

REVENGE

ROBERT J. STANTON
Department of Philosophy
University of Western Ontario
rstainto@uwo.ca

SUMMARY: This paper discusses, in a preliminary manner, what revenge is. (It does not address the rationality or moral standing of revenge.) In particular, it proposes four elements of revenge —an agent, a recipient, a harm intended by the former, and a harm done by the latter which provokes the revenge. Based on these four elements, it highlights both agent-internal conditions for getting revenge, and agent-external ones. Along the way, the paper contrasts revenge with related phenomena like merely getting even, and retribution.

KEY WORDS: revenge, internalism, externalism, retribution

RESUMEN: Este trabajo discute de manera preliminar lo que es la venganza. (No considera la racionalidad ni la moralidad de la venganza.) En particular, propone cuatro elementos de la venganza: un agente, un receptor, un daño que el primero tiene la intención de hacer, y un daño hecho por el segundo que provoca la venganza. Basándose en estos cuatro elementos, resaltan tanto las condiciones internas del agente como las externas a él para obtener venganza. A lo largo del trabajo se contrasta la venganza con fenómenos relacionados como el de desquitarse y la retribución.

PALABRAS CLAVE: venganza, internismo, externismo, retribución

Philosophers have considered whether revenge is inevitably a bad thing; they have also considered whether it is irrational. (See Elster 1990, Uniacke 2000, and references cited there.) In contrast, my focus will be on (what I take to be) a related but distinct issue, and one which cannot be ignored when evaluating revenge, namely what revenge *is*. Specifically, I want to address, in an admittedly preliminary way, four questions about revenge:

- What are the key participants in/elements of revenge?
- What are the conditions on genuinely seeking revenge?
- What are the conditions external to the revenge-seeker's mind, if something is genuinely to count as getting revenge?
- How is revenge similar to, and different from, related phenomena such as retribution, deterrence, and “getting even”?

Before I turn to the questions, however, let me clarify my project. I want to investigate the *act* of getting revenge, both the mental state that gives rise to it (i.e., seeking) and the external result (i.e., getting). I am certainly willing to grant that things can be vengeful too. People can be vengeful —I know some who are. And people's products can be vengeful as well: a vengeful law (made to get vengeance), a vengeful weapon (fashioned so as to get revenge), etc. But vengeful things aren't my focus; the act of getting revenge is. Second, I won't be attempting to give necessary and sufficient conditions. In the end, I suspect the only way to do that is hopelessly unhelpful: what's necessary and sufficient for getting revenge is... getting revenge. I do think, however, that one can highlight some surprising and illuminating facts about what seeking and getting revenge requires. And doing so can help us keep clear about what it is that we are evaluating, when we ask about the morality or rationality of revenge. My aim is to do precisely that.

1. *Seeking Revenge*

As will emerge below, I think there is a deep relationship between the external act of getting revenge, and the internal mental state of seeking revenge. Despite how closely intertwined they are, in trying to understand revenge I will initially try to divide and conquer: first, I'll consider conditions on seeking revenge; then I'll suggest that seeking revenge is necessary, though (obviously) not sufficient, for getting revenge, and I'll turn to further conditions on actually getting revenge.

What are the participants in the intentional state of seeking revenge? Here is a first pass, to be complicated in Section 2. To begin with some obvious points: seeking revenge must involve an agent who seeks; equally, it must involve a target, or recipient. *A* seeks revenge on *B*. (To keep things straight, I'll use masculine gender for the seeker, feminine for the recipient.) In addition to these obvious participants in the intentional state, there are two other elements of seeking revenge that I want to highlight. First there is the reason for seeking revenge. This will be some harm perceived by the revenge-getter, and believed done to him by the revenge-recipient. Second, there is the harm which the agent intends to bring about. In sum, the basic form of seeking revenge is:

1. *Agent A seeks revenge on recipient B because of harm H_A by intending to cause harm H_B .*

Let me take each of the four participants in turn.

1.1. Internal Conditions on the Agent A

There are obvious points and less obvious ones, about the agent A . It's obvious that anything which genuinely seeks revenge must be the kind of thing which intends to perform actions, and the kind of thing which has reasons. Also obvious, since the reason for seeking revenge will be a perceived harm, is that anything which can genuinely seek revenge must be the *kind* of thing which is subject to being harmed: a rock can't seek revenge, because it can't intend; but it also can't seek revenge because nothing can harm it. But, less obviously, even more is required.

