

[Changes since version sent to Jay on Monday.]

I was first lured into philosophy by being told that it was “the study of the human condition.” I’m not certain I can say *now* what I thought *then* that this was. But I suppose that it had something to do with how we should view our lives, given various distinctively human limitations, such as mortality. I’m fairly sure that if I could invite my former self, with *his* understanding of “the study of the human condition,” to the present and ask *him* to retrospect the philosophy that I have since read (and, worse, the philosophy I myself have since written), he would affirm very little of it as answering to *his* understanding. But he would immediately recognize Jay’s book as answering to it. And he would find it as gripping as my present self does.

Shelves strain under the weight of books that propose answers to philosophical questions that are well understood—or at least treated as well understood. But a book that, in effect, raises a new question, is a rarer find, and particularly energizing. Jay is no doubt cringing as I say this, gearing up to remind us that the question of what the affirmation of life requires is not entirely original with him. So I’ll just say this: the clarity and insight that Jay brings to the subject puts us in a position to ask the question in a way that we couldn’t before.

Regret and affirmation

At the core of Jay’s book is the opposition of (all-in) regret and (on balance) affirmation. They reflect incompatible “yes” and “no” answers to the question: “Would we, knowing what we now know about how things have played out, bring it about that things were otherwise [than X], if it were in our power to do so?”

- To *regret X* involves (inter alia) something like the conditional intention to bring it about that not-X, if it were in our power.
- To *affirm X* involves (inter alia) something like the conditional intention to bring it about that X, if it were in our power.

And just as the conditional intention to X if C is incompatible with the intention not to X in C, so too is affirmation of X incompatible with regret about X.

Moreover, even when X and Y are distinct, regret about X and affirmation of Y may be incompatible. This is because of the “affirmation dynamic” (or at least one “affirmation dynamic”):

The unconditional affirmation **of** something commits one to affirming its necessary constitutive or causal conditions.

Thus, if X is a necessary constitutive or causal condition of Y, then unconditional affirmation of Y is incompatible with regret about X.

Why is this? Perhaps it just follows from the idea that intending an end commits one to intending the known necessary means. To intend to bring about Y if it is in one’s power, is to be committed to intending to bring about such known necessary means to Y as are in one’s power to bring about. X is such a means, and when considering whether to affirm it, one imagines that it is in one’s power to bring about.

“Conditional” affirmation

Jay suggests, however, that this affirmation dynamic can be blocked when affirmation is “conditional.” For example, I may affirm the heroism of the firefighters, but not the negligence that led to the fire. Although the discussion of conditional affirmation occupies only a small part of the book, it seems to me quite important. If the affirmation dynamic can be blocked in some cases, then why think it is inevitable in other cases, especially given its far-reaching and unsettling consequences?

I share Jay’s intuition that the affirmation of the heroism does not imply the affirmation of the fire whereas, say, the affirmation of the artistic success does imply the affirmation of the departure from Paris.

[It seems to me more natural, however, to view this not as a matter to two different *kinds* of affirmation, but two different kinds of *relations* between an object of affirmation and a condition. One and the same object of one and the same kind of affirmation might stand in different relations to different conditions, so that one is required to affirm one condition, but not the other. For example, if the heroism of the firefighters was due to their childhood experiences of being orphaned by a fire, then the affirmation dynamic might lead one to affirming those childhood experiences, but not, again, the fire itself.]

Having thought that I had cottoned on to the intuitive difference, I was then surprised at times by how Jay classified certain cases. For instance, explaining why the redemptive response to the bourgeois predicament fails, Jay suggests that affirming one’s efforts to end world hunger commits one to affirming world hunger. I wondered why the efforts to end world hunger were not to world hunger as the efforts to fight the fire are to the fire.

What sort of relation blocks the affirmation dynamic? Jay suggests that when the object of affirmation is an *action* and the condition is *a fixed circumstance to which the action responded*, we can somehow hold them sufficiently separate to affirm the object but not the condition.

I’m not sure that I understand this. Taken literally, it doesn’t seem to fit Jay’s overall view. Suppose I decide to pursue a career at a university founded by a rapacious 19th-century robber baron. That’s a decision in response to a settled circumstance. So, on the present explanation, I should be able to affirm the decision without affirming the rapine that made it possible. But I would have expected Jay to say, in this case, that affirming the decision did commit me to affirming the settled circumstance.

