

## 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. To *regret X* involves (inter alia) something like the conditional intention to bring it about that X did not exist or occur, if it were in our power. To *affirm X* involves (inter alia) something like the conditional intention to bring it about that X did exist or 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. Affirmation of X is incompatible with regret about X because the conditional intention to bring about X in C is incompatible with the intention to prevent X from coming about in C.<sup>1</sup> There is nothing terribly surprising about this. If I affirm that my child was born, then, of course, I can’t regret that my child was born. Indeed, it’s hard to see why, if I affirm the birth on balance, I should feel any competing pressure to all-in regret about it.

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<sup>1</sup> As I argue in Niko Kolodny, “The Myth of Practical Consistency,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 16 (2008): 366–402, I don’t believe that one is guilty of irrationality, in general, in having inconsistent intentions, which one knows cannot both be satisfied. But it often will be, particularly, as in this case, when the content of one intention is the negation of the other.

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,” and what I will put as:

*Dynamic 1:* The affirmation of X “commits” one to affirming the necessary causal and constitutive conditions of X—the historical conditions without which X would not have existed or occurred.

Thus, if X is a necessary constitutive or causal condition of Y, then affirmation of Y is incompatible with regret about X. A special case of this affirmation dynamic, which occupies much of Wallace’s attention, is that:

The affirmation of our *attachments* commits us to affirming their necessary constitutive or causal conditions.

By “attachments,” Wallace means the personal relationships, careers, projects, causes, and so on that give meaning to our lives. It is natural that these objects of affirmation should attract our attention. For if there is anything that we affirm, it would seem, it is such attachments.

What makes Dynamic 1 so interesting, and unnerving, is that it commits us to affirming conditions that, as we know, are not worthy of affirmation: that, on sober reflection, call for all-in regret. “A striking feature of human life,” Wallace argues, “is our commitment, in virtue of our attachments, to affirming historical events and social structures that we cannot ultimately regard as worthy of affirmation” (8).

To illustrate what Wallace has in mind, consider Derek Parfit’s case of “the young girl’s child.”<sup>2</sup> A fourteen year-old girl decides to conceive a child, far too young to be able to care for it properly. Had she waited, she and the child that she would then have had would have had

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: 1984), ch. 16.

better lives. So she made the wrong decision, one of a kind that she would not now, at 28, advise her fourteen year-old daughter to make. She has grounds to regret, or at least lacks grounds to affirm, her decision. Nevertheless, she is committed to affirming it. For at 28, she has long since come to love her daughter, and a necessary causal condition of her daughter's existence is that regrettable decision.

Or consider disabilities, such as deafness. Suppose we believe that deafness is a condition that there is reason to regret.<sup>3</sup> All things considered, it is better to have than to lack hearing. Nevertheless, a deaf adult who has come of age within a thriving deaf community has likely thereby been initiated into unique forms of expression, manners, humor, and fellowship. These are all distinctively valuable attachments, which the deaf adult has reason to affirm. And since these attachments would not have come about without the condition of deafness itself, the adult is committed to affirming that condition as well.

Something similar can be said of the protagonist of Bernard Williams's "Moral Luck," an imagined Paul Gauguin.<sup>4</sup> Gauguin's decision to abandon his family in France in order to pursue his singular artistic vision in Tahiti, Wallace concludes, was simply wrong. It was not redeemed, or "justified," as Williams argues, by Gauguin's eventual artistic success. Nevertheless, Gauguin

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking for myself, I simply don't know whether deafness is a bad, as opposed to a departure from what most people with hearing take to be "normal." My doubts were set in motion, in particular, by Andrew Solomon, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search for Identity* (New York: Scribner, 2012), ch. 2. People who are proficient in sign, which may be very difficult to become unless one is or is raised by someone who is deaf, can do a great deal that I can't do and that I envy. It's worth noting that while the main theme of Solomon's book is the estrangement, overcome to greater or lesser degrees, of parents from children who are radically different from themselves, a secondary theme is more or less Wallace's affirmation dynamic. Many of the parents and children in question find themselves pulled this way and that by regret and affirmation about the conditions (such as deafness, autism, Down's syndrome, dwarfism, schizophrenia, severe disability, precocity, and rape) without which those children would not exist.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: 1981), pp. 20–39.

is attached to, and so affirms, the work that his leaving France made possible. So he is committed to affirming that decision, even though, to the detached observer, it calls for all-in regret.

