# Regret and forgiveness, the choice of oneself

By Michèle Croquevielle

If I look at a picture of myself from 10, 20 years ago, or from even younger, or from yesterday, do I recognize myself? Do I know it's me and not my sister or my neighbour? And how do I know it? If I recognize myself, it must be because at least I know something about me, I can "draw" some sketches of myself. Some may know very clearly who they are, others not so much. But with certainty everyone can recognize a stroke, something that defines and identifies us. And it allows us to say, when we look at photographs, "that girl isn't me, but that one is." There is an identity. Either way, when I do something I know and am able to do, especially if I can do it well, it is a great sensation of affirmation of who I am.

But sometimes I make mistakes, errors, that I only notice after I make them (sometimes even while I'm making them, impulsively, and I feel I can't help it). How do I notice? Well, there are two indicators that may help, and here I utilize one of the core proposals of Existential Analysis: being "human being" is coexisting, it is dialoguing between two realms: the self [my mind-body-spirit] and the other, the one in front of me. Then, when I make mistakes, it's my 'self' that resents it (something "makes noise" physically -my stomach tightens, or something becomes uncomfortable in some place of the body or the psyche-); or, referred to the realm of the other, I realize given something happens to the one in front of me, something changes in their face or more clearly, they lash out against me verbally or physically. Who has not accidentally hit someone on the street due to being distracted? Or, after a conversation with someone, going back home staying with a sensation of strangeness, uncomfortableness: *I told them something I shouldn't have, I have hurt or offended them, and even if it wasn't my intention, I did it.*

Doing psychology classes in university, a student asked me something about depressive patients. The question surprised me as it had a very derogatory tone towards them. My answer was accidentally "Instructive," with the goal that there no doubt was left in him, nor the other students, in how to proceed with these people and their infinite pain. On the way home, a very unpleasant sensation accompanied me, an *internal narrowing*, the opposite of what I am used to (I always end up happy and satisfied after finishing my classes). Revising what had happened and myself, I realized that, if well the content of my answer was correct, the manner was not. That student did not deserve to be put in the exposed so emphatically in his mistake. I felt very bad with him and myself. Why also myself?

What I know about me is that I am not a cruel person, I am not a hound, I do not hurt people, deep down I am a good person that does not search to inflict pain in others, and even (due to my profession) I try to help others. Definitively, the one that did that **was not me, it was not like how I am.** That person made that young person feel bad (even though he didn't say anything, but I felt it) does not resonate with me. "I don't recognize myself in that picture."

Aching pain of my own being! Because of a situation that became threatening
-not being a good teacher, or at a least sufficiently clear one, for the alumni to comprehend such seismic error-, I reacted impulsively to eradicate the threat, without considering the sensibility, the openness of the student that only wanted to learn more. Great pain, because for a moment, I abandoned myself.

**What is lost when <u>I make</u> things that are not my own?** "I" get lost in myself, the self is lost, <u>I become a stranger to myself.</u>

For Existential Analysis, regret is similar to grief: the loss of something valuable: myself. That is why it hurts so much, that explains the sadness, the sorrow.

But... Not everything is lost! There is still the possibility to recover, to recover myself. And it requires from **decision** as regret is a <u>personal act:</u> a forgiving of oneself. And what do you obtain in the act? Nothing more and nothing less than restoring myself; go over, re-draw **my own outline**, of myself: for me to feel and see what I truly am, what goes well with me and what does not. And for the other, for the other, for the community, because -even with the mistakes, the guilt, the infringement of the limits of others- regret allows me to newly find a meeting point.

In regret there is an attempt to **replenish self-value** and the limits, in the cases that oneself is the cause of damage to an other and/or oneself.

One recognizes and **admits** that it was not fine to do that, that it was a mistake. And the usual impulse is the sentiment of "I would've rather not done it!" Regret is realized, firstly, through **internal dialogue** with me about oneself's way of acting.

Kierkegaard proposes that in regret I choose myself. In that way a restructuring surges of the self in the sense of the person, and in the "forgiving oneself," is stablished the willingness to "liberate oneself" to do it better.

Next class, before starting, I saw the student again and asked for silence to speak. I publicly asked for apologies (I thought it was important to do it that way, as I had exposed him in front of everyone). I told him the manner in which I answered to his question was not correct, and even if I embraced the contents of it, the manner had been incorrect. The youth said "I accept your apologies," and then he confirmed he indeed had been affected. His expression changed (now lighter) and my being with myself did too.

But regret is only possible if I see you. If I direct myself to the person that was hurt. I say this as it is very painful when I am offered apologies and they feel as a formality exclusively (they didn't see me again, they passed me by again). And it deepens the wound.

Regret surges to recover the relationship with myself, with my own persona. I lay that bridge to "go back to me," and then, when I express my regret (to you), I lay it towards you, to recover our relationship.

But, what happens if I was the one hurt, the one infringed, whose limits were trespassed? The most likely thing to happen first is that a reaction surges (fight or flight) towards the offense in question. However, I'll remain with resentment that only forgiveness may alleviate.

What does it mean to forgive? What do I do when I forgive? Am I forced to do it? Can I forgive even though the other is absent or lacks regret?

As I said before, when I do an offense, I carry it, it weighs on me, it occupies me emotionally. In computational jargon, I'm utilizing space of my hard drive of which I can't organize freely. Because of this it will be **my decision** if I desire or not to "liberate the other of their debt." But forgiving does not mean forgetting, nor that we will have necessarily a good relationship starting from there.

Forgetting also has two aspects: the self (that I just mentioned) and the other. It will obviously be easier to forgive if the other is shown, **if they allow me to see them** truly for who they are (the external part of regret, when someone that hurt me says: "*I didn't want to do it, I'm not like this in essence*"). If I see them as a person, I will be able to comprehend them (knowing the motives behind the damage done to me), and because of that it will become easier to forgive them, because it is their essence that became visible to me. This is true for someone that we feel affection for (a loved one that offended me in a discussion, and then approaches me to offer their apologies because it was not their intention, simply a daze), or with a stranger, for example when someone in the street drives right in front of me, and then makes a gesture of apologizing, and I can see how they regret their mistake. It is important to clarify that "comprehending" is not "justifying," as the latter corresponds to the plain of ethics, of the distinctions between what is right and wrong; for the same reason, that there is regret and forgiveness, will not stop the offender from having to obey by the laws or rules stablished legally or socially.

Also, even if it seems fairly hard, forgiving can also rely solely on me (even if the other does not regret it). Do I erase the guilt of the other when I forgive them? No, I just stop referring to them; I don't have a "pending tab" with them. But be careful: It is my own weight I am setting free, not theirs: them, if they do not regret it, will keep carrying the load of the abandonment of themselves, the loss of their own value.

Finally, I have to say that making mistakes is very human. Precisely because of how imperfect we are and for the fundamental condition of being free, life and its movements lead us routinely to committing mistakes. Threats that are **subjectively experienced** to our physical integrity (for example, feeling unprotected materially), psychic integrity (for example to our self-esteem, limits), many times have made us infringe, hurt others, getting to the point of even destroying them (sometimes achieving it). Regret and forgiveness are very decisive and personal acts, that search for the reunion with oneself -in the first place- and with the other. It's a coming back home, "my home" that place that I habit, that I know and that I like, in front of myself and in front of you, in front of the other, in front of the community.

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