

A Theory of Regret

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How many details, how many pieces of evidence are required for one to know regret? Can one be punctilious in regret? How careful can I be in my evaluation, especially considering that what's at stake—if I am experiencing regret—is the lack of care I once demonstrated that now has me in an uneasy state of searching. What would lead me to conclude that I am now more capable of seeing what I could not see then? I say to myself what everyone knows already, or could have known, should they be gathering the same details. *I can be wrong, I have been wrong: I regret that I am no longer in the right. I regret what is already known of me, what is known of me before I know it of myself.* If I regret something, presumably, I wish I could have done something otherwise; I wish that I could have done the, or even just that, right thing. But if doing otherwise was an option—if every action implies an otherwise—then how could I have been wrong?

I search for details. I look around for and at the signs of others, but as usual, others conceal from me what anyone in possession of this knowledge in decency knows to withhold from the one who cannot, he thinks, understand in the first place. Signs go silent in the moment of irretrievable trespass. The talking begins to happen elsewhere.

Regret is a problem of recognition as it emerges in relation to opposed wills, which do not communicate—which have failed to communicate, and now remain in a state of oblique willing that only appears blank, in and as silence. One intends to be punctilious in regret; one hopes that the cause of regret can be proven or refuted. But if signs change—or remain the same in muteness—then counting becomes sheer treachery. One can be exposed as having tried to do so, even as we fail to verify the terms of the regret that we now, however tentatively, feel. To try is already to have made a confession: I should have done that differently. I have been seen, so I might just as well be heard.

Suddenly, I want to tell the one who notices: Feel free to wait in silence. There's less to come.

Regret is a problem of calculation, especially if we suppose regret to be the mischievous relative of virtue. I can feel regret and not be wrong—or else, I can feel regret and not be evil, since regret implies some relation to virtue. It's just that we don't know how to measure the distance between what we've said or what we've done from what would otherwise leave us in the Good.

The Habit of Virtue

This is the problem of regret as Aristotle introduces it in *Nicomachean Ethics* as a problem of and for virtue. For Aristotle, virtue is of two types: virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought, Aristotle says, is something that does not come naturally. It has to be taught and it has to be learned.¹ We are, Aristotle says, “completed by habit.”² We have to build our capacities for virtue, which will become our character, which is also the character of virtue, since it will be possessed by more than one. What this means is that the pathways for some things can be changed in the course of habituation, where other things by nature—by essence—resist. Like the stone:

A stone, for instance, by nature moves downwards, and habituation could not make it move upwards, not even if you threw it up ten thousand times to habituate it; nor could habituation make fire move downwards, or bring anything that is by nature on one condition into another condition.³

If the raw matter of the stone in gravity prevents it from tending upward of its own volition—no matter how many times we toss it in the air—then the human, no less comprised of matter, is the being capable of changing his course on the basis of what can be produced as thought in the act of habituation. Of course, we might have to make the same claim for domesticated animals, for whom acting well is also a result of habituation, of a thought learned by rote repetition. Having acquired the character of virtue, the domesticated animal now—and no less than man—has the capacity to pursue a more virtuous course. It can, for instance, shit outside, instead of inside.

In this sense, the distinction on offer here between stone and being—whether man or animal—is obvious enough. But what it does, and rather importantly, is to locate the question of virtue outside of a metaphysical conception of morality. Virtue, for Aristotle, is something acquired, not necessary. We don’t fall to the ground no matter what. Nor do we arrive with, or because of, the virtue of character. And while it might be argued that virtue may, in metaphysical terms, remain indiscernibly present in the Good, like vodka in water, it exists as a category for Aristotle precisely because there are things that are—without question and for everyone—Wrong. If this is so, then virtue, we will have to say, flourishes in the realm of the not so easily decided. And I would wager that for most of us this is a fairly common understanding of the term. Very few of us, I suspect, find the refusal to kill another human being virtuous. If the decision to not kill is virtuous, then the impulse to kill—in almost every encounter—must be appealing to us, in some measure, as a possibility, as something that could be enjoyed, understood by myself and by others as acceptable even though I now find myself resisting the impulse. And if acceptable, it is merely less than absolutely right; if unacceptable, it is absolutely wrong.

Aristotle made a list of acts and emotional states that he considered simply wrong, that admit of neither appeal nor complication. One would expect virtue, by contrast, to be equally determined. And yet for Aristotle, virtue is not a necessary condition, as are the behaviors defined as wrong. Virtue is contingent, even though virtue of character once achieved will come to appear and behave as a necessary state and will do so by way of the work of moderation that everyone who moves from virtue in thought to virtue in character inevitably embraces in the process of habituation, which involves finding a state of moderation—a mean between excess and self-mortification. Aristotle’s list, then, includes only those acts and affects that admit of no mean.

