

## Revenge and Mercy in Tarantino: The Lesson of Ezekiel 25:17

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You read the bible, Brett?...Well there's this passage I got memorized, sort of fits the occasion: Ezekiel 25:17. "The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers. And you will know my name is the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon thee."

-- Jules Winfield, *Pulp Fiction*

As it appears in *Pulp Fiction*, "Ezekiel 25:17" is not an actual biblical quote; no English translation of any portion of Ezekiel (or any other book for that matter) is worded quite like the "cold blooded shit" Jules says to "a motherfucker before [he] pops a cap in his ass." (PF) But the lesson that Jules eventually derives from the "verse" is quite biblical: one ought to show mercy. In fact, Tarantino's films abound with acts of mercy—acts of mercy that we are meant to admire. It seems, according to Tarantino's films, *mercy* should be common practice. And yet *justified revenge*—the seeming opposite of mercy—is a common theme, as well as a common motivating factor, for characters in Tarantino's films—and it seems that applause is intended for them. For example, the Bride's "Roaring Rampage of Revenge" in the Kill Bill Saga is not portrayed as morally heinous, but as justified; in the end, "The lioness has been reunited with her cub, and all is right in the jungle." It seems that, according to Tarantino's films, if we were ever wronged as they were, *we would be morally justified in taking revenge on our enemies like they did.*

Now whether or not Tarantino uses his movies to communicate the specifics of his own moral views is unclear. (Art, sometimes, is just art and not intended to communicate anything.) But what is clear is that watching Tarantino's movies (and taking them at face value) leaves one with the impression that, although mercy should be

common practice, revenge is justified. For simplicity's sake we will call this "Tarantino's view." (Although—and I must be clear on this point—this is only a name; I am not ascribing any particular view to Tarantino himself.)

I think *Tarantino's view* is quite common—his movies wouldn't be enjoyable for so many if it wasn't—but one is forced to wonder whether sense can be made of it. Are not these two claims—that *mercy ought to be shown* and that *revenge is morally justified*—inconsistent? How can one be morally justified in enacting revenge if one should be merciful? In this chapter, I will argue that, contrary to appearances, *Tarantino's view* is consistent. I will define mercy and revenge, outline the examples of both in Tarantino's films and show that his movies endorse both but do so in a logically consistent way. We will then test *Tarantino's view* against philosophical arguments and see if his view can withstand scrutiny. I will argue that it can. All in all, we will attain a deeper understanding of Tarantino's films as well as an understanding of the philosophical debate and issues surrounding the moral justification of revenge.

### **Revenge vs. Retribution**

"Revenge is a dish best served cold"

--Old Klingon Proverb

We must define both mercy and revenge if we are to maintain clarity in our discussion. Although we will say more about specific definitions of mercy later, a broad definition of mercy will do for now. We will say that *mercy is considerate treatment of others, especially those under one's power*. Revenge, however, is not as easily defined and, to do so, we must distinguish it from something with which it is often confused: retribution.

What is retribution? Take some person who wrongs another; call that person *the offender*. An action that is carried out on the offender accomplishes retribution when the action is negative (one can't accomplish retribution with a foot massage), the action is intended as punishment for the offense, is proportionate to the offense, and the offender is aware that it is intended as punishment. So, in short, we might say that retribution is accomplished when "a penalty is inflicted for a reason (a wrong or injury) with the desire that the [offender] know why this is occurring and know that he was intended to know."<sup>1</sup>

Revenge has these qualities as well, and in fact is a type of retribution; but revenge has additional qualities that set it apart. Retributive punishment can be administered by anyone; revenge, on the other hand, is personal and, thus, only those who are wronged by the offender can *get revenge* on the offender. Revenge is fueled by emotion and desire *to see* the offender suffer—not simply a desire to ensure that the appropriate price is paid. Revenge sets no limit on what harm can be inflicted and, in fact, the amount of punishment that is doled out is dependent solely on what the person who seeks revenge deems appropriate.

Examples from Tarantino can help us clarify the notions of retribution and revenge. Consider the alternate ending to *Natural Born Killers*<sup>2</sup>, where—after leading the serial killers Mickey and Mallory out of prison—Owen Taft (their "guardian angel") kills both of them with a shot gun at point blank range. Many would suggest that Mickey and Mallory deserved to die for their crimes, but even if that is so, Owen killing them

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<sup>1</sup> Nozick, Robert. "Retribution and Revenge." Robert Solomon and Mark Murphy's *What Is Justice?* Oxford University Press, New York. 2000. (p. 214)

<sup>2</sup> The reader may or may not be aware that Tarantino wrote *Natural Born Killers*. He actually wanted it to be his first writing/directing debut, but it was given to Oliver Stone instead. Interestingly enough, Oliver didn't do it at all like Tarantino envisioned, and consequently Tarantino never watched it. (See Bernard, Jami. *Quentin Tarantino the Man and his Movies*. Harper Perennial, New York. 1995. Chapter 6.)

accomplishes neither revenge (he was never personally wronged by them) nor retribution (he was not intending to punish them for their crimes, nor did they view his action as such).

