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Comments on Jon Elster's
"Norms of Revenge"

I want to announce at the outset that these comments are friendly ones. There is not a trace of revenge in them -- even though Jon Elster has managed to unsettle me thoroughly by reviving a topic that I studied in secret some years ago and left for dead. If I were the sort of Albanian he describes,¹ I suppose that the shock he has delivered to my system would be an affront, and we would all be in for an afternoon of gunshots and under-the-left-leg insults. Alas, I'm not that sort of Albanian but only a Swedish-German Protestant from Nebraska, so twisted by guilt and self-doubt that I'm actually delighted rather than affronted. So my comments will express that delight, and my sympathy with Elster's line of argument, by proposing a few suggestions for friendly amendments to his views.

Like Elster, I think it is necessary to begin a discussion of revenge with some careful distinctions, and he has indicated some important ones: for example, the distinction between, on the one hand, the passions for revenge, which are such a powerful and persistent factor in human affairs, and on the other hand the ubiquitous, elaborate, but highly culture-specific social norms that regulate and institutionalize vengeful conduct. Both the passions and the norms, moreover, are distinguishable from the interests people might have in revenge -- or what we may characterize more broadly as the factors that can generate either explanations or justifications for the passions and norms of revenge. Let me begin my comments on Elster's paper with a few remarks about those distinctions.

I. The Concept of Revenge

First, with respect to the concept of revenge, it seems important to separate what might be called revenge proper from some closely related things, such as retaliation, retribution, the feud, the vendetta, and the like. All of them appear to have at least three things in common. (1) All of them begin with a putative victim -- a person believed to have suffered harm, usually at the hands of an identifiable offender or offenders. (2) All of them involve responding in kind to that injury -- inflicting suffering on others in response to the harm done to the victim. (3) And all of them involve a significant element of

purely backward-looking motivation -- a motive generated by an awareness of the injury to the victim alone, rather than by an awareness of opportunities to recoup losses, prevent future evils, or gain future advantages. The term revenge may be used very loosely to cover anything that has those three characteristics. Moreover, it is often extended to cover cases in which one or more of those characteristics is only marginally or metaphorically present -- as when we speak of the victim of a disease (or an unremembered psychological trauma, or a false belief) taking revenge by striking out blindly against the world at large, or against an innocent. Think of Othello, or Quasimoto.

So revenge is a protean concept, and my first suggestion is simply that, if we are going to make progress toward either an explanation or justification of either the passions or the norms of revenge, we are likely to do better if we work with the specific forms of revenge separately, rather than with the undifferentiated concept. This is so because the motives and objects and criteria of success for the different forms of revenge hook into standard explanatory and justificatory strategies in such different ways. Tit-for-tat retaliation, for example, fits snugly into both rational choice theory and evolutionary biological accounts of cooperative behavior.² But Elster is surely right to conclude that revenge in general doesn't fit very well in either place. The feud, for example, or the Ayatollah's norms of revenge, are hard to accommodate in such accounts. I suggest that this is so because revenge in general is not usefully regarded as one phenomenon, but rather as a family of related phenomena -- related by various overlapping or metaphorical versions of the three characteristics mentioned above, but otherwise highly distinct from one another. Thus we cannot get an essentialist definition of revenge in general -- one that captures the essence of a feud as well as the glee of a mob at a public execution, a crime of passionate revenge as well as the remorseless, relentless vendetta of Michael Kohlhaus,³ and the cheerful, mean-spirited, tit-for-tat vengeance of office politics as well as the wars waged to avenge an affront to the faith, or to the throne, or to the flag.

So my first friendly suggestion, as I say, is to differentiate and consider separately the various forms of revenge -- both their passions and their norms.

II. Pure Personal Revenge

My second suggestion is that we focus first on what I will call personal revenge (which, it seems to me, has some claim to being called revenge proper, or revenge in the strict sense, all others being derivative or watered down versions of it). And further, I suggest that we begin by considering an

idealized or "pure" notion of personal revenge. If we can see how we might be able to explain or justify those passions and norms, we may be in a better position to give an account of more muted passions and more complex norms.

Pure personal revenge, as I will use the term, is pure in the sense that it has a single, simple motive: namely, satisfaction of the desires (the outrage) roused by the sense of injustice, where this is wholly free of strategic considerations, free of concerns about restitution or compensation, free of the desire to prevent future evils or gain future advantages. It is personal revenge in the sense that it is carried out by the very person who was victimized, upon the very person who caused the offense. And it is personal in the sense that its criterion of success is entirely personal or subjective: namely, the satisfaction of the victim's vengeful desires.