I’m more persuaded by a different suggestion, explicit in some footnotes and implicit in parts of the text. The affirmation dynamic is blocked when the object stands in a relation to that condition that is—for lack of something better—wholly “ameliorative” or “rectifying” or “protective.” That is, the condition is, or threatens, some bad, harm, loss, wrong, violation, failure, etc. and the object of affirmation addresses this condition: it puts it right, avoids it, memorializes it, etc. Thus, rescuing the kids, not breaking a promise, repaying a debt, apologizing for a wrong, making up after a fight, bringing a criminal to justice, ending poverty, having a fitting memorial service, etc. might all stand in ameliorative or rectifying or protective relations to the relevant conditions.

To affirm such an object, one might say, is to be turned against the bad that it addresses. To affirm the rescue is to regret the threat, to affirm the memorial is to regret the loss, etc. So to affirm it is compatible with, indeed perhaps even requires, preferring that, or at least being indifferent to whether, the bad, and so the ameliorative value itself, had never existed. The standpoint of justice, for example, would be fully satisfied had the crime never taken place; the standpoint of love for the children would be fully satisfied had the fire never been set; the standpoint of fidelity to promises would be fully satisfied if a promise had never been made, etc.

To wipe the slate clean would not be to lose anything such standpoints care about. [After discussion, I think that what I was groping for here was: that the bad condition—the fire—isn't a necessary condition of the *primary* object of affirmation in such cases, the thing that first sets the dynamic in motion as it were—the safety of the children. The necessary condition is either that no fire occurred or, if a fire occurred, that it was put out. So the affirmation dynamic doesn't commit one to affirming the bad condition. Perhaps this means that one doesn't affirm that the fire was put out, period. Instead, one affirms that the fire was put out holding fixed that there was a fire.]

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However, many values are not like this. For example, my career at the university isn't part of putting right the injustices of the Gilded Age. Thus, to affirm it is not to be turned against the injustice it presupposes. Likewise, the young girl's child isn't part of putting right... what would it even be?... the non-existence of the child? Thus, to affirm the child is not to be turned against the unjustifiable choice to conceive. The standpoint of love for the child, or of attachment to the career, would not be fully satisfied—indeed, not satisfied at all—had the unjustifiable necessary condition, and so the child or career, never existed. To wipe the slate clean would be to lose precisely what such standpoints care about.

Importantly, however, there will be mixed cases. Some ameliorative goods or projects are valued as more than simply ameliorative. For example, a firefighter might value her career not simply as something that ameliorates a bad, but as a career that gives her life meaning—something that plays the same role that a non-ameliorative, artistic career, might play for someone else. When it is valued this way, perhaps she cannot affirm the career without affirming the regrettable condition. This may explain why—as Jay claims and as I said surprised me at first—the redemptive response to the bourgeois predicament fails. To affirm a career as a relief worker *as one* values one's career as an academic, as something that gives one's life meaning, would be to affirm something that does not stand in a purely ameliorative relation to the condition of suffering. [Perhaps, though, as Sam, Seana, and others were urging, even the valuing of one's career as a relief worker ultimately has the "conditional" structure described above. The primary object of affirmation is something like: that one did something valuable with one's life. That there was suffering to relieve is not a necessary condition of this. Had there not been suffering to relieve, one would have had another career, and that would have been fine. Contrast the case of where the primary "object" of affirmation is a particular person, such as one's child.]

New grounds for toleration?

Jay argues that the inability now to regret some past decision, even in light of all the facts, does not mean that that decision was justified. Thus, he rejects, or explains away, Williams's thought,

in “Moral Luck,” that decisions can be retroactively justified by our later attitude toward the decision.

At least in the cases that Jay considers, the explanation turns on an attachment has developed in the interim, which provides the agent with new reasons. Since those reasons were not present at the time of acting, and since the action’s justification depends on the reasons present then, they do not bear on the action’s justification. However, they do give the agent reason to affirm to attachment, and, by the affirmation dynamic, this requires the agent to affirm—and so to be unable to regret—the decision that made it possible. The young mother now has reason to affirm her attachment to her child. So, by the affirmation dynamic, she must affirm the decision to have the child and so cannot regret it.

