Revenge
What It Is and What It Isn’t

As a subject that has always fascinated observers of human social life, revenge has been portrayed in all forms of art, recounted in the oral and written histories of most if not all peoples, and in more recent times sought after as a favored target of “current affairs” reportage. We can all think of revenge scenarios we have heard about, read about, or experienced directly, and thus as I attempt here to clarify some basic definitions and distinctions relevant for better understanding this topic, picking just one case as somehow paradigmatic runs the risk of being more misleading than helpful at this point. So, let me offer instead a set of fairly recent real world examples, each of which is unique in some respects but also an instance, sadly, of a regularly occurring sub-type.

1. In response to the September 2001 attacks by the Al-Qaeda organization against targets in the United States (which killed 2,976 people, all but 55 of whom were civilians, and including many who were not American citizens), U.S. military forces invaded Afghanistan in October 2001. The official reasons for the invasion were to kill and/or capture Al-Qaeda members, especially their leader Osama bin Laden, and to punish the Taliban government then in control of Afghanistan for providing Al-Qaeda with land bases and safe haven.

2. In late February 2002, Hindu mobs attacked Muslims in the state of Gujarat, India, initially killing 70 people and burning a mosque. The attacks were claimed to be in retaliation for the previous day’s fire bombing by Muslims of a train carrying Hindus returning from Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh (where conflict over a contested religious site had been going on for years). Fifty-eight people were killed in the train attack.¹

3. At one point in the autobiography of a Los Angeles member of the Crips gang, the author is describing the conversation he and another gangster had with the mother of one of their slain comrades, and she says (in part): “You were his homeboys, his friends, and because of this I have called you two over here to tell you personally . . . I don’t want to ever see you again if you can’t kill them motherfuckers that killed my boy . . . Do something to avenge my son’s death!”

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4. A man pays a large court-ordered debt in a civil suit entirely in small coins delivered to the home of the claimant.

5. An employee at a private firm is denied a promotion that is given instead to a fellow worker, so the first employee seduces the second employee’s girlfriend in retaliation.

To identify more specifically what all these cases have in common, it is obvious in the first place that each involves an effort by one party to harm another party, as a kind of “payback” for perceived harm allegedly caused by the second party. The nature and extent of the harm suffered by the “wronged” party varies from case to case, as does the degree of actual causal responsibility on the part of the presumed “offending” party. But in all five situations there is a claimed victim (group or individual) on the one hand, and a perceived perpetrator of wrongful harm who is the target of retaliation by some avenging agent (group or individual), on the other hand. This commonality also accords with the primary dictionary definitions of revenge as “harm done in return for a wrong,” “returning evil for evil,” and the like. The term itself goes back to Old French (where the related verbs were revenger and vengier, “to avenge”) and from there back to the Latin re- (“back”) and vindicare (“to avenge”). Significantly, vindicare is the root term not only for “vindictive” (“wanting revenge”) but also for “vindicate,” which in its now obsolete usage did mean “to avenge, punish, or retaliate” as well as “to make or set free; deliver or rescue (from).” In fact, “vindicative” and “vindictive” were used as

synonyms in earlier times, whereas now most people tend to treat them as referring to quite different conditions. Further, given their common etymology “revenge” and “vengeance” have most often been treated synonymously too, though not unusually the latter term has been more closely connected with some notion of justice, while the former is more limited to the simple desire to “get even.”

Second, the effort at retaliation (from the Latin re and talis, “of such kind,” and thus the verb retaliare, “pay back in kind,” and talio, “exaction of payment in kind”) in each of these five representative examples is planned rather than some kind of instantaneous reflex response. The “lag time” between the perceived harm suffered and the actual “payback” will vary of course, as will the level of organizational calculation and complexity, but in every instance the vengeful deed executed or at least advocated is mediated by deliberative cognition and is not an immediate, involuntary “striking back.” This sometimes overlooked common feature of revenge scenarios is important because it implies a dimension of reflective choice, and consequently casts doubt on the position of those who claim that vengefulness in the human animal is just a visceral, “instinctive” response to being attacked, essentially no different from the hostile response of any other animal in similarly threatening circumstances.

