On Revenge: The Other of Forgiveness

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1 Revenge as the Eerie Modern Antithesis of Forgiveness and Justice

Today the terms revenge and forgiveness stand for opposite and mutually exclusive reactions to wrongdoing and are associated with strong, equally opposing values. While forgiveness is highly regarded as virtuous, rational, and civilized, revenge is said to be cruel, excessive, irrational, and primitive. Forgiveness is praised as the truly human ability to free oneself from the past and to shape one's own future while revenge is dismissed as an unfree, purely reactive behavior. While forgiveness is said to be the foundation of peace, revenge is supposed to cause eternal discord. Given this utterly bad reputation, it goes without saying that revenge is supposed to have no place in our culture, except among the lawless and vicious. Nonetheless, philosophers like Peter French, Robert Solomon, Jeffrie Murphy, and very recently Fabian Bernhardt have discovered some

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virtues in vindictiveness and revenge.[1] In this chapter, I will follow up on their reflections.

Let us start with the question of what constitutes the negative image of revenge and how it came about. The complex of elements that make up the dominant contemporary horror image of revenge in philosophy is very vividly portrayed in the beginning of the book *Forgiveness and Revenge* by philosopher Trudy Govier. The book starts with the case of Javed Iqbal, a Pakistani man who had murdered over 100 boys and dismembered their bodies and dissolved them in acid (Govier 2002, 1). Thus, the first example of revenge the reader is confronted with turns out to be the act of a sadistic serial killer, which he passes off as "revenge" against the police, who had refused to accept his complaint against two servants who had beaten him (in reaction to homosexual advances):

> 'In this way I would take revenge from the world I hated,' he said of his six month homicidal binge, 'My mother cried for me. I wanted 100 mothers to cry for their children.'

After the theme of revenge has thus been related to sadistic serial murder, it is subsequently associated with cruel and uncivilized retaliation: The shocked reader learns that the judge not only imposes a death sentence but orders that Iqbal should be strangled in front of his victims' parents and his body cut into 100 pieces and dissolved into acid, thus "taking to extremes the retributive idea that the punishment should fit the crime, because the state would be involved in the same level of barbarity as the criminal himself" (Govier 2002, 1).

From Govier's rendition of this horror story we can deduce the typical elements of the modern understanding of revenge as the epitome of the other of Western civilization: It is associated, *first*, with sadism, that is, the *desire to inflict suffering on others for one's own gratification*. From this description emerges a *second* characteristic, namely, the *immorality* of revenge: since it turns another person into a means of satisfying one's own lusts, revenge violates the categorical imperative. *Thirdly*, since revenge, as retribution, aims at adding a new suffering to what the victims has suffered, thus increasing the total of suffering in the world, it is to be judged as *irrational* (from an utilitarian perspective). *Fourthly*, as the story of

Iqbal perfectly illustrates, revenge is understood to be *excessive*. This understanding has even given rise to its own idiom in English: "with a vengeance" means to an extreme or excessive degree. *Fifthly*, revenge, because of this wild, irrational, and excessive tendency, is illegal by nature. *Sixth*, the thirst for revenge turns normal or even virtuous people into monsters who kill innocent children. The existential danger of moral depravation by revenge pervades our classics such as *Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Kohlhaas*. *Seventh*, retaliation is a primitive custom only to be found in "barbaric" societies.

However, it was only in modern times that the image of revenge as an inherently unjust, excessive, irrational, and cruel practice of vicious people gradually emerged. In the Old Testament the term for revenge *nqmh* stood for moral repair. It meant "originally restoration of the wholeness or salvation of a community." In this sense, God's revenge is spoken of (Probst and Sprenger 1992, 2). In ancient Greece there was a close connection between revenge and justice. To repay like with like meant to act justly, revenge could be a legal claim and the words for "revenge" and "to take revenge" could be the same as those for "punishment" and "to punish" (τιμωρία, τιμωρέομαι) (Gehrke 1987, 129). How did it then come about that terms like vengeance, retaliation, revenge stand for the opposite of justice and moral repair—the social wilderness?

