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Feeling Revengeful

Myisha Cherry - University of California, Riverside

Abstract

I provide an account of feeling revengeful and I do so while rejecting three revenge myths: (a) feeling revengeful means feeling anger, (b) feeling anger means feeling revengeful, and (c) succeeding at revenge means achieving something negative like putting others down. My aim is to articulate the complex dimensions of feeling revengeful which will also disprove the above views. I also make a case for precision in the ways we describe our emotional and affective states and trouble the tendency to necessarily link anger to revenge, anger's action tendency to vengeance, and view angry people as "the avengers."

Keywords: revenge, anger, retribution, retributive emotions

Introduction

I want to think about revenge as a complex feeling and do so while challenging three revenge myths: (a) feeling revengeful means feeling anger, (b) feeling anger means feeling revengeful, and (c) succeeding at revenge means achieving something negative such as putting others down. My aim is to articulate the complex dimensions of revenge as feeling(s); this will disprove (a) and (b). I will do this by showing the diverse psychological and emotive states involved in feeling revengeful—in which anger *may* play a part, but isn't required—and by claiming that the "approach tendency" of anger is a tendency with various approach options, in which, again, revenge *may* play a part, but isn't required. My first aim is to make a case for precision in the ways we describe our affective states and to trouble the tendency to necessarily link anger to revenge. My second aim is to provide, albeit briefly, an example of oppressed communities feeling revengeful in ways that escape standard moral objections to revenge—a case of what I refer to as "the success model" of feeling revengeful.

I'll begin by providing an account of feeling revengeful. In doing so I'll also disprove the idea that feeling revengeful means feeling anger. I'll then argue that there are different types of anger—all with an approach tendency but with different approach options and aims—to disprove the claim that feeling anger means feeling revengeful. I'll conclude by claiming that we not only have linguistic reasons to improve the ways we think and talk about anger and revenge in general and "feeling revengeful" in particular, but moral reasons as well. I'll end by drawing on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin to illustrate how oppressed communities often feel revengeful in ways that escape moral objections found in the literature.

The Complex Dimensions of Feeling Revenge

Revenge is not an unfamiliar or rare phenomenon. It's a popular theme in literature and film perhaps because it is something we all can relate to—given the persistence of wrongdoing and the agency and desires of victims and bystanders. Homer's *Iliad* is rich with examples of revenge. The Trojan War begins as an act of revenge against Paris for stealing Helen, the wife of Menelaus. Later, Achilles kills Hector for killing his childhood friend Patroclus. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins by the protagonist's father's ghost commanding him to "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.25). And he succeeds, but soon after he is stabbed by Laertes's blade. Men are not the only fictional characters who enact revenge in literature. Stephen King's *Carrie* is a story about a woman who takes revenge on those who have bullied and hurt her. The book ends with a climactic scene of Carrie, with the use of telekinetic powers, engaging in a bloody act of revenge on her classmates. Revenge is also a major theme in film. In Jack Hill's 1974 American blaxploitation film *Foxy Brown*, the main character, played by Pam Grier, goes after a gang who murdered her boyfriend. In a memorable scene, Foxy says to a group of young revolutionaries, "You just take care of the justice, I'll handle the revenge myself." And she does! Here Foxy makes an important distinction and has no problem declaring which one she prefers. In The Bullitts's 2021 Western *The Harder They Fall*, a stellar Black cast of characters depict two rival gangs headed by outlaws Nate Love and Rufus Buck respectively. Nate seeks revenge against Rufus for killing his parents when he was a child. Pointing to the prudential necessity of enacting revenge, Nate's love interest reminds him that "as long as that man [Rufus] draw breath, your spirit is gonna be cursed and wild as it ever was." Nate gets his revenge in the end but only after Rufus reminds him that "letting [him] live, that was the true revenge." All this revenge, albeit fictional, is sensational to witness. It also speaks to the human potential and hidden desires of many to enact their own revenge. Perhaps that's why revenge remains a recurring theme in popular culture. We know what revenge looks like in action. But what does it feel like? That is to say, what are its affective features? This is the task I take up in this essay.

