

Is justification retrospective? (1800–2500 words)

Wolf (and Williams' postscript) the idea of a retrospective justification irked me. I would like to approach the question of whether justification is retrospective through different forms of justification. I would have to account for how these justifications vary with time and what sort of change would cause these justifications to change with time. I would have to determine what makes those things time-dependent and how an individual's knowledge shapes those forms of determination.

As Williams discusses ideas of retrospective justification, the question of whether justification is retrospective arises from these arguments of how regret and agent-regret are justified. Williams introduces the ideas of retrospective justification through the example of an artist who leaves his family to become great at his skill. In this paper I will argue that this moral justification isn't retrospective. I will do this through examples of agent-regret of justification in which an agent regrets her responsibility in an action but not in such a way that the regret is moral.

Williams uses the example of a painter Gauguin who leaves his family to hone his skills as an artist. Gauguin makes this decision with the notion that he determinately sees he can enable his own success as a painter by making this decision. Gauguin unequivocally declares this possibility and chooses to make the claim that his success as an artist will justify his choice. Being away from them, Gauguin can focus on his own craft and become the best artist that he can be. Becoming a good artist is what determines his success, and this sort of success in art justifies the morality of his action to leave his family. Williams explains that, if he is a successful artist, then he is justified in leaving his family to become a great artist, and, if he isn't, then he was not justified. "The justification, if there is to be one, will be essentially retrospective," Gauguin says (24).

Williams goes into a bit of detail on the formation of this moral conviction that Gauguin holds. It is a combination of intrinsic and a extrinsic luck such that Gauguin becomes a good artist. There is an element of luck involved which Williams introduces as "moral luck." As opposed to our everyday notions of "luck" which people can sometimes think of as being in the right place at the right time (or, on the flip side, the wrong place at the wrong time), moral luck is the sort of luck that justifies the morality of an action. It is a moral decision in the sense that Gauguin there are factors at play of right and wrong, what Gauguin should or shouldn't do, or similar factors. Gauguin choosing to leave his home could put a burden on his family or require that he have some sort of self-reliance before making such a decision. One may argue the moral dimensions There are unexpected outcomes, things out of our control, or things that simply don't go as planned. It's possible that Gauguin had planned to find a notion of

success in his own society but simply wasn't able to achieve it. It could have been that his notion of art wasn't valued by those around him and he wasn't able to adapt to the aesthetic standards of his society. Williams describes Gauguin as making this decision such that he does not need to justify himself to others and the only thing to justify his success will be success itself. This way Williams rids the example of all externalities (if I could use such a term) that would interfere with success. This brings success as its own self to the table. And, given the fact that the justification of the moral decision to leave his family and start his own life requires Gauguin to make draw on the elements from the future, his justification will be retrospective. He cannot know whether the decision is justification until future rolls around and tomorrow comes. A retrospective justification comes from the way we look back on the actions we do and, through rational deliberation, determine the morality of those decisions. However, the morality of those decisions are still due to the moral luck of how things turn out. As explained, if Gauguin achieves success, that decision is justified. If not, it isn't.

Williams uses agent-regret as proof that this action is justified in a moral retrospective justification. Agent-regret is a version of regret that a person feels with regards to her past actions. Even if the agent was justified, she might still feel some sort of regret about her actions. This type of regret is agent-regret. The example of a truck-driver who cannot avoid a small child getting hit is used in which Williams describes as the lorry problem. The truck-driver was as careful as possible, planned out her actions in such a way that the death was, in all knowable ways, unexpected and unavoidable. The lorry-driver, in this example, feels some sort of agent-regret such that, in hindsight and through rational deliberation, the driver believes she could have acted differently to avoid the death. The driver may seek some sort of compensation and think she has some moral obligation to make do something kind (such as paying some sort of sum of money or similar). And, because the death of the child is so innocent and the child is blameless in this example, the driver regrets her actions. It is due to luck and, in this case, moral luck. It is agent-regret because the driver was directly involved in this death. And it is a moral justification because there was a moral element to the action. One might argue that the child faced a blameless death and did not deserve it. The regret for the decision is a retrospective justification.