Third, in all these cases the vengeful actions are motivated by the need of the wronged party to feel better, by means of retaliation, even if what is demanded is some kind of punishment for the purported wrongdoers, again in the name of “justice.” In other words, the real focus in revenge is on the emotional needs of those who have suffered directly or indirectly because of what some other individual or collective agent allegedly has done. In her book Forgiveness and Revenge, Trudy Govier also emphasizes along these lines the emotional foundation as well as the intentionality of revenge efforts: “When we seek revenge, we seek satisfaction by attempting to harm the other (or associated persons) as a retaliatory measure,” and thus: “To satisfy our desire for revenge, we must be agents in bringing harm to others who have harmed us, and we must act with the intent to cause this harm in order to ‘get even’ or restore a balance.”

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on the topic, Jeffrie Murphy offers a similar though somewhat less precise definition: “Vengeance is the infliction of suffering on a person in order to satisfy vindictive emotions or passions. Vindictive emotions are harsh negative passions – anger, resentment, even hatred – often felt by victims toward those who have wronged them . . . The goal of vengeance is simply to provide vindictive satisfaction to victims . . .”

The disappointed employee and the resentful debtor both felt they were losing something of value (job promotion and monetary assets, respectively, as well as a measure of accompanying personal pride), so to feel better about that loss they aimed to inflict humiliation, embarrassment, and hurt feelings on another person who they thought was partially to blame for their loss and yet was benefiting from it. Assuaging the pain of grief and anger resulting from the death of a family member or from the deaths of fellow members of a religious community clearly motivated the desire for revenge in the cases of the gang member’s mother and the Gujarat attack, whatever other aims were also involved. And even though the official line used to generate public support for the American-led invasion of Afghanistan was not explicitly framed in terms of revenge, “national sentiment” in the United States was interpreted enthusiastically in the mass media and government circles as mostly demanding it, as part of coping with the fear, grief, shame, anger, and sense of loss that many people felt in response to the “9/11 attack on America.”

The differences between these examples are important too, especially when it comes to morally assessing them and other similar cases. One such difference has to do with whether the avenging agent is an individual person or some kind of collective entity that can be said to act in retaliation. An individual filled with the desire for revenge certainly can seek assistance from other individuals who may be sympathetic to that desire, but as some dialecticians like to point out, there is a “transformation of quantity into quality” that occurs in the dynamics of social interaction, such that a qualitative change results from enough individual agents working together, thereby creating an identifiable group agent like a mob or a government in control of

4 Jeffrie G. Murphy, Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 17. As I will try to show later, fear is also a crucial emotion behind the desire for revenge, and in my estimation Murphy underestimates its role in his book.
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military forces. Particularly in the case of the U.S. military retaliation, identifying which collective agent is the relevant focus for purposes of assigning moral responsibility gets complicated rather quickly, but for many people it didn’t seem strange at the time to make references to an enraged citizenry itself desiring vengeance or to the whole nation-state as both victim and avenging agent.

This distinction between individual and collective agency obviously is relevant also for determining the identity of the perceived wrongdoer, who would be the target of revenge. The fellow employee and the civil suit claimant were exclusively targeted for harm as individuals, even if other individuals (management personnel in the one case, lawyers and/or judges in the other) may have had more to do with the specific actions that “cost” the self-identified victim. On the other hand, the vengeful parent seemed to be demanding some kind of physical violence against either the rival gang itself (at least indirectly) as an organized paramilitary group or any particular person associated with it; and the Hindu mob violence was directed against Muslims as an identifiable group in the Gujarat area, whether or not any Muslim individuals there had any direct involvement in the previous day’s train attack against a Hindu group. And again, the widespread encouragement of vengeful feelings after the 9/11 attacks was focused mostly on Al-Qaeda and the Taliban as shadowy, alien, and evil groups, as well as on a few individuals such as Osama bin Laden.

Another difference in these various cases (as already implied) has to do with the nature and extent of the planning involved, from the moment of the harm/loss suffered to the cessation of specific retaliatory actions. Relevant variables here include how much time the revenge strategy will take to carry out, how many people are involved in the planning, the types of resources to be used, the nature and extent of the organization among co-conspirators (the differences between mob action and military campaigns, for example, are usually discernible after all), the criteria for success, and the intended proportionality between the retaliatory harm to be inflicted and the harm suffered by the party seeking “satisfaction.”

