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Huddleston, Andrew (2021) Ressentiment. *Ethics* 131 (4), pp. 670-696.
ISSN 0014-1704.

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Ressentiment

Forthcoming in *Ethics* Vol. 131, Issue 4, July 2021

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Abstract:

In his *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche famously discusses a psychological condition he calls *ressentiment*, a condition involving toxic, vengeful anger. My view takes some inspiration from Nietzsche, but this paper is not primarily a work of exegesis. I offer a free-standing theory in philosophical psychology of the familiar state aptly described with this term. In the process of developing my account, I chart the terrain around *ressentiment* and closely-related and sometimes overlapping states (ordinary moral resentment, envy, vengefulness, anger, and the like). *Ressentiment*, I shall contend in this paper, is not simply a ten dollar word substitutable for ‘resentment,’ though it is indeed a species of that genus. On the account I develop, the perception of being slighted, insulted, or demeaned figures centrally in cases of *ressentiment*. Moreover, *ressentiment*—like cowardice or lecherousness—is not merely an ethically neutral psychic formation, but is, I suggest, a manifestation of vice.

I. Introduction

On May 23, 2014 in Isla Vista, California, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger went on a shooting spree, killing six people and injuring fourteen others. Shortly before this murderous rampage, he uploaded a manifesto in which he outlined his motivations. In his twisted way, he thought it a cosmic injustice that sorority women were spurning him. He wanted revenge and took it in an indiscriminating fashion. A few years later, self-styled “white nationalists” marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting variously “you will not replace us” and “Jews will not replace us”—the background perception being that other racial and ethnic groups were, through an alleged conspiracy, gaining power and status that the white supremacists thought was rightfully theirs. One rammed his car into a group of counter-protesters. Sometimes, as in these cases, the toxic grievances issue in violent action, in outbursts of terror. Sometimes, as we see in a variety of forms in contemporary political life, these grievances

influence one's voting. Sometimes they lead to posturing displays of power or to verbal tirades on Twitter. Sometimes hostility simmers in more subterranean ways, in passive-aggression and fantasies of revenge, without anything much being done.

We academics will be familiar with milder and less dangerous forms of a similar phenomenon: Those, for example, who feel (justly or unjustly) that they have gotten insufficient professional recognition and then stew in spiteful anger and spout their vitriol in the blogosphere, in barbed requests "simply for clarification" in q&a sessions, or behind the anonymity of cuttingly dismissive referee reports.

What is going on in these cases? Much will of course depend on the psychological specifics. We might describe these agents as beset with some combination of anger, vengefulness, envy, resentment. But there is also, I suggest, a more specific potential diagnosis we might want to avail ourselves of as well: namely, *ressentiment*.

The notion of *ressentiment* is of course most famously associated with Nietzsche, who made it a key element of his account in his *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Nietzsche did not himself coin the term. Nor did he introduce the notion into philosophical discourse.¹ But he has perhaps done the most to bring it to the attention of philosophical readers today and to contribute to our understanding of the psychology underlying it. His efforts in this direction are, to my mind, one of his most important lasting contributions to philosophy. At the same time, Nietzsche's own analysis is closely bound up with his specific project of thinking about the genesis and ongoing influence of Judeo-Christian moral values. He thus is less interested in giving us a well-delineated theory of what the state in general is (sug-

¹ It was in circulation before him in, for instance, the work of Dühring (1865).

gestive though his remarks may be), than he is instead in charting its relation to this morality, as well as its role in forms of internalized self-cruelty. Moreover, since his interests lie with a consideration (and in large part an indictment) of this Judeo-Christian morality and its legacy, he focuses on the particular cases of *ressentiment* most relevant to this. In the process, he offers us telling examples of it, but they are arguably not the sole, or even the main cases of it. If we try to build a general theory of *ressentiment* just from these, we may be led astray. Specifically, we may be misled into thinking that *ressentiment* is only the reaction of those under conditions of systematic powerlessness and deprivation, or is a reaction which confines itself to repressed, subterranean channels. But that is too limiting. For it is also, I suggest here, sometimes the reaction of the comparatively well-off, particularly those with a strong sense of entitlement, who feel they aren't getting their due. And it sometimes expresses itself in outward action and turns violent. Many of its most disturbing cases fall into this mould. It is potentially an attitude of oppressors as well as of the oppressed, of the powerful as well as the powerless, and of many ordinary folk who fall in between.

Given the notion's prevalence within Nietzsche's work, and relative neglect in anglophone moral philosophy, *ressentiment* has had its most extensive and philosophically-rich discussion within the orbit of Nietzsche interpretation. This paper will thus begin with Nietzsche. But it is not intended to be mainly interpretive in focus. Nietzsche situates his discussion within a larger speculative narrative about the underpinnings of this psychology and its place in certain forms of social transformation. Although aspects of this account are potentially instructive, I will not be wedding myself to any of the details. My primary goal is to offer

a free-standing theory of a familiar (and vicious) psychological condition that is usefully labeled with this term.

In the process, I chart the terrain around *ressentiment* and closely-related and sometimes overlapping states (ordinary moral resentment, envy, vengefulness, anger, and the like) and also seek to explain what's ethically objectionable as well as psychologically pernicious about *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*, I shall contend in this paper, is not simply a ten dollar word substitutable for 'resentment,' though it is indeed a species of that genus. My account puts a particular emphasis on the perception that one has been slighted, insulted, or demeaned as at the heart of *ressentiment*. This, I will suggest, is at least as important in understanding *ressentiment* as seeing it as rooted in powerlessness *per se* is. Yet the latter, thanks to Nietzsche's focus on the so-called "will to power," has tended to guide, indeed monopolize, discussions of *ressentiment*, in a way that misses a core dimension of the underlying phenomenon. Likewise, we will miss an important element that is distinctive about *ressentiment* if we take this phenomenon to be captured in purely *descriptive* or *explanatory* terms—telling us why an agent is having a certain reaction, and what role it plays in her psychic economy. On the view I put forward, to be prone to, or to have, *ressentiment* is thereby to manifest a vice or to be temporarily in a vicious condition. In this way, it is akin to avarice, cowardice, lecherousness, boorishness—and other more colorful flaws of character.² Whereas resentment is the genus, which has both commendable and problematic manifestations, *ressentiment*, on my view, is one inherently vicious type of it. Some Nietzsche scholars, thinking they are taking their cue from the great "immoralist" himself, bend over so far backwards to avoid being "moralizing" with their treatment of *ressentiment* that they miss what, as I see it, is the

² Cf. James (2012) on "assholes," for example.

ethical core of *ressentiment*, which serves to identify an inherently criticizable phenomenon. Yet however exactly we understand this state of *ressentiment*, it is an important and theoretically interesting sub-category that deserves more attention in moral psychology than it gets. This paper is an attempt to bring this (sadly topical) notion to the table for further discussion in anglophone moral philosophy.

II. Nietzsche as a Point of Departure

Although there are hints of the idea in earlier work, *ressentiment* is most extensively explored in the first essay of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, and then different manifestations of *ressentiment* are again treated in both of that book's two subsequent essays.³ One of Nietzsche's key claims is that *ressentiment* is the engine of what he calls the "slave revolt" (GM, I:10), marking the transformation from a Greco-Roman warrior ethic centered around the notions of "good" and "bad" to a Judeo-Christian morality centered on the notions of "good" (in a different sense) and "evil." My interest in this paper is not in the role *ressentiment* is supposed to have played in creating or sustaining Judeo-Christian moral values, nor is it in the potential relevance of *ressentiment* to a critical evaluation of such values.⁴ These matters raise considerable complexities, both exegetical and philosophical. I instead want to try to better understand how we might think about this psychological condition itself. What, according to Nietzsche, is *ressentiment*?

Most commentators agree that it is referring to a specific mixture of aggrievement,

³ See Abbey (1999) for a discussion of its anticipations.

