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Revenge: Interplay of creative and destructive forces

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Abstract

This paper will review the literature on revenge with an emphasis on its inherent ubiquity, self-preservatory and adaptive propensities. The exploration of the topic will draw from cultural, social/judicial and clinical texts to elucidate the interplay of creative and destructive elements at play in revenge. A theory about degrees of revenge will be suggested, and creative, libidinal and contained ways in which to express this otherwise destructive desire will be argued.

Literature Review

We live in times when revenge is in the air. The gruesome events of 9/11, shootings at schools and universities, as well as daily news reports, are there to remind us of the incredible power of acts of revenge. 9/11 has further served to highlight beliefs that are held by individuals and by cultures and societies about revenge. Ideas and perceptions on the topic are quite diverse depending on where one lives and how one has been acculturated. One man's terrorist (in one culture) is another man's freedom fighter (in another culture). In some settings revenge is almost never mentioned (so odious is it in those cultures), while in others one may be expected to perform brutal acts of revenge or face being an outcast (perhaps even a dead one).¹

Albanians have a canon of revenge that dates back to the fifteenth century, and to this day Blood Feud Committees exist in Albania. Jane Goldberg's (2004) article on revenge gives details on current cultural codification of revenge in Siberia, Greece and amongst the Bedouins who have a saying: "If a man takes revenge after forty years, he was in a hurry." Needless to say this speaks volumes about the power of this desire,

¹ In Corsica or Southern Greece, a man was often reminded of his duty to vengeance by a glass of *rakia* that was passed to him in public from behind. If this tacit accusation of cowardice was ignored and no killing resulted, the man who had not avenged his own kinsmen was shunned by the society at large.

illustrating its decades-long durability in peoples' memories and the patience people exhibit as they wait to exact their revenge.

On a personal note, I believe that my choice of this topic is relevant to who I am as a South African, a Jew and a person who wished to understand her own feelings of revenge. Growing up under Apartheid in South Africa for 27 years prior to emigrating to the United States, I was witness to one of the most organized and elaborate systems of revenge, hate and brutality, in recent history. I believe that this regime of terror was related to the anger and humiliation felt by Afrikaaners, as a group, due to their defeat at the hands of the British in the Boer wars, the internment of many Afrikaaners due to their support of Hitler during WWII and their subsequent fears about where their next enemy may be lurking.

Writing this paper is an attempt on my part to integrate, to some degree, that which I was culturally a part of, and to accept parts of myself which I had either denied or rejected, parts that are capable of experiencing and, at times, acting on vengeful feelings.

In order to explore the range of this topic, my paper has been organized from the broader to the narrower perspectives on revenge, from its overt cultural manifestations to the endogenous feelings within each of us. I will progress from cultural/historical themes through societal/judicial

concerns to some of the emotional/developmental considerations of revenge as reflected in the literature. Where ideas on the topic have not been found some hypotheses will be made.

Some of the questions that this paper will try to address are: Is revenge an emotion? If so, is it a universal emotion? What is its function? What is it about revenge that provokes such different feelings and responses? When and how does revenge take shape developmentally? Is there a range in the expression of this emotion as a result of maturational and cultural determinants? And finally, can Eros trump Thanatos and can revenge ever be rendered creative and constructive rather than destructive?

To begin with, the very definitions of revenge in our culture reflect different attitudes and positions that are held about revenge. These attitudes flow through some of the central arguments on the subject. The two predominant positions seem to be: 1) a focus on revenge as an ego stabilizing and self-preservatory response and 2) a focus on the destructive capacities of revenge and the need to forgive. ²

An example of one of the latter perspectives comes from Erich Fromm (1983) who defines revenge as “a spontaneous form of aggression; an explosion of destructive impulses that are activated by special

² Much of what is available at first glance on the subject, e.g. on the Internet, seems to have the word “forgiveness” closely located to the word revenge in the title or subtitle of books or articles. Those books and articles were, for the most part, purposely deselected for the purpose of this literature review because of the bias insinuated in their titles.

circumstances usually perceived as threatening to survival” (p.272). He goes on to say that revenge is incredibly destructive because of its “innate” intensity and the spontaneous reaction to perceived, unjustified suffering inflicted on an individual or group.

