

This is the penultimate version of a paper published in *The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. Please cite only the published version: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00948705.2019.1609360>

50 free copies are available here:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/zFJPejRRy8mtAqSX4Spn/full?target=10.1080/00948705.2019.1609360>

## Agent-Regret and Sporting Glory<sup>1</sup>

Jake Wojtowicz

King's College, London

[Jake.Wojtowicz@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Jake.Wojtowicz@kcl.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** When sporting agents fail through wrongful or faulty behaviour, they should feel guilty; when they fail because of a deficiency in their abilities, they should feel shame. But sometimes we fail without being deficient and without being at fault. I illustrate this with two examples of players, Moacir Barbosa and Roberto Baggio, who failed in World Cup finals and thus cost their team the greatest prize in sport. Although both players failed, I suggest that neither was at fault and neither was deficient. I argue that we can fail through no fault of our own because our abilities are always fallible. This fallibility means that to succeed—to achieve sporting glory—we must run the risk of failure. The appropriate emotion to feel over such failures is *agent-regret*. This picture of agency suggests that sporting agents and observers should not take up what I call the “critical position”: the idea that someone who fails must be deficient or must have been at fault. This allows for a softer, but also more accurate, attitude towards our own failure and the failures of others. I end by suggesting that the fallibility of our abilities is made clear through playing or watching sport, and this can illuminate life more broadly.

**Keywords:** agent-regret; failure; shame; guilt; skills; Bernard Williams; Joseph Raz

In this article, I explore the place of agent-regret in sport. I start by introducing ordinary regret, guilt, and shame. Regret responds to a variety of bad things, guilt responds to my fault or wrongdoing, shame responds to my inability to live up to some standard, agent-regret responds to a failure of my action.

How can my action fail, without me being at fault or failing to live up to some standard? I argue that agency is based on fallible abilities: even when we exercise our

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments: Thanks to Francis George for discussing this paper with me and offering several helpful examples, Joseph Walsh, Emily Ryall, and Alfred Archer for insightful and constructive comments on this paper, and Massimo Renzo and David Owens for discussions of the issues in this paper. Special thanks go to Chris McMullan for countless discussions of sports and philosophy and for helping me find numerous cases of agent-regret in sport. The research for this article was completed whilst I was funded by the LAHP, the Aristotelian Society's Student Bursary, and the King's College London Philosophy Department's Peter Goldie Award.

abilities properly they might fail. Just as we can succeed when luck is on our side, as with the free-kick that goes in, we can also fail with the free-kick that sails wide. As humans, the only way we can act is through these fallible abilities and to be sporting agents who seek sporting glory through the success of our abilities is to open ourselves to failure. This should lead us to accept a more nuanced view of how sporting agents and observers should react to these failures. It is not always appropriate for commentators or fans to play the blame game, nor for players to feel guilty; rather we should recognize that people can fail without being at fault and agent-regret is the appropriate first-personal reaction to such failures.

### **Regret, guilt, and shame.**

When it comes to sports, a wide variety of people might come to regret some sporting failure. I might regret that the Rochester Red Wings had a bad season or that Leroy Sané kept getting called offside against Liverpool in the 2017-18 Champions League quarter-finals. Someone who regrets that Sané kept getting called offside does not need to be involved in the action or hugely invested in what is happening.<sup>2</sup> Regret arises when we think that it would have been better had things turned out otherwise, and anyone who can think it would have been better had things turned out otherwise can feel regret (Williams 1981, 27).

But some emotions arise only in participants. How might Sané, or a Red Wings player, feel? Maybe they'll be annoyed at others: Sané might have been angry at the officials, whom he thought were wrongly flagging him offside, or he might have reacted with a sanguine acceptance that sometimes things do not always go your way. Our focus is on a more specific sort of emotion: not just the emotions we might feel when things do not work out, but on the negative emotions that we direct towards *ourselves* or towards what *we have done*.

Sometimes the appropriate emotion is something like guilt. One feels guilty when one thinks one was at *fault* (Williams 1981, 30) or did something *wrong* (Scarre 2017, 570–71; Baron 1988, 260–61; Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011, 73–82).<sup>3</sup> Now, one might construe guilt as 'moral' and think that guilt can only apply in situations in which one might let others down, such as team sports, or cheat, such as by doping. But we can still be at fault or do the wrong thing in non-moral domains. What sort of cases do I have in mind? Here are a few cases of doing the wrong thing, or being at fault for some failure:

- A rugby player kissing his badge before touching down for a game-winning try, leaving an opponent enough time catch up and knock the ball out of his hands.
- A tennis player failing to take account of the wind and thus hitting the ball out (Tannenbaum 2007, 53).

