**Mistakes, Personal Relationships, and the Irreplaceable**

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**Abstract:** Most of us have some valued personal relationships that we take to be irreplaceable. This claim is familiar in certain discussions of love and value theory. But these relationships are frequently irreplaceable in a strong sense, not previously articulated, that contrasts with the irreplaceability of other kinds of valued items (such as mementos). In this article I articulate this sense of strong irreplaceability and defend its applicability to various personal relationships. These applications reveal something special about the distinctive, non-utilitarian value of personal relationships, as well as the rationality of a person who does not regret the mistakes she has made concerning personal relationships.

We often speak of valued personal relationships, such as that between a father and his daughter, as being irreplaceable. It is not just that the child is irreplaceable – which she surely is – but the father’s relationship to that child is also irreplaceable. That is, it is irreplaceable for the father. A father would experience an irreplaceable loss were he to lose this relationship with his daughter, even if he were assured that she would grow up to lead a happy and fulfilled life in complete separation from her father and that he would have a wonderful new child of his own in her place. Common talk, as well as academic philosophy, recognizes this point. But I think there is a particularly strong sense in which our valued personal relationships are irreplaceable that has not been sufficiently articulated. This sense is revealed by carefully considering how we do and should respond to our mistakes that, either by happenstance or by plan, fortunately have produced valued personal relationships.

As a philosophy professor, I have on occasion asked students to reflect on their lives up till now and to think about their hopes for the future. Many are largely satisfied with their pasts, but of course most have made several mistakes and at least some confess to having regrets. One commonly expressed attitude toward their mistakes has struck me. Several times a student has said something of the form, “Though it was a mistake for me to have done x, I wouldn’t want to change having done x if I could do it all over again.” Someone might admit that it was a mistake not to have started college sooner, say, but also claim that if they could do it all over again they would not want to change their actual educational path.

My initial response was that such an attitude is irrational. The objection in mind was that if one thinks that one has made a mistake in doing x, then one wishes that one had not done x. So, when someone acknowledges such mistakes they should want to change having done x if they could do it all over again. The idea behind this objection is that one does not really think it was a mistake to delay college if they do not wish that their life had gone differently in that regard. Call this the rationality objection. Those who insist that they would repeat their mistakes are often

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guilty of irrationality, I think, due to the influence of pride and the simple unwillingness to fully admit the error of their ways – as when people dismiss their mistakes by overly embracing the slogan “No regrets”.

Though I think that the rationality objection holds in many cases, I am no longer sympathetic to the rationality objection in all cases. My aim here is to characterize the situations in which this attitude toward one’s mistakes is not necessarily irrational, as I think this reveals something significant about the way in which we value our relationships with others. In section I, we will examine different types of mistakes that affect personal relationships and consider the rationality objection as applied to each of them. To anticipate, the claim is that the rationality objection often does not apply when the mistake results in valued personal relationships that the person likely would not have developed had he acted otherwise.\(^2\) In section II, I mark the fundamental distinction that drives the present argument – the difference between what I call *strong irreplaceability* and *weak irreplaceability*. Many material objects, such as family heirlooms, are irreplaceable in the latter sense. However, they are likely not strongly irreplaceable. The valued personal relationships discussed in section I are supposed to present us with examples of strong irreplaceability. The difference between strong and weak irreplaceability, as explained in this section, consists in a difference in our preferences concerning certain counterfactual situations. Section III clarifies the force of these claims – for example, whether they are normative or purely descriptive – and attempts to justify the methodology. Then in section IV the claim about the strong irreplaceability of personal relationships is applied to the value that we assign to ourselves, even in recognition of the fact that mistakes have contributed to shaping our identities and histories. The value we assign to our own identity and history might play a privileged role in explaining our attitudes toward the earlier cases (or vice versa). Finally, in section V, these observations are applied to conclude something important about the ways in which we value our relationships with people, including ourselves.

I.

Let’s focus on our reactions to mistakes of a particular kind. It is obvious that almost every action we perform has effects beyond itself. Let us pay attention to those effects that concern personal relationships in particular. Sometimes it is relatively easy to discern that a given action is responsible for producing or significantly altering such a relationship. Had Andrew not married Veronica, he would not have his lovely daughter Emma. Had Matt gone to college rather than take that full-time job, he wouldn’t have met his lifelong friend Max. And Jonathan would not have entered into his long-term romance with Stephanie had he asked Sally to the dance instead. Finally, stretching the concept of a personal relationship a bit, had Roman pursued an interest in a healthier dog breed, he would not have his prized relationship with his dog Brutus. In each of these four examples, I claim, our protagonist can recognize the mistake that he made, but yet not wish that his past were different in that regard due to the development of a valued relationship that he easily recognizes as depending on that mistake. Andrew, for example, recognizes that he would not have his valued relationship with Emma – in fact, Emma would not even exist – were

\(^2\) Given that these cases all produce something that is valued (and often greatly valued), perhaps ‘mistake’ is too strong a word. But ‘sub-optimal’ seems too weak. The point is just that the person realistically could have done better. This understanding of ‘mistake’ – that someone realistically could and should have done better, even if she did something valuable in its place – should be kept in mind throughout.
it not for his entering into a marriage with Veronica. Nevertheless, he thinks that marrying Veronica was a dreadful mistake. In addition to looking at personal relationships as the effects of our mistakes, we can also look at personal relationships in their own right as mistakes, even if they are valued.

Importantly, these protagonists can also acknowledge that had they pursued alternative paths they likely would have developed other valued personal relationships as well. Andrew recognizes that he could have had children, whom he would have loved just as much as he loves Emma; Matt knows that he likely would have developed good friends had he attended college right out of high school; Jonathan later comes to find out about his chances with Sally; and Roman realizes that he would have loved a dog of a different breed just as much. So these protagonists, as I describe them, recognize that they made mistakes and also recognize that the valued personal relationships that resulted from these mistakes would likely have been replaced with equally good or even better personal relationships had they acted otherwise. Nevertheless, our protagonists do not wish that they had acted differently, because they find the actual personal relationships more valuable than the potential personal relationships that could have taken their place. In brief, this is the thesis that I aim to defend, interpret, and draw consequences from in this article.