To be sure, philosophers and social psychologists have linked feeling and revenge. The most common accounts have been "feelings of revenge," "retributive emotions," and "emotions of revenge." These thinkers describe feelings of revenge as emotions that come about through humiliation, last longer than other emotions, and whose goal is to make the target suffer (Elshout et al., 2015). Feeling and revenge are also linked together in discussions about retributive emotions. Philosophers define these emotions as those that motivate and/or comes with a retributive wish. Emotions that are often listed as retributive are anger and hatred. Jeffrie Murphy, for example, in describing "retributive hatred," writes:

Jones has injured me, has taken unfair advantage of me, has brought me low, and is himself unrepentant and flourishing. I hate him and want him brought low . . . I want Jones to be hurt . . . [P]art of the basis for desiring the hurt is the desire to restore what seems (at least to me) to be the proper moral balance of whatever goods are in question. (1988, 89)

What for Murphy makes hatred a retributive feeling is its desire for the target to suffer in order to restore "proper moral balance."

Philosophers have also linked *the act* of revenge to emotions and affective attitudes. In *Forgiveness and Revenge* (2002), Trudy Govier highlights the various dimensions of revenge. In her view, revenge entails intent: revenge is "deliberately bringing harm . . . for the sake of enjoying having brought that harm" (12). However, revenge is not limited to motive. There are emotions that are also part of the picture. For Govier, 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). When revenge is practiced there are core elements to its success. The three core elements to successful revenge are: (1) intention to harm another in response to their initial harm, (2) the revenger’s agency in that harm, and (3) the actual suffering of the one who is harmed.¹ What makes revenge harmful and therefore morally objectionable for Govier is that it treats another as the instrument of our satisfaction and “morally diminishes the revenging victim” (13).

In an attempt to broaden Govier’s claims, Alice MacLachlan (2016) notes that the intent aspect of revenge is more robust. It’s not enough that we intend to harm our target: additionally, “the revenger needs her target to know that this is an act of revenge” (139). While there are reasons to reject revenge as a moral good, MacLachlan doesn’t think that in revenge we always treat our targets as instruments of our satisfaction. Rather, she argues that “revenge is . . . a communicative action [where the recipient is a] moral addressee, rather than an instrument to my purposes” (137). In this way, “the target is not merely instrument, but audience” (140). While she points out that “I necessarily take their personhood seriously insofar as I see them as someone capable of persuasion . . . [a strike against revenge is that] it is intended to end, rather than continue moral conversation” (143). Therefore, when she condemns revenge, she acknowledges that “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” (147).

I find these thinkers’ views on emotions, attitudes, and revenge illuminating. However, their accounts are insufficient for describing feeling revengeful. For example, their accounts seem to be limited to retributive emotions like anger and hatred as if they are sufficient for describing what it means to feel revengeful. Their accounts of revenge also rely too heavily on what these emotions do, their target, and their length, while ignoring other affective attitudes and other feelings that are experienced (when these emotions are absent). Although there is focus on intent and desire in some of these accounts, they fall short in capturing the complex dimensions of what it is to feel revengeful—beyond emotions and desires. Also, several of the thinkers’ primary concerns are not my focus in this essay. For example, contra Govier and MacLachlan, I am not concerned with successful “acts of revenge” but with feeling revenge (having the feeling even if we don’t engage in revengeful actions). While there is mention of “emotion[s] of revenge” (e.g., hatred on the part of Govier and Murphy) and claims that revenge is a “complex emotion,” I’m interested in accounting for more affective aspects of revenge. It includes emotion, but also other psychological states and affective attitudes. The word “feeling” captures the broadness that I’m after.

Before I describe “feeling revengeful,” it’s important to highlight what I am not referring to. By “feeling revengeful,” I am not referring to the emotions of revenge like hatred, as if we can reduce feeling revengeful to them. My view is that they cannot. Rather, I’m describing a more complex phenomenon that consists of desires and emotions, as well as other affective states (such as pleasure and so forth) which may have different aims, focus, and physiological responses. As a result, the experience of feeling revengeful will vary by persons and according to circumstances.

I’m going to introduce five features of what it is to paradigmatically feel revengeful, arguing that in these cases one feature will typically be present *and* accompanied by one or more of the others. My aim through this “combination approach” is to present a more varied and complete picture of the phenomenon without reducing feeling revengeful to the experience of retributive emotions.

¹ As summarised by MacLachlan (2016).