Seeking to harm someone because you take them to have harmed you is not yet to seek revenge. For instance, suppose you seek to harm a person so that they won't harm you again. That's deterrence, not revenge. In particular, think of the "tit for tat" strategy in cooperative games. To achieve the best outcome, your policy is this: if your opponent cooperates, you do too; but if he defects, you do the same. This policy calls for harming someone for the reason that they harmed you. But following through on this policy isn't seeking revenge. Or again, suppose you harm someone in response to a harm they did to you, but without feeling any anger or malice toward them. You harm them in return, rather, because you believe strongly in actions being rewarded, and you think this harm is the (negative) reward which is due. Again, this does not seem to me to be seeking revenge: it is, or anyway can be, the non-malicious pursuit of retributive justice. (Some will be skeptical of this last contrast. I return to it at the end of Section 3.)

What then is the extra element? Here I want to propose something thoroughly non-obvious. Speaking for myself, I don't think we'll be able to individuate the requisite mental state purely internally: maybe we can find lots of necessary conditions on seeking revenge, couched in a narrow psychological way, which don't make reference to what getting revenge is; but, I fear, fully sorting out the mental state without making reference to the public act isn't possible. Recalling what I said at the outset, about how closely connected seeking revenge and getting revenge are, I offer this suggestion: the fundamental difference within the agent, between some state of wishing to harm someone on purpose because they harmed him, and specifically seeking revenge, is that in the latter case *it is precisely getting revenge that he is seeking*. In one way, this isn't especially odd: captur-

ing the mental state of seeking a warthog is pretty much bound to require one to make reference to things outside the mind, namely warthogs. But in another sense this appeal to getting revenge to explicate seeking revenge is peculiar, because seeking revenge seems to be a necessary condition for getting revenge. As I will explain at length below, you can't get revenge by accident, you have to be trying to get it. So, to distinguish getting revenge, one must talk about seeking revenge—but to sort out what it is to seek revenge, one must talk about getting revenge! Still, the peculiar quasi-circle isn't restricted to seeking revenge: there are other cases in which seeking X is a necessary condition for getting X , yet capturing the nature of seeking X requires reference to X itself. Specifically, this happens quite a bit when the thing sought is a social construct. Thus, I maintain, getting revenge is a social phenomenon like bidding three no trump, or making a promise. And, like these activities, seeking to engage in them requires you to intend to take part precisely *in them*: to want to bet three no trump, for example, requires nothing less than having the concept BIDDING THREE NO TRUMP and intending to perform just that action.

A natural objection to spelling out what it is to seek revenge in this quasi-circular fashion is this: Seeking revenge *can* be distinguished purely internally—specifically, in terms of a distinctive emotional response—so it *should* be so distinguished. The emotional response, the objector might add, has two parts: feeling harmed, and becoming angry as a result; and anticipating the satisfaction of getting even. The objection fails because this appeal to distinctive emotions can't be made to work. First, suppose you have adopted a tit-for-tat strategy, and you also happen to be a hot-blooded sort of person who (a) feels aggrieved whenever a player defects on you, and (b) looks forward, with relish, to the suffering of such wrong-doers. If you apply your strategy to a defector because that will have the best long-term outcome, even while exhibiting the right emotional response, you still don't seek revenge: your actual reason for harming the defector is, despite the accompanying feelings, not the right sort of reason to classify you as seeking revenge. Another more complicated idea which the objector might pursue is that some kind of strong emotion must have given rise to the agent A 's intention to cause harm. It's not enough that A exhibit the right emotional response *and* intend to induce harm because A was harmed; the latter intention must have been produced by the former emotions. This is more promising. But even more complexity is required: it can't be

that the emotional response must “stick around” because, though it arguably isn’t true, the old dictum that “Revenge is a dish best served cold” doesn’t seem contradictory; and it would be a contradiction if seeking revenge required still feeling angry. One would thus need a very subtle, multifaceted mental condition: the bipartite emotion would have to exist, but it would not need to remain throughout the mental state of seeking revenge, as long as it was able to give rise to the requisite intention. The first problem, then, is merely that I am not sanguine about getting at revenge-seeking wholly internally via such complexity. The more fundamental problem, however, is that I doubt one can avoid making reference to the external act of revenge in any case: when one tries to specify what exactly “feeling the right kind of anger” is, and what exactly “the right kind of pleasurable anticipation” is, our quasi-circle comes back. That’s because, surely, the answer to these questions will get us into an appeal to revenge itself, an appeal of precisely the kind that is supposed to be avoided: the right kind of anger/pleasure, the kind which distinguishes merely intending to harm because harmed from revenge, is... the kind of anger/pleasure which goes along with seeking revenge. Indeed, I note that Aristotle at one point writes: “Let anger be [defined as] a desire, accompanied by a pain, to exact an apparent revenge.” He adds immediately after: “and every instance of anger is accompanied by some pleasure which comes from the expectation of taking revenge” (see *Rhetoric* 1378). If the requisite anger/pleasure response and revenge are anything like this tightly connected, the “problem” of mentioning revenge when specifying what it is to seek revenge reemerges in any case, even if we appeal to distinctive emotions.