Even those of us who, unlike Gauguin, have led lives without such serious moral faults, may find ourselves committed to affirming conditions that we know are not worthy of affirmation. Probably everyone who reads Wallace's book, and certainly everyone who reads this comment on it, has committed him- or herself in some substantial way to the "bourgeois pursuit" of academic philosophy. Such bourgeois pursuits, Wallace argues, would not be possible if not for certain unjust conditions. Most often the unjust condition that Wallace has in mind 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. Thus, we find ourselves in the "bourgeois predicament": insofar as we affirm these bourgeois pursuits, we are committed to affirming these unjust conditions.

Having toughened us up with these examples, Wallace then breaks the really bad news. Everyone of us, burgher or no, is attached to some particular person (if not someone else, then at least his own dear self). 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.

Are we then fated to affirm what we ought not affirm? There is at least one way out. Our all-things-considered reason to affirm the conditions of our attachments depends on the case against affirming them. And the case *against* affirming them may consist only in the *objections of people who themselves affirm* those conditions. Provided that the young mother's child

affirms her own life, then she will be committed to affirming, and presumably will affirm, her mother's decision. In affirming the decision, Wallace argues, the child, so to speak, waives its objections to it (178–179). So no case against affirming the decision remains. The mother has reason, all-things-considered, to affirm it.

Yet this escape-route is closed in the other cases. Take deafness. Is it true that each and every case of deafness is unanimously affirmed by all those who might have an objection to it? Even if the deaf adult affirms his (noncongenital) loss of hearing, is he joined by his parents, who were thereby estranged from him, unable to share their feelings with him or find their way in his world? Why assume that their objections are waived? It is even clearer that Gauguin's family, left behind in France, has no reason to affirm his decision. So their objections remain in place. The same is true of the objections of those at the business end of the unjust conditions of our bourgeois pursuits or of the horrors of history responsible for the existence of those we love.

2.

What explains Dynamic 1? Wallace doesn't say. The passage that at first might seem to offer an explanation (73) contains, as far as I can make out, only repeated assertions of it. Now, Wallace might reply that this isn't a problem. Of course, it would be interesting to know what explains Dynamic 1. But we don't need to know what explains it in order to explore what it implies.

However, this is to assume that we have good grounds to accept Dynamic 1, in its full generality, in the first place. Yet just as Wallace doesn't offer us much in the way of explanation, he also doesn't offer us much in the way of argument. As far as I can tell, he simply points to some cases, such as that of a punting expedition, in which it seems fairly plausible that affirming some particular thing (e.g., the punting trip) commits one to affirming some particular

necessary condition of it (e.g., the organization of the punting trip). Now, it would be one thing if Dynamic 1 were self-evident. But Wallace himself grants that there are valid counterexamples to it, involving what he calls “conditional” affirmation. That is, Wallace himself grants that Dynamic 1 needs to be qualified as:

*Dynamic 1\**: The *unconditional* affirmation **of X** commits one to affirming the necessary causal and constitutive conditions of X.

But if Dynamic 1 should be qualified in this way, then why couldn't it be qualified in other ways too? Why assume that even Dynamic 1\* is the proper generalization from examples like the punting outing?

