

Envy and Its Discontents

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One of the most potent causes of unhappiness is envy. Envy is, I should say, one of the most universal and deep-seated of human passions.... Not only does the envious person wish to inflict misfortune and do so whenever he can with impunity, but he is also himself rendered unhappy by envy.

~Bertrand Russell, "Envy"¹

Introduction

Envy, and its effects, are discussed by many kinds of scholars, including (e.g.) philosophers, psychologists, and economists. Due to this fact, envy is treated as a reason for acting, a social force, an emotion, an emotional episode, and a vice—sometimes even in the same work. Envy has also been hypothesized as a ‘primary energizer’ of societal ills and social stagnation.² There are thus many different accounts of the nature of envy. And this is to be expected. For the term ‘envy’ is sometimes ambiguous between (at least) an emotion, a reason for action, or a moral failing.³ But partially due to this terminological fecundity, different scholars provide various moral evaluations of envy, ranging from the claim that it is morally vicious to morally benign or even that it is morally praiseworthy.

Our primary concern here is with a particular usage of envy—envy as a vice. Consequently, we seek to develop an account of the nature of the vice of envy. We thus begin by providing a definition of the vice of envy, which will then allow us to differentiating the vice of envy from other things that go by the same name. With a definition in hand, we then distinguish the vice of envy from other usages of the term ‘envy’ and evaluate these diverging claims regarding the moral status of envy. We end the chapter with a brief discussion of the corrective virtues that help an individual overcome envy.

The Nature of Envy

Our goal in this section is to develop a definition of the vice of envy.⁴ A definition is needed since the term ‘envy’ is used in a plethora of ways, which at times leads to scholars talking past one another. We begin by noting some of the myriad ways in which scholars understand envy and its moral status. Some treat envy primarily as an emotion. Marguerite La Caze is one such scholar; she writes that ‘envy is a complex of feelings involving the recognition that others have, through luck or either deserved or undeserved means, received goods or had successes which are considered desirable.... [So understood,] some forms of envy are not only excusable, but morally valuable: those forms which are directed at undeserved success and beneficiaries of unjust circumstances.’⁵ Envy, in this sense, may indicate proper moral concern, as it can be (along with

¹ Russell (1930, 82 and 85).

² Silver and Sabini (1978, 313).

³ See, for instance, Silver and Sabini (1978, 314).

⁴ A more detailed treatment of some these issues can be found in Perrine (2011), from which the present section is adapted with modification.

⁵ La Caze (2001, 32). La Caze also admits that there is another sense of envy which is an attitude or character trait which disposes a person to feel disturbed at the good fortunes of others. La Caze calls this “vicious or unfair envy.” She grants that this sense of envy is a vice and is thereby “likely to detract from one's own happiness and that of others. Envy in such a case is clearly wrong” (La Caze 2001, 35). But see Stan Van Hooft (2002) for an argument

resentment) a ‘moral [emotion] connected with a concern for justice’ which has ‘an important role to play both as part of a rich emotional life, and in making it possible to live ethically because they enable us to recognize and respond to injustices against ourselves and others and so relate to other human beings.’⁶

Discussion of envy as an emotion can also be found in other disciplines. There are, for example, a number of illuminating psychological studies of the emotion of envy. Peter Salovey’s oft-cited *The Psychology of Jealousy and Envy* shows the number of ways in which envy as an emotion is ‘influenced by societal norms and values. It appears to exist in all cultures... , although the expression of envy may vary somewhat depending on [the] culture.’⁷ In his thorough cultural study of envy, psychologist Helmut Schoeck famously argues that the emotion of ‘envy alone makes any kind of social co-existence possible’⁸ by providing a comparison-based motivation for success and further work. ‘Envy is a drive which lies at the core of man’s life as a social being, and which occurs as soon as two individuals become capable of mutual comparison.’⁹ According to Schoeck, the emotion of envy plays a central motivational role, one which often in turn motivates a concern for justice:

A certain predisposition to envy is part of man’s physical and social equipment, the lack of which would, in many situations, simply result in his being trampled down by others.... Potential envy is an essential part of man’s equipment if he is to be able to test the justice and fairness of the solutions to the problems which occur in his life.¹⁰

Aaron Ben-Ze’ev similarly remarks that ‘some degree of jealousy and envy is essential in preventing attitudes of total indifference between people. In fact, quite often deliberate attempts are made to induce jealousy in mates, or envy in friends.’¹¹ Envy’s role in social motivation and cohesion in this respect has also been documented in apes¹² and canines.¹³

Others primarily treat envy, not as an emotion, but as a disposition. According to Rawls, for example, envy is ‘the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages.’¹⁴ Rawls distinguishes between ‘benign envy,’ where there is ‘no ill will intended or expressed,’ ‘emulative envy,’ which ‘leads us to try to achieve what others have,’ and finally ‘envy proper’ which is a ‘form of rancor that tends to harm both its object and its subject.’¹⁵ Gabriele Taylor, in her careful treatment of envy, similarly distinguishes between what she calls ‘state-envy’—when ‘another is merely the occasion for realizing [one’s own] shortcomings’—and ‘object-envy’—when ‘the person concerned focuses on the other as somehow crucially involved in her finding herself in an inferior position.’¹⁶

that La Caze improperly dissociates the emotion she refers to as envy from the deeper character traits that give rise to it.