In light of this, I maintain that a condition on seeking revenge is that it is revenge that one is seeking. An important implication of this, however, is that one cannot get revenge unless one has the concept REVENGE. For, you cannot seek revenge unless you have REVENGE. (A more highly charged example of needing the concept in order genuinely to exhibit the property in question is being a scientist: having a predilection for observation and experiment is not enough for being a scientist, so it might be claimed, because SCIENTIST is a modern social construct —and to have that construct genuinely pertain to you, you must be aware of the construct, and you must intentionally behave so that it applies to you. Yet, as above, it’s doubtful that one can give sufficient conditions for intending to behave in this “scientist way” which don’t make reference to the

institution of modern science.)¹ Suppose that, though a bit peculiar, this is right. Then, A , who seeks revenge, must not only be a thing which intends, can be harmed, has reasons, etc.: he must be a thing which has the concept REVENGE. As a result, when we speak of nations, corporations, terrorist groups, etc., seeking revenge, we aren't speaking literally —unless we also think that such groups can be in the requisite intentional state, and in particular have the concept REVENGE. Similarly, lower animals can't genuinely seek (or get) revenge.² Many of them can be harmed. Some of those can intend harm to another. And some further sub-set of those who can intend harm, can intend it precisely because they were harmed. But unless they have the concept REVENGE —which, arguably, no lower animal does—, they can't seek revenge.

1.2. Internal Conditions on the Recipient B and the Harm H_B which is intended

Once again there are obvious constraints on participants B and H_B , and less obvious ones. Obviously, to be seeking revenge the agent must have a target, or cluster of targets, in mind. One can seek revenge on Nazis, as a group. One can even seek revenge on “whoever burned down my house” —a target whose precise identity remains unknown. But “free floating revenge” in the sense of not knowing in any sense who harmed me, not caring, and merely lashing out at whoever comes my way, seems oxymoronic. (You can't retaliate intransitively. Or aimlessly either.) It's also obvious that the revenge-seeker must take the target to be a thing which acted for reasons: you can't seek revenge on a rock unless, bizarrely, you happen to think that the rock in question has acted in a harmful way towards you.³ On a related but less obvious note, the agent A must believe

¹ It might be objected that one can seek revenge without realizing that this is what one is doing. I think “unreflective revenge” like this can happen. Take a teacher about whom students have written a letter of protest. She tells herself that the low grades she ends up assigning to these student are designed to make them work harder; but in fact, she is out for revenge. The thing is, I don't think this kind of case shows that one can seek revenge without having the concept, or without aiming to instantiate it, since the teacher does have the concept REVENGE. Moreover, one part of her is precisely seeking *it*: in the case imagined, the teacher is aiming precisely at revenge —she just isn't aware that this is her aim.

² By “lower”, I mean animals like frogs and fish. I don't intend apes and such to be included, since they are likely candidates for having the requisite mental states.

³ Andrew Botterell noted (p.c.) that one might be able to seek revenge on something which no longer acts for reasons. For example, suppose B harmed A deliberately, but thereafter got ill and fell into a persistent vegetative state. At least

that it is the target that is responsible for the harm done to A . If A thinks that C did the harm, but B is much more vulnerable, or just closer to hand, and hence becomes A 's chosen target, what A is seeking, in seeking to harm B , is not genuinely revenge. A wants to vent his anger, to take it out on someone. But he isn't seeking revenge. (Unless, of course, harming B would indirectly harm C , and this is the reason for going after B .)

Of course there is a complication. I said that A can seek revenge on a group like the Nazis. That is, a group, and not just an individual, is an appropriate target for revenge. At first glance, this poses no problem for my criteria: it merely requires that A take the group to act for reasons, and to be capable of being responsible for harm, and to blame the group for H_A . But there is a worry: what if A is only able to lash out at persons in the group who he himself knows not to be directly responsible for the harm H_A ? If he does so, doesn't he still seek revenge? And doesn't that falsify one of my criteria? It seems to me that the answer one should give depends upon which view of collective responsibility the agent A adopts, and also upon which view is correct. If A believes that every member of a group is somehow responsible for the harm done by that group, then even though he recognizes that B isn't *directly* responsible for H_A , he thinks she is responsible. So A can genuinely seek revenge on her, consistent with my claims. If, in contrast, A doesn't really believe in collective responsibility, then it's a consequence of my view that A can only vent his anger on B . Moreover, to anticipate the discussion below, about external conditions on getting revenge, whether A can really get revenge on group members who aren't directly responsible for H_A also depends upon whether group members, merely by belonging to a collective that brought H_A about, themselves brought about H_A . If so, revenge can be got by going after those not directly responsible. If not, not. Happily, I think that considering things this way both saves my criterion, and reflects our ordinary intuitions.⁴

The foregoing are conditions on being an appropriate target B in (1). Turning to H_B , the harm A intends to cause to B , I want to make one point quickly here. I'll return to it at greater length below. It is enough for seeking revenge that the "harm" A intends for B to suffer be *taken* by A to be a genuine harm. It's obvious that you can't

as far as this condition goes, A could still seek revenge on B post-illness, even though B is no longer an agent who acts for reasons. (Other conditions might rule out such seeking, of course.)

