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The Problem of Spite

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The Problem of Spite

Abstract

Spite is one of the most negative emotions. It ranges from the ruthless, malicious, and enormously destructive, to the trivial and seemingly harmless. Yet all spiteful acts seem to lack rational justification and to be preoccupied solely with the intent to harm—even at the risk of harm to oneself. To rid ourselves of this nasty emotion, I propose a solution which involves the elimination of the deep underlying causes that root spite within us. Drawing upon the emotion theories of Robert Solomon and Max Scheler, this thesis describes spite as an emotion, analyses what is wrong with spite, and proposes what needs to be done about spite. I argue that while spite may be an inherent human trait, it is a dysfunctional emotion that serves no conceivable good and only incites damage.

Keywords

Spite, Emotion, REBT, Resentment

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Chapter One: The Irrationality of Spite

Spite has several forms, all of which are linked, but notably separate. These forms are spite as an emotion, spitefulness as a personal characteristic, and spiteful action. The primary focus of this chapter will be on spite as an emotion and how such an emotion directly causes spiteful actions; because spite as a characteristic is the habitual practice of the other two forms embodied in an individual it will not be . While there is significance in spite as a characteristic, one must first understand spite as an emotion and the actions which it provokes so that one understands the motives and causes behind the characteristic.

On the spectrum of radical emotions, envy is located next to spite, a feeling which has not only been deemed a vice, but a deadly sin for thousands of years. Envy is a feeling in which an individual desires an object, trait, or benefit without having done anything for it. Robert Solomon describes it as "...wanting without merit, without any intelligible claim of a right to it, without any real hope of getting it." (Solomon 101) with "it" being the desired object, trait, or benefit. Envy is similar to jealousy in that both emotions feed off of one's desire for something but jealousy does not have the same vice-like nature as that of envy because when one feels jealousy, one "fears loss" and has "a legitimate claim" (Solomon 105) to the object; this legitimacy is absent in envy. In addition to its lack of legitimacy, envy is negative due to the actions which it may cause. Because one feels entitled to an object or trait which one does not have and which one has little or no desire to legitimately have, envy may result in one stripping the desired object or trait from its legitimate holder. This desire exists between envy and spite and is worth exploring, however, for the focus of this thesis it, but rather serves as an example

to show how envy may turn into serious, wrongfully done and undeserved harm, thus earning it its “deadly” status. An example of envy can be demonstrated through a scenario in which a person feels envious of her neighbor’s new car. While the neighbor is not doing any wrong in owning the new car, the envious person feels as if they deserve the same car and that their neighbor is wronging them by having what she does not, even though the neighbor may have worked hard to earn the car, she feels that she deserves the same car without putting in the same work. This example also highlights the comparison which is present in envy; the woman is comparing herself to her neighbor and the object which her neighbor holds. This comparison will be readdressed later in the chapter. Other characteristics which can be found in envy are laziness and weakness because of one’s unwillingness to achieve the desired object or trait through legitimate means. To envy is to want something which one does not have and which one has no legitimate right to have but to consider their current status as one in which one feels wronged in not having the wanted something. It is this false sense of entitlement which makes envy irrational and possibly deadly, but spite takes such feelings further and down a much more dangerous road.

In feeling spiteful, one feels entitled to retribution and does harm as a result of this entitlement to do justice. This harm may be done to the holder of an object or trait, or the object itself; either way, harm is done to something. Furthermore, in feeling entitled to do the justice, one perceives the act of harm to be just and rational, when in fact it is quite the opposite. The object of one’s entitlement, or the wrong which one feels the need to right, with spite may be something which one has a legitimate claim to, or not, or may be a response to an objective wrong or a wrong which never occurred but

in all cases, the feeling of spite yields illegitimate actions and unfair punishment to the victim, even if it is objective. Additionally, feelings of spite may push one to the point of which one willingly harms one's self in order to spite another. This willingness is fueled by the entitlement found in spite in that one values the carrying out of the entitled justice more than one's own state of being. While the element of entitlement is shared by both spite and envy, the justice aspect which is located within this entitlement is exclusive and fundamental to spite.

Justice is present all throughout spite, but its presence is perverse and illegitimate, thus making spite is an irrational emotion. The first element of justice found in spite is the comparison made between one's self and the victim one wishes to spite. In seeking justice one attempts to level the conditions of one's self and one's perceived trespasser, and in doing so, one makes a comparison between the status of one's self and one's perceived trespasser, otherwise there would be no basis for the leveling. The first sense of perversion of this comparison, thus of the justice, is that one compares one's self to someone that may not be on an equal level as one's self. Max Scheler argues that this belief of equality between two separate individuals:

... must therefore be strongest in a society like ours, where approximately equal rights (political and otherwise) or formal social equality, publicly recognized, go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property and education. While each has the 'right' to compare himself with everyone else, he cannot do so in fact. (Scheler 50)

So while one may feel entitled to one's neighbor's new BMW, it is easy to see the fault in making such a comparison to one's self and one's neighbor if the neighbor were a neurosurgeon and one's self was a fry cook. The comparison is between two economically unequal individuals but the individual without the BMW believes that the

two are equal, thus wrongfully creating the belief that he is entitled to the BMW and that he is being wronged in one of two ways: 1. That it is unjust that the neurosurgeon has a BMW and the fry cook does not. 2. That the neurosurgeon is intentionally harming the fry cook by having a BMW. In feeling spiteful, one feels the need to take action in response to the wrong which may or may not have been committed. Additionally, in feeling envious, one desires X , so if one were to miraculously receive X, then one's envy would arguably cease. With spite, however, one's feelings would only be satisfied once the the perverse justice is carried out, and only then.

In order to right the perceived wrong, or to perform justice (or seek vengeance) one attempts to harm the trespasser to restore the perceived balance or equality which one presumes to exist. It is this perceived wrong that makes spite and spiteful actions irrational in that they cause one to seek vengeance for a wrong that may not exist and to do undeserved harm to a person.

