Open Access *Epistora Journal of Philosophy and Humanities*

EPISTORA *Conceptual Article*

Whether You Marry or Not, You Will Regret It: Fear, Desire, and the Inverse Difference

Luca Magni
Luiss Business School, Rome, Italy

Submitted: September 20, 2026 **Accepted: September 26, 2026** **Published: October 05, 2026**

Citation: Luca Magni (2026). Whether You Marry or Not, You Will Regret It: Fear, Desire, and the Inverse Difference. Epistora J. Philos. Humanit. 1(1), 1-5. Article EJPH-2026-101

Abstract
This article examines the aphoristic passage on regret in the "Diapsalmata" section of Volume I of Kierkegaard's Either/Or, through the analytical apparatus of Learnable Theory. It argues that the aesthete's paradox, whereby every choice and its negation both lead to regret, is not primarily a psychological observation about idealizing unlived possibilities, but a structural consequence of what Learnable Theory identifies as the umbra cone and the inverse difference. Reading the passage together with its dialectical counterpart in Volume II, Judge Wilhelm's ethical response, the article shows that the text stages a condition rather than explaining one: whatever is defocused by a choice does not disappear but persists as an unfalsifiable alternative whose value grows precisely because it cannot be tested against experience. The analysis further argues that in Kierkegaard's text regret does not follow the choice but is co-implicit with it, which sharpens the claim that the inverse difference operates independently of the existential weight of the content chosen. The article then introduces a further refinement: the rate at which the shadowed alternative gains value is not uniform, but depends on the affective vector, approach or avoidance, with which it was originally excluded from the field of enacted options. Drawing on the literature on separate approach and avoidance motivational systems and on the temporal asymmetry of regret, the article predicts that idealization should be strongest when the enacted choice was driven by fear while the foreclosed alternative remained desired. The article closes by considering what the ethical stage's response to this condition, commitment renewed in time rather than declared once for eternity, suggests for a theory of decision that takes seriously the impossibility of eliminating the shadow cast by any choice.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Learnable Theory, Umbra Cone, Inverse Difference, Regret, Decision theory, Approach-avoidance motivation

Introduction

In the "Diapsalmata" section of Either/Or, Kierkegaard has the anonymous character known as "A" delivers one of the most quoted and most misread pages of his work. The authentic text is shorter, harsher, and philosophically more interesting than a superficial reading might suggest. This article proposes a reading of the original passage through Learnable Theory, in particular the constructs of the Umbra Cone and the Inverse Difference. The claim is that "A"'s paradox is not a generic psychological observation about the human tendency to regret, but a case in which a cognitive and existential structure, already identified by the theory in other domains, manifests itself with particular clarity. The aim is not to offer yet another Kierkegaardian commentary, but to show how a framework developed elsewhere accounts for a phenomenon that traditional Kierkegaardian exegesis (see, for example, Mackey, 1971; Westphal, 1996) describes without formalizing.

The Text and Its Dialogical Frame

The passage reads, in the Hong translation: “Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it […] Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it […] Trust a girl, and you will regret it. Do not trust her, and you will also regret it […] Hang yourself, and you will regret it. Do not hang yourself, and you will also regret it […] This, gentlemen, is the quintessence of all the wisdom of life” (Kierkegaard, 1987a, pp. 38–39). Two philological elements are decisive for the interpretation that follows. The first is the structure of the sequence: from marriage, the domain of long-term existential commitments, to laughing and weeping, near-instantaneous emotional reactions, to the extreme gesture of hanging oneself. The progression is not accidental. It shows that the mechanism of regret does not depend on the weight or the duration of the choice: it operates identically on a lifelong commitment and on a momentary reaction. The second element is the voice. The passage belongs to Volume I of Either/Or, the section in which “A” speaks, the anonymous aesthete whose perspective the whole work calls into question (on the literary construction of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous voices, see Mackey, 1971). In Volume II, Judge Wilhelm responds directly to this position, proposing the ethical stage as an alternative (Kierkegaard, 1987b). The theme of time and vows returns in A's own essay “The Rotation of Crops,” where the aesthete remarks that married people who pledge love “throughout eternity” say little, because whoever is finished with time is probably finished with eternity too; if the couple said instead “until Easter, until next May Day,” they would say something more sensible, because they would say something they might actually carry out (Kierkegaard, 1987a, p. 296). Reading “A” in isolation deprives the paradox of its critical interlocutor within the work.

