

# The Facts: Revenge & Retribution

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The criminal justice system permits retribution (giving murderers their due) but not revenge (such as vigilante lynching), because the State is believed to be more fair, accurate, and dispassionate than private avengers. Many believe that capital punishment is far removed from the excesses of revenge and deny any similarities between retribution and revenge.

**There are important differences between revenge and retribution:**

- In revenge, an individual retaliates, whereas in retribution the State retaliates.
- In revenge, a minor offense might warrant a response, whereas in retribution only illegal acts are punished.
- In revenge, avengers may harm more or less as they see fit, whereas in retribution the State seeks a punishment that fits the crime.
- In revenge, avengers are allegedly motivated by anger or hatred, whereas in retribution, the State's agents are supposed to be motivated by duty.

**But there are chilling similarities...**

- Both revenge and retribution pervert the golden rule to mean "Do unto others as was done unto you." Both use the perpetrator's despicable behavior as the standard by which to act. The true form of the golden rule, by contrast, uses positive ideals as the standard: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
- Both revenge and retribution promise victims that harming the perpetrator will bring satisfaction. Avengers seek the sweet taste of revenge; the State promises "closure" to murder victims' families.
- Both revenge and retribution encourage family members of murder victims to remain in a state of victimhood, which, they are told, can only be resolved by harming another. Both revenge and retribution teach that pain can be healed by making others suffer, the same belief held by many murderers.
- Both revenge and retribution assume that some humans deserve grave, even lethal harm. This belief is also how most murderers justify their crimes.
- Both revenge and retribution assume that perpetrators' bad moral merit overrides their claims as human beings to be protected from degradation and death. By dehumanizing the perpetrator, avengers and punishers risk becoming like murderers — acting as if some humans are not valuable.
- Both revenge and retribution encourage punishers to numb themselves to the violence enacted upon perpetrators. By numbing themselves to the violence of execution, avengers and State functionaries risk becoming akin to murderers, unable to respond compassionately to the suffering of another.