

5. “Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya”: Revenge as Moral Address

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Summary: Trudy Govier offers a sweeping moral critique of revenge, arguing that even non-violent, limited, acts of revenge are wrong, insofar as they necessarily treat the target as an instrument of the revenger’s satisfaction (offending against respect for persons) and thus morally diminish the revenger. I challenge Govier’s critique by broadening her account of revenge, focusing in particular on its communicative complexities. Revenge aims to address rather than *use* its target, I argue, 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. Nevertheless, the unilateral nature of this address and the morally simplistic worldview on which it depends present significant (and likely fatal) moral risks to any project of vengeance.

My father was slaughtered by a six-fingered man... When I was strong enough, I dedicated my life to the study of fencing, so the next time we meet, I will not fail. I will go up to the six-fingered man and say, ‘Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.’
—*The Princess Bride* (1987)

1. Introduction

As I write, vengeance is very much en vogue. The phenomenon of “revenge porn” – posting explicit photos of one’s ex on dedicated internet sites – has become so pervasive that a number of jurisdictions, including California and New Jersey, have passed legislation against it. In pop culture, the last few years have seen a major motion picture remake of *Oldboy*, the second film in Park Chan-Wook’s *Vengeance Trilogy*, as well as the hit

American TV drama, “Revenge” – which took a narrative reminiscent of Alexandre Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo* and placed it in a fashionable Hamptons setting. Over the last decade, global politics have been dominated by multiple US-led wars, both of which are plausibly conceived of as acts of retaliation against states more or less dubiously associated with the 9/11 terrorist acts in 2001. Meanwhile, Internet activists like Anonymous and the Perverted Justice Foundation continue to pursue vigilante campaigns against perpetrators of sexual violence, pedophilia, and online bullying, which the wider public views with an ambivalent mixture of condemnation and gratitude.

Those who study and promote reconciliation may well cite political and pop cultural phenomena as evidence for a pressing need to counteract the vengeful spirit of our age. At the same time, the popularity of vengeance is perhaps evidence for the opposite conclusion, that the impulse toward revenge needs to be taken seriously and cannot be condemned out of hand. Revenge deserves our consideration both for its formidable motivating power in the world, and for the – perhaps illusory – moral kernel at its heart, namely, the intuition that those who commit irreparable harms deserve to pay, that institutions are not always effective, and those most acquainted with and affected by wrongful harm have a role to play in effecting their perpetrators’ deserts. Revenge is dangerous precisely because it compels not only our worst impulses, but some of our best: sympathy for the downtrodden, righteous anger at their oppressors, the rush and surge of emotion spurred by agency regained, and our satisfaction at a karmic universe, where things work out as they should. Condemnations of revenge that fail to take seriously its appeal will only poke holes in a straw opponent.

For this reason (among others), Trudy Govier’s groundbreaking contributions to philosophical discussions of reconciliation in *Forgiveness and Revenge* (Govier 2002) – hereafter, FR – are notable because they start by

taking seriously the moral standing many give to revenge. Govier carefully weighs arguments for and against the value of vengeance, distinguishing the empirical from the conceptual, and acknowledging the apparent connection between revenge and a sense of justice, the victim's self-respect and regained agency, and what we might call cosmic balance. Yet, she concludes, whatever goods an act of revenge might appear to achieve, a successful campaign amounts to "satisfaction at having brought about the suffering of another human being" (FR, 11) and is thus morally objectionable, given basic moral commitments to respect for persons. There are, of course, other downsides to revenge – its famously obsessive nature, the risks of escalating vendettas, the tendency to spiraling violence, and potential harms to innocent third parties – but none of these is *intrinsic* to revenge, argues Govier, in the same way the message that "[the] other human being is fit to be an instrument for her own satisfaction" (FR, 12) sits at its core. Someone could commit an act of revenge that avoided each of these pitfalls, but it would remain morally objectionable.

Moral justifications for revenge fail, she argues, because:

Underlying the moral case for revenge is the assumption that *it can sometimes be right for a person to be the agent of deliberately bringing harm to another person, for the sake of enjoying having brought that harm.* (FR 12)

Govier identifies revenge with its motive and condemns it in light of that motive: "deliberately bringing harm... for the sake of enjoying having brought that harm."