In Bülent Diken's article titled "The (Impossible) Society of Spite", Diken cites H.M. Enzensberger's description of a spiteful individual as one who is:

A 'radical loser' [who] can imagine only one solution to his problems: 'a worsening of the evil conditions under which he suffers'. Spite, in this sense, is a promise of a feeling of power... (Diken 99)

Diken then cites Slavoj Žižek who furthers the characterization of Enzensberger's "radical loser" by stating:

...the 'radical loser' seeks equality in destruction of others together with himself, but this demand for justice emerges as a demand for the curtailment of the other's enjoyment, while 'the necessary outcome of this demand, of course is asceticism: since it is not possible to impose equal *jouissance*, what one *can* impose is only the equally shared prohibition. (Diken 99)

From these descriptions, one can not only draw the conclusion that one who acts spitefully is not only seeking perverse justice, but does so in a strictly harmful way to reduce one's presumed status to that which below that of the actor.

Because of the many layers of wrongful assumptions found in spite, the action of spite can never be rationally justified. The very essence of spite is irrational. It assumes that equality is stretched across all of humanity, which, according to Scheler, one should not. This assumption then leads to a sense of entitlement, like that found in envy, which, too, is wrongfully assumed. Further, one assumes that by harming someone and bringing them down, one is restoring a balance which does not objectively exist. This last aspect is rather ironic in that one is demonstrating that they are on a lower level than their target by desiring to bring them down to their level, and yet in doing so one feels a sense of power; to my mind this irony further supports the irrationality of spite. Additionally, one may act against one's own self interest in attempting to satisfy one's desire for revenge, thus making spite even more irrational. Because the principles which comprise spite are so corrupt, one can only wonder why we even have it. While it may sound harsh, spite is indeed a feeling of a "radical loser" who has no desire to help himself so he attempts to bring the others down below his level; even though he believes that both he and the victim exist, or should exist, on equal levels. In feeling spiteful one believes that one is being wronged and thus needs to do something about it, a possible solution for this will be addressed in a later chapter.

Through understanding spite as an emotion and as an action one can understand the irrationality ever-present within it. External action is the desired response to spiteful feelings, for without the action, one's spite becomes *ressentiment*.

Ressentiment, as well as resentment, are neighboring emotions to spite because they share similar aspects of envy and perverse justice within in entitlement, but instead of seeking vengeance through malice as a means of establishing equality, one remains passive and does no external action to change one's position in a lower social, economical, or physical state. The most popular definition of *ressentiment* is cited by Alina Wyman in her article "The specter of freedom: *ressentiment* and Dostoevskij's *notes from underground*" and is that of Friedrich Nietzsche who defines *ressentiment* as:

... a peculiar psychological reaction to situations of coercion, in which the subject's immediate emotive responses, such as the impulses for revenge, anger and rage against the oppressor are silenced and, as it were, turned inwards. Barred from external expression by the consciousness of utter impotence in the face of the injuring power, these venomous feelings penetrate deep into the injured self, finding no other target but one's own anguished pride, already lacerated by the oppressor. This repeatedly frustrated craving for power... does not dissipate with time but grows ever stronger as external resistance to oppression weakens. (Wyman 120)

The difference between spite and *ressentiment* is one's willingness to externally pursue the solution to one's perceived wrong. The resentful individual is even weaker than the "radical loser" because he is even more unwilling to take action for that which he believes to be wrong. It is this mentality that Nietzsche viciously attacks as being ultimate weakness and the polar opposite of his existential goal of achieving *übermensch* status. A better, more applicable, definition of *ressentiment* is provided by Scheler in his book, appropriately titled, *Ressentiment*. In his book, Scheler describes the mind of one who feels *ressentiment* as that which tells one's self:

"I can forgive everything, but not that you *are*-that you are *what* you are-that I am not what you are-indeed that I am not *you*." This form of envy strips the opponent of his very existence, for this existence as such is felt

to be a “pressure,” a “reproach,” and an unbearable humiliation. (Scheler 53)

Ressentiment brings one down to a lower level like spiteful actions do, but on an internal level, creating a belief that those who are above one’s self are actually below those whom they oppress. But all of this only exists in the mind of the oppressed, making it too an irrational thought since it in no way changes the reality of one’s oppressed state, but rather makes it permissible, if not obligatory, to accept one’s oppression as a means of “taking the higher road”. The significance of the comparison between *ressentiment* and spite is to show that the desire for external action is necessary for the emotion and action to truly be spite or spiteful.

The action of spiting another is defined as being malicious (and not much else) and appears to have strong relation with, if not fully explained by, *shadenfreude*. It may appear that in being spiteful one is taking pleasure in inflicting pain on another, but this relationship between spite, malice and the satisfaction of its successful execution cannot be explained as simply and as directly as *shadenfreude* suggests.

Shadenfreude, or the pleasure one feels in the pain of another, is present in committing a spiteful action. One is harming another and in doing so gaining a pleasure from a sense of conducting justice, but *shadenfreude* is not the motive in performing a spiteful action, the justice is. Because the justice is the primary motive, *schadenfreude* is an element of spite, as opposed to spite being an element of *schadenfreude*.

As a final means of understanding spite, several examples of spite as demonstrated in literature will be outlined with explanations as to where and how spite is being done within them.