Fromm argues that this form of aggression is different from “normal defensive aggression” in the following two ways: 1) it is an act performed in cold blood, after the damage has been done, and is therefore not a defense against immediate danger; 2) it is of great intensity, often crude, vicious and insatiable.

On the other hand we have the perspective explicated by Marongiu and Newman (1987) in which they differ from Fromm in the following ways: they see his definition as imprecise, not fitting all cases of revenge, and moreover, they posit that though Fromm recognizes that revenge is a feeling exhibited the world over, he also calls it “abnormal aggression,” which is a contradiction in terms.

This paper will use the approach of Morangiu and Newman to frame the argument. It will be demonstrated later in the paper, via the literature review and through a case vignette, that vengeance is not always “an act performed in cold blood” nor is it an act that necessarily takes place “after the damage is done” as Fromm asserts. The fact that an injustice or feeling

of danger, experienced at one point in time, can remain with a person long after the injury *and* constitute the driving force for later acts of vengeance and/or other acts of self protection and self preservation, will be explored.

There are any number of reasons why an event that occurred in the past may indeed continue to have a life of its own, manifesting as a desire for vengeance in the psyche of an individual or within a group long after it has taken place. Here are some examples and observations made by various analysts on this particular point.

From a drive theory point of view Freud (1893-1895) had the following to say:

The instinct of revenge, which is powerful in the natural man and disguised rather than repressed by civilization, is nothing whatever but the excitation of a reflex that has not been released. To defend oneself against injury in a fight and, in doing so, to injure one's opponent is the adequate and **performed psychical reflex**. If it has been carried out insufficiently or not at all, it is constantly released again by recollection, and the 'instinct of revenge' comes into being as an irrational volitional impulse
(pp. 205-206)

What follows are ideas about revenge by a number of Modern analysts, trained in the Modern Analytic tradition of its founder Hyman Spotnitz. He is known for developing an analytic method, which he found to be effective when working with schizophrenics and patients experiencing pre-Oedipal and pre-verbal states so as to prepare them maturationally for a classical analysis.

Two Modern analysts make note of the revenge that children inevitably feel toward their parents. In this sense, they are both saying that these feelings are ongoing long after the fact and that unlike Fromm, *they* view this as a normal human propensity. Jane Goldberg (2004), has the following observations:

All children, invariably, want revenge against their parents, for good reasons and bad. Feelings of wanting revenge begin in childhood, and all children are susceptible to them. In their dreams at night and in their daydreams, play and fantasy, children plot all manner of schemes to retaliate against their parents. Even with the best parenting, childhood is a frustrating time, and frustration cannot exist without rage and hate and the desire to pay back in kind. (p. 7)

June Bernstein (2004) also talks about resentment leading to feelings of revenge due to growing up:

Human beings could regard the inevitable loss of the bliss of infancy, the need to work, to bear children, and to tolerate all of the evils that accompany growing up as unavoidable consequences of maturation and development. But do we? Absolutely not! The expulsion from the Garden of Eden is an unfair punishment. We never planned to grow up, just as we don't plan to grow old and die, and the fact that we are given no choice arouses our opposition and need to get even. (pp.37-38)

Goldberg also says the following about parents and revenge:

The most common expression of revenge is when parents treat their own children as they themselves were treated. They are able, at long last, to extract a long-deferred revenge for the indignities and suffering they endured while they were at the mercy of their own parents' parenting. Parents rarely recognize that in their behavior. (p. 8)

Modern analyst Nancy Holmes, (2004) begins her article about revenge in females by discussing firstly the pleasure that can be derived from revenge and secondly, what she terms “constructive retribution,” both positive outcomes of a potentially dangerous desire:

Getting even, if done correctly, is one of life’s greatest pleasures. An important goal for any analysis is to help the patient get even in ways that give her pleasure and don’t land her in jail or in the back ward of a psychiatric hospital. Although all human beings savor revenge, most, unfortunately, seek it with unconscious and primitive methods that cause them as much suffering as the objects they are out to get. Beginning analysis can often be the first step toward constructive retribution, but as we know, it is an arduous, often painful process that requires courage and fortitude. The best revenge takes time and patience, but in psychoanalysis we begin the first time we come into the analyst’s office to report the crime (p.49).

