-suited to perform this function. The same seems to be true of despairing regret. While Des is inclined to dwell on what he has lost, the despairing quality of his regret seems rather to deter any attempt to recover it. In what follows, then, I shall assume that despairing and sickened regret have no remedial function: they function only to prompt policy change.

This brings us back to the issue of lost and future opportunities. In particular, it suggests that the binary distinction between 'future opportunity' and 'lost opportunity' is too simple. Despairing regret is licensed only when what has been lost is lost *forever*. But the

yearnings that characterise wistful and bitter regret imply that the lost alternative is out of reach only for *the foreseeable future*.<sup>17</sup>

So far, I have found functional differences between all but two of these flavours of regret: I have yet to account for the contrast between bitter and wistful regret. The difference seems to lie, not in their functions, but in how the subject understands their loss within the context of their life as a whole. As Winnie construes the situation, she has lost something she cares about and now wishes she had. But Billie takes herself to be *hard done by*, compared to her more fortunate counterfactual self. The implication is that her regrettable action has deprived her of something she *ought* or *deserves* to have, leaving her worse off than she should be. If so, it might be argued that bitter regret necessarily presupposes a misguided view of the situation, and so can never be licensed. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I shall assume that bitter regret can sometimes fit the situation.

I have argued that regret has several remedial functions: hot regret motivates the subject to undo, mitigate or compensate for what they have done, while wistful and bitter regret function to keep the lost alternative in view, in case the situation should change. These remedial functions are key to explaining the distinctive phenomenology of these three flavours of regret. Given this, there is no strong case for regarding policy change as the *sole* defining function of regret: for some flavours of regret, their remedial function is at least as important.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Sickened regret would appear to be compatible with either possibility.

<sup>18</sup> In Section IV, I shall argue for a stronger claim.

(e) Remedy and the retrospective character of regret

It might be objected that I have overlooked an important reason to regard policy change as the sole defining function of regret: it is only policy change that explains regret's *retrospective* character. Policy change presupposes that the subject has, in the past, got something wrong. In contrast, regret's remedial functions presuppose only that the subject has some concern that remains unsatisfied: hence, these remedial functions could be performed just as well by feelings of frustration or longing. Hence, if we want to explain what distinguishes hot regret from mere frustration or wistful regret from mere longing, it is policy change that is key.

In response, I shall argue that there is more than one explanation for regret's retrospective character. While the retrospective character of regret can be explained by its role in promoting policy change, it can be explained by its remedial functions too.

As we have seen, regret presupposes, not only that the subject's loss results from something they have done, but that they could have acted differently; and that, had they done so, they might now possess what they have lost. In other words, regret implies something about the subject's practical *capacities*: that it was once within their power to satisfy their concern. Of course, this will also have depended on the external conditions that held at the time. Still, the implication is that, under those conditions, the subject had the skills and attributes needed to achieve their goal. This constitutes evidence, if only defeasible evidence, that they may *still* have the power to put things right, were a similar set of circumstances to arise.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Zeelenberg et al. (1998) report that a key contrast between regret and disappointment is that regret involves a sense of *control*; they take this to suggest that regretful subjects are

In this respect, hot regret contrasts with mere frustration. Feelings of frustration, in themselves, do not presuppose that the subject is themselves responsible for their failure to achieve their goal. As a result, they do not presuppose the goal was once within the subject's reach; and hence provide no grounds to hope that it continues to be so. Consequently, we might expect frustration to be short-lived, unless sustained by independent grounds for hope (or perhaps by desperation). In contrast, Holly's sense that she *could* once landed the prize offers some grounds for hope that she could so in the future, helping to sustain her motivation to try. Similar points could be made about wistful and bitter regret. Admittedly, in these cases, this assurance has no *immediate* practical significance; in these cases, the point is that this assurance might become significant in future.

I have argued, then, that regret's retrospective character has two explanations: it reflects *both* its role in prompting policy change *and* its remedial functions. Hence regret's retrospective character does not imply that policy change is the sole defining function of regret.