⁶ La Caze (2001, 31). See also Solomon (2007, 101-3) and Ben-Ze’ev (1992).

⁷ Salovey and J. Rothman (1991, 282).

⁸ Schoeck (1969, 4).

⁹ Schoeck (1969, 3).

¹⁰ Schoeck (1969, 5f).

¹¹ Ben-Ze’ev (1990, 515).

¹² See Khamsi (2007)

¹³ Carroll (2008).

¹⁴ Rawls (1971, §80).

¹⁵ Rawls (1971, §80).

¹⁶ Taylor (1988, 234).

Our specific interest, however, is with envy as a capital vice. Having an adequate definition of the capital vice of envy will allow us to distinguish between the various different states that these authors call ‘envy.’ To this end, we begin with an examination of Thomas Aquinas’ analysis of envy, since he offers one of the best treatments of the definition of envy in the literature. One of the virtues of Aquinas’ analysis is his attempt to distinguish envy from similar sorts of acts. To accomplish this, he offers a definition of envy as ‘sorrow for another’s good... [when] another’s good may be reckoned as being one’s own evil, in so far as it conduces to the lessening of one’s own good name or excellence. It is in this way that envy grieves for another’s good.’¹⁷ Yet, despite the strengths of his account, Aquinas fails to provide an adequate definition of envy. For his definition fails to include all cases of envy and fails to provide the common element to all instances of envy.

Aquinas’ Account of Envy

In the *Summa*, Aquinas treats envy as a vice opposed to charity.¹⁸ Envy is opposed to charity because it is opposed to an effect of charity—rejoicing over another’s good. As Anthony Kenny has pointed out, envy is always directed at another person.¹⁹ For Aquinas, charity involves loving one’s neighbor and wishing what is good for her.²⁰ In contrast with charity, envy does not rejoice over another’s good, but is adverse to it. Aquinas calls this aversion ‘sorrowing over another’s good’ and considers envy to be a kind of sorrowing over another’s good.²¹

But Aquinas notes that there are many different ways to sorrow over another’s good, and not all of these ways are envy properly speaking.²² Aquinas discusses three specific cases: fear, zeal, and righteous indignation.²³ A person can sorrow over another’s good ‘through fear that it may cause harm either to himself, or to some other goods.’²⁴ For example, a citizen of a city may sorrow over the ability of an invading commander to command and deploy his troops effectively, for the citizen is fearful that the commander’s abilities might bring about the destruction of his own well-being. This sorrowing, however, is clearly not envy but fear, since the aversion to another’s good is caused by seeing that good as harmful to oneself. Second, one may grieve over another’s good ‘not because he has it, but because the good which he has, we have not.’²⁵ For example, upon noticing the great piety of her friend Cathy, Christine desires to become more pious—all the while, not being adverse to Cathy’s piety. Aquinas claims that this form of sorrow over another’s good is not envy either, but zeal, and fails to be vicious.²⁶ Here, one does not become adverse to the other’s good, but desires one’s own good all the more. (Let us note that,

¹⁷ *ST II-II.36.1*. Aquinas also discusses envy in *De Malo*, question 10. Because these two discussions are very similar, we focus on the account in the *ST*.

¹⁸ *ST II-II.36*.

¹⁹ See Kenny (1963, 193): ‘It is possible to be envious of one’s own fruit trees; but only if one mistakenly believes that the land on which they stand is part of one’s neighbor’s property.... What is not possible is to envy something which one believes to belong to oneself.’

²⁰ *ST II-II.25.1*. See Roberts (2007, 72). Aquinas also extends charity to include love of one’s self; see *ST II-II.25.4*.

²¹ *ST II-II.36.1*.

²² Here, as throughout, we ignore instances of acts which are simultaneously an act of envy *and* something which is not envy, e.g., fear. Such acts are clearly possible; but for the present purposes of defining envy we focus on pure cases of envy.

²³ *ST II-II.36.2*.

²⁴ *ST II-II.36.2*.

²⁵ *ST II-II.36.2*.

²⁶ Many authors speak of an envy that leads one to emulate another; traditionally, this form of ‘envy’ was called zeal or emulation. See, for example, Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.11 (1388a30-5).

while we agree with Aquinas that zeal is distinct from envy, and fails to be vicious, we are dubious of his claim that zeal is a form of sorrow over another's good. We are inclined to think that zeal is better categorized as sorrow over one's *lack* of a good, perhaps occasioned by seeing another's good.) Third, one may sorrow over another's good because that person is undeserving of that good.²⁷ For example, a student may sorrow over another student's superior test score, not because the latter was more knowledgeable on the topic, but because she cheated. For Aquinas, this is not envy properly speaking either, but a form of indignation, which Aquinas claims can belong to 'good morals.'²⁸ According to Aquinas, these three different ways one can sorrow over another's good—fear, zeal, and indignation—are not cases of envy, but states distinct from envy. Consequently, he endeavors to provide a definition of envy that excludes them as cases of envy. However, Aquinas actually offers two definitions of envy, in two separate passages.