⁴ See Bittner (1993); Reginster (1997); Wallace (2007); Poellner (2011) for a discussion of these issues.

hatred and vengefulness.⁵ As mentioned already, this is not simply a term of Nietzsche's invention. It is a French word, but one that was in circulation among educated German speakers since the 17th century.⁶ It was under philosophical discussion in the period right before Nietzsche—though, so far as I can tell, *not* in major figures of Francophone moral and social philosophy, such as La Rochefoucauld or Rousseau.⁷ Eugen Dühring, a philosopher popular in the 19th century and now mostly forgotten, but read, cited, and used as a foil by Nietzsche, makes use of the term, and was Nietzsche's main source for it. Dühring takes *ressentiment* to be an impulse to retaliate against those we take to have done us some injury.⁸ He seeks to explain how this feeling of *ressentiment* is in fact the source of justice, a project Nietzsche finds dubious (GM, II:11).

What does Nietzsche himself make of it? Predictably, it is a matter of interpretive controversy. It is sometimes thought, based on Nietzsche's main examples, that *ressentiment* arises just among the weak and powerless. But, on closer inspection, this is not his view (Cf.,

⁵ For a representative range of readings, see Williams (1993); Bittner (1993); Richardson (1996); Reginster (1997); May (1999); Risse (2003); Janaway (2007); Poellner (2011); Anderson (2011); Leiter (2014); Clark (2015); Katsafanas (2016); Jenkins (2016); Elgat (2017); REDACTED (forthcoming).

⁶ There is some degree of disagreement on the precise details here. See Kaufmann (1950), Bittner (1993), and Risse (2003). Risse notes: "Although 'ressentiment' is a French word (and thus missing from the Grimms' dictionary), the German educated elite had used it since the 17th century. The word was presumably adopted because German lacks a good word for the English 'resentment' and the French 'ressentiment.' (There is the word *Groll*, which, however, does not characterize a frame of mind or an attitude, but tends to arise with regard to a specific event or person.)," p. 164, note 11.

⁷ There are some interesting similarities (but also, in many cases, potential divergences) with an important phenomenon Rousseau describes in his second *Discourse*. According to Rousseau, people, once they are in society with others, long for certain forms of status and esteem. Unlike its allegedly more natural counterpart "*amour-de-soi*," the "*amour-propre*" at the root of this is specifically connected with the phenomenon of people comparing themselves to each other and in particular, wanting to be *better than* others. This psychological hypothesis is the lynchpin of a sweeping speculative story about various social phenomena, most notably, as the title of the essay indicates, the origins of inequality. *Amour-propre*, according to Rousseau, has a tendency to become "inflamed," and in cases where it does, we see many of the familiar marks of *ressentiment*, including sometimes a desire for vengeance. Rousseau (1997 [1754]); Rousseau (1979 [1762]). See Neuhouser (2008) and Kolodny (2010) for further discussion.

⁸ Dühring (1865). See Small (1997) for discussion.

GM, 1:11). It can also, he thinks, arise among those who are not powerless (in any thick or interesting sense), but who feel they have been slighted or injured. This can be a feature of the comparatively well-off, the “noble,” the “strong.” There thus needn’t be conditions of structural deprivation or powerlessness.⁹

Second, it is sometimes thought that *ressentiment* involves vengefulness that has been repressed.¹⁰ It of course can. Those who maintain this are often thinking of Nietzsche’s telling examples of those who preach Christian love, but deep down really feel vengeful hatred, and who cannot be honest with themselves about their malicious feelings. But not all cases of *ressentiment* are like this. The agent beset with *ressentiment* needn’t mask from himself the fact that he is in this condition through mechanisms of self-deception. The anger and vengeful urges can also, to whatever extent possible, be knowingly suppressed for prudential reasons, or indeed can remain at the forefront of consciousness. When either happens, it does not thereby necessarily cease to be *ressentiment*.¹¹

Third, it is sometimes thought that *ressentiment* terminates in or is somehow bound up with value creation or revaluation.¹² Nietzsche gives us a supposed world historical example of this. The priestly people, on the story he tells in the *Genealogy*, take revenge by overturning the nobles’ values and instituting a new set of “slavish” values with mass appeal

⁹ This cuts against a widespread view, which links *ressentiment* in Nietzsche closely (maybe essentially) to powerlessness, e.g., see Scheler (1915), Richardson (1996), p.61, Wallace (2007), Janaway (2007), p. 81, Leiter (2014). It is of course true that powerlessness is a key feature of (much of) the *ressentiment* thematized in GM I, and to that extent these readings are right. But I agree with Jenkins (2016) at least in thinking that we should not assume this powerlessness to be a feature of *ressentiment* in general, as Nietzsche understands it.

¹⁰ Cf., Reginster (1997), p. 286. (Reginster’s current view has moved away from this commitment).

¹¹ There is a more subtle question about whether the agent in the state of *ressentiment* can represent to herself that this is the condition she is in. While many are self-deceived, consciousness of one’s own *ressentiment* is not impossible among the psychologically self-aware. Indeed, one of Nietzsche’s many goals in the *Genealogy* is presumably to get his readers to be more self-aware (GM, “Preface,” 1) about precisely these sorts of elements that continue to operate in our own psychology today. On this theme, see Gemes (2006).

¹² Cf., May (1999), p. 44.

(GM, I:10). But in many other, more ordinary cases, *ressentiment* doesn't involve this. It operates, and festers, against the backdrop of a stable set of values.

Fourth, it is sometimes thought that *ressentiment* needs to be a standing feature of character. Nietzsche will talk, for instance, of venomous people of *ressentiment*, those for whom this deep-seated disposition colors their way of looking at and being in the world. I think he's right that there are such people. But *ressentiment* on his view can also be an episodic state (GM, I:11) in addition to a structuring orientation to the world.¹³ I think he's right to think that as well. It can be a condition that one is in, which lingers for a bit, but which one then one gets over, as one might get over a bout of rage or jealousy. We, in my view, need to understand both sorts of cases, and not assume that *ressentiment* is just the deep-seated thing, or that the deep-seated thing is the only philosophically-interesting phenomenon. As a methodological matter, I think we get *ressentiment* more clearly in to view when we focus first on the episode of *ressentiment*. That is because it is a good first step in understanding people of *ressentiment* to think that they are people disposed to being in *this* sort of state. We of course might also delve deeper into their psychodynamics and say more to try to explain why that is (e.g., their deep feelings of inadequacy, powerlessness, or what have you, and their ways of coping with these). This is one potential approach with certain explanatory

¹³ Jenkins (2016) argues that features of persons of *ressentiment* are wrongly read back into the condition as such, which he goes on to interpret simply as a feeling of vengefulness. Some considerations speak in favor of this reading of Nietzsche. But some speak against this interpretation. I will not pursue them here, since this is not primarily meant to be an exegetical piece. If *ressentiment*, as Nietzsche meant it, is nothing more than a feeling of vengefulness, then the notion, to my mind, becomes less distinctive and interesting in moral and philosophical psychology. It is something for which we already had and have a good term. Yet many who read Nietzsche think that he is on to something more specific and psychologically complex. Vengefulness is indeed a part of that, but not it in its entirety and specificity. I take it that there is indeed such a richer notion to be discussed, and set out to explicate it here. But I don't have the space in this paper to treat all the relevant Nietzschean texts, and thus will not stake anything on the interpretive issue *per se*.

promise in many cases.¹⁴ But I myself am more hesitant about taking this strategy much further, and hence confine myself to thinking about the cluster of symptoms indicating the condition, as opposed to theorizing speculatively about what might further underlie it.

Nietzsche, it seems to me, has arguably put his finger on something psychologically distinctive that is not just in a quasi-mythic, quasi-historical past of priests, nobles, and the slave revolt, but is a key element continuing to operate in human psychology in a pervasive way. He himself further emphasizes this point, noting its ongoing operation in his day: “this plant [of *ressentiment*] now blooms most beautifully among anarchists and anti-Semites—in secret, incidentally, as it has always bloomed, like the violet, albeit with a different scent” (GM, II:11). This, of course, is stinging verbal irony; *ressentiment*’s scent is not “beautiful,” but repulsive.

What I shall seek to do in the next section is to develop an account of *ressentiment*, building on some of the lessons from this section, but in a way that is not meant to be simply or primarily exegesis. Nietzsche has a rhetorical tendency to oversalt his prose with coarsely sweeping claims (e.g., in the quotation above, that *ressentiment* has “always bloomed” “in secret”). Maybe. Other things Nietzsche says seem to be in some tension with that. But we don’t, for the purposes of this paper, need to terminate discussion in parsing Nietzsche’s specific remarks. He is a point of departure for further reflection.