The first literary example of spite is found in Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in which he describes the burning of Moscow in 1812. Tolstoy describes Moscow as being a city which was inhabited by the older, traditional, Russians because the younger generations had chosen to move to the newer St. Petersburg. In 1812, Napoleon successfully invaded and took over Moscow, Tolstoy writes, however:

The victory gained did not bring the usual results because the peasants Karp and Vlas (who after the French had evacuated Moscow drove in their carts to pillage the town, and in general personally failed to manifest any heroic feelings), and the whole innumerable multitude of such peasants, did not bring their hay to Moscow for the high price offered them, but burned it instead...After the burning of Smolensk a war began which did not follow any previous traditions of war. The burning of towns and villages, the retreats after battles, the blow dealt at Borodino and the renewed retreat, the burning of Moscow, the capture of marauders, the seizure of transports, and the guerrilla war were all departures from the rules. (Tolstoy, Book 14, Chapter 1)

This account provides a classic example of spite; the people of Moscow felt entitled to their city and that actions needed to be done in response to the oppression of the invading forces. Also, they did not have the strength to fight the French, so they brought the French down to their status of not having a city by literally burning it down. By destroying the object which both Napoleon and the natives felt entitled to, the natives balanced the relationship between themselves and their invader. This burning, however, goes directly against the self interest of the people of Moscow. While these people may have been unable to successfully fight their invaders, it is not a logical strategy to waste resources, energy, and an entire city itself to prove a point. While the action of burning down the city of Moscow may appear to be noble and even romantic, it was by no means a rational response to the invasion of Moscow, and Tolstoy shows this through his description of it being "a war...which did not follow any previous traditions of war."

and how it was a “[departure] from the rules [of war].” This example includes many elements of spite, from the sense of justice to the act going against the actors’ well-being for the sake of spiting an oppressor. Nevertheless, it is difficult to entirely label this example as wholly negative due to the courage of the natives, the impossibility of them overcoming the occupying army, and the willingness to destroy their own city so that Napoleon could not have it. But because it took place in the context of war, it seems problematic to exclusively label the action as one done purely out of spite.

A second similar example is that of General William Sherman’s burning of Atlanta during the civil war. After having successfully invaded and taken over Atlanta, Georgia, Sherman ordered the burning of the entire, defenseless city. His burning was in no way justified as being a military strategy, since the city had already been taken over and he had time to strategically destroy buildings and supplies that may have aided the confederates. This action demonstrates spite in a more malicious action than Tolstoy’s account of the burning of Moscow did, some would even argue that Sherman’s actions were beyond that of being spiteful, those being actions of hate. In succeeding in his invasion of Atlanta, Sherman had felt entitled to the city itself and performed an action which went against his own self interest. Again, to burn down an entire city takes resources and energy which could be used to make real military advances, but instead, Sherman chose to direct his power towards unnecessary destruction. Even more, in successfully destroying the city, Sherman gained a sense of power. This power, though already established through the winning of the battle was not sufficient to Sherman, he wanted even more, and in order to do so he had to be the agent of mass destruction. It is because of this radical intensity that this example stretches into feelings of hate and

evil. Sherman's actions are puzzling when addressed in the context of spite because Sherman already had total power over the confederate forces in Atlanta, yet he still chose to destroy it for more power, as if winning the battle was not enough in his mind. This example shows how revenge plays into spite and how it appears that revenge, unlike retribution, has no limit or set end (French 67). General Sherman took a very irrational route of establishing his dominance over the city of Atlanta by not only overtaking it, but by mercilessly destroying it until there was nothing left. This example of spite shows the extent to which one can harm another as well as one's self in seeking a sense of power through large-scale destruction.

A third example of spite is demonstrated through the character of Jack in *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Jack's character is described as being the epitome "of the worst aspects of human nature when unrepressed or un-tempered by society" (Wikipedia 2013). He seeks dominance over his fellow classmates when they are all left stranded on a desert island, but does not seek dominance through reason, but rather through aggression and the intimidation of others. Jack continually makes rules which he only enforces when they are in his favor and develops a rivalry with his classmate Ralph, the more rational and good-natured leader. Due to Jack's spiteful nature, his actions on the island are rarely for the good of the group and more often for the sake of preserving his savage power. Jack feels entitled to a powerful position, however, he is not the right man for the job. Not only is Ralph a more rational leader, but his interests include the entire group, rather than just the power that comes with the position. Because Ralph possesses these qualities which Jack does not, and Jack feels entitled to the leadership position, Jack appears envious of Ralph's traits. The

destruction which Jack does in order to give himself a sense of power is in his actions which go against the best interest for the survival of the group. While this example is not nearly as clear-cut as that of Tolstoy, it still contains the necessary elements of spite and demonstrates the irrationality of spiteful emotions and spiteful actions, as well as the grave danger which may ensue from such feelings and actions.

A fourth, and quite notable, example of spite is demonstrated by a narrator without a name in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. This book opens with the memorable quote:

I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased. However, I don't know beans about my disease, and I am not sure what is bothering me. I don't treat it and never have, though I respect medicine and doctors. Besides, I am extremely superstitious, let's say sufficiently so to respect medicine. (I am educated enough not to be superstitious, but I am.) No, I refuse to treat it out of spite. You probably will not understand that. Well, but I understand it. Of course I can't explain to you just whom I am annoying in this case by my spite. I am perfectly well aware that I cannot "get even" with the doctors by not consulting them. I know better than anyone that I thereby injure only myself and no one else. But still, if I don't treat it, its is out of spite. My liver is bad, well then-- let it get even worse! (Dostoyevsky 3)

It is this character that goes beyond feelings of spitefulness by demonstrating an existential spite in which the individual spites one's self. Dostoyevsky's character shows a spite but further demonstrates *ressentiment* in that he chooses to inwardly turn his spiteful feelings, allowing for the receiver of his spite to be his own self. The irrationality of this individual is overwhelming and at the same time fascinating. The underground man demonstrates the epitome of spite to the point where his existence is paradoxical, for if his goal to be spiteful and his spite are directed towards himself, he is seeking to harm himself to the lower level of himself. The underground man is by no means an

ordinary case of spite but he provides a significant philosophical example of one who demonstrates existential spite and radically demonstrates the irrationality in spite itself.