For the names of some automatically include baseness—for instance, spite, shamelessness, envy, and adultery, theft, murder, among actions. For all of these and similar things are called by these names because they themselves, not their excesses or deficiencies, are base. Hence in doing these things we can never be correct, but must invariably be in error. We cannot do them well or not well—by committing adultery, for instance, with the right woman at the right time in the right way. On the contrary, it is true without qualification that to do any of them is to be in error.⁴

If doing a base thing—even if we do it with great style, as Aristotle perhaps accidentally suggests that we can (the right woman at the right time in the right way)—is true error without qualification, then we are left with an odd problem. By definition, being correct is not the same thing as being virtuous, since having the character of virtue entails habituating ourselves to a mean somewhere between excessive vice and total self-mortification. If our participation in one of the base activities described by Aristotle were understood in relation to virtue then we would be able cheat just a little bit (more than a glance, less than an orgy) so long as we don't berate ourselves for it too strongly. But for Aristotle, such actions and affects do not admit of variation or a mean. And yet, one would assume that doing any of these things or experiencing any of these emotions—murder, adultery, envy, shamelessness—would produce absolute regret; the clear instance. But this is not the case for Aristotle, since virtue is always a practice of moderation and the establishment of a mean. Regret, then, can only follow something related to virtue, which is not a necessary condition. What this means is that regret cannot follow from something Wrong, from a failure to remain on the right side of an absolute. Regret, for Aristotle, only follows from a failure to achieve moderation, which is understood to be a virtuous, if habituated, act.

This leads me to wonder about the relation between virtue and virtuosity. The virtuoso has special skills, is in possession of more than mere mastery. The virtuosic performer, even though he is more than mere master of the medium in which he works, nevertheless excels within the realm of technique. Virtuosity is an achievement of the possible, since the possible is determined by the outer limits of a medium or a technical form that was theretofore unforeseen even if always present as an option and rarely achievable even once the conditions of possibility are exposed in the moment of virtuosic performance.⁵ To be virtuous, in the Aristotelian sense, is to hold back; it is to do less than the virtuoso and more than the sloth. And yet, one finds in Aristotle's list of the absolutely wrong—and thus the-always-outside-of-virtue—an experience of virtuosity: the right woman at the right time in the right way. Perhaps we will have to say, following Aristotle, that virtuosity thrives in the realm of the wrong. One can do something with great aplomb—better than others before you, even though the options you see, the loopholes you find, have always been seeable—and simply be wrong.

Consider, for instance, the example of Herman Cain, aspirant to the Republican presidential candidacy for the 2012 election, who has been accused of carrying on a thirteen-year long affair (a virtuosic act that exceeded its limits) with a woman in Georgia—Ginger White—who has said of the affair: “It wasn't complicated. I was aware that he was married. And I was also aware I was involved in a very inappropriate situation, relationship.”⁶ In other words, she was aware that what she was doing was wrong. But if wrong, then she could—at least in Aristotle's terms—experience no regret. For Cain, by contrast, regret will not necessarily follow from the affair itself, but from its exposure, which forces those signs to be understood outside of the context that made them possible as wrong and thus beyond, or perhaps it is better to say *before*, regret. The question for Cain is not whether what he did was wrong, but how the exposure of that wrong is to be understood in relation to his

character. Now that the signs have migrated and have no necessary and animating limit, can he move from virtue of thought (from a recognition of the mean to be reached) to virtue of character, where that mean will become habituated as virtue? To do so is no simple task, since what such a move requires is the establishment of a mean constituted by non-necessary states and contingent signs; one has to move from a virtuosic performance in the realm of the all-too-knowable (because wrong) to a realm beyond the possible. Regret, then, will follow from the management (and thus from the possible mismanagement) of signs—both what I display to others and what I see in the faces and discourses of others, knowing all the while that those signs are, in no sense, grounded, even if sense is what we rightly seek in them.

But before we go further into the question of the display of signs, we should know what it is that actually constitutes virtue for Aristotle. Which actions and affects, in other words, admit of a mean, precisely because they are not absolute? Aristotle suggests a few, all of which are identified by the two related, yet opposed actions or affects, all of which demand an experience of moderation that define virtue in each case: pleasure and pain (interestingly, to be completely incapable of pleasure, according to Aristotle, is to be insensible—that is, incapable of sense), generosity and ungenerosity (where money is concerned), honor and dishonor.⁷ Where anger is considered, Aristotle makes a distinction between an irascible and an inirascible person. And where truth is concerned, we are meant to locate ourselves between self-deprecation and boastfulness:

In truth-telling, then, let us call the intermediate person truthful, and the mean truthfulness; pretense that overstates will be boastfulness, and the person who has it boastful; pretense that understates will be self-deprecation, and the person who has it self-deprecating.⁸

One way of reading this proposal is to suggest that truth is always present, with or without the achievement of virtue. Seen thus, to be boastful is to obscure what nevertheless remains there amidst the excess in any claim that may obscure it, however partially. Self-deprecation, by contrast, minimizes a truth that should be more properly exposed. Yet, since virtue is only ever a question of our response to non-necessary actions and affects, we are left, potentially, with a much more interesting prospect: namely, the idea that truthfulness does not exist outside of the experience of a mean, which will in any case be very difficult to agree upon. How will we find a mean if the set, by which any mean can be derived, is itself not entirely closed or even closeable? We could, of course, imagine a contingent totality that makes signification possible, but how would one begin to quantify—even if only for the sake of a contingent formation—the distance between boastfulness and self-deprecation? What would a three mean?