This seemed right to me, and I wondered about further applications of it. In particular, I wondered whether it might help us to account for the notoriously elusive stance of toleration. On the one hand, toleration involves an impulse of rejection. We don’t tolerate what we wholeheartedly embrace. On the other hand, it involves an attitude of acceptance. In tolerating something, we somehow restrain this impulse. The question is how the impulse and its restraint can both be called for.

As Jay’s discussion of deafness brings out, however, an attachment—a relationship, practice, way of life—that genuinely gives meaning and worth to the lives of those who have it can be conditioned on a genuine bad. If this is true of disabilities, then it might also be true of false religious beliefs, authoritarian or hierarchical structures, needless deprivation, suffering, or limitation. Consider, for example, a religious practice, organized around values of simplicity and humility, which prohibits any education beyond a sixth-grade level.

I think I judge this as bad, without qualification: that it would be better if people did not embark on this way of life, just as it would be better if people were born with hearing. It’s not that I think it is an equally good way to live, just different. That’s my attitude of rejection. Yet, at the same time, having embarked on such a way of life, they have a genuinely valuable attachment to it, just as the deaf may have genuinely valuable attachment to deaf culture. It isn’t just that their lives will go worse if they are torn from those ways of life (something that may not be true, if they would in time become attached to other options). It’s rather that they have valid reasons, grounded in the attachments they have come to have, to resist the change. What tempers my attitude of rejection is, in part, my recognition of these reasons.

Affirming attachments, affirming the life that we have lived

One affirmation dynamic is:

A. The affirmation of our attachments commits us to affirming their conditions.

This is just a special case of what we called “the” affirmation dynamic above.

However, as the book progresses, Jay lays greater emphasis on a different affirmation dynamic:

B. The affirmation of the life that we have lived commits us to seeing our attachments as valuable (contrast affirming them).

This is explained, I think, in a different way. If we do not see our attachments as valuable, then we cannot see ourselves as having reason to affirm the life that we have lived. So our

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affirmation of the life that we have lived will be, by our own lights, groundless. (Note that affirming our attachments, while not seeing them as valuable, would not help with this. Our affirmation of the life that we have lived will still seem groundless. That's why I say that we are committed to seeing our attachments as valuable rather than to affirming them.)

Jay seems to see this dynamic as extending not just to the attachments, but also to their conditions. So he seems to accept a further affirmation dynamic:

C. Seeing our attachments as valuable commits us to affirming their conditions.

Why this should be so wasn't clear to me.

In any event, why consider B and C in addition to A? Why isn't A enough? That is, insofar as we are attached to our attachments, we will affirm them. Why stress that, in addition, we are driven to affirm our attachments in order to affirm the lives that we have actually led?

Part of the thought may be that our drive to affirm the lives that we have actually led is somehow especially urgent or inescapable. Hence, it lends our drive to see as valuable (or affirm) our attachments a kind of urgency or inescapability that merely being attached to them would not.

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But why should our drive to *affirm the lives that we have actually led* have this special urgency or inescapability? Jay seems to suggest that it is because, as seems undeniable, our *drive to live* has a special kind of urgency or inescapability. But why does our *prospective* drive to live imply a drive to affirm, *retrospectively*, the lives that we have actually led?

One explanation is:

1. Our drive to live somehow craves a justification, transferring its urgency to the search for, or manufacture of, such a justification.
 - [At times, though, Jay suggests precisely the opposite: that our drive to live couldn't care less about its justification, although we can ask, in a reflective mood, whether it has a justification.]
2. There is such a justification only if there is something to live for.
3. There is something to live for only if our existing attachments, established in the past but projecting into the future, are valuable.
 - [Why only existing attachments? The prospect of new attachments can be something to live for. There are those who, having lost everything, start again.]
4. So the drive to live transfers its urgency to the judgment that our attachments are valuable.
 - This is desired conclusion: that the urgency transfers to the judgment that our attachments are valuable. But notice that no attitude toward the lives that we have lived plays any role in this. [But why does it transfer its urgency to the judgment that *the lives that we have lived* are valuable, much less to *affirming* them? Some existing attachment can be worthwhile and so project reasons into the future, even if that attachment does not suffice, on balance, to make the life that I have actually lived until now worthy of affirmation. For example, the person with the bad professional life, which makes it the case that, despite his good personal life, he lacks reason to affirm the life that he has lived, might still see his good personal life as something to live for.]

