

Dynamics of Affirmation

‘*Tu regrettes qu’il est mort?*’ asked Pierre shrewdly.

‘*Non, absolument pas, je regrette qu’il ait vécu.*’

‘*Mais sans lui, you would not exist.*’

‘One shouldn’t be egotistical about these things,’ said Patrick with a smile.

—Edward St. Aubyn, *Bad News*

1.

At the core of Jay Wallace’s potent and engaging book, *The View From Here*, is the opposition of (all-in) regret and (on balance) affirmation. *Regretting X* involves something like conditionally intending to bring it about that X did not occur, if it were in our power. *Affirming X* involves something like conditionally intending to bring it about that X did occur, if it were in our power. 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, if it were in our power to do so?” The incompatibility, it would seem, derives from the intention-like character of regret and affirmation. Affirming X is incompatible with regretting X because intending to bring about X in C is incompatible with intending to prevent X from coming about in C.

There is nothing terribly surprising about this. The more surprising, and troubling, forms of incompatibility are between affirming X and regretting some *distinct* Y. The incompatibility arises from what Wallace initially calls the “affirmation dynamic”:

(1) Affirming X “commits” one to affirming the historical conditions without which X would not have occurred.

This commits us to affirming things that call for all-in regret. Thus, Wallace supposes that a mother, who loves her child, is committed to affirming her decision to have a child at fourteen, while knowing that the decision was regrettable; a deaf adult, who is attached her deaf community, is committed to affirming her deafness, while knowing that it is regrettable; and Gauguin, whose painting has flourished in Tahiti, is committed to affirming his decision to abandon his family, while we know that it is regrettable. Indeed, Wallace supposes his readers are committed to affirming the unjust conditions without which the “bourgeois pursuit” of academic philosophy itself would not be possible, while knowing that they are regrettable. Worse still, everyone of us, burgher or no, is attached to someone. But that particular person would not exist if human history had not taken a fairly precise course. And that course surely winds its way through crime and catastrophe. So, insofar as we love at all, and so affirm the existence of particular people, we are committed to affirming many, if not all, of the horrors of history.

2.

Why accept (1)? As far as I can tell, Wallace simply points to some cases in which it seems fairly plausible that affirming some particular thing (e.g., a punting trip) commits one to affirming some particular necessary condition of it (e.g., its organization). But if this is one intuitively confirming instance of (1), Wallace himself highlights many intuitive counter-instances to (1). As Thomas Nagel observes, the claim that we must affirm the horrors of history seems “outrageous” or at least an “extravagance.” Nagel responds: “our affirmation of anything... is bounded by a statute of limitations on its reach into the past. We can take much about the world that we have not created, good and bad, as simply given, and limit our

affirmations and regrets to what is downstream from that.”¹ Wallace might protest that this qualification to (1) is ad hoc. But his protest seems weak until we are given some reason to accept (1) in its full generality.

The reason, I would suggest, stems from the familiar idea that if one intends an end, then one is “committed,” as a matter of instrumental rationality, to intending the necessary means to it. Suppose that one affirms X and that Y is a necessary causal or constitutive means to X. Is one committed to affirming Y, as (1) claims? That’s to ask: Is one committed to intending Y, if one could bring it about? Well, if one could bring about Y, then Y would then be a necessary *means* to X. And one intends X, since one affirms it. So, if one could bring about Y, then Y would be a necessary means to something one intends. So, it seems, one is committed, as a matter of instrumental rationality, to intending Y, if one could bring about Y. And this is just to say that one is committed to affirming Y. Since X and Y were completely arbitrary, (1) is established in its full generality. No matter how far back we page in our calendar, we can’t set a date for Nagel’s statute of limitations.

3.

We have so far suppressed an important qualification to (1). It does not apply, says Wallace, when affirmation is “conditional.” For example, I may affirm the heroism of the firefighters who rescued my children from our burning home, but not the negligence that led to the fire (73–75). But which things call for only conditional affirmation and why? If conditional affirmation is not subject to the dynamic, then perhaps it is what saves us from affirming the horrors of history.

¹ Thomas Nagel, “An Invitation to Hand-Wringing,” *London Review of Books* 36:7 (April 3, 2014): 25–26.

Wallace 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, conditionally, the object but not the condition. But why? After all, it's still true, as we know, that had that fixed circumstance not obtained, the action would not have obtained. And in the other cases, such as the punting expedition, that thought alone seemed enough to set the dynamic in motion. Moreover, this suggestion seems at odds with Wallace's overall view. Suppose I decide to join a university founded by a 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 one imagines Wallace would say that affirming this decision did commit me to affirming the settled circumstance.

