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Contribution to Symposium on *The View from Here*

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Replies

I wrote *The View from Here* (henceforth VfH) in a spirit of exploration. I took as my starting point some well-known (if seldom discussed) reflections about the relations between justification, regret, and affirmation in Williams's paper "Moral Luck". But in developing my reflections from this starting point, I found myself quickly entering territory that is poorly charted to date. The book is meant as an invitation to the philosophical community to join me in exploring this territory, and I am grateful to my four commentators for their willingness to take up the invitation. In what follows I offer some responses to their trenchant and provocative comments and objections, organized under four thematic headings.

1. The Nature and Objects of Affirmation

The book distinguished between two different kinds of affirmation: conditional affirmation, which screens out background conditions of the immediate object that is affirmed, and unconditional affirmation, which carries a commitment to affirming the conditions of its proper object. An example of the former is the attitude we take toward the heroic actions of the firefighters who rescue potential victims of the conflagration; in preferring that their heroic actions should have been performed, we are not in the same way affirming the fire that made them possible. The young mother, by contrast, in affirming the child whom she loves, also

affirms the earlier decision to conceive, insofar as it was a necessary condition for the child's existence.

Niko Kolodny questions this distinction, asking whether there are any cases in which affirmation is genuinely conditional in the relevant sense (sec. 3). In the firefighter example, for instance, he suggests that what we strictly affirm are the lives of the people at risk from the fire. Our attachment to those individuals determines us to affirm the necessary condition for their continued existence, but in the firefighter case this necessary condition has a disjunctive content: it is either that the fire should not have happened in the first place, or that the firefighters should have responded to the fire by saving those who were at risk.

This is an interesting proposal that applies neatly to the firefighter case, but I am not certain that it generalizes. Kolodny is right that in thinking about the firefighters, our attachment to those at risk will naturally determine a complex structure of retrospective preferences. In ranking various ways things might have been, we prefer both the scenario in which there is no fire and the scenario that includes fire plus heroic rescue efforts to the scenario that those to whom we are attached should have suffered death or grievous injury. We also prefer, for the same and other reasons, that there should have been no fire to the scenario that the fire occurred that put our loved ones at risk. But it seems to me that the values that lead us to affirm actions when we reflect on them retrospectively will not always commit us to a complete structure of backward-looking preferences of this kind. I can be glad in retrospect that I decided to take an umbrella to work, given that it rained, without having to take a stand one way or another on the question of whether it should have rained in the first place. Or I might have this conditional preference, while also preferring absolutely that it should have rained

than that it should not have rained (so that rain plus no umbrella dominates no rain in my retrospective ranking of possible outcomes).

It might be helpful in this connection to recall the analogy proposed in VfH between retrospective attitudes and ordinary future-directed intentions. It is a commonplace that we form conditional intentions for the future without that committing us to taking any attitude in particular toward the conditions to which the intentions are relativized. One's intention to appear at the courthouse in the morning if one is summoned to jury duty is compatible with a wide range of attitudes toward the prospective scenario that one will be summoned, including hope that it doesn't obtain, or mere indifference, or the fervent desire that the summons will in fact be issued in the morning. If attitudes of this kind are familiar in the future-directed case, it is obscure to me why analogues of them shouldn't equally be intelligible when we look back on things that have happened in the past.¹

Kolodny, for his part, seems to concede that at least some of our retrospective attitudes exhibit the structure of what I call unconditional affirmation, especially our attitudes toward the individuals whom we love (6). Others have reacted to my argument by questioning whether any of our retrospective attitudes exhibit this structure. On this approach, one can affirm the existence of the person one loves, while remaining neutral on the question of whether the necessary conditions for their existence should have been in place (or even wishing that those conditions hadn't obtained). This seems to me to be a coherent psychological outlook, one that might well be nourished by reflection on the implicitly conditional structure of many of our attitudes toward both the future and the past. If it is possible to affirm past actions and events conditionally, then why not adopt this attitude across the board? Why not affirm the continued

existence of the individuals one loves, for instance, without taking a stand one way or another on whether the conditions necessary for their coming into existence in the first place should have obtained?

Though it seems to be a coherent possibility that one might adopt attitudes of retrospective affirmation that are in this way conditional all the way down, I am struck that this doesn't seem to be the way we actually think about many of the things to which we are presently attached. Thus nearly everyone who has written about the case of the young girl's child takes it for granted that the mother will not be able to regret her decision to conceive, given her attachment to the person to whom she gave birth. They assume, in other words, that the mother's affirmation of her child will have an unconditional character, committing her to affirming as well the necessary conditions of the child's existence. Retrospective attitudes of this kind seem to me humanly intelligible, and they are characteristic of attachment to individuals, and perhaps to other things as well.