Spite is a negative, harmful, feeling which incites irrational actions. It arises when one believes that someone else exists on an even status as one's self, but has something which one does not, and because of the belief that both individuals are on the same level, one feels that they are being wronged. The two individuals, however, do not exist on the same level, and if they did, then the spiteful one would have legitimate means of achieving the desired object, and therefore, have no reason to feel spiteful. The satisfaction that lies in committing a spiteful act is achieved in the worsening of the condition of another. The irrationality in such a feeling is that one believes inflicting harm is appropriate and deserved by the victim, despite the objective reality in which the harm is neither appropriate nor deserved.

Chapter Two: The Ethics of Spite

To consider spite in light of ethics, I propose to consider two contrasting ethical theories and see how spite and spiteful actions fit within each. These two opposing views are the deontological view of Immanuel Kant's and the utilitarian view of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill's.

Kant's deontological view assumes that all humans are autonomous beings due to their capacities to reason, and because all humans have such a capacity, they all exist under a single moral law, that being the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is defined by Kant as to "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant 73), meaning one must view one's action in a universal context from which one can then assess whether it is universally right or wrong and further, whether the action is morally acceptable, permissible, or unacceptable. The primary focus of the deontological view is to discover a "Perfect Duty", which is done by examining the maxim and determining whether or not it is paradoxical. An example of this can be demonstrated through the examination of the question of whether or not it is permissible to lie whenever one wishes. The paradox found in this maxim is that if one were to always lie, then there would be no notion of telling the truth, and without such a notion, the conception of lying would be meaningless. The concept of lying relies on the concept of telling the truth, so by acting on the maxim, one creates the paradox that renders it unacceptable.

The maxim which I created for spite is "I will do harm as a punishment to others because I perceive it to be the appropriate response to one whom I believe to have wronged me." With this maxim, it is difficult to draw a paradox, especially since this

maxim is at the core of the justice systems which society constructs and enforces. However, There is a second assessment of a maxim which is that of “Imperfect Duty” in which the maxim which one wishes to will is applied on a universal scale. In applying the maxim of spite to this, one can assess that spite is indeed morally unacceptable because these actions undermine the justice systems which they attempt to mimic. This is quite problematic, especially with spite, because the perverse justice which is carried out is biased, passionate, and possibly undeserved; all the elements which justice systems were created to eliminate.

However, in Chapter One I argued for the irrationality of spite and that actions done out of spite are irrational in their nature. This irrationality may conflict with the necessary deontological assumption that all beings are autonomous because autonomous beings are presumed to think and act rationally. So the question raised from this conflict is whether or not an autonomous being can act irrationally and still be considered to be autonomous. To my mind, it is unreasonable to presume that an autonomous being *a/ways* acts rationally, and while I cannot attest to there ever not being an individual who did in fact *a/ways* act rationally, the overwhelming majority of humans have not, do not, and will not; we make mistakes. So while spite itself is an irrational action, it is completely possible for an autonomous being to perform acts of spite and still hold one’s autonomous status, since one still has one’s capacity for reason, it is just not being demonstrated while being spiteful. Because an autonomous being can be spiteful and still remain autonomous, the moral unacceptability of spite in a deontological context remains.

The deontological approach to the morality of spite works in favor of my argument, the utilitarian approach, however, is somewhat more challenging to assess. Bentham and Mill's utilitarian approach claims that "...one should assess persons, actions, and institutions by how well they promote human (or perhaps sentient) happiness." (Brink 2008) meaning that the morality of an action is not found within the action itself, but within the consequences of the action and how those consequences affect the happiness of those involved; the goal, as Bentham described it, is to always have "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (537 Bentham). Unlike Kant's categorical imperative and its universality, the utilitarian approach and assessment of the morality of an action must be done on a case-by-case basis. To again question the morality of murder, a utilitarian would not be concerned by the act of murder, but rather the outcome of murder and the happiness or pain it may cause. So if one were to murder a heinous, sadistic dictator and the population which was once oppressed by such a person becomes exponentially happier because of his death, then the act of murder is morally justified, if not even morally necessary due to the amount and the intensity of the happiness gained from such an action. On the other hand, if one were to murder a popular and well-liked politician, and in doing so the population which felt positively of him feels pain because of his death, such an action would be considered morally unacceptable. Despite the fact that many people may gain happiness from his death, and that he may have even been secretly overwhelmingly corrupt, because the majority of the population affected would feel pain rather than happiness, the action is morally wrong. This latter example, however, questions the good in adopting a utilitarian view, after all, should one who is corrupt and evil morally deserve punishment for one's

ill actions? While that deserved punishment may not be death, the ignorance held by the population about their beloved politician misguides their emotions and feelings of the politician. So if the most evil person on earth is loved by a majority of the population, then any publicly known harm that may come to that evil being will also cause pain to the population which loves him, even if it goes against their own self interest, and because a majority of the people would feel pain, it would be morally wrong to do harm to such an individual, despite their ultimate-evil status. This, however, does not totally dismiss the importance of utilitarian morality, especially in relation to deontological morality, since the two oppose each other but desire the same ends. So how does spite fit into utilitarian morality?

Because the utilitarian model of assessing morality is done on a case-by-case basis, in order to evaluate spite, examples of spite from Chapter One will serve as different cases. The first case to be evaluated will be that of Sherman's burning of Atlanta. As previously described, General Sherman destroyed the city of Atlanta for no strategic military reason, but rather out of spite and a desire to solely do harm. In burning down the city of Atlanta, one may presume that Sherman, and maybe even some, or the majority of his men, received happiness from performing the atrocious action. But when compared to the pain and devastation felt by those who inhabited Atlanta at the time, in addition to those who saw the evil in Sherman's action and who, though not directly affected by the fires, still felt pain from them, the pain would strongly outweigh the happiness of Sherman and his soldiers (assuming that his soldiers even enjoyed performing such actions). Because the pain caused by the action outweighs the

happiness, both in amount and intensity, this example of spite would be undoubtedly morally wrong and unacceptable.