While there is much that is insightful in her analysis, in this paper I offer an alternative picture of revenge – one which highlights the communicative dimensions of revenge, ultimately describing the transaction between revenger and target as a form of (admittedly imperfect) moral address. My reading lessens the charge that

vengeance always, necessarily, offends against the principle of respect for persons. Nevertheless, I conclude, there remain conceptual as well as empirical reasons against endorsing widespread practices of revenge.

2. Satisfaction at suffering: Govier on revenge

I begin by outlining what I take to be the core elements of Govier's account of revenge, and the critique she develops out of that account. Govier isolates three key elements to successful revenge:

- a) the intention to harm another in response to their initial harm;
- b) the revenger's agency in that harm;
- c) the actual suffering of the one who is harmed.

Someone intends to commit an act of revenge when she responds to the person who hurt her by aiming to “get her own back and settle accounts” (FR, 2) – that is, when she tries to do something that will hurt her target as much as they have hurt her. The desire for revenge is not simply a desire that something bad happen, i.e. that her target is harmed, but a desire that she – the one seeking vengeance – is the cause of that harm. Should her target slip and break an arm, or get an expensive parking ticket, or succumb to illness, this will not be satisfying to the would-be revenger, even if such accidents produced *more harm* than she had originally intended. Her agency in causing harm to her target is key to the satisfaction of revenge, as much as the harm itself is. Also, the vengeful act must actually cause the target suffer. Should she aim to harm and end up helping her antagonist, this would be equally unsatisfying, as Govier illustrates with the example of Ann, who retaliates against Michael – a workplace bully – by telling his wife he is having an affair, only for Michael to find this a relief and blessing (FR, 2-3).

What of the moral case for and against revenge? Govier notes that philosophical defenders of revenge – most notably Robert Solomon and Jeffrie Murphy – tend to emphasize the naturalness of the vengeful impulse, the sense of balance created by the exchange of harms, and the ways in which revenge at least appears to promote justice, the victim’s self-respect, equality of agency and stature between victim and perpetrator, and victim satisfaction (Murphy 1995; Solomon 1990). Solomon and Murphy take these to be a *prima facie* moral case for revenge, placing the burden of proof on those who wish to rule it out. They succeed in doing so only by focusing only on benign examples, Govier argues, such as “a single discrete act of a bland and non-violent nature” (FR, 3) – for example, a nasty remark made in passing or a vote against someone’s pet project at a meeting. This focus allows them to downplay the “exaggerated, unreliable, and anarchic tendencies of personal revenge” (8) – as do fictional revenge fantasies, like Fay Weldon’s novel *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (Weldon 1983), which narratively constrain the effects of vengeance so that only the guilty are hurt, the cause remains righteous, and all are morally improved as a result (6-7). Outside of fiction, revenge is far more likely to spiral outwards into violence, vendetta, and vigilantism. Moreover, Govier notes, the satisfactions of revenge are often hollow to the revenger: a beaten, downtrodden opponent is less formidable, and so their defeat is less cathartic (9-10).

We might describe the disagreement here as varying levels of skepticism about the constrained nature of revenge – defenders believe that the practice can, at least at its best, maintain certain internal limits, so that revenge *need* not involve violence, illegal action, and escalating or spiraling cycles of retaliation. Skeptics about revenge, on the other hand, see the hazards of revenge in practice as inevitable. Once someone is compelled to revenge, he or she cannot avoid all the risks involved in undertaking such a course of action. Such debates often reduce to

discussions of those reactive attitudes seen to motivate revenge, which Jeffrie Murphy calls “the vindictive passions:” resentment, anger, vindictiveness, and even hatred. Those who see a moral role for such attitudes are less likely to conclude that these emotions are necessarily socially destructive, or will inevitably overtake other moral considerations and rational caution.

Ultimately, questions about the psychology, escalation, and side effects of revenge are empirical issues, external to the question that most concerns Govier: namely, the moral status of revenge itself.

Suppose it were non-obsessive, non-violent, kept proportional and within bounds, applied to those who really were the wrongdoers and not inflicted on innocent third parties, and satisfying in the end. In such a case, could revenge be right? In other words, is there anything wrong with the desire for revenge or the quest for revenge *as such*, considered apart from its consequences? (11)