Véronique Munoz-Dardé seems to accept that we sometimes unconditionally affirm things to which we are attached. But she is not convinced that this is as pervasive a phenomenon as I suppose, suggesting that there is a range of cases of retrospective outlook, including many that tolerate greater ambivalence than unconditional affirmation or its contrary, all-in-regret. She argues, more specifically, that we are not committed to the norms of unconditional affirmation, and that we are free to adopt attitudes that are more supple or nuanced in their evaluative orientation (5). For the record, let me say that I agree with Munoz-Dardé about this. It was not my intention to maintain that we are necessarily committed, as agents or persons, to affirming things unconditionally. In characterizing this attitude, I'm trying

to describe an outlook that will be familiar to my readers, as one that they find themselves adopting toward objects that play a significant role in constituting the meaning of their lives. My suggestion is that these kinds of retrospective attitudes are natural byproducts of the attachments that play such a large role in this context, and that their structure involves implicit commitments whose broader implications have not adequately been explored.

Munoz-Dardé identifies a different feature of our present outlook that might condition our tensed attitudes toward actual and prospective states of affairs. This involves agency and the motivational structures inherent in it, which determine us to struggle against a present obstacle or pain more intensely than we might object to a similar or greater obstacle or pain that is in the past (1-3). This is an interesting perspectival feature of our outlook on things, and Munoz-Dardé's reflections on it strike me as plausible and illuminating. She makes the further point that the perspectival effects of agency on our evaluative outlook cannot be explained by appeal to what I call attachment, and I agree with her about this as well. But the point is not an objection to the view developed in VfH. My claim there was not that all perspectival features of our evaluative outlook could be accounted for in terms of the commitments latent in attachment, but only that there is an important class of perspectival phenomena that can be made sense of in these terms, which involve our retrospective attitudes of regret and affirmation. I stand by this claim, even while welcoming Munoz-Dardé's reflections on other perspectival elements in the lived experience of engagement with value.

2. *Williams's Gauguin.*

Attachments, as I understand them, can take a variety of objects. We are attached to the individuals whom we love, but we are also attached to the activities that constitute our significant life projects, and we are attached to life itself. Kolodny makes the observation that the disturbing conclusion of VfH does not require anything beyond appeal to our attachments to individuals (sec. 4). If we are attached to individual people, and if those attachments involve retrospective attitudes of unconditional affirmation, then a dynamic is already in place that potentially commits us to affirming historical and social conditions that are, considered in themselves, deeply problematic or objectionable. There is no need to argue, in addition, that we are typically attached to our lives in the same, unconditional way. Furthermore, Kolodny suggests that it is anyway obscure why our attachment to our lives should commit us, as I suggest it does in VfH, to affirming the normative conditions that make possible that very attachment.

On the issue of the necessity of these claims to the modestly nihilistic argument developed in the concluding chapter of my book, Kolodny is absolutely correct. But I was not merely interested in presenting the most efficient and streamlined statement of that argument. Having made some claims about the nature of retrospective affirmation, I also hoped to explore, at least tentatively, a variety of contexts in which that phenomenon appears to play a role. Thus, philosophers such as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche have raised provocative (if elusive) questions about the conditions under which it is possible for people to affirm the lives they have led, and I wanted to see what I could make of some of those questions, in light of the understanding of unconditional affirmation presented in the earlier parts of VfH. A distinct concern of mine in the book was to interrogate some ideas that figure importantly in the work

of Bernard Williams, about our attitudes toward the things that make it possible for us to affirm our lives in the first place. The role of “ground projects” or “categorical desires” in anchoring agents to the lives they have led and propelling them forward into the future is a subject that is discussed in several of Williams’s seminal papers on the limits of our allegiance to morality. In “Moral Luck” in particular, Williams appears to argue that the mature Gauguin is psychologically unable to regret the immoral decision to leave his family behind in Paris, because that decision was a necessary condition for the successful projects that are the basis for his later ability to affirm the life he has led.

My book is not intended as a linear argument for a single nihilistic conclusion, so much as a succession of overlapping reflections in which the connections between affirmation, regret, and attachment are explored in different contexts, taking ideas from such philosophers as Nietzsche and Williams as a touchstone. Of course, Kolodny’s larger point may simply be that he finds some of these reflections much more compelling than others. He is sympathetic, in particular, with my idea that there is a compelling dynamic leading from the affirmation of individuals to the affirmation of the necessary conditions of their existence. He elucidates this idea, helpfully, by appeal to the commonplace thought that intending the end commits one to intending the necessary means (sec. 2). If unconditional affirmation has an intention-like character, then affirming an individual brings with it a commitment to affirming the prior decisions and historical conditions that were necessary for the individual to come to exist in the first place. But, Kolodny notes, there is no similar structure of means/end commitment latent in the relation between our lives, as objects of affirmation, and the normative conditions that make it possible for us to adopt that attitude toward them. Thus, the artistic projects and

accomplishments of the mature Gauguin are not themselves necessary conditions of the thing that he endorses when he affirms his life, in the way (for instance) the young girl's decision to conceive was a necessary condition for the existence of the individual child whom she now loves.