The subject trends in the direction of self-loathing but does so with an eye toward truthfulness.

Would a seven, in turn, imply a tendency to boast but with the appearance of an at least slight inclination toward truthfulness? We are already doing more than numbers must when we begin to describe things this way.

Are Non-voluntary Relations Possible?

Aristotle's solution to the problem was not to introduce the problem of data within a system of measurement, as I have—i.e., the idea that what we need to measure is immeasurable because

ungrounded—but to introduce a distinction between non-voluntary and involuntary relations, as it regards the achievement of virtue, or the experience of regret that follows from our inability to realize the mean. That is, what concerns Aristotle at this juncture is the status of ignorance with respect to the will. How, in other words, can we deem an action to be lacking in virtue if the agent does not understand what is at stake?

Everything caused by ignorance is nonvoluntary, but what is involuntary also causes pain and regret. For if someone's action was caused by ignorance, but he now has no objection to the action, he has done it neither willingly, since he did not know what it was, nor unwillingly, since he now feels no pain. Hence, among those who act because of ignorance, the agent who now regrets his action seems to be unwilling, but the agent with no regrets may be called nonwilling, since he is another case—for since he is different, it is better if he has his own special name.⁹

“His own special name,” it should be said, is ignorance. If, in Aristotle's terms, I feel no regret about a particular action, then that action cannot be linked to a knowing use of my will. Whatever it is that I did I did without the knowledge or information that I would have needed in order to intend to do whatever it is that I did. Thus, whatever occurred was going to occur with or without my knowing, even if I exercise some degree of agency—if, that is, agency can be separated from will. By contrast, if I now experience regret, at least in Aristotle's terms, I do so because I am aware that in the face of what occurred I was unwilling. If I was unwilling, then I was not in total ignorance of the possible causes of what occurred, nor was I ignorant of possible responses, each of which might blunt the cause of the event that now has me in a state of regret. An involuntary action is a failure of virtue precisely because I refuse to exercise my will toward the achievement of a mean. If I saw that it was possible—and indeed preferable—to do otherwise and nevertheless refused to act, then I am likely to experience regret, and surely regret, in this instance, will have the salutary effect of making me more careful in the face of signs and decisions to come.

Likewise, Aristotle's distinction between non-voluntary and involuntary relations makes clear that regret is only possible in a situation where we are capable expressing our will, which we can only do if we are not in ignorance; that is, if we have before us information—signs that indicate possible causes and that can be described as possible because they are not necessary. These signs can be made to be otherwise if we see them as such and then redirect them. A non-voluntary action, by contrast, implies that we could not have seen what was going to occur. In such cases, we might be sad about what has occurred, but our sadness can only imply sympathy or empathy, since regret implies a refusal of the will that now merits blame.

But what if, in a non-voluntary relation, the signs that comprise causes and events—which either bring us to grief (whether in sympathy or empathy) or leave us indifferent (as Aristotle supposed)—are merely concealed from us? For one, we might be better able to see that non-voluntary relations occur more rarely than we suppose—especially if we assume, as Aristotle did, that regret follows from our interaction with others rather than objects; or, at the very least, non-sentient matter. If a volcano erupts and burns my house to the ground, I may feel devastated, but should I feel regret? The volcano is like Aristotle's stone: it will do what it does no matter how hard we try to redirect it. I can't regret the volcano, merely my decision to live near it. I might regret believing the realtor, who, eager to sell me the house, was all too willing to show me signs of confidence about the impossibility of an eruption. He might even have shown me data, produced evidence that it had been centuries since an eruption had last occurred, sensing all the while my eagerness to live with

everything else that exists there: the trees, a view of the sea, my fantasies of solitude—whatever else I have revealed about myself in the hopes of becoming this other self that now seems only one more object away. Nevertheless, it was possible to see otherwise; there was other information to consider.

Of course, what I am describing here is more than a broken fantasy of real estate and self-hood. It is, more and less plainly, the logic of bureaucracy, which involves a use of the will in an action that may very well affect us, but will come to us—however erroneously—as a non-voluntary relation, since the signs that matter and the signs that can be otherwise have been concealed from me. We act in ignorance. We are nonwilling even though we make a choice. The bureaucrat, as we know, is always at least one step ahead of what he shows. The bureaucrat regularly displays signs and asks for our engagement with those signs in the interest of secreting the ones that really matter; the signs that must remain unseen, despite their potential to be seen.¹⁰ If a bureaucracy is to succeed, we will have to believe in the relative ubiquity of non-voluntary relations, which should compel us to refer our involuntary relations—and thus our regret—to the signs that now sit before us. This is a regular experience of bureaucracy: we work on something that we nevertheless already seem to regret. We know that what we are doing is already too late to be of any use and we do it anyway. If we are truly in the grip of bureaucracy, we will always be working on something that has long been finished, and the labor we offer will, in nearly every case, result in the formation of a compromise—of a mean that will sit between our demand and what the bureaucrat wants—but will do so strictly for the appearance of a compromise that might once have seemed useful, but was never, as it turns out, actually in the offing. And so long as we continue to work on what we also know to be too late to be of use, the bureaucrat will retain the space of anonymity he needs precisely in order to go on creating events that we will come to know—and largely in an effort to retain the appearance of self-respect—in and as a non-voluntary relation. He can remain silent even if he speaks, since what he will speak about is either already over, or never mattered, save for the preservation of silence elsewhere that speaking here—speaking now about these things that really do not matter—will effect.