For Govier, the answer is yes, for two reasons. First, revenge necessarily treats another as the instrument of my satisfaction, offending against the Kantian principle of respect for persons. Second, revenge “morally diminishes the [revenging] victim” (13). Recall that on Govier’s account, revenge has three key elements: the intention to inflict harm in response to harm, the revenger’s agency in inflicting that harm, and the actual suffering of the target as a result of the harm inflicted. In revenging, my aim is to inflict suffering on a particular person, and my aim is satisfied if that suffering is inflicted. Moreover, the connection she draws between purpose and satisfaction is deeper—my aim, in inflicting suffering, is to experience exactly that satisfaction that comes from having inflicted it. I aim to inflict suffering because I know I will be satisfied when I have inflicted it, and not for some other purpose. This connection distinguishes revenge from some other satisfaction at suffering: suppose, for example, my

sense of honesty dictates that I tell someone a difficult truth, knowing that hearing it will cause them suffering. My purpose in the latter case that my audience possess the knowledge – knowledge I am aware will be painful for them – and I am satisfied in my purpose when they possess it (and are thus suffering), but I do not set out to tell them in order to gain satisfaction from that suffering. The hearer’s pain is a necessary, foreseeable, consequence of the satisfaction of my purpose, but does not consist in it.

In other words, the core aim of revenge on Govier’s definition is that another person suffer *for* my satisfaction. Their unwanted, non-consensual suffering means that I treat them as a means and not an end, in a manner inconsistent with their dignity as a person. Moreover, this disrespect is particularly insidious, since my satisfaction in this case requires that they *suffer*. Requiring that someone be amused or pleased for my satisfaction and without their consent would also be disrespectful, but would not have the additional elements of pain and disutility. The first moral strike against revenge is significant: if indeed it requires instrumental suffering in this way, then revenge necessarily offends against respect for persons.

The second aspect of the moral case against revenge is predicated on the first. Govier claims that the desire for revenge is an evil desire, and that to act on that desire is thus “to indulge and cultivate something evil in ourselves” and to “commit [ourselves] to maliciousness and hate,” resulting ultimately in moral diminishment (13). There are two things worth noting here: first, the idea that the desire for revenge is an evil desire depends on the prior argument for the moral wrongfulness of revenge. If revenge is not wrong, then the desire for revenge is not wrong, either. Second, the claim that the desire for revenge is not simply a bad desire but an *evil* one is a very strong claim. It is true that desiring to treat another as a means rather than an end and desiring to cause pain are hardly commendable wishes, but what warrants the appellation evil? Recall that Govier’s focus is on the moral status of revenge that is

“non-obsessive, non-violent, kept proportional and within bounds” (11) – and, in order not to beg the question, limited to non-violent, legal forms of retaliation. Failing to limit her cases in this way would confuse the issue, since illegal or violent actions may be immoral on their own merits, apart from their status as acts of revenge.

Why, then, is the desire for revenge an evil desire? Govier’s case revolves around the psychological status of the revenger, yet she describes more than one psychological state. We are first told that the revenger gained satisfaction from the suffering of her opponent, and then, told that the revenger “desires to bring harm to another so that [she] may contemplate with satisfaction that harm,” and further, that “when we seek revenge, we do so in order to take pleasure in the fact that *the offender has been made to suffer* and *it is we who have brought this about.*” Govier goes on to describe the desire for revenge as “the wish to deliberately bring suffering to another human being and contemplate that suffering for our own satisfaction and enjoyment” and she concludes that the emotion of revenge is “hatred that goes so far as to include joy at the evil meted out to another person... positive joy in the fact that we have caused the suffering of another person” (13).

The emotions and reflections described in the previous paragraph are distinct and increasingly distasteful psychological states. There is a difference from experiencing satisfaction at some act, on the one hand, and doing that same act so that you might later contemplate it with satisfaction, on the other. The latter implies a willingness to dwell, indulge, and inhabit the experience in memory and reminiscence longer than is necessary. This, in turn, suggests an enthusiasm and affinity that is incompatible with someone who commits revenge perhaps out of a sense of honour, a moment of self-assertion, or from righteous indignation. The shift from “satisfaction” to “pleasure” is starker still. There are many forms of satisfaction that are not also pleasures, but are rather

experienced as a sense of relief, escape, closure, catharsis, or duty fulfilled. To equate the satisfaction of desire with pleasure at that satisfaction is mistaken, and risks committing to a simplistic psychological hedonism. The distinction is important, since the idea of pleasure at someone's suffering is more morally troubling than satisfaction through someone's suffering, since it suggests sadism or cruelty in addition to vindictiveness. There are many instances where relief or closure is an appropriate reaction, but pleasure would not be.