Kolodny is right that whatever dynamic might be implicit in cases such as Gauguin's is more obscure than the commitment at issue in cases, such as the young girl's child, involving our attachments to individuals. I would describe it as a commitment of something like coherence or perhaps stability in one's attitudes. The attitudes of a person do not hang together very well if they affirm their life unconditionally, but regret on balance that it includes the projects that make possible that affirmative attitude in the first place. It is pressures of this kind, I submit, that preclude the mature Gauguin from wishing that he hadn't gone to Tahiti, even while he affirms the life he has actually led on the basis of the artistic projects that that fateful choice made possible. (For discussion, see VfH, secs. 3.4 and 5.2.) Perhaps Kolodny is correct in thinking that these psychological pressures of coherence or stability are ultimately specious, and that no genuine intellectual commitments are determined by them. But if so, it seems to me that the argument of Williams's "Moral Luck" will be difficult to make sense of.

On my reading of that paper, Williams starts from premises about the mature Gauguin's psychological inability to regret his earlier decision, and reasons from them that the decision thereby acquires a retrospective justification (being "justified by its success"²). It is the pressures of coherence or stability referred to in the preceding paragraph that explain Gauguin's psychological inability, looking back on the earlier decision from the perspective of the artistic projects with which he is at that point comprehensively identified. One of the larger themes of

VfH is that this perspectival inability to regret an earlier decision, on account of psychological pressures inherent in one's later point of view, does not amount to an ex post facto justification; regret and justification simply do not track each other in the neat way Williams's argument seems to presuppose.

Carla Bagnoli and Véronique Munoz-Dardé both seem to question the broader reading of Williams's argument that I present in VfH. We are all in agreement in attributing to Williams the view that rational justification and moral demands can come apart from each other. But Bagnoli and Munoz-Dardé dispute that there is an argument for this conclusion that starts from psychological premises, and is meant to support the normative conclusion that Gauguin was justified to do the thing that morally wronged his family back in Paris. On Bagnoli's reading, as I understand it, Williams's argument is meant from the start to be couched in normative terms. He believes that our ground projects are the source of our most fundamental reasons for action, and that morality cannot hope to compete with such project-based reasons when it comes into fundamental conflict with them. On this reading, Gauguin's immoral decision back in Paris was the right one for him to take, insofar as it is justified by the balance of his project-based reasons. And the fact that it is in this way justified explains his later inability to regret the decision when he looks back on it in thought. Thus Bagnoli writes: "[Gauguin's] decision is rationally justifiable. Consequently, immunity to all-in regret is rationally justifiable" (4). Similarly, Munoz-Dardé expresses skepticism about whether Williams intends there to be a movement from psychological premises to a normative or evaluative conclusion in "Moral Luck". On the reading she favors, "[e]lements of perspective bear on the nature of value in life and not just on psychology. This...reverses the order found in Wallace's account" (3).

It may be that Bagnoli and Munoz-Dardé agree with me that Williams's argument doesn't work when it is interpreted as moving from psychological premises to normative or evaluative conclusion. Perhaps they are attempting, in the spirit of charity, to read into Williams's text an argument that will not be vulnerable to the objections I bring against him, objections that they agree with me in finding compelling. This would be a laudable impulse, but I am at a loss to see how else the argument of "Moral Luck" might be read. It is beyond dispute that that argument turns on the temporal dimension of the Gauguin case; it is a question, as I noted earlier, of "justification by success", where the success condition will be satisfied only at a time much later than the decision it is supposed to justify. This is the feature of the situation that involves epistemic luck, since Gauguin could not know, at the time when he made the decision to flout his moral obligations to his family, whether or not he would be successful in the path on which he was then embarking. On my reading, success of the relevant kind justifies the earlier decision by conditioning the standpoint from which Gauguin looks back on it in thought, making it the case that he is unable to regret the thing that he then did. Bagnoli, by contrast, supposes the decision to be "rationally justifiable" for apparently independent reasons, where this feature of it also renders justifiable his inability to experience regret. But what is the independent feature that might justify the earlier decision at the point in time at which it has given rise to a successful outcome?

