



BRIAN PRICE

A THEORY OF REGRET

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A THEORY OF REGRET



Brian Price

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FOR ALEXANDER GARCÍA DÜTTMANN

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We do not see our hand in what happens, so we call certain events melancholy accidents when they are the inevitabilities of our projects (I, 75), and we call other events necessities because we will not change our minds.

Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*

I now regret very much that I did not yet have the courage (or immodesty?) at that time to permit myself a *language of my very own* for such personal views and acts of daring, labouring instead to express strange and new evaluations in Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulations, things which fundamentally ran counter to both the spirit and taste of Kant and Schopenhauer. What, after all, did Schopenhauer think about tragedy?

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

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Introduction

REGRETTABLE POLITICS

This book is born of an effort to take regret seriously as a political emotion. It is also an attempt to understand the oft-professed absence of regret—the decisive moment in which one declares that one regrets nothing—not as a sign of virtue, as it is typically heard in boast, but as an expression of conviction. By “conviction,” I mean a commitment to first principles, or the betrayal of human complexity and the diversity of life in the ongoing adherence to what we have only ever believed in one way. If I profess my conviction, if I give it a name, I usually do so when the corresponding signs of my belief—what I believe and what I want you to believe even more than I do, so that I am never left to doubt myself—have gone missing in the world. If what I believe is best has always been before me in the right way, why would I protest? The tautological character of conviction is such that its seeming and ceaseless relevance depends on the constant absence or presence of whatever this or that holder of conviction seems to prize most. In order to maintain my sense of conviction, I must remain unsatisfied and also always without remorse, so that my perpetual dissatisfaction can stand as proof that I have only ever been right about what I believe to be wrong. The political left and the political right are equally susceptible to conviction in just this sense, which can only name a perpetual absence that must be corrected by various means of insistence on what does not change, whether rhetorically, in the form of dogmatic speech, or else as real violence.

Is this not the lesson of Adolf Eichmann, the haunting advocate of the clear conscience, the most infamous opponent of regret? Recall Eichmann's famous declaration about regret, published in English translation in *Life* in 1960. The phrase, of course, has become a commonplace of popular culture: "But to sum it all up, I must say that *I regret nothing*. Adolf Hitler may have been wrong all down the line, but one thing is beyond dispute: the man was able to work his way up from lance corporal in the German army to *Führer* of a people of almost 80 million. I never met him personally, but his success alone proves to me that I should subordinate myself to this man."¹ Most striking in Eichmann's claim to have no regrets is the attendant admission that Hitler "might have been wrong all down the line," an admission he made, it should be emphasized, to a fellow ss officer turned Dutch journalist in Argentina in 1955.² That is, Eichmann was speaking to someone with whom he could trust to be already in agreement—not a reporter from *Life* but someone he was bound to by a shared sense of conviction. Likely, Eichmann experienced the feeling as an expression of duty. This is what allowed Eichmann, and presumably the Dutch journalist in exile, to recognize a right that did not diminish every other wrong so much as render those wrongs ethically irrelevant on the basis of what Richard Rorty has described, in critical terms, as a "preference ranking." For Rorty, preference rankings are what follow, in certain strains of moral philosophy, from an inability to accept that "the boundaries of the self are fuzzy and flexible," which leads moral philosophers—and also Eichmann, in no sense a philosopher—to draw lines around selves where there may be none and to develop systems "which divid[e] people up according to whom one would prefer to be fed first, for example."³ What mattered most to Eichmann was the becoming-Führer of Hitler, the invocation of eighty million as a picture of consensus, and consensus as the becoming-arbiter of the Good.

Curiously, Eichmann's response in the interview unfolds in the rhetorical structure of a preference ranking in process. It is one that depends, as any preference ranking must do—and however tacitly it happens—on a consideration of potential regrets. If Eichmann begins the ending of his confession by saying, "But to sum it all up" (the clause that always goes missing in its everyday citation), it is because he earlier admits in the interview that he did, in fact, regret something:

There was only one thing I regretted. If I had not been in a state of shock at this time, I would have done more for my wife and children. Unfortunately, I did not make provision for them ahead of time, unlike the gentlemen from the Intelligence Section of Schellenberg's, the so-called kid-glove boys in the S.S. I, too, could have had my family securely wrapped in a very comfortable cocoon of foreign exchange and gold. In fact, I could have easily sent them on to the farthest, the most neutral of foreign countries. Long before the end, any of the Jews I dealt with would have set up foreign exchange for me in any country I had named, if I had promised any special privileges for them.