Consider the meaning of revenge. Revenge means "punishment inflicted in retaliation for an injury or offense" (Merriam-Webster) suffered by the revenger or by persons close to himself or herself. Such *second-party punishments*—punishments carried out by the victim or her close ones—are part and parcel of the social practices of nearly *all* societies. These punitive reactions include a great variety of phenomena from mocking counter-speech to blood vengeance, and they differ greatly with regard to their legal and moral status, that is, with regard to whether they are morally or legally permitted, required, or even prohibited. It is difficult to imagine a society in which there exists no second-party punishment at all. If philosophers would focus less on the moral ideas in the light of which we prefer to understand ourselves and more on the moral practices we actually engage in, then revenge would be a much-discussed topic of contemporary ethics. However, with a few recent exceptions, the interest of philosophers in second-party punishment in comparison to

forgiveness or to legal punishment has been infinitesimal until today. While philosophical articles and books on forgiveness are exploding, the ideas, practices, and feelings associated with revenge have remained a special topic of a few scholars of antiquity and literature.[2]

The reasons for this go back to the seventeenth century. Contemporary philosopher's lack of interest in the subject of second-party punishment is the late consequence of the distorted and narrowed modern image of revenge which modern political philosophy itself has played a major role in bringing about (Bernhardt 2020). Whereas Thomas Aquinas still distinguished between just and unjust revenge and regarded anger seeking revenge as just when it was a matter of retribution for an injustice (Aquinas 2003, 259–260), it was the philosophers of the seventeenth century who started to condemn revenge as a thoroughly wild, illegal, and vicious practice. "Revenge is a kind of wild justice which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out" starts Francis Bacon his essay *On Revenge*. Since then, revenge is excluded from the field of practices compatible with the system of values established by the modern state, which claims the monopoly of coercion and punishment (Verdier 1980, 15).

Obviously, the devaluation of revenge and its equation with vindictive passion by Bacon and his contemporaries served to legitimize the state as the sole enforcer of punitive justice. However, the new view of revenge arose not merely from the state's claim to an exclusive right to punish. This claim also entails a change in the penal objectives, which are no longer about the satisfaction of private individuals, but about the defense of the legal system against transgressions. Thus, punishment is now defined as something other than retaliation, namely an "evill inflicted by publique Authority" the aim of which is "not an revenge but terrour" (Hobbes 1991, 214–216). Since then, revenge is equivalent to violating the law of the State, which aims to ensure the safety of its citizens and to punish those who transgress its norms. Under these conditions revenge can only be prohibited, it cannot be claimed as a right and even less as a duty (Verdier 1980, 15). It is now redefined as cruelty and attributed to certain passions:

[G]lorying in the hurt of another, tending to no end [...] and glorying to no end, is vain-glory and contrary to reason; and to hurt without reason [...] is commonly stiled by the name of Cruelty. (Hobbes 1991, 106)

The distinction between legitimate state punishment and cruel private revenge remains authoritative for jurists and philosophers to come.

Today the idea is virtually an integral part of our ethical self-image that we have overcome revenge in two ways: On the one hand, through the state's monopoly on punishment, which does not seek retaliation, but more "humane" punitive goals such as deterrence; on the other hand, through an ethics of forgiveness, which counteracts the dangers of vindictiveness. However, this narrative of moral progress derives from a confusion of types of revenge that have little in common in their normative structure and moral status. It is based on projecting back into history and other societies an understanding of revenge that can only develop in modern state systems combined with a Western morality (Bernhardt 2020, 498). Almost all philosophical discussions of revenge since then start from this narrowed concept of revenge as it can only exist in societies that have separated revenge from law. However, they do not understand this concept of revenge as related to a special type of society and culture but treat it as universally valid. Nozick's quasi-universal distinction between revenge and retribution, which equates revenge with an emotionally motivated and immoderate reaction, has become almost classic (Nozick 1981, 366–367).