A certain kind of consequentialist might answer this question by appeal to the value that the earlier decision produced. The decision to leave the family in the lurch is justified, on this view, if it turns out to be successful in its generation of sufficient positive value to outweigh the suffering and torment that were inflicted on the people he left behind. It seems clear that this

fairly crude outlook is not Williams's own way of thinking about justification. A subtler invocation of later value is suggested by the following passage from Munoz-Dardé: "Someone who stuck with Williams's own morals could avoid any appeal to unconditional affirmation in explaining Gauguin's self-vindication. The issue is not one of attachment, but simply that of a superior perspective of someone who has lived the life on there being enough significance in it" (5). This is suggestive, but it is hard to discern in it a clear alternative to the reading proposed in VfH. I agree that his successful artistic projects have a kind of significance for the later Gauguin that shapes his perspective when he looks back on the things that he has done in his life. But I fail to see how this kind of significance can even purport to constitute a retrospective justification without the detour I propose through the psychological constraints it determines on what the mature Gauguin is able to regret. And these psychological constraints are fundamentally a matter of the mature Gauguin's later attachments.

3. Ambivalence, and the View from Here.

All-in regret about an event or circumstance, and unconditional affirmation of the same event or circumstance, are mutually exclusive. As I have defined these notions, there is no possibility of experiencing both of them at the same time. But it may be wondered whether a study of retrospective attitudes that is constructed around these notions can do justice to the complexities of the circumstances we look back on in reflection on the past.

Bagnoli articulates a concern of this kind about my account. She distinguishes between a narrower notion of regret, tied to the on balance preference that things should have been otherwise in the respect that occasions this emotion, and a broader notion, which tolerates

ambivalence of attitude. She suggests that the broader notion is more appropriate to the contingencies of human agency, noting that even the successful Gauguin will have much to regret when he thinks about what he did to the family he left behind in Paris. Thus Bagnoli writes: "In the broader sense that Williams' category [of agent-regret] picks out, however, Gauguin may want that things had been otherwise, even though he would not change his decision. Arguably, the successful Gauguin might reasonably think: 'I am happy I was actually able to pursue my vocation, but I am profoundly sorry that I left my family behind. I regret that they suffer, but I would not want that things had gone otherwise'" (3).

I agree completely with Bagnoli that this would be a reasonable set of attitudes for the mature Gauguin to adopt as he looks back on the things that he has done in his life. As with all of us, the life he has led is a complicated mixture of the good and the bad, interwoven in ways that cannot in fact be disentangled, and his retrospective emotions should reflect and do justice to these differently-valenced features of the past that he reflects on. But the framework I propose for understanding retrospective emotions allows for at least two different attitudes that it would be open to someone like Gauguin to adopt in acknowledgement of the unfortunate things he has experienced and done.

First, even if Gauguin is glad on balance that he left his family behind in Paris, on account of the role that decision played in shaping his present artistic projects, he can also wish that he could have achieved those projects without abandoning his wife and his French children. Similarly, the young girl can wish that she could have had the child to whom she gave birth at a later stage in her life, even while she affirms the decision to conceive when she did in virtue of its relation to the existence of the individual whom she now loves. These attitudes go

together perfectly naturally, having different proper objects. Affirmation is directed at the decision that the agent took at the earlier point in time, under the historical conditions that actually then obtained. The world being as it was, there was no realistic scenario available to him at the time in which Gauguin could have had the artistic career that made him who he is without abandoning his bourgeois family life back in Paris; just as for the young girl, the decision not to conceive when she did would in fact have meant that the child she has come to love would not have existed. The later attachments of these two agents determine them to affirm the earlier decisions, taking realistically into account the consequences that would have ensued if, under the conditions that in fact obtained at the earlier point in time, they had acted otherwise. (This is the “realism condition” introduced on 72 of VfH.) But while having these affirmative attitudes, one can also and simultaneously regret that things were as they were in the relevant respects. That is, Gauguin can regret that it was not possible for him both to pursue his artistic career in the South Sea islands and to live up to his moral obligations to his family; and the young girl can similarly regret that she could not have had her daughter when she was older and more mature.

This is one way in which unconditional affirmation can persist alongside an element of regret about the past that one reflects on. A different way exploits a distinct conception of regret that is acknowledged in VfH.³ According to this conception, to have regrets about something is not necessarily to wish on balance that it were otherwise, but to have a pained consciousness that it happened that is appropriate to the things about it that are unfortunate or problematic. Both Gauguin and the young girl can have regrets, in this sense, about the decisions that they

affirm in retrospective reflection, and I agree with Bagnoli that such attitudes are warranted given the mixed character of the objects that are affirmed.

Against Bagnoli, however, I would insist that the narrower notion of all-in regret that I identify is itself an important phenomenon, and that it is crucial to a complete understanding of the cases at the center of discussion in VfH. Thus it is Williams who insists that the “most basic regrets” of the mature Gauguin *cannot* attach to his earlier decision to leave his family to their own devices.⁴ The notion of basic regret that figures in this claim is certainly not the broader one that tolerates emotional ambivalence (cf. Bagnoli, 3), since there is nothing in the mature Gauguin’s outlook that would preclude his feeling regrets about what he did, or prevent him from wishing that he could have both had his cake and eaten it. Similarly, the young girl is generally assumed to be unable to regret the decision that gave rise to her daughter, and the sense of regret at issue here must again be the narrow one that is precluded by affirmation.