⁴I am grateful to Rich Campbell and Jenna Woodrow for raising this question about revenge on groups.

seek revenge by intending B to experience something that you know full well B enjoys: e.g., you can't seek revenge on me by sending me to a Jane's Addiction concert, if you know that I adore Jane's Addiction concerts. But, curiously, you can seek revenge by wishing B to experience something which, though you think otherwise, would actually be pleasant for B . For instance, if you believe that B hates rock concerts, then you can seek revenge on B by intending to bring it about that B attends a Jane's Addiction concert—even if B actually loves such concerts. (*Getting* revenge is rather different, as will emerge below.)

1.3. Internal Conditions on the Harm H_A which is Perceived

H_A , recall, is the harm done to the revenge-seeker: the reason that the agent has for wanting to harm B in return. Now, to echo a point made when discussing the revenge-recipient, the agent who seeks revenge must have a particular reason, a particular perceived harm, or cluster thereof, for wanting to harm B . If one is merely angry with B , and so wishes to harm B on purpose, but with no H_A in mind, this doesn't amount to seeking revenge.

A related aspect of revenge, already hinted at above when I said that rocks can't get revenge, is that the avenger must be *aware* of the harm done. If A is harmed by B , but A doesn't realize that he was harmed, then even if A plans to harm B on purpose, this isn't seeking revenge. (This derives from the fact that the harm H_A must be part of the reason for wanting to bring about H_B —something it cannot do if there's no awareness.) Moreover, the avenger must believe that the harm was done *to him*, and this must be part of his reason for wanting to harm B . To explain what I mean, take an example of “revenge by proxy”: If D is paid by A to harm B , because B is perceived to have wronged A , this could be a case of A seeking revenge on B , but it isn't a case of D seeking revenge on B . (This also connects up with the idea that to be seeking revenge, it must be revenge that you are seeking: in “revenge by proxy”, this isn't true of D , the direct cause of the harm. D is seeking payment, not revenge.)

The notion of “perceived harm” must be a fairly broad one, of course, if A being aware that *he* was *harmed* is to be a condition on seeking revenge. One can seek revenge on people who physically or emotionally hurt one's friends: this indirect harm to oneself must be allowed to count. One can even seek revenge on people who clearly tried, but failed, to cause physical or emotional harm. Here is a nice

case suggested by Dave Matheson. As it happens, A is invulnerable to tooth-decay, because he has only false teeth. A realizes, however, that B intends to rot A 's teeth: B , not knowing about the prosthetic teeth, keeps giving A Coke, Coke, and more Coke. A isn't physically harmed. Nor, let's stipulate, does A even feel hurt by what strike him as B 's silly antics. Even so, if A decides to get back at B by getting B 's teeth to rot, then A is still seeking revenge on B . In this imagined case, however, I want to say that A nonetheless does perceive harm, just not of a "negative hedons" sort.

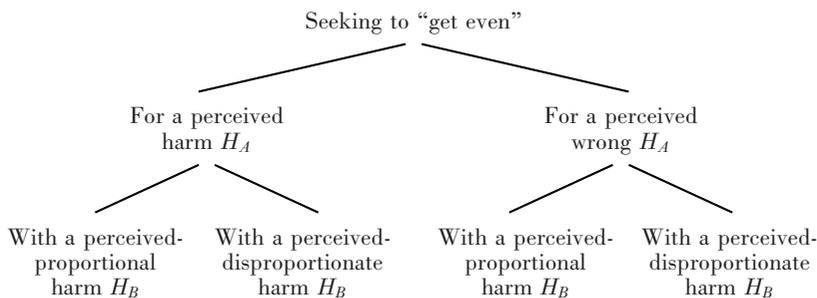
1.4. Four Sub-Varieties of "Revenge"?

One last complication about the four participants in the "seeking". There are numerous sub-varieties of what one would loosely call "getting even", and they should be distinguished. First, there is the difference between seeking to "get even" for a mere harm, and seeking to harm because of a wrong. For the latter, the person who is getting even must take the harm done to be unfair, or blameworthy. Feeling hard-done-by must be a feature of his reason: A may feel that H_A highlights B 's lack of respect, or that H_A is a case of A not being given his due, or some such. For example, a convict may seek to get even with the judge who sentenced him, but he can only seek this specific sub-variety if he thinks the judge did something untoward. If he recognizes that the judge performed perfectly well, and arrived at a fair result by wholly equitable means, the convict may still seek to injure or even kill the judge, but he can't really seek this latter kind of "getting even". (The existence of this sub-variety of "getting even" doesn't require that a group must have a codified legal system, of course; but it does require norms that are perceived to be in play, and which are taken sometimes to be violated.) For the former variety, in contrast, it's enough for the agent to think that he has been harmed.