For an example of retribution, we can look to the movie *True Romance* where Clarence kills Drexel, his new wife Alabama's pimp. He specifically acknowledges that he is haunted by the fact that someone as morally repugnant as Drexel is "breathin' the same air as [him]...getting' away with it every day" and admits that Drexel doesn't "deserve to live" and thus wants to kill him...and does so. (TR) Clearly Clarence wants to punish Drexel for his immoral behavior—and even wants to ensure that he knows that is why he is being punished (that is why Clarence makes Drexel open his eyes and look at him before he kills him). But since Clarence has never been personally wronged by Drexel, we can't call this an act of revenge. But we can call it an act of retribution.

But, for a perfect example of an act of revenge, we can look to O-ren Ishi, in *Kill Bill*. As she pushes a samurai sword into the chest of her father's murderer, Boss Matsumoto, she says to him "Look at me, Matsumoto...take a good look at my face. Look at my eyes. Look at my mouth. Do I look familiar? Do I look like somebody you murdered?!" Clearly, in this case, a victim of the offender—fueled by emotion—is punishing the offender, for his offense—with the punishment that she deems necessary—and is ensuring that he knows he is being punished for that offense. This, we might say, is a *text book case* of revenge.

So revenge, unlike retribution, is personal, emotional, includes a desire to see the offender suffer and sets no limit on punishment. Retribution is simply the accomplishment of appropriate punishment of a wrongdoer by anyone. And it is revenge,

not retribution, that is the focus of this article and the main focus many of Tarantino's films. And it is the "Tarantinian" suggestion that revenge is justified that shall be evaluated.

### **"Justified" Revenge in Tarantino**

When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, at the time it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you're doing his will.

--Beatrix Kiddo, *Kill Bill* [original script]

Examples of revenge abound in Tarantino's films. In *Pulp Fiction*, Marcellus exercises revenge on Zed—for anally raping him—by blowing off his genitals with a shot gun and then promising to get "Medieval on his ass" with a pair of pliers and a blow torch before he finally kills him. At the end of *Reservoir Dogs* we have the perfect "revenge" circle. Joe Caveat wants revenge on Mr. Orange because he set them up and shot Mr. Blonde to whom Joe owed a debt of gratitude. Mr. White—on the assumption that Orange is not a cop (but a good kid and his friend)—threatens immediate revenge on Joe if Joe shoots Orange. Nice Guy Eddy threatens revenge on White if White shoots Joe (his dad), and—after Joe does shoot Orange, White shoots Joe, and Eddy shoots White—White shoots Eddy for shooting him. And when Orange—out of an act of loyalty—reveals to White that he is a cop, White—quite distraught—shoots Orange in the head as a final act of revenge before the credits roll. These films, however, are silent about the justification of these particular acts of revenge; but some others films don't follow suit.

It is hard to watch *Death Proof* without concluding that the girl's act of revenge on Stunt Man Mike is meant to be applauded—I know I did the first time I saw it! (Embarrassingly, I saw it for the first time in a theater.) However, for a clear portrayal of

revenge as morally justified, one need look no further than *Kill Bill*. The “roaring rampage” of the Bride (Beatrix Kiddo) in *Kill Bill* is motivated solely by desire for revenge. Bill and the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad (or “D.iV.A.S.”—the acronym Tarantino coined for the group consisting of O-Ren Ishii, Verntia Green, Elle Driver and Budd in the original script) attempted to kill her and her unborn child—at her wedding rehearsal no less—for simply wanting to quit her life as a hit man (“...jetting around the world, killing human beings, and being paid vast sums of money” (KBV2)). After she awakes from her coma—inflicted upon her by Bill shooting her in the head—she finds her unborn child gone, presumes the child to be dead, and then sets out to individually kill each D.iV.A.S. member, Bill himself, and anyone who gets in her way. She is fueled my emotion to punish those who wronged her and the appropriate punishment is set by her standards; that is, she seeks revenge!