Essential Elements of Learnable Theory

Learnable Theory distinguishes the Learnable, the universal cognitive-affective horizon through which a subject renders experience accessible, from learnables, the culturally specific frames of meaning that horizon makes possible (Magni, 2011; Magni et al., 2023, 2024, 2025). Within this framework, every cognitive or decisional act involves a comparable structure of foregrounding and backgrounding: bringing a content to the foreground necessarily entails a defocusing of others, which are not thereby eliminated from the field but shifted into what the theory calls the Umbra Cone. Prepositions and other relators perform a specific, narrower instance of this general operation, selectively relegating particular elements rather than the whole remaining field. The Umbra Cone is not a negligible residue. It is the space in which non-actualized alternatives remain, withdrawn from direct empirical verification and therefore exposed to a process of idealization that concrete experience, with its limits and its frictions, cannot correct. From this dynamic follows the Inverse Difference: the value attributed to what remains in the shadow tends to grow in inverse proportion to its accessibility, while what has been chosen, and is therefore observable, wears down under comparison with its own real limitations. Applied to ordinary cognition, the mechanism is observable in cases as banal as they are recurrent. Someone who turns down a job offer to stay with their current organization tends, over the years, to build an increasingly favorable image of the professional path they might have taken: the hypothetical salary grows in memory, the difficulties that role would have entailed thin out, and the position never held ends up appearing free of exactly the concrete problems that the position actually held continues to display every day. It is not that the declined choice was truly better. It is that it remains in the Umbra Cone, shielded from the daily wear of direct experience, while the choice actually made continues to expose itself to comparison with reality and with its own limitations.

The same mechanism operates in purchasing decisions, for example in the house not bought that, over time, appears free of the structural problems of the one actually bought; in educational choices, for example in the degree program not taken that seems as though it would have opened opportunities the path actually followed did not offer; and in organizational decisions, for example in the candidate not hired who, in hindsight, is imagined as the solution to problems the candidate actually hired failed to resolve. In none of these cases does the Inverse Difference require that the discarded alternative actually be better. It only requires that it remain inaccessible to verification, a condition that its very exclusion from the field of enacted options automatically guarantees: unable to be tested, the alternative cannot be disproven either, and this immunity to falsification is what fuels its growth in value over time. Kierkegaard's passage suggests that the same mechanism also operates on the existential plane, and it is this extension that the article sets out to argue.

Regret as a Pre-Choice Structure

A superficial reading of "A"'s paradox might reduce it to a banal observation about chronic dissatisfaction. The Kierkegaardian formulation, however, resists this reduction for a precise reason: the syntactic structure "whether you… or you…, you will regret it either way" does not describe a regret that arises after the choice, as its consequence. It presents the two options as already burdened with the same outcome before the choice is even made. This is a point that Learnable Theory can render more precise than traditional philosophical exegesis does. If the Umbra Cone were generated by the choice, one would expect a temporal sequence: first the decision, then the defocusing of the alternative, then its progressive idealization. "A"'s text instead suggests that the Umbra Cone precedes the choice. The moment a subject represents an option as a possible choice, the alternative is already present as a shadow, and regret is already co-implicit in both poles. This is therefore not a temporal degeneration of experience, but a property of the field of choice as such, which precedes the decisional act rather than following it.

From Cognition to the Existential: The Pervasiveness of the Mechanism

The sequence Kierkegaard chooses, marriage, laughing and weeping, trust, an extreme gesture, spans a range from long-term existential commitment to instantaneous emotional reaction to the ultimate decision about one's own life. If the Inverse Difference were a phenomenon tied to the specific content of the choice, that is, if it depended on marriage being a decision laden with social and affective expectations, one would not expect to find it identical in the case of laughing or weeping at the stupidities of the world, reactions that entail no long-term commitment whatsoever. The fact that the mechanism is identical across all the cases listed by "A" supports the hypothesis that the Inverse Difference is a formal property of the choice structure itself, not a side effect of decisions that happen to carry heavy existential significance. This has a significant consequence for decision theory as applied to organizational and professional contexts: if the mechanism operates independently of the weight of the choice, then no strategy that limits itself to "choosing better," that is, to improving the quality of the decision made, can by itself neutralize the structural regret that accompanies it.

