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On Regret: A philosophical and psychological analysis

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HONORS PROJECT

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The purpose of this paper is to show that the philosophical conception of mourning
created by Derrida can be used as a framework to explain the different lines of research regarding regret in cognitive psychology. The paper will first explain the conception of regret through psychological research and explain those different streams of research. The paper will then explain the conception of Derridean deconstruction and mourning. Finally, the paper will show how that theory of deconstruction and mourning can be used as an encompassing theory to explain the findings regarding regret in psychological research.

I. Psychology

The particular psychological lens used in this paper will focus on the works of cognitive psychology/science. Cognitive science is “focused on the empirical understanding of particular phenomenon that occurs in the mind” (Friedenberg & Silverman 2011). The psychological section of this paper will expost the current understanding of regret in light of the data and theories collected over time. The section will mainly focus on particular streams of regret research including rationality, regret forecasting, action vs inaction regrets, counterfactual thinking, and autobiographical memory.

A. The Rational Actor

Classical economist literature, heavily influenced by the enlightenment, assumed be to be what are called rational actors. Rational actor theory assumes that humans tend to rationally calculate their decisions and behavior like many computer programs do now: taking certain parameters, inserting those parameters into functions, and returning an action. Kahneman and Tversky wrote many initial papers calling for more research on this subject (Kahneman & Tversky 1986). The sum of Kahneman's work over the years was published in his work “Thinking Fast and Slow” (Kahneman, 2011). Over their careers, Kahneman and other researchers debunked the Rational actor theory. Dan Ariely, a later behavioral economist of
Kahneman’s ilk put it quite well when he characterized it in the following way. He posited in his book *Predictably Irrational* that humans are not rational actors because they are not just irrational sometimes, but predictably so (Ariely, 2010).

Regret’s relation to the rational actor theory was elucidated by the researcher Bell. Bell posited that regret could be one of the factors that cause human behavior to be less than rational (Bell, 1982). It can be understood that Bell and the researchers after him have shown that regret is one of those factors that cause humans to be less rational on a spectrum of rationality. He specifically gives evidence where people seem to still irrationally pay for lottery tickets due to the regret that would be involved if they did not play a particular number and they lost the next day (Bell, 1982).

**B. Regret Forecasting**

Later research showed it was not the feeling of regret itself that causes irrationality but it is more of the idea that people often avoid more favorable outcomes due to the fact that they anticipate regret future regret and use that to change decisions they are making now. The irrationality of predicted regret is elucidated when one realizes that affective forecasting in individuals is quite poor and this poor forecasting can be applied to regret (Gilbert, Morewedge, Risen, & Wilson, 2004). The poor forecasting causes them to mis-analyze situations. Gilbert puts it succinctly when he states that “Clearly, people pay a steep price to avoid future regrets, and our studies suggest that they may be purchasing emotional insurance that they do not really need” (Gilbert, Morewedge, Risen, & Wilson, 2004).

**B. Action vs Inaction**

As work in the conception of regret became established, certain distinctions within the field needed to be made. One such distinction is the distinction between action and inaction
regret. An action regret is a regret based upon an action that one has done in the past. An inaction regret is based upon regret regarding an action that one did not do. For example, I could regret taking the freeway on the way home from work or regret that I did not apply for the promotion that I was wanting on my job. After the distinction between action regret and inaction regret was made debate ensued regarding which of the two is “worse” or more emotionally salient.

The action/inaction salience debate was mainly between Kahneman in the action camp and. Gilovoich and Medvec in the inaction camp. To show the complexities of this debate, they worked on a collaborative effort to explain the distinction, and their opinions regarding it, in a joint paper. Kahneman argued for something called the late to be known as the “action effect”, where it seemed at the time that regrets of action seemed to be more severe compared to regrets of inaction due to the ephemeral nature of inaction regret. Medvec & Gilvoich argue that those inaction regrets still have emotional salience and they are not ephemeral. (Kahneman, Gilvoich & Medvec, 1998)

Later it was discovered that regret is not something that can be studied outside of the context of a temporal history of decisions. The researchers found that considering actions within the temporal history of decisions can cause people to actually “regret inaction more than they regret action” (Zeelenberg, Van den Bos, Van Dijk, & Pieters, 2002). A theory explaining why inaction regret is so emotionally salient is due to the fact that the past possibilities of inaction are undefined (Rajagopal, Raju, & Unnava, 2006).

C. Counterfactual Reasoning

Another line of research regarding regret has characterized regret as counterfactual reasoning. (O’Connor, McCormack, & Feeney, 2012; Weisberg & Beck, 2012) Below is a sketch model I have created that synthesizes this information.