The reasons for the use of “unconscious and primitive methods”, which do indeed cause much suffering, will be further expanded and elucidated in the following sections of the paper from both societal and emotional/developmental points of view.

Societal/Judicial Concerns

In his chapter, in the book entitled *Lex Talionis: On Vengeance*, Frijda (1994) states the following:

Desire for vengeance certainly is one of the most potent of human passions and has been one of the major preoccupations in world literature.... Of course vengeance is not an emotion. But desire for revenge, the urge to retaliate, most certainly is. It is a mere coincidence that no word for this emotion exists in current English. As a matter of fact, the English language has exactly the right word for it, but it has gone out of usage: Wrath. ... The desire is an emotion, in that it has all the usual features of one: It is a state of impulse, of

involuntary action readiness, generated by an appraisal often accompanied by bodily excitement, and with every aspect of control precedence: preoccupation, single-minded goal pursuit, neglect of extraneous information, and interference with other activities.³ (p.264)

Frijda further defines revenge as “an act designed to harm someone else, or some social group, in response to feeling that oneself has been harmed by that person or group, whereby the act of harming that person or group is *not* designed to repair the harm, to stop it from occurring or continuing in the immediate confrontation or to produce material gain” (p.266). Secondly, he continues, “...vengeance may even be harmful to the individual, to the point of being self-destructive, and this too he or she knows” (p.266). He cites in this instance the case of Euripides’ Medea who destroyed all that she loved in the name of vengeance. Other features, according to Frijda, are its persistence over time and the remarkably violent nature of revenge fantasies (p.268).

Contrary to what Frijda says about vengeance being an act that is *not* designed to stop the harm that motivated the vengeful response, Morangiu and Newman (1987) again say that it *can* and *is* used, clearly not to repair,

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Frijda adds the following “Vengeance might thus be expected to form one of the major topics in the psychology of emotion. Not so. No major psychological study has appeared on the topic during the last 70 or 80 years. A literature search from 1967 to 1991 yielded not a single study having “vengeance” or “revenge as its main subject. Many studies dealt with “retaliation.” But few addressed the core issues of its reasons, power and extent.”

but rather to deter future harmful repetitions of an act, and that moreover, this approach is known to work in some situations. Yet on the flip side, they too point out that in feuding cultures people often lose track of the “debt,” and the cycle of vengeance can, and at times does, become interminable.

There are systems of law and order designed for the sole purpose of containing and curtailing acts of revenge. The Mosaic law “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (considered severe by most cultures today) was in fact one of the earliest attempts to contain retaliatory feelings: one eye, for say, *two or more* eyes, was determined to be unjust.

We are reminded by Morangiu and Newman (1987) that within societies, there exists at their core, an ongoing tension between reciprocity (e.g. acts of revenge) on the one hand and the maintenance of social order, and its demand for obedience, on the other.

Cultural/Historical and Literary Themes

In his article entitled “On the Importance of Getting Even: A Study of the Origins and Intention of Revenge” Seton (2001) argues that revenge is a behavioral norm, “deeply rooted and profoundly important to human life” (p.77). He makes note of the following two aspects of revenge: the automatic assumption that retribution will, in some form, follow a transgression and its “ubiquity in human thought and throughout the

chronicles of humankind.” He writes: “In good part, revenge contributes warp and woof to the world’s history, to the plots of drama and literature, and to the role of government, law and religion” (p.78).

Let us look briefly at how revenge is depicted in two literary texts: one ancient and one medieval. Greek mythology brings us characters trying to balance hatred and desire for revenge with more “civilized” or less destructive behavior. Likewise, Shakespeare tackles the subject in *Hamlet*.

In Homer’s “Odyssey” Ulysses thinks through his situation and uses his cunning to outsmart the Cyclops first through the use of words and then through preying on the Cyclops’s vulnerabilities in order to escape. The myth illustrates how these three approaches—delayed gratification, careful assessment of the situation and planning a strategy— exemplify the use of higher-order ego functions and symbolization. Tellingly, as Ulysses flees the Cyclops, we also see an example of the risk to self as Ulysses could not resist the psychological satisfaction of addressing the Cyclops in derisive tones thus risking being hit by rocks that the giant was throwing blindly in the direction of his voice.