In *ST*, IIaIIae 36.1, Aquinas states that 'envy is about another's good name in so far as it diminishes the good name a man desires to have.' Aquinas' first definition of envy is thus: sorrow over another's good in so far as that good diminishes one's own good name. This definition connects envy with the vice of vainglory, the immoderate desire for glory.²⁹ Glory is the display of some (perceived) excellence—a 'manifestation of someone's goodness.'³⁰ When a person desires glory for something other than an appropriate end, that person has an immoderate desire for glory.³¹ This definition of envy connects envy and vainglory by making the object of the latter—glory—an essential part of the definition of the former. Here a person envies when *another* person's excellence keeps people from acknowledging her *own* excellence. The other's 'good name' lessens her own 'good name.'

But Aquinas provides a second definition of envy in the very next question: 'we grieve over a man's good in so far as his good surpasses ours; this is envy properly speaking and is always sinful.'³² This second definition of envy is thus sorrow over another's good when one is sorrowful because the other's good surpasses one's own, that is, when another is more excellent. Whereas the first definition connected envy to vainglory, this one connects envy to pride. For Aquinas, a person is proud when she has an inordinate desire of her own excellence;³³ he writes, 'for to be proud is nothing else but to exceed the proper measure in the desire for excellence.'³⁴ In these cases of envy, a person desires to hold a higher position than she actually holds; holding this higher position is meant to be a rival to the person to which she compares herself. What is noteworthy about this second definition of envy is its divergence from the first. The first incorporates one's 'good name' into the definition of envy; the second incorporates one's 'excellence.' But clearly one's good name and one's excellence need not be the same thing—one can have a good name, but lack an excellence, or conversely one can have an excellence, but lack a good name.

So, Aquinas offers us two different definitions that are not coextensive. Unfortunately, neither is adequate insofar as a good definition should do at least two things. First, it should include all cases of envy and exclude all cases that are not cases of envy. It should be 'broad' enough to include all the various ways in which one can envy, but 'narrow' enough to include

²⁷ *ST* II-II.36.2.

²⁸ *ST* II-II.36.2.

²⁹ *ST* II-II.132.2

³⁰ *De Malo* 9.1; cf. *ST* II-II.132.1.

³¹ *ST* II-II.132.1-2.

³² *ST* II-II.36.2. The 'properly speaking' suggests that Aquinas is offering a definition here.

³³ *ST* II-II.162.1.ad 2, II-II.162.2.

³⁴ *De Malo* 8.2.

only them. Second, a good definition should provide that which is common to all cases of envy.³⁵ A definition that did these two things would provide, in Aquinas' terms, the 'formal cause' of envy. Both of Aquinas' definitions fail to meet these requirements of an adequate definition. Note, first, that each is too narrow. Each incorporates into the definition of envy a particular kind of envy—the first, a kind of envy associated with vainglory, the second, a kind associated with pride. Consequently, some cases of the first type of envy will fail to be cases of envy according to the second definition; similarly, some cases of the second type of envy will fail to be cases of envy according to the first definition. Thus, *neither* definition can cover *all* cases of envy.

One might attempt to mend Aquinas' definition by making combining his definition disjunctively. Indeed, such a disjunctive definition may be closer to Aquinas' original thought; at one point he writes that 'another's good may be reckoned as being one's own evil, in so far as it conduces to the lessening of one's *own good name or excellence*. It is in this way that envy grieves for another's good: and consequently men are envious of those goods in which a good name consists, and about which men like to be honored and esteemed.'³⁶ Perhaps Aquinas intends to define envy disjunctively by stating that acts of envy are *either* of the first type of envy *or* of the second type of envy.³⁷

Now such a disjunctive definition will include all cases of envy only if there are only two types of envy—those connected to pride and vainglory. But if there is a third type of envy, then this definition will also be inadequate. Are there simply two types of envy? It is implausible to think so. Often people are envious, not of other's good name or excellence, but of other's relationships. A classic case is the Biblical case of Joseph and his brothers. The brothers were envious of the love their father had for Joseph.³⁸ His father's love was not an excellence or good name of Joseph's. So they were envious of something other than a good name or excellence. But if one can envy another's love, then it is plausible that one can envy other things as well, such a material possessions. So it is implausible that there are only two kinds of envy.

Perceptions of Inferiority and Envy

In the remainder of this section, we argue that an adequate definition of envy requires the notion of a perception of inferiority. Since perceptions of inferiority are the result of a comparative notion of self-worth, we begin by explaining the latter. Although the connection between envy and comparative self-worth has been noted before, its role in helping provide a definition of envy—and thereby distinguishing it from other ways of sorrowing—has not. We will thus first describe a comparative notion of self-worth before turning to how it can amend Aquinas' definition of envy.