---

<sup>2</sup> The tone of the regret we feel can be altered by our relations to a particular event (Wallace 2013, 37–42). A fan will feel a deeper regret than a mildly interested party; I just mean to bring out the fact that ordinary regret does not presuppose any close involvement.

<sup>3</sup> Even if there are forms of guilt that do not involve wrongdoing or fault, such as survivor guilt (H. Morris 1988; Velleman 2005), there is a recognisable form of guilt that does involve something like fault and this is the relevant notion for this paper.

- A footballer pulling back an attacker and earning a red card despite the fact his team-mate was covering and could have made the tackle.
- A footballer trying to score a wondergoal rather than playing in her teammate for a tap-in (Smith 2015, 107–8).
- A player rushing a set-piece and messing up.
- A player letting her anger get the better of her and punching an opponent under the eyes of the referee.

Of course, some of these things are worse than others: the rugby player deserves to feel much worse for what he's done than the tennis player should feel for a slightly thoughtless shot; this is because his behaviour is a more severe wrong both insofar as how it disrespects his opponent and because of how it stops his team from winning the game. Yet all of these actions might lead to some degree of guilt. From minor mistakes to major errors of judgment, from rash decisions to narcissistic ones, guilt concerns doing wrong or being at fault.

**Guilt** is a self-directed negative emotion that focusses on one's fault or wrongdoing.

In other cases, people do not just feel bad over some fault or wrongdoing, rather they feel bad about the sort of person they are (Deonna, Rodogno, and Teroni 2011, chap. 3). This is the domain of shame. Emily Ryall, in this volume, gives a clear overview of the various features we might include in an account of shame (Ryall forthcoming). I will not weigh in on the debate of how exactly we should construe shame. What matters for our purposes is, as Ryall points out, that shame concerns failing against some standard; not only does my action fail to meet a standard (I exhibited a fault or it was wrong), rather this failure says something about *what I am*. In shame, I fail to meet a standard of being a certain sort of person.

Shame won't arise just because of any failure to be a certain way. I must think that being that way is important. Ryall suggests that shame arises when we fail to achieve some core value (Ryall forthcoming). One of my core values might be that I am a decent squash player: I think that I *should* have a good backhand because decent squash players have a good backhand. I am ashamed by my poor backhand because it shows that I am deficient as a squash player, and it is important to me that I am a good squash player. But I do not think of myself as a basketballer, which is why my inability to slam dunk the ball arouses no shame.<sup>4</sup>

Shame and guilt can arise from the same incident. We can even feel both at the same time. Of course, when we feel these emotions it can be hard to work out which exactly we are feeling; but there are various ways in which we might distinguish shame and guilt, such as in terms of the actions they inspire. The point I'll focus on is that these emotions have different *objects*. Take the player who goes for the wondergoal rather than playing in the easy pass. She might come to realize that she does this because she's narcissistic. And she might see how this is a flaw and wish she was more of a team player. The player who punches the opponent might be ashamed that she lacks self-control. Other players do not show enough commitment, or they're just bad at a backhand volley,

---

<sup>4</sup> Ori Herstein offers the dunk example at (Herstein 2013, 176–77).

or not fit enough. Sometimes players are *deficient* as sportspeople in general, or specifically as, say, footballers. And when we are deficient, we might feel shame.

**Shame** is a self-directed negative emotion that focusses on one's failure to meet a standard of being a certain way (and one thinks it is important for one to be that way).

Guilt and shame both play an important role in sport—sportspeople often do the wrong thing or fail to meet the standards they, or others, set. These emotions are prevalent in sport and to understand these sports, and our attitudes towards ourselves and others as participants in them, we need to understand these emotions. But what about a player who shows no fault, does no wrong, does not fail to meet any standard, yet still fails? How should a player respond to the misplaced but well-planned shot or to the shot that is well-executed but just fails to stay in because the wind gusts it out of play? And why would such reactions be important? In the rest of this paper, I will argue that agent-regret is the appropriate reaction here and that it is a central emotion in sport.