As it was, I was able to give my wife only a briefcase full of grapes and a sack of flour before going up into the mountains from Altaussee. I had also given them poison capsules, one for my wife and one for each child, to be swallowed if they fell into the hands of the Russians.⁴

There is, of course, an even more chilling discussion of regret, even if the word isn't used—chilling precisely as a testament to Arendt's well-known and controversial claim of Eichmann's stupidity in place of an idea that he was, by essence, evil. Save for the fact that what Eichmann appears to do in the interview is to invoke potential mistakes and begin to classify them. Even earlier in the interview, for instance, Eichmann reports that "Himmler went on to say that he had made some mistakes. 'I'll tell you one thing, Eichmann,' he said, 'if I have to do it over again, I will set up the concentration camps the way the British do. I made a big mistake there.' I didn't know exactly what he meant by that, but he said it in such a pleasant, soft way that I understood him to mean the concentration camps should have been more elegant, more artful, more polite."⁵ Setting aside, for the moment, the odd assumption that Eichmann makes about the notion of a better—"more elegant, more artful, more polite"—concentration camp, what we see here is a steady movement from mistake (Himmler) to regret (about his wife and children) to the final determination that, in sum, he has no regrets at all (how could eighty million people be wrong?). In other words, Eichmann separates reason and emotion in the very act of establishing a preference ranking, so that what might have produced pangs of regret—his wife and kids with a bag of grapes and a pocket full of poison—is, for him, no real cause for regret at all, since the best thing that could have happened, according to his logic, happened. Eichmann's response is not so unusual in terms of the way that regret is regularly

regarded: as long as the best is realized, so long as virtue is achieved or observed, regret can be understood not as a response to a mistake but instead as a mistake in itself. It is the kind of mistake—perhaps the only of its kind—in which the consequences of that mistake disappear in the instant of its identification. For example, what Eichmann seems to assume, or simply wants his reader to believe, is that every choice comes down to an evaluation of the relative value of potential goods, which makes regret both possible and unnecessary at once, insofar as choice is never understood as something that we make without an enclosed, auto-democratic scale.

There is, of course, nothing terribly unusual about such an insistence on the separation of reason and emotion, especially as that separation is very often made in response to the manifestation of regret. The distinction is as common to Western philosophy as it is to Eichmann's special brand of stupidity. As we'll see in chapter 1, for instance, Aristotle considered regret to be useless to both the determination and the experience of virtue. Alternatively, one could argue against such a notion, as Janet Landman, author of a pioneering study of regret, has, and say instead that "regret is a form of inductive reason in that it proceeds from the given to the not given, comparing what is (a particular 'given') with what might have been."⁶ It is the feeling of regret that cannot be separated from the act of distinction and comparison. Our thought is motivated, in such an account, by a feeling about something that has transpired and that we now revisit, rationally. It could also be said that regret, if we take the claim for inductive reason seriously, is a feeling that brings us back to reason. This is not so far from the way that the problem has been taken up in moral philosophy around the idea of rational regret, which in most cases involves the establishment of what should count as a greater or lesser good, so that we can say, without fear of self-deception or absurdity, that we have good reason to regret having chosen *x* rather than *y*.⁷ Or as Thomas Hurka puts it, "The regret is rational as an instance of proportional love [in which we divvy up and rank our feelings in relation to the relative merits of each possible good, whether state or object, that will be included in decision], but like all such love it becomes less rational for more remote possibilities."⁸ So, for Hurka, it would be rational to regret experiencing bad weather when on holiday, insofar as we will have missed out on an anticipated pleasure, but not more than one would regret missing out on the pleasure "you would have enjoyed had a stranger given

you a million dollars on the beach or had aliens abducted you and taken you to an intergalactic pleasure palace.”⁹ In other words, regret can be understood as rational if we retain a sense of the inherent value of things, on the one hand, and impose modest limits on our imaginations, on the other. But it is hard for me to imagine what good such modesty might bring, beyond the assurance it may provide us about what we have chosen to do or accept or else decline. If I am forced to imagine an intergalactic pleasure palace in order to understand why I chose to visit Seattle when I could have gone to Palm Springs, then it would be hard to imagine a use for regret in the world of political experience, or even, in the realm of the social, as it involves an experience with others whom we do not, exactly, comprehend.

By contrast, at the core of this book is an argument that regret is unconditionally transformative, and thus of no real import for reason. Regret is unconditionally transformative in that when I feel a pang of regret when revisiting an image or memory of something I have done and imagine how I might have done it differently, but without any definite image of what I might do next time, knowing what I now think I know, I do not project something because I feel I am in possession of nothing. And, besides, if there is a next time, it will not be the same time that has already passed me by. Regret is not restorative, just as we imagine paintings to be subject to restoration, inasmuch as we consider paintings to be things that can be cleaned or repaired in time or in the event of an accident (the risk of time): shown as they really were, shown now as they truly are. For instance, if I turn down my friend’s invitation for drinks on Thursday night, after having done the same thing to her repeatedly before and for the same reason, she may decide to stop trying; she may cease to be my friend. A few months pass by and I realize that I have not heard from my friend. When I write and when I call, I receive no reply. I begin to feel regret. I begin to wonder about myself. I dwell on the event of our last moment of contact, which is also my most recent appeal to my supposed busyness. Now that I feel the loss of my friend, my work seems less pressing than it did before; or, at least, I can see that it was not so pressing in this one instance—not enough, as it turns out, to jeopardize a friendship I have valued, since for her, this one instance was yet one more instance of the same. In revisiting the scene of my decision, I imagine an alternative—I imagine what I believe would have been a better thing to do. I may even recall previous instances in which I responded in roughly the same way.