The first feature of feeling revengeful is *vindictive plans*. These plans include the intentions and motives of the agent. In feeling revengeful, the agent has the intention to harm another or a desire that they be harmed in response to their intentional harm. But as MacLachlan points out, the target of my revenge must know the reason for the harm. Using the example of coworkers, she notes:

Take two colleagues: Leah and Mateo. Mateo has ruthlessly and persistently bullied Leah over many years . . . 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. Leah's swing vote determined the outcome . . . 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" that she wishes to communicate. (2016, 138–39)

It's not enough that I have the desire or intention to harm, I must desire that the target know that I am the reason why they have been harmed. Such harm may be physical or psychological. The suffering might entail the experience of excessive guilt but also goal frustration.

The second feature is *vindictive powers*. In feeling revengeful, I not only desire that the target is harmed: I also take such harm to be instrumental, a means to an end. The end is to achieve a restoration of power in the sense of balancing the universe or achieving individual moral power. On this view, the harm is desired in order to right a wrong, to balance the score, or to restore a sense of fairness and reciprocity. In Murphy's terms, it's to "restore what seems (at least to me) to be the proper moral balance of whatever goods are in question" (Murphy 1988, 89). The agent believes and therefore wishes that the target is harmed so that a previous harm is undone. If injuries are seen as diminishment, then relative status has been harmed via the wrongdoing. In feeling revengeful, I desire my target suffers so that revenge can "atone for or annul the damage" (Nussbaum 2016, 26).

The harm can also be desired to gain recognition; this is to say that it aims for the target to acknowledge wrongdoing.² This is quite different from MacLachlan's claim that the wrongdoer know that we are behind the revenge. I can desire that they know I orchestrated their destruction, without desiring that they confess to the offence or acknowledge the harm they've caused. The avenger can feel revengeful by desiring to say to his target—as is the case in the movie *The Princess Bride*—"Hello. My Name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die." But he can also feel revengeful by doing as the fictional detective Adrian Monk did after he found the killer of his wife Trudy after twelve years of searching: get recognition. While pointing a gun at his target Monk instructs him to dig. Unbeknownst to the police witnessing, Monk knows there is a body buried in the front yard. By instructing his target to dig, he's getting him to admit to the killings of not only his wife but a witness. The killer immediately begins to confess and explain why he murdered them. This was the recognition Monk was after.

But feeling revengeful doesn't just consist of motives and aims. Feeling revengeful is typically accompanied by emotions—what Murphy describes as *vindictive passions*. These passions, on his view, are "often felt by victims towards those who have wronged them" (2003, 17). Vindictive passions include hatred, resentment, and moral disgust.³ For Govier, the emotion of revenge is "hatred that goes so far as to include joy at the evil meted out to

² Silva (2021) claims that this is what anger is after, but I think revenge, even absent anger, is after such acknowledgement.

³ Here I depart from Jeffrie Murphy's account of vindictive emotions. For him, they are limited to anger, resentment, and desire for revenge. My account is more expansive.

another person” (13). According to Adam Smith, “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” ([1759] 1976, 63). Moral disgust is often not listed as a vindictive passion. This is because it is associated with avoidance behaviour. The victim is less likely to directly confront the offender when they feel disgust. However, as Curtis and Biran (2001) note, this just makes it likely that the person who experiences moral disgust would recruit revenge by others. In addition, they claim that any avoidance associated with moral disgust functions “to punish and ostracize moral offenders” (29). So, while moral disgust is not typically considered a vindictive passion, we can see why it is an emotion one can feel when they feel revengeful.