There is reason to doubt this claim that justification is sometimes retrospective. The justification of Gauguin's decision to leave was based off information available to him at the time. This would include his information about the probability of becoming a good painter, how his family life would be different, and how he would achieve the success he seeks. The justification would be in this information, but not in the results of his actions or how things turned out. Whether he achieves success is irrelevant. In the case of the lorry example, the

justification of the driver's action in hitting the child would follow a similar line of reasoning. The information available to the driver at the time determines the justification of the action.

This argument on information available to people at a certain time has its shortcomings. People never have complete information about the results of their actions, nor is their information free of uncertainty. William's response leaves room for what one may consider to be justifications that are "good enough." There may be a threshold to be sure the action is morally justified that comes from this feeling. A "good enough" justification would be a justification in which one uses these feelings to gauge something that one can rely on, even if it isn't completely certain.

I might argue that these "good enough" conditions are ways that people delude themselves in some ways. An action might be justified even before one knows the outcome of the action with certainty. Gauguin might be justified in leaving his family even before he knew for sure he would be successful. These conditions don't give enough certainty for one to know that they are true, and, in this way, Gauguin is deluding himself. The individual overestimates his/her own importance and certainty associated with knowledge.

Williams might respond that this delusion from the uncertainty associated with actions made on information that is "good enough" would require for justification to be retrospective in some cases. Williams might say that to avoid any self-delusion or knowing claims without complete certainty, an individual uses agent-regret and retrospective justification to correct any such delusion in retrospect.

I would respond that it is not delusion to rely on these "good enough" conditions as long as an individual understands the limits of these "good enough" justifications. Gauguin can understand the limits of his justification by understanding the limits to his information at the time when he leaves his family. He can deliberate on the way different pieces of information cause him to justify his claim (that he is justified in leaving depending on whether he becomes a good painter), and compare those deliberations to the way he justifies similar claims. He could understand his limits by deliberating on his belief that he has the potential to become a good painter. These limits should be such that they seem reasonable in retrospect. This means one can see how that knowledge is limited in the same way when looking back on it in retrospect. And this way, the justification remains the same, even when looking back on the action in retrospect.

I would argue that the type of regret of these actions is causal but not moral. The claim "If Gauguin leaves his family and becomes a great painter, he will be justified on the grounds that he is successful," is a claim made on the causal dependence of the justification due to

success. Gauguin might experience agent-regret because he did not become a successful painter. The way this lack of success was determined from the actions that lead up to it causes this feeling of regret. This deterministic view of causality, in which the outcome that happens from an action can be determined from the current state of the action, would mean that moral luck comes from these sequence of events that cause one another. And, because people can rationally deliberate the outcomes of these states, the moral justification would not be retrospective. The way the actions that lead each causal state to the next one would be justified depends on the information available to the individual at the time of the state. It would not depend on the outcomes in a way that would make justification retrospective.

I would separate the feeling of regret from moral justification of the action. The agent in the lorry example feels regret, and these feelings are at the hand of luck. This does not mean that the morality of the decision is due to luck and, therefore, the regret and agent-regret due to the decision are not shown to be morally justified. If Gauguin becomes a successful painter, the positive nature of Gauguin's decision to leave his family is not that the morality is positive (that the action is moral), but that the decision he made was the right one (that the action is rational.) Any sort of regret might be due to the lack of rationality when the decision was made, not of the morality of the decision. And any sort of feeling of regret after an action occurred would not change the justification of the action in the past. The justification would not be retrospective.

Williams might also respond to the separation of feeling associated with the action from justification of the action itself by saying there is something troubling with the idea that a truck driver who kills a child experiences no feeling of regret. And, because of the troubling nature of this idea, there should be some sort of feeling or response from the individual that a life was lost. The idea might be troubling because the driver wasn't sure she could have done all the she could have to avoid hitting a child or that Gauguin wasn't sure he had all the information that was available to him. But these concerns are the result of the limits individuals have to their information. Neither the driver nor Gauguin had all the information about everything that could have happened and this information itself wasn't free from uncertainty. These limits are always present with an individual's access to information. Because it is always present, the idea that an individual experiences no feeling of regret would seem less troubling.