A proper understanding of agent-regret and the underlying picture of agency will allow us to better understand the failures of sporting agents; and it will allow us to resist a particularly noxious element we can find manifested in sports:

**The critical position** holds that whenever a player fails it is because she was at fault or failed to meet some standard; she deserves to be criticised as at fault, or as deficient.<sup>5</sup>

Commentators, fans, teammates, and the sporting agent herself can all take up this position. In the first-personal case it leads to guilt or shame, in the third-personal it leads to blame. My picture will suggest that this is mistaken and a softer—and more accurate—judgment is due. I will focus on the first-personal reaction of agent-regret, but my arguments tell just as much against the critical position as adopted by commentators, fans, and teammates.

## Two sporting cases

I want to look at two losing moments from World Cup finals to motivate why we need to make sense of agent-regret. They both show highly skilled and committed players who—through no fault of their own—failed in momentous ways.

*Roberto Baggio missing his penalty against Brazil in 1994.* Roberto Baggio was a great penalty taker: 'I don't want to brag but I've only ever missed a couple of penalties in my career' (Baggio 2002). As he stepped up to take his penalty in the 1994 World Cup final, he had the following thought:

[Cláudio] Taffarel [the Brazilian goalkeeper] always dived so I decided to shoot for the middle, about halfway up, so he couldn't get it with his feet. It

---

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Alfred Archer for offering this position as a contrast.

was an intelligent decision because Taffarel did go to his left, and he would never have got to the shot I planned. (Baggio 2002)

Baggio's approach was smart. He didn't just decide to thwack it, he didn't go for the showy option; rather he carefully thought where he would put his penalty. But he missed. 'I failed that time' (Baggio 2002). No matter that two other Italy players had missed already so Brazil would have won had they scored their last penalty even if Baggio had scored his. Because he missed that penalty Italy lost the World Cup.

*Moacir Barbosa conceding against Uruguay in 1950.* Moacir Barbosa was Brazil's goalkeeper for the 1950 World Cup. In the final game, Brazil faced Uruguay and were drawing 1-1.<sup>6</sup> Had the score remained 1-1, Brazil would, under the system in place, have won the World Cup. But Barbosa, just off his line, conceded a shot from Alcides Gigghia. Maybe we put this down as a mistake or a misjudgement. But on at least one plausible understanding of this situation, Barbosa did the right thing. He was beaten at the near post because he was slightly off his line, but Barbosa quite reasonably expected Gigghia to put in a cross, so he prepared for one by being a little off his line. He did the right thing, he just got unlucky: in preparing for a cross he made himself more vulnerable at the near post, yet had he covered his near post he would have been more vulnerable to a cross.

Neither player was deficient, and neither did anything wrong nor exhibited any sort of fault. Thus, the critical position would be inappropriate here: it would be inappropriate to feel guilt or shame, or for third-parties to blame these players. They failed, but this was through no fault of their own. Agent-regret is, I suggest, the appropriate first-personal reaction to such failure.

### **Agent-regret**

What exactly is agent-regret? Bernard Williams introduced the notion, and provided us with perhaps the most vivid case: 'The lorry driver who, through no fault of his, runs over a child' (Williams 1981, 28). How could he run over a child through no fault of his own? Perhaps the child was walking alongside the road and stumbled, too late for the driver to do anything about it. The driver was not drunk nor was he speeding; if he was, he would have been at fault. But, on an ordinary understanding of what it means to be at fault, we can say that the lorry driver did nothing wrong nor was he at fault. Williams's point was that although the driver was not at fault, we do not expect him to feel mere regret. His involvement means that his emotion should be directed to his own actions, rather than just at the badness of the outcome. So he should not feel ordinary regret, nor should he feel guilt (Williams 1981, 30). Williams thought that instead that the driver should feel agent-regret.

When one feels agent-regret, one evaluates one's action as bad, as a failure. The lorry driver failed insofar as he, rather than driving safely, killed a child. Yet we should not be misled into thinking that agent-regret occurs only in horrific cases. Agent-regret is commonplace. We might feel agent-regret after spilling another person's pint, dropping red wine on a white couch, or bumping into someone. I will focus on fairly momentous

---

<sup>6</sup> For brief accounts of this event see (Bellos 2000; Caple 2017; Wilson 2013, 136-39; Yousif 2012).

events like Baggio's miss, but the Sunday League player might also feel agent-regret for fluffing a shot.