Something else, I suggest, is going on. It stems from the fact the *primary* object of affirmation in the case of the fire is simply the safety of the children. *That's* the thing that first sets the dynamic in motion. It's what explains our affirmation of what we might at first misdescribe as putting out the fire. Now, the bad condition, the fire, isn't a necessary condition of the primary object of affirmation, the safety of the children. Instead, the necessary condition of the children's safety is disjunctive: either that no fire occurred or, if a fire occurred, that it was put out. One isn't committed to affirming that the fire was put out, much less that there was a fire. Instead, one is committed only to affirming the disjunctive condition: that either no fire occurred or, given that one did, it was put out. Properly speaking, (1) needs no qualification. There aren't two different kinds of affirmation, "conditional" and "unconditional." There's just affirmation. It's rather that some necessary conditions of what we affirm could have been satisfied in more than one way. Thus, in being committed to affirming those necessary

conditions, we need not be committed to affirming the actual way in which they happened to be satisfied.

This sort of structure, which stops the affirmation dynamic from reaching back to the bad condition, is likely to be present when one affirms something, like putting out the fire, that stands in a relation to the bad condition that is—for lack of something better—wholly “ameliorative” or “rectifying” or “protective.” That is, the condition is, or threatens, some harm, loss, wrong, violation, failure, etc. and the object of affirmation addresses this condition: it puts it right, avoids it, memorializes it, etc. One affirms such an ameliorative or rectifying or protective good only because one affirms some primary good that was threatened with harm, loss, wrong, violation, failure. To affirm the ameliorative or rectifying or protective good is to be turned against the bad that it addresses, to wish that it had never occurred. 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 requires, preferring that, or at least being indifferent to whether, the bad, and so the ameliorative value itself, had ever 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 started; 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.

However, there may be mixed cases. Some ameliorative goods or projects are valued as more than simply ameliorative and so affirmation of them may not be purely “conditional.” For example, a firefighter might value her career not simply as something that ameliorates a bad, but also as a career that gives her life meaning (75 n. 46). This may explain why Wallace goes on to

say that the “redemptive response” to the bourgeois predicament fails (239), because affirming one’s efforts to end world hunger commits one to affirming world hunger.

One wonders, though, why the affirmation of one’s career in this way, as something that gives one’s life meaning, couldn’t still have a purely “conditional” structure. Suppose the primary object of one’s affirmation is that one did *something or other* 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.

Wallace would likely question whether one’s attachment be simply to some valuable career or other, rather than to this very career. One of his themes is that attachment cleaves to the particular. In any event, where the primary “object” of affirmation is a particular person, such as one’s child, the conditional escape-route seems completely closed off. It is this very child one loves, not some child or other.

So even if “conditional affirmation” keeps (1) from reaching back to the historical conditions of what is “conditionally affirmed,” not all affirmation is “conditional.” Our love for particular people is not “conditional,” and so neither is our affirmation of them. That’s enough for Wallace’s unnerving conclusion. For odds are that the converging paths of history that lead to the existence of those we love snake through untold waste and gore. Even if a veil of ignorance shields us from the grisly details, we must at least be prepared to affirm them—at the limit, to affirm the totality of human history, the whole bloody, sordid tale.

4.

As the book progresses, Wallace brings other structures, having to do with “affirming the life that one has led,” under the banner of the “affirmation dynamic.” These structures are less plausible than (1). And it’s not clear why we are asked to consider them.

To begin with, Wallace suggests (119) that:

(2) Affirming X commits us to affirming the “normative conditions” of X: that is, that which makes X worthy of affirmation.

(2) is supposed to imply:

(3) Affirming the life that we have lived commits us to affirming our attachments.

Affirming the life that we have led just is affirming the life we led over not having lived at all (68). So the life that we have led is *worthy* of affirmation only if the life that we led is *better* than not having lived at all. And it is better, if it is, only if our actual attachments were valuable (109). So (2) commits us to affirming our attachments.

But why accept (2)? Intending to X does not, in general, commit us to intending to bring about that in virtue of which X is worthy of intending, whatever exactly that would be.

And how does (3) advance Wallace’s inquiry? What is gained by establishing that, in addition to the manifest fact that we *actually* affirm our attachments, we are *committed to* affirming our attachments *insofar as we affirm the life that we have lived*? Why isn’t it a needless detour?

At times, Wallace suggests that our drive to affirm the lives that we have led is somehow especially urgent or inescapable. Thus, our drive to affirm the lives that we have led gives, via (3), the affirmation of our attachments a kind of urgency or inescapability that they would otherwise lack.

But why should our drive to *affirm the lives that we have actually led* have this special urgency or inescapability? Wallace 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 transfer its urgency and inescapability to affirming, *retrospectively*, the lives that we have actually led?

At times, the thought seems to be this. 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*. 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. Therefore, my drive to live transfers its urgency and inescapability to affirming the life that I have actually led. But one wonders whether it isn't simply an artifact of how the test of "affirming the life that one has lived" is constructed.

At other times, the thought seems to be this. First, our drive to live somehow craves a justification for itself, transferring its urgency to the search for, or manufacture of, such a justification. Second, there is such a justification only if there is something to live for. Third, there is something to live for only if we have attachments, established in the past but projecting into the future, and if they are valuable. Therefore, our drive to live transfers its urgency and inescapability to our attachments and to our judgment that they are valuable.