The Ethical Counterpoint and Its Limits

A's remark in "The Rotation of Crops" already contains the reformulation that the article proposes to read as the ethical stage's answer to the Umbra Cone: a commitment not declared as an act that suspends time, "throughout eternity," but as an act renewed in time, "until Easter." Judge Wilhelm's Volume II, which defends marriage as an ethical commitment, can then be read against this remark (on the relation between the aesthetic and ethical stages in the pseudonymous authorship, see Westphal, 1996). The difference is not cosmetic. A commitment declared for eternity implicitly denies the very existence of the Umbra Cone, pretending that the discarded alternative no longer exerts any pull. A periodically renewed commitment instead acknowledges that the shadow remains, and shifts the question from "how to avoid regret" to "at what cadence to renew the choice despite regret." This does not resolve "A"'s paradox, it scales it down. Within the framework of Learnable Theory, one could say that the ethical stage does not eliminate the Umbra Cone but reduces its recursive depth, preventing the idealization of the unchosen alternative from feeding on itself undisturbed over time through an act of periodic verification. It remains an open question, and the article does not claim to settle it, whether this scaling down is sufficient, or whether, as the corrosive tone with which "A" closes his own discourse suggests, every attempt to domesticate the paradox is destined for an irony similar to the one with which the original text liquidates its own conclusion.

The Affective Vector of the Umbra Cone: Fear and Desire

The preceding sections treat inaccessibility to verification as a sufficient condition for the value growth the Inverse Difference describes, while remaining agnostic about a relevant aspect: the affective coloring with which the alternative was excluded from the field of enacted options. Not all exclusions are equivalent. An option can remain outside the focus because it is repellent, an avoidance vector, or because it is simply less attractive than the one chosen, a preference vector in which both options were desired but one prevailed over the other. The observable outcome, the defocusing, is identical in both cases. The affective relationship with the resulting shadow is not. This distinction finds grounding in the literature on approach and avoidance motivational systems, which Gray (1970) first proposed as distinct neurobehavioral circuits rather than opposite poles of a single axis, and which Carver and White (1994) operationalized in the BIS/BAS scales still used

today to separately measure individual sensitivity to punishment and to reward. If approach and avoidance are separate systems rather than a single dimension with two ends, then an option excluded out of fear and an option excluded out of subordinate preference are not the same thing motivationally, even when they produce the same cognitive defocusing. The Inverse Difference, as formulated in the preceding sections, does not distinguish between the two cases: it treats the Umbra Cone as an affectively homogeneous space, when it probably is not. The distinction generates an empirically testable prediction. Value growth should be greatest in the most uncomfortable case, the one in which the enacted choice was driven by fear while the discarded alternative remained desired: here the Umbra Cone holds an object already invested with desire before it was even excluded, and its inaccessibility to verification only amplifies a pre-existing investment. Different is the case in which the discarded option was itself feared: here one would not expect idealization, but rather a form of retrospective anxiety over "would it really have been that terrible," distinct from the regret for the unlived life that "A" speaks of. An empirical anchor for this prediction comes from Gilovich and Medvec's (1995) research on the temporal asymmetry of regret. Regrets over actions taken would hurt most in the short term before fading, while regrets over omissions would tend to grow over time, because the counterfactual space of an action never attempted remains open-ended and thus always reinterpretable favorably. Read together with the distinction between avoidance and subordinate preference proposed above, the strongest case for value growth over time becomes the fear-driven omission: an action never attempted, toward an object already desired, excluded out of fear rather than lack of attraction. This case combines the unbounded counterfactual openness of inaction, which Gilovich and Medvec associate with the growth of regret over time, with the pre-existing desire for the avoided object, which the avoidance vector proposed in this section makes explicit.

"A"'s text offers a direct testing ground for this distinction, because its sequence is not affectively homogeneous. "Hang yourself" is a case of pure avoidance: the discarded option, not hanging oneself, is not desired in itself, it is simply the absence of the feared act. Marriage is instead a more ambiguous case, and precisely for that reason more instructive: someone who does not marry out of fear of commitment, rather than out of lack of attraction to married life, finds themselves exactly in the condition the prediction above identifies as carrying the highest risk of retrospective idealization. "A"'s paradox, read in these terms, does not describe a uniform mechanism applied to different cases, but a family of cases that share the logical structure of regret while differing in its expected intensity. For Learnable Theory, this does not amount to a revision of the Inverse Difference but to a boundary condition that modulates its rate of growth. Inaccessibility to verification remains the necessary condition for value growth. The affective vector of origin, approach or avoidance, determines whether that growth converges toward idealization of the unchosen alternative or toward an unresolved anxiety that does not translate into regret proper.