III. A Theory of *Ressentiment*

It is clear enough that *ressentiment* is, in certain respects, akin to a “reactive attitude,”

¹⁴ REDACTED (Forthcoming) makes helpful use of this approach.

in the sense of that term we get from P.F. Strawson.¹⁵ It is a psychological condition involving a perception of something done to one (thus, partly backward-looking), an affective response to this, and certain forward-looking attitudes and wishes for redress. In *ressentiment*, some of the psychology is in common with Strawsonian resentment, but it is more specific in several ways, and importantly different in several ways, which I go on to describe. It is, on my view, a hybrid phenomenon in that it has a descriptive-explanatory dimension (i.e, it tells us what someone is feeling and why) and it has a normative one. In aptly labelling something as *ressentiment*, one is not simply registering value-neutral psychological facts; one is also making a normative judgment and thereby censuring the agent displaying the condition.

Ressentiment is a state of the psyche involving:

- i) suffering and anger in relation to
 - ii) a perceived injury, slight, and/or undesirable state of affairs
 - iii) that one feels to have been perpetrated by some individual or group.
 - iv) One is resentful, and, on some level, regards ii) as unjust or unfair,
 - v) and one moreover focuses on ii) specifically as insulting or demeaning.
 - vi) One desires vengeance against the felt perpetrator.
 - vii) One dwells on i)-vi), often in an obsessive way.
-
- viii) Moreover, the psychological dynamic, in the specific form it takes in the agent in question, is such as to constitute an objectionable feature of character or instance of behavior.

¹⁵ Strawson (1962).

Conditions i)-vii) are descriptive of the agent's psychology. But condition viii) is on my view also crucial. According to the account I provide, *ressentiment* is a normatively-laden phenomenon. Condition viii) is unusual because determining whether it is satisfied relies on a normative judgment, which presumably holds true in virtue of certain features of the agent. But what are these features exactly? Are they simply i)-vii)? My suspicion is that i)-vii) are jointly necessary, but not sufficient. We need a more nuanced, holistic assessment of the particular case, the specific shape of vi) and vii) especially, and their place in the agent's psychic economy, in a way that will elude elaboration in terms of further specific conditions that are usefully regulative. That is tantamount to saying that there is a role that discerning (and often controversial) normative judgment plays in the application of this, as it were, ethical diagnosis in specific cases.

Such normatively-flavored phenomena are familiar in moral-psychological life: People are boorish, cowardly, perverted, lecherous, judgmental, self-righteous, people-pleasing, or more colorfully, but familiarly: "assholes."¹⁶ My focus is not on the niceties of these terms, nor to weigh in on rarified debates in the philosophy of language and meta-ethics about thick terms or concepts more generally, but instead to suggest that there are these vice phenomena, however exactly they are to be analyzed. That much, I take it, should be fairly uncontroversial. I will claim that *ressentiment* is a phenomenon like this. As with the notions above, it

¹⁶ One might think that the latter invectives *simply* function to convey generic disapproval, but that is rather doubtful. See James (2012) for a thought-provoking account of one such term. They would seem at least to have some richer descriptive content, since these terms are not interchangeable, and often seem apt for different (if sometimes overlapping) types of censurable behavior (and people).

can involve episodes (e.g., “that was so cowardly of you not to speak up for him at the meeting”) or can involve alleged standing features of character (“you are a coward and your behavior at the meeting once again demonstrated that”). *Ressentiment* similarly can come in temporally-limited episodes, or as a standing feature of character. For reasons given in the previous section, I see *episodes* as having explanatory priority. We best see what *ressentiment* is by seeking to understand an episode of it, and we derivatively understand a person of *ressentiment* as someone disposed (for various reasons, which could be further elaborated) to episodes of this kind.

Let me turn to expanding on the conditions of an episode of *ressentiment* in the order set out above. *Ressentiment* is, first of all, characterized by a negative phenomenology. If there is an injury or a slight or an unfortunate condition that I don’t know about, or don’t care much about, it is not going to be the occasion for *ressentiment*. It has to, on some level, make me suffer and make me angry. Those are of course different sorts of states, but they go hand-in-hand. One is primarily angry about that which one perceives to have caused one’s suffering. Hence i).

Ressentiment is provoked by something, and frequently (though not always) takes this as its target. This spark can be an isolated incident (e.g., Maria got the promotion, and John didn’t), or a more standing condition (e.g., John is upset that no one seems to respect or appreciate his philosophical contributions). Often it is a combination of the two, where a particular incident might tap into deeper and more pervasive feelings of inadequacy, indignation, or frustration. Sometimes, the cause of the *ressentiment* and its intentional object may come apart. John might have *ressentiment* about Maria’s promotion, but the cause (or at least a major cause) of the *ressentiment* is (let us suppose) his own feelings of inadequacy (which

he may or may not fully admit to himself). Likewise, an agent may have *ressentiment* in reaction to what he merely perceives to be a slight, but which in fact isn't. (Perhaps he mishears or misinterprets a compliment as an insult.) *Ressentiment* is thus a reaction to a ii) perceived injury, slight, and/or undesirable state of affairs.¹⁷

Ressentiment is a three-way relation. There is the agent with the *ressentiment*, the state or incident it is in response to, and the putative perpetrator on whom his ire fixates. This perpetrator described in iii) is the felt cause of the state or incident that the agent is reacting to. The agent with *ressentiment* needn't (reflectively anyway) think of the perpetrator as an agent or group agent.¹⁸ He might have *ressentiment* against someone that he doesn't reflectively take to be morally responsible, or even aware of what's going on. The putative perpetrator can be a group, but needn't be reflectively thought by the agent with *ressentiment* to be exercising concerted group agency. The point is that the problematic state or incident is not simply regarded as an unfortunate state of affairs; it is a constitutive part of *ressentiment* that blame is sought somewhere. The person with *ressentiment* feels, on some level, that the state or incident is traceable to this perpetrator. The allegedly perpetrating individual or group is *felt* to be blameworthy, even if this makes no real reflective sense. The connection to the alleged perpetrator is often tenuous, illogical, or entirely non-existent. (Someone might be upset about his declining standard of living and the loss of social respect among his peers, and blame "immigrants" for that.) Sometimes, this blame may be out of step

¹⁷ These overlap in that injuries and slights are also undesirable states of affairs, but except in a fairly minimal sense, not all undesirable states of affairs (even those one perceives, per iii), to have been "perpetrated") are injuries. *The-jobs-having-all-dried-up* is, I take it, an undesirable state of affairs which one might feel, however wrongly, has been perpetrated by "immigrants." That is related to an injury (one's being out of job, say) but it is not itself an injury. The point in differentiating these is that one's reaction can primarily be focused on an undesirable state of affairs more than on an injury per se, though in conditions iv) and v), of course, they can shade back together.

¹⁸ Cf. in this respect Strawson (1962) on resentment.

with one's conscious, reflectively-endorsed beliefs, but one feels it to be the case even so. One might thus have *ressentiment* toward that conspicuously successful person even though he has not led in any appreciable or intelligible way to the unfortunate (or often—let's be realistic—very moderately less fortunate) state one finds oneself in; what will make this a case of *ressentiment* instead of just envy is in part the primitive unconscious logic of this sort of assignment of blame.¹⁹ To further illustrate the centrality of such blame, take the case of a person who loses his legs in an accident. Unless there is a target of his anger in the form of a felt perpetrator (whether an agent, a group, or a more abstract entity [e.g., that corporation] on whom blame is placed), it is not going to be a case of *ressentiment*. If one truly just accepts (both theoretically, and, crucially, at a more affective or unconscious level) that it is a freak occurrence, one is not going to have *ressentiment*, though one may have a range of other negative emotions (e.g., despondency, frustration). Hence, I submit, condition iii). Tying i) to iii) together, and explaining their connection, we can say that i) is a key aspect of the agent's reaction to ii) and the perceived perpetrator described in iii), but the reaction, importantly, goes beyond just this suffering and anger.