2   Revenge and Forgiveness in the Context of Acephalous Societies and Revenge Cultures

However, the modern concept of revenge as an irregular and excessive reaction for the "pleasure in the suffering of another" (Nozick 1981, 367) can hardly apply to *acephalous* societies, that is, societies without a central state in which individuals belong to clans or families. In societies where such groups bore responsibility for damage or injury caused by their

members, the rules of retaliation served to regulate violence: "in traditional societies, far from being an outburst of pure violence, ceremonial vengeance is a way to rigorously restrict violence. It is indeed a sophisticated exercise of justice." (Hénaff 2010, 215)

As ancient historians and ethnologists have shown, vengeance, in the social context of traditional vengeance cultures, is subject to strict normative codes which, for all their differences, exhibit certain universal uniformities. In contrast to the modern idea of revenge, vengeance is limited to certain social relations. In case that the two partners of a crime belong to distinct social units, the damage that the group of the offended suffers must be paid by the other. In the case that the offender and the offended belong to the same unit, it is the whole group that punishes the offender, as such an act goes against the system of values recognized and sanctioned by its members and thus jeopardizes its unity and cohesion (Verdier 1980, 15):

> The duty of vengeance outside is the counterpart of the interdict of vengeance inside: duty and interdict express the two sides, external and internal, of solidarity; one cannot take revenge on those whom it is precisely one's duty to avenge; vengeance must not break the unity of the group that it is called to promote and preserve towards the outside. (Verdier 1980, 21, transl. MSL)

Structurally, retaliation follows the rules and norms of the gift exchange between groups or clans, as a negative gift that results from the reversion of the offense and the permutation of the roles of the offender and the offended (Raymond Verdier 1980, 14) From a modern perspective this raises questions that are not easy to answer. If vengeance is not primarily about the pleasure of seeing the other suffer, what is the point of exchanging negative gifts? Why is it necessary to get even?

This question can be understood in two ways: First, as a question about the *rationality* of revenge, its objective measure. And secondly, as a question about the personal *reasons* and *motivations* people have for taking revenge.

From a modern utilitarian perspective, seeking revenge must appear irrational, for the dead relative cannot be brought back to life by the

killing, which creates new suffering. However, regarding the rationality of retaliation, already Hegel has pointed out that retaliation is a formal kind of justice which is understood universally:

> Since the perpetrator is a rational being his action implies that it is something universal. 'If you despoil another, you despoil yourself: if you kill anyone then you kill all and yourself. The action is a law which you set up and, in your deed, you have fully recognized its validity.' The perpetrator may therefore himself be subjected to the same form of treatment as that which he has meted out and, in so far, the equality that he has violated may again be restored (*Jus talionis*). (Hegel 1986, Ch I, § 20)

The idea of formal justice does not necessarily require uniform practice. Within vengeance societies justice was never taken to require exactly "the same *form* of treatment." Blood revenge, although obligatory, did not necessarily have to be carried out. Since vengeance was understood in terms of debt and credit, it could be replaced by compensation (Verdier 1980, 17). However, in the absence of an institutionalized system of law enforcement, the threat of revenge was necessary to enforce compensation. Thus, it served "to reestablish right order, to restore a prior supposed equilibrium that has been disturbed by some wrongful act or some debt owed but not paid" (Miller 2006, 4). In this capacity, revenge, both as threat and execution, was an indispensable part of the process of moral repair in the wake of wrongdoing. Since the function of revenge was to ensure a *balance among equals*, it had to be based on a measure that was immediately apparent to all, which was symbolized by the Lex Talionis. This practice was based on the belief that a peace "that does not involve evening up scores and restoring the balance is not peace among equals" (Miller 2006, 15). Thus, in many vengeance cultures, excessive revenge was considered unethical and distasteful (Miller 2006, 24). However, maybe because of its exceptionality, it was not infrequently made the subject of epics about extraordinary persons and events (e. g. Achilles in the *Ilias*).[3]