But what about on a smaller, less harmful level? A second case will be the utilitarian evaluation of a spiteful act on a personal level. Imagine if I were to have purchased two candy bars, and after having eaten one and being satisfied, I had no desire to eat the second. Not wanting the other candy bar, nor wanting to hold on to it, I decide to throw it away in a nearby trashcan. A friend of mine, however, sees what I am planning to do and interrupts the action from happening, since he desires to eat the candy bar. He may ask for the candy bar and even reason with me about how he should have it since I do not want it, he is hungry, and how it would be a waste for me to just throw it out. Yet out of spite I throw out the candy bar, so that he can never have it. I may even feel good about doing it, perhaps his sadness brings about feelings of *schadenfreude* within myself. But the morality of the action depends upon the amount and intensity of happiness which it causes. So while I may feel good about spiting my friend, he may be devastated that I would perform such an action, even more so, my other friends who may have witnessed the event may feel bad for my friend and resentment towards me for being spiteful; in this case, the pain obviously outweighs the happiness, thus, making it a morally wrong event. However, if I were to feel absolute enjoyment from such an event and my friend was not really affected by the action, maybe he did not like the candy bar flavor and just wanted something to snack on, then the action would be morally permissible, since my happiness outweighs his pain. In this instance, the same event has the possibility to be morally acceptable or unacceptable, depending on the levels of happiness and pain felt by the event. It is because of this

example that the utilitarian approach to spite is insufficient, thus making the approach itself at least questionable, at most totally wrong.

Even further, within the context of spite, it seems hard to adopt a utilitarian approach when it may so easily result in a De Sadian-like reality. If one were to receive extreme pleasure and happiness from doing terrible actions to people, who might feel pain, but not a greater amount than the actor's level of happiness, such events would be morally acceptable, if not morally encouraged; this is clearly wrong. Because of this, the utilitarian approach seems unfit to morally analyze spite, especially because spite is most often done from person to person, where there may be few or zero witnesses to further quantify the pain or pleasure caused by the event. However, the utilitarian approach does bring about questions which deal with spite and its nature, the first of which being whether or not spite can be justified, and if so, is it still spite?

In Chapter One, spite was described in many instances as being a perverse justice in which one may feel justified in performing a spiteful action, even though the recipient of the spite may not have done anything to deserve the action. In instances such as those, even though the actor of spite may feel justified in performing the action, the action is not actually justified because the act of spite is unwarranted. But what if spite is one's last resort of retaliation? This conundrum is demonstrated through Tolstoy's account of the burning of Moscow during the French invasion of 1812.

The people of Moscow had no real means of fighting Napoleon and his troops, so rather than allowing him to take over the city, the Russians willingly burned it to the ground, so that there was nothing for Napoleon to conquer. At face value this example demonstrates spite on a large scale; there is a thing which is desired by group x but

group y does not want group x to have it, so group y destroys the thing so that no one can have it, even though it goes against the presumed self-interest of group y. Even further, the act of spite appears to be quite just in that the people of Moscow did not have the means to properly fight Napoleon, but they did have the means to hurt him by destroying their city, and even if it did act against their self-interest, they still prevented an invading force from stealing a territory which was not theirs.

Because the burning was done in the context of war, and appears justified because of that, one may question whether or not the act was truly done out of spite, or rather out of military strategy. The people of Moscow did not want Napoleon to take their city, or to be successful on his conquest, so they did all that they were capable of doing in preventing his success. In order to truly evaluate whether or not the burning was done out of spite, one would have to know the intention of the people who performed the burning. Did they really destroy their city solely because they felt that if they could not have it, no one should? Or did they do it for a greater reason, to fight back an oppressive force with the only means necessary? And if it was indeed the latter, would it still be spite? To my mind, it would not be, not because of the reasonable justification in burning Moscow and because of the context which it was done in.

While the true intentions of the people of Moscow in 1812 may never be known, from a larger viewing of the event and the context in which it occurred, the burning of Moscow seems to be a justified retaliation to an invading force, rather than an act done out of spite. From this example, one might argue that cases in which spite appears to be justified are not examples of spite, but rather of legitimate cases of justice and its execution. This view is highlighted by Saint Augustine who argues that when an act of

vigilante justice, like that of spite, is done without hate that it is not perverse, but pure, if not necessary, justice. With spite, however, hate is quite commonly, but not always, present. Because of this, I return to my previous analysis of the burning of Moscow; if the actions of the Russians were done without hate, then their actions would be considered to be justified, and not spiteful.

This hate-element of spite contributes to its irrationality, and also its perversion of justice. It is what separates acts of spite from those of pure justice, and while not all spiteful actions are done out of hate, there are indeed elements of animosity present in spite, and this is what truly illegitimizes the justice one believes to be carrying out. But what if one performs an action out of spite to someone who may deserve the harm?

To answer this question, one should again consider the candy bar example. Imagine that my friend whom I wish to spite by throwing away my candy bar which he desires performed the very same action to me several weeks prior, and in me denying him the candy bar, I am carrying out justice which I believe to be deserved by my friend. In this instance, I would argue that the act of throwing out the candy bar was not done out of spite, but rather out of real justice. However, the original, identical, action which incited the desire for retribution would be considered spiteful, due to the intention of my friend in performing the action. The significance of this example, as well as the one before it, is that spite can never be truly justified, and if it appears to be, it is no longer an act of spite, but rather an act of justice or retribution, so long as any element of hate is absent from the action.