"Repaying a harm" and "repaying a wrong", in turn, each has a further sub-variety —depending upon whether H_B , the harm intended, must be taken, by A , to be roughly of the same order as the harm perceived. (I'm not here raising the issue of whether the harm intended must be perceived as of the same *kind*: it's the degree of harm, not the vehicle, being of the same order that is in play. The former isn't the issue because on *any* ethically/rationally interesting variety one needn't aim for "an eye for an eye" —but on some varieties of getting even, one should aim for "an eye's-worth for an eye".) Seeking proportional harm may be the paradigm case, but it's

not the only kind of seeking to “get even”. Suppose, for instance, that I think you put a tiny scratch on my car. I think you did this on purpose, and want to get back at you. So, I hatch a plan: to have you fired from your job, to have your wife and kids leave you, to have your dog run over by a bus, and to have your house and car burned beyond recognition. There’s something unhappy about this case, as an example of seeking to get even —especially in so far as the agent himself recognizes how exaggerated the ratio of harm-done to harm-intended is. Or consider the opposite scenario. I got you fired, convinced your spouse to get a divorce, killed your dog, etc. It would be infelicitous for you to seek to get even by merely scratching my car, knowing full well that this won’t bother me that much. (Interestingly, if this is all you *can* do, then seeking revenge by scratching my car somehow seems less odd, even when you know that this won’t bother me much. I put this complication aside.) Yet, though “overblown” and “underblown” respectively, competent judges agree that these are cases of “getting even”.

We thus have a taxonomy like this:



Now, people differ with respect to which nodes on this tree should actually carry the label “revenge”. Some speakers seem to employ different words for seeking harm for a perceived wrong versus seeking harm for a perceived harm. Thus Suzanne Uniacke writes “Revenge can be taken for an injury that is not an offence *nor regarded as such by the person taking revenge*” (2000, p. 62; my emphasis). For Uniacke, this distinguishes “revenge” from “vengeance”, where it is the latter which requires that one feel wronged. Others happily apply “revenge” to both kinds of harm. And, though in informal questioning it seems very widespread to apply “revenge” to overblown and underblown cases, there may be people who hesitate to do so.

This raises a point about the limits of the present methodology. I suspect this divergence arises because when this much detail comes into play, we begin to push on the limits of the determinacy of the concept. For the same reason, the method of considering intuitions about “Would it be revenge if...?” starts to break down: that method can carry us quite some way to understanding what revenge is (and is not); but when disagreements become widespread, further intuition-mongering may yield diminishing returns. Happily, at this level of grain, what matters is not which of these four sub-varieties “really is” revenge, but that there are different things here; equally important is that one recognize that which one is at play may have important consequences for the morality and rationality of revenge.

2. *Further Complications about Participants: “Harm Under A Description”*

To sum up so far, I began with four questions about revenge: what are its key elements, what are the conditions on seeking it, what additional external conditions are there for achieving it, and how is revenge similar to and different from related phenomena such as retribution, etc. My focus so far has been on the first two questions. With respect to the first, I identified four core participants/elements in the act of getting revenge: the agent *A*, the recipient *B*, the harm *A* wants to inflict, and the harm done to *A* which provokes the revenge. As for the second question, I noted conditions —some obvious, some less so— on seeking revenge, clustering the discussion around the four participants. Having laid out some “internal” conditions on the mental state of seeking revenge, I’ll shortly turn to “external” constraints on actually getting revenge. First, however, I want to draw attention to additional complications regarding “the elements of/participants in” seeking revenge, by flagging some logico-linguistic features of (1), repeated below.

1. *Agent A seeks revenge on recipient B for harm H_A by intending to cause harm H_B.*

The first point about the participants is that the first slot, for *A*, is transparent: it allows substitution of co-referential terms *salva veritate*. This should be obvious: if Twain seeks revenge on *B*, and Twain is Clemens, then Clemens seeks revenge on *B*. The second slot, in contrast, looks opaque. Note, for instance, that one can seek revenge on Santa Claus for having left the wrong present, or on

“my uncle” for never visiting, when in fact my parents lack siblings. That’s a hallmark of opaque contexts.