Ressentiment will also bring to bear a normative framework in the agent's thinking as well. Although the idea of the perpetrator is here basically just a causal one (however faint or nonexistent the actual causal influence), the agent with *ressentiment* will feel that something unjust or unfair has been done to him. I stress this point because ordinary moral resentment and *ressentiment* can overlap a great deal. It is sometimes wrongly supposed that they must be distinguished sharply; if thoughts of morality or justice enter the picture, it is

¹⁹ For a discussion of the irrational forms blame can take, see Pickard (2013). We often have a psychological tendency to blame those we do not reflectively regard as blameworthy.

thought, then it becomes a case of moral resentment and is no longer *ressentiment*.²⁰ But this is wrong; they are not mutually exclusive. Cases of resentment can be (or can turn into) cases of *ressentiment* depending on how these feelings of moral indignation and the like operate within the agent's psychological economy. It's striking, in fact, how often the vocabulary of justice or fairness gets appealed to by agents of apparent *ressentiment*. This happens even when the notion of justice or fairness being employed is highly warped, or reflective of a perverse sense of entitlement. Elliott Rodger's constant refrain centers around these notions; these women *ought* to be having sex with him, yet aren't. He distortedly perceives this to be deeply unfair and unjust.²¹ While notions of justice often play a central role in the agent's thinking, *ressentiment* can sometimes persist with a clear-eyed awareness of one's own shortcomings. Someone might slight you in some way, perhaps by saying you are too unattractive ever to land an attractive partner, or too untalented to be a successful philosopher. Now suppose this is a case where the person is not knowingly giving offense, maybe saying this in a way that is not gratuitously mean, in a situation where you accidentally overheard. You might agree with their assessment, and their assessment might be true, but you might still be primed for *ressentiment*. The cases ripe for *ressentiment* are those where there is not just a blow to your self-esteem, which of course there is here, but where you feel (again, this needn't be a rational or reflective judgment) the injustice or unfairness of the situation,

²⁰ Cf., May (1999). It might be thought that *ressentiment*, on Nietzsche's account, preexists (and in fact precipitates) morality; therefore, morality and thoughts of justice can't figure into the psychology of *ressentiment*. Even simply as Nietzsche exegesis, this conclusion is unwarranted. First, there can be normative thoughts of justice (fairness and unfairness, desert, blame, etc.) that are not part of the Judeo-Christian framework that, according to Nietzsche, arises with the slave revolt. Second, even if specifically moral thoughts don't figure in all instances of *ressentiment*, such as those preceding the slave revolt, that has no bearing on whether they figure in some later instances of *ressentiment*.

²¹ See Srinivasan (2018b) and Manne (2017) for discussion of this case.

for instance, because of differing “constitutive luck.”²² “How come he is so talented and handsome and I am not?” Thus, you might, in some sense, agree with the facts stated in the slight, but still feel your condition to be, in some sense, unjust or unfair.²³ Hence iv). Remember, the assignment of blame here is often completely irrational; you might be upset, in essence, about your constitutive luck and still blame someone who, in fact, had no hand in that at all. This is indeed a frequent pattern in *ressentiment*.

Ressentiment is not a matter of just any sort of injury, however. It, I suspect, involves injuries, slights, or undesirable states of affairs that are perceived, with indignation, to represent an affront. The basic idea is that the injury, slight, or standing state of affairs is one that insults or demeans your worth, either as a person, or in some more specific role, particularly one that you care very much about (e.g., being an accomplished philosopher or sports-person). Suppose someone says something cutting about my philosophical acumen. That may be a source of worry. But I will not feel similarly about my basketball talents, such as they are, being denigrated, because I have no such talents, and don’t care about having them. For others, matters may be reversed with philosophy and basketball. Of course, in some thin Kantian sense, *any* moral wrong deliberately done to you (e.g., being robbed) arguably fails to respect the humanity in your person, and is to that extent an affront. But I think it’s just a matter of contingent psychological fact that most people do not in these circumstances tend to get especially exercised by the affront to their dignity *per se*, in comparison with other harms suffered (for instance, having one’s possessions lost, one’s peace of mind walking home at night ruined, the terror inflicted during the mugging, and so on.). This means most

²² Nagel (1979).

²³ Cf., Elgat (2017).

of these circumstances tend not to produce *ressentiment*, because people (maybe ardent Kantians aside) don't focus or dwell on this dignity/status-related aspect of the situation. Those situations that arouse *ressentiment* are instead ones where this dimension is more salient in the agent's conceptualization of and feeling about the wrong perpetrated.

Places where social hierarchies are in play are especially fertile for *ressentiment*. Yet although we often (tempted by Nietzsche's main examples) think of *ressentiment* as coming, as it were, from the bottom of the hierarchy up, it needn't be this way. Witness the fragile ego of Donald Trump, so easily slighted. It also characterizes situations where people are at or near the very top of the pecking order, and feel that this is not being adequately respected. Take the case of the sulking Achilles, which seems to me to be a central instance of *ressentiment*. He feels that the prize of Briseis should have gone to him, yet he has been unfairly deprived by Agamemnon. He's not doubtful that he deserves her. He believes he does, and that is partly what precipitates his spectacular episode of *ressentiment* that we get at the beginning of the *Illiad*. Or consider certain middle-class white supremacists, or the proverbial well-off Trump voter. They might feel *ressentiment* toward people they think are encroaching on their territory, getting "uppity," lazy moochers getting things they don't deserve, and that they—the middle-class white people—are not getting the respect they deserve for their upstandingness, hard work, and so on. (Whether it is an instance of *ressentiment* will depend on the specifics of the case, which we are often not in a good position to judge; all the real-world examples I give are governed by that crucial proviso.) It is important to remember that although *ressentiment* is most often felt toward those one perceives to be higher in the pecking order, it can also be felt toward those one perceives to be lower, or toward one's perceived equals. Affronts to status in the form of perceived slights or insults,

elevation of others to what one regards as an inappropriate status, and deprivation of what one thinks one is due on account of one's status usually figure centrally in *ressentiment*.²⁴ Hence v). Together, conditions iv) and v) could be thought of as constituting a kind of *indignation* in the face of ii-iii).

But for all we have said so far, this might well just be an instance of ordinary moral resentment in the form of such indignation. A situation where someone is demeaning you, and you (understandably) are upset in response could fit the basic pattern of i)-v) too. Yet it is how the agent *processes and responds* to this indignation, as well as the simmering [condition (vii)] of this, and of the related anger and suffering [condition (i)] that will take us into the distinctive territory of *ressentiment*. A desire for revenge will notably be paramount. Sometimes these revenge fantasies are consciously entertained on the part of the agent, as in the case of the embittered narrator in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*. Sometimes they are unacknowledged by the agent, who claims to love his neighbor as himself, but still gets the thrill of vengefulness, under the guise of the triumph of "justice." And sometimes the revenge is acted upon. Why the *desire* for revenge, though? How does indignation progress to this point, instead of toward wanting alternative modes of redress (such as, for instance, simply wanting an apology, change in future behavior, etc.)?

We can approach this question in a few ways. What does the agent *aim* to achieve with the revenge? What, if anything, would *satisfy* the person wanting revenge? Or: What *function* is this revenge (and desire for revenge) serving in the agent's psychic economy? These potentially give us different sorts of angles on the underlying psychological 'logic' of revenge

²⁴ Clark (2015) is right to highlight the dimension of being slighted as a core element of the phenomenon (at least according to Nietzsche).

(to the extent there is a logic to it at all).