This is the problem of describing a relation as non-voluntary. Despite the fact that Aristotle makes the distinction between non-voluntary and involuntary relations in the pursuit of virtue—and thus in the realm of contingency rather than necessity—the non-voluntary relation takes on the appearance of a necessary state, much like the stone that will fall to the ground no matter how often we try to habituate it to upward movements. But it is only an appearance, and while it may not be possible to habituate a stone, the stone—or any object that will not be habituated—still contributes, in important ways, to being. In this way, I am in full agreement with Bishnupriya Ghosh's critique, in "Governing by Wrong," of the tendency within human rights discourse to attribute wrongs only to actions done to human beings, which supposes—she argues—that what happens to objects never bears any relation to human life, which is itself a major ontological error. If maintained, human rights discourses will do little to redress the wrongs done to human beings who cannot but be affected by the objects that constitute being in often poisonous ways and that remain unobstructed precisely because they are thought to be without rights because they are inanimate.¹¹ My example of the volcano suggests one way of understanding the problem. If objects contribute to the constitution of being—and there is no reason, in my view, to say otherwise, especially in the context of a theory of regret that bears a relation to virtue, which is, as we've seen, a non-necessary state—then the idea of a non-voluntary relation will be altogether appealing to both the one that wishes to deceive, and the one that is all too eager to not know. If my house burns down, I shall only be able to blame the Cosmos. I shall be able to hold no one responsible and also, by definition, I will feel no regret. If I were capable of feeling regret, I might be made more alert to future alternatives, even as I

find myself in steady pursuit of a particular object or place and a particular understanding of that object or place. The absence of regret in the face of a supposed non-voluntary relation can only, in this sense, fortify a perceptual habit that prevents me from seeing ahead of, or behind, what appears, which is what I shall need to be able to do if I am going to make good—nay, *any*—use of my will in relation to this or that bureaucratic form. I need to be able to see with, and then ahead of, the bureaucrat. I need to stop thinking that the bureaucrat is as vulgar as the task that he sets before us if I am going to be able to expose and bring an end to his infamy.

It must be said that while the bureaucrat traffics in ignorance, he is in no sense stupid. He may very well procure our ignorance by arranging signs in a manner that demands that we act—that we do something—but in a manner that will come to be understood as an instance of non-willing. And as I have already suggested, we will be all too happy to see it this way, since we take it for granted that the bureaucrat does not have our best interest in mind, and since we are also incapable of seeing ahead of him. There will be no regret and no change. To be ignorant, which is what we are meant to be in the face of what the bureaucrat displays, is to be missing information, to be in want of knowledge. To be stupid, by contrast, is to be incapable of acquiring that knowledge. If we are in want of knowledge, we may very well be capable of it. Stupidity, for our purposes here, refers to one of two possible states, neither of which is essential. In the first sense, stupidity is an inability to hold together in thought incommensurables, whether such states indicate incommensurable demands or seemingly incommensurable phenomena. In the second case—which is not unrelated to the first—stupidity merely indicates whatever it is that I do not understand and feel shame for not knowing, whether or not that shame is reasonable. All that matters, in this case, is that I have perceived some aspect of my own stupidity, gone silent at the moment in which that gap reveals itself; stood behind that silence as polite disagreement, even if I perform the mute signs of having been irretrievably wronged. This is what bureaucrat asks of us: that we hide our stupidity, leave it concealed by the non-voluntary relation he has produced for us. This is why the bureaucrat can bear the complaints about his own stupidity, knowing as he surely does, that our complaints do nothing less than register our own, so long as we remain incapable of recognizing the oblique relations that are in no sense non-voluntary, and thus are in every instance a possible source of regret. Regret is, as we all know, the risk of engagement, but the risk is less than we regularly suppose, since regret itself only occurs in the realm of contingency and never necessity.

Thinking Ahead, Doing Otherwise

If I am lingering on the logic of bureaucracy, it is because this is the realm—it seems to me—where a conception of regret is both most possible, useful, and also the most challenging, especially since the bureaucrat is lacking in virtue. That is, he cannot think in terms of, nor can he feature in honesty, a mean. Moreover, if the bureaucrat regularly shows us signs and causes—signs set forth as causes—that are to be understood in terms of non-voluntary relation, then regret is simply not possible. In this sense, I'm sympathetic to Aristotle's distinction between non-voluntary and involuntary relations insofar as regret emerges in the recognition of our own involuntary response. However, we will need to be able to recognize that a non-voluntary relation is more likely an involuntary one. Many so-called non-voluntary relations can be exposed as dissimulations, if we are capable of breaking with the perceptual habits bequeathed to us by the recurrent signs willed by one with an intention to deceive, or that remain with us in ignorance—and thus as something that we cannot help—rather than as evidence of our own stupidity, which we should be capable of correcting.