With regard to the obvious differences between our modern idea of revenge and the ethics of vengeance cultures, we need to distinguish between *revenge as an acting out of vengeful emotions* and *retaliation as an*

execution of justice in the sense of evening up scores and restoring the balance (Verdier 1980, 16). Thus, in passages where the context does not already specify how the term revenge is to be understood, I will here henceforth use the term *revenge* for an uncoded act that springs from a "thirst for revenge" (Nozick 1981, 367) and may be excessive or not, and *retaliation* for an act of paying back former injustices according to a strict notion of proportionality. The term vengeance is henceforth used in a rather vague and encompassing way for *all* kinds and forms of first- and second-party punishment. Of course, an act of vengeance can encompass both revenge and retaliation. Whoever is obligated to retaliation in the context of a vengeance culture may also harbor feelings of vindictiveness, but this connection is no more necessary than moral or legal guilt is necessarily connected with feelings of guilt: One can feel guilty without being guilty, and vice versa, and one can thirst for revenge without having a right or a duty to revenge, and vice versa. On the other hand, in a vengeance culture, one is obligated to retaliate even if one does not desire it at all.

Thus, in the context of a traditional vengeance culture, it is rather rare that "revenge impulsively surges in response to wrong and becomes perversely delicious to those possessed by it" (Griswold 2007, XIII). In the ancient world, blood revenge must be thought of rather as a laborious fulfillment of duty than a welcome opportunity to lustfully satisfy one's own cruel and sadistic inclinations (Gehrke 1987, 130). It more often required considerable discipline and self-conquest: "A person obliged to take revenge must resist all kinds of temptations to forgive and forget" (Miller 2006, 96). We must therefore return to the question of what motivates people to take revenge.

If we can safely assume that in antiquity revenge was rather not a passionate and immoderate frenzy, but put on a leash (Gehrke 1987, 141), the motivation to revenge can only be understood in terms of honor, which, when diminished, also means a loss of status and power: Only the fear of losing social prestige and being seen as a pitiful coward and ungrateful relative could move people to risk their lives for blood revenge in honor of, say, a distant or disliked quarrelsome relative. If the price of evasion is loss of honor and social status, even ordinary fearful people will have sufficient reason to retaliate:

The core belief at the heart of most revenge cultures is that man is more naturally a chicken than a wolf. Thus revenge cultures are invariably shame cultures. (Miller 2006, 96)

The knowledge that one will have to pay for a misdeed is based on knowing the enormous importance of honor and status for everybody involved. An act of violence is not only an act of harm but calls into question the equal value of the victim of wrongdoing and his relatives. People in vengeance cultures were not stoics; they did not assume that self-respect could be maintained even against the open disrespect of others:

When one has been harmed unjustly (or even insulted), one's honor is in question. In a traditional honor culture, to fail to respond to this injury out of cowardice is to reveal one's dishonorable nature. The point of revenge then is not to inflict harm on the wrongdoer, but rather to demonstrate one's willingness to risk being harmed oneself in a confrontation with the wrongdoer. [...] The proper analogy is with self-defense; to take revenge is to defend one's honor against an insult. It is to restore one's dignity the best way one can, through a defense against the standing imputation of dishonor. (Kaufman 2016, 323)

Vengeance is thus to be understood as a *communicative* process in which honor, status, and self-respect are re-negotiated.[4] In the context of vengeance cultures, retaliation sends a symbolic message in which the implicit message of the avenged action—a message of disrespect—is virtually refuted. By retaliating, the avenger restores honor to the originally injured party even if the latter is dead (Gehrke 136). In such a case, the members of the community whose social recognition counts in matters of honor are addressed. A dead person could gain even more honor than when he was alive if he was avenged in a very elaborate way. For example, the fact that the avenger Thorstein had to travel as far as from Iceland to Byzantium to revenge the ancient Icelander Grettir, communicated to all bystanders and listeners to the story of the revenge, that Grettir "must have been something special given that Thorstein traveled so far from home to avenge him" (Miller 2006, 100). Thus, retaliation meant irrefutably showing one's appreciation for one's family members or friends.