This distinction places the legitimacy of labeling an action as being spiteful on the intentions and emotions of the actor, rather than on the act itself. Because of this

emphasis one may question the deontological approach to spite because it is only concerned with the action itself, not the actor's intentions. However, spite can logically be both concerned with the intentions of the actor and deontologically morally wrong. The importance of the intention of the actor is concerned with an action being labeled as being spiteful, rather than with the morality of the action. To return to the candy bar example where my friend performed the same action to me several weeks prior, both events would be considered to be morally wrong, but only the former of the two events would earn the title as being an act of spite. So while it may appear that the requirements of an action being labelled as spite conflict with its deontological moral evaluation, the two are quite unrelated and independent of one another.

Because the intention and feeling of the actor in a spiteful event is what makes the action spiteful, one must then wonder whether or not the reaction of the victim matters in defining the necessary conditions of spite, or, is an action still spiteful if no one is harmed by the action? To again return to the candy bar example, suppose that I desire to spite my friend because I enjoy the *shadenfreude* I feel from his pain, and I attempt to elicit such feelings by throwing out the candy bar he wanted, but after doing so my friend does not express or feel any form of pain or sadness, but rather remains unaffected by my action, not just in appearance, but internally. Arguably, my action, though done with spiteful intentions, did not fulfill my expectations, thus, did not align with my intentions of the action, suggesting that even though the action was done out of spite, it is not spite since it was not successfully done. This, however, does not seem to be totally sound. Even though the action may not be successfully carried out, because the intentions of the action are spiteful, the act is still spiteful, even if unsuccessful. The

nature of the action depends on the intentions, rather than the desired ends. Much like the separation of an act of justice and an act of spite, the distinction between the two relies on the intention and the validity of the intention. When an act is done out of spite, the actor not only attempts to do something spiteful, but feels spiteful, and because these feelings of spite fuel one's actions, the actions, whether successful or not, are still done out of spite.

It is because of this that spite and *ressentiment* are so closely related, since one can perform a spiteful action unsuccessfully, but still feel as if one is not a loser after having failed by internally legitimizing one's failure. This is demonstrated especially well by the fable of the fox and the grapes in which a fox who cannot reach grapes which he so strongly desires rationalizes his loss by adopting the belief that the grapes which he before desired are sour and disgusting, and furthermore that anything that does actually eat the grapes does not know anything about what good grapes are, making the fox better off by not only being unable to eat the grapes, but in knowing they were bad. So if one were to be unsuccessfully spiteful, one may still reap the internal satisfaction and positive reinforcement of the action by means of *ressentiment*.

By evaluating the morality of spite one can also better explain and understand the nature of spite. By viewing spite from the deontological perspective, one can assess that spite is morally wrong. The utilitarian perspective, however, challenges the results of the deontological perspective by shifting the focus of where morality lies within an action from the action itself to the results of said action. This view is problematic when evaluating spite on two levels: 1. Because of the nature of spite most often being performed on a person-to-person level, the utilitarian view allows for a horrific De

Sadian reality to not only be legitimized, but morally encouraged, and if such a reality were to be considered moral, one must then question the legitimacy of the view which allows it to be. 2. Because a spiteful action is only truly spiteful when the intentions of the actor are fueled by spiteful emotions, it seems problematic to evaluate the morality of spite based on a condition which is not necessary for spite, that being a successful spiteful act. Because of these problems, as well as the points which arise out of them, a utilitarian view of spite is unfit to make a moral evaluation of spite, or of anything for that matter. Out of this, the conclusion that spite is always morally wrong can be made. Events in which spite may appear to be justified, and thus possibly morally permissible, are in fact not events of spite at all, but rather cases of justice which may demonstrate characteristics found in spite, so long as feelings of hate are absent. Therefore spite is not only irrational, but never justified or morally acceptable.

Chapter Three: Eliminating Spite

In my final chapter, I set out to complete my previous definition of spite as an emotion and suggest what should be done with the problem of spite.

Before addressing spite specifically, one should first understand the significance of emotions themselves. There are many different theories of emotion all of which attempt to explain their significance and purpose; some of these theories may belittle the power of emotions such as physiological and behavioral theories that describe emotions as being learned patterns or bodily changes and nothing more. However, other theories suggest that emotions are not merely physiological states, but cognitive experiences which reflect one's interpretations of and interactions with the surrounding world. Aristotle and Robert Solomon argued that emotions served as a means of judging the outside world and that by feeling, one is assessing something outside of the self. What really separates the cognitive view from the other theories of emotion is that it suggests that emotions are more than just feelings, but reflections of judgements made by the self. This model fits the assessing of emotions far better than other theories because it allows for emotions to be meaningful experiences with significance outside of the feelings themselves. Solomon explains that

“[Emotions] do not just ‘fit’ into our lives but shape our lives through their conceptions and evaluations of the situations in which we find (or could find) ourselves, of the people we deal with, and of ourselves and our place in the world.” (True To Our Feelings 204)

Emotions are not just feelings, but feelings which link the body to the mind, providing physiological responses to mental experiences. When one is wronged, one feels anger, and in feeling angry one may then feel the need to retaliate or flee from the situation. In this instance the act of being wronged is the experience, the feeling of anger is the

emotion, and the response which follows is the result of a judgement made and the beliefs held by one's self. The emotion is also a judgement made by the self as a physiological response to the event; one feels angry when wronged because one assess and contextualizes the situation as one in which anger is the appropriate response. Solomon argues that these physiological responses are the signals of evaluations one makes and the emotion which fits the evaluation, suggesting that the physiological response is second to the judgement which it reflects. The heart of this argument is that emotions are cognitive judgements made by the self, and while the self may not even recognize that these judgements are being made, the feelings which certain judgements elicit suggest that certain emotions reflect certain judgements. To return to the feeling of anger, one feels angry when one makes the assessment that one has been wronged and that anger is the appropriate response to that judgement. What separates this view from those which suggest that emotions are learned behavior is that the cognitive view gives emotions significance outside of the feeling itself. While one may learn that anger is the appropriate response to being wronged, the behavioral view fails to acknowledge anything else outside of that. However, it is what exists outside of the physiological response that gives it its significance; the feeling is what *alerts* the self, not what *determines* it.