Regret, I think we can now say, comes by way of the recognition that we have misused our will, that we acted in accordance with signs that were only an instance of dissimulation. Regret is thus what prevents us from either apathy or nihilism. If we feel regret, it means that we can recognize the difference between a non-voluntary relation and an involuntary one. We can see that the involuntary relation is often nested in the appearance of a non-voluntary relation. And if we can see this, then what we can see in any instance is the potential to do otherwise, which will depend on our ability to perceive oblique and spontaneous relations. It is, for this reason, not redundant to say that if we become less stupid—if that is, we become more capable of the oblique relation—we will be held less often in ignorance. What this requires is that we learn to anticipate without precedent, and precisely because the bureaucrat is himself someone who is skilled in thinking obliquely, in a discontinuous relation to what appears. Thus, if regret is related to virtue, virtue should no longer be understood as the achievement of a mean, since acting virtuously in the face of bureaucracy implies that our thoughts and our actions are to be severed from habit. And it is possible to do this since the habits of perception that precede a virtuous act owe their occurrence to the contingency of signs in being.

In this sense, regret should be distinguished from *akrasia*, which was of paramount importance to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and describes our capacity to make decisions that run counter to what we normally think of as best. As Amelie Rorty—a very influential theorist of *akrasia*—has put it: “A person believes akratically when he believes that *p*, being implicitly aware that *p* conflicts with the preponderance of serious evidence or with a range of principles to which he is committed.”¹² *Akrasia*, then, defines a use of the will, but toward an end that is other than what we might otherwise believe to be good—much like when we carry on with the task set before us by the bureaucrat, even though we curse him for setting before us something we know to be of no use. But it does not indicate a weakness of will. Just the opposite:

Akrasia is a disease that only the strong can suffer. To be capable of it, a person must not only be able to note his failures, but also be capable of voluntary intervention in his thought patterns, directing attention and inferences by the principle to which they commit themselves.¹³

It is tempting to see in Rorty’s suggestion that akratic thought—and the action that follows from it—involves an ability to intervene in one’s own thought patterns an experience similar the one that I am describing in terms of regret. Regret emerges in the recognition that a non-voluntary relation is better understood as involuntary, such that I will now be better prepared to perceive oblique relations that cannot be predicted. And *akrasia* does indeed imply a strong will and an ability to think otherwise. But in such moments, we do what we do expressly to act in a non-virtuous manner. Likewise, for Rorty, akratic thought can lead to melancholia, our ability to persist in a state of mind, or world-view, that runs counter to our principles.¹⁴ In this sense, regret is small change to the melancholic who can see the alternative but refuses, for some reason, to release his will from an akratic thought, even though he should be capable of doing so. Moreover, since, in an akratic state, our thought and our will is directed expressly against a set of principles that constitute virtue as a habit of perception, the deviation from those principles will always be recognizable by way of those principles. Or as Rorty puts it, the very “conditions of *akrasia* assure the possibility of its reform.”¹⁵ And reform is, for Rorty—just as it was for Aristotle—the goal. But it need not be. We would be better served by the idea that thinking is what happens after or without respect to habituated perception, even if that implies that the actions we regard as lacking in virtue are owed to the very same capacity for thinking otherwise. An akratic thought/action merely mirrors, in inverse proportion, the moral logic of virtue and its habits. An akratic thought—or what appears to us as an

akratic thought—might go further than the proportionally inverse limits of virtue allow, but if our perception remains grounded in habit then we will not be capable of seeing what exceeds that limit.

Likewise, it could be argued that regret follows from a weakness of the will, which shares certain, but not all, of the characteristics of *akrasia*, and does to some extent explain our inability to see that what the bureaucrat displays for us as a non-voluntary relation might very well be the dawning of a recognition that what we have experienced, instead, is an involuntary one. In “Intention and Weakness of Will,” Richard Holton defines weakness of will in a manner that distinguishes it from *akrasia*: “...central cases of weakness of will are best characterized not as cases in which people act against their better judgment, but as cases in which they fail to act on their intentions.”¹⁶ To draw the distinction, Holton cites a passage from Kingsley Amis’s novel *Lucky Jim*—the moment in which Dixon, an untenured junior colleague, wakes up after a night of drinking in the home of his head of department, Professor Welch, only to find that he has cigarette burns all over his bed clothes. Holton cites the following passage from the novel:

Had he done all this himself? Or had a wayfarer, a burglar, camped out in his room? Or was he the victim of some Horla fond of tobacco? He thought that on the whole he must have done it himself, and wished he hadn’t. Surely this would mean the loss of his job, especially if he failed to go to Mrs. Welch and confess what he’d done, and he knew already that he wouldn’t be able to do that.¹⁷

For Holton, this is not a case of weakness of will precisely because Dixon never intends to confess what he’s done. As Holton explains, “It is because he knows that he is someone with a tendency to weakness of will that he acts as he does. So, on the account given here, his weakness of will explains his action (or rather his inaction).”¹⁸ If his weakness of will explains his action, Holton’s account goes, then he does not act against what he otherwise intends, since he has no intention to be truthful. His action is weak, but since he knows that he’s weak willed, he does not actually break with an intention to be honest. If, however, Dixon had vowed the day before never to drink again, then the next morning would be proof of weakness of will, since his actions ran counter to his intentions. He would have proven himself too weak in will to remain sober, to see his intention through to the end. Likewise, in Holton’s account, this episode could not qualify as *akrasia* since he does not willingly act against his better judgment. As Dixon sees it, it would be bad to confess this to his boss’s wife, so he doesn’t.