**Agent-regret** is a self-directed negative emotion that focusses on one's failure in action, where this failure is through no fault of one's own and does not imply that one failed to meet a standard.<sup>7</sup>

Baggio and Barbosa should feel agent-regret. On my understanding, neither player did anything wrong, neither player demonstrated any flaw in themselves. Their well-honed skills that they appropriately chose to use failed to bring about the intended outcome. Their actions were bad because those actions were failures, and this is the object of agent-regret.

But how can our actions (rather than just their outcomes) be bad—how can they be the sorts of thing that we regret—if we are not at fault? And what is it that we might feel bad about in such a case? Julie Tannenbaum provides an illuminating discussion. After exploring the case we discussed above where she hits the tennis ball out because she failed to take account of the wind, she offers a contrast case:

Now consider a situation in which my decision is flawless... yet in spite of my best intentions, effort, and attention I hit the ball out. [A] Suppose that I hit the ball out simply as a failure in execution, as happens to even the best tennis players in the world. My body does not do precisely what I instructed it to do. [B] Or suppose that I hit the ball out due to a slight increase in the wind that could not reasonably have been expected. In this case my body does what I instructed it to do, but given the wind, my action is not what I intended. How should I evaluate these actions of mine? I cannot find fault with them insofar as I look to the decisions that led to them. But I can find fault with my actions insofar as they fail to realize the end I set for myself, namely playing tennis well. So the actions are not a success.<sup>8</sup> (Tannenbaum 2007, 53)

It is a failure to hit the ball out and it is a bad thing, especially when one wants to win the game. But Tannenbaum brings out something central: that our actions can be failures, or can be bad, through no fault of our own (see also [De Wachter 1985, 54]).

In cases like *A*, it is the simple fact that 'even the best tennis player in the world' sometimes fails to execute the shot properly; even Serena Williams sometimes aims in the right spot but hits the ball too hard or too wide. In cases like *B*, it is bad luck (like a gust of wind) that intervenes and puts the ball out. Baggio and Barbosa, as presented, are cases of *A*. We can also imagine them as cases of *B*: if Taffarel had pulled off a wonder-save or Gigghia hit a sublime shot that no keeper could have stopped, we might see this as the intervention of bad luck (at least from the perspectives of Baggio or Barbosa). But in one important respect, these two points—that none of us is perfect and luck can always intervene—are similar: no matter what we do, we lack perfect control over the world. This

---

<sup>7</sup> The way in which one fails might matter to agent-regret (Williams 1981, 25–26, 36). I discuss this, as well as some developments to the attitude we should take towards our failures, in (Wojtowicz 2018).

<sup>8</sup> [A] and [B] are my labels.

is why even the best tennis player in the world sometimes fails to hit a shot successfully, and why we cannot guarantee our actions against the influence of wind or wondersaves. I now want to discuss a picture of agency that bolsters this, and which suggests that the critical position, where every failure is due to a fault or a deficiency, is wrong.

### A theory of action

Think about what counts as my action. If I am being judged for my actions, then shouldn't those judgments just focus on what is down to *me* (Nagel 1979, 25)? Add in the beguiling thought that only my *will* is in my control, then we get to the idea that what counts as my action, and judgments about me in light of this, should be based solely on the content of my will. On this picture, what counts as down to me—and what I can be judged for—depends on 'the ultimately fair basis of [my] own contribution' (Williams 1985, 194). And if we think that I deserve praise only for what I control, we get into the issues about desert in sport that concern the fact that I did not choose to have my talents or predispositions in the first place, so even these cannot form the basis of judgments about me (see Simon [2007]; Loland [2016]; Carr [1999]; S. P. Morris [2015]). But I will not discuss this debate because I will not buy into this control-based view of action and assessment.

This picture of agency has serious issues. Almost nothing in the world is in my absolute control, so virtually nothing that extends past my mind will be an action of mine (See Nagel 1979). Williams's point in introducing agent-regret was that our susceptibility to agent-regret showed that such a picture of agency is clearly mistaken (Williams 1981, 29–30). Instead of trying to argue why this conception of agency is mistaken, I want to set out an alternative that develops some thoughts from Joseph Raz, demonstrate how plausible it is, and show how it underpins both agent-regret and—the upside of this picture of action—glory in sport. On this picture, we are responsible for what we are *able* to do or avoid. Something counts as down to me if it came about due to my ability, or due to my abilities failing to bring about what I was able to bring about. We are responsible for these successes or failures.