Discussion

The implications of this reading extend beyond Kierkegaardian exegesis. If the Inverse Difference is a structural property of the field of choice rather than a side effect correctable through better information or more accurate decision processes, then organizational practices that promise to reduce decisional regret through greater rationalization of the choice process face a theoretical limit, not merely a practical one. Regret is not a computational error that a better decision could avoid. It is the structural price of any act that brings one option to the foreground while relegating another to the Umbra Cone. The distinction between avoidance and subordinate preference introduced in the previous section adds a practical lever to this otherwise static picture. If the rate at which the Umbra Cone gains value depends on the affective vector with which the alternative was excluded, then an organizational or clinical intervention cannot simply make the decision better informed: it must be able to distinguish, at the moment of choice or retrospectively, whether an option was discarded for lack of appeal or out of fear of it. A candidate not promoted out of fear of a role change, for example, is structurally more exposed to retrospective idealization of the untaken career path than a candidate who simply preferred to stay. Recognizing this difference does not eliminate the Umbra Cone, but it allows one to predict where its growth will be fastest, and therefore where an intervention of periodic verification, on the model of the ethical stage discussed in the section "The Ethical Counterpoint and Its Limits," will be more necessary. This does not imply that every intervention on decision-making is useless. It suggests instead that the more realistic stake is not the elimination of regret, but the conscious management of its recursive depth, in the sense indicated by the Kierkegaardian ethical stage: not preventing the shadow from existing, but preventing it from

deepening undisturbed, and recognizing that this cadence of verification should be tighter wherever the original affective vector was fear rather than simple preference.

Conclusions

The paradox “A” enunciates in Either/Or is neither a maxim of practical wisdom, as its own ironic closing suggests, nor a simple statement of generic human dissatisfaction. Read through the Umbra Cone and the Inverse Difference, the passage displays a precise structure: regret precedes the choice rather than following it, and operates identically regardless of the existential weight of the content chosen. The ethical response the work builds in the following volume does not eliminate this structure; it reformulates it in temporal terms that limit its recursive drift. To this structure, however, a qualification must be added: its rate of drift is not uniform, but depends on the affective vector, approach or avoidance, with which the alternative was originally excluded from the field of enacted options. For a decision theory that takes this lesson seriously, the task is not to promise choices free of regret, but to understand why no choice can ever be entirely free of it, and to distinguish the cases in which this freedom from regret is least attainable of all: those in which what was discarded, out of fear, was an alternative already desired.

Bibliography

- Carver, C. S., & White, T. L. (1994). Behavioral inhibition, behavioral activation, and affective responses to impending reward and punishment: The BIS/BAS scales. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 67(2), 319–333. https://doi.org/10.1037/00223514.67.2.319
- Gilovich, T., & Medvec, V. H. (1995). The experience of regret: What, when, and why. Psychological Review, 102(2), 379–395. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.102.2.379
- Gray, J. A. (1970). The psychophysiological basis of introversion-extraversion. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 8(3), 249–266. https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(70)90069-0 Kierkegaard, S. (1987a). Either/or: Part I (H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1843)
- Kierkegaard, S. (1987b). Either/or: Part II (H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1843)
- Mackey, L. (1971). Kierkegaard: A kind of poet. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Magni, L. (2011). Research proposal for the application of critical discourse analysis to the study of learning cultures. Journal of Critical Realism, 10(4), 527–542. https://doi.org/10.1558/jcr.v10i4.527
- Magni, L., Marchetti, G., & Alharbi, A. (2023). Learnable theory & analysis. Luiss University Press.
- Magni, L., Marchetti, G., & Alharbi, A. (2024). Learnable linguistics for business leaders. Open Research Books, Youcanprint.
- Magni, L., Marchetti, G., & Alharbi, A. (2025). Generative leadership of meanings. Open Research Books, Youcanprint.
- Westphal, M. (1996). Becoming a self: A reading of Kierkegaard's Concluding unscientific postscript. Purdue University Press.

© 2026 Luca Magni. Published by Epistora Publications under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License. Unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction are permitted, provided the original work is properly cited.