Another explanation is:

1. The test of whether I can affirm the life that I have actually led is whether I can affirm to have lived that life *rather than never to have lived at all*.
2. However, my drive to live rebels at the conditional intention, as it were, to annihilate myself in retrospect: to make it the case that I never lived at all.
3. So my drive to live transfers its urgency and inescapability to affirming the life that I have actually led.

A reverse affirmation dynamic?

Whether by the A-dynamic or the B&C-dynamic, we are driven to affirm the conditions of our attachments. However, in some cases, we lack reason, on balance, to affirm the conditions, even taking into account what they have contributed to our lives.

There is an important qualification. One thing that can affect our reason to affirm the conditions of our attachments is whether the case *against* affirming them consists in only in the *objections of people who themselves affirm* those conditions. This is what distinguishes the young mother's reasons to affirm her decision from Gauguin's reasons to affirm his. In affirming the decision, the child, so to speak, waives its objections to it. So the mother has reason overall to affirm it. But Gauguin's family in France has no reason to affirm his decision. So these objections remain in place.

Still, as with Gauguin, this qualification is often absent. So we seem forced to the unnerving conclusion that we are more or less fated to affirm conditions that we know we ought not to affirm. Or, if a veil of ignorance shields us from the *actual* conditions of what we affirm, then we must at least be prepared to affirm conditions that we know we ought not affirm—at the limit, the totality of human history, the whole bloody, sordid tale. Sweeping though the conclusion is, I don't see how we avoid it, and it strikes me just as disturbing as Jay paints it as being.

However, Jay *seems* to go even further, and here I'm less sure. That is, he seems to suggest that because we lack reason to affirm, on balance, the *conditions* of our attachments, we also, as a consequence, lack reason to affirm the *attachments* themselves and *the lives that we have actually led*. This happens, in particular, with the bourgeois predicament. Because we have lack reason to affirm (on balance) the injustice that conditions our bourgeois pursuits, we also lack reason to affirm those pursuits, and so we lack reason to affirm the lives that we have actually led. "The result is to undermine the rational basis of the affirmative attitude we take toward our lives, and to frustrate our concern to live in ways that are worthy of that kind of attitude" (187).

As far as I could tell, this was not an instance of any of the affirmation dynamics so far considered. It seemed, instead, to be a kind of "reverse" affirmation dynamic:

- D. Insofar as we lack reason to affirm (on balance) the conditions of our attachments, we also lack reason to affirm (on balance) those attachments.
- E. Insofar as we lack reason to affirm (on balance) our attachments, we lack reason to affirm (on balance) the lives that we have actually led.

Why should there be this reverse affirmation dynamic? Jay doesn't explain it. Is the thought

that one has reason on balance for an attitude only if one has reason on balance for the attitudes that it commits one to having? But is this so obvious?

Does this reverse affirmation dynamic have plausible implications? Consider Gauguin's attitude toward his Tahitian children. If we agree with Jay, then Gauguin lacked reason to affirm his decision. So according to the D-dynamic, it would follow that he lacked reason to affirm the attachments conditioned on that decision: not only his artistic career, but also his attachment to his Tahitian children. Unless I'm missing something, it seems to follow his very love for them, while natural enough, would be, by his own lights, misplaced. But this seems to me a kind of category mistake. The case for loving for our children is not conditional in this way on our past mistakes or other regrettable conditions.

[Or consider a life shaped by disability, such as deafness. Deafness is something impersonally regrettable, which we should not wish on anyone. Having hearing is not. According to the D&E-dynamic, it would seem to follow that the deaf lack reason to affirm the *lives that they have lived*, whereas, for all that has been said, the hearing have such reason. This too seems hard to accept.]

The following reasoning may lend plausibility to the reverse affirmation dynamic.

1. Gauguin and the bad scientists lack reason to affirm the lives that they have lived, even though their attachments were genuinely valuable, because of Gauguin's decision and the scientists' bad conduct.
2. Gauguin's decision and the scientists' bad conduct were conditions of their attachments.
3. The best explanation of 1, then, is the reverse affirmation dynamic: because they lack reason to affirm the conditions, they lack reason to affirm the attachments, and so lack reason to affirm the lives that they have lived.