However, I do not think the presence of these emotions fully explains what it is to feel revengeful. Unless these emotions conceptually motivate vengeful action or necessarily entail a desire for revenge, vindictive passions alone can’t give the full account of the feeling-revengeful phenomenon. This list is also not exhaustive. For example, we can imagine a hybrid of emotions that might fit under vindictive passions. They might include humiliation and resentment, or disgust and grief. Or they might include what David Shoemaker describes as “hurt feelings.” Moreover, emotions that might not traditionally count as vindictive might count when in combination with other emotions. These emotions might include shame, a blind love for justice, or pride. Murphy claims that emotions like anger and hatred “often prompt acts of vengeance or revenge, but one can have the passions without acting on them—just as one can feel sexual lust without acting on it” (2003, 16). However, feeling revengeful should not be reduced to the experience of these vindictive passions. In feeling revengeful, there are other things we typically feel and desire beyond and in addition to these emotions. Furthermore, MacLachlan points out that since there are various forms of revenge one could intend (e.g., nonviolent, proportionate, etc.), there are also different categorical feelings we can feel as a result. While vindictive passions such as hatred, disgust, and resentment may be present when desiring violent cases of revenge, they may be absent when desiring nonaggressive instances of revenge, cases like “the success model” that I defend in section 5.4 Therefore, I do not think the retributive emotions of anger and hatred can fully explain what it is to feel revengeful. There are additional emotions—beyond the standard, retributive ones—that also fall under the category of vindictive passions.

There are also other things we can feel or desire to feel when feeling revengeful. These other affects may include pleasures. The fourth feature in feeling revengeful is *vindictive pleasures*. These pleasures come about through the contemplation of and/or successful completion of revenge (via the suffering of the wrongdoer). Aristotle associated revenge (via anger) with pleasure. He writes: “[Anger] must always be attended by a certain pleasure—that which arises from the expectation of revenge” (*Rhetoric*, II.2). These pleasures include enjoyment and satisfaction. I can get joy from planning a revengeful scenario. This pleasure feature is explained in *The Count of Monte Cristo* as Dantès talks about his revenge: “How did I plan this moment? With pleasure.” I might also get pleasure in the form of a sense of satisfaction at a job well done performed in the name of moral duty and self-respect (Barton 1999). I might also experience joy after I see my target harmed. Govier suggests that hatred can include such joy. I agree. But I also think that an agent can experience such enjoyment without the hatred. Consider the case of revenge fantasies. Recent research in psychology suggest that revenge fantasies can calm negative feelings of frustration and humiliation and bring with them pleasure at imagining the suffering of wrongdoers. Without the experience of hatred by agents imagining revenge, they can experience calm and comfort.⁵ When a person aims for or achieves such pleasure by thinking about, planning, or engaging in revenge, they are feeling revengeful.

4 See MacLachlan (2016, 136).

5 See Craig Haen and Anna Marie Weber (2009).

Lastly are *vindictive products*. Contrary to the notion that we tend towards vengeance in order to satisfy our vindictive passions, we can also feel vengeful to satisfy other things whether we intend them or not. I refer to these feelings and desires as vindictive products. They include the desire to achieve, or the experience of, relief, escape, closure, or catharsis from revenge (MacLachlan 2016). While feelings of relief or closure are not vindictive, they can be described as such when vindictiveness becomes a means to achieve them. MacLachlan thinks, contra Govier, that “not everyone commits revenge out of enthusiasm . . . [Therefore,] to equate the satisfaction of desire with pleasure at that satisfaction is mistaken, and risks committing to a simplistic psychological hedonism” (2016, 136). It’s here where the distinction between pleasure and products matter. Relief and closure can be a product of the target’s suffering even when pleasure at their suffering is absent.

Thus, feeling vengeful paradigmatically consists of the following features:

A) Vindictive Plans

The *intention* to harm another or a *desire* that they be harmed (by myself or others) in response to their intentional harm, and for them to know the reason for the harm. The nature of this harm or suffering can vary from physical harm to goal frustration.

B) Vindictive Powers

Harm *desired* as instrumental to righting wrongs or gaining recognition.

C) Vindictive Passions

Emotions like hatred, resentment, moral disgust, hurt feelings, or a combination of emotions like pride and humiliation.

D) Vindictive Pleasures

The contemplation and/or successful completion of revenge (via the suffering of the wrongdoer) that comes with *enjoyment* and *satisfaction*.

E) Vindictive Products

Desires to and/or achieve *relief, escape, closure, or catharsis* from revenge.

To feel vengeful is to paradigmatically experience A, B, D, or E. When C is experienced, it is typically accompanied by A, B, D, or E. This is because feeling vengeful is more complex than vindictive passions alone and therefore should not be reduced to them. While this account describes what it is to feel vengeful, it also supports two important claims. It shows that revenge is not dependent on anger for its existence. If we omit anger (one of the vindictive passions), we can still feel vengeful since (C) doesn’t fully explain the phenomenon. But also, anger is not the only vindictive passion. One can experience hatred or disgust. And when one does, in combination with other features, one feels vengeful. This shows that revenge and anger are not necessarily linked. Therefore, the claim that feeling vengeful implies feeling anger is false.