Munoz-Dardé makes a similar plea for the virtue of ambivalence as a realistic attitude to adopt toward the world as we find it, with its admixture of beauty, grace, and horror. In her illuminating discussion of the *mezquita* of Cordoba (5-6), she observes that the aesthetic experience of this architectural site will naturally be accompanied by a mixture of both celebration and repulsion. Her further suggestion, I take it, is that it does injustice to the complexities of both history and cultural experience to insist that the observer must take a stand, one way or another, in the uncompromising terms of all-in regret or unconditional affirmation. But I agree with her about all this. There is a passage in VfH in which I discuss our attitudes toward objects that we value, such as Newton’s science or the splendors of Venice (VfH, 233, note 37). I address, particular, Williams’s suggestion that valuing such things puts

pressure on us to endorse “every dreadful happening that has been necessary” to create them.⁵ Against this suggestion, I claim that valuing Newton’s science or Venice seems compatible with deep ambivalence about the historical and social circumstances that produced them, and that it is only when attachments enter the picture that there is psychological pressure on us to affirm such (often dire) circumstances. I would say about Munoz-Dardé’s Cordoba example, similarly, that aesthetic appreciation for the remarkable structures on display there is fully compatible with ambivalence about the events that created them, and perhaps even enhanced by such ambivalence (insofar as it contributes to or accompanies historical understanding).

Munoz-Dardé might respond that if deep ambivalence is compatible with valuing such objects as these, then valuing is perhaps a suitable paradigm for thinking about our attitudes toward all of the people and projects with which our unfolding biographies are bound up. Just as we can value the *mezquita* while being profoundly conflicted about the history that produced it, so too might we value our friends and loved ones or our most important life projects while being deeply divided about whether their necessary conditions should have occurred. This is the possibility, mentioned earlier, that our attitudes of affirmation toward the things that we admire and love might be conditional all the way down, so that there is no pressure on us to affirm their necessary antecedents.

As I noted above, I have no philosophical argument to offer to the effect that this is an incoherent or unstable possibility. It might even be a desirable state to aspire to, combining appreciation of the good things in our lives with a certain serene detachment, both toward them and toward the circumstances that gave rise to them. At the same time, however, this more detached attitude does not in fact seem to be the one that people commonly take themselves to

adopt toward the most significant values with which their lives are bound up. Williams, for one, certainly assumes that our ground projects and our loves tether us very firmly to the world that made them possible, impelling us to affirm their necessary conditions. (Indeed, as noted above he seems to think that similar commitments are built into the structure of valuing, something I would join Munoz-Dardé in disputing.) Likewise, it strikes me and many others as very natural to think that the young girl's love of her child will commit her to affirmation rather than ambivalence about the necessary circumstances of the child's existence. I note further, in this connection, that the attitude of aesthetic appreciation appropriate to such objects as the *mezquita* of Cordoba and Venice does not carry over very plausibly to the immediate objects of love and devotion. To love someone is not merely to have a discerning appreciation for the features that make them admirable and that make your relation to them interesting and valuable, but to be *invested* in them, in a way that does not sit so easily with deep ambivalence. Or so it seems to me (and, I believe, to Williams and many others).

It is true that we generally do not think very clearly about the events and circumstances that were necessary for the objects to which we are attached. We get on with our lives, acting in the spirit of our projects and important relationships, without dwelling on how things must have been in order for them to come to exist, as our projects and relationships. But it is deeply disturbing to become aware of the ways on which dreadful or lamentable circumstances might have conditioned the immediate objects to which we are in this way attached. And what disturbs us, I submit, is our inchoate recognition that regret or ambivalence about those circumstances might not be a realistic option for us. This is the somewhat pessimistic conclusion of my book.

4. The Pessimistic Conclusion

If attachments involve an attitude of unconditional affirmation, then we are committed, in virtue of them, to affirming the necessary conditions of the things to which we are attached. These conditions include not only the actions of ours that gave rise to the objects of present attachment, but also impersonal events and states of affairs that do not involve our own personal agency, such as the deplorable social conditions that made possible academic research in philosophy in its contemporary form, or historical calamities without which, for all we know, the people we love would never have been born. Commitments of this kind do not ultimately make sense, insofar as they are commitments to affirm things that we cannot view as worthy of that attitude. Our predicament is to be saddled with attitudes that are in this way absurd, and I suggest in the final chapter of *VfH* that a position with this structure might be described as incorporating a modest form of nihilism.

