

## Thoughts on Regret

The following paper is part of a project of Kevin Price for a multi-week program on overcoming regret. Each part will read like essays. Its book form will be decidedly different.

### Regret is a Luxury of Modern Living

In many respects, regret is a luxury of modern living and it stems from the increasing influence of marketing, advertising, consumer culture and self promotion through social media. In earlier generations, people were not as heavily bombarded with manufactured desires and artificial needs.

The advent of modern media and technology has led to a relentless barrage of advertisements, pushing products and lifestyles that promise happiness and fulfillment. This situation has only gotten worse with the rise of social media where people compare their real lives by the make believe lives created by others

Regret in this context, arises from the constant comparison between one's reality and the seemingly perfect lives portrayed in advertisements and social media. The pressure to attain material possessions and follow specific trends creates a sense of inadequacy when unable to meet these artificially constructed standards. As a result, people may look back with regret on missed opportunities or purchases that failed to deliver the anticipated satisfaction. It can also show up in individuals who want to accomplish "great things" the larger culture make these aspirations unobtainable.

In contrast, earlier generations were not nearly as plagued by the same level of commercialization and consumerism. Their needs were more rooted in genuine necessities, fostering contentment with simpler lives. While they undoubtedly faced their own challenges, the burden of regret, driven by the illusion of unattainable aspirations, was less pronounced.

Modernity has freed up time (the ability to have more leisure) for individuals to focus on what they wanted or wanted to be, when in the past the emphasis was on what needed to be done. t

Acknowledging the impact of marketing and advertising on our perceptions can help us resist the allure of excessive consumption and embrace a more meaningful and fulfilling existence, free from the shackles of regretful choices influenced by artificial desires.

### The Industrial Revolution: A Turning Point in the History of Regret

The Industrial Revolution marked a profound turning point in history, not only for its transformative impact on society, economy, and technology but also for its role in the development of regret as a prevalent human emotion. Before this era of rapid industrialization, life for the majority of people was centered around survival and sustenance. The daily struggle for survival left little room for contemplation and introspection about the past, leading to a reduced emphasis on regret.

In pre-industrial societies, individuals were preoccupied with meeting basic needs, toiling through physically demanding tasks that built character and resilience. Their focus was primarily on the present and immediate future, leaving little opportunity to dwell on the past or ponder what could have been different. Envy was often minimized as social structures were relatively homogenous, and ambitions were often tied to basic necessities rather than material possessions or status.

However, as the Industrial Revolution brought about urbanization and a shift to factory-based economies, life became more complex and competitive. New technologies and mass production created opportunities and disparities, leading to increased social stratification. People now had more time and energy to ponder the paths not taken and the “what ifs” of life. Regret started to emerge as a natural consequence of comparing oneself to others and feeling unsatisfied with personal achievements or circumstances.

Furthermore, the growing interconnectedness of the world through industrialization exposed individuals to a wider array of lifestyles and possibilities, further fueling feelings of regret as people become aware of the choices they might not have considered or pursued. Worse still, many of these choices were beyond the reach of most – fueling envy and regret.

This isn't to paint with a broad brush. There is no doubt that the industrial revolution did many things to improve the quality of life of humankind – longevity, education opportunities, healthier living, etc. But the tradeoff for many for such wonderful things is the serenity that a more simple life offers. In many ways, envy is the result of the accumulation of years of envy and jealousy.

The Industrial Revolution was a turning point that catalyzed the development of regret by shifting societal priorities, introducing new ambitions, and exposing people to a multitude of alternative paths and lifestyles. Regret became an intrinsic part of the human experience as life became more complex and interconnected. Despite the benefits brought forth by industrialization, the evolution of regret also serves as a reminder of the importance of balance and contentment amidst the changing tides of progress.

#### Regret in the United States is Linked to the Rise in Commercialism in the 1960s

Regret in affluent countries like the United States became increasingly intertwined with the rise of commercialism during the 1960s. This pivotal decade witnessed a profound shift in American society, as consumerism took center stage, altering the nation's values and priorities. It took the issues that arose during the Industrial Revolution around envy and want to a whole new level. The post-war economic boom led to an unprecedented emphasis on material wealth and the pursuit of instant gratification. The rise of 1960s commercialism "educated" people that they "needed things" or status that previous generations didn't even consider a want.

With the emergence of television as a dominant medium, advertisers capitalized on the power of persuasion, promoting a culture of desire and envy. People were bombarded with images of an idealized lifestyle, fostering a sense of inadequacy and prompting them to seek fulfillment through possessions and experiences. The commercialization of American life created a stark contrast between perceived societal expectations and individual realities.

As a consequence, many individuals began to experience profound regret, fueled by their inability to attain the status and happiness promoted by the consumerist narrative. The pressure to conform to these materialistic ideals led to personal disappointment and a constant

sense of emptiness and disillusionment. Regret, thus, became a product of a society that valued material possessions and self importance over emotional fulfillment and personal growth.

The surge in the “advertising age” and the commercialism that accompanied it during the 1960s played a significant role in linking regret to a growing discontent with a culture that prioritized consumer goods over genuine happiness and self-actualization. The impact of this era continues to resonate in modern American society, prompting introspection about the true sources of fulfillment and the potential for alternative paths to a more meaningful existence.

