

Regret in Homeric Epic

Regret is not included among “primary” emotions, but generally regarded as universal (see, for example, Gilovich et al. 2003). This paper considers “regret—sadness, frustration, anger— felt by a person or group about a decision or action from the past. Regret is counterfactual—it is experienced only by when people imagine how they could have acted differently in the past, usually to achieve a better outcome. Not all regret is remorse; often people regret choices that were not morally wrong, but had poor outcomes; but it always requires that present-ego revisit the mind of past-ego.

Homeric Greek has no word for “regret.” Nonetheless, the emotion is represented. Perhaps the clearest example is Helen at *Il.* 3. 173-6:

ὥς ὄφελεν θάνατός μοι ἄδειν κακὸς ὀππότε δεῦρο
υἱεῖ σφῶ ἐπόμην θάλαμον γνωτούς τε λιποῦσα
παῖδά τε τηλυγέτην καὶ ὀμηλικίην ἐρατεινήν. (175)
ἀλλὰ τά γ’ οὐκ ἐγένοντο· τὸ καὶ κλαίουσα τέτηκα.

I wish that cruel death had pleased me when I followed your son here, leaving my marriage-chamber, and my friends, and my cherished daughter and my delightful agemates. But that did not happen. So I am worn away as I cry.

Similarly, Odysseus says that it would have been better, κέρδιον ἦεν, if he had not waited in the Cyclops’ cave (*Od.* 9.228–30), Hector that it would be better if he had listened to Polydamas (*Il.* 22.103), and Pandarus similarly regrets that he did not bring horses to Troy (*Il.* 5.201–16). Such expressions are not limited to regrets about one’s own choices (Hector says that it would have been κέρδιον if Paris had died unmarried, *Il.* 3.40–42), and there are other ways of

expressing regret, as when Achilles says ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτετύχθαι ἐάσομεν, ἀχγύμενοί περ at *Il.* 18.112 and 19.65.

The essential element in Greek regret is not wrongdoing or even error, but ignorance of the future—a decision may have been reasonable at the time, as Pandarus' was. This is not at all surprising in the Greek context, since Greek thought is so concerned with human limits. Homeric characters do not say that they should have understood more than they did, as contemporary Westerners often do. Also, Homeric characters (with one possible exception) do not regret making choices whose external consequences were what they expected, because they did not realize about what their future response to those consequences would be, or their moral standards have changed.

It may be surprising that gods sometimes also express regret (although the God of the Hebrew Bible certainly feels regrets [Gen. 6:6–7, 1 Sam. 15: 11]). Athena says that she would not have served Zeus by helping Heracles if she had known that Zeus would oppose her now:

εἰ γὰρ ἐγὼ τάδε ἦδε' ἐνὶ φρεσὶ πευκαλίμησιν
εὗτέ μιν εἰς Αἴδαο πυλάρταο προὔπεμψεν
ἐξ Ἑρέβευς ἄξοντα κύνα στυγεροῦ Αἴδαο,
οὐκ ἂν ὑπεξέφυγε Στυγὸς ὕδατος αἰπὰ ῥέεθρα. (*Il.* 8. 366–9)

If I had known this in my intelligent mind when he [Eurystheus] sent him [Heracles] to the house of Hades who keeps his gates fastened to bring the dog of hateful Hades from Erebus, he would not have escaped the steep streams of Styx.

Commentators have discussed Athena's use of Heracles, hated by Hera, as her example of her service to Zeus (see Kirk 1990 on 8.362–9 Kelley 2007, p. 60), but not her regret. This is the only passage in Homer where a form of οἶδα appears in an expression of regret, or where a the

past action has no causal connection to the present. We cannot know whether Athena is sincere, and, if she is, whether her past self would in fact have acted differently.

Zeus too expresses regret, also in a unique form, in his pity for Achilles' horses:

ἄ δειλώ, τί σφῶϊ δόμεν Πηληϊΐ ἄνακτι

θνητῶ, ὑμεῖς δ' ἐστὸν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε;

ἦ ἵνα δυστήνοισι μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἄλγε' ἔχητον; (*Il.* 17.443–5)

You poor things, why did we give you two to the lord Peleus, a mortal, while you are ageless and deathless? Was it in order that you suffer pain among unfortunate mortals?

This is the rare instance where he seems to think that he should have predicted how the horses would suffer. Zeus may not have not lacked knowledge that the horses' charioteer would die, but he seems most probable that he did not know but how both he and the horses would experience it.

Works Cited

- Gilovich, T. R. F. Wang, D. Regan, S. Nishima. 2003. Regrets of Action And Inaction Across Cultures. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 34.1: 61–72.
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