In other words, the claim that revenge necessarily diminishes the character of the revenger is defended here with reference to a particular, and more extreme, picture of the psychological state of the revenger than is initially contained in Govier's definition of revenge. It is not hard for me to imagine a committed revenger who can truthfully say that they take no pleasure in the task they have set themselves but, rather, feel compelled to act – whether from a sense of injustice, duty (if they believe revenge to be not only permissible, but required), family loyalty, or the need to strike back against ongoing bullying and cruelty.

Someone could meet Govier's initial standards for revenge – aiming to settle accounts by inflicting some harm on the one who did wrong – and possess none of the hatred, cruel pleasures, and vindictive joys she goes on to describe. That is not to say that such hatreds and cruelties are not often associated with vengeance, in practice, but recall the task Govier has set herself is to determine whether there is something morally wrong with appropriate, proportionate, non-violent revenge *in principle*. The claim that revenge morally diminishes the revenging victim seems to rest, largely, on her description of the psychological state of the revenger – a description that may seem extreme, given the range of revenging acts under consideration, i.e. those that are non-violent, non-obsessive, proportionate, and legal.

Without such a vivid psychological picture, we can only say the project of revenge morally diminishes the revenger insofar as revenge is (as argued above) morally wrongful, and the desire to commit a morally wrongful act always in some sense diminishes the one who desires it – especially when such a desire becomes my will, and I act upon it. This is, in some sense, true; the virtuous person does not desire the bad, and *a fortiori*, does not act on a desire for the bad. But the strength of this objection will falter if the bad in question is not a serious wrong. Thus the moral case against revenge ultimately hinges on the first claim: that its satisfaction depends on treating another instrumentally, and not with the respect persons deserve.

But is this the only way to view the act of revenge? Govier acknowledges that the desire for revenge is “a highly complex emotion, involving as it does notions of agency, wrong, responsibility, and rightful suffering” (13). Surely the purpose of revenge is, in part, to express this emotion and communicate these complex notions to the intended target. Indeed, acts of revenge are sometimes colloquially described as “sending a message”. But ordinarily, we do not think of the recipients of our messages as instruments, but addressees – i.e. persons capable of receiving, understanding and interpreting what we communicate. And so, if revenge is – among other things – a communicative action, and if the message revenge communicates contains moral themes such as injustice, defiance and redress,³⁵ then might the recipient of my revenge be better described as a moral addressee, rather than an instrument to my purposes? Below, I consider another reading of the revenge transaction.

3. The Six-Fingered Man: Revenge as moral address

³⁵ That is, these themes are moral in the sense that they contain references to moral concepts and principles, not moral in the sense that the revenger is necessarily good or just.

Conceiving of revenge as a communicative act is significant because it changes and broadens our understanding of the revenger's motive. Govier's case against revenge is compelling because, if true, it condemns an act of vengeance that would otherwise be not only legally but also morally permitted. The revenger's motive, i.e. the satisfaction of seeing her tormentor suffer through her agency, is sufficiently wrongful that wrongfulness carries over to the act itself. Thus even a benign act – a vote at a meeting – becomes wrong if it is, at the same time, an act of revenge. But what if that motive were more complicated than Govier allows?

Indeed, let us examine in more detail the example of a negative vote at a meeting. Take two colleagues: Leah and Mateo. Mateo has ruthlessly and persistently bullied Leah over many years, and Leah has come to see herself as having little power and few options. Leah sits on a committee where she suddenly found herself in a position to vote to defund a pet project of Mateo's – and she did so. Mateo was not a member of this committee, and will never know the individual votes. Moreover, since the meeting was split fairly evenly, Leah's swing vote determined the outcome. Leah did not consider the project's merits (if she had considered them, her vote would have been the same, since his project lacks merit). Rather, she did so because this was the first time she found herself in a position to hurt Mateo, and she desired very much to hurt him as he has hurt her. Leah's act counts as revenge on Govier's account.

Yet, from Leah's own perspective, will she feel that she has adequately revenged herself? Perhaps – Mateo's project is important to him, and he is hurt by its cancellation. But unless Mateo knows that she, Leah, voted, and how and why she voted, and unless he knows Leah's vote was the deciding factor, Mateo's relationship to Leah will not change. Leah hasn't yet 'gotten her own' back, or sent the message of "agency, wrong, responsibility, and rightful suffering" (FR, 13) that she

wishes to communicate. Why not? Mateo doesn't understand that he was defeated *because* he is the kind of colleague who bullies and belittles others, who manipulates and torments them. There is no connection, in Mateo's mind, between his ongoing cruel and non-collegial behaviour, on the one hand, and his sudden burst of professional bad luck, on the other. Mateo has not been made to see himself as Leah sees him, to experience his defeat as Leah's victory. Mateo will not experience his disappointment as *punishment*, and so the act, while causally effective, remains voiceless. Leah may well remain dissatisfied – not because her revenge is unsatisfying – but because her actions do not yet constitute revenge. Leah has retaliated against Mateo, but she has not committed revenge.