On the control-based picture, being a human in the world is like 'being in an alien environment, tossed about on the waves of fortune whenever we venture beyond our thoughts and intentions' (Raz 2011, 237). How are we able to make a mark on the world if we are tossed about on the waves of fortune? The despairing thought—a thought we find in Nagel (1979), although one that he tries to ameliorate—is that we lack absolute control, absolute control is required for agency, so we are not agents capable of any impact on the world *qua* agents.

Raz offers us an alternative. Sometimes we gamble and are at the whim of things totally outside our influence; yet in other cases 'actions, while depending on matters over which we have little influence, are not gambles' (Raz 2011, 237). We need to distinguish between 'playing roulette' and 'cooking, eating, shopping' and other such activities (Raz 2011, 238). The former is a gamble, its result a fluke; the latter are not, even though they depend on some luck for their success. Even though these latter activities require luck, such as having the right opportunity or your stove not breaking as you fry an egg, they also require judgment over when they will (most likely) succeed, and the exercise of various skills (Raz 2011, 238).

Let's say that one has a *skill*, or an *ability* to bring about an outcome, if one *can* bring about that outcome through purposively setting out to achieve it. I have carried tea

across the room many times without spilling it, so I could have avoided spilling it this time even though I spilled it all down myself (Raz 2013, 223).<sup>9</sup> What matters on this picture is that I have the capacity, the ability, the skill to bring about this outcome.

On this account, some outcomes are lucky and are flukes, akin to Raz's gambles. In sports, this is no achievement if the wind carries my long pass into the net (Simon 2007, 13). It's barely true that I scored the goal; rather, I kicked it and it flew into the net. Here, we are tossed about by the waves of fortune. Yet sometimes we are not tossed about by these waves, we surf them. Sometimes, although I needed luck on my side, the outcome arose *in virtue* of my skill. It only happened *because* of my skill (and some luck). If an outcome arose due to my skill it is no fluke (Simon 2007, 15–16).<sup>10</sup> If it came about due to my skill, I scored the goal and I can rightly be praised for it. What's more, in such a situation I can react not just to some outcome, but to my own action. I can revel in my own success.

When agents utilise certain skills, even if they depend on luck to bear fruit, certain outcomes are down to that agent, and that agent can be held responsible for those outcomes.<sup>11</sup> That is the basic account. But Raz's own position won't help us with sporting cases. There's quite a lot of space between a gamble and something like frying an egg, which is almost certain to be successful. Raz plumps for a fairly conservative approach and thinks we are responsible for the outcomes we create in the world when they are in our 'domain of secure competence' (Raz 2011, 245). Something is in one's domain of secure competence if one can perform the task knowing that one would succeed if one tried (Raz 2013, 223). But this is too restrictive for many outcomes. It strikes me that abilities can include scoring a free-kick or hitting the bullseye. One can bring about these outcomes given one is a skilled footballer or a darts player, but one might not bring them about in many instances even when one tries, and one might not know that one would succeed if one tried.

Even when a masterful set-piece taker like David Beckham sets himself to score the free-kick, he might not score; and he might not even have a probabilistically high chance of doing so.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is no fluke that he scores.<sup>13</sup> This is an achievement, and it is David Beckham's achievement because his skills lead to the ball going in the net. In fact, this lack of certainty seems to be central to sporting achievement. After all, sports are partly about doing difficult things. We want sports players to do these difficult things, we want them to score free kicks or play wonderful passes. As Frans De Wachter put it, 'There is no greater thrill than the long shot that hits to the millimeter—even though no player in the world has this constantly and completely under control (or better, precisely

---

<sup>9</sup> This uses a general notion of "can" that doesn't imply that on this very occasion I could have succeeded. See (Perry 2001, 103 note 51; Raz 2011, 246–47; Honoré 1999a).

<sup>10</sup> Simon develops this as a thesis about desert: a player who hits a fluke does not deserve praise, whereas someone who gets lucky due to skill might.

<sup>11</sup> It won't always be clear whether something is down to skill or luck, and there will clearly be degrees of luck and skill involved. The distinction is "soft" (Raz 2011, 237).