What distinguishes envy from other types of sorrowing is that envy originates with a comparative notion of self-worth. Comparative self-worth is a way of evaluating one's own worth by comparing oneself to others.³⁹ In order to have this sort of self-worth, one must compare oneself to others. Comparison is essentially a two-term relation—it requires another thing, with which to be compared. Consequently, given a comparative notion of self-worth, one

³⁵ This second requirement is important because it excludes definitions of things that simply list all the things that fall under the relevant term.

³⁶ *ST II-II.36.1*, emphasis ours.

³⁷ Let us note that it is expositionally unclear if Aquinas is actually offering a disjunctive definition.

³⁸ This example was suggested by Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung.

³⁹ Thus, one's self-worth is distinct from one's worth as a self; rather, one's self-worth is similar to one's self-esteem.

cannot ask the question of worth in isolation; it must be asked when there are others to be measured against.⁴⁰

Here a counterfactual test is useful. Namely: if a person were to come to believe that she were surpassed by another, would her self-worth diminish? If so, then that person has a comparative notion of self-worth. If not, then that person most likely does not. This counterfactual test is useful, for one can have a positive estimation of oneself while having a comparative notion of self-worth. For example, a person utilizing a comparative notion of self-worth may still evaluate herself positively if she does not believe anyone else surpasses her.

A comparative notion of self-worth can give rise to a perception of inferiority in which one conceives of oneself as inferior to another. A perception of inferiority requires four things. It requires (i) an evaluation of another's good, (ii) an evaluation of one's own good, and (iii) a comparison between the two evaluations in which (iv) due to a comparative notion of self-worth one perceives one's worth to be inferior as a result of the comparison.⁴¹ The qualification "due to a comparative notion of self-worth" is important here. For there can be many sorts of *judgments* of inferiority, and not all of these are relevant to envy. For instance, I may judge myself to be inferior to certain Olympic athletes with regard to (say) rowing; but such a judgment of inferiority is irrelevant to my own self-worth. I may judge myself to be inferior to some person by an independent standard. Both kinds of judgments of inferiority are to be kept distinct from the perception of inferiority that occurs in cases of envy. In perceptions of inferiority of the sort relevant to envy, one perceives one's worth to be inferior only if one feels as if one's own self-worth is now diminished due to the other person's good. One takes the other's superiority to indicate a lack of value in oneself. To put the point differently, others may be able to tell that you are inferior to another in those other regards; but only you can feel your own worth to be inferior.

As noted earlier, the role of comparative self-worth in envy has not been unnoticed. For example, in his article "Envy and Inequality," Aaron Ben-Ze'ev writes that the natural candidate for [the central concern of envy] is inferiority. The importance of the inferiority concern in envy conveys the weight we attach to our comparative stand. People compare themselves with others to reduce uncertainty about themselves and maintain or enhance self-esteem. An unfavorable comparison often leads to envy.⁴²

Similarly, Gabriele Taylor writes that 'envy rests on interpersonal comparison. The envious person thinks of another as being in some way better off than she is herself.'⁴³ And Rebecca DeYoung, in her book *Glittering Vices*, notes the important role that a comparative notion of self-worth plays in the vice of envy.⁴⁴

What does seem to be unnoticed to date, however, is how this notion of comparative self-worth can amend the lack in Aquinas' definition of envy. What distinguish cases of envy from

⁴⁰ The 'others' here need not be actual different individuals. Rather it could even be conceptions of people, e.g., fictitious characters.

⁴¹ This account of envy enjoys some empirical verification. Psychologists Peter Salovey and Judith Rodin performed a study on what they called 'social-comparison jealousy,' which can be taken to be roughly synonymous with our usage of the vice of envy. They found that envy was most intensely experienced when a subject was in 'situations (a) containing negative feedback about oneself (b) in a domain that is particularly self-defining, (c) followed by a comparison to another person who has performed well on this same self-defining dimension rather than on another dimension' (Salovey and Rodin 1984, 782).

⁴² Ben-Ze'ev (1992, 554).

⁴³ Taylor (2006, 41).

⁴⁴ DeYoung (2009, 41-57, especially 44-9).

other kinds of sorrowing are perceptions of inferiority. When a person perceives that she is inferior to another *and* that perception gives rise to sorrowing over the other's good, then that person is envious. Thus, we may define envy as: sorrow over another's good because of a perception of inferiority regarding the other's good. This definition is clearly in the same vein of thought as Aquinas'. In fact, we can see it best as amending and supplementing his account, not replacing it.

Note that an envious person sorrows over another's good, not simply when that person's good actually surpasses the envier's good, but *because* the envious person perceives the other's good to surpass his own (even when it may not). The exact relationship between a perception of inferiority and sorrowing is complex. Nevertheless, it seems there is at the very least some sort of causal connection between one's perception and one's sorrow. One's sorrow follows from one's perception of inferiority; if one lacked a perception of inferiority, then one would not envy. And one would lack a perception of inferiority only if one did not have a comparative notion of self-worth.