Indeed, even restricting our attention to “unconditional” affirmation, there are still cases in which it will seem to many implausible that to affirm some particular thing commits one to affirming some particular necessary condition of it. Not putting too fine a point on it, the claim that we must affirm all of human history strikes one recent reviewer, Thomas Nagel, as “outrageous” or at least an “extravagance.” Nagel responds that:

it does not seem too defensive to suggest that our affirmation of anything, our own existence included, 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. This would leave most of us with plenty to feel guilty or ambivalent about, and those feelings wouldn't be diluted in the ocean of our universal implication in the horrors of history.<sup>5</sup>

If Nagel's suggestion is that it makes no sense to regret or affirm events that took place too far in the past, then it seems straightforwardly false. I can regret the burning of the library at Alexandria and all that human letters lost thereby, and I can affirm the proclaiming of the Emancipation Proclamation, as a first step in a still unfinished project of racial equality. Why

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Nagel, “An Invitation to Hand-Wringing,” *London Review of Books* 36:7 (April 3, 2014): 25–26.

not? But if Nagel's suggestion is that we have not been given compelling reason to accept that what we affirm now *commits* us to affirming what took place so far back in the past—that Dynamic 1\* is true in its full generality—then he has a point. If the only argument for accepting Dynamic 1\* is that it has some plausible instances, such as the punting trip, then why don't these other, implausible instances amount to a counterargument? Why not conclude that Wallace got carried away, overgeneralizing from a few beguiling examples? At best, something less general than Dynamic 1\*—something bounded by a statute of limitations—is true.

It's resistance along these lines, I think, that makes it incumbent on Wallace to offer some theoretical reason to accept Dynamic 1\* in its full generality. The most promising approach to explaining Dynamic 1\*, it seems to me, would be to see it as following from the phenomenon of instrumental irrationality, given the intention-like character of affirmation. Roughly, if one intends an end, then one is "committed," as a matter of instrumental rationality, to intending the necessary means to it. For example, if I intend to smoke another cigarette, then I am committed to lighting another up. So, here's the idea. For the time being, let's ignore the issue of conditional affirmation and return to the original Dynamic 1. Suppose that one affirms X and that Y is a necessary causal or constitutive means to X. Is one committed to affirming Y, as Dynamic 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.

However, this is only a rough sketch. We need to take care with the fact that *conditional* intentions are at issue. Intending to smoke a cigarette *conditional on being outdoors* might commit one to lighting up *conditional on being in the park*, but it does not commit one to lighting up *conditional on being inside*. Taking this point on board, we should put the relevant phenomenon of instrumental rationality as follows:

*Instrumental*: If one intends E *conditional on being in C*, and if, *when one is in D*, M is a necessary means to that E, then one is committed to intending M *conditional on being in D*, *provided that being in D entails being in C*.<sup>6</sup>

What we need to show now is the following: to affirm X is to intend X *conditional on being in some C*, whereas to affirm Y is to intend Y *conditional on being in a D that entails being in C*. If we can show this, then, according to *Instrumental*, affirming X will commit one to affirming Y. And I think that we can show this, if we understand the “intention-like character” of affirmation as:

*Affirmation 1*: One affirms Z iff one intends Z *conditional on being in a situation in which one could bring about Z and all of the actual consequences of Z*.

And this understanding seems in the spirit of Wallace’s approach. To affirm Z, on this understanding, is to answer yes to the question, “If it were up to you to make it all happen all over again would you will it so?” *Affirmation 1* immediately implies that to affirm Y is to intend Y *conditional on being in a D in which one could bring about Y and all the actual consequences of Y*. What remains to be shown is that being in this D entails being in the corresponding C.

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<sup>6</sup> Here I ignore a complication. It isn’t quite true that one is committed to intending the necessary means to what one intends. Strictly speaking, one is committed to intending such means when one will take those means only if one *intends* them. If one will take the means whether or not one intends them, then instrumental rationality does not commit one to intending them. I confess that I am not quite sure how to run the deduction once this point is taken on board. Yet it seems too technical a point to be what stymies the dynamic.