Before considering our examples in greater detail, something should be said about valued personal relationships. I do not have any rigorous account to offer of what makes something a valued personal relationship. But I will offer a few comments. Obviously, the relationship must be personal. In this context, this means that our protagonist has some acquaintance with the person of his interest in the ordinary sense of engaging in conversation, physical contact, exchanging looks, and the like over an extended period of time so as to constitute a relationship in the normal sense. There is familiarity with at least some of the distinctive mannerisms, personality or behavioral traits of the person. The relationship should hold in virtue of particular features of the person of interest that are distinctive to her, such as her intrinsic qualities, her biological or social standing to our protagonist, or their shared history. Of course this is vague and underspecified, but I believe that we can at least agree on standard examples (as discussed below). These relationships are also supposed to be valued. This means that our protagonist cares about the person of interest as an object worthy of his concern and interest. The protagonist also embraces this relationship – he wants to maintain and develop it. Let’s now consider some examples of valued personal relationships, the existence of which depends on some action or commitment that the protagonist, in retrospect, recognizes as a mistake.

Children. One of the strongest and typically highly valued relationships is that between a parent and his child. Consider our father, Andrew, who loves and cares for his daughter, Emma. However, he recognizes that Emma exists, in a very straightforward manner, only due to actions that he recognizes as mistakes. Andrew is convinced that he never should have entered into a romantic relationship with Veronica, let alone marry her and decide to have a child with her. The marriage ends in divorce, and Andrew greatly regrets the relationship with Veronica. But this regret in no way affects his relationship with Emma or the value that he bestows upon this

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3 Here and elsewhere I will often use the term ‘better’ to refer to, basically, an evaluation of goodness. But as the discussion should reveal, I think that what one values (or the degree thereof) can diverge from one’s evaluations of goodness.
relationship, even though he knows that this relationship would not exist were it not for the mistakes he made with Veronica.

Normally when a person recognizes that they have made a mistake, they will and should say that they prefer the counterfactual situation in which they make a better choice. This is the point behind the rationality objection. But what about Andrew? Though Andrew views the marriage to Veronica as a mistake, he nevertheless claims that he prefers the actual course of events to the alternatives in which his choices for romantic relationships are different. If he could go back and do it all over again, he says, he would prefer to make the same mistake again because he values the relationship with Emma that this mistake produced.

This may seem like an instance of a quite common phenomenon that is in no way peculiar to valued personal relationships. It is often the case that an action that is not desirable when considered on its own is desirable as a necessary, reasonable, or simply fortuitous means to a greater good. One might think that our present case is of this standard form.

But I do not think this is so. Let us imagine that Andrew has some intellectual sophistication and can seriously consider reasonable alternatives to the actual situation. He recognizes that had he not maintained his relationship with Veronica he very likely would have entered into a relationship with another woman – he may even have particular women in mind – which would have produced children whom he would have loved and valued just as much as he loves and values Emma. So if the desired end were simply having a loving and valued relationship with a child of one’s own, then the relationship with Veronica was not a necessary or even reasonable means. Andrew then considers the counterfactual situation in which instead of marrying Veronica he marries Megan. Suppose that the marriage to Megan would have been a happy one, and it would have produced a child that Andrew would have loved and valued just as much as he loves and values Emma. So, all things considered, the alternative is a happier and generally more desirable life, by Andrew’s own standards, with a valued parental relationship plus a successful marital relationship. Andrew believes these claims. I do not find it at all implausible that Andrew would fully consider and understand this possibility, but still prefer the actual situation to it. His attachment to Emma is that strong and highly valued.

Perhaps, instead of merely wanting a child, the end Andrew sought was having a child with Veronica in particular. In this situation it is still true that Andrew would prefer his relationship with Emma to relationships with other possible children – even “better” children, according to Andrew’s own standards for valuable traits – born to Veronica. Of course the actual relationship with Veronica (or something very close to it) was necessary for the end of having a relationship with this particular child, Emma. But it is simply not true that the end Andrew sought was to have Emma in particular born to Veronica, as if he could anticipate her characteristics before she was even conceived and then prefer her over other possible babies. In short, Andrew’s desire to repeat his mistake is not accounted for by the standard means-to-end explanation.

*Friends and Lovers.* Rather than go to college, Matt took a full-time job right out of high school. It was unfulfilling, and after three years he realized it was a mistake not to pursue his college degree. He then quit his job and enrolled at the state university. Many years later Matt realizes that he should have listened to his parents and started college straight out of high school. One of the positives that came out of this mistake, though, is that it produced a life-long friendship with Max, whom he met at that job.

Matt recognizes that had he started college three years earlier, his life overall likely would have been a bit better in the sense (among others) of achieving his goals, being pleasurable, and
living out his values. And he also recognizes that had he gone to college earlier he likely would have met people who, instead of his best friend Max, would have become his friends. After all, he did make several friends when he eventually went to college. In spite of recognizing all this, Matt still prefers the actual course of events, in which he delays his university education, because he prefers his friendship with Max to alternative possible friendships. This is reasonable even if Matt recognizes that at least one of the friendships in the counterfactual situations would have been of equal value (by normal standards – whatever they are – for evaluating friendships) to his friendship with Max.

Friendships simply are not replaceable in that way. Many of our other relationships with people are replaceable, however. This is often true even when we value, appreciate, and respect them. We often value, appreciate, and respect our neighbors and colleagues even though we would have no preference were we to consider a possible world (or simply a move) in which different people are our neighbors and colleagues, so long as they possess the same or similar traits that we find so desirable in our actual neighbors and colleagues. This is not to say that we treat our neighbors and colleagues merely as means or anything of that sort. It is just to say that we do not privilege our relationships with them over our relationships with others, in counterfactual situations, who are equally good neighbors or colleagues. If we think otherwise – if we resist replacement – that suggests that we view the neighbor or colleague as more than just a neighbor or colleague. It is strong evidence that we view them as something of a friend.