Hamlet is another example of revenge that is contained and delivered in a calculated way. Shakespeare depicts an evolution occurring within

Western thought and culture at that time in that murder was no longer automatically avenged and externalized. **(PAUSE)**

Let us now look more closely at why and how the impulse of revenge works in the human psyche.

Emotional/Developmental Considerations

In trying to understand what is going on for individuals when they feel the desire for revenge, we will consider amongst others, Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, Melanie Klein, Harold Searles and Modern analysts June Bernstein, Jane Goldberg, Lucy Holmes and Jacob Kestens.

Looking firstly at the issue of identity, what it is and how it develops over time, gives us some insight into revenge. When an act is perceived by an individual to be unjust, it follows that the identity of that person has been somewhat or greatly affected. According to Seton (2001), citing Erikson, “[t]he concept of an individual identity was at all times a biopsychosocial phenomenon: it was never unrelated to the biological person and the social surround... By the end of the second year, in addition to individuation, something closer and more clearly in the service of ‘getting back’, is detectable in acts of intransigence, deliberate misbehavior, tantrums and/or spite” (p.81).

Seton (2001) goes on to say that the “[m]eans of revenge can become vastly more complicated in later adolescence when actualizing and authenticating one’s sense of self is an on-going and often exigent need. . . . Because identities run the full gamut of stability from rock-firm to jury-rigged, people vary greatly in their susceptibility to affronts and their readiness to respond vindictively” (p.82).

He makes another interesting observation: “[f]or individuals suffering psychosis or for those who have become disorganized by severe trauma or depression, revenge is rarely present” (p82). It seems therefore that there needs to be a measure of libido and aggression intact within the individual and a desire to return to a prior libidinal level of self concept or identity in order to seek revenge. It seems too that once crushed beyond a certain point, the ability to seek restoration of those libidinal feelings for oneself is either temporarily or permanently inaccessible”.

When there *is* still access to libidinal and aggressive impulses, the theory of Melanie Klein (1946-1963) is illuminating in terms of what can be done to restore the self. Klein explains:

“...while the oral libido still has the lead, libidinal and aggressive impulses and phantasies from other sources come to the fore and lead to a confluence of oral, urethral and anal desires, both libidinal and aggressive. . . . The phantasized onslaughts on the mother follow two main lines: one is the predominantly oral impulse to suck dry, bite up, scoop out and

rob the mother's body of its good contents. The other line of attack derives from the anal and urethral impulses and implies expelling dangerous substances (excrements) out of the self and into the mother. These excrements and bad parts of the self are meant not only to injure but also to control and to take possession of the object." (p.8)

These two impulses, described by Klein, are evidenced in acts of revenge. The "taking from" the other in order to replenish the self as well as "putting into the other" or projecting bad parts of the self that one might wish to be rid of seem implicit and may function independently or in tandem with one another.

Klein (1946), quoting Freud, describes projection as originating from a deflection outward of the death instinct. He sees this as a way in which the ego overcomes anxiety by ridding itself of danger and badness. When an individual feels injured to the point of desiring revenge the death instinct has been mobilized and there follows a desire to rid oneself of death instinct feelings, deposit them elsewhere, and take back some libidinal substance from the object in question or from other objects.

Various Modern analysts seem reconciled to the inevitability and important purpose served by revenge in psychic health. The very title of Goldberg's article, "Fantasies of Revenge and the Stabilization of the Ego: Acts of Revenge and the Ascension of Thanatos" denotes both an appreciation for, and about the paradoxical role of the death drive expressed

through the desire for revenge. Her focus on the role of fantasy is particularly illuminating. I quote:

When our desire for revenge remains on the level of fantasy, it actually serves several constructive psychological functions. For example, the desire for revenge, directed toward another, can serve as an internal gyroscope. Vengefulness maintains the balance of the destructive drive by directing it away from the self. In this, a desire for revenge is self protective and stabilizing to the psyche. It marks the beginning of movement away from narcissistic self-involvement by allowing another person existence enough for blame. When someone has been wronged, a psychologically healthy response is to direct rage at the wrongdoer rather than turn it against the self. Wanting revenge is part of the healing process of hurt and anger. (p.10)

Fantasy therefore plays a critical role in working with and mastering feelings of revenge. Being able to fantasize the ways in which one might redress and avenge hurtful acts is a great outlet and discharge for aggression: a way of acting without acting. Conversely, the *inability* to imagine and fantasize is very problematic and may lead to action in order to release aggression and get relief.

