

The Puzzle of Regretted Parenthood

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A friend of mine whom I'll call "Barry" has a four-year-old son, Seth. Barry treasures Seth and loves him very much. But their family circumstances are pretty bad, and Seth is having a very rough childhood. At the time Seth was conceived, Barry had had no reason to suppose that the circumstances would turn out as they have, but: There has since been a very nasty divorce; there are protracted custody disputes, geographical dislocations, and severe financial difficulties; the boy has fairly serious health problems that are exacerbated by the others; and more. As it's turned out, it was not good for Barry to have fathered a child at that time, and Barry regrets that he did so. Knowing what he knows now, he would not do it again. In fact, he fervently wishes he had not brought Seth into the world.

The scenario I have described is not only possible but actual. Nor (so far as I am in a position to judge) have I exaggerated the facts for effect. Barry loves Seth without qualification and wholeheartedly wants the best for him; yet Barry quite sincerely wishes that Seth had never been born.

Is this combination of attitudes irrational on Barry's part? No; at least, not obviously. His love for Seth is entirely normal and healthy and based on no sort of error or cognitive shortcoming. Yet his regret and his counterfactual wish are themselves based on excellent reasons; had the relevant facts been known at the time to Barry and his now ex-wife, they would have been utterly compelling, and the couple would firmly have decided against parenthood.

But something is wrong. What is it, if not irrationality? There is an apparent contradiction, or at least an impossibility. Barry loves Seth and wants the best for him. Any possible world compatible with Barry's desires would be one in which Seth is thriving. Yet any world compatible with Barry's sincere and heartfelt wishes is one in which Seth does not exist. So there is no possible world in which everything is as Barry would have it. Given his conative condition, Barry is metaphysically doomed to some measure of dissatisfaction. –And on Seth's behalf in particular: It's not so much that Barry himself would be better off had Seth never existed, as that it would in some difficult sense have been better *for Seth*.

A first potential way out: Of course, merely metaphysical impossibility does not eo ipso convict a subject of irrationality. Utterson believes that Jekyll is a respectable man of probity; he also believes that Hyde is a deformed monster and far from respectable. Hyde and Jekyll being one and the same person, Utterson's beliefs are true in no metaphysically possible world. Yet Utterson is being in no way irrational; he has strong evidence for each of his two beliefs, and, more to the point, he has no way of knowing that Hyde and Jekyll are one; the identity being a posteriori, he has no way of deriving a contradiction from his beliefs.

But such an exoneration does not apply to Barry. Barry can derive the contradiction; it relies on nothing a posteriori. He knows perfectly well as a matter of logic that if he had not fathered Seth, Seth would not now exist and could not go on to thrive. Yet, still without irrationality, Barry still both wishes that Seth had not existed and wholeheartedly wants him to be well and happy.

Moreover, though he is not a philosopher, Barry feels the tension and finds it troublesome. He knows that wishing Seth had never been born is not tantamount to wishing that Seth would die or that he were dead. He also knows that “Had I to do it over again, I would not have...” does not entail “If I now had the ability to travel back in time, I would undo....” And I think he agrees that he is not being irrational, at least not in the way I would be irrational if I wanted all the marbles to be in the box but one marble to be left out, but there is something cognitively unsatisfactory about his overall conative state with respect to Seth.

A second potential way: The argument assumes a tenet of Kripkean essentialism, that had Seth not been fathered by Barry, Seth would not exist (even if a qualitatively identical boy had come into existence at the time and gone on to have a life very much like that being lived by Seth in reality, etc.). But Kripkean essentialism is not universally accepted. Perhaps Seth, the very same person, could have existed without having been fathered by Barry. He could have had a different father, or more fancifully, had no biological father at all but come into existence in some asexual or even nonbiological way.

This hypothesis, if indeed metaphysically possible after all, provides Barry’s conative structure with a proper object. On this view, what would satisfy Barry is that Seth should exist and thrive, but just not be his, Barry’s, son.

But, despite its propriety, that putative possibility is not what Barry wants. He loves Seth as his son, not as someone else’s (or nobody’s). Cherishing Seth paternally is an integral part of his love.¹

A third way: De dicto vs. de re. Barry wishes he had not fathered a child, i.e., become a parent. He does not wish that he had not had Seth in particular.

True, given that he did become a parent, he is delighted that it was Seth he had. Nonetheless his not having become a parent a priori entails his not having fathered Seth.

A fourth way: We might say, not that Barry wishes Seth had never been born, but only that Barry wishes things had not gone sour after Seth's birth. All would have been fine but for the divorce, financial straits etc. And presumably Barry does wish that those things had not happened.

Or just maybe he doesn't have that wish. But even if he does, that is not the wish uppermost in his mind. What he wishes first and foremost is that Seth had never been conceived. The fact is that he does wish that, and strongly.

A fifth way:² Barry prefers a world in which Seth was born and Seth thrives, to what he takes to be the actual world. Barry also prefers a world in which Seth was never conceived, to the actual world. Even though those two worlds are mutually incompatible, Barry's two preferings are perfectly consistent and not intransitive. I prefer a world in which I'm given a free case of fine Chateau Lafite Rothschild but no other wine, to the (otherwise similar) actual world, and I prefer a world in which I'm given a free case of fine Chateau Margaux but no other wine, to the actual world. Who wouldn't?—in each case. There is nothing irrational or even undesirable about that.