What, exactly, does the vindictive person desire when she desires revenge, in particular? Govier is right that she wants to cause her target to suffer harm, but this is not the whole story. The would-be revenger wants to draw a connection between the pain her target now suffers and the pain she, the revenger, previously suffered. She wants her target to understand that he is suffering because the revenger wants him to suffer and because he deserves to suffer, and, further, that he deserves to suffer *on account of suffering* he initially inflicted on the revenger. In other words, the revenger needs her target to know that this is an act of revenge. The satisfactions of revenge arise, at least in part, from the successful communication of this message, since this message is what expresses agency, moral indignation, and the aim of 'restoring balance'.

In other words, the revenging agent doesn't merely wish that her target feel certain things (i.e. pain and suffering). She wishes that he come to believe and understand certain things (i.e. the connection between the pain and suffering he now feels, and the moral blameworthiness of his previous actions). Moral philosopher Adam Smith describes vindictive emotions and desires (i.e. those that fuel revenge) in the following:

Resentment would prompt us to desire, not only that he should be punished, but that he should be punished by our means, and upon account of that particular injury which he had done to us. Resentment cannot be fully gratified, unless the offender is not only made to grieve in his turn, but to grieve for that particular wrong which we have suffered from him. He must be made to repent and be sorry for this very action (Smith 1976, 63).

The first few elements here match Govier's picture: the vindictive person wishes that her perpetrator should suffer ("be punished") and that he should suffer through her own agency ("by our means") because he has hurt her ("that particular injury..."). But Smith goes further; it is not enough for the target to suffer ("grieve") and even experience regret as a result of that suffering. He must regret his current state in light of *his own past behaviour* that led to his suffering ("grieve for that particular wrong which we have suffered from him"). The would-be revenger wishes to hurt her target, yes, but the hurt is not the final aim—or at least, is not the complete, final aim. The aim of revenge is not only harm, but *transfor-mational* harm. What Smith describes here is a fantasy of forcible moral persuasion.

We now possess a very different description of the relationship between revenger and her target. Whereas previously the target was described as merely playing an instrumental role in the ultimate aim of revenge – i.e. the revenger's satisfaction or pleasure at witnessing his suffering – now the target is not merely instrument, but audience. The revenger does not merely aim to hurt her target, she aims to show him something, to make clear to him the moral picture that consumes and motivates her. We can add to Govier's initial conditions of revenge, that the revenger aims to harm her target in such a way that he understand a) it is she who harms him and b) that she harms him on account of the harms he committed against

her – she wishes him to share her perspective on their history and on his just deserts, even if he does not agree with it. She must not only inflict her agency on the target in some way, she must *address* him. Revenge is, among other things, a complex form of communication.

The clearest illustration of the communicative element to revenge can be found in the cult 1973 William Goldman novel and 1987 film, *The Princess Bride* – though the particular act of revenge in question departs from the constrained, non-violent, legal model discussed until now. The Spanish fencer Inigo Montoya explains his life’s defining passion in the following manner:

“My father was slaughtered by a six-fingered man... When I was strong enough, I dedicated my life to the study of fencing, so the next time we meet, I will not fail. I will go up to the six-fingered man and say, ‘Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.’”—*The Princess Bride* (1987)

It will not suffice for Montoya to hurt, or even to kill, his father’s murderer – at least, not without explanation. That would not be revenge. For his revenge to succeed, he must speak the words to the six-fingered man. He must address his target (“Hello”), identify himself (“My name is Inigo Montoya”), name and explain the wrong in question (“You killed my father”) and connect it – both morally and causally – to the suffering he is about to impose (“Prepare to die”). Montoya practices this address as he practices his sword fighting, since these words are as essential to his purpose as his skill. Indeed, when he eventually finds and confronts the six-fingered man – the nefarious Count Rugen, who is himself an excellent swordsman – at the climax of the narrative, Montoya speaks and repeats the words over and over, drawing strength and focus from them even as he is wounded. And the words themselves seem to hurt the six-fingered man – who screams at him,

“Stop saying that!” – well before it is clear that Montoya will rally enough to win the fight.