The ethical contexts in which revenge was obligatory, however, also knew forgiveness, if the term is understood in the *thin* sense of the German term *verzeihen*, that is, a renunciation of accusation and revenge (Schumacher in this volume). Forgiveness as *verzeihen*, however, does not belong to a totally different logic of thought and action than revenge but is tied into a web of elements of moral repair, of which revenge is also a part. In an honor and shame culture, only the threat of revenge motivates apology and compensation, and compensation in turn is a necessary condition for forgiveness. Within the framework of an ethic centered on honor and equality, forgiveness can therefore not be an unconditional act. It must contain an element of vengeance that, however, can be transformed into apology (the humiliating aspect of which can be understood as compensation for vengeance), compensation, and other forms of redress.

This is also true to a certain extent for other cultures in which equality is an important value. An unconditional forgiveness (which Derrida claims to be the only true forgiveness) risks to send the communicative message that the forgiven is not equal regarding honor and moral worth—either he is so far above you, or so far below you, that it makes no sense to take revenge. This logic may be undermined by Christianization, that is, in the context of the Christian doctrine of sin, when the conviction spreads that you are a deeply sinful being just as your fellow man. However, in the absence of such a self-image and metaphysics of sin, by unconditionally forgiving one would pretend something that is not really possible, as Hannah Arendt once noted in her *Denktagebuch* (*Thinking Diary*):

> Forgiveness, or what is usually called it, is in truth only a sham process in which one acts superior to the other in demanding something that people can neither give nor take from each other. The sham process consists in the apparent lifting of the burden from the shoulders of one by another who presents himself as unburdened. (Arendt 2016, 3)

This statement stands in some tension to Hannah Arendt's famous reflections in *The Human Condition*, where she declares it a basic condition of free human action to be able to forgive one another.[5] However, Hannah Arendt was aware of the difficulties that this demand implies in terms of self-respect, equality, and moral repair. In the *Denktagebuch* she argued that (unconditional) forgiveness could only mean leaving the relationship:

> Forgiveness between people can only mean: renunciation of revenge, silence and passing, and that means: the fundamental parting—while revenge always remains close to the other and does not break off the relationship. (Arendt 2016, 3)

Thus, unconditional forgiveness would not be a step toward repairing the relationship but rather toward social exclusion. Arendt's observation that when one abandons the economy of guilt, one usually abandons the relationship as well, whereas revenge attaches to the relationship, applies both to vengeance cultures and to contemporary forms of revenge. For revenge can be both: an expression of hate and of love, as it has always been known throughout popular art like Preston Sturges' well-known *The Lady Eve*.

3   Hidden Vengeance in Today's Culture

The modern moral ideas in the light of which we understand ourselves today look vastly different from those in traditional cultures of shame and honor, especially when we contrast, as we often do, the distorted and narrowed image of revenge with idealized conceptions of punitive justice and forgiveness. We should be aware, however, that the modern philosophical ideas in the light of which we understand our culture and distinguish it from other cultures do not always coincide entirely with the norms and principles that guide our real feelings and practices. For example, while the idea that injustice should be paid for seems irrational in light of widely held utilitarian ideas, it has not disappeared within modern western societies. What exactly the real differences are between our culture and past vengeance cultures, leaving aside the different legal structure, is after all not so easy to say. For example, whenever we compare our ideas of punitive justice with the "barbaric" practices of

vengeance, we assume that we have a coherent understanding of punitive justice that can be clearly distinguished from vengeance and that fits our practices of punishment. However, while hardly any legal theorist today would count retaliation explicitly among the justifications of punishment, this principle is certainly anchored in the general understanding of punishment (Hallich 2021).[6] Jeffrie Murphy has pointed out that "many of our ideas of retributive justice—or even justice in general—depend on ideas of revenge, of paying back, of getting even—ideas that most contemporary philosophers want to reject as primitive, irrational, and even evil" (Murphy 2006).[7] In the context of this paper, I cannot pursue this discussion in detail. The question in which respects punishment is rightly understood as retribution, and the extent to which retribution is the same as retaliation, requires its own investigation.