The trouble here is that weakness of will cannot account for the specificity of Dixon’s thought—the range of possible signs, possible events—which await him on the other side of decision. It is too simple to describe him as weak willed. It would be better to say that what Dixon is up to is trying to think ahead of the bureaucrat. The situation cannot be defined by reason. He has to think politically. He needs to anticipate the possible ways of being read, and by the very one who has indulged *with* him in a night of heavy drinking—which involves, let’s be honest, the loosening of signs in the moment of intoxication and in memory. The choice, in other words, is not so simple. Nor is it a matter of virtue. There is no mean. Signs float and show multiple aspects at once. Perhaps Welch wanted to know if his young colleague was a good drinker and *thus* worthy of promotion. Perhaps he is a reader of Maupassant and would welcome the very idea of “some Horla” with a taste for tobacco. None of this is rational, but a “proper” use of the will cannot be restricted to reason, to the pursuit of truth as a stable set of signs that can be seen in just one way. What if Dixon gives away the wrong sign? That is, what if he shows too much? What if his head of department actually loathes

Maupassant and is searching for a sign of Dixon's own irrationality? His imbecility? Sometimes we speak too soon; sometimes we show the wrong thing.

Time to Speak

If I have avoided, up to this point, naming what likely seems to be obvious to you—that regret is problem of decision—it is because decision is most often understood, in political terms, as problem of time, of knowing when to speak; of the instant. This is surely Dixon's problem. Not just *what*, but *when*, knowing all the while that one can wait too long. And to wait too long is to have things decided for you. Jacques Derrida and Alexander García Düttmann have confronted this problem, each in their way, most forcefully and directly.¹⁹ García Düttmann's theory of decision—and it is not always marked explicitly as a question of decision, so much as a problem of thought—is increasingly less haunted by doubt than was Derrida's late reflections on the problem. This has, it seems to me, everything to do with the ways in which the fate of intellectual life itself is increasingly threatened in the university—where administrators now regularly speak about being practical while making the most irrational and impractical decisions. What could be more bleak than deciding against theory, thinking of theory—thinking of thinking—as impractical? If we are being practical, as teachers, then we are informing our students how to prepare themselves to do a job. But there are no jobs. And if there are, then what are we preparing them for if not merely for doing what has already been done, which no longer even exists. Gone are the days of a pyramidal bureaucracy, in which one understood precisely what it took to move upward; when one knew or was better able to perceive where, or even what, power was. How can we feel good about that, given the state of what currently exists, given what passes for doing? Theory is practice. To be capable of it—to have a theory—is to imagine something better than what appears, and precisely on the basis of what appears. Thinking practically is akin to habituating oneself to a mean. Preparing oneself for it.

Such, it seems to me, are the stakes of García Düttmann's recent essay "Euphemism, the university, and disobedience," in which García Düttmann offers an urgent plea for speaking well, which also means speaking urgently, in the face of the euphemistic speech of the contemporary university. Following Benveniste, García Düttmann defines euphemism as speech that bodes well, in a manner of "saying something with the intention not to say it."²⁰ It happens, for instance, when we refer to Cloud® technology as something that will preserve our personal data—our photos, our files, our music—when really what Cloud® does is to take our information away; to privatize what once belonged to us on the promise of preservation. What I give will remain, but no longer as mine. I know this and I do it anyway. "Cloud" sounds nice—angelic, fluffy, white—but does something horribly wrong. I quote García Düttmann at length:

That euphemism is the linguistic condition of contemporary society means that those who live in this condition know about the reality of their lives without actually confronting it; deception and belief in some magical power merge in euphemistic speech, and the ability to deceive oneself and others collapses into self-deception as fate. When speaking, writing and thinking, euphemists actively contribute to the suppression of their awareness, and are therefore aware of what they try to conjure away, as well as of the repelling conjuration itself. They produce an ambiguity in which they install themselves. Using a euphemism always signals a resistance that stems from a fundamental acceptance.²¹

If euphemism signals resistance that is also an acceptance, then we would have to say that euphemism is the language of the one that suffers from a bureaucracy, but does so without regret,

since the euphemism is what allows us to remain oblivious to what we should know all too well. It allows us to remain in ignorance, just as we do when we willingly entertain a dissimulation that appears to us, even though we should and probably do know otherwise, as a non-voluntary relation. García Düttmann's theory of euphemism explains, as I see it, the very way in which we might mistake an involuntary relation for a non-voluntary one, especially since euphemisms—as García Düttmann conceives of them—provide us with a reason to suspend our will even when things go badly, and do so in optimistic tones. *Well, computers are made to become obsolete so I better give Cloud® all of my data, where it least it will be safe even if it no longer stays with me as apart of something that I own.*