Envy involves the disposition to feel hostility, spite, or ill-will at the perceived superiority of another person in some respect, be it possessions, success, or reputation. And here we see that a further self-referring attitude lying at a deeper level within envy is a form of dissatisfaction with oneself. When one feels envy, one is dissatisfied with one's own possessions and situation. One might go on envying the corrupt politician for example, not only because he has something which I want, but also because I am not satisfied with my own situation and want to be in his. This is demonstrated when, if I do get what he has, I might still envy him because he got it before I did. Because I am fundamentally dissatisfied with myself, my envy is not relieved when I do get what I want.⁴⁵

So envy is being disposed to will against the good of the other—the envious person 'would like to see the other person robbed, dispossessed, stripped, humiliated or hurt'⁴⁶—but it also involves being disposed to feel contrary to one's own (true, even if unperceived) good. It thus detracts from the common good in two ways. (It can also count against the common good in further ways as it can easily lead to other related vices, such as malice, cruelty, vindictiveness, and *schadenfreude*.) So it should be 'obvious by now how the fundamental attitude of the envious is directly opposed to love. To love is to seek others' good and rejoice when they have it. To envy is to seek to destroy others' good and sorrow over their having it.'⁴⁷

Differentiating 'Envy'

This definition allows us differentiate between the various things that go under the name 'envy.' First, this definition allows us to distinguish envy proper from indignation. We take La Caze to be describing indignation when she writes 'some forms of envy are not only excusable, but morally valuable: those forms which are directed at undeserved success and beneficiaries of unjust circumstances.'⁴⁸ In the case of indignation, one sorrows over another's good because that person is undeserving of that good. What gives rise to the sorrow is not a perception of inferiority but rather something more akin to a sense of justice. Consequently, this definition of envy will exclude cases of indignation from the class of envy.

⁴⁵ Van Hooft (2002, 144).

⁴⁶ Schoek (1969, 8).

⁴⁷ DeYoung (2009, 51).

⁴⁸ La Caze (2001, 32).

Further, this definition excludes cases of zeal as cases of envy. At first, it may appear that, on this definition, cases of zeal count as envy. Our definition of envy is sorrow over another's good because of a perception of inferiority regarding another's good. Is not this just what happens in a case of zeal? Recall the example of Christine and Cathy. Christine sees Cathy's piety. Christine notices her own piety, and then sees that Cathy's surpasses her own. Christine, desiring to be as pious as possible, sorrows over not achieving a certain level of piety. Is this not a case of sorrowing over another's good because of a perception of inferiority regarding another's good?

In response, note two things. First, as we said above, we disagree with Aquinas that zeal is a form of sorrow over another's good. Since envy is a form of sorrow over another's good, our account implies that zeal is distinct from envy. Second, cases of zeal lack perceptions of inferiority. As mentioned above, perceptions of inferiority require four things: (i) an evaluation of another's good, (ii) an evaluation of one's own good, and (iii) a comparison between the two evaluations in which (iv) due to a comparative notion of self-worth, one perceives one's worth to be inferior as a result of the comparison. Cases of zeal lack perceptions of inferiority because to have a perception of inferiority one must have a comparative notion of self-worth, and the zealous fail to have this *qua* zealous. When a zealous person judges herself to be inferior to another, she implicitly makes appeal to standard that is independent of herself and the person she is judging to be superior to her. The zealous recognizes, by her comparison with another, that one can do better along this independent standard than she currently is. But the zealous person does not evaluate her self-worth *in terms of comparison with the other*. So the zealous person lacks a perception of inferiority; zeal is not an instance of envy.⁴⁹

Finally, this definition allows us to distinguish envy from jealousy. Although—informally—the terms are often used interchangeably, there are important differences between the two. Most importantly, in cases of envy, the envier lacks some good that another has; in cases of jealousy, the jealous has the good and is fearful that the good might be lost to another. As Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung writes, 'although we often use *jealousy* and *envy* synonymously, jealousy is the condition of loving something and possessing it, and then feeling threatened because the loved thing or person might be taken away.'⁵⁰

Cases of jealousy need not involve perceptions of inferiority. In particular, they fail the fourth condition: one perceives one's worth to be inferior. For in cases of jealousy, it is not that the other person surpasses one's own worth—the other person lacks the relevant good! Further, a case of jealousy might not even involve a comparative notion of self-worth. A person might fear the loss of some good not because it makes her comparatively better off, but because she enjoys that good in and of itself.

Other features differentiate envy from jealousy. Robert Solomon says that jealousy has a feature that envy lacks: 'as opposed to envy, jealousy requires some sort of legitimate claim. A jealous person must have some right (or believe that he does) to the thing in question.'⁵¹ Similarly, it is commonly understood that envy involves an element of willing against the good

⁴⁹ Thus, consider a zealous person whose self-worth is intimately tied up with being as pious as possible. If this person has convinced himself that he is as pious as possible but then meets another who is more pious, that zealous person may actually feel their self-worth diminish. But this will not be a case of envy. For the zealous person may feel their self-worth diminish, not because another is comparatively better, but because he has fallen short of his self-imposed standard for positive evaluation of his self-worth. (Thanks to Christian Van Dyke and David McNaughton for urging more clarity on these points.)

⁵⁰ DeYoung (2009, 44).