If we look at our everyday lives and our favorite film narratives, our attitude toward vengeance today looks rather contradictory. If we were asked how we felt about revenge, it is a fair guess that most of us would emphatically reject it as a course of action. A narrative of moral progress, deeply rooted in our culture, has convinced us that we have overcome vengeance, or, for compelling ethical reasons, should overcome it. This said, we can hardly deny that we are more familiar with revenge—or, let's say, phantasies of revenge—than its official rejection would suggest. For as little as revenge is present in philosophy and ethics, it permeates the world of popular art. The narratives of novels and films revolve around small and big revenges, from nasty remarks to blood vengeance. Moreover, since the fictionalizations of the forms of revenge that occur in our societies obviously do not yet satisfy us, the narratives of movies and series often take place in imaginary vengeance cultures like *Game of Thrones*. An entire genre, the *Western*, thrives on our imaginary identification with the hero, who takes punishment into his own hands in the absence of a functioning legal system. Moreover, it is striking that vengeance in literature and film is by no means presented only as vicious and scary. In the imaginary world of literature and film, we quite naturally apply the distinction between ethically justified revenge and unjustified revenge which philosophy, after Thomas, has abandoned. Moreover, art can problematize forgiveness as well as revenge both as justified and—at least—emotionally comprehensible and describe it, at the same time, as morally inappropriate and socially risky.

However, it is not as if revenge is only lived out in the imagination. Whereas blood revenge is rather rare, the social life vibrates with microvengeances such as slights, social exclusions, vile remarks, and slander. When, in daily life, consciously or unconsciously, thoughtfully, or spontaneously, we inflict our small doses of suffering in response to another infliction of suffering, however, we give it other names like "rebuke," "social sanction," or "social punishment." It is true, however, that we also *justify* it differently. When we talk of social sanction, we use to justify the suffering inflicted not as a pay-back but as a means to prevent the transgressor from repeating her transgression in the future. So, in theory, *social sanction* does not seem to be just another name for *retaliation*, because it is justified by the aims of deterrence and/or the communication of norms. However, in practice retaliation and deterrence are not easy to distinguish. For "any punishment that is communicated to the punisher satisfies both deterrence and retribution goals because it communicates a norm violation and the existence of people who are willing to punish (both of which may reduce future norm violations), and it inflicts damage to the norm violator (satisfying the retributive goal)" (Crockett et al. 2014, 2279). Actually, recent psychological research shows that we actually think, act, and feel more in categories of retaliation than we admit to ourselves.

A group of researchers—Molly J. Crockett, Yagiz Özdemir, and Ernst Fehr—have attempted to isolate retributive motives by examining how much people will invest in punishment even when they know that the punished individual will never learn about the punishment. They found that such "hidden" punishment was frequently used by both second-party victims and third-party observers of norm violations, "indicating that retributive motives drive punishment decisions independently from deterrence goals" (Crockett et al. 2014, 2279). Apparently people go to considerable lengths to punish those who violate social norms, even if this cannot have the socially deterrent effect that is usually alleged to be the goal of punishment. The findings clearly revealed a preference for retribution without any social benefits (Ibid., 2280). Moreover, the research showed that the self-reports of the tested persons about their