That is, we need to show that being in a situation in which one could bring about Y and all of the actual consequences of Y entails being in a situation in which one could bring about X and all of the actual consequences of X. But this follows immediately, since X and all its consequences are themselves just consequences of Y. Thus, affirming X commits one, as a matter of instrumental rationality, to affirming Y. Since X and Y were completely arbitrary, Dynamic 1 is established in its full generality. There is no stopping place. No matter how far back we page in our calendar, we can't set a date for Nagel's statute of limitations.

3.

As alluded to earlier, Wallace himself notes an important qualification to Dynamic 1. It does not apply when affirmation is "conditional." In such cases, "past circumstances are 'screened off' in reflection, and one forms preferences regarding parts of the subsequent flow of events, taking it as given that the events leading up to it occurred as they did" (74). 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). Although the discussion of conditional affirmation occupies only a few pages, it seems crucial. If conditional affirmation is not subject to the dynamic, then perhaps we can avoid the far-reaching and unsettling consequences of the dynamic—such as our commitment to affirming the horrors of history—by showing that only conditional affirmation is at issue in the relevant cases.

So we need to ask: Which things call for only conditional affirmation and why? 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 the object but not the condition. This is what, he suggests, makes conditional affirmation

possible. But it remains underexplained, to my mind, why the dynamic should be blocked in this case. 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. In any event, this suggestion hardly seems to fit Wallace's overall view. Suppose I decide to pursue a career at a university founded by a 19<sup>th</sup>-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 Wallace to say, in this case, that affirming the decision did commit me to affirming the settled circumstance.

Clearly, something else is going on. It seems to stem 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, there aren't two different kinds of affirmation, "conditional" and "unconditional." There's just affirmation. So Dynamic 1 is fine in its unqualified form. 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. 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. One affirms such an ameliorative or rectifying or protective good, one might say, 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. 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 (75 n.

46). This may explain why Wallace goes on to say that the “redemptive response” to the bourgeois predicament fails (239). There, he suggests that affirming one’s efforts to end world hunger commits one to affirming world hunger. At first, this might seem puzzling. Why are efforts to end world hunger not to world hunger as the efforts to fight the fire are to the fire? Perhaps Wallace’s thought is that to affirm a career as a relief worker *as one* values one’s career as a firefighter, 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.

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. The question, though, is whether one’s attachment to one’s career, and so what one affirms, can really be so abstract. Can one’s attachment be simply to some valuable career or other, rather than to this very career? It seems of the nature of attachment—and this is one of Wallace’s driving themes—to cleave to something more 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, precisely because one’s attachment is to a particular. It is this very child to whom one is attached, not some child or other. The young girl cannot say: “I affirm only having had some child. The decision to conceive *this* child is not a necessary condition of having had some child. If I had waited instead, then I would still have some child. So I am not committed to affirming my decision to have this child.” That wouldn’t be love.

So even if “conditional affirmation” keeps Dynamic 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. So our affirming them commits us to affirming the very historical conditions without which they would not have been. That seems enough—provided that Dynamic 1 is true—for Wallace’s unnerving conclusion: that we are fated to affirm conditions that we know we ought not to affirm. 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.

This point, I think, makes Wallace’s book one of most arresting calls to philosophical reflection of recent memory. But I find what he goes on to say less compelling. As the book progresses, Wallace lays greater emphasis on several other structures, which he includes as part of, or at least leaves the reader to include as part of, what he calls the affirmation dynamic. All seem to involve, in one way or another, the (arguably contrived) idea of “affirming the life that one has led.” These structures seem to me to be quite different from Dynamic 1. They seem to me far less plausible. And, at times, I’m not even sure that I understand what the point of discussing them is supposed to be.

To begin with, Wallace suggests (119) that:

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

And he seems interested in this primarily because he is interested in the following implication:

*Dynamic 3:* Affirming the life that we have lived commits us to affirming our attachments.

Dynamic 3, it seems, is meant to be derived from Dynamic 2 in the following way. 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 in virtue of our actual attachments having been sufficiently valuable (109). So our attachments are normative conditions of affirming the life we led. So, according to Dynamic 2, we are committed to affirming our attachments.