I have argued that you can feel resentment and still not feel vengeful. In this way, I agree with Stephen Darwall that “reactive attitudes like resentment and indignation can be distinguished from the desire to retaliate or gain vengeance” (2006, 83). As a result, there are additional desires, affects, and emotions at play that account for typical experiences of the phenomenon—such as a desire to right a wrong or get closure—for the passion to feature in feeling vengeful. Resentment doesn’t necessarily entail the desire, therefore: other intentions and motives must accompany resentment. In their absence, to feel resentment is not necessarily to feel vengeful. As we will see in the next section, this claim also depends on the type of anger experienced.

Action Tendencies and Breaking the Link

There are philosophers and psychologists who have not only linked anger with revenge but have defined anger in relationship to its vengeful tendency. Consider the following claims:

It appears to me that you are right in feeling especial fear of this passion, which is above all others hideous and wild . . . [It] consists wholly in action and the impulse of grief, raging with an utterly inhuman lust for arms, blood and tortures, careless of itself provided it hurts another, rushing upon the very point of the sword, and greedy for revenge even when it drags the avenger to ruin with itself. (Seneca [45] 2010, 1.1)

On Seneca's account, what it is to be angry is to be greedy for revenge. And such revenge is bound to cause the vengeful agent to suffer too. Therefore, we have reasons to be afraid of anger and to resist it in our lives.

Martha Nussbaum has a similar view. She claims that anger involves this vengeful tendency and we should therefore try our best to transition out of anger into love and generosity. She writes:

The idea of payback or retribution—in some form, however subtle—is a conceptual part of anger. I . . . argue the payback idea is normatively problematic, and anger, therefore, with it . . . The claim is not that anger conceptually involves a wish for violent revenge; nor is it that anger involves the wish to inflict suffering oneself upon the offender. For I may not want to get involved in revenge myself: I may want someone else, or the law, or life itself, to do it for me. I just want the doer to suffer . . . that anger involves, conceptually, a wish for things to go badly, somehow, for the offender, in a way that is envisaged, somehow, however vaguely, as a payback for the offense. They get what they deserve. (Nussbaum 2016, 22–23)

There are social psychologists who have also made similar claims. Carroll E. Izard (1997) has argued that the action tendency of anger is retaliation. And more recently, Jonathan Haidt has argued that “anger comes with an inclination to attack, humiliate, or otherwise get the person back who is perceived as acting unfairly or immorally” (2003, 856). Some have made weaker claims, choosing instead to reject the conceptual point and opt for an account based on occurrence. For example, Charles Barton (1999) claims that “revenge is . . . typically accompanied and fueled by feelings of indignation, anger, and resentment for wrongs suffered” (1999, 86). If these thinkers are right, then we cannot separate anger from feeling revengeful; for what it is to feel anger is to feel revengeful. However, in what follows I'll show why I reject this picture.

In *The Case for Rage* (2021), I argue that, contrary to the broad strokes view of anger, anger is not one thing. There are different types. We can identify them by looking at the target (at whom and what it is directed); the perspective that informs the anger (the attitude from which the anger arises); its action tendency (or propensity to act); and its aim (i.e., the purpose and plan from which the anger arises). The action tendency of all anger types is “approach motivation,” in which an agent is motivated to approach the target of her anger. But the kind of approach one desires or engages in is depended on many factors. It depends on the type of anger one has, given its features. To help illustrate this, let's look at the differences between two anger types as argued in the book.

One type of anger that arises in the context of political injustice is *wipe rage*. The target is racial “others,” those who are of a different race than the agent. The perspective that informs wipe rage is a zero-sum-game way of thinking. The agent falsely thinks that they are experiencing injustice because of Mexicans or Blacks, and part of their anger is informed by the attitude that if these racial others make progress or succeed, then this will ensure his and his racial group’s failure. These two features will influence the type of action one would have a tendency to engage in, as well as their aims. The action tendency in wipe rage is to eliminate the racial other, and its aim is the racial other’s social or physical exclusion.