The desire for revenge, in general, arises against the backdrop of a perceived injustice or slight of some kind. (Hence the connection between vi) and the preceding conditions). Revenge seeks to respond to this situation especially, though not exclusively, by way of *payback*, usually violence exacted against the perceived wrongdoer, with their suffering maybe a kind of compensation for the wronged party, maybe thought of in terms of what the wrongdoer more primitively deserves, maybe a combination of both.²⁵ *Ressentiment* aside, that is perhaps the most paradigmatic operation of ordinary revenge, from the *Illiad*, to the *Oresteia*, to *Hamlet*, to *Once Upon a Time in the West*, to Tarantino. The wrongdoers must be made to pay, whether with their lives, or with some form of suffering. Revenge often involves wanting to inflict this payback oneself. But not always: For instance, the desire for revenge can be satisfied when the felt wrongdoer gets what is perceived to be a deserved comeuppance, even when it is just fate (or God or the gods), and not one's own agency, that brings this about.²⁶ What people *want* when they want revenge varies, and it is often unclear even to they themselves what exactly they want, or whether they would be satisfied if they got it, or whether even by their lights justice would, in any way, be served. This is compounded in cases of *ressentiment* because the perceived perpetrators are often simply symbolic scapegoats, demonized by the agent of *ressentiment* for matters (e.g., bad constitutive luck, cosmic

²⁵ The saying "success is the best revenge" could be interpreted as meaning, somewhat obliquely, that one prefers success *over* revenge. But I think there are borderline cases where success is itself perceived as revenge. (Hence one reason revenge needn't be violent, though often is, and where it is not straightforwardly a kind of "payback.") Suppose someone who's already won the International Kant Prize writes a nasty review of your book, then the next year *you* win the International Kant Prize. You might appreciate that as a kind of sweet revenge, and not just for the distress your success caused the other person, or that you somehow deprived him of a good; suppose, for instance, he couldn't win the prize a second time...

²⁶ A similar point is underscored by Nietzsche in the core example he gives in GM, I:15.

or systemic injustices, or alleged such “injustices”) with which they had little or nothing personally to do, and for which they have little or nothing to answer for morally.

It’s important to see that the wished-for revenge, if successful, wouldn’t necessarily put the injured party in a substantially better position. It needn’t be strategic in this way. The underpaid waiter upset with his economic lot can want that grossly demanding, gratingly successful rich person he’s serving, who’s treating him like dirt, to choke accidentally on his Michelin-starred meal. But though the waiter might take a certain perverse satisfaction in the thought of this revenge, it would not, were it to come about, counteract the demeaning mistreatment, or better the waiter’s economic lot one whit, or make him feel better about himself. Equally, it is important to note that people desire such revenge, even when it would, in some obvious sense, be deeply counterproductive, not just to desire the revenge, but to exact it. After all, it is a notable fact that people are sometimes willing to die in the process of securing revenge. It is an interesting question why, and I suspect there is not a general answer to this. Elliot Rodger began his revenge-fuelled shooting spree likely aware, or suspecting, that it would be the final act of his life. Perhaps he was already bent on suicide, and desperate to take as much of the world with him as he could. But his vengeful motives likely did not have a single strategic logic, or single psychological determinant. On one level, he wanted to right, through violence, what he perceived to be a cosmic injustice, to, as he puts it at various places in his manifesto, *make people pay* for what [sic] “they” have [sic] “done” to him. Thus he describes his actions in terms of a “Day of Retribution.”²⁷

But surely that is not the whole psychological story in his case, or in many others. Consider things from a more functional perspective: Revenge, in some cases, may be a way

²⁷ <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/1173619/rodger-manifesto.pdf>

of venting the hostile, unpleasant emotions that have built up, and even simply *desiring* the revenge may allow for that to some degree, if only, as Nietzsche might put it, in effigy. This may partly explain why there is psychological satisfaction in mere fantasies of revenge, throwing darts at the person's visage pinned to the wall, or some analogue of this in imagination.²⁸ Revenge may also be a way of somehow reassuring oneself (or maybe others) of one's own strength and potency by proving what one can do, perhaps trying thereby to counteract the sense of being demeaned. The bullied school shooter doesn't want to feel weak, and, by shooting up the school, he shows everyone in a terrifying fashion that he is far stronger than they thought. (And there may be a corresponding shadow satisfaction simply in *imagining* what one might do that might show them this.) But it is important not to get carried away reductively with either of these psychological points and think that revenge is really always "about," say, proving oneself or venting, even if, by taking revenge, one *sometimes* accomplishes both of those things as well. In any event, it is frequently crucial in *ressentiment* that one desires such vengeance against the perceived wrongdoer, where that vengeance is typically perceived by the agent of *ressentiment* (however irrationally) to be *righting an injustice through payback*. In any event, hence vi).

Even when revenge does eventually get taken, it is important, I believe, that the agent dwells on the situation for a period. This means that *ressentiment*, while potentially episodic,

²⁸ Describing a "thirst for retribution," James (2012) vividly notes, "Reactive feelings do not simply arise in the moment of confrontation. They can intrude on a pleasant sunny day, in a flashing image of the man in question suddenly breaking out in a rash, of his losing his bladder control in a public place, of his convulsing from having eaten poisoned food, of his being mowed down by a truck, of his being crushed by a meteor, or of fluids spraying spontaneously out of all his orifices (onto his friends standing nearby), p. 121. It is important to note, in this vivid catalogue of nastiness, that these vengeful satisfactions would not be brought about *through one's own agency*, thus vengeance is not in general about considering what you could or would do the person *yourself*, though it sometimes is.

has to be of some duration. It is etymologically reflected in the word. *Ressentiment* has its root in “*sentir*” (“to feel” in French, from the Latin “*sentire*”). *Re-sentir* is to feel something again, with the connotations of reliving it vividly.²⁹ The agent mulls over the slight, perceived injustice, etc., in some cases obsessively, thinks about how the grievance might be redressed through revenge, and fantasizes about or plots that revenge, and sometimes actually takes it. Hence vii).³⁰ But we should not make the common mistake that even if *ressentiment* begins here, it needs to end here. If we focus a great deal on the examples Nietzsche gives in GM I, we might think *ressentiment*-filled agents are those who are constitutionally powerless and incapable of taking real revenge, so make due with compensatory substitutes only. This certainly is characteristic of some agents with *ressentiment*. But others who are capable of revenge refrain from it for seemingly prudential reasons (Achilles not killing Agamemnon, for instance). And some actually do take revenge, whether in the form of petty passive aggression or in savage violence or in something in between. This may or may not dissipate their underlying *ressentiment*.

Now for the final and perhaps most complex and elusive point. Conditions i)-vii) are not quite enough for understanding the charge of *ressentiment*. For *ressentiment*, I maintain, is not a purely descriptive notion. To have *ressentiment* is to manifest a vice in an episode,

²⁹ Cf. Jenkins (2016).

³⁰ Since my own account is not an exegesis of Nietzsche, I will not consider at length whether this condition should be attributed to him (see Jenkins (2016)). It is evident, as mentioned in the previous section, that he thinks that the strong and noble can sometimes have *ressentiment* and that this *ressentiment* can terminate in successful revenge (GM, I:10). Whether they might “dwell” on it is more difficult to say. If they do, it is not for very long. He does say that in the strong their *ressentiment* terminates in a “*sofortigen Reaktion*” and thus it does not “poison” them (GM, I:10). This has been translated (correctly) as “immediate reaction,” which can suggest instantaneity, but could also be correctly rendered as “prompt reaction.” (A German server who tells you your food “*kommt sofort*” is not of course at that very instant setting it down on your table...) If one is strong, one can go back over things, vividly relive the injury, as one, as it were, sharpens one’s sword, then get down to revenge promptly; for Nietzsche, revenge is a dish that the strong serve warm. Like the promised food, *es kommt sofort*.

or, more deeply, in character (if it is a standing feature of your personality). *Ressentiment* is a vicious species of resentful indignation. But its vicious dimension cannot, I suspect, be usefully specified in terms of further conditions. For this reason, though I think conditions i)-vii) are necessary for *ressentiment*, I am doubtful about claiming that they are sufficient. Identifying it, I believe, requires an exercise in moral judgment, to the effect that the agent in that condition is vicious, on account of the *particular shape and manifestation* that i)-vii) take in his or her case. The cases of *ressentiment*, on my account, are the cases where such moral judgment is apt.³¹

Though I will refrain from giving further specific conditions, I think we can at least do a bit to try to explain what grounds such a judgment, that is, *why* it's a vice (or an instance of viciousness) when it is. Broadly-speaking, there are two routes toward explaining what makes something a vice. (I'll mostly just use that term "vice" for the sake of simplicity, but note that I am talking about both character traits and about episodes of viciousness.)

One route is more *functional*, in both personal and social terms. Something can be a vice (indolence, for instance) because the behavior or the character trait hampers one's flourishing as a person. If you fritter away your entire day smoking pot, eating chips, and watching television, you will have certain higher possibilities of accomplishment foreclosed to you. Something can also be a vice because the behavior or the character trait hampers the flourishing or well-being of a group. Being self-centered and uncooperative fit this pattern.