But this explanation has nothing to do with (2), (3), or *any attitude toward the lives that we have led*. And it doesn't say anything directly about our *affirmation* of our attachments. What it shows is that we are particularly driven to be *attached* to our attachments and to *believe* that they are valuable. Of course, if we are attached to our attachments, then we are bound to

affirm them. But one might have thought that it was obvious that we affirm our attachments, before saying anything about the drive to live.

5.

Elsewhere, Wallace 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 led*. Because, in particular, we have lack reason to affirm 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 led (187, see also 7, 11, 13, 223, 248, 249, 259). This threatens to be an even more troubling conclusion than that we are committed to affirming *conditions* of our attachments that are unworthy of affirmation. We must acknowledge that our *attachments themselves* and so our *very lives* are unworthy of affirmation.

As far as I can tell, this is not an instance, or direct consequence, of any of the affirmation dynamics so far considered. It seems, instead, to involve two “reverse” affirmation dynamics:

(4) Insofar as we lack sufficient reason to affirm the conditions of our attachments, we also lack sufficient reason to affirm those attachments.

(5) Insofar as we lack sufficient reason to affirm our attachments, we lack sufficient reason to affirm the lives that we have actually led.

But (4) and (5) seem scarcely plausible, especially when applied to cases other than the bourgeois predicament. Consider Gauguin’s attitude toward his Tahitian children. If we follow Wallace, then Gauguin lacked reason to affirm his decision. So according to (4), 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. But this seems a category mistake. The

case for affirming our love for our children is not conditional in this way on our past mistakes. Or consider that (4) and (5) would seem to commit Wallace to the conclusion that the deaf lack reason to affirm their attachments and the lives that they have lived, whereas, for all that has been said, the hearing have such reason. That sits uneasily with Wallace's denial of any "inconsistency between acknowledging the value of activities that essentially involve a given disability on the part of the adults who already have the disabling condition and seeking the eradicate the same condition in future generations" (129).

So why accept (4) or (5)? Presumably, the case for (5) is, first, that we have reason to affirm our lives only if our lives have been filled with attachments that are valuable, and, second, that those attachments are valuable only if there is sufficient reason to affirm them. But why assume that something is valuable only if there is sufficient reason to affirm it? If we have learned anything, it is that affirmation is a peculiar kind of attitude, with its own peculiar requirements. (We will return to this point.)

The rationale for (4) is even less clear. Is it because if one lacks reason for the necessary means—the condition—then one lacks reason for the end—the attachment? But this isn't true. Suppose buying a ticket is too expensive, even though it is a necessary means to traveling. Still, if I *have already*, mistakenly, bought a ticket, I don't lack reason to travel. It's water under the bridge. Likewise, when I ask whether I affirm my career as a philosopher, I dial back the clock to the time at which I decided to be philosopher. And, at *that* time, the "necessary means"—the historical injustices that made philosophy possible—*were* water under the bridge.

Perhaps there are abductive grounds for (4) and (5)? Perhaps they explain why Gauguin's regrettable decision makes it the case that he lacks reason to affirm the life that he has lived? But there's a simpler explanation. The decision is *part* of the life that Gauguin has lived.

So it is simply *part of the object that he evaluates* when he evaluates the life that he has lived.

It's a red herring that the decision is also a condition of his attachments. Thus, Gauguin can have reason to affirm his love for his Tahitian kids. This is because the problematic condition—the decision—while part of the *life* he has lived, is not part of the *attachment*—his love for his children.

Perhaps there are other abductive grounds for (4) and (5)? How else to explain our ambivalence, when reminded of the unjust conditions of our bourgeois pursuits, about those *pursuits themselves*? Again, however, there's a simpler explanation. We just feel guilty about our unfairly benefiting from, or being otherwise complicit in, the unjust condition. This would explain why the bourgeois predicament is *only* for the bourgeois (227). Like us, the deprived also have attachments that are profoundly conditioned by the unjust condition. But unlike us, they have no reason to feel guilt.

Suppose, however, that (4) and (5) hold. Because we lack sufficient reason to affirm their bad conditions, our attachments and the lives we have led are not “worthy of affirmation.” That sounds like a crushing verdict, as though our attachments and our lives had been revealed to be pointless or empty. But it means only that we lack reason for *one* kind of positive response toward our attachments and the lives that we have lived: the peculiar attitude of *affirmation*. We still have reason for other positive responses toward them: cherishing them, holding them up for emulation, etc. It should not take the wind from our sails.

In sum, the arguments that Wallace makes for (2)–(5), and the uses that he makes of them, seem to me to go too far, in two senses. They go too far in the sense that what Wallace says about them outstrips what can be confidently supported. And they go too far in the sense

that the book would be no less significant or powerful without them. The conclusions that Wallace draws from (1) are, left to themselves, hard to deny and hard to shake off.