Now let us consider romantic relationships, like Jonathan’s long-term romantic relationship with Stephanie. Jonathan greatly values his relationship with Stephanie, and he remains happily faithful to it. Late in life he discovers that an old interest of his, Sally, had a strong romantic interest in him to which he was long oblivious. Suppose that Jonathan believes that a life with Sally would have been easier and, in some objective sense, better in various ways – e.g., in terms of lifestyle or companionship. Jonathan believes that he would have had at least as fulfilling of a romantic relationship with Sally. And this life could have been his, let us fancifully suppose and have Jonathan believe, if he had only invited Sally to a dance years ago. That was his mistake. But as a result he developed a relationship with Stephanie instead. And due to this valued relationship with Stephanie, Jonathan prefers the actual situation to the counterfactual situation in which he lives a happy life and enjoys a long-term romantic relationship with Sally.

So-called “romantic relationships” are quite varied, of course. Many are largely for companionship, some are largely physical, and a few are largely intellectual. And I have imagined a situation in which the relationship is long-lasting and ends only with death. But this is not how things always go. Romantic relationships are often relatively short-lived. Even though a romantic relationship is short-lived and ends by the consent of the parties involved, it could still be valued. This is so even if the relationship is considered a mistake. I doubt that all who look back on these “failed” romantic relationships feel the same when it comes to the replaceability question. If the relationship was just valued as a lesson or for the physical pleasure, then a suitable replacement would be just as good. But if the person was, or even still is, valued as friend or something similar – as something more personal or respected than mere flesh or instruction – then counterfactual replacement would likely be resisted. And because romantic relationships are, for many people, important to their self-identity and the narrative of their life, they also might prefer the actual “failed” relationship to similar replacements.4

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4 In section IV I have more to say about the role that self-identity could play in such judgments.
Pets. It is well-known that people often grow particularly attached to their pets, sometimes to the point of considering them “part of the family”. Roman is such a person. He values the relationship that he has with his dog Brutus. This relationship is valued because Roman enjoys and respects dogs, and this is the particular dog to which Roman has become attached. This attitude toward a dog typically is not considered crazy, because dogs are animals capable of something like devotion, a personality, and reciprocating our affection. So, it is not always a stretch to think of these as like our relationships to people. Roman would not be satisfied were Brutus to be replaced with a duplicate dog, even if it were assured that Brutus would be well taken care of elsewhere. Of course, many pet owners do not have this attitude toward their pets. But such people do not consider their pets part of the family. Roman is not like them.

Thus far this shows that Brutus is not replaceable for Roman in a familiar sense. I now want to take the story a step farther, however. Suppose that Brutus is of a dog breed that is prone to various health problems and a short lifespan. As such, Roman recognizes that it was a mistake to buy Brutus instead of a dog of a more robust breed. Roman recognizes that had he purchased a healthier dog, he would have had a valued relationship with a different dog – perhaps he even has a particular candidate in mind – that likely would have lasted longer and, all things considered, been more enjoyable and rewarding. To avoid complications, let’s also assume that he thinks Brutus still would have been well taken care of in this counterfactual scenario. Nevertheless, if he could do it all over again, Roman insists that he would prefer to repeat his choice of Brutus rather than picking the healthier dog.

Note that the mistakes like those described above, which affect personal relationships and seem to privilege the actual situation, can be of two kinds. First, the mistake could be about something that does not in itself concern personal relationships directly, but which affects the personal relationships one enters into down the road. Second, the mistake could be immediately about a personal relationship – i.e., entering into a personal relationship with someone or something that one should not. We could make a poor choice, for example, about whom to take as a friend or lover. While I call these latter situations “mistakes”, I have also emphasized that these personal relationships could nevertheless be greatly valued.

II.

There is nothing novel about noting the irreplaceability of our relationships with the people and pets that we value. There is novelty, however, in noting that this irreplaceability holds when the relationships are recognized as resulting from mistakes and that they resist replacement even in counterfactual situations that are recognized as better (in at least some natural sense that involves, say, the evaluation of goodness) than the actual situation. In this section I want to mark, characterize, and defend the distinction between what I will call weak irreplaceability and strong irreplaceability.

Many have recognized that our personal relationships are tied to particular individuals in an especially strong sense. I value a friend, say, for his qualities. We became friends in the first place because he shares my interests, is a decent and sociable man, and is supportive when I am in need of help. Though these qualities provide the reasons for my entering into the friendship, it is not the case that just anyone who matches or exceeds my friend with respect to those qualities could be substituted in his place and thereby be my friend. My friendship is instead tied to a particular individual, not just a person of a given type, with whom I share a history. Duplicating
the person – i.e., their intrinsic qualities – isn’t enough to make a friend. I value my relationships
to many other things, in contrast, simply because they possess intrinsic qualities of a certain type,
not for their particularity or our shared history. As such, I would easily accept a substitute that is
at least as good with respect to these intrinsic qualities. Examples here include everyday items
such as my lawnmower, computer, and toiletries. But replaceability does not hold for all our
material possessions. We do sometimes value our material possessions for their particularity or
history – e.g., a family heirloom, a car with which one associates precious memories, a familiar
old tool.

It is natural to think that the story about Andrew is simply another story that illustrates the
importance of particularity and history. But the story makes a stronger case for this claim than
does the existing literature on this topic. For, the point is typically made about the failure of
substitutivity within a world either at a time or across times.5 My friendship does not necessarily
extend to those in the world around me now who share my friend’s admirable characteristics.
And if I lost a friend I would not be content with a duplicate as a replacement. A valued
friendship does not come into existence with nor continue through such substitutions.