The second route to explaining why something is a vice is more *constitutive*. It says

³¹ For those with doubts about what this commits one to meta-ethically, a weaker view can also suffice. Judgments or attributions of *ressentiment* (like attributions of, say, lecherousness) include a judgment, on the part of the one applying the charge, that the affected agent is thereby vicious in the episode of behavior or in character, or in both. One needn't subscribe to the idea that there are *facts* licensing the aptness of such judgments; one could simply see it as an expression of disapproval, for instance.

that the vicious behavior *in itself constitutes an ethical defect*. The classic Aristotelian vices provide one such model for this. The reaction and dispositions of the *phronimos* indicate (or maybe constitute) the mean in what is appropriate. But, on this particular model, there are then excesses or deficiencies, extremes of over-doing it or under-doing it. So for instance, the “magnificent” person might spend an appropriately large sum on a feast. But at one extreme, that of excess, a person will spend too much in ways so as to be tastelessly vulgar, at the other extreme, a person will spend too little in ways that are stingy.³² To be clear, I’m not myself propounding this model here—I find it rather too schematic to accommodate some vices—but merely giving an *example* of a view on which vices are constitutive demerits. These two routes for understanding vice—functionally and constitutively—are compatible, since constitutive defects (e.g., excesses and deficiencies, on the Aristotelian model) can also have functional shortcomings. The crucial point with a constitutive view *per se* is that a vice’s badness doesn’t consist *solely* in these functional shortcomings, where that is explained in terms of *downstream causal effects*.

With these broader ideas of the functional and the constitutive in mind, what are we to say about *ressentiment’s* vice profile? It can, I believe, *partly* be understood functionally. There are, that is to say, ways *ressentiment* is often bad for the agents afflicted by it because of what it leads to. It can tend to impair functioning through its potential for distorting effects on the rest of the psyche. Its frequently obsessive quality might, in some cases, steal energy from other tasks. Its retrospective focus might, in some cases, lead one to dwell on past slights rather than planning for the future. The self-deception it sometimes involves might

³² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1122a-1123a.

undermine one's integrity as an agent.³³ Its emphasis on violence might lead the agent to outright self-destruction. Its bad effects can also be thought of socially. People beset with *ressentiment* can make whole environments around them "toxic," as we often say, whether by fostering *ressentiment* in others, or simply by creating an insalubrious and unpleasant atmosphere. When faced with people of *ressentiment*, we often want to keep a *cordon sanitaire*.³⁴ Far worse can come of *ressentiment* as well, particularly when it turns violent. The fact that it can be problematic in these different ways in different individual cases is partly why, per viii), we require a careful holistic look at the afflicted agent, and a particular normative judgment about its manifestation in his or her case.

But we should not just stop with the functional, as though this were the whole story. It can also be vicious, I argue, because it is constitutively bad. Here it is ethically bad in itself, not because of some further bad thing it leads to. But why might it be bad *in itself*? By their nature, such questions are notoriously difficult to answer in an informative way. One wants to say: *It just is*. To say something (here, a vice) is good or bad *in itself* is already at or near a kind of explanatory bedrock.

We might, though, explore the idea that *ressentiment* constitutes a kind of *error* and is bad for that reason. We might try to flesh out the error in an epistemic way, so as to claim that in cases of *ressentiment* a mistake is being made, for instance, a mischaracterization or

³³ This point is developed well in Reginster (1997).

³⁴ Nietzsche, for this reason, will thus sometimes use metaphors associated with poisoning in connection with *ressentiment*, for instance in GM, I:10, where he suggests that undischarged *ressentiment* poisons. Another crucial Nietzschean metaphor is that of explosiveness (GM, III: 14), which points us toward the possibility that *ressentiment* might turn violent, an important observation that not enough interpreters of Nietzsche have taken on board.

misrepresentation of one's target, or appeal to a faulty idea of justice.³⁵ There is often an error of these kinds. But while this, as I indicated above, happens frequently (scapegoating of perpetrators, mistaken ideas of justice or of what one is entitled to, etc.), it doesn't happen always, and even when it does, it doesn't exhaust why it's vicious. Sometimes the issue is instead the disproportionate magnitude or inappropriate duration of the reaction. False beliefs, again, may be involved here, but needn't be. The agent with *ressentiment* may have identified the appropriate perpetrator and may be angry about a genuine injustice, but may take something small too far. Indeed, she might even believe her reaction to be of inappropriate magnitude while unaccountably in the grips of it. If there is a kind of error here, it is an ethical error in attitude and action, not an epistemic error in belief. Likewise, the viciousness of *ressentiment* may be due (partly anyway) to its deleterious effects on the agent or on others, even where there is no error in target or in moral framework.

Another potential route would draw on the Aristotelian model. It could be thought an excess or deficiency of a corresponding virtue. But this seems to me an inadequate account as well. First of all, there is probably not a single virtue to which the vice of *ressentiment* corresponds. The best candidate perhaps is judiciousness, but citing that is far less informative than focusing, as the appropriate flipside of *ressentiment*, on the more specific virtuous ways of coping with one's indignation in the face of some perceived wrong, in contrast to seeking vengeance characteristic of *ressentiment*.³⁶ Appropriate reactions could involve a

³⁵ May (1999), p. 42, claims that this falsification of the target is a key feature of *ressentiment*. This sometimes happens, but as a general matter, this characterization seems to me incorrect. It can involve a clear-eyed apprehension of the object of one's animus.

³⁶ It should be noted here that I am not claiming that i) to vii) are sufficient for *ressentiment* and, moreover, I am not claiming that they are the reason the agent is to be condemned ethically, per viii). My account is thus compatible with the idea that we might more positively or neutrally judge certain vengeful agents who stew on their urges, given the specifics of their cases. How about someone who wants Eichmann to suffer for his

range of things: registering the wrong, most likely suffering from it, and being angry about it, identifying the correct party to blame, if any, and perhaps, where appropriate, seeking an apology, or legal redress, modification of future behavior, offering forgiveness, altering the relationship with the perpetrator, brushing it off, etc. In the cases of *ressentiment*, this will take a vicious turn, in the particular ways that the agent desires vengeance and dwells on such revenge, and in the ways that the rest of the psychological dynamic unfolds in related behaviors and attitudes colored by this desire for vengeance. That might involve certain excesses or deficiencies. But tempting as it is to forswear the complexities of the qualitative with something that sounds as though it is quantitative, this actually gets us little explanatory traction.

I'm doubtful, as I say, this can be specified in terms of further necessary and sufficient conditions, except to note (which, admittedly, can seem rather unsatisfying) that they constitute an ethical defect, the identifying of which requires an exercise in normative judgment. But alas, the true view is sometimes unsatisfying in this way, unsatisfying at least if we labor under the (in my view, unrealistic) expectation that complex moral-psychological particularities can be regimented, in such a way as to absolve us of the difficult task of judgment and

dehumanizing treatment of Jews? Does Simon Wiesenthal have *ressentiment*? How about a battered wife plotting vengeance against her demeaning husband? Or Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son*? (Thanks to _____ for these excellent examples respectively). My theory predicts *why* these borderline cases are tricky. We will need to make a normative judgment about the particular agent displaying these traits and their operations in his or her psychic economy. In some of these cases, we might think that desiring vengeance is appropriate, or at least understandable or excusable, such that we might not want to condemn the agent who has such desires and stew on them. Our willingness to describe something as *ressentiment*, as opposed simply to resentment, can vary with our assessment of the normative facts of the situation. At the same time, we need to remember, in thinking about these cases, the functional dimension of vice as well. An agent with *ressentiment* might not be manifesting an ethical defect in itself for which we would criticize her morally, but might be *doing badly* because of the way it impairs her flourishing. The charge of viciousness, and *ressentiment*, might rest simply on that. (Compare how we might, on these sorts of functional grounds, indict as a vice someone's extreme and unproductive scrupulousness without condemning him morally for this (indeed while in some sense praising him for this.)

interpretation in individual cases.³⁷ By the same token, I doubt we can give useful conditions for separating, say, the lecherous person from the (simply) horny person; we must instead make recourse to a moral judgment on the specific forms his behavior and attitudes take. Such is a consequence of these conditions' inherently normative inflection, coupled with a sensible holism and particularism in this domain. Some conditions of the psyche, ethically speaking, are *just plain bad*. End of story. To always expect some "because" clause after that seems to me a misunderstanding both of moral life and of the objective of a moral philosophy that is trying to comprehend it adequately. But that is borne of my particularist bent. The heart of my account, it should be noted, is potentially compatible with various more systematic pictures of the vices, if one's taste is for such things, and one wanted to draw on it to explain why *ressentiment* is a vice.