### The Role of Culture and Family of Origin on the Development of Regret

regret can be a deeply ingrained emotion that lingers in our lives, and its roots often trace back to our upbringing and the cultural environment we grow up in. Poor parenting can significantly contribute to feelings of regret later in life. When parents fail to provide the necessary emotional support, encouragement, and guidance, it can lead to a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt in their children. Unmet needs during childhood may manifest in adulthood as regrets for missed opportunities, unfulfilled aspirations, and unresolved conflicts. Furthermore dysfunctional homes can contribute to children believing they are not enough, and cannot ever be enough.

Moreover, the impact of a culture that perpetuates the idea that we are not enough can exacerbate these feelings of regret. In a society that constantly emphasized comparison, achievement, and perfection, individuals may find themselves haunted by what they perceive as failures or shortcomings. The pressure to conform to societal standards and the fear of judgment can create a breeding ground for regret over decisions made or paths not taken.

Overcoming regret requires introspection, self-compassion, and understanding that our worth is not solely defined by external measures of success. It is accepting the fact that death is inevitable and an actual part of life. It is acknowledging that focusing on one’s failed past is done at the expense of making the most of the time one has left. Challenging cultural norms and redefining what it means to lead a fulfilling life can be liberating, allowing individuals to focus on personal growth and embracing their unique journeys.

Ultimately, by acknowledging the impact of poor parenting and cultural influences on our lives, we can begin to break free from the shackles of regret and pave a way for a more compassionate and authentic existence. We can move from the false self that is driven by fantasies that cannot materialize to becoming one's true self, which is bolstered by a healthy sense of reality.

### Regret is Strongly Linked to the False Narratives People Create About Themselves

Regret often emerges as a consequence of crafting a false narrative about one's life, comparing it to an idealized existence constructed within the confines of their imagination or trusting the imagined lives being conveyed by others. Human minds have a tendency to construct alternate realities, projecting a life filled with success, happiness, and fulfilled aspirations. This self-created illusion, often bolstered by societal expectations and media influences, sets the stage for disappointment when reality falls short of these grandiose dreams.

Every person has times where they write "fiction" about themselves. "if I had done such and such, this would happen." They romanticize the "could have" when they could just as easily look at how "the alternative" could have gone very wrong. In fact, people often made the choice to do things differently because they had those negative alternatives in mind. Unfortunately, over time, they often look at those events with envy and jealousy, and forget the whole picture. If people are going to write fiction about themselves (and they will) it should be beneficial and not harmful.

In this pursuit of an idealized life, individuals may overlook the beauty of their own unique journey, dismissing genuine achievements and meaningful experiences. Constantly measuring their lives against an imagined standard, they fail to appreciate the authentic path they've walked and the valuable lessons they've learned along the way.

Moreover, social media platforms and the curated lives of other can exacerbate these feelings of regret. People often present only their best moments online, further perpetuating the illusion of an impossibly perfect life. Worse still, many of these "best moments" are largely fictionized. This comparison culture intensifies the dissatisfaction with one's own reality, as it is

pitted against the distorted portrayals of others.

Overcoming regret involves acknowledging and accepting that life's twists and turns are natural, and comparing it to an illusion is inherently unfair. Embracing the authenticity of one's journey, with both its highs and lows, fosters gratitude, humility, and self-compassion. By learning to rewrite the narrative to align with the truth of their experiences, individuals can find contentment and discover that their real-life story is just as worthy of celebration as any fantastical tale they may have imagined.

### The Stoics on Regret

The Stoics held a fundamental belief in determinism, which means that they saw the universe as governed by a divine, rational order. According to this worldview, everything that occurs both positive and negative events, unfolds in accordance with this cosmic design. From the Stoic perspective, all events, whether perceived as good or bad, were destined to happen and, therefore, were supposed to occur as they did. This view helped protect Stoics from the temptation of regret (it must be tempting or we would never pursue it).

This understanding of determinism played a crucial role in shaping the Stoic view of regret. They argued that regret arises when individuals hold the erroneous belief that things should have turned out differently than they did. By resisting the natural flow of events and yearning for an alternate outcome, people create inner turmoil and distress.

Instead, the Stoics advocated for embracing the notion of fate and accepting the world as it is, recognizing that certain things lie beyond human control. By aligning their will with the universal reason (logos) and accepting the individuals could attain a sense of inner peace and serenity.

In this context, the Stoics did not dismiss the importance of learning from past actions or mistakes. They believed in using reason to improve one's character and actions in the present. However, they emphasized the importance of focusing on what is within our control, such as our judgments, choices, and attitudes, rather than ruminating on what is beyond our influence.

We often hear about the importance of acceptance when it comes to things beyond one's control. The Stoics went much further, advocating that we should "love what is," regardless of what "it" is.

In summary, the Stoics' belief in the inevitability of all events allowed them to view regret as a product of misguided expectations, leading them to prioritize acceptance and wisdom in their pursuit of a virtuous and fulfilling life.

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