García Düttmann's target, here, is the conditioned university, which is, I would add, an oblique bureaucracy: "A university forced to entrust itself largely or entirely to the market is a university based on acceptance, hostile in principle to criticism and to the new, unless criticism and the new can be transformed into commodities and thereby appeal to potential clients, patrons, sponsors."²² "Euphemism," García Düttmann continues, "as the exploitation of acceptance in language is the linguistic condition of such an institution."²³ The "achievements" of the conditioned university so described by García Düttmann depend on the dissimulations of the bureaucrat. Such dissimulations could not occur in an unconditional university, since "...in the unconditional university there can be no euphemism because the idea is not separated from reality by a gap."²⁴ The reason for this, as García Düttmann speaks of it—citing Derrida's notion of the unconditional university—is that the university without condition is a place where "everything can be said"...and yet there would be 'no fundamental right to say everything.'²⁵ What this implies is that the university should be a place where anything can be said, which is what makes the university unconditional, so long as what is said is worth saying. The unconditional character of the university does not imply, as García Düttmann's reading of Derrida suggests, an unchecked pluralism of ideas. Rather, one needs the unconditional character of the university in order to think well—to discover new ideas, new ways of saying and doing—which also requires judgment, precision, and urgency. Our ideas must stand up under scrutiny, and we should be expected to scrutinize the ideas of others right away. This is, as García Düttmann suggests, what euphemistic speech seeks to prevent. However, it is also what should prevent the proliferation of euphemistic speech, which is why speaking well—openly, precisely, and *in the instant*—is a matter of civil disobedience, which is understood as the "resistance to reification."²⁶ Or as García Düttmann puts it:

If disobedience is therefore also the only manner of resisting euphemism, academics and administrators should start calling things by their names. This practice would activate the resistance inherent in all acceptance and direct it against the restrictive fiction of euphemism, against the distancing that both disguises and shows itself, though never so as to make something visible but always so as to make something acceptable.²⁷

If we are to call something by its name, presumably, we are closing the gap that euphemism opens up between an idea and reality. But what does it mean for us to speak directly? To call something by its name?

If we must call things by their names, are we no longer in the realm of metaphor, which always operates at some level of figurative remove? In one sense, we might say that euphemism is a particularly pernicious form of metaphor; pernicious insofar as the figurative use of language is intended to provide a deceptive distance between the word and the material thing to which it refers. Or, to put it slightly differently, the material character of the metaphor—cloud as white, heavenly,

and barely material—refers to the material conditions of a cloud, but the meaning of that metaphor relates to something that bears no logical relation to what is actually happening: Cloud®, in actuality, is a mode of appropriation. A real cloud is incapable of appropriation. It holds nothing it won't release. Following García Düttmann's logic—the idea that calling things by their names will activate the resistance in all acceptance—we can see how insisting on the problem of Cloud©'s misuse of the material characteristics of an actual cloud in the production of metaphor will point to the deception inherent in the rhetorical positioning of appropriation as preservation. As I see it, what García Düttmann demands is that we speak directly to the rhetorical problem inherent in the invocation of the cloud as a euphemism for privatization. But in so doing, have we actually called things by their name? We need the figurative potential of a cloud—as that potential is understood with respect to the material properties of the object that both gives rise to, and is described by, the metaphor—if we are to describe the thing itself, which will be, in this case, a non-thing: the gap between the idea and reality.

For one, we can and should continue to invoke the illogical character of euphemism on the basis of the ways in which the figurative association departs from the material character of the object that it invokes, and is invoked by. This is especially important since bureaucracies regularly change their names. Consider the recent and now numerous name changes made by the private military contractor once known as Blackwater, then Xe, and now—most chillingly, most euphemistically—Academi. Academi's CEO, Ted Wright, described the name change as an effort to describe it as “an institution of trained thinkers and warriors.”²⁸ Learned *and* practical: erected in the image of the conditional university itself. We can and should protest Academi and all that the euphemism does, and what it suggests about the synchronization of its discourse with the “practical” imperatives of the university. Calling a thing by its name, in this instance, is an important act of exposure. However, what is exposed is not a thing, but an operation that covers over what we might describe as *the* thing.

In this sense, we might wonder if the exposure that follows from calling things by their name will prevent the next occurrence. Might I come to regret the time that I have spent exposing this particular euphemism—even if I speak in the instant—knowing that the euphemism put into play here may very well be the predicate of another dissimulation in the making? What would lead us to believe that another name—another euphemism—isn't being made possible by our attention to this one, obvious as it is in all of its horror, its overt disgrace? The name encourages us to see these two institutions—the university and the now privatized industrial military complex—as continuous, as related entities. And it is hard not to imagine the status of professors as akin to the trained and now famously reviled contract killers in such a comparison. We are figured in the relation drawn between Academy and Academi *as*—in terms of—the murderous and un-checked Blackwater mercenaries in Iraq. Who wouldn't want to get rid of us?

For this reason, we should be willing to call something by its name, so long as we also retain a belief in the metaphoric character of any name, so long as we insist—as I believe we must—on the material limitations that give rise to metaphors in the first place. In this sense, when call something by its name, we remain aware of the possible gap that gives rise to euphemism and also of the contingency of the signs that we relate to the object before us, or elsewhere; that is, if we retain our respect for the contingency of the thing, which is not to be confused with the thing-in-itself.