Furthermore, because emotions reflect judgements made by the self, to understand an emotion is to understand the judgements which elicit its feeling; so to understand anger, one does not look at the physiological responses of anger (increased heart rate and testosterone), but rather consider the judgements which lead to such responses. Because these judgements are what defines an emotion, it would appear to

be wrong to suggest that emotions are not linked to cognition and even further, reason. An emotion is a physiological response to a judgement made by one's self, giving the judgement significance amongst the countless other judgements unknowingly made by the self at every moment, and because the judgement dictates the emotion, the judgement is the key to understanding the emotion. So what judgements are made that elicit feelings of spite?

In his book *The Passions*, Robert Solomon systematically describes strong emotions ranging from anxiety to worship. Within this "emotional register" Solomon describes the emotion which is that of resentment. In order to assess how spite fits into the cognitive theory of emotions we will look at Solomon's description of resentment due to its extreme resemblance to spite, the two differ, however, in what one does with the feeling. Resentment is often inwardly directed while spite is often a desire which requires external actions to be satisfied. It is worth distinguishing a difference between resentment and Scheler's *Ressentiment* due to the extremeness of the latter and while the two are indeed linked and nearly identical, it is problematic to consider them to be one in the same in the same way it is wrong to compare a paper cut to a knife wound; they are both similar in that they are harmful experiences but the severity of the latter makes the the thought that they are identical ridiculous. This link, however, is important and will be acknowledged later on in this chapter. In his description of resentment Solomon provides the reader with the "mythology" of the emotion, stating that resentment is

"the mythology of oppression and siege... A sense of being 'thrown' into an inferior existence, through no fault of one's own...like Sisyphus 'scorning' the gods, his only weapon his 'defiance'..." (The Passions 293-294)

So when feeling resentment or spite, one not only assumes a submissive role, but also that one is in such a role for reasons which one cannot control, alleviating one's own responsibility from one's state. Spite takes this even further by not only removing one's responsibility from one's state, but also from one's ability to get out of such a state. In resentment, one justifies one's inferior state, but with spite, one desires to bring others down to it, rather than seeking legitimate means of upward mobility to alleviate one's inferiority. This is one of the judgements made by one's self that elicit feelings of spite, that one is not only inferior, but that one can do nothing about one's inferiority.

When describing the status of resentment, Solomon describes resentment as being

“Intolerable inferiority...It is the sense of intolerable inferiority that drives resentment, forces it to disguise itself and adopt complex strategies - all aimed at overcoming its present status and proving itself at least equal, if not (preferably) superior.” (The Passions 292)

The moral issues located within resentment and spite are not centered around the feelings of inferiority so much as the means which one seeks to escape inferiority.

Solomon states that the desire of resentment is to “destroy one's enemies...and to be in a position of indisputable and unmatched power and importance.” (The Passions 294).

Both the status and desire of resentment help to paint the picture that is the judgements which elicit feelings of resentment and spite. Those judgements are made about one's own position and level of superiority (or lack thereof) and one's ability to do something about one's position. In feeling spiteful, one makes the evaluation that the only way to escape one's inferiority is to harm those whom one believes to be the cause of one's inferiority. In my previous chapters, I argued that these judgements are flawed, thus, making the courses of action which follow them to be flawed as well. However, because

these judgements are flawed, and are made out of what was previously described as being a perverse justice, spite itself is a flawed emotion.

I say that spite is a flawed emotion due to its irrationality and lack of morality. The judgements which are made by one's self to cause feelings of spite are poor and flawed judgements; they are perverse. And because these judgements are irrational, so is the emotion itself. This seems problematic when arguing that all emotions reflect cognitive judgements which are linked with reason, since my entire argument thus far has been focused on the lack of good reason found within spite. Yet spite still remains amongst all the other rational emotions, and the self manages to find ways to rationalize spiteful actions, after all, it is not an emotion associated with spontaneity, but rather the opposite. Spiteful actions are often associated with themes of cunningness, cleverness, and intellect; the actions may be passionate but they are rarely immediate. Solomon agrees in his description of the strategy found in resentment stating that "No emotion is richer in strategies than resentment..." (The Passions 294), and because of these rich strategies found in resentment and spite, one finds ways to rationalize their actions. The more time one spends planning a spiteful action the more time one has to rationalize the act within one's mind, wrongfully justifying an act through complex, yet, connected reasoning. This lack of immediacy also allows for spiteful emotions to be masked by other feelings, both hiding it from outsiders as well as allowing for it to fester within the self. Additionally, the cunning and witty themes positively associated with spite are what contribute to its trivialization, justifying malice through intellect. This trivialization is dangerous and should be recognized so that a harmful emotion cannot be legitimized.

But with all this bad present in spite, one can only wonder why we feel it in the first place?

To give spite the benefit of the doubt, the only conceivable reason for the continual survival of spite is that it gives the possibility of power to those who may never otherwise have it. Does this mean that that spite is ever justified? To my mind, no, and not because I believe that persons without power should remain without it, but rather that the means which one uses to achieve power through spite are always ill intended and harmful. Spite achieves power by means of bringing others down, not by bettering the self. One may even harm one's self to bring others down, which makes one wonder whether spite is really about achieving power, or just attempting to reduce everyone to as miserable of a state as that of the the spitee; I believe both elements are present but that the latter is more prevalent. Despite all these terrible outcomes which make spite out to be a truly bad, if not evil, emotion, it continues to exist within humanity as an innate part of the self. This continual existence is a serious problem within humanity which needs to be addressed, fought, and eliminated if possible.