Goldberg (2004) describes one way in which fantasy stabilizes the ego: “Fantasies of revenge maintain a bond with the person toward whom the revenge is directed. If the feelings of separation or grief are too painful to be tolerated, holding onto the hate is a way of holding onto the relationship with the person.” Goldberg (2004) adds that plotting revenge may serve to

forestall suicidal behavior at times when grief and loss are too intense to bear.

Searles (1956) identifies the role of revenge when it comes to repression of grief and separation-anxiety. He explains: “It enables the person to avoid or postpone the experiencing of both these affects, because he has not really *given up* the other person towards whom his vengefulness is directed: that is, his preoccupation with vengeful fantasies about that person serves, in effect, as a way of psychologically *holding on to him*” (p.177).

Lastly, and on a different note, Jacob Kesten (1955) in his paper entitled *Learning for Spite* demonstrates how the self-destructive tendencies associated with revenge can be turned to advantage. He presents the treatment of a ten-year old boy who reacted to his parent’s demand for academic excellence with resentment, anger, rage, revenge and hate. During the boy’s treatment Kesten, a Modern analyst, used the negative attitudes stemming from unconscious resentment within the child to do something constructive and pleasurable for the child himself. As Kesten puts it: “He. (the child) became more interested in defeating the therapist by learning, than in defeating his parents by *not learning*” (p.39).

A few words regarding assessment and working with revenge: analyst, Mary Sherrill Durham's book titled the *The Therapist's Encounters with Revenge and Forgiveness* describes two basic character types and the different approaches to working with each type. She calls type one "the exploited repressive patient" who primarily uses repression as the major defense, and requires help in expressing feelings of outrage at how he or she has been treated.

The second type she describes is "the vindictive character" who is seen to primarily use dissociation. These patients show formidable resistance to treatment and the formation of a therapeutic alliance. The author discusses ways of working with the negative transference resistances of these patients.

Whereas "the exploited repressive patient" is able to form a positive transference with the analyst, "the vindictive character" acts out his or her history of humiliation by attacking and devaluing the analyst and the treatment and using other treatment destructive behaviors. Due to time constraints and the scope of this paper, I cannot elaborate further on therapeutic interventions and approaches to working with revenge today.

I found many papers on revenge to have a focus on forgiveness and/or the insatiable nature of revenge: the thirst for blood (after the fact) that does not act as a deterrent, that cannot be quenched and the "cycle of violence"

that once begun, has no end. There are indeed those cycles of revenge, and they are indelible because they are so horrible.

I wish to posit a different view and assert that there *can* be degrees of vengeance and that revenge *can* be a conscious choice rather than a compulsion. The following case vignette, it is hoped, will serve to demonstrate what a single, contained and limited act of revenge can look like and how it can be sufficient to satisfy a once violated, now perpetrating individual.

Case Vignette

This is a composite case to protect the identity of patients. The patient, I call Irma, was going through a protracted divorce process during which her husband purposely found a way to tie up their joint assets. While he had access to their monies, she and her two young children had been left short of resources, an act she experienced as painfully unjust, punitive and humiliating. It made the divorce process especially difficult when it came to paying her lawyer several thousand dollars for his services, as he did not accept credit cards. She also needed money to cover daily expenses for her daughters and herself.

When presented with this predicament, the mother of two remembered that she had access to a joint account, one that either of them could use

independently of the other. Knowing that her husband paid little attention to finances, she chose the following course of action: Irma decided to draw on the account to pay for all her expenses, knowing that the loan would automatically be drawn on her husband's bank account over time.

The young mother realized that should he discover her act that he would be furious with her decision and she prepared herself for that eventuality.