For my purposes, however, the crucial issue is the opacity of the “harm” slots. Being an intention, it’s no surprise that the third slot definitely can be read opaquely. *A*’s reason, that is, is some perceived harm by *B* *conceived in manner such-and-such*. Hence to get a true instance of (1), the description of the provoking event must correspond to *A*’s conception of that event. (Or anyway, that’s required for a true instance of (1) read opaquely. I’ll suppress this caveat below.) As a result, a true instance of (1) can be turned false by substituting a description of the provoking event which does not, in fact, motivate *A*. To give an example, of the kind familiar from Davidson (1963 and elsewhere), suppose that the event of *killing my cat* just was the event of *B moving her index finger on the trigger of her gun*. I can seek revenge on *B* for having killed my cat, by intending to set her house afire. But it doesn’t follow from my seeking revenge on *B* for *having killed my cat* that I am seeking revenge for *B having moved her index finger on the trigger of her gun*. I might not know how my cat was killed: suppose her body, badly decomposed, was found in a nearby stream. This illustrates the way in which slot number three can be read opaquely, so that the participant isn’t the harming event itself, but only that event under a description.

Nor, being sought/intended, is the fourth slot inevitably transparent. Indeed, *A* might take an event *E* to be harmful under one description, but not take it to be harmful under another. Here’s an example. Suppose ramming *B*’s dog with a bus would be killing the rabid animal which was about to bite *B*, give her rabies, and thereby lead quickly to *B*’s painful death. For reasons given above, about *A* having to take the intended action to be harmful, *A* can’t seek revenge by intending to kill the rabid animal which was about to bite *B*, etc. For that would patently help *B*. Yet, in support of non-substitutivity *salva veritate*, *A* can seek revenge by intending to ram *B*’s dog. (Whether *A* can actually *get* revenge thereby, given that this action would not actually harm *B*, is another matter. I return to the issue in Section 3.)

Thus it isn’t in general some harm done to *A* *however described*, or some harm sought for *B* *however described*, which are the participants in the intentional state of seeking revenge. Instead, it’s harms under some description that (frequently) are the participants. On the other hand, just as we can think of *de re* belief and *de re* desires,

etc., presumably we can make sense of *de re* revenge. That requires only that there be an event which, under some conception, *A* takes to have harmed him; and that there be an event which, under some conception, *A* thinks would harm *B* in return. And *A* seeks to exact revenge on *B* by doing the latter, because of the former.⁵ However, rather than exploring *de re* revenge further, which would take us into deep water indeed, let us turn back to the firmer ground of additional conditions on getting revenge. Given my modest aim of a preliminary investigation, I think I've made sufficient progress on what is involved in seeking revenge.

3. *Getting Revenge: External Constraints*

I have explored the participants in/elements of revenge in some detail, stressing in particular that it will sometimes be necessary, when cataloguing them, to have qualifications like “so described” sprinkled about; and I have offered some agent-internal conditions on seeking revenge. But the question was what revenge itself is. I turn to that now.

As hinted early on, a first condition on managing to get revenge is that it was revenge that you were *seeking*. Thus many of the foregoing points about seeking revenge afford, indirectly, conditions on what it is to get revenge. Specifically, for revenge to be got:

- the thing which gets revenge must be an agent who intends things, and has reasons;
- that agent must also have the concept REVENGE, because what ultimately distinguishes revenge from merely intending to cause harm to the thing which harmed you is that it is revenge which is sought;
- the agent must have a reason for wanting revenge, which will be some specific harm(s) or wrong(s) of which he is aware;
- he must also intend a specific target, or cluster of targets, and he must take them to be intentional agents who were the source of the perceived harm;

⁵This logical feature, as it happens, may give us another reason for denying that “lower” animals, and corporations, can seek *de dicto* revenge. (“Another” unless this just is the lacking-intentions reason in another disguise.) For seeking revenge *de dicto* requires having *de dicto* attitudes —and it’s not obvious that “lower” animals and corporations have such things.

- he must intend something to befall the recipient which he takes to be harmful to them; moreover, at least in clear-cut cases, that something should strike him as roughly proportional to the harm he takes himself to have suffered;
- both the harm H_A perceived by A , and the harm H_B intended to befall B , will often be *de dicto*, i.e., “harms under a description”.

3.1. External Conditions on the Harm H_A

The first external condition is that the harm must really have occurred. Consider the following case. A Nazi, deluded by vicious propaganda, is convinced that Jewish bankers have plundered the German economy; and he wants revenge. He thus resolves to seize all their bank accounts. If he succeeds in his plan, he hasn't exacted revenge, say I, because the “harm” was fabricated. More than that, if A seeks revenge on B because he thinks B harmed him in some manner m , it isn't enough for B to have harmed A somehow or other. B must have harmed A in manner m . To give an example, suppose I think that you torched my car. In fact, you did no such thing. But, unbeknownst to me, you did steal my lawnmower. If I incinerate your car, seeking revenge for your having torched mine, it seems to me that I haven't got revenge on you, precisely because my reason for seeking revenge doesn't track the harm you actually caused. The revenge attempt misfires.