The example at hand is different from these, however. Andrew is imagining a counterfactual
situation in which Emma might not even exist. He is not being asked if his love for his child
could be extended or if he could find suitable replacements within the actual world. Of course,
from his position within the actual world, he states that he would not and should not extend the
value and love that he has for his daughter to similar children simply because they share common
traits. Nor could he ever actually replace her, no matter how closely the new child resembled
Emma. Given his connection to the actual Emma, this is appropriate and expected. This is not the
issue before us, though. The question is whether or not he would and should prefer a
counterfactual situation in which such a connection to Emma never exists (perhaps because
Emma never exists), but a parental relationship that is just as valuable (again, by Andrew’s own
lights) exists with another child within the context of a loving marriage to Megan. Such a world
seems to better match Andrew’s ideals – with both valuable marital and parental relationships –
so why is it not preferred to the actual world which is deficient in the former regard?

Consider other things that we judge to be irreplaceable. Family heirlooms or personal
mementos are good examples. Suppose your great-grandmother gave you a silver dollar on a
special occasion when you were a child. Because of this connection to your great-grandmother,
as well as the memories the coin enkindles in you, you greatly value this coin. You do not want
to lose it. This shows that you value your relationship to it (e.g., its being in your possession) as
opposed to its mere existence. And you would not be satisfied with it being replaced with a
duplicate silver dollar. It is irreplaceable.6

But the extent to which the silver dollar is irreplaceable is not as great as the sense in which
our previous examples manifest irreplaceability. Importantly, this is not merely because you
value the personal relationships more than you value your relationship to this coin. For example,

5 All of the examples contained in the articles cited in footnote 1, for example, are of this type.

6 Someone could trick you into being content with a duplicate. Someone could lose the coin, say, but find a
replacement that you mistake for the original. Of course coins can be replaced in this sense. In principle (if not in
practice), people could be replaced in this sense as well. But the coin is irreplaceable in the sense that you would not
accept this replacement. This is evident when we consider the anger or disappointment you would experience upon
discovering the deception.
you might put up more of a fight to make sure that you do not lose this coin than you would to
preserve your relationship with a friend or pet. That is to say, you might care more about keeping
this coin than keeping a particular friend. Even so, there is a sense in which the coin is more
easily replaceable. You readily recognize that you would be indifferent to a counterfactual
situation in which your great-grandmother gives you a different silver dollar coin than the one
she actually gave you. That is, when you consider counterfactual situations you do not have a
preference for maintaining a relationship with any particular coin. Rather, you simply want to
maintain a relationship with whatever coin your great-grandmother happens to give you in that
world. Because you are indifferent to such replacements across possible worlds, your
relationship to the coin is only weakly irreplaceable. This is, I think, the clearest way to illustrate
the critical distinction between these two senses of irreplaceability. And introducing this
distinction will, I think, help us better understand personal relationships and modes of valuing.

The examples presented in the previous section were supposed to illustrate a stronger sense
of irreplaceability. Andrew is not indifferent to a counterfactual situation in which he has a
parental relationship with a child other than Emma, even if that relationship would be a
successful one and set in a more desirable context. The essence of strong irreplaceability is that
the resistance to substitution holds across worlds. This concept could potentially apply to non-
personal relationships as well. One could be extremely sentimental or overly fetishize some
material object, say. This concept could even apply, perhaps in perverse or masochistic cases, to
relationships that are not valued. It could even be true of a person’s attitudes towards objects or
people to which the subject has no relationship, in the normal sense of the term that involves
acquaintance or familiarity, at all. Such possibilities are unlikely, however, and I have focused on
those cases—valued personal relationships—to which its application seems, for good reason,
most natural and appropriate.

The notion of strong irreplaceability applies to both our relationships to things and people, as
well as to things and people themselves. These applications should be kept distinct, however.
Someone could easily be led into thinking that there is a tight connection between the two. For
example, someone might think that the strong irreplaceability of our valued relationships to
people is derivative from the strong irreplaceability of the people themselves. The intrinsic value
of the object itself is sometimes seen as a consideration supporting its irreplaceability when it
comes to our relationships. Consider, for example, the following passage from Kant:

In the realm of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can
be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all
price and therefore admits of no equivalent, has dignity.

That which is related to general human inclinations and needs has a market price. That
which, without supposing any need, accords with a certain taste (i.e., with pleasure in the
purposeless play of our faculties) has a fancy price. But that which constitutes the
condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have mere
relative worth (price) but an intrinsic worth (dignity).  

7 Kant (1990), pp. 51-52. David Velleman’s “Love as a Moral Emotion”, reprinted in Velleman (2006), brought this
passage to my attention.
Some of my applications of the concept of irreplaceability likely diverge from what Kant would allow. And when it comes to our relationships to things and people, I would deny that replaceability goes hand-in-hand with whether the object in question has a price or dignity. First, people can be replaceable in various relationships (e.g., the competent colleague who is not a friend) even if they are priceless and have dignity. So even things of great intrinsic worth are replaceable, in an acceptable sense, in relationships. Second, those things that are not “above all price” and lack dignity (e.g., a silver coin) can be irreplaceable as the object of a relationship. So even things of little intrinsic value can be (weakly) irreplaceable in relationships. I certainly do not want to suggest that Kant himself would have disagreed with either of these claims. And it may be that strong irreplaceability, at least in the normative sense, does go hand-in-hand with intrinsic worth or dignity.

III.

I hope that the examples presented in the previous section have strong intuitive appeal. But there certainly are some concerns and objections that can be anticipated. For one, someone might wonder whether the fundamental claim here is descriptive or normative. That is, are these examples supposed to illustrate that people in fact respond in a way that shows they treat their valued personal relationships as strongly irreplaceable? Or, are these examples supposed to illustrate that people should treat their valued personal relationships as strongly irreplaceable? If the former, it seems that some empirical evidence is needed to support the claim that people actually do respond as such. If the latter, the mere presentation of a story in which a character responds as such seems insufficient to support the normative claim. In this section I will address various objections concerning the methodology of presenting fictional examples. And I will also clarify the conclusions that I think are to be drawn from these examples.