Yet it is not clear why we should accept Dynamic 2. As far as I can see, it doesn't correspond to any familiar structure of ordinary intention, on which we might model an analogous structure of affirmation. Intending to X may commit us to intending the necessary means to X. But it 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.

It might be said that we don't need Dynamic 2 to establish Dynamic 3. Dynamic 3 follows directly from Dynamic 1. In affirming the life one led, one is, as it were, conditionally intending to live again the very life one lived, should one be faced with that or the alternative of never having lived at all. But a necessary constitutive condition of the very life one lived is each attachment formed in that life. A life without any of those attachments would not have been the very life one led, but instead a different life. So Dynamic 1 commits one to affirming each attachment. But this can't be what Wallace has in mind. For any event in one's life, no matter how trivial or regrettable, is likewise a necessary constituent of the very life one led. Surely, Wallace doesn't mean to imply that we are committed to affirming every single event in one's

life. (Nor must he imply this. Preferring the life one actually led to not having lived at all need not commit to preferring the occurrence of any event in that life to its not occurring, any more than preferring the whole of a collection to nothing at all commits one to preferring the presence in the collection of some element to its absence.) Perhaps the thought is that in affirming the life that we have lived, we are affirming the fact that we lived *a* life that was better than not having lived at all. A necessary condition of living *a* life that was better than not having lived at all was living a life with *some* valuable attachments. But it needn't have been a life with every single forgettable and lamentable event of our actual life. Granted, but by the same token it needn't have been a life with any of the valuable attachments of our *actual* life either. Or perhaps the thought is that holding fixed that we lived that the very life we did, we affirm the *evaluative fact* that that life was better than not having lived at all. And a necessary condition of that life being better than not having lived at all was that that life contained the attachments it did. But it makes no sense to affirm the *evaluative fact* that that life was better than not having lived at all. In affirming that, what are we conditionally intending to bring about? We can conditionally intend to bring about changes in the world—such as to form this or that attachment, if we had it to do over again—but we can't conditionally intend to bring it about that those changes, once made, have the value they have, any more than we can conditionally intend that  $2 + 2 = 5$ . In sum, I don't see any way to deduce Dynamic 3 from Dynamic 1. To deduce Dynamic 3, we seem to need Dynamic 2. But it remains unclear why we should accept Dynamic 2.

There is something plausible in the vicinity of Dynamic 2, which might be mistaken for it: namely, that affirming X commits us to *believing that X is worthy of affirmation*. By analogy, intending X commits us to believing that X is worthy of intending. Otherwise, our intention of X is “akratic” or “incontinent,” in defiance of our normative belief. Thus, affirming the life we

have led commits us to believing that it is worthy of affirmation, which in turn commits us to believing that there were some valuable attachments that made it so. (Indeed, the “skeptical worries” that Wallace says result from resisting Dynamic 2 seem more accurately worries that result from this dynamic (121). One affirms the life one has led, but instead of believing that it is worthy of affirmation, one worries, skeptically, that it may not be.) Yet it isn’t clear how this dynamic serves Wallace’s purposes. Wallace’s aim, it seems, is to show that we are committed to affirming our attachments. But believing that something is valuable does not commit one to affirming it.

In any event, it isn’t clear how Dynamic 3, even if true, advances Wallace’s purposes either. After all, we affirm our present attachments simply because we are presently attached to them. What is gained by observing (if there is a fact to be observed) that, in addition to the if-not-definitional-then-at-any-rate-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 seems to suggest 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 Dynamic 3, the affirmation of our attachments a kind of urgency or inescapability that they would otherwise lack. This is what makes Dynamic 3 worth our attention.