motives did not match the results as concerns retribution: "When asked to provide justifications for punishment, people frequently report a motivation to deter future crimes." (Ibid., 2279) Thus, while self-reports of deterrence motives correlated with deterrence-related punishment behavior, self-reports of retributive motives did not correlate with retributive punishment behavior. The desire to sanction the bad behavior of others seems to stem from a desire for retaliation rather than deterrence and the communication of norms. It was also found that there was a stronger tendency for second-party punishment than for third-party punishment. Thus, retributive motives were stronger in second- than third-party punishment (Ibid., 2284). Moreover, other studies suggest that this desire is deeply rooted in the human psyche. Neurological measurements show that punishment of unfair behavior triggers immediate gratification in the brain, thus "proving" the old saying "revenge is sweet" (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003).

4   Revenge and Moral Repair

If the results of the mentioned studies can be generalized, we tend to delude ourselves about the motivational basis of many of our social actions. Our motives to retaliate do not derive primarily from the purposes we cite for justification, viz. deterrent effect or a strengthening of the normative system.[8] I would now like to explore the relevance of this result to the question of the function and ethical value of vengeance with regard to processes of moral repair. After all, the fact that we practice retaliation and that we like it does not show that it is to be recommended from a moral point of view, nor does it show that is useful and not harmful in social life. If we follow the narrow modern understanding of vengeance, revenge seems to be both dysfunctional and vicious. It could only play a destructive role in processes of moral repair, as it adds a new injustice to an injustice.

However, as has been shown, the narrow modern understanding of vengeance is neither universally applicable, nor does it fit our own social practice. Instead I propose to distinguish between just and unjust, functional and dysfunctional, ugly and elegant forms of revenge as was

common before modern times and is still common in other ethical systems. There are even conflicts that can be more easily concluded by a properly dosed form of retaliation than by an apparently generous forgiveness that is easily misunderstood as condonation.

As already Peter French and Jeffrie Murphy have argued, with regard to our self-respect, there is also much to be said in favor of the social function of small and measured acts of vengeance—that is, so-called social sanctions. It seems to be a basic fact about humans, famously discussed by Strawson in his paper *freedom and resentment*, that we feel resentment toward those who treat us with contempt or malevolence, even of the petty varieties. We feel personally hurt when someone else has crossed moral boundaries and maltreated us. In such a case, the question is how we restore respect and self-respect. Perhaps the other person did not realize that she was degrading us? In such a case we could draw her attention to the little misfortune and receive her sincere apologies. But what if she just sneers at it? True, if one's self-respect has not really been hurt, it might be best to forego revenge altogether and respond with benevolence. But what if it has? What if we know that we do not have easy mental digestion but will remember long afterward if we do not react? Are we then to console ourselves with the moral vision of our own superiority as all-forgiving beings? Or demand that the law should prohibit the offensive behavior which has hurt us? A more self-reliant reaction would be to take revenge into one's own hands for which a sarcastic remark is often sufficient. I am talking of measured and carefully dosed vengeance, not of frenzy. Thus, responding "in morally appropriate ways to insults, derisions, disparagements, and other forms of perceived wrongful disrespect is elemental in sustaining equitable human relations. Such wrongful behavior should not go by the board without retribution being brought to bear on it" (French 2016, 382). Our knowledge that our fellow human beings will *not* forgive what they believe to be our meanness and inconsideration, but will quite often pay us back for has not only a deterrent effect but also motivates us to be careful in our interactions to avoid misunderstandings. The deterrent effect is not to be confused with the motivation for revenge, which is less about deterrence than getting even.

However, as discussed in the section on vengeance cultures, the ethical dimension of revenge is not reducible to its social usefulness in terms of deterrence. It concerns also the communication of norms and self-respect. This even applies to clandestine forms of revenge like the unsavory activities of the waiter who secretly spits in the soup of an impertinent guest who has belittled him. Here the communicative dimension of the revenge can be understood in the sense of a soliloquy in which the avenger proves to himself that he does not take any shit from Mr. Rude.