There is much we might criticize about Montoya’s actions; few moral philosophers endorse lethal sword fighting, after all. But in seeking to revenge his father’s murder, does he necessarily treat the Count with disrespect? Again, for some, this question will be ridiculous: in most moral frameworks to murder someone is always, necessarily, to treat them with disrespect. But let us put the *method* of revenge to one side. Recall that the question at hand is the intrinsic wrongfulness of revenge, apart from its frequent association with violence. Suppose Montoya were to approach his target, and utter instead, “Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to be revenged” – and the revenge that followed were some harmful but appropriately constrained, legal, non-violent act, as initially stipulated. It is true that Montoya will nevertheless intentionally harm another human being –but this harm is inflicted not only, or even primarily, for Montoya’s satisfaction (let alone his enjoyment). It is inflicted to communicate the moral message Montoya wishes to express, and that he summarizes in his initial address: that the Count has hurt Montoya, and was wrong to hurt Montoya, and deserves to suffer for hurting Montoya, and that Montoya is here to ensure that this state of affairs takes place. Revenge necessarily involves intentional harm, but arguably, it is intentional harm in the service of moral address as much as it is intentional harm for the revenger’s emotional satisfaction alone.

Lest this be taken as a ringing endorsement of vengeance, a few things ought to be noted. Few real-life examples of revenge will meet the moral and narrative standards of *The Princess Bride*. In many cases, actual revengers will fall short of the communicative ideal described by Smith and exemplified by Montoya. In my example above, I suggested that Leah would not be satisfied by her anonymous act of harm against Mateo –

but if she is not particularly reflective, she may well be simply treasuring it as a secret talisman the next time Mateo mocks or bullies her. If so, then what Leah really desired was retaliation of any kind, and not revenge in particular. Revenge's conceptual connection to retributive justice is found in its communicative complexity, and the link the revenger attempts to draw between suffering and desert in the target's worldview. I take this communicative complexity to be intrinsic to the act of revenge, and to the suffering imposed in the act of revenging.

Does this expanded, communicative account of revenge as a form of moral address fully answer Govier's concern regarding respect for persons? On the one hand, when I address someone, intending to persuade them of something, I necessarily take their personhood seriously, insofar as I see them as someone capable of persuasion. On the other hand, even non-violent revenge as communication has a potentially serious strike against it: it is intended to *end*, rather than *continue* moral conversation. Contrast the forcible finality of revenge with what Govier has to say about rational argument, for example:

The other person is addressed as a rational being, as a person with beliefs and values of his own, as one who thinks and is capable of changing his beliefs on the basis of reasons and evidence. To present someone with an argument is to attend to his or her mind and thinking processes and to do so in a non-manipulative way. It is to honestly acknowledge differences of opinion and belief, not to skirt over them, hide them, or seek to avoid them...to show respect for [arguers] as autonomous thoughtful people. (POA, 8)

Revenge falls short of this profoundly respectful account of persuasion not because of its vindictiveness or its viciousness, but because of its unilateral nature. Argumentative persuasion is a potentially reciprocal

address; the one who persuades is ideally open to being persuaded, in turn. This is not the case with revenge. While, in practice, a single act of revenge often spirals into further retaliation (which we could call reciprocal acts of address), the revenger never intends that it do so. She does not see her target as a moral interlocutor – who is able to respond in turn – but as a passive audience. Revenge fails to participate in a moral dialogue – or if it does so, it also always aims to shut that dialogue down, ending the moral conversation. The revenger must assume the rightness of her own cause, and so she aims to persuade without being open to reciprocal persuasion.³⁶ Address without the possibility of response has a place in communicative life with others, but it carries the risk of disrespect. And in the case of revenge, this risk is significantly heightened.