(My friend Jason Southworth pointed out to me that the entire *Kill Bill* saga could be interpreted as a symbolic story of Bruce Lee getting revenge for the *Americanization of Japanese Culture*. Beatrix’s outfit in Vol. 1 is Bruce’s (from *Game of Death*), the Crazy’s 88’s resemble Bruce’s portrayal of Kato The Green Hornet’s sidekick (a role that he found demeaned him and the martial arts), the music played before that scene is the Green Hornet’s theme, and David Carradine (who plays Bill) got the lead role in *Kung Fu* over Bruce. Of course, it could also be that Tarantino just likes throwing in Bruce Lee references—but I love viewing the movies this way.)

That Beatrix’s quest portrayed as morally justified is very clear. As Beatrix herself points out:

“When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, at the time it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you’re doing his will.” (KB) [original script]

And as Budd points out:

“I don’t dodge guilt. And I don’t Jew out of paying my comeuppance. That woman deserves her revenge. And we deserve to die.” (KBV2)

And, as was pointed out in the introduction of this chapter, the Kill Bill Saga ends with a blessing on the Bride’s actions: “The lioness has been reunited with her cub, and all is right in the jungle.” It seems clear: in the Kill Bill Saga vengeance is portrayed as morally justified.

### **Mercy in Tarantino**

The truth is, you're the weak. And I am the tyranny of evil men. But I'm tryin' Ringo...I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd.

--Jules Winfield, *Pulp Fiction*

Examples of mercy abound in Tarantino’s films, almost as much as examples of vengeance do. In *Kill Bill Vol 1.*, Bill shows Beatrix mercy when he—as she lays in her hospital bed—recalls the “goodbye forever” poison syringe assassination order. And in *Kill Bill Vol. 2*, when she shows up to kill him, Bill shows Beatrix mercy by allowing her time with her daughter before also giving her a fair opportunity to kill him. In *Pulp Fiction*, Butch hunts down Marcellus and even would have blown off Marcellus head, had he not been stopped by Maynard the “pawn shop shop-keep.” And yet, when the tables turn, and—while Marcellus is being anally raped by Zed—Butch is able to escape, Butch does not leave Marcellus to this awful fate, but instead—in a obvious act of mercy—rescues him. And, in return, Marcellus shows mercy to Butch by forgiving the wrong Butch inflicted on him by refusing to throw the prize fight.

But the most notable example of mercy is Jules Winfield’s. Jules and Vince narrowly escape death—by the “miracle” of Vince and he being missed by multiple

bullets fired at them from point blank range. Jules “feels the touch of God” and thus concludes that Ezekiel 25:17 instructs him to give up being “the tyranny of evil men” (by being a cold blooded hit man) and instead to become “The Shepherd.” As he enters the “transitional period” between his two lives, the restaurant where he and Vince are eating is robbed. But instead of killing the thieves (which he actually envisions doing in original version of the *Pulp Fiction* script), he begins his new “Kane-from-Kung-Fu-style” life with an extreme act of mercy: he buys their lives, letting them escape with a large amount of stolen money—\$1500 of it his own.

And I don’t think much of an argument is needed to show that these films glorify these acts of mercy. After all, Bill admits that he owes Beatrix better than to “sneak into her room in the night, like a filthy rat, and kill her in her sleep.” Such a thing would “lower” him. (KBV1) And Ezekiel 25:17 is the moral lesson of *Pulp Fiction*; God gave both Jules and Vince a chance to be shepherds (Vince rejecting that chance led to his death). It is clear: according to Tarantino’s films, mercy should be common practice.

### **What is Tarantino’s view?**

“It’s mercy, compassion, and forgiveness I lack, not rationality”  
-- Beatrix Kiddo, *Kill Bill Vol. 1*

As was pointed out in the introduction, it certainly seems that these two claims—that *mercy should be common practice* and that *revenge is justified*—are inconsistent. How can one be justified in enacting revenge if one should be merciful? It seems that *Tarantino’s view* is inconsistent. I, however, will argue that it is not.

Acts of revenge in Tarantino’s films are just what one would expect them to be: acts, driven by the victim’s emotional desire for satisfaction, after personally suffering a



wrong at the hands of the offender. But, in Tarantino's films, mercy is never exercised in lieu of such vengeance.

Consider the acts of mercy we have discussed so far. In *Kill Bill*, Bill recognizes the wrong that he did to Beatrix—he was a “real bad daddy” (KBV2)—and likewise recognizes that he has no claim of vengeance upon her. In fact, he seems to recognize her claim of vengeance on him and—even though he reserves the right to defend himself—he feels obligated to give her a fair shot at killing him. In *Pulp Fiction*, Butch showed Marcellus mercy, but Butch had no right of revenge on Marcellus. (In fact it was the other way around; Butch wronged Marcellus by refusing to throw the prize fight after he had promised to do so and accepted Marcellus' money for doing so.) Thus, the mercy that Butch showed Marcellus was not in lieu of a right of vengeance. Marcellus had a right of vengeance on Butch, but didn't waive that right until Butch saved his life. Clearly Marcellus viewed Butch's action as an action that lifted his right of revenge and thus Marcellus wasn't merciful in lieu of revenge either. Lastly, consider Jules's act of mercy in the final scene of *Pulp Fiction*.