<sup>12</sup> I put this in terms of making a decision and then utilising a skill. This is simplified for ease of discussion, but I intend my arguments also to apply to a more complicated picture. For a discussion of the ways in which we might consciously, or not, control our actions in the context of sports see (Papineau 2017, pt. I).

<sup>13</sup> We can add that scoring must be *guided* by his abilities, see (Perry 2001, 82–83).

for this reason)' (De Wachter 1985, 58). Our skills are fallible, and they need luck. Sporting glory seems to rely on these difficult and imperfect skills.<sup>14</sup>

But these fallible abilities come with a cost.<sup>15</sup> They leave us responsible for the outcomes we create in the world but also for things that arise because of our actions but which we could have avoided through our success (Raz 2011, 244–45).<sup>16</sup> For instance, someone who picks up a vase 'which slips from his fingers and breaks' is responsible for smashing the vase *because* he could pick up a vase safely (Raz 2011, 244).<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the lorry driver did not intend to hit the child, but it came about as a consequence of his actions and he could have avoided that outcome: the driver has driven many times before and not killed anyone. He could have driven successfully, but through no fault of his own he did not. His misfortune is that his skill in driving safely did not allow him complete control over the world.

Return to sports. David Beckham can feel annoyed at himself for missing just because he *could* score. He is responsible for missing and feels bad about it because he could have avoided it by *scoring*. But the reason he did not score is not some deficiency in himself, nor is it that he took the wrong option; rather, he did not score because he did not get the right luck. Yet because he was able to score but failed—albeit through no fault of his own—his reaction to this is not like ordinary regret. It isn't just that the ball didn't go in the net; rather, *he missed*. His emotion is directed at his own action: it is agent-regret.

### Sport and agent-regret

We can fail through no fault of our own because to succeed requires luck and sometimes we do all that is in our power but we do not get that luck. Agent-regret is the other side of sporting glory: we lack total control over the world so to achieve anything worthwhile we need to use fallible skills and when we succeed we can bask in this glory; but even if we do our best, even if we are neither deficient nor at fault, we can fail and feel agent-regret. I want to turn to two final points. Firstly, how this bears on Barbosa and Baggio and what this means for the critical position; secondly, I want to consider how reflecting on sport might help us to see the significance of agent-regret in life more generally.

Let's return to the cases we discussed above. How should Baggio or Barbosa feel? Although Baggio—in accepting both that he failed but also that it wasn't, at least to some extent, his fault—does exhibit some of the symptoms of agent-regret, it's clear from Baggio's (2002) description of the event that there are many things he could, and did, feel. Mardean Isaac describes Baggio as a classic case of shame: '...the pressure of millions sealed him into himself, with nowhere to look but the ground, where alone his gaze could

---

<sup>14</sup> I do not set out what sporting glory is, but in linking it to the successful exercise of certain skills I hope to avoid the idea that glory must be equated with winning. Arsenal in the late-Wenger years achieved some glorious moments of sublime skill but won little.

<sup>15</sup> Although the following sketch is brief and underdeveloped, I hope that it is a plausible outline of responsibility for failures.

<sup>16</sup> Emily Ryall asked whether this is *causal* responsibility. In short, yes. But I prefer to see this responsibility as thicker than *merely* causal and as akin to what Tony Honoré calls "outcome responsibility", see (Honoré 1999b). I cannot here explore the ways that this differs from certain understandings of causal responsibility.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Perry (2001) offers a similar account, stressing our abilities to avoid certain outcomes.

not be met by the world's' (Isaac 2018). In Barbosa's case, we find talk of him feeling guilty, but this is combined with indignation and anger over how so many others blamed him.<sup>18</sup> It should be no surprise that such significant events arouse a multitude of emotions. My aim is not to say that we should expect players to have an absolutely accurate picture of what exactly went wrong and thus what exactly they should feel. Rather, my aim is to urge us to leave room for agent-regret and to recognize that often guilt or shame are inappropriate.

What would it involve for Baggio or Barbosa to feel agent-regret? For one, they would have to see themselves as not doing anything *wrong*. I think that is the right result. They thought about something (or it was instinctual) and made a good decision. Yes, this decision backfired for Barbosa and Baggio's execution failed, but—in one sense—they did as well as they could do. They put their well-honed abilities into play and these abilities just didn't work out. Baggio's ability misfired and Barbosa, in choosing to step off of his line, made it harder to save the near-post shot, but he (arguably) did the right thing in trying to stop the cross. Of course, they didn't do as well as they could do in another sense: Baggio could have scored, Barbosa could have saved the shot. They took all the right steps so were not at fault or deficient. But because each player could have succeeded and did not, it is *his* failure. Thus agent-regret is appropriate.