This contrasts in stark ways with a more positive type of anger: *Lordean rage*. This kind of anger also arises in the context of political injustice. However, rather than being targeted at racial others, its target is those who are complicit in or perpetrators of racism. The perspective that informs the anger is an inclusive perspective, for the person with Lordean rage does not believe they are free until everyone is free. These features affect the action tendency and aim of the angry agent. The action tendency is for the agent to fight the problem by changing it. Thus, the aim of Lordean rage is to change laws, policies, culture, those in power, etc. Remember, the approach tendency is connected to the aim, which is informed by the other features. If one has wipe rage, one is more prone to engage in revengeful behaviour given one’s target and perspective. However, those who have Lordean rage are not likely to engage in standard destructive cases of revenge, but rather will tend, due to the anger’s target and perspective, to engage in constructive action. So, while revenge may be part of the picture of some types of anger (wipe rage), it is not necessarily part of all types.

This shows that if we omit revenge as one of the approach options, we will still have anger (e.g., Lordean rage). We can therefore conclude that anger and revenge are not necessarily linked. This also makes the colloquial phrase “don’t get mad, get even” coherent—for it’s possible to feel revengeful without anger. Thus, we can also conclude that the claim “feeling anger means feeling revengeful” is false.

The “Moral” of the Story

My account of feeling revengeful is important because it allows us to achieve more precision in the ways we describe certain phenomena. This precision has both linguistic and moral import.

As we’ve discovered, there is no need to overemphasise the connection between anger and revenge as if they are necessarily and always linked. It’s best we choose our words carefully! We should be resistant to the description: “She is angry and therefore feels revengeful.” I have shown that this is an inaccurate moral picture. I’ve claimed that since there are a variety of angers with different aims and action tendencies, anger doesn’t necessarily entail the desire for revenge. In addition, the claim “she feels revengeful and is therefore angry” is also inaccurate since I’ve argued that feeling revengeful doesn’t necessitate feeling angry because there are other vindictive emotions like hatred and hurt feelings that one can feel instead. The assumptions behind these two claims are also incomplete. Feeling angry is not sufficient for feeling revengeful. Vindictive powers or products typically accompanies the anger.

There are more precise alternatives on the table to describe an agent in relationship to anger and revenge. They are the following:

1. She is angry but doesn't feel revengeful.
2. She feels revengeful but doesn't feel angry.
3. She is angry and feels revengeful.

Any of these options paints a more accurate moral picture of the agent. We must remember that (3) is not the only possibility. However, when we describe it as such, we have a fuller account of how she feels than we do on the incorrect picture.

I'm not just concerned with conceptual thinking and linguistic accuracy but moral action. Silencing, vigilantism, and political backlash can occur if we overemphasise the connection between anger and revenge (i.e., "She is angry and therefore feels revengeful").

For example, instead of listening to and giving uptake to an angry victim's claims of wrongdoing and injustice, we are likely to silence them with the thought that silencing their anger is silencing their revenge. This can have horrible consequences for the moral and political spheres. It can dissuade protest, prevent recognition, and delimit democracy.

Vigilantism can also result from the inaccurate picture. Seeing an angry person may justify irrational fear and the need for self-defence. If angry people are avengers in waiting, we may think that we must attack them before they attack us. This will sow seeds of distrust and violence. There can be no justice, respect, or peace when such thinking guides our behaviour. But such actions are not limited to individual citizens. There can also be state-level political backlash against angry citizens. Since the thought is that angry citizens are also feeling revengeful, political steps might be taken to respond, albeit irrationally, to angry citizens in order to curb their potential vengeful behaviour. This may manifest in increased policing, oppressive policies, and state violence. Since emotions are gendered and racialised—that is to say, we read and assess emotions differently based on a person's race and gender—this is likely to have a disproportionate impact on women and people of colour. There are certain emotions, such as anger, that we are encultured to think are virtuous for men or white people to have and vicious for women and oppressed minorities to have. This is likely to affect *who* we see as angry avengers in waiting. Angry Black protestors, angry feminists, and angry Palestinians, for example, are more likely to be victims of silencing, vigilantism, and political backlash.

Given these practices, we have linguistic and moral reasons to improve the ways we think about anger and revenge in general, and about "feeling revengeful" in particular.