Determining the answer to the descriptive question is no easy task. There are various factors to consider that complicate any empirical investigation into how people would actually react to these scenarios. These concerns arise for any investigation of regret. They include the following:

1. Difficulty in comprehending the counterfactual.

If we were to sample non-philosophers for their reactions to these scenarios, they would likely have a problem appreciating the literal sense in which the scenario is contrary to fact. It takes some training to be able to fully appreciate counterfactual situations, in which actual world events and relationships might be wholly absent or radically altered, and to imaginatively distance oneself from one’s actual situation in order to provide an appropriately objective answer. We are asked, in effect, to stand outside of all possible worlds and make an evaluative judgment comparing the actual situation to the proposed counterfactual scenario. There is likely to be a residue of the actual in these contemplations and evaluations, and after all it is still supposed to be our evaluation. This task is made more difficult when we are to imagine the absence of relationships, perhaps the complete absence of people in the counterfactual world, as well as imagining some indeterminate relationship (and perhaps indeterminate person) existing in the counterfactual scenario. In everyday life our counterfactual reflections tend to involve more modest deviations from reality, such as imagining that we had made a different isolated decision. And we often do not follow through and recognize the likely ripple effects of these alterations.
(Though movies sometimes do this, to dramatic effect.) Empirical investigation of our counterfactual thinking can easily slip into oversimplifying questions, such as by asking how one would feel about a counterfactual situation in which an event is simply “subtracted”. Of course, some other event must take its place and the consequences of removing the “subtracted” event must be fully considered as well.

2. Actual attachments create bias.

One potential problem about considering such counterfactuals is that it is quite difficult to put aside our actual situation, especially when it comes to our personal attachments and emotions, and provide an unbiased evaluation. This is the straightforward problem of distancing our evaluations from our actual attachments. Such attachments tend to exert something like a gravitational force, skewing judgments in their favor. One might think that the task is impossible because such objectivity can never be reached – we must always state our preferences as a person who lives in the actual world with these relationships. While this is obviously true, it does not follow that we cannot be objective, in the minimal sense of being relevantly unbiased, however difficult that might be for some in practice. I can objectively say, for example, that I wish I would have bought the minivan rather than the convertible that I actually bought. In making this judgment I keep my general values, character, and goals fixed, but I needn’t show any bias toward my actual decisions and possessions. Such evaluations can at least sometimes be performed without bias.

3. A sense of guilt, rejection, or betrayal of actual world attachments.

Some might be reluctant to opt for the counterfactual situation because, consciously or not, there is some emotion preventing them from endorsing that option. They might feel guilty about voicing a preference for a relationship with a child other than their actual child. Relatedly, they might think that voicing (or even thinking) such a preference would constitute a rejection or betrayal of their actual relationship. Such emotions and sentiments could rest on a misunderstanding of the counterfactual – e.g., momentarily thinking that they are choosing or considering an actual replacement for their relationship. But such emotions can influence our reactions even if we have a completely accurate understanding of the counterfactual before us. Andrew might feel as if he would be somehow betraying Emma by preferring the alternative situation, even though he knows there is no betrayal or abandonment within either the counterfactual situation (i.e., relationship with baby x) or his actual situation (i.e., relationship with Emma), regardless of the preference that he proclaims. And there is also the fact that in the alternative situation Emma might not exist at all. So Andrew might reject it not because he judges his relationship with Emma to be more valuable than this other possible parental relationships, but because he values Emma herself and cannot endorse a world in which she does not exist. This last problem can be addressed by stipulating that she exists in that world, but with different (and, of course, loving) parents. This stipulation could easily provoke unsettling emotions as well, though.

Such emotions taint the reactions. The actual world relationships would not be rejected or betrayed by our subject stating a preference for the counterfactual relationships. So we want to
make sure that if subjects state a preference for the actual situation, they do not do so simply because an emotion like guilt is (in this case) irrationally pressuring them in that direction.

4. An unwillingness to admit, in a strong sense, one’s mistakes.

With our third point we saw that emotions and sentiments directed at others – guilt, rejection, and betrayal – could bias one to favor the actual situation. It could also be the case that self-directed emotions similarly bias one toward voicing preferences for actual relationships. Chief among such emotions is pride. People will often stand by their mistakes out of pride or simple stubbornness. These are often situations to which the rationality objection, presented earlier, legitimately applies. That is, someone might be aware that they have made a mistake (here I am imagining a situation that does not involve valued personal relationships nor does it have other fortuitous consequences), but simply out of pride or stubbornness insist that they would gladly repeat the same mistake and that they have no regrets. Such people admit their mistakes in only a weak sense, for in practice – e.g., when it comes to apologizing, feeling (or admitting to) regret, or wishing they had done otherwise – they stand behind them.

5. A sense of “it was meant to be”.

Some people have a general belief that things happen as they are supposed to happen or that everything happens for a reason – a reason that is presumably good or at least not to be challenged. Such people might then resist preferring the counterfactual situation even though they understand the natural sense in which it seems better, and they aren’t necessarily afflicted by guilt or pride. Rather, they simply think that the actual order of things is the preferred order of things. The reactions of such people should be discounted, for the purposes of this investigation, because they are not even open to the possibility of a counterfactual situation being preferable to actuality.

I raise these 5 points as caveats. In order to establish my claims about the way we value personal relationships, it must be the case that the subject appropriately understands the counterfactual situation and they consider it with an open mind. Further, they opt to prefer the actual situation not simply because of biases or out of irrational emotional influences like guilt, rejection, betrayal, pride, stubbornness, and the like. It might be the case that an experimental philosopher could create conditions in which subjects are assured of such understanding and protected from such emotional encroachment. Then, we could gather evidence to test the descriptive question of how people actually respond to such vignettes. Though that is not part of my present project, it would certainly be interesting data.

I think that it is natural and appropriate for people to react to these scenarios in a way that shows their valued personal relationships to be strongly irreplaceable. My preferred explanation of the reluctance or refusal here is that the particularity or history influences value in a very strong sense. And I would encourage the reader to treat these vignettes as something like fables (certainly not arguments) that prompt you to think of your valued personal relationships as

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8 I am not claiming that these emotions are always irrational. Rather, as described in the text, they are supposed to have an irrational influence merely in these particular situations.
strongly irreplaceable. This is to take the fundamental claim as normative. Reasons can be provided simply by presenting and illustrating scenarios in a particular way – describing the right situation, emphasizing the right concepts and distinctions, and then simply asserting a claim. And I have no compunction about presenting these stories in this spirit.