To sum up: I have allowed that all flavours of regret can prompt policy change. Indeed, policy change seems to be the only function of despairing and sickened regret. I have noted, though that policy change is not all of a kind; different flavours of regret are apt to prompt different kinds of policy change. More importantly, I have argued that Jacobson understates regret's remedial functions. Regret has several remedial functions, and these are key to explaining the particular phenomenologies of hot, wistful and bitter regret. For these forms of regret, then, remedy is at least as important a function as policy change. (For a summary of regret's functions, see Table 1.)

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more likely than disappointed subjects to attempt remedial action. For evidence supporting this, see Zeelenberg and Pieters 1999.

	Functions to produce policy change?		Remedy?	
	Deliberative or practical?	Concerning priorities?	Undo/mitigate/compensate?	Keep goal in view?
Hot regret	Yes, especially	Yes	Yes	No
Despairing regret	Yes	Yes, especially	No, because opportunity is lost gone for good	No
Wistful regret	Yes	Yes, especially	No, because opportunity is gone for now	Yes
Sickened regret	Yes, especially	Yes	No, because opportunity is gone for now	No
Bitter regret	Yes	Yes, especially	No, because opportunity is gone for now	Yes

Table 1: Flavours of regret and their functions

Finally, we have already begun to see how the contrasting functions of these flavours of regret point to differences in their fittingness conditions. While hot regret presupposes that there is an opportunity to remedy the situation, other forms of regret presuppose that this opportunity has been lost for the foreseeable future – or, in the case of despairing regret, that it is gone for good. Hence regret is not a single sentiment, in Jacobson’s sense.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Does this imply that regret is not a single *emotion*? I have argued elsewhere (Price 2015) that we can legitimately type emotions at different levels of specificity, depending on our explanatory interests. The different flavours of regret have important features in common: they are all negative emotional responses to a certain kind of situation (broadly characterised); and they all function (broadly speaking) to enable the subject to cope with that kind of situation. This justifies regarding regret as a single emotion for some purposes. For

## IV

We can now return to the question from which we started: what constitutes a regrettable action? Earlier, I distinguished four situations that might be thought to license regret:

- (a) The subject has made a culpable mistake.
- (b) The subject has made an unwitting mistake.
- (c) The subject has made a choice that turned out badly due to an unlucky mishap.
- (d) The subject has made an uncomfortable choice, foregoing one good in order to secure another.

As we saw earlier, Williams (1981) holds that any of these situations can license regret, while Jacobson (2013) argues that regret is licensed only when the subject has made a mistake.

What light might the preceding discussion throw on this question?

First, it is clear that regret of any flavour can be licensed by a mistake. Moreover, there is no reason to limit this to culpable mistakes. Admittedly, self-recrimination is appropriate only when the mistake is a culpable one. Nevertheless, even if the subject's mistake was unwitting, a change of policy may be in order. Moreover, the subject may be able to put the situation right. Hence, any flavour of regret can help the subject deal with a mistake, culpable or otherwise.

What about unlucky choices? In these cases, policy change is not required.

Nevertheless, regret may still be able to perform a remedial function. Williams' example of the unlucky lorry driver tends to obscure this point, for there is nothing the driver can do to

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other purposes, however, it will make more sense to treat different flavours of regret as distinct emotions.

remedy the situation: he cannot undo or mitigate the child's injuries, nor is it clear how he could compensate for having caused them.<sup>21</sup> However, not all unlucky choices have this feature. Suppose that Una has always wanted to be a museum curator – a position rarely advertised and hard to get. By a stroke of luck, she is offered two such posts at the same time. She would be thrilled with either post, but chooses Museum A because it offers better opportunities. Later, she hears that – quite unpredictably and through sheer bad luck – Museum A has suffered a serious fire and must close. Una now regrets her choice.

The situation does not call for policy change: Una did not choose badly, nor is there anything she could learn that would avoid this happening again. Hence the situation does not license self-recrimination, nor does it call for sickened or despairing regret. Nevertheless, hot regret might motivate her to try to reverse her choice or to look for another, similar post. If that is out of reach, wistful or even bitter regret might ensure that she does not lose sight of the value museum work has for her. In Una's case, then, regret may still perform a remedial function: if so, her situation could license hot, wistful, or perhaps even bitter regret.