The model I have in mind here is the sort of classic Hollywood revenge scenario, in which a blameless person (almost always a man) is gradually, and with agonizing inevitability, first cornered, then taunted and abused, and finally tortured by a gang of evil thugs. He tries to ignore them and is beaten; tries to be conciliatory and is humiliated; tries to escape the whole situation and is repeatedly recaptured. Each step in the sequence is outrageously unjust; the victim repeatedly refuses (or is unable) to retaliate, and thus falls victim to even greater injustice. Finally, driven wild by his tormentors, and heedless of anyone's safety or welfare, he erupts in an orgy of violence which ends only when he himself is satisfied -- only with catharsis.

Now I assume we can agree that this revenge scenario has enormous popular appeal, in the sense that it is very easy for a skilled narrator to tell stories of this sort that will produce, in nearly any audience, an intense experience of vicarious outrage and consequent cathartic satisfaction. That is, of course, an empirical claim that only storytellers and historians and anthropologists can properly assess. But my impression is that they would confirm it, with caveats about significant cultural differences in what sorts of events can arouse outrage in an audience.

What interests me about this scenario is the possibility that it distills and represents a very wide-spread if not universal human response to injustice, and that we may be able to make some progress with the explanation and justification of norms about revenge by first addressing the issue of what is usually called the "sense of justice" and injustice.

The idea is this: Suppose that human beings generally have a sharp sense of in justice as well as a

sense of justice. And suppose the sense of in justice includes the disposition to be outraged and then satisfied by the revenge scenario just outlined. That would mean that the sense of injustice would include a disposition toward pure personal revenge. And if that were true, then the problem of explaining the passions that drive such revenge would be roughly the problem of explaining the emergence, persistence, and universality of (that part of) the sense of injustice. That seems to me to be a promising way to pose the problem. Alan Gibbard has explored the possibility of getting an evolutionary explanation of the sense of justice; ⁴ perhaps a similar line can be developed for the sense of in justice, and in particular, for a disposition toward pure personal revenge.

Here is an opening for such an explanation: There is some evidence from social psychology which suggests that prompt retaliation does not typically induce counter-outrage or counterattack, and thus a cycle of revenge. What appears to happen is that an aggressor who is punished immediately (by the victim?) tends to accept the punishment as just, or at least understandable and acceptable, while one whose punishment is delayed tends to develop (during the delay) the belief that the initial aggression was justified. Consequently, an aggressor whose punishment is delayed tends to regard it, when it finally comes, as an in justice. He thus comes to see himself as victimized by the retaliation, and is disposed to counterattack. ⁵ Now on the assumption that we can explain the evolution of some sort of tit-for-tat retaliative strategy (a la Hamilton and Axelrod), ⁶ we may then be able to go further and explain the evolution of a disposition toward pure personal revenge as a conflict-reducing element of character. That is, we can do this if we can show that a universal disposition toward pure personal revenge would tend to prompt retaliation that was both satisfying to the victim of injustice and acceptable to the aggressor. To reiterate: the overall explanatory strategy would be to show first how a sense of justice is adaptive; then to show how that would be reflected in a sense of in justice (roughly, a general, passionate revolt against unfairness); and then finally to show how a disposition toward pure personal revenge, as a part of the sense of injustice, would increase reproductive fitness by reducing conflict.

Normative theories of reciprocity, justice, and rational choice may go further; they may give reasons for choosing to develop such a disposition, and in that sense may justify it.

III. Beyond the Purely Personal

My third suggestion is a sketch of how the results concerning the passional elements of pure personal revenge might be extended. Progress from this point would branch in two directions. One branch would

be generated by various transformations of the passionate element of pure personal revenge. For example, by considering various less-than-pure revenge motives, or less-than-personal acts of revenge. Can we use the notion of a sense of injustice to explain or justify the passionate elements of revenge-by-proxy -- that is, scenarios in which people other than the victim retaliate (or need satisfaction), or people other than the offenders are punished? Can we get an explanation or justification of complex motives for revenge -- desires for satisfaction mixed with strategic motives and utilitarian considerations, perhaps? This branch sticks with the passionate element but moves away from pure and personal passions to complex and impersonal ones.

The other branch of development parallels the first and is generated by examining the social norms that might govern each sort of revenge (as defined by its passionate elements), beginning with the purely personal form. Here again, it seems to me, the initial focus on pure personal revenge is useful.