⁵¹ Solomon (2007, 105).

of another that need not be part of jealousy. To quote Solomon again: ‘envy is not just covetous but involves a malevolent attitude toward the envied person. I am not sure whether this is a necessary ingredient in envy, but it is certainly a common one. Thus envy’s double edge: It is not just competitive without hope or merit and so damaging to oneself. It can also be malicious and dangerous to the other person as well, or... damaging to the general social system in which it plays a role.’⁵²

Envy’s Offspring

The above account also explains envy’s role as a capital vice. A capital vice is one which gives rise to other vices and directs them to a particular goal or end.⁵³ On this account, envy is the result of a perception of inferiority. Because an envious person is experiencing unpleasant emotions and feelings regarding her own self-worth, she will attempt to remove that perception of inferiority, so that she no longer judges the envied person to be superior to herself. By doing so, the envious person will no longer be envious and return a measure of self-worth to herself.⁵⁴ There are two ways to reclaim this position. One is to reduce or remove the superiority of the other in some way, so that the envied individual is at least on par with the envier. The other is for the envier to increase her position so that she surpasses that of the envied. Since the former is often times easier to achieve, the envious are more likely to pursue it over the latter.⁵⁵

If the envier is envious of the public standing or good name of another, then the envier may attempt to reduce that good name. For example, he may publicly detract from the importance or impressiveness of the other’s accomplishment (the vice of detraction or slander). Alternatively, the envier may not publicly detract another, but secretly go about and spreading rumors regarding the other or his accomplishments (the vice of tale bearing or gossip). Regarding *how* the envier attempts to reduce the good name of another, there are two chief ways. First, the envier can diminish the actual importance or impressiveness of the other’s accomplishments that are the objects of comparison for the envier (‘Sure, if headquarters gave me *those* many resources, I could have easily secured that contract!’); second, the envier can draw attention to other (real or imaginary) faults of the envied (‘Anyone who spent that much time at the office could accomplish that, but I prefer to not neglect my children’s well-being.’).⁵⁶ The ultimate goal of these actions is to lessen the good name of the other, so that the envious person’s comparative position is increased.

Envy can also give rise to *schadenfreude* and hate. *Schadenfreude* is finding pleasure in the pain of another. Envy can give rise to *schadenfreude* when the person who is the object of envy undergoes some particular pain or loss. In particular, if the envied undergoes something bad that is directly relevant to the quality that surpasses that of those envying. For example, suppose a

⁵² Solomon (2007, 105).

⁵³ *ST I-IIa.84.3* and 4.

⁵⁴ We here discuss some of the ways people attempt to maintain self-worth. For a much more comprehensive list, see Crocker and Park (2003, specifically 299-304).

⁵⁵ Stan Van Hooft writes that “Envy is a specific form of being displeased: namely one motivated by greed and self-dissatisfaction” (Van Hooft 2002, 145). Van Hooft seems mistaken in including greed in this way. For an envious person, more likely than not, will desire that a person *lack* the relevant good than that he or she actually has it. (If I have the nicest car in the neighborhood, and then my neighbor buys a nicer one, I would be just as content with his car being stolen as with coming to own *that* make and model.) This indicates that, while greed may be part of some instance of envy, it is only accidentally so.

⁵⁶ These two ways roughly correspond to what Alicke and Zell call ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ control in their (2008, 86f).

group of students is envious of another student, who does not work hard, but nevertheless excels in school work. If that group of students comes to learn that that student was caught cheating and punished, they are more likely to experience *schadenfreude* than if they learn that some other ill befell the student (e.g., her bike was stolen).⁵⁷

Hate is when a person wishes ill of another and does not take pleasure in their good. For the envier, the goods of another are not a source of pleasure, but pain, since they are what give rise to a perception of inferiority. Further, because the goods of another give rise to perceptions of inferiority, the envier will find pleasure in the loss, removal, or hampering of those goods. Further, the envier will wish ill of another in that she desires that the other lose his comparative superiority. But hate of another can extend beyond the relevant area of goods. For example, suppose that Alex is envious of James' abilities as a basketball player. As a result of envy, Alex may come to hate James. But he might not simply wish ill of James' basketball ability; he may also wish ill regarding other things in James' life that have little to nothing to do with basketball ability.⁵⁸

Envy can also lead to other vices—such as vainglory, covetousness, greed, and injustice—though we do not have the space to discuss these in the present chapter. But when they do arise, these 'daughter vices', like *schadenfreude* and hate, show that the envious is concerned to remove the sense of inferiority they have when compared to another.

Envy in Social-Science Research

So far, we have specified the nature of envy as being sorrow over another's good because of a perception of one's own inferiority regarding the other's good, and documented its relationship to other vices. We can return to the treatment of envy in the social-sciences with which the paper began, for the definition we've developed helps differentiate the vice of envy from the motivational force that gets labeled the same in the social-scientific literature. Such a differentiation is needed in order to see how some of what social-scientists find to be morally neutral or even praiseworthy about 'envy' really can be; these cases, we argue, are not about the vice of envy at all. Our definition will also help show how those cases involving damage to one's own good or the good of the community really can be about the vice of envy.