The Success Model

One of the concerns that white Americans held after the abolition of slavery was fear that the formerly enslaved would take up arms and enact violent revenge. It's not surprising that given these worries, many race men such as Booker T. Washington sought to convince whites that Blacks were not resentful. Unfortunately, these worries still exist today. I want to end by claiming, controversially, that some Blacks do indeed feel revengeful in response to historical and modern racism and racial oppression. But the nature of the feeling runs counter to the popular white imaginary.

I refer to this feeling as the “success model” of feeling revengeful because part of the feeling entails the idea that “success is the best form of revenge.” This model of feeling revengeful has aided in Blacks’ resistance and survival, and escapes some of the criticisms posed by MacLachlan and Govier.

Two examples that capture the success model comes from W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin. In the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois describes his discovery of being different from his white classmates. This discovery then leads to a desire that, I believe, captures feeling revengeful.

He writes:

I was different from the others; or like, mayhap in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head,—some way . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife . . . This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. (8–9)

There are vindictive plans. As a result of being shut out by the veil, Du Bois decides to beat his classmates at everything and to wrest opportunities from them through reading law and telling tales. There are also vindictive products. He does it so that he might escape death and isolation, and use his latent genius. There are vindictive powers, for such acts are instrumental to gaining recognition via being coworkers in the kingdom of culture. There is also vindictive pleasure. Du Bois admits that the sky was blue (i.e., that his days were wonderful) when his striving (or revenge) was successful. Lastly, there is a vindictive passion, a contempt that eventually fades. Du Bois refers to what I am calling feeling revengeful as spiritual strivings, and there's no doubt that is indeed that. Feeling revengeful in a context of oppression can produce a striving that consists in part of what I am calling the success model of feeling revengeful.

A passage from James Baldwin's “My Dungeon Shook: A Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” ([1962] 1993) also provides an example of the success model. Baldwin's instructions to his nephew are different from Du Bois's description in that while Du Bois's feeling is connected to outward action; Baldwin's instructions are psychological. Yet, it is still an example of feeling revengeful. Baldwin writes:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish . . . You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and *how* you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying, “You exaggerate.” They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one’s word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority but to their inhumanity and fear. (7–8, emphases in original)

There is a vindictive plan. Baldwin wants his nephew to quash white expectations, to frustrate their plans for him to perish. There is also a vindictive product. The aim of such quashing is so that he may escape and get relief from what his white countrymen say or intend for him. He does this by refusing to believe what they say about him. Note that there is no anger or hatred. Baldwin in the next few sentences tells his nephew to accept his countrymen with love rather than contempt or anger. This love in combination with pride or hurt feelings produces what I am calling vindictive passions.

Although there is a focus on vengeance and targets in the success model, this is not all of what striving, in general, aims at. In the lives of the oppressed, the success model of feeling revengeful runs alongside other feelings and plans such as love for oneself and joy despite oppressive conditions, as well as desires to survive, thrive, honour one’s ancestors, and leave a legacy. In this way, feeling revengeful is part of the story of the oppressed, but is never the whole story.

The success model also escapes some of the worries posed by Govier. For example, rather than “treat another as instruments of our satisfaction” it instead treats evil intentions, desires, and actions as instruments. They become the motivation to survive despite obstacles. Since the aim and action of the oppressed are plan frustration/failure via success rather than harm proper, feeling revengeful doesn’t “morally diminish the revenging victim.” Instead, it can, as Baldwin claims, validate them. Although MacLachlan is worried that revenge ends rather than continues the moral conversation by making the target an audience, the success model operates differently. Some conversations, such as those in which one’s dignity, humanity, or inclusion is under discussion, should not be continued. When this occurs, targets *should* be an audience to the oppressed party’s survival and thriving—which, fortunately, occurs despite the targets’ cruel actions or aims.

Conclusion

Feeling revengeful is more complex than simply experiencing anger. There are typically other emotions involved, as well as other psychological and affective features that are present; anger itself may not even be present. But feeling revengeful is not all about what we feel. Feeling revengeful can aid in one's survival against oppression and allow one to do so without perpetuating more oppression or suffering in the world. Getting clearer on these matters can help us understand our emotional lives better. It can also help curb further destructive behaviours, such as silencing and backlash, while encouraging more constructive types, such as striving.

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