JULES: Normally both your asses would be dead as fuckin' fried chicken. But you happened to pull this shit while I'm in a transitional period and I don't wanna kill ya, I wanna help ya. But I can't give you this case cause it don't belong to me. Besides, I've been through too much shit over this case this morning to just hand it over to your dumb ass...Now, I want you to go in that bag and find my wallet.

PUMPKIN: Which one is it?

JULES: It's the one that says “Bad Motherfucker.” (Pumpkin finds the wallet with the words “bad motherfucker” embroidered on it.) That's it. That's my bad motherfucker. Open it up; take out the money. Count it. How much is there?

PUMPKIN: About fifteen hundred dollars.

JULES: Okay, put it in your pocket, it's yours. Now with the rest of those wallets and the register, that makes this a pretty successful little score.

VINCENT: Jules, you give that fucking nimrod fifteen hundred dollars, and I'll shoot him on general principle.

JULES: No, Yolanda, Yolanda, he ain't gonna do a goddamn motherfucking thing; Vince shut the fuck up!

YOLANDA: Shut up.

JULES: Come on Yolanda, stay with me baby. Now I ain't givin' it to him Vincent. I'm buyin' somethin' for my money. Wanna know what I'm buyin' Ringo?

PUMPKIN: What?

JULES: Your life. I'm givin' you that money so I don't hafta kill your ass.

Jules wasn't ignoring a right of vengeance; neither Ringo nor Yolanda had personally wronged him. He was stopping them from doing something that would require him to kill them: taking his case, killing anyone in the diner, continuing to their life of thievery, or leaving with his *bad motherfucker*. And notice that this is consistent with the commands of Ezekiel 25:17 which doesn't demand forgiveness but simply calls Jules to "shepherd the weak through the valley of darkness."

Thus, it seems that *Tarantino's view* is this: Mercy is a praiseworthy—and even desirable—thing. Perhaps it is even obligatory in certain circumstances if we take Ezekiel 25:17 seriously. But it does not trump the right of revenge; when an offender wrongs a victim, the victim's obligation to show mercy is lifted and revenge is morally justified.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps we can most clearly articulate *Tarantino's view* by delineating mercy. *Considerate mercy*—sparing others pain when possible (even if inconvenient)—is desirable and perhaps even obligatory. However *forgiving mercy*—where one forgives those who have wronged him/her—is not morally obligatory. Granted, someone who exercises *forgiving mercy* is nicer (more virtuous) than one who doesn't; but one who does not forgive is not doing anything morally wrong. So it seems that *Tarantino's view* is that *compassionate mercy* ought to be shown, but not in lieu of vengeance; *forgiving mercy* can be dispensed with.

Like Beatrix, it seems that *Tarantino view* lacks mercy, compassion and forgiveness but not rationality; the view is perfectly consistent. However, consistence, although required for truth, does not guarantee truth. So, one must still ask, is *Tarantino's*

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<sup>3</sup> Actually, Tarantino doesn't think all acts of revenge are morally justified. I will elaborate on this in the last section.

*view* correct about mercy and revenge? It certainly seems that the general point about mercy—that it is a good thing—seems right. But isn't vengeance something that most philosophers frown upon?

### **Tarantino and Asian Philosophy<sup>4</sup>**

That bitch ain't gittin' no Bushido points for killin' a white trash piece  
of shit like me with a samurai sword.

-- Bud, *Kill Bill* [original script]

Some might try to find justification for *Tarantino's view* in Asian Philosophy. After all, Bushido—the warrior code of ethics derived from Asian philosophies like Buddhism, Zen, Confucianism, and Shintoism that emphasizes “loyalty, self sacrifice, justice, sense of shame, refined manners, purity, modesty, frugality, martial spirit, honor and affection”<sup>5</sup>—does suggest that acts of vengeance are justified in many circumstances. However, although some acts of vengeance that occur in Tarantino's films—like O-ren's killing of Boss Matsumoto—might be justified under the Bushido moral code, most of them would not be.