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. There is a certain logic to this. But one wonders whether it isn't too much an artifact of how the test of "affirming the life that one has lived" (itself already a somewhat artificial notion) has been constructed. And, in any event, even if this tells us that affirming the life that we have lived is urgent and inescapable, this tells us something about affirming our attachments only if Dynamic 3 is correct. Again, we haven't been given good reason to accept Dynamic 3.

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.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, our drive to live transfers its urgency and inescapability to our attachments and to our judgment that they are valuable.

Maybe. But, first, this explanation has nothing to do with Dynamic 2, or Dynamic 3, or *any attitude toward the lives that we have led*. It never uses the phrase "lives that we have led." Note that 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

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<sup>7</sup> However, one might wonder why only existing attachments could give one something to live for. The prospect of new attachments can be something to live for. There are those who, having lost everything, start again. But let this slide.

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.

And, second, this explanation 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. And, in any event, one doesn't need to say anything about Dynamic 2, or Dynamic 3, or "affirming the life we have led" to make this point.

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*. This happens, in particular, with the bourgeois predicament. Because 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. "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, 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. If Wallace is right, 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:

*Dynamic 4:* Insofar as we lack sufficient reason to affirm the conditions of our attachments, we also lack sufficient reason to affirm those attachments.

*Dynamic 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 Dynamics 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 Dynamic 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. Unless I’m missing something, it seems to follow that his very love for them, or at least his affirmation of his love, would be misplaced. But this seems to me a kind of category mistake. The case for loving for our children, or affirming our love for them, is not conditional in this way on our past mistakes or other regrettable conditions.

Or consider a life shaped by disability, such as deafness. Again suppose that deafness is something impersonally regrettable (and not redeemed by unanimous “waiver by affirmation” of the objections to it). Having hearing is not. According to Dynamics 4 and 5, it would seem to follow 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. This too seems hard to accept. And it seems to sit uneasily with Wallace’s earlier, conciliatory conclusion that: “There is no theoretical 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 it’s worth asking why we should accept Dynamics 4 and 5. Presumably, the case for Dynamic 5 is supposed to be something like this. We have reason to affirm our lives only if it is better to have lived those lives than not to have lived at all. But this is true only if our lives have been filled with attachments that are valuable. And 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. Offhand, those requirements might entail that we lacked sufficient reason to affirm something that was nonetheless valuable. (We will return to this point at the end of this section.)

The rationale for Dynamic 4 is even less clear. Perhaps Dynamic 4 is supposed to follow from the thought that if one lacks reason for the necessary means, then one lacks reason for the end. Suppose, for simplicity:

*Affirmation 2:* One affirms Z iff one intends Z conditional on being in a situation in which one could bring about Z.

Then the relevant thought would be:

If one lacks sufficient reason to intend M conditional on being in a situation in which one could bring about M—i.e., to affirm M—and if M is a necessary causal or constitutive condition of E, then one lacks sufficient reason to intend E conditional on being in a situation in which one could bring about E—i.e., to affirm E.

But this just isn’t true. Suppose M is buying a ticket to New York, which is too expensive to be worth it, even though it is a necessary means to E, traveling to New York. Suppose, however, that I *have already* bought a ticket to New York. Do I lack reason to travel to New York? No.

Buying the ticket was a mistake, but that's water under the bridge. I might as well take the trip.

Granted, this sort of situation might seem like a technical curiosity. But in the context of affirmation, it's actually the most natural situation to consider. When I ask whether I affirm my career as a philosopher, say, which of the possible situations in which it is in my power to bring this about is it most natural for me to counterfactually place myself in? The most natural situation to consider, it seems, is one in which we dial back the clock *only so far as* the time at which I decided to be philosopher. And, at *that* time, the historical injustices that made philosophy possible *were* water under the bridge. So in what sense do I lack reason to embark on the career? If the universe has already paid for the ticket, taking the ride only makes the best of a bad situation. In application to *this* reverse affirmation dynamic, Nagel's statute of limitations finds some purchase. The natural statute of limitations, when considering my reason to affirm a given event, is to go only as far back in time as just before that event.