One possible solution to the problem of spite is the promotion of seeking legitimate means to one's desired ends. Through spite, one's desired end may be power but rather than gaining superiority through harming one's wrongfully perceived trespasser, one should seek legitimate means of gaining superiority by making one's self achieve goals above those who one wishes to be superior in relation to. So even though one may incorrectly perceive what one believes to be a wrongdoing, in attempting to achieve superiority over the perceived wrongdoer, one is bettering one's self and not directly or intentionally harming the innocent other in doing so. And while

the desired ends may be ill, the means by which one achieves such a role are honorable and recognized with great respect in society, unlike those of spite which are cowardice and impotent. This sublimation of spite appears to be the ideal correction to the problem of spite in that it transforms a total wrong in to a notable good, and while the ends of the sublimation may be questionable, the means directly oppose the radical negativity found in spite.

This solution, however, is a bit of a pipe dream. Not only would it be impossible to sublimate all spiteful desires to those of hard work, but it also does nothing to eliminate the problem of spite. In sublimating spite, one is indeed bettering one's self, but one is doing so based on a perverse judgement, which may in turn fuel other harmful desires. One may argue that if one were to sublimate feelings of spite and better one's self thus ultimately achieving the superiority originally desired that the desire for superiority would cease after its achievement. However, I am skeptical of this. If one's desires are to correct a wrong, then by achieving superiority one may not end one's desires for the correction, but rather just have the ability do so from a more powerful level, and possibly doing so without harming one's self. An example of this would be a physically weak person who may sublimate their spiteful desire to harm muscular people into a desire to work out. This person would seek their retribution for their previously inferior position through legitimate good means. Yet what is to suggest that upon achieving notable strength the once weak individual would still wish to harm those who were once stronger than he, as a way to further establish one's superiority and to correct the originally perceived wrong. While that person's means were quite

good, their desired ends remained ill and harmful to others. This then points to a new solution in which spite is not sublimated, but eliminated.

Because spite is fueled by perverse judgements, the solution to getting rid of the bad caused by spite is not found in its sublimation, but rather through its elimination. Further, because spite as an emotion is elicited by the evaluations which are exclusive to it, the problem does not lie in the feeling of spite itself, but rather in the judgements made by one's self which cause the feelings of spite. As stated over and over again, these judgements are flawed and wrong, which makes spite problematic as an emotion, as well as problematic to get rid of. After all, how does one fix an error in judgement? Education is a broad solution, but for more serious cases of spite, it is not the best. What I suggest to be the solution to the problem of spite is the correcting of the judgements which elicit spiteful emotions. The means by which such a correction would be done is through Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy as developed by Albert Ellis in the 1950s.

Radical Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) is a form of therapy which states that people are free, able to act rationally and irrationally, holistic, products of constitutional factors and subjective influence, generate behavior internally, and most of all are capable of change over time (Neenan 3). From this set of criteria, REBT assess that psychological problems are rooted in one's thoughts and beliefs, not within the state itself. So in the case of spite, the problem should not be addressed by looking at spite itself, but rather the thoughts and beliefs which fuel one's judgement of the world that in turn cause spiteful emotions. Through REBT, one is forced to recognize one's irrational judgements and understand why they are irrational; the first step is identifying and

accepting the problem. Through this forced recognition, patients of REBT are intended to not only recognize their irrational beliefs, but to internally combat them so that they do not give rise to greater problems, such as acts of spite. Ellis created a list of many common irrational beliefs which fuel such passions, the two which are directly applicable to spiteful actions are: 1. I must damn others if they do not treat me well. And 2. I must control events and people because they control how I feel. (Fitzmaurice) These are the irrational beliefs which REBT is created to fix and replace.

REBT owes its methods to the ancient Greek Stoic philosophy which encouraged one to control one's self. The Stoic belief argues that one is incapable of controlling the surrounding world, however, one does have the means, if not duty, of controlling one's responses to the surrounding world and because of this, one should focus and meditate on controlling one's reactions because that is all one really can do. REBT applies this Stoic belief to a form of therapy which teaches one to do what the Stoics proclaimed centuries ago, that being controlling one's responses to the outside world, and even further, to correct the beliefs which allow for negative passions to be felt in the first place. Through REBT one recognizes one's own problems and resolves them within the self, eliminating the internal beliefs which fuel the irrational judgements that initially cause the problem.

While this solution does not completely eliminate spite, it effectively combats the causes of spite within the self, ideally preventing one from making the judgements which result in spiteful emotions, and if one can prevent or suppress the judgements and beliefs which cause one to feel and thus act spitefully, then spite can be controlled within the self, never to be unleashed into the open and hopefully never to be inwardly

turned. Additionally, the statistics of the success rates of REBT are quite good; Ellis states that “Evaluations of REBT show that 65 percent of those treated improve significantly, and 90 percent who have at least 10 sessions show marked improvement.” (Ellis 38). While REBT may not be an ultimate solution, it is one which addresses the problem of spite at the source and has a very likely chance of successfully correcting the poor judgements and beliefs that ignite spite within the self.

Without spite, the world would undoubtedly be a better place for all of humanity. By eliminating spite, one is erasing a dark feeling which can only be satisfied by destruction. Spite is not the cause of all destruction in the world, but it is a universal facet of life which is exclusively associated with harming others. It is a selfish, deceptive, ruthless, nasty emotion which has no conceivable good because it only leads to harm. It is only wishful thinking to hope to eliminate all of spite from humanity, after all, small, more innocent, forms of spite are common and accepted amongst friends as jokes and games, causing no real harm to others. However, when feelings of spite are beyond that scope of mutual friendly fun and understanding, they are a wrong which needs to be dealt with, not through punishment, but rather through therapy which addresses and corrects the underlying beliefs and judgements which initially elicit spite. By becoming mindful of and correcting one’s irrational beliefs and judgements, one can control one’s emotions and further sever the ties which allow for spite to be felt and acted upon.

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