1. Actual Decision: A or B
2. Person picks B and gets undesirable outcome C

Counterfactual reasoning occurs: “If I had not chosen B then undesirable C would not have happened”.

3. Ergo, I should have picked A (Regret)

Counterfactual reasoning does not necessarily lead only to regret. It was found that the road of counterfactual reasoning is bifurcated. Counterfactual reasoning can also lead to the emotion of relief (Weisberg & Beck, 2010). Based on the above conception it could also be

1. Actual Decision: A or B

2. Person picks B and gets *desirable* outcome C

Counterfactual reasoning occurs: I am glad that I picked B, instead of A.

Moreover, due to the complexity of regret, young children around the ages of 9 have yet to develop the cognitive faculties necessary to experience regret because they do not have the ability to reason counterfactually (Rafetseder & Perner, 2012).

D. Autobiographical Memory

In addition, regret has a certain autobiographical component, in that when we are considering regret our autobiographical picture of ourselves can impact regret levels. Specifically it was found that using autobiographical memory models, one can predict regret shown in the One of the most interesting paradoxes is that the actual event that causes future regret may not have necessarily been negative in the past. Davidson and Feeney use the example of a weeding day. The event in itself is not negative unless certain life experiences cause that day to be regretted. This causes regret to have an emergent quality through autobiographical time, sometimes regret did not occur until twenty plus years *after* the event itself. The events that happen in those twenty years impacts how a person views that event (Davison & Feeney, 2008).
II. Philosophy

The philosophical lens used in particular, in this paper, will be a philosophical lens of Derridean Deconstruction. Jacques Derrida is a continental philosopher from the 20th century. Derrida has done particular deconstructions on the concepts of such as forgiveness in *On Forgiveness* published in 2001.

A. Deconstruction

Deconstruction has three important parts: The sign, the embroidery, and “differance.” (not a misspelling of difference but a French neologism of Derrida). The beginning of deconstruction is seen in Sassuerian writings about communication by means of language. Ferdinand De’ Sassure argues that communication via language is the transmission of mental signs by means of the spoken words (Sassure, 1913).

Derrida understood the works of Sassure in the context of textualism/original intent as a mode of constitutional analysis. Derrida disagreed with the original intent school of thought that argued that a word in language can be directly linked back to a particular sign and realized that understanding original intent would be impossible. Derrida argues that whenever a concept is spoken about another level of what he calls embroidery is added. The recognition of the differance between the embroidery and that one can grow closer to understanding nature of the intended sign by peeling off and observing the embroidery left upon the word. Recognizing this embroidery is the differance between concepts (Callen, 2014; Derrida, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2001, 2001).

The goal of deconstruction is not to simply analyze concepts, for the sake of breaking them apart. Neither is deconstruction something that can occur in one particular setting. Deconstruction comes out of respect for a particular concept and requires a certain fidelity to
return to the concept at hand and a good faith attempt to understand said concept (Callen, 2014; Derrida, 1967, 1984, 1994, 2001a, 2001b).

B. Deconstruction of Mourning

Derrida’s Deconstruction of Mourning can be understood as an interaction between force, failing, recapitulation, and the image (Derrida, 2001).

C. Relative Force and the Subject of Mourning

By “force” or *dynamis* Derrida, means something like life force. Force is the ability to change and impact the world around oneself. However, force is not entirely under the umbrella of life force. Things that are nonliving can have force as well. The relative lack of force that something has is the impetus of mourning. The subject of mourning is the thing that is seemingly devoid of this force. (Derrida, 2001)

D. Failing Well and Failing Poorly

There is an important distinction between failing well and failing poorly. Derrida speaks about the importance of failing well by arguing that mourning can take two different paths. Derrida argues that mourning could take the path of failing well and failing poorly. When one mourns one is failing the subject of the mourning. Failing well is when the person can mourn effectively without focusing on the mourning so much that the person is incapacitated with sadness. The distinction between failing well and failing poorly is better understood when looking at Sigmund Freud’s work *Mourning and Melancholia* where he talks about how mourning if unkempt can overtake the ego causing mourning to slip into melancholia (Freud, 1916). Failing well would be avoiding this melancholia while mourning.

E. Recapitulation and Image
Recapitulation occurs in mourning when one thinks of recapitulation in a musical sense. In the recapitulation the theme of the symphony is revisited later in the song. Recapitulation in the sense of mourning is when the force is returned to the image. (Derrida, 2001). The subject of mourning leads us to the next important section of mourning what is called the image. The subject of mourning is recapitulated by means of the image. The image according to Derrida is the vehicle of mourning. Mourning occurs through the image of the subject one possesses in one’s head. The image is like a theme that the recapitulation result of mourning makes variations of (Derrida, 2001).