3.2. External Conditions on the Recipient B and the Harm H_B

A related point, about the target B of the revenge, is this: suppose A believes that B did the provoking harm H_A , but in fact that's not the case. There was harm done, but B had nothing to do with it. It then seems to me that, though A can genuinely *seek* revenge on B for this harm, A can't actually *get* revenge on B . You can't “avenge B 's action”, if B didn't actually do it. Moreover, the recipient B must be an agent as well, and one who could appreciate the intended harm, if it came about—it's not enough that the revenge-seeker believe B to be such an agent. Getting revenge on my house, for its many, many faults, remains metaphorical, even if I have come to believe that my house is harming me on purpose.

Of course getting revenge on B by destroying his house isn't metaphorical, *if* destroying his house harms B . Which leads to another external constraint, having to do with the harm H_B . B must

actually be harmed by the action which A intends to injure her. It's not enough, for revenge to be *got*, that A thinks such-and-such will harm B —though that does seem enough for revenge genuinely to be *sought*. For instance, suppose B is keen to have her house burned down; suppose she needs the insurance money, and hates the damnable house in any case. If A sets fire to B 's house, seeking revenge for damage done to A 's car, A doesn't really manage to get revenge in this situation, because B won't actually be harmed. So, actual harm is required for successful revenge-getting.

Something that is less clear is whether B must realize, or even be intended to realize, that she has been harmed, if the revenge is to come off. Intuition strongly suggests that A can seek revenge, and get it, by hurting B in a way that she will never be aware of—e.g., by intentionally increasing her risk of hepatitis, though she never comes down with it. However, it does seem to me that the best cases of revenge are ones in which the recipient recognizes the harm. Similarly, though I think A can get revenge on B without B knowing who brought the harm about, I hazard that the ideal cases are those in which B sees the *connection* between harm H_A which she did, and harm H_B which is now done to her. And that is likely to require B to realize that it was A who brought about H_B .⁶ That said, we may once again be approaching a level of grain at which the method of intuition fails us.

One final point, about how H_B must come about. It's clear that you can't get revenge by lucky accident: it's not enough that A be in the mental state of seeking revenge on B , and then something bad happens to B , which happens to satisfy A 's wish that H_B occur. Still, the foregoing may suggest that to get revenge it's enough that A seek revenge on B , and that B ends up getting harmed in manner H_B *because of the seeking*, and *by A*. Then, one might think, it's not by accident. But in fact that's not sufficient either. Another kind of "lucky revenge" must be excluded. To modify a case from John Searle (1983), suppose I am seeking revenge on my uncle because he made me lose my family and my job. I'm so upset that I have

⁶ In claiming that the revenge-recipient need not be intended to recognize the harm or who produced it, for revenge to be sought or got, I am in direct disagreement with Nozick 1981. Nozick maintains that *all* revenge seeking is communicative: "a penalty is inflicted for a reason (wrong or injury) with the desire that the other person know why this is occurring and know that he was intended to know". I think this is too strong, as applied to revenge. As Francis Bacon put it: "*Some*, when they take revenge, are desirous the party should know whence it cometh. . . ." (Cited in Walker 1995, p. 582.)

resolved to kill him. As it happens, I am obsessed to such a degree with this revenge-seeking that I'm constantly distracted while driving. I don't notice a man crossing the street at a cross-walk, and I hit the poor gent with my car. I kill him. Coincidentally, the pedestrian is my uncle. Here I, the revenge-seeker, killed my uncle; and a salient part of the cause was precisely my revenge-seeking. Yet I think this episode still would not be a matter of me getting revenge on my uncle, because there isn't the right kind of causal connection between the revenge-seeking and the harm done: getting revenge requires not only the seeking of H_B , and its coming to be because of my seeking such, but also that H_B was brought about in the right kind of way because of the seeking. (Nor is it enough that I intend both the end and the means: I could intend to kill my uncle by hitting him with my car at a cross-walk, hoping that it will look like an accident. But even if I do intend that means, if what happens ends up being a genuine accident, in the sense that I wasn't aiming for him just then, then I still don't get revenge when I kill the pedestrian, i.e., my uncle.)

I come, at last, to the fourth question about revenge, viz. how it is similar to and different from related actions. What I have said has already distinguished revenge from the general phenomenon of harming-because-one-was-harmed. In particular, I have contrasted it with deterrence, as in the tit-for-tat strategy, and with other kinds of harming to improve one's ends. Before closing, I want to consider how revenge relates to punishment. It's clear that not all kinds of punishment are revenge: punishment designed to deter is not revenge, for reasons sketched above. Nor is punishment designed to instruct or rehabilitate a kind of revenge. But it may seem that what is sold as "retributive punishment" is actually just state sanctioned revenge: vengeance meted out by some authority. (Such an accusation assumes, on my view, that this authority is capable of having the right kind of intentions, and has the concept REVENGE. But put that aside.) This is related to the sorts of questions philosophers have traditionally asked about revenge, of course: if revenge is always blameworthy, and retributive punishment is really just a sub-variety of revenge, then retributive punishment is always blameworthy as well. What's more, if revenge is irrational, and retributive punishment is a kind of revenge, then the latter is irrational too. But, it seems that retribution is quite different from revenge. Following Nozick (1981, pp. 366 ff), I note six differences.⁷ First,