Susan Fiske is an example of a psychologist who is aware of the difference between envy as a vice and envy as a motivating emotion; she differentiates 'benign envy' (what we've been calling envy as a motivating emotion) from 'malicious envy', the vice.⁵⁹ Yet her work also shows ways in which benign envy can lead to malicious envy. As Fiske puts it, 'we [humans] are comparison machines.'⁶⁰ Numerous studies show that we're more likely to compare ourselves with other individuals who are similar to ourselves than with those who are more distant on some scale. But the research also shows that we tend to make comparisons upward rather than downward; that is, we are more likely to compare ourselves with those who possess more of a particular good that we have than with those who possess less of it. Benign envy motivates us precisely because of the comparison we make between our own possession of the good in question and the other's possession of the same good. But when we are frustrated from achieving the good that we want, the same psychological mechanisms that had earlier motivated us could

⁵⁷ Cf. Powell, Smith, and Schutz (2008).

⁵⁸ Cf. Crocker and Park (2003, 302).

⁵⁹ Fiske (2010, 703f).

⁶⁰ Fiske (2011, 13).

now lead us to will for the person we are comparing our self with to lose her good. So it is not surprising that people who self-report feeling higher levels of envy towards those who have a higher socio-economic status also report a greater tendency towards harming them, especially when coupled with anger.⁶¹ And other research suggests that upward comparisons are more likely when an individual is feeling unhappy or insecure, precisely when the inferiority that encourages benign envy to develop into the vice of envy is itself increased.⁶²

Perhaps the most research has been done on envy of wealth and other material goods. Although their understanding of happiness is not the same as is usually embraced by virtue-based approaches to ethics—usually focusing on ‘subjective well-being’ rather than *eudemonia*—numerous studies show that, beyond a certain level of affluence, increased wealth does not correlate with increased happiness.⁶³ What matters significantly more than real wealth, according to the work of both psychologists and economists, is positional wealth⁶⁴ and the acquisition of positional goods—goods which are valued, in large part, due to their scarcity alone.⁶⁵ The more affluent a society becomes, the more that both demand and consumption are driven by competition for positional goods, which in turn heightens the competitive thinking that drives envy. But it’s also the case that merely living in an increasingly affluent society increases the cost of achieving one’s own ends, even if it doesn’t drive up one’s own desires for wealth.

A plethora of books document this rise in the wealth of those in developed countries, and their impact on their citizens. Robert Frank’s *Luxury Fever*, for example, documents the dramatic increase in material prosperity in the United States.⁶⁶ Two of these increases are as follows, though there are many more: the average size of a newly built house doubled between the 1950s and the late 1990s, and the average price of purchased automobiles increased by 75% in the 1990s.⁶⁷ The increasing disparity of wealth, even if the worst off were increasing in real wealth⁶⁸, impacts all the members of society. Given what we know from psychology about upwards comparative judgments, the super-rich set the bar for relative comparison in a way that trickles down through all socio-economic classes. As Robert Frank points out, ‘Adam Smith’s celebrated invisible hand ... rests on the assumption that each person’s choices have no negative consequences for others.’⁶⁹ But this is not the case in terms of our comparative judgments and beliefs about self-worth. Our psychological mechanisms are such that the success of others leads quite natural to a decline in our own self-assessment, which leads to envy. The reason for this is

⁶¹ Fiske (2011, 23f).

⁶² See, for example, Lyumbomirsky and Ross (1997).

⁶³ See, for a few examples among many, Frank (1999, particularly chapter 5) and Schwartz (2004, particularly chapter 5).

⁶⁴ Hirsch refers to positional wealth as oligarchic wealth; see his Hirsch (1976, 27).

⁶⁵ ‘In a meta-analysis of 207 studies totaling over 142,000 respondents, researchers noted that “when people reported how they actually felt about the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ or indicated that their relative disadvantage as undeserved or unfair, it was these feelings—not the sheer [actual] difference—that predicted collective action’ (Fiske 2011, 89). See, among numerous others, see also Hirsch (1976, 2ff); Klein (1997); Solnick and Hemenway (1998); and Schwartz (2004, chapter 9 and 152ff).

⁶⁶ This increase is, of course, not restricted to the United States. As Robert Frank points out, ‘Japan, with fewer than half as many people as the United States, consumes more than half the U.S. volume of luxury goods’ (Frank 1999, 32).

⁶⁷ Frank (1999, 3, 4, and 21).

⁶⁸ It is not the case that the worst-off are increasing in real wealth, however: ‘earnings of those in the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution have actually declined by more than 10 percent [between 1979 and 1999]’ (Frank 1999, 45). See also Levy (2007).