But whether or not either the descriptive or normative claim is correct, these vignettes and the subsequent analysis prompt us to consider the possibility that we value some things or relationships such that they resist substitution across possible worlds. There is value in simply articulating this concept of strong irreplaceability and its consequences, whether or not it does or should apply to our valued personal relationships. And without doing any empirical work to support the descriptive claim, we can formulate and defend a substantive conditional claim. If people (who are suitably trained and prepared so as to avoid our 5 caveats) respond to these counterfactual situations regarding valued personal relationships in a way that manifests a resistance to replacement with mistake-free “upgrades” across worlds, then this shows something deeply interesting and important about the way they value those relationships. Perhaps the descriptive claim is wrong, though, and our valued personal relationships are irreplaceable merely in the same sense – weak irreplaceability – in which a relationship to a family heirloom is irreplaceable. Of course, this is not equivalent to saying that family heirlooms themselves are just as irreplaceable, let alone as valuable, as are people.

IV.

There is another kind of personal relationship that deserves special attention, and this is the relationship we have with ourselves. You might wonder if valuing your relationship with yourself is just the same as valuing yourself. I think not. There is a distinction here, just as much as there is a distinction between valuing another person and valuing your relationship with that person. We can value ourselves, but we can also value our relationship with our self. Many of us want to know ourselves, be proud of ourselves, interact with ourselves, spend time with ourselves, etc. These are all marks of personal relationships. These attitudes and interests require the existence of self-awareness (among other things), not just the mere presence of a self. Intrapersonal relationships are possible because we are capable of reflecting on ourselves and (among other things) enjoying, admiring, and caring about what we find. Like all personal relationships, one’s relationship to oneself can be valued or not valued. This can depend upon whether we enjoy our own company, find ourselves to be a source of pleasure or admiration, learn from ourselves, and so on. Let us put aside those unfortunate cases in which one does not value this most personal of relationships, and consider only those in which the relationship with oneself is valued. So, the person values herself for her own particularity and history and not just because, say, she sees herself as a means to some valuable end. Such a person is likely self-satisfied, comfortable in her own skin, pleased with her situation, or proud of her accomplishments and traits.

But even those of us who value our relationships with ourselves recognize that mistakes have been made. As with the examples from §1, these mistakes can be of two different kinds. First, we could have made mistakes that, in themselves, did not immediately or directly concern our

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9 Brian Weatherson advocates a similar role for narrative thought experiments. See: http://tar.weatherson.org/2010/08/24/surveys-and-thought-experiments/
relationship with our self, but nevertheless had such consequences down the road. I understand this type of situation as one in which we perform an action that is not in itself self-defining, but nevertheless it has later effects that partially shape our identity. Here ‘identity’ is used in some vague sense that is supposed to capture our conceptions of ourselves as having a core personality, character, and history. This means that, by changing our identity, the mistake eventually changed the person (our self) who is the object of our relationship. Second, we could have made mistakes that directly affected our relationship with our self by directly shaping our identity or relationship to it. This could be by making a decision or performing an action, in the normal sense, that contributes to our self-definition. Or, it could also be by making a reflective decision to embrace a part of our self – i.e., I decide to enter into a relationship with that person (e.g., I identify with or affirm some aspect of myself, especially some aspect that is self-defining).\(^{10}\)

I could have been a better person and done more with my life. I have made mistakes, and these mistakes partially shaped the person who I am today. The mistakes that I have in mind were not means to a greater good nor did they just so happen, by good luck, to have this result. Rather, I would have been a better person, by my own standards, had I not done those things. Not only would I have been a better person, I would have been more self-satisfied and proud of myself. In other words, it seems that I would have had a relationship with myself that is better than the relationship that I actually have with myself. If these mistakes concern self-defining actions, I also would have been, in a very natural sense, a different person. So do I prefer the counterfactual situation, in which I do not make those mistakes and I have a relationship with a different and improved version of my actual self, to my actual relationship with myself?

It is helpful to imagine a case with concrete details. Imagine that you squandered your youth on many nights of drinking and other minor vices, rather than devoting yourself (as you easily could have done) to more worthwhile pursuits. Suppose you believe that you made a mistake in the career that you chose – you think you should have pursued a life of woodworking, rather than the academic life. You also think it was a mistake not to have taken that promotion early in your career that would have required you to move outside of your comfort zone (both professionally and geographically), but likely would have made you more successful within your field and more satisfied with your social life. Now, things of value nevertheless did come from your actual decisions. You enjoyed the nights of partying, and you are comfortable with the inclination toward such activities that it left in you to this day. You also think that there is value (not just in itself, but for you) in the career you have pursued. And you are content with the workplace and city you chose to remain in. Each of these decisions played a significant role in shaping the person who you are, such that you would have been a different person had they been replaced with the relevant alternatives. After all, it is not unreasonable to think that decisions concerning what one finds pleasure in as a pastime, what one does as a career, where one lives and how one does in that career are self-defining.\(^{11}\) You are certainly content with the person you are, but you also realize that you could have done better. With all these suppositions in place, and with the 5

\(^{10}\) Here I have in mind something like Harry Frankfurt’s notion of identification, as introduced in a series of articles reprinted in Frankfurt (1988).

\(^{11}\) If you do not think that these decisions are self-defining enough to make you the person who you are, either in terms of their quality or quantity, then I invite you to add or alter the decisions as needed.
caveats from the previous section in mind, would you prefer the counterfactual situation (in which the mistakes are erased) to the actual valued relationship that you have with yourself?

This is the strong irreplaceability question as it applies to intrapersonal relationships, at least on the assumption that you would have been a different person – had a different practical or agential identity, we might say – had these decisions or others gone otherwise. I want to avoid any substantive discussion of whether, strictly speaking, the present case involves a literal substitution of a relationship with oneself for a relationship with another self, such that it exactly parallels the interpersonal cases. I think it does, but there are skeptics who will claim that you could not have had an intrapersonal relationship with a distinct self – that is impossible. All that is possible is a relationship with a qualitatively different self. So be it.