⁷ Walker (1995) argues that Nozick exaggerates the differences between revenge

putting aside group actions for the moment, whereas revenge must be personal (harm H_A was done to the avenger, and harm H_B is inflicted by the avenger), retribution need not —nay, ideally should not— involve a personal tie. (Smith 1965 also notes this difference.) Second, arguably revenge can be got for what is in fact a mere hurt —whereas it’s clear that genuine retribution can only be got for a wrong. Third, and related to the personal/impersonal contrast, in the ideal case revenge should yield a feeling of enjoyment, whereas in the ideal case retribution should not be enjoyable. (Maybe both can yield “satisfaction”, but if so the satisfaction that comes from retribution must be of a very different sort: satisfaction at seeing justice done.)⁸ Fourth, there need be no generality in revenge, whereas retributive acts should be universalizable: in retribution, one is committed to a general principle, calling for similar punishment for all, in similar circumstances. Fifth, I granted that one can seek (and get) revenge that isn’t proportional; but retribution, to be sought or got, must be proportional. (This, presumably, is related to point four: one would not will the universalization of disproportionate punishment.) Sixth, and now departing from Nozick, whereas seeking revenge need not be communicative —it can be, but need not be, designed to send a message— exacting retribution *must* be an act of communicative behavior. (Nozick thinks that revenge too is always communicative: for him, the difference is not whether there is a message, but what the message is. The message in retribution, as Nozick puts it, is “this is how wrong what you did was”. I think Nozick is on the right track about retribution always being communicative, and about what the essential message of retribution is —but, I think, he overstates communicative intentions when it comes to revenge. See note 6.)

Thus ends my discussion of what revenge is. As noted at the outset, my discussion is preliminary. Even without aiming for airtight necessary and sufficient conditions, and even recognizing the

and retribution. I think Walker exaggerates said exaggeration. But I won’t address that dispute here.

⁸ As noted, the relations between revenge and the emotions are rich and various. As Aristotle also pointed out, even if you don’t ultimately feel satisfaction upon getting revenge, the mere state of seeking revenge brings with it a conjuring up of the pleasure which you anticipate from success (*Rhetoric* 1378B). What’s more, it seems that the “ideal” cases of revenge being exacted involve a feeling of enjoyment on the part of the revenge-seeker, when the target “gets what’s coming to her”. As Aristotle says in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1117A5: “Men [. . .] are pleased when they exact their revenge.” And too, as stressed above, revenge is prompted by the right kind of angry feeling. This question about revenge and the emotions clearly merits more detailed study.

limitations of the “Would it be revenge if...?” method, there is, I’m sure, much left to be said about what revenge is. But I hope I’ve said enough to clarify somewhat what it is that ethicists and rational choice theorists are talking about, when they consider the morality and rationality of revenge.⁹

REFERENCES

- Aristotle, 1987, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in J.L. Ackrill (ed.), *A New Aristotle Reader*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, pp. 363–478.
- , 1982, *Rhetoric*, in H.G. Apostle and L.P. Gerson (eds.), *Aristotle: Selected Works*, The Peripatetic Press, Grinnell, pp. 603–630.
- Chagnon, Napoleon, 1988, “Life Histories, Blood Revenge and Warfare in a Tribal Population”, *Science*, no. 239, pp. 985–992.
- Davidson, Donald, 1963, “Actions, Reasons and Causes”, reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 3–19.
- Elster, Jon, 1990, “Norms of Revenge”, *Ethics*, vol. 100, pp. 862–885.
- Nozick, Robert, 1981, *Philosophical Explanations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Searle, John, 1983, *Intentionality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Smith, James M., 1965, “Punishment: A Conceptual Map”, *Ethics*, vol. 75, pp. 285–290.
- Uniacke, Suzanne, 2000, “Why Is Revenge Wrong?”, *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 34, pp. 61–69.
- Walker, Nigel, 1995, “Nozick’s Revenge”, *Philosophy*, vol. 70, pp. 581–586.

Received: August 1, 2005; accepted: December 7, 2005.

⁹ A draft of this paper was read to the Philosophy Department at Carleton University and at the 2004 Canadian Philosophical Association. I benefited greatly from questions and comments from the audience members. I am also grateful to Andrew Botterell, Samantha Brennan, Richmond Campbell, Allen Habib, Anita Kothari, David Matheson, Carolyn McLeod, Chris Viger and Catherine Wearing for discussion and/or comments on a previous draft.