This is a problem for García Düttmann's argument, as I see it, only insofar as the urgency of speaking well and speaking directly—of calling a thing by its name as quickly as possible—forecloses the productive possibility that inheres in the experience of regret, at least as I am describing it

here—which is to say, as the recognition that what we have understood as a non-voluntary relation was really an involuntary one. Interestingly, for García Düttmann, regret serves the temporal dimension of euphemism:

The time of procedure, of method and lobbying, of hesitation, regret and petitioning, of opposition ‘in opinion’, is a kind of euphemism that dissimulates the necessity and also the risk of such urgency, of an urgency that is the very manifestation of thinking and doing something.²⁹

García Düttmann is, here, in obvious sympathy with Carl Schmitt’s critique of opinion as dissimulation in the workings of the liberal democratic state—with the idea that the ceaseless gathering of opinion merely covers over a decision that is being made elsewhere. Here, regret merely facilitates bureaucracy and a totalitarian logic of exception. But I would suggest that this not actually an instance of genuine regret so much as it is merely a pretense for talking more, for considering options that are never meant to be chosen in the first place. Seen thus, regret does no more for us than our refusal to recognize a non-voluntary relation for the involuntary relation that it truly is. If our ruminations—which we wrongly refer to as regret—prevent us from taking an action that we otherwise believe to be the correct action, then we are not experiencing regret at all. More likely, it is something like an akratic thought that leads to melancholia, or else unbound caprice. Genuine regret is future oriented and is not based on the simple reversal of our action in an identical situation. If regret follows from the recognition that we have misperceived an involuntary relation as a non-voluntary one, then what regret gives to us is both a measure of skepticism about what appears and the knowledge that what appears may be what is already over. What we are looking for can only be found in a more oblique relation to what appears.

Thus, I would be inclined to suggest, pace García Düttmann, that the problem is better described not as a distinction between appearance and acceptance, but as a scenario in which appearance *is* acceptance, even if the acceptance in appearance is assumed for the purpose of dissent. This is why we cannot be perspicuous in regret. To count in a meaningful way, to establish a mean, would depend on a belief that the context of our action—or future action—will remain the same. We should call a thing by its name, and as quickly as possible, knowing that we might soon regret it. In more worrisome terms, what this means is that we may call a thing by its name, and be right about what appears, but what appears might simply be what has passed. The bureaucrat, in other words, may already be elsewhere and noticing how far behind his thought—and how far behind his place—we are. Imagine, for instance, that Dixon decides on the Horla excuse and finds that his boss hates Maupassant and won’t tolerate such imbecilities, even if he’s the one that produced the cigarette burns. In this sense, it is not just a question of knowing when to speak; it is also about knowing which signs—which aspect of the sign that appears—matter, and also how much to show of what we actually perceive. More productively, if we speak too soon, and what we feel is regret, we are nevertheless not wrong, since to be wrong implies something necessary and constant and thus well outside of the domain of our perceptual habits and the actions that follow from those habits. As such, the tinge of regret we feel is an opening; it is the way in which we can begin to perceive our own ignorance. And if we can now perceive our ignorance, then we are no longer stupid. If we are no longer stupid, then we are now capable of perceiving oblique relations and holding together in thought incommensurable relations.

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Notes

¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Second Edition, Trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 18.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ In this sense, I would suggest that the solution to virtuosity itself, insofar as virtuosity can only ever remain within the limits of a medium or a technical form, is what Alexander García Düttmann has described as “aesthetic seriousness,” which occurs at the moment in which intention breaks off at the limits of possibility. See Alexander García Düttmann, *Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Quoted in Susan Saulny, “Woman Claims Affair with Cain, and He Denies It,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2011, A19.

⁷ Ibid., 26.

⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰ For a more developed discussion of the visual logic of bureaucracy, especially as it complicates more traditional bureaucratic forms, see my essay, “Bureaucracy and Visual Style,” in *Companion to Michael Haneke*, ed. Roy Grundmann (London: Blackwell, 2010), 301-320.

¹¹ Bishnupriya Ghosh, “Governing by Wrong,” *World Picture 6* (Winter 2011): www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_6/Ghosh.html

¹² Amelie Rorty, “Akratic Believers,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (April 1983): 175.

¹³ Ibid., 176.

¹⁴ Ibid., 177.

¹⁵ Ibid., 183.

¹⁶ Richard Holton, “Intention and Weakness of Will,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 96, No. 5 (May 1999), 241.

¹⁷ Quoted in Holton, 258.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ An especially useful source for Derrida on the question of decision (though the question lingers over nearly everything he wrote) is *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). For García Düttmann, see his *Philosophy of Exaggeration*, trans. James Phillips (New York: Continuum, 2007).

²⁰ Alexander García Düttmann, “Euphemism, the university, and disobedience,” *Radical Philosophy* 169 (September/October 2011), 43.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 46.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 46.

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸Wright is Quoted in Spencer Ackerman, “Blackwater 3.0: Rebranded ‘Academi’ Wants Back in Iraq,” *Wired*, www.wired.com/dangerroom/2011/12/blackwater-rebrand-academi. Accessed on December 14, 2011.

²⁹ García Düttmann, “Euphemism, the university, and disobedience,” 46.