Irma figured that the divorce might be settled by the time her husband discovered the transaction and that by then her divorce settlement would provide her with the money she needed to pay him back. As time went on, she did however feel justified in taking and *not* returning the money. Were her act to go undetected, she thought it a fair penalty for him to pay for the expenses she incurred during the time he had denied her access to part of what he knew to be rightfully hers and for the stress that she and her daughters had suffered due to his anger and sadism.

The patient felt that this solution "evened the playing field", that she was able to "give him some of his own medicine". She had employed her cunning to care for herself and her daughters at a time that her husband was behaving as if he held all the power. She felt neither a need nor an urge to go

any further with *her* sadistic and vengeful desires, rather, she felt quite satisfied.

His successful attempt to cause her hardship had been returned in secret, a necessary feature of this act of revenge, as she knew how punitive and vindictive he would be were she to act in some overt way. She was in fact not “perpetuating the cycle or revenge”; she was concealing it so as *not* to provoke a response and develop the cycle. Irma felt no moral dilemma or feelings of guilt about what she had done. Should her husband ever find out about her act of revenge, Irma was fully, if reluctantly, prepared to return the funds to him.

My countertransference to this case is positive and I find myself wanting to support this patient in her efforts to regain her emotional equilibrium. At the same time I also find myself enjoying my own sadistic urges towards her ex-husband as much as she does. Because I am comfortable with these feelings within myself, I think this type of patient can sense that, and can in turn, become more comfortable with her own aggressive urges and enjoy using them in ways that benefit her.

Were I, for example, to focus on forgiveness, a popular and culturally sanctioned approach to revenge in Judeo-Christian cultures, at a time that a patient was exploring a particular set of feelings and reactions to

mistreatment and hurt, I think that the analysis could become bogged down and derailed in a way that would short circuit or foreclose deeper exploration. I fear that something natural and authentic, and dare I say untamed, within human nature, is sacrificed or lost when we clinicians, privilege, or insert, culturally adaptive positions into the client's narrative. I have to wonder whether we may, at times, be identifying, or colluding unconsciously with some version of a cultural super ego, against the energy of the id and the efforts of the reality based, self protective ego.

Discussion

This case supports the theory that revenge is a normal response to an injustice. It illustrates that revenge is an attempt to, or a way to restore feelings of equilibrium within a relationship, as well as feelings of self worth or identity within an individual. We can see from this case how the ego can regain, or simply gain, strength as a result of employing both strategy and skill in the execution of an act of revenge. It shows too, that a limited expression of the desire for revenge can be gratifying and that it is not always necessary to use excessive amounts of aggression to get the desired effect.

When it could in fact be dangerous for an individual to use public or social mechanisms to address an injustice (due to fears of reprisal or

punishment) this case shows how a contained and ‘planned act’ of revenge can address an injustice without threatening to undermine the moral and social fabric of society. The act succeeds in this instance precisely because it is under the sway of the ego. An act of revenge can therefore, I believe, be truly creative if aggression is used for positive ends rather than for purely destructive means.

Conclusion

The desire for revenge, along with some of the accompanying primitive feelings that are generated in relation to this desire, can be unwieldy and disturbing. As clinicians we might notice, in our countertransference, a desire or an inclination to distance ourselves from the patient due to the intensity and over stimulation engendered by revenge. We could also register feelings of disgust about the topic and/or the patient.

By presenting explanations of the underlying psychodynamics of revenge, its function and examples of how it can be skillfully expressed, I have tried to offer a counterpoint to some of the negative cultural views on the subject. This is an attempt of sorts to appreciate, value and retain a much maligned aspect of human nature and thereby avoid some of the “declawing” of this desire at the hands of “culture”.

As with anything the patient brings into the analysis, the desire for revenge is yet another window into the hurt and suffering of the patient. It is an opportunity for exploring any number of issues which might include resistances to maturation, or some of the unconscious motivations that arise both within and outside the analytic relationship. How this exploration unfolds with the analyst can, and does, I believe, make all the difference in how the patient's revenge will ultimately get played out.

To my mind of thinking, and in my experience, it seems possible for revenge to be both creative and effective. It is my hope that what I have presented here today will assist both analysts and patients alike to work with, and through, this potentially dangerous yet equally libidinous desire.

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