Revenge Is Bad  
Affirmative Case by Travis Herche



This case argues that revenge is bad, and rehabilitation protects us from it.

There are many affirmative cases this year that toss the word revenge around, perhaps with an over-aggressive definition of retribution. Rarely is there any substance behind it. This case provides the substance.

To sell this case, you must discipline yourself carefully to avoid getting pulled into any impacts other than revenge. This case isn’t about recidivism rates or crime prevention or comparing countries; it’s about exploring and then applying an abstract philosophical principle. If you get pulled off your value and play the negative’s game, you’re in hot water. As long as you can get the judge to understand it and stay on board with it through the round, you win.

Have a solid definition of retribution on standby for the 1AR in case your opponent tries to wage a definition war.

Revenge Is Bad

Bryan Robinson wrote in ABC News 2016:

“Bud Welch fought his rage and desire for retribution when his daughter Julie was killed along with 167 other people in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Welch had opposed the death penalty before his daughter was killed, but he reversed his stance as he tried to cope with his loss in the weeks following the bombing. "People used to tell me, particularly when Julie hit her teenage years, that 'Bud, you'd change your mind [about the death penalty] if your daughter was murdered,' " Welch said. "After the bombing, I was so full of revenge and retribution, I didn't even want a trial for [Oklahoma City bombers] McVeigh and [Terry] Nichols. I thought the federal government and prosecutors were useless and I just wanted them fried." Welch, who owned a service station in Oklahoma City at the time, said he was so grief-stricken and had such a hard time dealing with his loss that he would go home and drink to try to get himself to fall asleep. His drinking gradually increased.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Bud was caught in a spiral of hate. The more he fixated on the people who wronged him, the more power they had over him. His path to healing would have been easier had he been, “Resolved: Rehabilitation ought to be valued above retribution in criminal justice systems.”

# Anti-Value: Revenge

An anti-value is just like a normal value turned upside down. That means the more we avoid it, the better off we are.

Revenge is operationally defined as: “The act of inflicting harm as a proportional response to significant unjust injury.”

Here’s why this is the best way to measure the resolution:

## Value Link 1: Unethical

There are a narrow range of scenarios where inflicting harm on others is justified. Think about shooting someone in self defense or harming an enemy soldier in a just war. All of these scenarios have something in common: the harm is used to prevent something even worse.

Revenge doesn’t do that. It comes after a wrong has been done, when it’s too late to stop it. Revenge is harm inflicted for its own sake – harm to make us feel good, not harm to prevent greater harm.

Here’s a test that proves that inflicting harm to make ourselves feel good is unethical.

## Example: Naughty Puppy Test

Suppose you adopt a little black lab puppy at a homeless shelter. You bring her home, give her food and water, name her Sadie, and go to bed. When you wake up the next morning, you discover that Sadie got into the kitchen cupboards. She made a big mess and smashed several dishes.

You’re furious. So you put Sadie in a tiny cage and burn her with matches. Every time you hear her whimper in pain, you feel a grim satisfaction. You’re getting revenge for all those broken dishes.

Hopefully you’re horrified by this story. Torturing a puppy is obviously wrong. But it’s not any less wrong to inflict pain on a human being just because it gives us grim satisfaction. Feeding our base urges is something to control – not something to justify acting cruelly.

## Value Link 2: Harms Victims

We are all born with certain appetites. They whisper about the pleasures of ill-gotten wealth; of drugs; of promiscuity. If we indulge these appetites, they will destroy us.

Revenge is a particularly dangerous appetite because it feels so justified. In the moment of loss or grief or anger, we feel like we deserve revenge. But revenge only causes more pain – both to the original wrongdoer, and to those weak enough to give in to their anger.

Albert Schwietzer once said:

“Revenge... is like a rolling stone, which, when a man hath forced up a hill, will return upon him with a greater violence, and break those bones whose sinews gave it motion.”[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let’s be clear: the victims don’t deserve revenge. They deserve the freedom of forgiveness and moving on with their lives. That may not be a fasionable message in a world of pop culture and vigilante superheroes, but it’s the only constructive way to respond to harm.

Harold Takooshian, professor of psychology at Fordham University in New York, said last year:

“"Like hate, revenge is something that takes a toll on the person who feels wronged, as well as the [person's] enemy. It is inherently unhealthy because it takes a psychological and physical toll on the person. Venting those feelings of anger and hostility does not decrease those feelings," he said.”[[4]](#footnote-4) [[5]](#footnote-5)

Batman’s fight for vengeance never ends. Mother Theresa, Ghandi, and Pope John Paul II have a better model.