4. Against revenge: Complexity and entanglement

I have suggested that even if the communicative account of revenge draws our attention to its redeeming features as a form of moral address, this communication fails to be wholly respectful insofar as it is unilateral, and not open to reciprocal address. This worry is compounded by the worldview necessary to engage in ‘forcible’ persuasion of this nature. Above, I quoted with approval Govier’s remark that the vengeful impulse is a “highly complex emotion” (12) embedded with multiple moral notions. This is true – and yet, at the same time, revenge necessarily communicates a simple, even simplistic, story. The decision to revenge oneself rests, in part, on two beliefs: that the target deserves to suffer, and that the revenger has the authority to impose that suffering. Both conditions – desert and authority – are tied to the shared history of the revenger and target: the target deserves what he deserves because he has caused suffering, and the revenger has the

³⁶ Thanks are due to Susanne Sreedhar for pressing me on this point.

authority she has because she experienced that suffering (French 2001). According to the logic of revenge, the revenger's own suffering both determines another's desert and confers her authority to exact that desert.

Revenger's logic cannot hold without a simplistic worldview to support it. To see her suffering as capable of conferring authority and determining desert in such a clearly defined and discrete manner, the revenger must see herself as exceptional – as distinct and different, or at least examined in isolation from others around her. If she thinks about her experiences in a broader context, the starkness of her suffering becomes diluted and it begins to lose its capacity to ground her purpose. To illustrate this, let us return to Leah and Mateo. Reflecting on her vote, Leah might reassure herself that she had every right to retaliate, given her suffering at Mateo's hands. Then she thinks about other, more junior colleagues, whom he has also hurt, and who lack this opportunity – and indeed, whom she herself has failed to protect or defend. She might think about other bullies in the workplace who have not targeted her but whose torments are worse than Mateo's, all things considered. She might recall that Mateo has been left (unfairly) stagnant in this position for the last 10 years, while other, younger colleagues have moved on to better positions. She might think back and flush, recalling times she has been cruel or callous in the past, inflicting suffering through carelessness or cruelty. If she is conscientious in these ramblings, the thoughts “Who am I to inflict this?” and “Is there more to the story?” may cross her mind.

Note that this kind of comparison would not necessarily (and should not) affect a jury's deliberations, or a moral philosopher's determination of culpability for wrongdoing. The retributive logic of revenge is more direct than either of these, and does not invoke questions of reciprocity, the social contract, or shared membership in a kingdom of ends. These are impersonal sources of moral authority, and the revenger's authority is necessarily

personal. Revenge draws a direct link between the initial imposition of suffering (“You killed my father”) and the subsequent decision to revenge (“Prepare to die) – the equation is karmic, not contractarian or Kantian, in nature. Revenge seeks to correct for wrongful suffering by placing it in balance, but this balance of sufferings is only possible if considered in isolation. A broader, more attentive examination of the various sufferings in which we are implicated and which touch us, as secondary and tertiary victims, is staggeringly complex. Indeed, some have argued that this is not just an empirical claim, but an *ontological* one.³⁷ To be the kind of human creatures we are is necessarily to be caught up and implicated in complex webs of suffering – ranging from the chains of production that create our daily sustenance (food, clothing, energy), to our inherited histories of oppression and injustice, as well as the more mundane pains of a world where affection and love are not always requited, courtesy and manners not always returned, and the needs of loneliness and depression go unmet. Revenge as a moral address can only ever communicate an incomplete moral picture because the logic of revenge can only function if we block out our wider entanglements in webs of interdependence and responsibility.

Thus, revenge as moral address now has two strikes against it, which, taken together, leave it fraught with moral risk. Revenge as moral persuasion communicates an incomplete (and thus, a false) moral picture, and revenge as moral address does not treat the addressee as an interlocutor, thus shutting down any corrective response. In fact, the satisfactions of revenge – i.e. the sense that karma has been achieved, and a balance been struck – require that the revenger’s worldview *not* change, that she not move past her identity as wronged victim and avenging

³⁷ See, for example, Alexis Shotwell, “How do we respond to suffering? Interdependence, food, and responsibility” (Unpublished). Shotwell draws on Donna Haraway’s book *When Species Meet* (2007) in making her case for an ethics of entangled embodiment.

agent. In this sense, Govier is right that revenge may morally diminish the revenger—not because it requires a particular range of distasteful psychological states, but because it effectively freezes her in a particular role and that role’s subsequent perspective.

It is telling that Govier goes on to argue, in the later chapters of *Forgiveness and Revenge*, that one benefit of forgiveness – as an alternative to revenge – is that it allows all parties to move past the identities of victim and perpetrator, finding new relational balance in reconciliation. While I disagree with Govier’s core understanding of revenge as pleasure at another’s suffering, I share her intuition that a commitment to respectful engagement with other moral agents may require we put down the revenger’s mantle, and look for other ways to resolve wrongdoing and its aftermath.

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