F. Mourning

Mourning according to Derrida is an act where through an image that the person has left behind. If the person has failed well, when they died, the force the person once had can be recapitulated and through the recapitulation something novel can be created with that force, and the force can yet again act upon the world and change it (Derrida, 2001).

A great example of Derridean mourning would be a mourning of a teacher or a mentor who leaves their image to you in the lessons you have learned through and through the things that they have taught you. When you are faced with a situation that is similar to what that person taught you, their force returns, recapitulated into this novel situation and alters your behavior in some way. Mourning in the Derridean type can be colloquially understood when looking at the eulogy of a teacher that says “she yet speaks.”

III. Integration

To complete the integration between mourning and psychological concepts of regret one must take a philosophical leap. First one must realize that mourning is not strictly for mourning the death of a person. Mourning is used for any particular type of loss. Freud in his
work *Mourning and Melancholia* explains that one can mourn “liberty, country or any ideal” (Freud, 1916).

In regret the subject of mourning is a past decision that a person has made. People in a way are mourning that decision. The next paragraph integrates particular similarities between the deconstruction of mourning and the conception of regret in psychology to show how they are related.

The fact that the way one perceives a past event or decision is impacted by past decisions in a temporal stream and that the temporal stream encompasses lifetime autobiographical memory relates to Derrida’s idea of recapitulation embroidery and differance. The counterfactual reasoning mentioned could be the image used as the vehicle for the mourning. Thinking through counterfactuals causes a particular recapitulation of what could have occurred. In a life experience a person often embroiders their memories of the past with their present experiences. The recapitulation of colored with past experiences causes a variation of on the theme of the past decision.

Going back to the marriage day example; the day of marriage is not necessarily a negative thing. However as emotions rise, and particular bad experiences and decisions with unfavorable outcomes occur the past decision becomes embroidered. The different levels of embroidery changes cause a different level of recapitulation. The marriage is not seen as a bad decision unless it is embroidered that way through time. The deconstruction of mourning can explain why it is not until 20 plus years later the decision is not regretted because the embroidery and difference has not caused it to be viewed in the negative light yet.

The fact that inaction regret can be more emotionally salient and the explanation given about how this can be explained by an infinite regress of possibilities can also be explained
through the lens of mourning. The problem here is that there are so many particular counterfactual images causes so many different vehicles of mourning creating an abundance of possible recapitulations. In the marriage example, deciding to not marry someone creates all the counterfactuals of what could have been had someone married that person. There is not really a mechanism of mourning to help one distinguish between the counterfactuals which is what makes inaction so emotionally salient.

The avoidance of regret can also be explained by means of mourning. Avoidance of regret can be explained by considering the loss of force and failure. In the context of failure regret is mourning in that one realizes that their life is finite and that their force is constantly declining. There is a feeling that failure is inevitable. Regret also causes someone to realize that their ability to impact the world around them is often temporally bound into the present. This feeling is not a desirable one so people often avoid regret, even to their detriment as shown earlier in (Gilbert, Morewedge, Risen, & Wilson, 2004). The sense of failing well and failing poorly could be seen in the idea that regret provides action guidance. A decision has “failed well” when it can help one learn from their past errors and promote more effective decision making. A decision has “failed poorly” when it was such a bad decision that it attributes to the poor affective forecasting mentioned earlier by Gilbert.

**IV. Critique and Further Research questions**

The largest critique of this paper could be that there are many different philosophical concepts of regret. Notably, there is considerable work that the ethicist Bernard Williams has done on “agentic regret” (Williams, 1981). Where this could have been more relevant to regret it was more of an intellectual exercise to take mourning and attempt to show how the theory of mourning explains regret in psychology instead of simply using a theory of regret.
Another limitation of the paper is the possible inability to generalize the results and ideas of what regret “is” because most of the research in this paper has to deal with both western philosophers and western psychologists with western populations. However, upon examination of research about regret across cultures it was found that although different experiences are more likely to cause certain populations to feel regret compared to other experiences the general experience of regret was found to be consistent within cultures. (Bruegelmans, Zeelenberg, Gilovich, Huang, & Shani, 2014)

Furthermore, there is considerable literature about the applied research regarding regret in consumer behavior (Tsiros & Mittal 2000); that could be integrated in future works as well.

VI. Conclusion

Overall the paper demonstrates that the idea of regret as conceptualized in cognitive psychology can be explained and understood through the lens of philosophical deconstruction and mourning.

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