So as not to be misunderstood, this is not a plea that we should set aside our generous willingness to forgive and instead avenge ourselves more. Anyway, most of us are not the forgiving people we sometimes pretend to be. We take revenge in some form, whether we admit it or call it something else. It is rather a matter of drawing revenge at all into the realm of actions which are to be examined and judged with a view to their benefits and harms, their justice and injustice. Classifying all forms of revenge as harmful and unethical only leads to removing revenge from ethical judgment. The same is true of a blanket judgment of forgiveness as good and beneficial. However, it depends on many factors whether moral repair is possible through forgiveness alone or, conversely, whether the past can only be closed through an act of retribution.

Notes

1. Cf. Robert Solomon (1994, 1999). Jeffrie Murphy (2000, 2003), Whitley R. P. Kaufman (2016), Fabian Bernhardt (2017, 2020) Charles Griswold (2013) and Alice MacLachlan (2016).

2. Starting with Peter Strawson's (1974) rehabilitation of reactive moral feelings such as resentment, some philosophers like Robert Solomon (1994, 1999), Jeffrie Murphy (2000, 2003), and Thomas Brudholm (2008), in recent decades have rediscovered the positive sides of "negative" emotions such as resentment and anger. Others, like Viktor Jankelevitch and Jean Amery, have pointed out that forgiveness can also be an inappropriate form of self-sacrifice. Myisha Cherry (2018), Alice MacLachlan (2009), and others have also drawn attention to the gendered significance of forgiveness discourses, noting that negative reactions and refusal to forgive may be a necessary response to regain self-respect in many contexts. However, while, after all these discussions, it seems to be rather accepted among philosophers today that "negative" emotions such as anger can be justified and appropriate in some situations, this is less true for revenge. Notable Exceptions are: Jeffrie Murphy (2000, 2003), Alice McLachlan, Kaufmann, Fabian Bernhardt (2017, 2020).

3. That the formal justice of the Talion law is universally intelligible does not mean that retribution everywhere followed the strict rule of proportionality. For example, Gehrke points out that the duty of revenge in ancient Greece still had a competitive side, which had its seat in the specifically agonal thinking of the Greeks. Thus one endeavored to return the benefit with an even greater one, or to return evil not with evil, but with even more evil (Gehrke, 133).

4. As one of the few philosophers who can find something positive in vengeance, Alice MacLachlan has also drawn attention to this *communicative* dimension of the deed as a communication about desert and authority: "Revenge aims to adress rather than use its target [...] for the revenger to be satisfied. It is plausibly described as a kind of forcible persuasion, in which the revenger aims to convince her target of the target's moral desert and the revenger's moral authority" (MacLachlan 2016, 129).

5. Arendt's considerations in *The Denktagebuch* are not in conflict with the positive value she puts on forgiveness in *The Human Condition*. In this book she limits the scope of forgiveness to ordinary human weaknesses, which one excuses out of respect for the other and oneself in the awareness of a common human frailty. This concept of forgiveness, then, does not refer to deep culpability, and it is closer to the Greek concept of apology than to Christian and modern forgiveness.

6. There are exceptions. Thus Whitley Kaufman claims that at the end of the day revenge and retribution have the same purpose, the same motivation, and the same moral justification (Kaufman 2016, 318). He even interprets the purpose of punishment in the modern state as the restoration of honor.

7. There are some indications that not only retaliation, but excessive revenge sometimes finds its way into criminal law. As Jeffrie Murphy observes, "much of American society pays at least lip service to the idea that forgiveness is an important moral value. And yet Americans generally seem to support unusually harsh mechanisms of criminal punishment."

8. The desire to punish seems to develop as soon as one realizes that certain persons have gained an unfair advantage for themselves at the expense of others, even when it is neither oneself, nor close persons who have been

harmed or disadvantaged. The tendency of "third parties" to punish without their own benefit has therefore also been called "altruistic" (Fehr and Fischbacher 2003).

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