## Application: Bud Welch

Remember Bud Welch, the grief-stricken man whose daughter Julie was killed in the Oklahoma City bombing? Here’s how his story ends.

Again from ABC News 2016:

“One day, about 10 months after Julie's death, Welch went to the bomb site — which he routinely visited because that was the last place where his daughter was alive — and began to examine himself and search for a way to get past his grief. He found that he was being consumed that the same rage and thirst of revenge that had driven McVeigh and Nichols to blow up the Murrah Federal Building and kill his daughter. "I finally asked myself three questions: Do I need to have a trial right away? Do I need to have a conviction? Do I need to have McVeigh and Nichols executed?" Welch said. "I came to the conclusion that none of those things needed to be part of the healing process I had to go through to get past this and stop the alcohol abuse and stop smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. "It was hate and retribution that drove McVeigh and Nichols. They were getting revenge for what happened in Waco, Texas, exactly two years earlier on April 19, 1993" — when U.S. government agents began storming the Branch Davidian compound, and the sect's stronghold went up in flames. "It was out of rage and retribution that Julie and so many fine people are dead today," Welch said. "After I began to realize what drove McVeigh and Nichols, I realized that I didn't want to let my rage and revenge get out of control like it did with them."[[6]](#footnote-6) [[7]](#footnote-7)

Bud was fortunate enough to see the cyclical pattern of revenge before it destroyed him, and get his life back on track. Others, seduced by vague notions of justice, allow their hate to get the better of them.

Here’s where the resolution comes in.

# Contention 1: Rehabilitation prevents Revenge

Rehabilitation is focused on building the best future possible: ending the cycle of violence and often even restoring a wrongdoer back to society. It reduces crime both inside and out of prison by teaching new habits. While it’s not always successful at changing the fate of a criminal, it is always successful in protecting us from the base urge for revenge.

# Contention 2: Retribution enables Revenge

In the next speech, expect my opponent to disagree with this argument. You’ll hear some cutesy wordplay to try to distinguish retribution and revenge.

For example, Samuel Johnson said:

“Revenge is an act of passion; vengeance of justice.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Nifty turns of phrase like this sound like they’re actually drawing a distinction between retribution and revenge. They’re not. They’re nothing more than semantic gymnastics. You’ll hear plenty of that. What you won’t hear is a substantive way that retribution and revenge are different. You won’t hear a way to exact retribution while avoiding my value links.

The path to healing does not lie in harm, or torture, or sadism. As much as we may want it, hearing those who wronged us whimper in pain only harms us, too. The only path to healing is through love and forgiveness, and that road is paved by rehabilitation. Thank you.

Opposing Brief

You have the option of disagreeing that revenge is retribution, but this obvious response has several pitfalls. First, it implicitly validates the idea that revenge is bad. If it weren’t, there would be no need for you to run the argument. Second, getting a logical advantage is extremely difficult. You’ll have to get very creative to come up with an alternative definition of retribution that isn’t, as the affirmative puts it, cutesy wordplay.

The one way to make the argument work is to clarify that something is not revenge if it is to prevent future harm. The affirmative explicitly says so in the case. Then run a case of your own arguing the retribution lowers crime rates, either by discouraging crime or by locking away criminals so they can’t keep hurting people.

There’s another, less obvious route that gives you a much stronger logical and strategic position. Agree that retribution is revenge, then argue that revenge is at least acceptable and can even be positive. Acknowledge that revenge is an ugly word. Run direct responses against the value links and concede the affirmative applications. Then push your own case, showing the practical benefits of retribution.

For an extra memorable debate, you could run my previously-published negative case arguing that revenge is actually a moral obligation. Have fun!

1. Bryan Robinson, “Why Revenge Is Bad and Good,” <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=96813&page=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Albert Schweitzer, SearchQuotes, accessed online March 26, 2017. <http://www.searchquotes.com/quotation/Revenge..._is_like_a_rolling_stone,_which,_when_a_man_hath_forced_up_a_hill,_will_return_upon_him_wi/238795/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elipsis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elipsis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Elipsis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Samuel Johnson, BrainyQuote, accessed online March 26, 2017. <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/samueljohn162803.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)