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## Contribution to Symposium on *The View from Here*

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### Precis

*The View from Here* is a book about our retrospective attitudes toward things that it is no longer within our power to affect, one way or another. The phenomena at the center of the discussion are regret and affirmation, which are negative and positive responses to the things that we look back on in retrospective thought. Regret is an emotion that reflects present unease with something that happened in the past; in its purest form—what I call all-in regret—it involves an intention-like preference that things should have been otherwise in some respect than they actually were. To regret in this way some past decision or circumstance is to be committed counterfactually to changing it, for the hypothetical situation that one had it in one's power to do so. "Would that it were otherwise" is a natural expression of a regretful attitude of this kind. Affirmation, by contrast, involves a similar, intention-like preference that some past action or circumstance should not have been otherwise than it was. Regret and affirmation, construed in these terms, are contrary attitudes that cannot be sustained at one and the same time toward one and the same object.

*The View from Here* explores the nature of these retrospective attitudes and the features of a person's situation that condition them. One large theme in the book is the role of attachments in shaping our attitudes toward the things that we look back on in reflection. We are deeply attached to the people we love and to the life projects that give our lives meaning, and these attachments determine corresponding attitudes of affirmation toward their objects. Indeed, by a

process that I call the “affirmation dynamic”, our affirmation of the objects of our attachments involves implicitly a commitment to affirm their necessary constitutive and historical conditions. Thus, in one of the cases that is discussed at some length in the book, a young mother’s attachment to her child will commit her to affirming the decision to conceive the child, insofar as the child would not have existed in the first place if the decision had not been made. A further large theme in the book is that our attachments evolve through time as we go about our lives, continuously altering the standpoint of retrospective assessment, with striking and hitherto unexplored implications for our attitudes toward the past.

Two implications of the perspectival character of retrospective thought are especially important in the book. The first concerns the relations between justification, affirmation, and regret. It is perhaps natural to suppose that decisions that were wrong or that lacked justification are ones that we should look back on with regret rather than affirmation. But for reasons that are developed in the book, this assumption is questionable. A decision that was wrong at the time it was taken may give rise to new attachments that preclude the agent’s regretting what they did from the later standpoint of reflection. This is true in the case of the young mother, whose inability to regret her decision to conceive, in virtue of her love for the child to whom she gave birth, does not constitute an *ex post facto* justification of the decision. And it is true, as well, in the famous case of Bernard Williams’s Gauguin, whose inability to regret his earlier decision to abandon his family is alleged to render the decision justified retroactively.<sup>1</sup>

The affirmation dynamic, once it is set in motion, will propel us further in thought, committing us to affirm not only our own questionable past decisions, but impersonal

conditions as well, insofar as they were historically necessary for the immediate objects of our present attachments. Yet those conditions are often ones that cannot possibly be regarded as worthy of being affirmed. An example of this second implication of my analysis is what I call the bourgeois predicament, whereby our attachment to inherently expensive projects and activities commits us to affirming the deeply problematic historical and social conditions that gave rise to them. The pessimistic conclusion of the book is that for all we know, our attachments to the people and projects that give our lives shape and significance might in this way commit us to affirming horrific human calamities and atrocities in the recent and remote past, insofar as they were necessary for the objects to which we are currently attached (for the existence of the individuals we have come to love, for example). I view this conclusion as involving a modest form of nihilism, and suggest that it expresses the grain of truth in Nietzsche's suggestion that we can honestly affirm our lives only if we are prepared to affirm the eternal recurrence of the totality of world history.

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<sup>1</sup> See Williams, "Moral Luck", as reprinted in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 20-39.