The great and lasting essence of bushido, centers—not upon combat, the techniques of war, the killing of men or the concerns of self, but rather—upon the total negation of all passion and desire. For the warrior to truly be a warrior, she must enter into a calm, empty place; she must give herself up and die. Only in this way can she achieve her end and vanquish her enemy. Bushido, in its essence, exists in a master/servant dynamic. Samurai in feudal Japan were first and foremost retainers,

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<sup>4</sup> For this section, a great many of my thanks go to my good and long time friend, Caleb Holt. Caleb is a third degree black belt in Kaishu Ki Kempo Karate, a Renshi (Assistant Instructor) in the discipline, and inspired and wrote much of this section.

<sup>5</sup> Steel, Nippon. *Nippon: The Land and Its People*. Japan: Nippon Steel Human Resources Development Co., Ltd. 1988 P. 329

warriors attached to a daimyo or regional lord. It was their duty to live and die for their lords. Samurai who failed in their capacities were either cast aside to become ronin ('wave men') or ordered to commit seppuku (ritual suicide). Failure in feudal Japan was considered a dishonor. Loss of any kind, particularly in battle was equally dishonorable. A samurai's failure reflected negatively upon not only himself but equally upon his lord distributing shame on a grander scale.<sup>6</sup>

The clearest evidence that Bushido cannot be used to justify "Tarantinian" acts of vengeance can be found in *Kill Bill*. Beatrix—given her training—is supposed to operate under the Bushido moral code. However, there is no room in Bushido for Beatrix's claim of revenge on Bill or any of the D.iV.A.S. She broke from Bushido the moment she broke from Bill. Bill is her lord; she is his samurai. He gives her training, protection, payment, and affection, all components required from a daimyo to his retainers. She in return is to give him loyalty, fidelity, and her life. And not only is Beatrix's quest for revenge unjustified, but because of her abandonment, Bill, as far as bushido is concerned, is justified in trying to end her life. Truth be told, when Beatrix woke up from her coma, if she followed the Bushido code—instead of vowing revenge on all who wronged her—she would have committed ritual suicide for failing to protect her friends and fiancé in the El Paso wedding chapel. All in all, Bushido would view Beatrix's actions as immoral. Her motives are self-centered and she is filled with passion, rage, and a great homicidal thirst; these are all abominations in bushido. This is also why Bill's action are not justified

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<sup>6</sup> For more on Bushido see: Newman, John. *Bushido: The Way of the Warrior* New York, New York: Gallery Books 1989; Perrin, Noel *Giving Up the Gun: Japan's Reversion to the Sword, 1543-1879* Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc. 1979; Nitobe, Inazo *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*. Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Co., Inc. 1969; Schirokauer, Conrad. *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilizations* Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1989; Varley, H. Paul *Samurai*. New York, New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc. 1970.

according to Bushido: he was only justified—according to Bushido—in killing Beatrix...not everyone in the wedding chapel!

Interestingly enough, the only “Bushido exemplar” is Hattori Hanzo who has—since his student Bill rejected the Bushido code—vowed to never again create an object which kills people, but abandons that vow when he learns that Beatrix intends to assassinate Bill. His student has gone evil and Hanzo has a moral responsibility to fix the problem. When the answer comes in the form of the yellow haired warrior, Hattori Hanzo is justified—according to Bushido—in breaking his vow to ensure that this wrong is righted. But this is the only example of “Tarantinian” revenge that is justified by Bushido. So I think it fairly clear that that Bushido could not be used to defend *Tarantino’s view*.

Of course, one could try to go outside Bushido in the Eastern traditions—to Buddhism and Hinduism—to find justification for Tarantino’s view. But I don’t think one will have much luck. Both religions subscribe to Karma and the notion that everyone will ultimately get what they deserve. Revenge is thus unnecessary, and enacting revenge may make you deserving of something you don’t want. So I think it also fair to conclude that Asian Philosophy can’t be used to defend *Tarantino’s view*.

### **Western Philosophy and Tarantino**

JULES: Oh man, I will never forgive your ass for this shit; this is some fucked up repugnant shit.

VINCE: Jules, did you ever hear the philosophy that once a man admits that he is wrong, that he's immediately forgiven for all wrong-doings; have you ever heard that?

JULES: Get the fuck out my face with that shit! The motherfucker said that shit never had to pick up itty-bitty pieces of skull on account of your dumb ass.

--Vincent Vega and Jules Winfield, *Pulp Fiction*

The most notable western moral code that speaks against revenge is the Christian one. Jesus told us to love our enemies, pray for those who mistreat us, and turn the other cheek.<sup>7</sup> The Apostle Paul even specifically tells us not to seek revenge.<sup>8</sup> Thus it seems fairly clear that one can't be a Christian and seek vengeance. But Christianity doesn't corner the morality market—and I even doubt that all Christians would agree with my interpretation of the above passages—so certainly much more needs to be said.