In addition, besides the amount of harm experienced first by the claimed victim and eventually by the revenge target, the distinction between physical and psychological injury on both sides needs to be addressed. In some of these cases, in response to wounded pride, vengeance aims at the emotional state of the other rather than
bodily damage,\(^5\) while in other instances the response to wrongful physical violence is an effort to inflict the same or worse on the perceived perpetrator (or those “guilty by association”). Naturally the physical and the psychological are quite interwoven experientially, and that fact too is very important in understanding and evaluating particular revenge strategies, as will be seen. But a qualitative difference of this sort is as relevant as quantitative determinations of the degree of injury sustained in the various cases, from both an ethical and a legal standpoint, as well as for purposes of conceptual clarity, attributing responsibility, and the identification of future consequences for all affected parties.

The last difference I will note in these examples has to do with whether the revenge strategy chosen is a more focused response to a specific grievance, or instead is more accurately seen as a means for pursuing multiple agendas. Personal motivations in the pursuit of vengeance are rarely simple in any case, and knowing the state of mind of the avenger or revenge advocate is often not possible for outside observers. But especially in the less obviously pre-planned mob attack, and in the completely unspontaneous military invasion, other collective goals were pretty clearly at stake besides the achievement of situation-specific emotional satisfaction and some kind of regaining of psychic balance for some victimized party. The Gujarat mass murder occurred in a social context of episodic intergroup violence between Hindus and Muslims in different parts of India over many years, and the recurrent fear of one’s own side being perceived as weaker, or less devout, than...
the other side by failing to retaliate likely has influenced decision-making by whatever internal leadership has asserted itself in particular volatile situations. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that the dream of “total victory” and/or genocide, as the only way to guarantee security for one’s own cultural community, has been alive for some members of both religious groups as well. Altogether then this mob attack might be interpreted as having been motivated by various defensive concerns along with (but as I will argue, distinct from) the desire for revenge itself.

Regarding the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, as mentioned revenge wasn’t an official reason cited by the government, although the desire for it was so widespread inside and outside official circles at the time that the denial (made explicitly on various occasions by administration officials) of its central motivational role in that dubious military undertaking was just not plausible. Apart from the stated goal of punishing the Taliban government (also to be distinguished more thoroughly from the goal of revenge in what follows), there was of course the defensive argument publicly made for retaliation to incapacitate Al-Qaeda so it couldn’t carry out future terrorist attacks. But as with any large-scale military campaign in recent times, there were other aims guiding the planning and execution of the invasion, only sometimes admitted by those involved. Some of the more controversial governmental motivations identified at the time were as follows: First, to generate public support for a U.S. administration already unpopular less than a year after it took power in a scandalous and legally questionable presidential election. Second, as it turned out the Bush administration was already planning to invade Iraq, again, and the Afghanistan invasion was used as a prelude, largely to channel public anger over the deadly events of September 11 into vengeful enthusiasm for taking out the Iraqi government, which itself was constantly linked (falsely) by Bush administration officials and rightist mass media with Al-Qaeda and those attacks. Third, it was widely charged that the U.S. government’s primary goal was to establish more firmly a dominant military presence in Central Asia, especially because of the oil and natural gas reserves available in that vast region. Accordingly, non-compliant governments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran were targeted for removal, all in the name of “defending freedom from its enemies.” And fourth, huge profits were achievable by favored big businesses selling products and services of all kinds to the U.S. military, in
addition to the natural resource riches to be had (the Haliburton corporation, in which the newly elected U.S. vice-president had previously served as a leading executive, was pointed to most often in this regard), while funding of domestic social welfare programs was cut in order to pay for this increased military spending, thereby fulfilling both financial and ideological goals of the Bush administration and a conservative Congress.

In looking at the similarities and differences between these five revenge scenarios, I want to emphasize that they all involve efforts at retaliatory violence, taking into account the distinction between physical and psychological injury as noted earlier. As I have argued elsewhere, violence can be usefully defined as “...the direct or indirect infliction of injury on someone or something by some agent...” where the concept of injury itself involves “...a continuum of harm, damage, or hurt to someone against his or her will or in some other way contrary to the recipient’s interests, ranging from that which is immediately life-threatening, through different degrees of debilitation, suffering, and loss, to a point of insignificance in the thwarting of desires.”6 I will be using these definitions of violence and injury throughout this book too, so a few initial clarifications are in order here. Regarding the possibility of both direct and indirect injury, we are first and foremost talking about individuals or some kinds of collective entities being either direct or indirect agents of violence, since from the standpoint of the recipient the degree of damage or hurt is usually the same. I will return to this topic in both its descriptive and normative dimensions in later chapters, but some examples here will suffice to make the present point:

When civilian government officials order a nation’s military personnel into combat in which they themselves do not directly participate...those officials are still intentionally and knowingly causing injury to other people, using as their means the men and women making up the military force. Similarly, in coordinating the execution of a convicted murderer, a prison warden may never wield the physical implements of death, but he or she will be one of the agents whose voluntary actions lead to an intended lethal outcome, so that even if the warden doesn’t directly kill, he or she indirectly kills that prisoner. Maybe less obviously but quite as accurately, we can also characterize as the

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6 Kit R. Christensen, Nonviolence, Peace, and Justice: A Philosophical Introduction (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2010), pp. 31–32.
indirect infliction of injury the actions of citizens in successfully pressuring government officials to carry out violence against someone, as in either of these other cases. That is, individually and collectively people in an organized society become perpetrators of violence themselves in this indirect sense whenever they positively do something to effectively instigate or support the carrying out of direct violence by others (as opposed to merely refraining from action, as in the passive inattention or indifference that also could imply its own kind of culpability).  

Another point worth mentioning about this characterization of violence, though it should be an obvious one, is that it focuses on the actual damage or harm done by someone, rather than on simulated, pretend, metaphorical, or virtual injury. People may have violent predispositions that are manifested in fantasies, dreams, various kinds of games, or everyday modes of expressing themselves, but until they actually cause physical or psychological harm of a smaller or greater amount to real (not just fictional or imaginary) others, they are not yet agents of violence even if they want to be. We may be rightly wary of such people, and be concerned that they are more likely to hurt someone else in fact, but even having violent intentions is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for an act of injuring. The main reason this distinction between real violence and pseudo-violence is relevant here is that if revenge always involves the effort to actually hurt another party in retaliation for perceived hurt suffered, then there is no such thing, literally speaking, as nonviolent revenge. In other words, in the same way we can separate actual, literal violence from virtual or metaphorical violence, we can distinguish between actual, literal vengeance and virtual, metaphorical, or figurative vengeance, and also allow that the latter, as only pseudo-vengeance, is usually nonviolent in both its intent and its concrete impact, while the former is by definition violent even if only to a vanishingly slight degree. The members of a sports team might talk about “avenging their loss” earlier in the season to a rival team, but clearly this is only a metaphorical way of referring to their goal of defeating the other team in their next contest (played within the agreed-upon rules) after having been defeated themselves, and not literally meant as a plan to hurt the other players or somehow damage the other team itself so that it can no longer function as an organizational unit. If the first team does win

7 Ibid., pp. 32–33.
next time, its members will likely feel better about themselves because they “made up for” the previous loss, but that loss wasn’t an actual victimization anyway, and their upcoming hoped-for victory will not be an actual violation of the other team. Certainly the lines of demarcation between game environments and the rest of our daily social interactions can become blurred for some people, and there is plenty of opportunity for psychopathology to develop regarding what is “real” and what is “just a game.” But in fact most people seem to understand this difference in a very commonsensical, unproblematic manner, whether the “alternative reality” they are talking about is football, or video games with themes of vengeance-motivated carnage, or even the simulation games devised by scientists to study human behavioral and cognitive responses to conflict.

As I have indicated, vengeance and punishment are not the same things, though they are often closely interwoven both conceptually and practically. Most philosophical accounts of punishment offer justifications of it that fall into one or both of two distinct categories: Punishing wrongdoers is necessary as a means of preventing further offenses, and/or it is necessary because it is required by the principle of retribution. Especially in legal contexts the state’s obligation to punish those convicted of crimes is asserted, on the one hand, by pointing to citizens’ rights to be defended from future similar crimes, and this presumably happens either by somehow incapacitating criminals (by incarceration or even death) or by deterring them (in cases of non-lethal, time-limited penalties) and other potential offenders from again violating those laws. On the other hand it is argued that, independently of the goal of crime prevention, retributive justice itself demands the punishment of persons convicted of crimes, in proportion to the severity of the offense, because that is what they deserve.

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8 As will be seen, this distinction between vengeance and punishment has been worked out in different ways by modern philosophers, but it was argued for by some in ancient times as well. For example, as Aristotle simply put it: “But revenge and punishment differ; for punishment is for the sake of the sufferer, revenge for the sake of the doer, that he may get a sense of fulfillment” (this “fulfillment” being the “satisfaction” identified by Govier and Murphy earlier). Aristotle, *On Rhetoric* (1.10.17), translated by George Kennedy, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 86.