Suppose, as in the case of traffic rules, we can explain or justify the existence of some form of a sense of injustice and some form of a disposition toward pure personal revenge; not any one form of each, but rather the need to have one form of each. Then the task of explaining or justifying a set of norms to govern a given form of pure personal revenge might be divided into two parts: The first would be the task of explaining or justifying the existence of passion-governing norms of any sort whatever. This is, I suppose, analogous to the problem of explaining or justifying the existence of the minimal state. And the second part would be the task of explaining or justifying the details of the particular set of norms at issue. Albanian or Icelandic or Sicilian ones, for example.

Put that way, it seems reasonable to expect a fairly short, convincing explanation and justification of social control of the passions generated by the sense of injustice. For one thing, pure personal revenge has no principle of proportionality -- or rather, is scaled simply to what the victim needs in order to be satisfied. And the existence of revenge-monsters like Michael Kohlhaus is better documented than the existence of other sorts of utility monsters. Further, there are obvious timing, fittingness, and adjudication problems that will arise. And behind all of this lies the specter of endless cycles of revenge that Aeschylus represented so powerfully in the Orestia. His solution, and ours as well, has been to take a good deal of the administration of justice out of the hands of the injured parties and put it into the hands of an impartial system of justice. So we can expect this part of the explanation to be fairly short and convincing -- or at any rate familiar.

But we would not expect (or at least I would not expect) to get either a short or a convincing or a familiar account of any particular set of norms -- early twentieth century Albanian ones, for example, or contemporary American ones. The origination of any particular set of norms is likely to require an explanation couched more in terms of local accident and circumstance than in terms of universal norm-making characteristics; and the persistence of any particular set of norms is likely to require an explanation couched more in terms of the effects of inertia and centripetal social forces on the accidental features of local norms than couched in terms of universals.

Moving down this branch, then, we would consider in turn the norms associated with each form of the passion for revenge. And I would intuitively expect similar results: convincing proofs or refutations on the general question of whether norms are needed to control those passions; little or no guidance on whether any given set of norms is the "correct" one.

IV. Autonomous norms

This brings me to a fourth suggestion; a much more tentative one. Elster is concerned at one point in his paper with the difference between accounts of social norms built up out of theories about external relations and interaction between individuals, on the one hand, and those built up out of accounts of the sort of internal relations and organic interactions characteristic of a community or a society. Hence his remarks about Smith and Durkheim, individual and social entities, homo economicus and homo sociologus.

I'm not sure I share Elster's optimism about individualistic explanations and justifications of concrete social norms in their full particularity. Such accounts, whether economic or biological or psychological or moral, seem to me to be doomed to be merely schematic: accounts of how something along certain lines would arise, or should arise, but indeterminate with respect to why any given concrete instance would or should arise. Perhaps I am actually misinterpreting Elster here, and expressing my own skepticism. But I do have it, whether Elster does or not; it is not an uncommon skepticism; and the line of thought I've been pursuing suggests a way of moving beyond it without abandoning metaphysical individualism or getting involved in chicken-and-egg disputes with holistic theorists.

My suggestion is that we approach this problem by thinking about the way in which social norms and institutions become autonomous -- become separated from the factors that produce them and are sustained, perpetuated and changed as much by their own internal structures and forces as by the ones

that generated them, or by external events.

To put it baldly: if concrete social systems get started in ways that can be explained with individualist methods, but once started, grow away from their sources (taking their members with them) according to increasingly autonomous principles, then it is clear why we will not be able to build up, from an account of the momentary interactions of individuals alone, either an explanation or a justification of any set of norms about revenge than have a lengthy history. For they will have spun off from their points of origin and developed in ways that must be explained (in part) by their accidental and autonomous dynamics.

And the behavior of the people who live in terms of those norms will have to be understood as much in terms of those autonomous dynamics as in terms of universal principles. I think that is a restatement of some remarks Elster makes in section II of his paper, but I raise the issue for clarification.

V. Norms about revenge

A fifth and final point, and another friendly suggestion, which is linked to the line of thought just sketched, is that when we move from a discussion of the passionate part of the subject to its norms, that we take care to consider norms against revenge -- norms forbidding us to express or even possess those passions -- as well as norms requiring revenge. (Perhaps we should speak of norms about revenge rather than norms of revenge.)

The importance of this wider question is palpable when the focus of discussion is pure personal revenge, since it is so obvious in that case that we need to explain and justify not only the norms that whip the mild-mannered or cowardly into vengeful action but also the norms that chill hot tempers and promote guilt for vengeful acts and vengeful feelings.