But all this shows is that one may rationally desire or wish for the relevant disjunction. Of course Barry favors every relevant world in which either Seth was conceived and thrives or Seth was never conceived. But the point is that in addition to

that preference, he has a more specific positive pro-attitude toward each of the mutually incompatible disjuncts.

A sixth way: We might say that Barry's desires for Seth's well-being are only conditional desires. What Barry wants is that, given Seth's existing in the first place, Seth should thrive; it does not follow that Barry desires categorically that Seth should (exist and) thrive.

But by that criterion of conditionality, virtually all our desires are only conditional. I want the waiter to bring me an order of pad thai. I don't want merely that if there is a waiter, the waiter will bring me an order of pad thai, even though I also know that there is a waiter and I can conditionalize. If any conditionalizing were needed, I already have (very) tacitly conditionalized, and now unconditionally want the waiter to bring the damn pad thai.

(A genuinely conditional desire is genuinely conditional, irreducibly conditional in content. I desire that if my wife goes to the grocery, she should bring home some apples. But I also unconditionally desire that she not go out at all, because that would make her bad cold worse.)

A seventh way: Perhaps desires and mere counterfactual wishes are not commensurable. They are quite different propositional attitudes; it's not as if Barry had flatly incompatible desires. There is no cognitive shame in a conflict between an actual future-oriented desire and a purely counterfactual wish regarding the past. Marcia wishes that she had bought a Gateway desktop instead of a Dell, but the purchase is history, and she wants her Dell to last her at least five years. There's nothing irrational about that.

This overlooks the fact that desires and (even counterfactual) wishes are subspecies of a more general conative category of pro-attitudes. There should be at least one set of worlds corresponding to a rational subject's state of satisfaction. At any such world, everything is at least as the subject would have it, even if there are other worlds that the subject might prefer. (The subject is satisfied with an annual income of \$1,000,000, even if s/he would prefer an income of \$1,000,000.25. Marcia is happy enough with her Dell. They are not greedy.) The trouble with Barry is that for him there is no such world, because there is none in which his desire is satisfied and his fervent wish is fulfilled. He cannot be happy. And as before, he knows this a priori. Moreover, he knows that his condition is permanent, so long as he and Seth both live (so it's not as though he could choose one alternative for now because he can switch to the other later on should he feel like it).

An eighth way: Perhaps the "trouble" with Barry is not so troubling. What is so wrong with contradictory conations? I gave the example of the marbles: I want all the marbles to be in the box but I also want one marble to be left out. Well, perhaps I have good reasons for each of those desires. The worst that can be said is that both cannot be satisfied, and I know that a priori. It's unfortunate. So?

I said that given his (permanent) condition, Barry is metaphysically doomed to some measure of dissatisfaction. But that is a common plight. I said that Barry is not obviously irrational, and I continue to think that is right. This eighth way is the least bad so far.

It is not entirely nonbad. First, it in effect simply abandons the premise that there's something cognitively wrong with Barry. That may well be the right move, but it would have been nice to have had some independent motivation for thinking so.

Second, even if Barry is not irrational in a strictly cognitive sense, there remains the question of whether there isn't still something rationally wrong, given that Barry has and will continue to have the reasons he does. As before, Barry knows a priori that his conative condition is unsatisfiable. For some romantic souls, that might be harmless fun. But it is not fun for Barry; to him it is very painful. (Even though he is not a philosopher. N.b., what is painful is not that he has contradictory desires; I doubt he cares about such. What's painful is his predicament itself.) It is rational to seek freedom from useless pain. And so, since he knows a priori that his desires cannot both be satisfied, it seems he is rationally obligated at least to try to escape his dilemma. Obviously he should not try to stop wanting Seth to thrive. So he should try to stop wishing he should not have fathered Seth.

But the wish is still supported by excellent reasons.

Is it irrational to ignore those reasons (much less to try to suppress them)? Prudentially it is perfectly rational, as in the case of Pascal's Wager, but we're used to setting that aside. On the other hand, the reasons in question are practical reasons of a sort, not theoretical/epistemic reasons, so the case is not exactly like that of the Wager, in which one strives to form a belief that one knows is disproportioned to one's evidence.

I said "practical reasons of a sort" because the reasons that support Barry's wish are not reasons for acting in any way (except just possibly for advising some potential parents to reconsider). They only motivate the wish itself. Also, as per the seventh way,

the status of practical reasons supporting mere counterfactual wishes may differ from that of practical reasons supporting current active desires.

Or the tension may be only apparent, as between norms that are really of different sorts.³ Barry's desire is, of course, apt and fitting. His wish too is apt and fitting, in light of the reasons supporting it; those judgments are entirely compatible. His desire is prudent and salutary. But his wish is not; it only distracts him and makes him unhappy.

Perhaps the best thing to say is that although there is a sense in which, given the circumstances, Barry ought to be wishing that he had never conceived Seth, the reasons supporting that obligation are outweighed by the psychic cost of vain regret, and on the whole he ought to get over it. Yet prudence and salutariness do not always trump aptness and fittingness. (It would be prudent and salutary for me to be glad that my sister is dying, but that does not make it in the least all right for me to be glad, or even to try to be glad.) So we would still need to hear why they should do so in Barry's case.⁴

Notes

¹ It is a curious feature of the concept of love, that you can love someone dearly and wholeheartedly while just as wholeheartedly wishing that that person had never been born.

² Suggested by Ram Neta.

³ This was proposed to me by Stew Cohen.

⁴ Thanks to Stew Cohen, Josh Knobe, Ram Neta, Geoff Sayre McCord and Susan Wolf for very helpful discussion.