Isn't this just a recognition that our abilities are not good enough? Isn't shame the appropriate emotion? Here are two considerations against this thought. Firstly, what Baggio regrets is not any inadequacy, rather the object of his regret is his own *action*. The picture of action that I have sketched above *underpins* this: it lets us say that it was indeed his own action, and that action reflects on him because it arose due to his fallible skills. But agent-regret does not involve any *judgment* of his skills. Secondly, even if agent-regret must involve the recognition that we are fallible, surely this is different to shame, or at least to paradigmatic instances of shame. Fallibility is not inadequacy unless we start to feel ashamed by our very humanity. If agent-regret is a sort of shame, it is a peculiar one worth studying on its own.

We need to leave space for agent-regret because neither shame nor guilt is appropriate, and agents are liable to gerrymander their emotion into either guilt, shame, or mere regret. By understanding agent-regret, we can better explain how they *should* feel, and move towards a better understanding (for us as philosophers, and for the participants in sports) of how sportspeople can react to such failures. We should recognise that the critical position and its tendency to encourage blame or guilt is not always appropriate; instead we should understand that not all of our failures come from faults or the inability to meet a standard. Players should recognise this and that agent-regret, rather than guilt or shame, is the appropriate reaction to such failings; fans, commentators, and teammates might regret the player's failure, but they should not blame the player.

Of course, agent-regret can also be destructive. It might put one off of ever playing sport again. But, although I haven't the space to develop this here, Williams was clear that agent-regret had an 'expression' that involved trying to make up for one's failure (Williams 1981, 28). Perhaps agent-regret can urge us from our past failures onto future glories. What's more, the better our skills the less likely we are to fail. As Robert Simon put it, 'his skill is what enables him to be lucky more often than others' (Simon 2007, 15). More importantly, agent-regret will not involve the damaging sorts of thought

---

<sup>18</sup> Not to mention the undercurrent of racism, see the discussions above in note 4.

involved in shame (and perhaps guilt) that involve the sportsperson thinking they are deficient or at fault.<sup>19</sup> Yet my point is not to show that agent-regret is useful, although I think it is. Rather my point is that it is appropriate, and to properly respond to our failures we should make space for agent-regret.

I want to end by reflecting on why sports are apt at illuminating agent-regret, and how this might affect our views other areas of our lives. Baggio shows us that sometimes we can do something and, despite being well-skilled, we can fail; Barbosa shows us that in choosing one option you make it more likely that you succeed in stopping the cross, but you make it less likely that you save the ball at the near post. There's nothing you can do to guarantee success. Given the discrete nature of sporting contests, partially isolated from the surrounding goings on of life, sports make this fallibility particularly obvious. Much as Barbosa had to make a choice, rugby players have to sprint to catch the player who has broken through the defensive line, but in sprinting they leave themselves open to the sidestep. Tennis players, in advancing for the volley, leave themselves vulnerable to the lob, but they can't just stay on the baseline forever. Baggio was known as 'The Divine Ponytail,' but even his abilities were fallible rather than divine. None of our skills—at least none of the skills we exercise in playing sports—guarantee success. Playing or watching sport should make that obvious.

I hope that the sporting cases vividly illustrate the impact luck has on our actions. But it also seems that reflecting on sport (both philosophically, and in playing or watching) might help us take up a clearer attitude to life in general.<sup>20</sup> When we see how luck infects sports, when we see that even Lionel Messi can miskick the ball or even Paul Scholes can misplace a pass, we might be a little more sanguine about our failures and realize that, although we can achieve impressive things, we can rarely (if ever) guarantee success. Agent-regret is grounded in our status as human beings with imperfect skills. Our agency is imperfect and imprecise, yet we can perform actions that are hugely impressive. We can score goals from 40 yards or hit a perfect backhand. Much as glory comes when our abilities succeed, agent-regret comes when they fail. To feel agent-regret when one tries and fails (through no fault of one's own) is to properly respond to one's status as a sportsperson and as a human agent. We can do the best we can to achieve glory: we can hone our skills (thus avoiding shame) and can do the right thing (thus avoiding guilt). But to have a shot at glory—in sports and in life—we must run the risk of agent-regret.