This is already implicitly granted throughout Elster's paper. But many of the examples in his paper, particularly the ones that motivate his suggestions about the connection between revenge and the psychology of traditionally male social roles and norms about honor, lead me to add a different sort of example to the discussion -- one described in painful detail in a 1985 book called The Victim's Song, by Alice R. Kaminsky.

That book is a sustained act of revenge, written in hatred (as the author says repeatedly), for the senseless murder of her son in a New York subway station. It is an act of pure personal revenge, an attempt to damage the psyches and reputations of everyone implicated in the gruesome event and the

unsatisfying legal case that followed: the teenage murderers, the witnesses, the police, the hospital and morgue, the lawyers and judges, the politicians, Norman Mailer (for his glorification of Gary Gilmore in The Executioner's Song), and indeed the whole city of New York -- the "rotten apple" as she puts it -- and especially its intelligentsia. She does this by telling the story in the way that is most designed to shame and injure the specific people involved, naming names, citing chapter and verse, reprinting damning bits of dialogue or court transcript. Here are some typical passages, pieced together almost at random from the first 74 pages (of 268):

Norman Mailer was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for writing a 1000-page "true to life" novel about a murderer, Gary Gilmore. He called it The Executioner's Song , and like other writers who have become rich and will become rich by concentrating on those who kill, Mailer paid little attention to the victims of Gilmore's crimes. I dedicate this book to all the suffering human beings whose lives have been destroyed by animals like Gary Gilmore. This is The Victim's Song .

And it is a song that is sung in hatred, not in love or forgiveness....

I have written [it] precisely because I want to inundate the reader with anger.

I hate the murderers of my son.

Hatred, hatred, hatred -- that is what consumes me, what makes it possible to live through each day. Like Yeats, "I study hatred with great diligence / for that's a passion in my own control" ...

And I wait to see Urena and Deltejo [the murderers] again. If there is such a thing as killing someone with hatred, they should both be dead by now.

And you, my reader, are you tired by my honesty? Would you rather be reading one of those false, hypocritical, comforting books that give you spiritual uplift, that tell you that despite what happens, like Job you should trust in God...? I despise such cliches. I despise their inherent dishonesty.... All the well-meaning inanities offered by all the well-meaning spiritualists are lies. The people who write books about how they have learned to live with tragedy say what they are supposed to say, not what they truly feel. No one who has lost someone he truly loves through murder can ever be comforted.

Eric Walbridge of Essex Junction, Vermont, made the following comment concerning the two

youths who raped and murdered his twelve-year-old daughter: "I've no hate for them. They're sick. I've prayed for them." And the man whose wife and four children were murdered cried at the funeral: "I forgive the murderer seven times over." These people are incomprehensible to me. Forgiveness under these conditions seems to be an obscenity.

This is, as you might guess, a tiresome and exasperating book. An act of pure personal revenge. What interests me about it, however, is the nature of that very dismissive reaction to it, and the fact that Kaminsky had to write it because our social norms about revenge systematically denied her any other way to satisfy her outrage. She was not allowed to show emotion in the courtroom; she was sent to psychiatrist after psychiatrist when her rage would not subside; and she was confronted daily by a spectacle she had never before understood: the way in which social conventions (reflected brutally in press accounts) treat desires for revenge as symptoms of a personality disorder.

Kaminsky's protest -- her indictment of a system of social norms that effectively condemns pure personal revenge in life while encouraging us to wallow in it vicariously in art -- is surely worth attention. In particular, in the context of this discussion, it should be a reminder that any adequate explanation or justification of norms of revenge should also be capable of accounting for equally powerful and pervasive norms against revenge. And the subtlety that such a double-sided task introduces should be salutary.

FOOTNOTES

1:

Following Margaret Hansluck, ...

2:

See Robert Axelrod, The Evolution of Cooperation (New York: Basic Books, 1984?).

3:

Heinrich von Kleist, Michael Kohlhaus [1808], in The German Classics, volume 4 (New York, AMS Press, 1969). According to Susan Jacoby, Wild Justice (), the 16th century man whose story was the basis for this novella was named Hans Kohlhaus. Jacoby points out that E.L. Doctorow's character named Coalhouse Walker, in Ragtime, is meant to tie into the Kohlhaus story.

4:

cite Minnesota studies paper.

5:

cites from revenge folders

6:

cite the paper, not A.'s book