To say that *ressentiment* is an objectionable psychic condition, an ethical vice or defect, is not to deny that it can have good effects. It might be conducive to creativity. It might make one work all the harder to prove oneself. Give one a certain energy. And so on. It's in general true of defects or vices that they can have this structure of potential benefit (to oneself, and to the broader world) as well as harm. A enduring lesson from Nietzsche, in fact, is that it is rare for things to be wholly good or wholly bad. Thanks to *ressentiment*, humanity, he claims, has become deeper and more interesting (GM, I:6). *Ressentiment's* complex effects are bound up in a way that is very difficult to disentangle.³⁸ Similarly, as with some other

³⁷ Even if we did try to specify such conditions, the interesting question would be whether a particular agent *meets* them, and the normative issues would come in at this level.

³⁸ For the heterodox attempt to rehabilitate (what he and his principal subject Jean Améry call) *ressentiment* and claim that it might even be praiseworthy, see Brudholm (2008). To my mind, his case is really one against forgiveness and in favor of ongoing justified anger in circumstances of grave injustice.

vices and flaws, there might, in some cases, be mitigating or excusing conditions for it, when we know more about how the agent ended up this way, either as a trait of character or as the background to an episode of behavior. (Not, I dare say, with Elliott Rodger, whose autobiographical manifesto, dripping with entitlement, inspires little sympathy, but with some more borderline cases perhaps.) But that said, there is always going to be something *pro tanto* bad about the state of *ressentiment* and something ethically defective about an agent in this state. We will sometimes be prone to think of it as (to use another Nietzschean metaphor) an ugliness of character, so much so that we almost instinctively turn our heads and cringe when faced with its manifestations. That is not of course an explanation of its viciousness, exactly, but it does reflect the fact that we regard it (like lecherousness, perhaps) as an especially repulsive form of vice.

It is a defect of character even where the target of *ressentiment* is, in some sense, an appropriate target of the reactive feelings. Even in cases where the anger is, in some sense, justified, or morally justified, my view indicates that there is something problematic about slipping into *ressentiment* itself. Consider people with what we regard as the right moral and political views, whatever those may be. The target of their criticism is blameworthy, deserving of censure and so on. But in some cases, they have slipped from righteous anger into what many I think rightly will regard as a toxic, ugly condition. Social media and the blogosphere will quickly acquaint one with some ready examples.

We should be careful not to conflate *ressentiment* and anger, however. In some circumstances, anger (including long-standing anger) is the entirely appropriate emotion to have. Some philosophical positions rooted in Stoicism try to dissuade us from anger entirely.

They claim it is a destructive emotion that we should avoid. It clouds our epistemic rationality, makes us less sensitive to considerations of justice, and exacerbates psychic tension within ourselves.³⁹ Amia Srinivasan in my view rightly points out that these Stoic and neo-Stoic treatments of anger conflate the issue of whether anger is apt and whether its effects are good.⁴⁰ It can be assessed along both dimensions. My own view on the topic is what we might describe as neo-Aristotelian.⁴¹ Anger is an appropriate emotion in certain circumstances. There is something meritorious about the agent who feels the appropriate amount of anger in the appropriate degree in the appropriate circumstances. There is, *prima facie* at least, something wanting in the agent (the doormat, for instance, or the utterly affectless person) who fails to feel anger when such anger is called for. One who is opposed to *ressentiment* needn't be opposed to anger in all its forms. For while *ressentiment* involves anger, not all anger involves *ressentiment*. One important distinction between anger and *ressentiment* is that anger needn't be bound up with a desire for revenge. The angry agent, for instance,

³⁹ The *locus classicus* is Seneca, *De Ira* [On Anger]. See Nussbaum (2001) and (2014) for a contemporary treatment in a neo-Stoic spirit. Nussbaum is not against strong emotions in general, but thinks there is something especially problematic about anger in particular.

⁴⁰ Srinivasan (2018a). Cf. D'Arms and Jacobson (2000) on the issue of whether an emotion (e.g., envy) is fitting to the situation to which it is a response (thus, appropriate in one sense) and the oft-conflated issue of whether it is good/ethically appropriate to feel it. The feelings/emotions associated with *ressentiment* might sometimes be appropriate in the first sense, and sometimes not (for instance, in some of the scapegoating or deranged-sense-of-justice cases). But it is a separate issue whether the reaction is, as it were, *ethically appropriate*. I maintain it is not appropriate in this latter ethical way, though could be in the former way (where the agent actually has been unjustly demeaned by the targeted perpetrator(s)). These two senses complicate our answer to whether the characteristic reactions of *ressentiment* are "justified" or "appropriate."

⁴¹ Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1125b-1126a. ("The person who is angry at the right things and toward the right people, and also in the right way, at the right time, and for the right length of time, is praised" [1125a, trans. T. Irwin]. Aristotle's own characterization of anger in the *Rhetoric* (1378a-b) connects it closely with a desire for revenge. As Nietzsche would no doubt have noted, this is one of many important ways that the pagan classical world differs from the Christian and post-Christian one. When angered, the expectation in the Greek world, even in Aristotle's time, is that one (like Achilles or Odysseus of yore) wants and takes revenge, rather than "turning the other cheek," or some non-vengeance based alternative. Our suspicion and condemnation of vengeance is a sign of the ongoing dominance of, at bottom, Christian morality, even once its metaphysics has been superseded.

might just want a sincere recognition of the harm caused and an apology from the wrongdoer, or steps taken to remedy the underlying issue in the future. Yet such anger can slide into the territory of *ressentiment*. We all know of angry people who just can't "let go," who felt appropriate anger initially, but continue to nurse the grievance well beyond that point. These are sometimes cases of *ressentiment*. The most pernicious forms of *ressentiment* (as Nietzsche profoundly recognized) are those that are no longer episodic responses to a particular incident but become one's default orientation toward the world.⁴²

Of course, angry agents can often be challenging to be around as well, and general discomfort on the part of others needn't be a consideration against their justified anger. It might be good, and appropriate, that they make others upset by, for instance, drawing attention to an injustice that is difficult to face. The mere fact that the emotion makes one difficult to be around doesn't settle whether it is *ressentiment* or a manifestation of anger that is not a form of *ressentiment*. Judging whether it is *ressentiment* depends on the psychology of the agent (and, crucially, a normative judgment about it). Observers can be highly fallible (as well as biased) judges of this. A rush to label a state as *ressentiment* can be a way of unduly dismissing its legitimacy and avoiding a confrontation with a view, a point, or a person that one doesn't want to deal with.

So far, I've presented an account of what I take *ressentiment* to be. But what's to say that the state I've identified is appropriately described as "*ressentiment*"? The objection might run as follows: I've strayed too far from Nietzsche. The term, this thought continues, only really makes sense in the context of Nietzsche's work and the examples he gives us. That

⁴² See Wallace (2007), Leiter (2014), and Huddleston (2017) for further elaboration of this distinction between episodic *ressentiment* and being a 'person of *ressentiment*.'

determines its meaning. In response, I would say that Nietzsche has no proprietary claim on this notion. It was in discourse before him, and it now has resonances of its own (which Nietzsche played a key, though not exclusive, role in shaping.) Moreover, we should not suppose that a great deal in my account turns on the word *per se*. I have tried to argue that this is an important category, or sub-category, that we should think more about. I want to illuminate a particular psychological condition, with which I take it most of us are familiar. “*Ressentiment*” is, in my opinion, the best candidate term we have for this state, but the state has been around a great deal longer than this term.⁴³ One way of trying to reinforce the appropriateness of the term “*ressentiment*” is to see how what I’m describing is distinct from closely-related states such as anger, resentment, envy, and *schadenfreude*. Now, it bears noting that a given agent at a given time needn’t be, exclusively, in one of these states. A given person is often in several such states at once. But I’ve tried to say what I think is distinctive about the psychological profile of *ressentiment* and the role of this notion in moral psychological discourse.