However, there is a simpler explanation of 1. The decision and the bad conduct are, along with the attachments, are *part* of the lives that they have lived. So they are simply *part of the object that they evaluate* when they evaluate the lives that they have lived. In other words, it is a red herring that the decision and the bad conduct are also conditions of their attachments. The reason why they cannot affirm their lives is like the reason why the guy with the bad professional life but good personal life can't affirm his life: not because the bad professional life is a compromising condition of the good personal life, but because, on balance, the good personal life doesn't make up for the bad professional life.

If we accept this simpler explanation, and deny the reverse affirmation dynamic, then it can be the case that Gauguin has reason to affirm, on balance, his attachments (even though, if he does affirm his attachments, then he is committed to affirming their conditions, which are not, as he knows, worthy of affirmation). This is because the problematic condition—the decision—is not *part of* the attachment—his love for his children. So Gauguin gets to love his kids. (The bad scientists, by contrast, may not have reason to affirm, on balance, their careers, since their careers themselves *may include as a part* the bad conduct.)

If we accept this explanation, and deny the reverse affirmation dynamic, then it can also be the case that the bourgeois have reason to affirm, on balance, not only their attachments, but also the

lives that they have lived (even though, if they do affirm, then they are committed to affirming their conditions, which are not, as they know, worthy of affirmation). This is because, at least in some cases, the problematic conditions are not *part* of the lives that they have lived. Or at least this is so if we avoid a metaphysics of the self that views everything that conditions our lives as part of those lives.

[(Whether one can say the same about the deaf, I don't know. Is deafness part of the life, or a condition in response to which one has lived that life?)]

The bourgeois predicament: impersonal regret or guilt?

Even if we stick with just the A-dynamic, we still have part of the bourgeois predicament, which is troubling enough: namely, our affirmation of our bourgeois pursuits (such as conferences like this) commits us to affirming certain unjust conditions that make those pursuits possible. Most often the unjust condition at issue is the present distribution of material resources, but at other times, it is some historical act of injustice, and at still other times, it is institutional structures that perpetuate injustice into the future.

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When reminded of these facts, I agree, it is hard not to feel ambivalence. But I wonder how much of this ambivalence stems from *impersonal regret*, open to anyone, about the unjust condition—which is what Jay emphasizes—and how much of the ambivalence stems from something like *personal guilt* about our relation to the unjust condition, especially appropriate for us, the privileged—which Jay tends to downplay. That is, is the ambivalent thought simply: “My attachment would not have been possible without this condition, which is, on balance, a bad thing”? Or does the thought also involve the idea that: “...which I contributed to, let happen, benefited unfairly from, or am somehow complicit in (say, by playing my part in an institution that perpetuates injustice)”? I'm assuming that guilt can make sense not only in response to one's discrete, voluntary misdeeds, but also in response to enjoying unfair advantage or being involved in an unjust enterprise.

Here's one reason I wonder. Why is the predicament only for the bourgeois, for those who have bourgeois attachments? Jay writes that I would not have grounds for regret had I “lived in a world that is distributionally much like the actual world, but occupied a position in that world of deprivation rather than privilege.” But why? Presumably, those who occupy a position of deprivation have attachments that are profoundly conditioned by that deprivation. Had they had our opportunities, their relationships, loyalties, etc. would be altogether different from what they are. So their attachments are conditioned by the same injustice as ours are. And impersonal regret about those conditions is just as open to them to feel. So, if impersonal regret is the source of our ambivalence, then it would seem that they have just as much reason to feel it.

One response is to say that since the grounds for regret are the claims of the deprived themselves, they waive those claims in affirming, just as the young girl's child does. But, first, any given deprived person can't waive the claims of *other* deprived people. And, second, if we are to suppose that all the deprived waive their claims, then that seems to liberate the bourgeois from ambivalence (as it liberates the young mother).

The other response is to emphasize what Jay seems inclined to minimize: something like guilt. The deprived really have no reason to feel guilt about their condition. But we bourgeois may have reason for guilt. To some extent, we may be complicit in it, and, at very least, we benefit unfairly from it.