At this point it is worth noting that the issue of strong irreplaceability can arise not only with respect to individuals, but also with respect to their traits. Many of our friends and relatives have distinctive quirks and habits that we might not judge to be best from a detached point of view. That is, among other things, we would not encourage or welcome them in other people. But we see some value in our friend possessing these distinctive quirks, and perhaps we have an attachment to these actual traits such that we would not prefer a counterfactual situation in which such quirks are replaced with more appropriate (or simply better) traits. The suggestion is that we find not only such people to be strongly irreplaceable, but also certain distinctive ways that they are. Think of the “flaws” in our family, friends, or lovers that we find endearing. Perhaps your husband has a peculiar taste in clothes. At the onset of your relationship, you preferred a man with more standard tastes. You still do, in the sense that if you were to divorce you would not want to date men with similar habits of dress. But given your husband’s actual taste in clothes, you would not have him otherwise. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” we often say about many charming (and sometimes even frustrating) imperfections. This want signals strong irreplaceability if the attachment to this trait – its resistance to replacement – extends across worlds. But we must also be certain that this really is treated as a flaw, where necessary means to a greater good do not count as flaws. For example, it is not a flaw if the woman does not think she would have been quite as amused, say, if her husband had better fashion sense. For a more serious case, consider the parents of a Down Syndrome child who would not want their child to be otherwise. Yet before conception their stated preferences would be otherwise, as are their preferences for future children. This same point about our attachment to flaws, imperfections, and the like can apply when we consider our own quirks as well. So even if the skeptic is correct and it is incoherent to wonder about a relationship with another self, it is certainly coherent to wonder about our preferences concerning a relationship with ourself equipped with different traits.

We sometimes do say that we wish we had someone else’s life. In saying this we might be saying something easily understandable – e.g., I merely wish that my life had been graced with their good fortune when it comes to money, talent, health, or looks. Of course we all would like for our lives to go better, and so too for our relationships with others. But there is a difference between wanting your life to go better and wanting a different identity – to literally be another

self. This is like the difference between wanting your relationship with your daughter to be better and wanting a different daughter altogether.

So, what to say about the descriptive and normative questions here? There is empirical data on how people react regarding mistakes in their lives and their attitudes toward counterfactual situations in which their decisions are better in these regards. These studies do show that people, unsurprisingly, have regrets and wish things had gone otherwise with respect to many things. One significant meta-analysis of regret studies shows that the most commonly expressed regrets concern, in order, one’s education, career, romances, and parenting. Regrets about oneself – self-improvement – came next. But regrets and counterfactual preferences concerning mistakes that are not valued do not have bearing on the rather nuanced situations that we are concerned with here. For example, the subjects presumably do not value the fact that they lack a college education, say. Or, in the other situation, they might value their marriage and children, but simply think that those same valued relationships could have been achieved at a later date. For those who regret having children so early (a common regret) it would be worth asking them if they are imagining themselves giving birth to the very same children, say, but only 5 years after their actual birth dates. If they express regret at marrying their spouse or having their children altogether and view these as mistakes, then that would seem to show that they do not really value those relationships. I will simply remain neutral on the question of whether our valued intrapersonal relationships and attachments to our own valued personal traits are or should be strongly irreplaceable.

Our self-defining decisions shape not only ourselves, but also our preferences. In fact, one might think that one’s preferences constitute one’s self or is at least expressive of the self. One could use this point to support the claim that people will tend to prefer a relationship with their actual self to counterfactual replacements. This is because one’s actual self-defining decisions have helped produce a system of preferences that favors those very decisions. For example, by choosing an academic life I have, over time, naturally developed a system of preferences that values that lifestyle over its reasonable alternatives. (Though, the converse could happen as well – familiarity breeds contempt, they say.) And I can be aware of this fact, all the while acknowledging that, had I chosen an alternative career, I likely would have naturally developed a system of preferences that values a career in woodworking over its reasonable alternatives. So, our actual self-defining decisions could cause us to possess values that produce strong attachments to the actual course of things. Note that this is not a situation in which the person’s judgments are biased, as described in Caveat #2 from the previous section. The bias of concern

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13 Roese and Summerville (2005). Here is a nice summary of the primary regrets: “Education is the number one life regret, accounting for 32.2% of all reported regrets (SD = 1.89). This is a strikingly consistent finding, confirmed by a wide margin in all but two data sets (those exceptions being Landman et al., 1995, and Data Set 3 of Landman & Manis, 1992). Career ranked number two (22.3%, SD = 3.28), romance ranked number three (14.8%, SD = 2.34), parenting ranked number four (10.2%, SD = 2.17), self ranked five (5.47%, SD = 2.52), and leisure ranked six (2.55%, SD = 2.34). These top six biggest regrets accounted for 86.4% of all regrets mentioned across all participants.” (1276)

14 Gary Watson, in his “Free Agency”, made the claim that one cannot dissociate oneself (completely, at least) from one’s evaluational system, since that system constitutes one’s very standpoint. He later backed off from this claim, though, in his “Free Action and Free Will”. Both articles are reprinted in Watson (2004).
there was that a preference might be stated which does not truly reflect the agent’s values. The point made here is that the agent’s values are, to a large extent, likely the product of her self-defining decisions. And not all of these decisions were the best – in our liberal use of term, they count as “mistakes” – as judged by the agent herself.