As Kolodny notes, I frequently move in the book from the premise that we are committed to affirming historical conditions that are not worthy of being affirmed to the conclusion that our lives themselves, or the objects to which we are attached in life, are not worthy of being affirmed (sec. 5). He calls this a kind of reverse affirmation dynamic, and observes that it is scarcely plausible in application to many particular cases. Thus it would seem a kind of “category mistake” to conclude that Gauguin does not have sufficient reason to love his Tahitian children on the basis that the decision to abandon his family in Paris, which was necessary for their existence, is one that is not worthy of being affirmed retrospectively (9).

I am grateful to Kolodny for pressing this objection, which raises issues that are not adequately addressed in VfH. In response, I would begin by pointing out that the modestly nihilistic thesis of the book would remain in place even if we reject the reverse affirmation dynamic and the specific inferences that result from applying it. Kolodny does not deny that our attachments, at least to the individuals we love, commit us to affirming prior events and circumstances that are objectively deplorable; I believe he would also agree with me that events and circumstances that are objectively deplorable are not worthy of being affirmed. But if this is right, then our attachments include or determine commitments that do not really make sense, insofar as they are commitments to affirm things that do not warrant that attitude on balance. This remains the case, even if we follow Kolodny in denying that our attachments themselves are in any way unwarranted or inappropriate to their objects. And it is enough, on its own, to justify the somewhat pessimistic conclusion of VfH.

But what of the reverse affirmation dynamic? Does the absurd commitment to affirm past conditions that are objectively deplorable call into question the rational credentials of the attachments that give rise to the commitment? Let us start with love, which Kolodny and I both take to be one of the central examples of the phenomenon of attachment. There are, I believe, reasons for love; indeed Kolodny himself has presented the most persuasive account I have encountered of the general shape of these reasons, describing love as a response to the value of relationships of various kinds.⁶ If one happens to stand in one of these relationships to another person, then I would agree that one has sufficient reason to love the person to whom one is so related, and also to be happy that the resulting attachment is part of one's life. The attitudes of love and attachment make as much sense as it is possible for them to make under these

conditions, and nothing I want to say about the absurdity of the remoter commitments that they determine changes this, in any way. Kolodny is right that it would be a kind of category mistake to think otherwise.

To the best of my recollection, however, I am careful to distinguish in VfH between attachment proper and the stance of unconditional affirmation that (as I suggest repeatedly above) naturally goes along with it. The several passages from VfH in which Kolodny discerns something like the reverse affirmation dynamic are passages in which I propose, admittedly with some hyperbole, that our ambition to lead lives that are worthy of unconditional affirmation cannot be realized in the world as we find it. My reason for saying this is that unconditional affirmation involves, constitutively, the commitment to affirm the necessary conditions of that which is immediately affirmed, where these commitments in turn, as Kolodny is prepared to concede, are not themselves warranted by their objects. Taking the affirmation of life to include the totality of commitments that are included under this attitude, it continues to seem to me plausible to say that the aspiration to live in a way that is worthy of being affirmed unconditionally necessarily eludes us under the historical conditions that we inhabit. This is just to say that nothing we might do in life would make it the case that the remoter commitments that the unconditional affirmation of life involves are appropriate to their objects.

It does not follow from this, however, that our attachment to life is unwarranted, or that we lack sufficient reason to be committed to the specific individuals and projects that imbue our lives with meaning and significance. The value of our relationships and activities makes it fitting that we are devoted to them in the way we are, and gives us compelling reason to cherish

and nurture and support them going forward. As Kolodny at one point observes, if a necessary condition for an otherwise valuable activity is already in place, we typically have sufficient reason to continue the activity even if the necessary condition is one that we would have had sufficient reason to reject, were it in our power to do so. His example is going through with a trip, once the too-expensive (and presumably non-refundable) ticket for it has already been purchased (10); but the same point obviously applies to loving the individual to whom you have given birth, or pursuing the valuable professional path that is now open to you as you decide what you are going to do with your life. We have sufficient reasons for attachments of these kinds, and they in turn give us sufficient reasons for being attached to life itself. My point is just that acting on these reasons will naturally determine us to affirm retrospectively the objects to which we have grown attached, and that the unconditional character of this attitude of retrospective affirmation includes commitments that in the nature of the case are not appropriate to their objects. This is the sense in which the aspiration to live in a way that is worthy of being unconditionally affirmed cannot be realized.

This line of thought provides appropriate context for considering one of Bernard Reginster's interesting objections to my argument, which is that it might not be pessimistic enough. His suggestion is that the unwarranted character of the remoter commitments involved in affirming one's life might undermine the psychological basis of our present attachments. Thus he writes (12): "How could we allow ourselves to enjoy and derive meaning from attachments to persons or projects, the very existence of which, while undeniably valuable, was made historically possible by terrible injustices?" The idea here seems to be that there might be a different kind of "reverse affirmation dynamic", whereby the unwarranted character of the

remoter commitments determined by our attachments calls into question, not the normative credentials of those attachments, but our ability to sustain our emotional investment in them. It threatens to “sap our motivation”, as Reginster at one point puts the point (12).