Resentment and *ressentiment* are related as genus to species. Although all resentment involves (i)-(iii), and often can involve (iv), and sometimes (v), it needn’t involve the desire for revenge (vi). Instead of wanting revenge, and being grotesquely contorted by your feelings, you can, as indicated already, want an apology, you can want to work with the person to improve his behavior, you can respond with cool dignity to slights, you can turn the other cheek, or you can simply be depressed about the whole situation. In some of the ethically

⁴³ If one insisted on using some other word— say “rancor” or “embitterment” or “aggrievement”—little of substance in my account would be lost. Even so, to my ear, those words don’t have quite the same flavor. There is inherent desire for vengeance in *ressentiment* (whether repressed or at the surface) that these words perhaps needn’t carry.

admirable cases of resentment, one looks on the other second-personally, as a kind of moral equal, an agent to whom such grievances might be addressed. This is not the dynamic of *resentment*.⁴⁴ This is not to deny that a desire for vengeance *can* be present in cases of resentment. After all, if a desire for vengeance is characteristic of *ressentiment*, and *ressentiment* is a species of resentment, then some cases of resentment involve a desire for vengeance. So too, I suspect there are cases of non-*ressentiment* resentment where one wants the perpetrator to suffer (for instance in some form of retributive punishment). Resentment, in its better forms, needn't, I think, involve this desire for vengeance, however.

The issues of self-worth, entitlement, and status that I suggest are in play when it comes to *ressentiment* can suggest important similarities to envy. Many cases of *ressentiment* of course involve envy as well. Envy, in general, involves wanting something that someone else has—the nice car or the good looks or the professional success.⁴⁵ This might involve suffering from the lack of it. But one needn't resent the situation, or regard it as unjust, or demonize the possessor of the coveted good. Such envy needn't involve a desire for revenge either.⁴⁶ Thus, fairly obviously, not all cases of envy are cases of *ressentiment*. But not all cases of *ressentiment* are cases of envy either. Consider the (reasonably well-off) “white nationalist.” He needn't be envious. But he nonetheless thinks that there is a threat to the status to which he feels entitled. That misguided sense of injustice provokes *ressentiment*, but needn't involve envy. *Ressentiment* can look a lot like *schadenfreude* too. But in cases of *schadenfreude*, one needn't perceive an injury or a slight or feel oneself in an unfortunate condition. One can be perfectly well-off and feel the frisson of *schadenfreude*. Not every case of

⁴⁴ Darwall (2013).

⁴⁵ See Protasi (2017) for a helpful account of envy.

⁴⁶ Cf., Wallace (2007) distinguishing *ressentiment* from envy.

schadenfreude is a case of *ressentiment*. Nor is every case of *ressentiment* a case of schadenfreude. *Ressentiment* involves a *desire* for revenge; in cases of schadenfreude, the focus is on savoring the already-actual misfortune of the other, and not only when it is perceived as a deserved comeuppance.⁴⁷ There are further important distinctions to be drawn among these psychological notions, despite there being considerable overlap. My aim here has been to try to give us some help in marking off the state of *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment*, I've tried to suggest, is a notion that helps us illuminate an important and objectionable psychological condition. But that is not what is most distinctive and useful about it. After all, we could do much (maybe all) of the psychologically descriptive work with our existing notions, such as anger, indignation, and resentment. But whereas the previous terms are more neutral, *ressentiment* picks out a vice.

IV. Conclusion

Some seeds of the view I put forward here are present in Nietzsche, but what I offer is not meant to be an explication of his views. Some of the examples cited as cases of *ressentiment* may fall into disputed territory, particularly from those who take Nietzsche as their main point of guidance. Those wedded to a narrower view of *ressentiment* may thus bristle about this extension. I have, in reply, tried to suggest in this paper that the cases in question form an interesting class, and that *ressentiment* is the best term we have for describing such cases. Perhaps inevitably, a philosophical account is going to impose more regimentation on a term like this than we have in our ordinary usage of it. I am, for my part, not simply trying to report on our present use of the term (and of course, very few of us now use it!), though I

⁴⁷ Watt Smith (2018) offers a good characterization of schadenfreude and a range of excellent examples.

think many examples of present usage support the line I want to take. Sometimes, for instance, the terms “resentment” or “anger” are used in cases where “*ressentiment*” might also apply.⁴⁸ On my view, this is accurate, but not as specific as we might want to be. We might have good reason for being more specific in some cases, but also for refraining from being more specific in others—for example, where we are talking in a broad way about large groups, or aren’t in a position to opine on the psychology of the individual agents themselves. That is one reason I describe my real world cases cautiously, as *potential* instances of *ressentiment*. Likewise, we may, in our use of the concept, not be trying to describe a psychological condition, but also to indict it as a vice. This is further reason we may want to employ *ressentiment*.

But what’s to say that this is actually a psychologically-important *kind*? Are we, in that frequent metaphor, “carving nature at the joints” in employing it? In order for it to be an interesting notion, do we need to identify some single deeper causal mechanism that sustains it? Does it need to have a predictive-explanatory role that allows it to earn its theoretical keep? There are a number of larger methodological issues here which we cannot settle.⁴⁹ But one thing to note is the frequent co-occurrence or “clustering” of the features described in *ressentiment*. That is itself a notable phenomenon to remark on, and it is what I have focused on here. Likewise, we might, with further investigation notice patterns between *ressentiment* and other things, both within individuals and in larger social groups, that might in turn support certain further inductive or abductive inferences. We might, as mentioned previously,

⁴⁸ For example, Faludi (1991), discussing gender issues, and Anderson (2016), discussing race issues, sometimes use the term “resentment.” This seems to me the right move in that they are discussing wide social trends. But *ressentiment* may be characteristic of many of the (typically white male) agents involved.

⁴⁹ Cf. Samuels (2009) on similar issues concerning the demarcation of psychic kinds.

explore particular hypotheses about other psychological phenomena with which it might be correlated and speculate about why—phenomena such as a sense of one’s powerlessness, forms of narcissism, ego fragility, feelings of inadequacy, general irascibility, self-righteousness, delusion, paranoia, and other such things. We might explore, from a more sociological perspective, the sorts of formations and institutions that tend to precipitate and perpetuate it and speculate on why. These are tasks for further work, including empirical work in both psychology and sociology, which I hope would be complementary to what I say here. How fruitful the notion of *ressentiment*, as I’ve set it out here, ultimately will in part depend on the results of such further investigation. But we need a sort of propaedeutic for further work, and that is one thing I aim to provide here. Even one who is not prepared to follow me to my view that it is a vice notion, will I hope, be able to gain illumination into aspects of this phenomenon, thanks to conditions i)-vii).

But all this said, we must also remember that *moral* psychology needn’t simply be a branch of descriptive psychology, however informed it should be by it. The tendency to collapse the former into the latter is, to my mind, rather unfortunate—and, ironically, perhaps, descriptively inaccurate too. For many of the key notions operative in moral psychology, particularly surrounding the virtues and the vices, are apparently shot through with normativity. This is, after all, *ethics*; our practice is of *evaluating*, not simply describing people. Or so I claim is the case with *ressentiment*.

Yet as so often in philosophy, we find ourselves with the term “*ressentiment*” operating in a productive interplay between how we do use a term and how we might use it. A similar sort of interplay marks the literatures surrounding guilt, shame, jealousy, and envy. Their boundaries are not as clear-cut as we might like. With all of these states just mentioned,

however, we have far more philosophical resources for thinking about them and their operations. I think we need greater such resources when it comes to *ressentiment*. This will help us reflect on ourselves and each other better as agents—not simply as rational agents, but as agents who are often irrational, and sometimes gripped by feelings that are deeply nasty. As Nietzsche says at the beginning of the *Genealogy*, we “knowers” are “unknown” to ourselves. (GM, “Preface,” 1). It is difficult to admit that we (collectively) can be like this. But admitting this is a step forward to self-knowledge.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ My thanks to

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