Well, one might ask, what if we *do* dial back the clock all the way to the time when it is in my power to bring about the injustices. In *that* situation do I have reason to intend the career? Well, in that case, the question has no determinate answer, since it depends on something that hasn't yet been settled: whether or not I will bring about the injustices. If I *do* bring about the injustices, then, again, I have sufficient reason for the career, since it is water under the bridge.

None of this touches Dynamic 1; that's a separate matter. It may still be true that if I affirm the career, I am committed to *affirming* the historical injustices, which I lack sufficient reason to affirm. It's just that the *reason against* affirming the injustices doesn't necessarily compromise the *reason to* affirm the career itself. These are just two different issues.

Wallace might reply that they are not different issues. If one lacks sufficient reason for some attitude A, then one lacks sufficient reason for any attitude, B, that commits one to it. But I

don't see why this should be. We need to keep in mind that "commits one to A" does not mean "entails that one has A." It means, instead, something like: "entails that one is incoherent, in certain way, if one lacks A." It is unclear what sort of reason, if any, it is against B that having it entails that, insofar as one fails to have A, one will be incoherent.

It might seem, however, that we have good abductive grounds for accepting Dynamics 4 and 5. Consider, first, that 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 bad scientists' bad conduct. (The bad scientists, described at 201, achieve great breakthroughs, but only by ruthlessly exploiting their subordinates.) Second, Gauguin's decision and the scientists' bad conduct were necessary historical conditions of their attachments. Isn't the best explanation of the first point the conjunction of the second point and Dynamics 4 and 5? 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 why Gauguin and the bad scientists lack reason to affirm the lives that they have lived. The decision and the bad conduct are, along with the attachments, *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, or, if any rate, we deny Dynamic 4, 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 affirm his love for his Tahitian kids.

However, there might seem to be other abductive grounds for accepting Dynamics 4 and 5. How can we not, when reminded of the unjust conditions of our bourgeois pursuits, feel ambivalence about those pursuits themselves? How can we avoid the sense that those pursuits themselves are somehow tarnished? Dynamic 1 might explain why we feel ambivalence about the *unjust conditions*. We see that we have reason to regret them, but we are committed, by the affirmation of our pursuits, to affirm those conditions. But why do we feel ambivalence about *the pursuits themselves*? Don't we need Dynamics 4 and 5 to explain this?

Again, however, there seems a simpler explanation. Our enthusiasm for our pursuits is dampened by something like personal guilt. In pursuing those pursuits, we contribute to the unjust condition, or let it happen, or benefit unfairly from it, or are otherwise complicit in it (say, by playing a part in an institution that perpetuates it). Indeed, this explanation makes better sense of the fact that the bourgeois predicament is *only* for the bourgeois, for those who have bourgeois attachments. As Wallace writes, 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” (227). But why not? 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 injustice no less than ours are.

The answer, it seems, is that the deprived have no reason to feel guilt about their condition. They, unlike us, neither were complicit in it, nor benefitted unfairly from it.

Suppose, however, that all of this is wrong. Because we lack sufficient reason to affirm their bad conditions, we likewise lack sufficient reason to affirm our attachments or the lives we have led. 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’s actually a very limited point. It means that we lack reason for *one* kind of positive response toward our attachments and the lives that we have lived. But it is compatible with this that we still have reason for any number of other positive responses toward our attachments and the lives that we have lived: to cherish them, to be pleased with them, to think them valuable, to hold them up for emulation, and so on. It’s just that we cannot have the attitude of *affirmation* toward them—the conditional intention to bring them about again if we could—because having *that* peculiar attitude commits to affirming their bad conditions—to a conditional intention to bring those conditions about again if we could. That we lack reason to affirm our attachments and our lives would be an interesting point (if it were true). But it’s not, properly understood, something that should take the wind from our sails.

In sum, the arguments that Wallace makes for Dynamics 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 Dynamic 1 are, left to themselves, hard to deny and hard to shake off.