In modern philosophy, it is commonly assumed that revenge is not morally justified. So, one might expect to find, in the classic philosophers, a commonly accepted *knock down argument* against the moral permissibility of revenge. However, this is not the case. Many classic philosophers consider whether “retribution” or “rehabilitation” should be the goal of government punishment, but most of them say nothing about the moral permissibility of personal revenge. They *do* agree that a government allowing citizens to personally seek revenge is ill advised because it would lead to social unrest (perhaps even chaos), but this doesn't tell us about revenge's morality; the fact that something should be illegal doesn't entail that it is immoral. A few have said a little *about* the moral permissibility of personal revenge—and at first glance it seems that they appose it—but when one takes a closer look, it becomes clear that they actually leave the question of revenge's moral justification open.

Hobbes (1588-1679), for instance, says that the natural law frowns upon vengeance.

The fift[h] precept of the Law of nature is: That we must forgive him who repents, and asketh pardon for what is past;... The sixth precept of the naturall Law is, [t]hat in revenge...and punishments we must have our eye not at the evill past, but the future good. That is: It is not

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:27-29.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 12:17-19

lawfull to inflict punishment for any other end, but that the offender may be corrected, or that others warned by his punishment may become better.<sup>9</sup>

Thus one is tempted to conclude that Hobbes doesn't think vengeance is morally justified. But such a conclusion would be hasty. Later Hobbes admits that if someone doesn't repent for his wrongs, nature doesn't demand forgiving mercy.

But Peace granted to him that repents not, that is, to him that retains an hostile mind...that..., seeks not Peace, but opportunity, is not properly Peace but feare, and therefore is not commanded by nature.<sup>10</sup>

And presumably, like Jules, he wouldn't let *admitting wrongdoing* qualify as repentance. And more importantly, since Hobbes didn't view the natural law as morally binding—it only describes what is prudent for one to do—whether or not vengeance is in accordance with the natural law is irrelevant to vengeance's morality.<sup>11</sup> Thus it seems that Hobbes leaves the question open.

John Locke (1632-1704) suggests that one should not seek vengeance on an abusive tyrant.

Must the people then always lay themselves open to the cruelty and rage of tyranny? Must they see their cities pillaged...their wives and children exposed to the tyrant's lust and fury...and all the miseries of want and oppression, and yet sit still? ... I answer: Self-defence is a part of the law of nature; nor can it be denied the community, even against the king himself: but to revenge themselves upon him, must by no means be allowed them; it being not agreeable to that law.<sup>12</sup>

So, at first glance, it seems that Locke would suggest that revenge is never justified; if it is not justified when a tyrant is subjecting you to "all the miseries of want an oppression,"

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<sup>9</sup> De Cive: Liberty. Chapter III-Of The Other Laws of Nature, p. 18

<sup>10</sup> De Cive, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Those that know Hobbes know that he suggests that the only moral obligation we have is to obey the state. Thus one is tempted to conclude that vengeance would be morally off limits, if the state condemned it. But *this* might not even be right! Hobbes, at least in one place, admits that one is not morally bound to follow the rule of the state if doing so requires one to sacrifice one's life or honor. And since many view vengeance as a defense of one's honor, it would seem that, according to Hobbes, vengeance could be justified even if the state forbid it. But it should be noted that Hobbes saying this is quite confusing, given other things that Hobbes says about the absolute authority of the state. See: Lloyd, Sharon A., "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2006 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2006/entries/hobbes-moral/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Locke, John. The Second Treatise of Civil Government. Chapter 19, paragraph 233.

then it would seem to never be. But, once we read further, we realize that such actions are not off limits because they are acts of revenge, but because they inappropriately cross social barriers. Such actions...

...exceed the bounds of due reverence and respect. [Those wronged] may repulse the present attempt, but must not revenge past violences: for it is natural for us to defend life and limb, but that an inferior should punish a superior, is against nature.<sup>13</sup>

Locke is not condemning revenge but the punishment of superiors. (Like Bushido, Locke would condemn the Bride's revenge on Bill.) But he leaves open the question of punishing—taking revenge upon—your equals.

Nietzsche (1844-1900) argued that resentment (clearly an emotion that fuels revenge) tends to poison one from within. Thus one might think that Nietzsche would argue that revenge is never morally justified. However, such a conclusion is hasty. As Murphy<sup>14</sup> points out, Nietzsche is suggesting that resentment is not in your self interest because—given the laws of society—it is usually repressed and thus acts as a poison. Given that fact, it seems unjustified to conclude that Nietzsche condemned *expressed resentment* in the form of revenge; if you can get away with it—like O-Ren and Beatrix—expressed resentment would not poison. So, it seems, Nietzsche too leaves open the question of revenge's moral justification.