## References

- Baggio, Roberto. 2002. "My Penalty Miss Cost Italy the World Cup?" *The Observer*, May 19, 2002, sec. Sport.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2002/may/19/worldcupfootball2002.football>
- Baron, Marcia. 1988. "Remorse and Agent-Regret." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 13 (1): 259–281.
- Bellos, Alex. 2000. "Moacir Barbosa." *The Guardian*, April 13, 2000, sec. News.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/apr/13/guardianobituarie.alexbellos>.

---

<sup>19</sup> For an account of how damaging shame can be, see (Ryall forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Alfred Archer for encouraging this idea.

- Caple, Alex. 2017. "Moacir Barbosa: The Goalkeeper Who Was Condemned for Life." *The Versed*. August 21, 2017. <https://www.theversed.com/65935/moacir-barbosa-condemned-life/>.
- Carr, David. 1999. "Where's the Merit If the Best Man Wins?" *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 26 (1): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.1999.9714575>.
- De Wachter, Franz. 1985. "In Praise of Chance." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* XII: 52–61.
- Deonna, Julien, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni. 2011. *In Defense of Shame: The Faces of an Emotion*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herstein, Ori J. 2013. "Responsibility in Negligence: Discussion of From Normativity to Responsibility." *Jerusalem Review of Legal Studies* 8 (1): 167–84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrls/jlt031>.
- Honoré, Tony. 1999a. "Can and Can't." In *Responsibility and Fault*, 143–60. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- . 1999b. *Responsibility and Fault*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- Isaac, Mardean. 2018. "Nothing Turns Away." *The Blizzard*. June 14, 2018. <https://www.theblizzard.co.uk/article/nothing-turns-away>.
- Loland, Sigmund. 2016. "Simon on Luck and Desert in Sport: A Review and Some Comments." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 43 (1): 15–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2015.1119048>.
- Morris, Herbert. 1988. "Nonmoral Guilt." In *Responsibility, Character, and the Emotions*, edited by Ferdinand Schoeman, 220–40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Morris, S. P. 2015. "Moral Luck and the Talent Problem." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 9 (4): 363–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2015.1121287>.
- Nagel, Thomas. 1979. "Moral Luck." In *Mortal Questions*, 24–38. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Papineau, David. 2017. *Knowing the Score: How Sport Teaches Us about Philosophy*. Constable.
- Perry, Stephen R. 2001. "Responsibility for Outcomes, Risk, and the Law of Torts." In *Philosophy and the Law of Torts*, edited by Gerald J. Postema, 72–130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. 2011. *From Normativity to Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2013. "On Normativity and Responsibility: Responses." *Jerusalem Review of Legal Studies* 8 (1): 220–34. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrls/jlt034>.
- Ryall, Emily. forthcoming. "Shame in Sport." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* ? (?): ?
- Scarre, Geoffrey. 2017. "The 'Constitutive Thought' of Regret." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 25 (5): 569–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2017.1381402>.
- Simon, Robert. 2007. "Deserving to Be Lucky: Reflections on the Role of Luck and Desert in Sports." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34 (1): 13–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2007.9714706>.
- Smith, Angela M. 2015. "Responsibility as Answerability." *Inquiry* 58 (2): 99–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2015.986851>.
- Tannenbaum, Julie. 2007. "Emotional Expressions of Moral Value." *Philosophical Studies* 132 (1): 43–57. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-006-9056-x>.
- Velleman, J. David. 2005. "Don't Worry, Feel Guilty." In *Self to Self: Selected Essays*, 156–69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Wallace, R. Jay. 2013. *The View from Here: On Affirmation, Attachment, and the Limits of Regret*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Bernard. 1981. "Moral Luck." In *Moral Luck*, 20–39. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana Press/Collins.
- Wilson, Jonathan. 2013. *The Outsider: A History of the Goalkeeper*. UK ed. edition. Orion.
- Wojtowicz, Jake. 2018. "Bernard Williams on Regarding One's Own Action Purely Externally." *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4 (1): 49–66. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2018.8>.
- Yousif, Layth. 2012. "The Tourmented Soul of Moacyr Barbosa." In *Bed with Maradona*. 2012. <http://inbedwithmaradona.com/journal/2013/4/8/the-tormented-soul-of-moacyr-barbosa>.