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<sup>21</sup> Williams suggests that the driver's regret will motivate him to make some kind of symbolic compensation, perhaps in the form of an apology (Williams 1981, 28). Recall, though, that regret is a *personal* emotion: it motivates the subject to compensate *themselves* for their regrettable action. An apology will not compensate the driver for having injured the child. Rather, it compensates the child, who has been hurt by his action; and for that, what is needed is an expression of remorse, not regret. (Compare Jacobson 2013.) Admittedly, I have allowed that expressions of regret can play a social function, by assuring another person that the subject is ready to change policy or to put things right. (See note 11.) However, the lorry driver can do neither of these things.

There is an objection that might be raised to this. In discussing it, I shall focus on hot regret, but similar points can be made about wistful and bitter regret. Earlier I suggested that hot regret presupposes that there is some prospect of remedying the situation: when there is no such prospect, the urge characteristic of hot regret will be misplaced. But (the objection goes) why should we not *also* insist that hot regret presupposes that the situation requires a change of policy? To make this objection stick, however, we would need to show that hot regret has some characteristic that can only be explained by its role in prompting policy change, and which would be out of place if policy change were not required. Yet it is hard to see what this characteristic could be. Earlier I suggested that regret's power to prompt policy change depends on two things: its painfulness and its retrospective character. As we have seen, however, both these characteristics are also explained by its remedial function. But if so, the prospect of remedy will be enough to license hot regret.

At the end of the last section, I suggested that for hot, wistful and bitter regret, remedy is just as central a function as policy change. The discussion in this section points towards a stronger conclusion. These forms of regret, I argued in Section III, are licensed only when there is a prospect of remedy. What I have said about Una's case implies that the prospect of remedy is *sufficient* to license these responses. In other words, to capture the function of these flavours of regret, we need to reverse Jacobson's formula: their function is to prompt a change of policy where appropriate, and in any event, to motivate or facilitate remedy. Arguably then, it is remedy, not policy change, that is the defining or central function of these flavours of regret.

I have argued that any flavour of regret can be licensed by a mistake; and that unlucky choices can license hot, wistful and perhaps bitter regret. But what should we say about uncomfortable choices – for example, when I choose to sell my home for the sake of a job? In this case, I have not made a mistake: hence, policy change is not required. Nor do I wish I

had made a different choice: hence I should not be motivated to undo my action. Hence self-recrimination is not warranted; nor does the situation call for sickened or despairing regret. Bitter regret does not seem to fit the situation either: since my choice was the right one, I have no grounds to feel it has left me hard done by, compared with my counterfactual self.

Nevertheless, on my account, an uncomfortable choice could license hot regret. This is because the remedial function of hot regret is not limited to undoing the regrettable action: it includes limiting or compensating for its effects. For example, I might compensate for the loss of my home by finding a new home with similar qualities. If this possibility is currently out of reach, the situation might instead license wistful regret. Hence, even when the subject recognises that they have made the right choice overall, an uncomfortable choice might still licence hot or wistful regret.

## V

I have argued that regret is not a single sentiment. Like dismay, it comes in a variety of flavours: hot, despairing, wistful, and so on. What links these experiences is that they are responses to a particular kind of situation – one in which the subject has acted in a way that has deprived them of something they care about, even though they could have acted otherwise. Broadly speaking, we can say that the function of regret is to enable the subject to deal with this kind of situation, whether through policy change, or remedy, or both.

At a more detailed level of description, however, different flavours of regret turn out to have different functions. Despairing and sickened regret function only to prompt policy change, while hot, wistful and bitter regret are characterised, first and foremost, by their remedial functions. Moreover, these differences in function point to differences in fittingness conditions. While Jacobson's claim that regret is concerned only with mistakes is true of some kinds of regretful experience, Williams' more liberal account is true of others. Finally, I

have conceded that the details of my account require empirical confirmation. But I hope at least to have shown that in developing a full account of regret, we should not neglect its varied phenomenology.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Talks based on this research were presented at conferences and workshops at the Open University, the Swiss Centre for Affective Sciences in Geneva and University College Dublin. I have also drawn on ideas in Price (forthcoming): in this paper, I expand on and refine some of the ideas presented there. I am grateful to my colleagues at the Open University, to Michael Brady, and to the participants at the conference and workshop for their insightful comments. Finally, I would like to thank Andreas Elpidorou and an anonymous referee for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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