

R. Jay Wallace

The View From Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013.

288 pages

\$45 (cloth ISBN: 978-0-19994-135-3)

It is a familiar retrospective stance to declare that if you could start again, you wouldn't change a thing, since your mistakes made you who you are. The bigger the mistakes, the more philosophically interesting this stance becomes. For example, if I commit a serious crime and later say that going to prison was the best thing that ever happened to me, how should I regard the act that put me there?

The View From Here is an engaging, deft, and ultimately daring examination of this pervasive but under examined emotional and evaluative dynamic. R. Jay Wallace argues that a person can rationally judge that something they did, or in which they are implicated, was unjustifiable, while at the same time preferring on balance that it occurred. In fact, this absence of regret can be rationally obligatory. Such a position has interesting implications for various philosophical issues that Wallace considers, the best known of which are the non-identity problem and moral luck. But the most novel chapters ask readers to consider how we ought to value our own lives, when the larger socio-historical preconditions of our most cherished attachments, and of our very existences, are morally reprehensible.

The first two chapters lay out the book's key concepts: attachment, unconditional affirmation, and all-in regret. *Attachment* is a fairly intuitive notion: the main examples are the important relationships and personal projects which 'imbue [our lives] with meaning and subjective significance' (27). That I am attached to something means that I am susceptible to certain emotions that track how the object of my attachment is doing, and I take myself to have special reason to care about it in this way. Importantly, Wallace claims that we are by default attached to our own existences, too. *Unconditional affirmation* is a stance one takes toward the objects of one's attachments: it is to be 'glad on balance that those objects are in fact part of the history of the world, taking into account the totality of the things that they involved' (75). By the latter phrase, Wallace means that unconditional affirmation 'spreads backward' to also affirm 'the historical conditions that were necessary for the existence of the thing one affirms' (75). Last, the opposite of unconditional affirmation is *all-in regret*: 'a stable reaction of sorrow or pain about a past action or circumstance', that comes with 'an on-balance preference that things should have been otherwise' (51).

It is obvious from the conflicting preferences they embody that the stances of unconditional affirmation and all-in regret cannot be directed by the same person toward the same object. I cannot prefer on balance both that something exists, and that it doesn't; nor can I (rationally, knowingly) prefer on balance that something is part of the history of the world, while also preferring that the events necessary to bring it about never happened. In Chapter 3, Wallace applies this idea to Parfit's case of the fourteen year-old girl who chooses to have a child. On one hand, it seems there are decisive reasons for her to wait, which (it can be stipulated) even she will acknowledge later on. Having the child, for the purposes of this thought experiment, is not justified. On the other hand, after the child is born and the young mother is attached to it, she thereby unconditionally affirms it. Because of this attachment, the mother is not in a position to feel all-in regret for the decision to

have had it, even though, by her lights, that decision was wrong. Wallace intends this as more than just a descriptive claim about her psychological inability to regret her child's existence—since she is attached to the child, all-in regret is 'rationally inaccessible to her' (98). The separability of regarding something as unjustified and regretting it on balance is illustrated with the example of a broken promise that coincidentally saves a life. I may not be able to regret your failure to get me to the airport once the plane crashes—but that does not retroactively justify you in promising me a ride and then standing me up.

This analogy also explains why, in Chapter 4, Wallace disagrees with Bernard Williams' famous argument concerning (a fictionalized) Gauguin. According to Williams, Gauguin's dubious decision to abandon his family for art was retroactively justified, at least on one evaluative dimension, by subsequent good fortune in his career. But even assuming that Gauguin cannot feel all-in regret for abandoning his family since he is attached to his subsequent life, it does not follow that what he did then has been justified. To this extent, Gauguin and the young mother have structurally similar situations. But Wallace sets the stage for the book's last chapters when he allows that, unlike the mother, Gauguin's earlier failings throw into question 'the rational warrant of [his] affirmative stance' (182). It may be that while Gauguin cannot feel all-in regret for his past, the unconditional affirmation that is rationally required and psychologically hard to avoid is still, nonetheless, objectionable. As such, the most appropriate response to his life might be an ambivalence that is 'deep' (185) or 'fundamental' (198).

The question of the last two chapters is whether we readers are like Gauguin in this respect—not because of our own moral failings, but because of the indefensible impersonal conditions which make the attachments we have possible. Both chapters defend refreshingly dour conclusions. In Chapter 5 Wallace describes *the bourgeois predicament*: the basis for affirming 'our' lives is ineradicably polluted by our complicity in 'social and economic disparities that we cannot possibly endorse' (187). In this part of the book, the first person plural refers mostly to progressive philosophers working in richly-endowed universities, although the bourgeois predicament is shared by any member of humanity's 'leisured class' (211) whose projects would not exist in a more egalitarian world. Wallace suggests that people in this situation can do no better than to regard their lives with Gauguin's deep ambivalence: one could be a moral saint, unconditionally affirm one's life, and still not lead a life that is 'worthy of unconditional affirmation' (248, my emphasis).

The final chapter expands its focus to encompass all of humanity: even if the social and economic disparities were fixed, it is safe to say that nobody alive today would have been conceived when and where they were, had it not been for various horrific, 'objectively lamentable' (252) events in world history. Insofar as we are attached to and affirm our own lives and those of the people we care about, on Wallace's view this might require us to affirm that history as well. To take one example, for my romantic partner and I to affirm each other, we must (like many) affirm World War II; we must also (like many) affirm our ancestors' theft of the land on which we were born. Even more uncomfortably on this account, the victims of that theft would be required to affirm it, too, insofar as their ancestry was influenced by the same history. This is Wallace's 'modest nihilism': 'the deep aspiration to live lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation may not be realizable at the end of the day' (257), because those lives are likely implicated, in one way or another, in a past that is unworthy of being affirmed.

Much might be said about Wallace's treatment of particular cases (though it should be noted that the book takes a thorough, not to say Parfitian, approach to countering potential

objections). A questionable move in the book's general argument is the assertion that attachment rationally requires *unconditional* affirmation of the sort that spreads backwards in time. Why not instead adopt the stance of 'conditional affirmation' (76) toward one's attachments? The content of that attitude is roughly: *given* the world we live in and its history, I affirm the objects of my attachment; but on balance, I would prefer for my life's various economic and historical preconditions not to exist or have existed. To be sure, conditional affirmation gives one a set of preferences that create some friction if they do not contradict each other: I have a preference for existence over nonexistence in this world, but I more strongly prefer that the world have been altogether otherwise (e.g. for World War II not to have occurred, although that would preclude my existence). Wallace assumes that this stance is only a 'theoretical possibility' that we cannot sustain while also being 'honest with ourselves' (255). My point is not that such a stance would be easy to sustain, but only that it does not seem any harder than the one Wallace recommends himself. *The View From Here* already proposes that nihilism and 'absurdity' (255) may be humanity's lot: our deepest attachments commit us to attitudes of unconditional affirmation about things we simultaneously regard as unacceptable. But while we are trafficking in absurdity, it is unclear why Wallace thinks it is more realistic for me to affirm the Holocaust than to qualify my attachments and be ambivalent about the fact that I exist. Despite such unanswered questions about the proper source of our ambivalence, however, the book is unfailingly interesting—because of, rather than in spite of, its bleakness.

S.A. Howard

Harvard University