

## Vengeance and Justice

Did America ever have a handle on the difference between vengeance and justice? It seems like every major crime provokes questions from an anxious media to the victims or the kin of the victims about what punishment is appropriate. The media asks the least-qualified and people listen.

Many think that the victims are the most qualified to mete out punishment, and they are, if the goal is vengeance. Vengeance is a visceral urge; it forces the perpetrator of crime to suffer the same indignity as the victim. Those who have suffered certainly know the pain most intimately, and are best suited to administer a like dose. Administering that dose does level aggressor and sufferer. Sadly, it levels them as animals.

Vengeance is intrinsic to all animals. The instinct is buried in our reptile brain, although humans have improved on it. While any common snake will instinctively retaliate when attacked, it takes human intellect to spawn the Count of Monte Cristo. But even Dumas's perfect Angel of Vengeance eventually realizes that men are not vipers, and that vengeance has its limits. Would that all of us were so wise.

Revenge also photographs better. It's no accident that action movies are almost exclusively based on retaliation rather than reflection. Retaliation grips one emotionally. Few people make an oath of deliberation. It has always been so; *The Count of Monte Cristo* is not a recent novel as societal trends go. Emotional reactions will always be easier to follow.

Justice focuses on righteousness, which requires deliberation. A just punishment does not even the score between antagonists, but balances the scales between transgressor and society. Balancing is a harder feat than simply matching pain. Justice cannot afford to demonize one who commits an atrocity without first examining how far any person is from committing that atrocity. Justice cannot recoil from a monstrous act with horror, it must dissect the creature to understand its workings. A just punishment is the result of applying reason and intellect to compassion and outrage. Controlling those emotions with reason is impossible for animals. Because humans can, they must.

The intellectual issue is simply this: is perpetrating evil, even on an evil person, evil? It is not an easy question to resolve, but I think that premeditated evil is evil, regardless of the recipient. Electrocuting a murderer because it hurts more equates morally to electrocuting a terminal patient. Needlessly harming a human being lessens those who do it.

I'm not going to pretend that evil does not lurk inside me. If someone gratuitously hurt one of my friends or family, my first urge would be the same as Edmund Dante's - a repayment in kind that would make Satan blanch. I can only hope that I will be able to control the viper inside. After all, I've read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, I should know better.