There is a genuine psychological possibility here, one that might well take hold in the psyches of at least some thoughtful agents who reflect on the relation between past calamities and the immediate objects to which they are attached. I have just argued that, even if we cannot hope to live lives that are fully worthy of being unconditionally affirmed, we still have sufficient reason to form and to nurture valuable attachments to the persons we love and to the projects that give our lives significance from our own point of view. But as Reginster observes, attachment involves an element of emotional investment that goes beyond mere intellectual acknowledgement of the evaluative and normative considerations to which it typically responds. To be attached to a project or a person is not just to register the value of the activities or the relationships that these attachments involve, but to be emotionally invested in them. One might conceivably agree that the values continue to be accessible to one’s agency, and that one has compelling reason to pursue them, but nevertheless fail to be invested in them any longer in the relevant ways. One might just lose interest, depressed or perhaps stunned by one’s recognition of the ways in which the objects to which one had formerly been attached are connected historically to events and circumstances that are objectively deplorable.

Indeed, there are two distinct ways in which one’s attitudes might be affected as a result of this kind of reflection. One might cease caring at all about the persons or projects to which one had formerly been attached, so that one no longer finds them compelling sources of subjective significance at all. Or, less dramatically, one might remain emotionally invested in

them to some degree, but lose the attitude of unconditional retrospective affirmation of their objects that typically accompanies attachments of this kind. (Compare the discussion in sec. 3 above of the possibility of valuing things, in the way characteristic of aesthetic appreciation, without the retrospective stance of unconditional affirmation of their objects.)

I agree with Reginster that these would be intelligible psychological responses to reflection on the conclusion of my book. They describe channels through which the modest nihilism that I discuss in VfH could bleed into a more comprehensively nihilistic outlook, leading people to become disengaged from the things that had formerly given their lives meaning. But while there is a real psychological possibility here, I am somewhat comforted by the thought that nothing in my argument shows it to be a warranted or fitting response to the threat of implication in the lamentable that I describe. As I explained above in discussing Kolodny's reverse affirmation dynamic, and as I believe Reginster would agree, the fact that unconditional affirmation involves commitments to affirm deplorable historical and personal conditions does not undermine the rational credentials of the attachments that lead us to adopt that attitude in the first place. Love and emotional investment are fitting reactions to relationships and activities that continue to be rich and rewarding, and for most of us attachments of these kinds, once formed, are robust enough to survive reflection on the disturbing commitments that follow from our unconditional affirmation of their objects. There is thus no normative basis in my argument for adjusting one's attitudes in the comprehensively nihilistic way Reginster describes, even if it represents a psychological possibility for some people. Perhaps it could be argued that one's total outlook would gain in coherence if, while continuing to be attached to the projects and persons who give one's life meaning, one were to

adopt retrospective attitudes of conditional rather than unconditional affirmation toward their objects. As I conceded in section 1 of these remarks, I have no argument to offer that this would be an unstable or otherwise untenable stance. But I join Williams and others in finding it to be humanly unrealistic: to be attached to persons and projects is to affirm them retrospectively when we reflect on whether they should have existed, and this attitude spreads backward onto the conditions of what is affirmed, in accordance with the affirmation dynamic, in ways that eventually cease to make sense.

Reginster also wonders whether the conclusion of VfH might be, in a different respect, overly pessimistic (7-11). He notes that the historical conditions that one is committed to affirming, according to my argument, can coherently be distinguished in thought from the proper immediate objects to which we are attached. Exploiting what I call the “parsing maneuver” (VfH, 70), Reginster wonders whether we might avoid the disquieting commitments by focusing on counterfactual scenarios in which the deplorable historical conditions did not occur, but the necessary antecedents of the objects to which we are attached nevertheless still obtain. Suppose the remote ancestors of a person we now love met while fleeing from a famine or other calamity at some point in the distant past. Instead of affirming the calamity, we might think about ways these individuals could have met even if the calamity hadn’t happened. And perhaps the affirmation dynamic commits us merely to wishing that one of those counterfactual scenarios had occurred. We would thus avoid the disturbing commitments of the affirmation dynamic, with the result that the larger structure of attitudes involved in affirming our lives is capable of making sense.

