

V as Revolutionary

In a post-9/11 America and a post-7/7 Britain it is almost blasphemous to suggest that terrorism can be used for good. This sentiment is perfectly understandable: millions of people witnessed on their television sets the horror of two jumbo jets being flown into New York City's Twin Towers in 2001, and then the bombing of London's busy subway system in 2005. After seeing the devastation and suffering that these attacks engendered, it is not surprising that terrorism should be viewed with such disgust by so many people. But is terrorism never justified? This is a question that is raised by the action-thriller *V for Vendetta*, a film based on a graphic novel of the same title. The story presents us with the protagonist V, who uses terrorist tactics to rebel against a fascist regime that has taken control of Britain sometime in the near future. A related question that naturally arises when viewing this film, especially in the light of Erich Fromm's essay *Disobedience as a Psychological and Moral Problem*, is whether V is acting as a rebel or a revolutionary. Is V's disobedience emanating from “anger, disappointment, [and] resentment”, or is it “in the name of a conviction or principle”? This is tantamount to asking whether his acts of terrorism are justified or not. A careful analysis of the motivations behind V's disobedience reveals that it emanates from both sources. But since V's disobedience is always guided by a conviction to principle, one must count him as a revolutionary.

It is certainly the case that V is a man possessed by anger and bitter resentment. And justifiably so. In the course of the film we learn that V had been held prisoner in a concentration camp where he and his fellow inmates were subject to medical experiments designed to find a vaccine to a deadly virus. Most of the prisoners died gruesome deaths as a result of the experiments. V was able to survive the experiments because of a rare genetic mutation that he alone possessed. He was also severely disfigured in a conflagration that engulfed the camp when

he made an explosive escape on November 5th, the anniversary of the 1605 Gunpowder Plot. From then on, V hides his disfigurement by wearing a costume of Guy Fawkes, the infamous leader of the Gunpowder Plot. V's maltreatment leads him to be consumed with rage against the perpetrators of the atrocities, which include Lewis Prothero, a mouthpiece of the government who had been the commander of the camp; Bishop Lilliman, who had been a complicitous priest; Dr. Surrige, who was the doctor responsible for overseeing the experiments; and Chancellor Sutler, who was the mastermind of it all. Dr. Surrige is especially interesting because she leaves behind a journal that paints a picture of a woman who was simply carrying out her duties as a medical investigator, very much reminiscent of the subjects in Milgram's experiments who justified their actions by saying that they were simply following orders.

At any rate, several of V's "terrorist acts" are in fact revenge killings of the aforementioned individuals. These revenge killings are doubtless motivated by V's anger and resentment. But is there any moral principle guiding V's vendetta? The answer to this question can be found in the emotions themselves. Anger is an emotional response to a perceived injustice. It is a response that humans share with other animals. If someone tries to take a bone away from a dog, for example, the dog will respond by growling, barking, and even biting the person. Many species of animals respond aggressively when other animals wander into their marked territory. In a very real sense, these animals' aggression is a response to what they perceive as "injustices". Likewise, human anger is an emotional response to an event or an act that one perceives as being unjust or unfair. The human capacity for language allows these perceptions to be articulated into explicit judgments that can be verbally communicated to other members of the species. Of course, when assessing a person's anger, it is perfectly appropriate to ask whether their anger is warranted—that is, whether their perception of an injustice is an accurate perception. Sometimes people get angry over petty, meaningless things. But this

certainly can't be said of V. If anyone deserves to be angry, it's V.

So the question then becomes whether V's vigilantism, which is motivated by a righteous anger, is itself righteous. In any modern, post-industrial democracy possessing an extensive and fair justice system the answer would be "No." After all, one of the important functions of any justice system is to satiate a wronged individual's hunger for vengeance in a calm, measured, and detached manner—literally detached, since the act of punishment is delegated to another party (i.e. the government). Vigilantism is uncalled for in such societies since justice can usually be found by recourse to the justice system—hence the name. V, however, doesn't live in such a society. The Britain that V resides in is a brutal totalitarian regime that is controlled by the very same people that wronged him. V doesn't have the option of appealing to the authorities since his victimizers *are* the authorities. Confronted with such a dilemma, vigilantism becomes a morally acceptable solution. So, although V's personal vendetta against his victimizers is motivated by anger and deep resentment, it would be a mistake to infer that it is necessarily unprincipled as a consequence. This is the inference that Fromm seems to make: he contrasts disobedience motivated by anger and resentment to disobedience motivated by principle and conviction. He fails to recognize the possibility that a person's anger may itself be motivated by the most important principle of all: justice.

This is not to say, however, that V is wholly unmotivated by an abstract principle or conviction. Indeed, V's disobedience has a twofold dimension. One dimension consists of the already discussed personal vendetta that he wages against his victimizers. The revenge killings are all part of this vendetta. The other dimension consists of a principled resistance to the fascist regime that has control of the country. The bombing of the Old Bailey at the beginning of the film and that of the Houses of Parliament at the end of the film are part of that resistance. V makes his motivations clear when he takes control of the state-run broadcasting system and airs a

prerecorded message where he describes the regime as being filled with “cruelty and injustice, intolerance and oppression. And where once you had the freedom to object, to think and speak as you saw fit, you now have censors and systems of surveillance coercing your conformity and soliciting your submission.” One can certainly sympathize with V's grievances against the government. But can one sympathize with his acts of terrorism as an acceptable form of resistance to that government? If the government is one which is responsive to the will of the people, then the answer must be “No.” Organized civil disobedience is usually sufficient to bring about change in a society that respects its citizens' right to dissent. But if one resides in a society that doesn't even allow its citizens to organize, then violence becomes necessary to bring about change.

At one point, Evey asks V if he really thinks that blowing up a building will bring about change. V responds by saying that both the building and its destruction are symbols: if enough people are swayed by the symbolism of blowing up a building, then change becomes possible. A totalitarian regime's power derives from its subjects' unquestioning submission to its authority. Obedience to such authority is ensured by engendering fear in the population. People are made to feel afraid of the possible repercussions of disobedience. This fear becomes so widespread and so pernicious that no one dares to disobey. So even though there may be undercurrents of discontent and resentment in the population, these never rise to the surface and nothing changes as result. Solomon Asch argues that dissenters are emboldened when there are others who are willing to stand with them against the majority. V's acts of terrorism serve precisely this function. When V's fellow citizens witness the bombing of the Old Bailey, and then the destruction of the Houses of Parliament, they are emboldened to express their discontent. They come to realize that they are not alone in their anger and resentment and finally dare to disobey. This disobedience is dramatized at the end of the film when countless numbers of people dressed

in Guy Fawkes costumes flood the streets to witness the destruction of the Houses of Parliament.

When one considers the extremes that had to be taken in order to bring down the fascist regimes of the twentieth century, *V for Vendetta's* final revolt must be seen as a relatively bloodless revolution. Nazi Germany, for example, had to be invaded from the east by Russia and from the west by the United States before it finally surrendered. Its destruction was necessitated since there was virtually no hope of its own people rebelling against its authoritarian power. Hirohito's Japan had to face the very real possibility of complete nuclear annihilation before it offered its belated surrender on August 15, 1945, six days (!) after the bombing of Nagasaki. Hundreds of thousands of people died in the struggle to subdue these totalitarian regimes, but countless more died at the hands of these regimes. *V's* terrorism seems almost humane in comparison.