There are also some interesting connections between our attitudes towards our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships to consider. This is because we are very much social creatures. Our practical identities are, to some significant extent, defined by our interpersonal relationships. This could be because the nature of valued personal relationships – like friendships, romances, and parenting – requires that we adopt the ends of those we value as our own. If our interpersonal relationships are strongly irreplaceable, this could make our intrapersonal relationship strongly irreplaceable as well. If one sees the core of his identity as defined by his relationships with his wife and children, and he takes these relationships to be strongly irreplaceable, then he very well might take his relationship with himself to be strongly irreplaceable as well. He would not wish to replace his actual life as a husband and father with a counterfactual situation containing a relationship with a different wife and son who provide a relationship that is a bit better than the actual valued familial relationship. This is because his relationships with his wife and children are strongly irreplaceable, and he would have to replace these relationships to change his intrapersonal relationship (on our assumption that these familial relationships are core to his practical identity). We could also run this argument in the opposite direction. If one’s intrapersonal relationship is strongly irreplaceable and the core of one’s practical identity is defined by her interpersonal relationships, then this could make her interpersonal relationships strongly irreplaceable as well.

V.

If valued personal relationships such as friendship are strongly irreplaceable, then we have a very simple and effective objection against utilitarian (and other consequentialist) accounts of friendship and other valued personal relationships. At least, we would have a strong objection against our actual attitudes toward friendship. Utilitarian theories have at least a chance of accounting for the weak irreplaceability of these relationships. This is because there is utilitarian value in preserving the valued connections we have to those particular people with whom we share a history. That is, there is utilitarian value in preserving these connections within a world. But in the counterfactual situations I have presented, and which are used in framing strong irreplaceability, the valued connections to particular people with which the person shares a history are preserved within that world. The substitution under consideration is only modal. And the cases have been constructed such that the counterfactual worlds score higher than does the actual world with respect to other utilitarian values. If no personal connection is broken within a world, and the counterfactual world otherwise fares better or at least as well by utilitarian standards, then it seems that utilitarian theories cannot accept the claim that the actual world situation is to be preferred. They could insist on this claim, of course. But I think that our natural sentiments push otherwise.

15 Kapur (1991), p. 484, makes the claim that our friendships partially constitute our identities. This claim is also implicit, I think, among all who think that friendship requires taking on the ends of our friends as our own.
Of course, establishing the descriptive claim about strong irreplaceability only shows us where our sentiments lie. A defender of utilitarianism could object that our attitudes here are misleading, and they only show that utilitarianism cannot account for our current attitudes toward friendships. And after all, moral theories like utilitarianism are often presented in a revisionary spirit. A utilitarian could insist that strong irreplaceability, assuming it to be a fact, is a mistaken attitude that should be modified. The utilitarian could even go so far as to claim that this attitude can be tolerated, as it is an innocent falsehood that does not prevent a greater good, though it should be acknowledged (at least by theorists) as a mistake.

I see at least 3 significant problems with this rebuttal from the utilitarian. First, it is not clear that human nature is such that we can change our attitudes toward these relationships. And it is unacceptable for a moral theory to demand us to do what is so contrary to human nature. Further, even if modification is not demanded by the utilitarian, we should resist a moral theory that judges some of our most core attitudes – those concerning valued personal relationships – to be false. Second, there is obviously a substantive debate over the source of morality and value. Our attitudes, sentiments, and the like are one live contender. Again, assuming that strong irreplaceability is widespread, that fact itself partially constitutes a value judgment that runs contrary to that of utilitarianism. And third, the revision that the utilitarian here suggests – be it in practice (modifying our attitudes) or just in theory (judging these widespread attitudes to be false) – is a revision that strikes to the core of our humanity. It is one thing to revise attitudes about a rather esoteric, minor, or isolated case. It is something altogether to say that our attitudes about valued personal relationships are mistaken in a systematic way. These attitudes are at the core of our humanity and identity.

So much for the challenge to utilitarianism; now onto the qualifications. Even if strong irreplaceability is true – in both its descriptive and normative senses – I do not think that utilitarian considerations can never justify preferring personal relationships from the counterfactual situation over our actual world valued relationships. It is just that there would have to be substantial (of course, this is a terribly vague qualification) utilitarian benefit that comes with the replacement. But even granting this, the objection to pure utilitarianism stands. For the utilitarian, the counterfactual situation is to be preferred whenever it contains better personal relationships or greater utilitarian benefits of some other kind. This much is still denied.

Many of us philosophers are too prone to embrace extremes and accept absolutes. I have written of irreplaceability as if it is an absolute – under no conditions would something that is irreplaceable be sacrificed or substituted. Common speech reveals that this tendency is widespread – e.g., “I would do anything for my friends,” many of us say to express some very sincere and strongly felt conviction. But I doubt that absolute irreplaceability (weak or strong) is true of many of the things that we sincerely say are irreplaceable. Things can be more or less irreplaceable, in the sense that our resistance to loss or replacement could be more or less. And though I think that at least some of my friends are irreplaceable, I can conceive of some situations in which I would opt for their loss or, well, replacement. But these would be highly unusual situations in which the costs of not losing the friend would be too great. For example, it could be that a great harm would come to others if I did not sacrifice this friendship. Maybe even an incredible opportunity at another relationship, mutually exclusive with a current relationship, would also be enough. Though, here the sense of irreplaceability fades. But personal
relationships that are strongly irreplaceable, even if not in an absolute sense, nevertheless reveal a non-utilitarian valuing. The subject would not prefer that these relationships be replaced, even across worlds, with personal relationships that are a bit better or are surrounded with modestly augmented benefits of other kinds. And this is enough to pose a problem for utilitarianism, even if the threat or promise of great consequences would make us prefer replacement.

In the introduction I said that, in general, it is irrational to claim that you have made some kind of mistake but, nevertheless, to insist that you would do it all over again if you could. If you make a mistake, then you should prefer mistake-free alternatives. I then claimed that this is normally true of mistakes, but that valued personal relationships prove to be the exception. But even if you are convinced that we do and even should treat these relationships as strongly irreplaceable, you might wonder how this at all bears on the rationality question. On this point I find a passage from Harry Frankfurt helpful:

Rationality belongs distinctively to the essential nature of a human being. If we regard a judgment or a choice as opposed to human nature – that is, if it strikes us as unnatural or inhuman – we are inclined to think of it as therefore involving a defect of reason.16

There is nothing irrational about these attitudes if they are part of our nature. If more needs to be said on their behalf, we could also note that such attitudes are certainly harmless and, I think, rather endearing.

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