Reginster is right to note the possibility of exploiting the parsing maneuver in retrospective reflection about the historical conditions of our attachments. This is possible because the historical conditions in question are typically connected causally rather than conceptually or metaphysically to the immediate objects to which we are attached. There are possible worlds in which, for instance, the individuals we love exist, even though the actual events that led to their existence do not take place. In the young girl's child case, a zygote genetically identical to the one from which her actual child developed might conceivably have been created much later in her life from an egg and sperm that were captured from her and the father at the time when they had sexual relations in the actual world, and preserved through cryogenic or other means. This is not an incoherent or metaphysically impossible scenario, and so it is available to be an object of retrospective reflection. The mother can intelligibly wish that things had played out in this way, and Reginster's suggestion is that an attitude of this kind might be all she is committed to in virtue of her attachment to her daughter.

I agree with Reginster that our attachment to individuals and projects will lead us to endorse counterfactual scenarios such as these when we think back on different ways in which the past might have been. Doing so is one way of wishing that things had been otherwise when we reflect on the actual conditions that gave rise to our present attachments (as the young girl does when she wishes that she could have had her actual child at a point in her life when she was better able to attend to the child's emotional and physical needs). But as I noted in sec. 3 above, such counterfactual preferences are not an alternative to the attitude of affirmation toward the actual historical circumstances that conditioned our attachments, but are compatible with them. The young girl can both wish that she could have had her actual child when she was

older and more mature, and affirm that she made the decision to conceive at the point in her life when she did. The latter attitude takes a different object than the former; it looks back at the decision she actually made, under the conditions that then obtained, and responds to the question of whether she now prefers that she should have acted otherwise. The aforementioned “realism condition” requires the girl to address this question by thinking clearly about how things would in fact have been if she had then decided not to conceive. Even if there are coherent scenarios, accessible to retrospective thought, in which the girl might still have had her child if she hadn’t then acted as she did, those scenarios do not describe what would in fact have happened if she had done otherwise under the conditions that then obtained. The closest possible worlds in which she acted otherwise, we might say, are all worlds in which the actual child to whom she gave birth does not exist. In this way, her affirmation of her child commits her to affirming the decision, despite the fact that it was not justified at the time. And the same conclusion applies to the remoter impersonal conditions that were historically necessary for the objects that we affirm (such as the famine or calamity that led the distant ancestors of the person we now love to meet).

Kolodny and Reginster both identify further respects in which my argument may be less pessimistic than it may initially appear to be. As Kolodny notes, the suggestion that it is not open to us to lead lives that are worthy of affirmation sounds like a “crushing verdict” on the human predicament (11), one that is appropriate to a book in which Nietzsche and nihilism are frequently invoked. But as I emphasized above, this verdict applies, strictly speaking, only to the “peculiar” retrospective attitude of unconditional affirmation. It leaves entirely intact our current and prospective reasons for a range of other positive responses toward our lives and

toward the objects to which we are attached, including loving them, cherishing and nurturing them, holding them up for emulation, and so forth. Once this is made clear, Kolodny suggests, the allegedly nihilistic conclusion of my book “should not take the wind from our sails” (11). Reginster takes this general line of thought one step further. Not only might the unworthiness of our lives for retrospective affirmation leave in place our ordinary reasons for valuing the things to which we are attached and acting in the spirit of those attachments, it could supply us with new reasons for these attitudes and actions. In particular, Reginster proposes that there might be a special obligation to make something of our lives that is generated by the human suffering and misery that may have historically conditioned the objects of our present attachments (13-14). We owe it to those past individuals to do what we can to ensure that their sacrifices were not in vain, by redoubling our efforts to realize the possibilities for engagement with value that those sacrifices have made possible.

I am deeply sympathetic to both of these suggestions, and they are fully in the spirit in which VfH was written. The nihilistic conclusion of the book is “modest”, in part, in virtue of the fact that it pertains only to one particular retrospective attitude that we characteristically adopt toward our lives (and a peculiar one at that!). The disturbing features of this attitude do not undermine our reasons for other positive attitudes and actions involving the objects to which we are attached, and they may even intensify those reasons, as Reginster suggests. To that extent, the pessimistic conclusion does not in fact take the wind from our sails, and it might even contribute some gusts of its own.

¹ See VfH, sec. 2.3, for more on conditional intentions and our attitudes toward the past.

² Williams, "Moral Luck", p. 36.

³ See VfH, pp. 45-6.

⁴ Williams, "Moral Luck", pp. 35-6; this key passage is discussed in VfH, pp. 139-43, and it is a constant reference point throughout chapter four of the book. Many people seem to disagree with my reading of Williams's argument in this paper, but I have yet to see a better proposal about how we should interpret the key argument on these pages.

⁵ The text by Williams that is discussed in this passage from VfH is his "Introduction to *The Gay Science*", as reprinted in his *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy*, e.d Myles Burnyeat (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 311-24. Burnyeat is here trying to make sense of Nietzsche's elusive ideal of eternal recurrence, which is of course also a theme in the later parts of VfH.

⁶ Niko Kolodny, "Love as Valuing a Relationship", *The Philosophical Review* 112 (2003), pp. 135-89.