The only classic philosopher I know of that explicitly speaks against revenge is Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.) who suggested desires for vengeance and harming one's enemies are immoral. But he actually never presents a satisfactory argument to this effect; he merely relies on his "intuition" that "true moral goodness is incapable of doing

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<sup>13</sup> Locke, Chapter 19, paragraph 233.

<sup>14</sup> Murphy, Feffrie. "Getting Even: The Role of the Victim." In Joel Feinberg and Jules Coleman's Philosophy of Law, Sixth Edition. Wadsworth, Belmont, CA. 2000. (p. 791)



intentional injury to others...”<sup>15</sup> So it seems, if we are *to show* that revenge is not morally justified, we need to go beyond the classic philosophers and seek out contemporary arguments.

Some might argue against the moral justification of revenge by pointing out that “two wrongs don’t make a right.” However, those who offer up this “saying” as an argument against the moral justification of revenge would simply be begging the question—that is, they would simply be assuming the truth of what they are trying to prove. To assume that vengeance is “answering wrong with wrong” is to assume, without argument, that vengeance is wrong. If vengeance is morally permissible, then a wrong followed by vengeance is not a case of “two wrongs” but a case of “a wrong and a right.” Thus, a separate argument against revenge needs to be put forth.

To do so, some might argue that we are not morally qualified to enact revenge—only God knows the intent of the wrongdoer and only he is without sin and thus morally worthy of “casting the first stone.”<sup>16</sup> But that perfect knowledge and moral character is required to qualify one to enact revenge is, at the least, unclear.<sup>17</sup> It seems that we can be “sure enough” about an offender’s intentions and as long as we haven’t done something just as bad as the offender, we are not being hypocritical by punishing them. (Even though O-ren was not completely without sin, the fact that she had never killed anyone’s parents in cold blood entails that she is not a hypocrite for punishing Boss Matsumoto.) So this argument seems wanting.

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> Romans 12:19 and Deut. 32:35.

<sup>17</sup> See Murphy (2000), p. 792-3.

Some argue against revenge by suggesting that it *does no good*. After all—even though O-Ren wasn't a hypocrite—O-ren killing Boss Matsumoto didn't bring her parents back. But—although it is true that seeking revenge doesn't “undo” the offense—it is far from clear that revenge accomplishes “no good” at all. The offender does get what s/he is due (thus justice is accomplished) and the victim gets satisfaction and perhaps even peace of mind. Of course, if a desire for revenge possess a person it might harm them more than it benefits (and if that is the case, revenge is unadvisable), but it is hardly obvious that revenge *does no good at all*.

If universal pacifism—the position that ALL actions of violence are wrong—is true, then clearly vengeance would be morally unjustified. But many don't find universal pacifism plausible. It entails that even actions of self defense—both personal and social—are morally unjustified; and this means Alabama should not have defended herself against the hit man Virgil (TR) and that we should not have opposed Hilter with force. Most find this implausible and in the same way that we can offer of up an argument for self defense, it seems that we can offer up an argument for revenge: It seems perfectly clear that *we have a moral obligation to NOT harm people who have not wronged us*. However, what could this possibly mean but that, when one does wrong us, the obligation to not harm them has been lifted? Why even bother to point out that we have an obligation to not harm others who don't wrong us, if we still have such an obligation even after they harm us? Wouldn't we then just have an obligation to not harm in any circumstance? And isn't that just pacifism? Thus it seems that, if one wrongs us, we are morally permitted to seek revenge; the obligation to *not harm* has been lifted.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mackie, although he is talking about retribution not revenge, acknowledges that this argument seems to have some force. However, he adds that it seems that most still won't think that punishment is permissible,

Given that we have found no convincing argument against it, and have seen a convincing argument for it, it seems that revenge can be justified.

### **Are We Going Too Far?**

I can tell you with no ego, this is my finest sword. If on your journey,  
you should encounter God, God will be cut.

--Hattori Hanzo, *Kill Bill Vol 1*.

So, it seems, western philosophy makes room for Tarantinian revenge. But perhaps Tarantino goes too far. After all, with revenge, there is no limit to the punishment's severity and its severity is determined by the avenger alone; this entails that the punishment could end up being much worse than the offender's original crime. For instance, In *Pulp Fiction*, Lance tells Vince that punishment for keying someone's car should be death. "No trial, no jury, straight to execution." In *Jackie Brown*, Louis kills Melanie in the parking lot of the Del Amo Mall because she wouldn't stop bugging him. (The final straw is her making fun of him for forgetting where he parked.) And such actions seem wrong.

I tend to agree, and would suggest that revenge that "oversteps its bounds" in this way is not morally justified. So I offer my defense of revenge with this caveat: *not all acts* of revenge are morally justified but revenge *can be* morally justified if the inflicted punishment reflects the original crime—in other words, if the punishment is "due." But I think that Tarantino's films offer this caveat as well. I don't think that the above examples are portrayed as praiseworthy. Notice also that, in *Pulp Fiction*, when it is suspected that Marcellus Wallace dropped Antwan Rockamore (a.k.a. Tony Rocky

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unless it is combined with an obligation to punish; but I find that unpersuasive and he says nothing more on the issue. See, "Mackie, J. L., "Retributivism: A Test Case for Ethical Theory." In Feinberg and Coleman (2000).

Horror) down four stories into a greenhouse for giving his wife a foot massage—even though Vince suggests that Tony was “playing with matches” and should have expected to get burned (PF)—both Jules and Vince acknowledge that he went too far.

JUELS: Now look, just ‘cause I wouldn't give no man a foot massage, don't make it right for Marsellus to throw Antwan off a building into a glass-motherfuckin-house, fuckin' up the way the nigger talks. That shit ain't right. Motherfucker do that shit to me, he better paralyze my ass ‘cause I kill the motherfucker, you know what I'm saying?

VINCE: I ain't sayin it's right. But you sayin' a foot massage don't mean nothing, and I'm saying it does.

But, even though “un-due punishment” is frowned upon, one might complain that *Tarantino's view* seems to suggest that—under certain circumstances—the killing of innocents is morally justified. After all, Tarantino suggests through the voice of Hatori Honzo:

“When engaged in combat, the vanquishing of thine enemy can be the warrior's only concern. This is the first and cardinal rule of combat. Suppress all human emotion and compassion. Kill whoever stands in thy way, even if that be Lord God, or Buddha himself.” (KBV1)

This quote is often attributed to Rinzai, “a ninth-century Chinese monk who developed a school of Buddhism that focused on ‘sudden enlightenment’”<sup>19</sup> and would seem to suggest the killing of innocents is justified if innocents stand in the way of due punishment. But I don't think that *Tarantino's view* really takes things that far (nor does the quote entail that one should). Beatrix does take this advice to heart when she fights the Crazy 88's, but this is only because the Crazy 88's are not innocent; they are sworn protectors of O-Ren. If they had simply refused to protect O-Ren she would have not touched them. (In fact, in the movie she offers this way out to Go Go, and in the original script she makes the same offer to Mr. Barrell—O'Ren's #2 who doesn't appear in the film—and he takes it!) But the most convincing evidence that Tarantino's films don't

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<sup>19</sup> [www.beliefnet.com/story/163/story\\_16301\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/163/story_16301_1.html)

promote the killing of innocents in the name of vengeance is seen in the scene that precedes the above quote where Beatrix kills Vernita Green.

VIRNITA: You have every right to wanna get even --

BEATRIX: -- But that's where you're wrong, Vernita. I don't want to get even. To get even, even Steven[,] I would have to kill you, go into Nikki's room, kill her, then wait for your old man, Dr. Bell, to come home and kill him. That would make us even. No, my unborn daughter will just hafta be satisfied with your death at her mother's hands. [original script]

Since “due” punishment would entail the killing of innocents, Beatrix refuses it. Beatrix knows that this is, morally, too far and settles for only killing Vernita.

So it seems that there is room for *Tarantino's view*; it is not only logically coherent, but I think it is defensible. As long as the punishment administered fits the crime and doesn't kill innocents, revenge is morally permitted. Some may be appalled that I am defending such a view but to them I say three things: (1) I am not saying that, if wronged, seeking revenge is morally obligatory; only that it is morally permissible to do so. (We can't shake a morally disapproving finger at O-Ren for avenging her parent's death.) (2) I am not saying that one should seek revenge if wronged. If you can't be sure that your act of vengeance is morally justified—that your desired punishment fits the crime of a guilty personal offender—you ought not seek revenge; and such things are hard to be sure of. (Besides, “loving your enemy” seems to have the moral high ground and seeking revenge is illegal. Although revenge is permissible, the non-avenger is more virtuous.) (3) This view, I think, is shared by the majority. As Murphy points out, this is why people enjoy revenge movies like Tarantino's and applaud when the victim finally kills the villain in the end.<sup>20</sup> Of course, the majority sharing the view doesn't make it right; but I think it does entail that one can't be appalled at its defense.

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<sup>20</sup> Murphy, 2000. (p. 788-789)