⁶⁹ Frank (1999, 9).

tied with the issues of positional goods and relative wealth mentioned above. It is primarily positional goods then which drive the kinds of upwards comparisons which can lead to envy—both as a motivation to work towards those goods one’s self, but also as fertile grounds for the vice. It’s not surprising, therefore, that there is data which suggests that those suffering the vice of envy have lower levels of physical and mental health.⁷⁰

The Importance of Being Prudent

We are now in a position to see how, with respect to envy, prudence is needed at a number of junctions. First, prudence can allow us, as moral agents, to differentiate the vice of envy from different kinds of sorrowing over others’ goods that need not be vicious. This important role played by prudence is not, of course, limited simply to envy; it will play a similar role in differentiating, for example, anger from wrath or the vice of pride from pride as proper self-evaluation. Second, since prudence directs the virtues, such as justice and kindness, toward their proper ends as well, and since the end of all the moral virtues is the flourishing of the individual, prudence will thereby also help to integrate the virtues.⁷¹ This is what Keenan calls the integrative function of prudence:

The virtues are interconnected through prudence.... The lack of prudence not only means that an inclination does not become a virtue, but also that, left without this directive and integrating virtue, the agent moves toward disintegration.... The ability to reason well depends in part upon the extent to which the agent’s personality is rightly ordered. Conversely, the ability to develop a well-ordered personality depends not only upon the intended exercise of well-ordered actions, but also on the prudential determination of those intended exercises. In fact, the function of prudence or right moral reasoning is to determine, intend, and choose actions that will lead to the right realization of those appetites.... Prudence functions to perfect a person’s natural inclinations through integrating them into a coordinated way of acting and living in a right manner.⁷²

Prudence involves having, *inter alia*, the wisdom to see how the individual’s good is interconnected with the good of the larger community of which she is a part. Imprudence can lead one to think that one’s good always comes at the expense of others’ good, and vice versa—a sentiment frequently found in those who envy, and which results not only in individual but also corporate disintegration.

Failing to see that the other’s good doesn’t necessarily count against one’s own good not only contributes to envy, but this envy can lead to a further vice, namely a species of pride:

Invidious, competitive pride is most likely to manifest itself in relationships in which the two individuals are close enough to equality in worldly terms to feel themselves competitors, and yet not very close friends or lovers.... It is not difficult to see why people who lack humility are spiritually bankrupt. Their capacity for human relationships—the spiritual ones that are the most important of their lives—is poisoned by the tendency to climb to eminence at someone else’s expense. The proud person is one who feels good about himself only if he has somebody who compares disadvantageously with himself.⁷³

⁷⁰ Fiske (2011), particularly chapter 2. See also Frank (1999, 142ff).

⁷¹ We borrow the ‘directing’ role of prudence from Keenan’s wonderful discussion in his (2002).

⁷² Keenan (2002, 265, 267, and 259).

⁷³ Roberts (2007, 85-6).

In contrast, the truly prudent individual will properly understand how individuals' goods can be cooperative and mutually reinforcing rather than necessarily competitive. Prudence's twin functions of perfecting practical reasoning and directing the individual's inclinations to their virtuous realization are part of the overarching role prudence plays in directing the individual's entire life in virtue.

Finally, if there are uses of the term 'envy' that actually refer to good objects—as La Caze, Schoek, and others suggest—then prudence will also help us understand and achieve these goals. As with all moral goods, the attainment of prudence will make it easier to develop further virtues. 'This requirement makes [the] interplay between prudence and the moral virtues dynamic. For although the moral virtues need prudence to set the mean to realize the ends of the moral virtues, prudence needs those moral virtues disposed to their ends in order for prudence and those virtues to advance.'⁷⁴

Countervailing Virtues

We end on a more optimistic note. The vice of envy is contrasted with corrective virtues—virtues that reduce and eliminate the vice, combat the vice's offspring vices, and generally restore the well-being to an individual. With envy, two virtues in particular stand out as corrective: charity and humility.

One reason why envy is so powerful is because the ultimate desire it aims to satisfy is so powerful, namely having a positive estimation of one's own self-worth. It is deeply important to us human persons that we see our own lives, what we do, and who we are, as valuable and worthwhile. As we've seen, the envious person may try many ways to minimize envy, some of which are vicious in their own right, in an attempt to find a positive evaluation of himself. What is important to notice, however, is how woefully inadequate these ways are as a response to the vice of envy. For they do not remove the vice; they simply attempt to work around it, and with it, to minimize its harmful effects (and even then these strategies are bound to have mixed results). Put simply, these ways do not correct envy, but merely mask it.⁷⁵ Further, these ways fail to provide what is ultimately desired by the envious person—a positive evaluation of their own self-worth. Even if one achieves some measure of comparative success, such a position is an unstable foundation for self-worth. For there are still those who came before, who perhaps achieve that relevant good faster, with more success, etc.... And there are still those who come after, who can dethrone.

Charity and humility are correcting virtues, not because they work around envy, but because they remove the source and results of envy. As noted earlier, envy is opposed to charity, which is the virtue to love another and tend towards that which is good for her.⁷⁶ Whereas charity requires wishing others well, expressing joy when good things happen to them, loving them, and loving one's self, envy leads to wishing ill of others, expressing sorrow over their good, and ultimately hating them. The development of charity will naturally drive out envy, since one cannot both rejoice and sorrow over another's particular good. Charity will naturally manifest itself in ways that discourage envy. Earlier we approvingly quoted Van Hooft as saying that 'a further self-referring attitude lying at a deeper level within envy is a form of dissatisfaction with oneself.

⁷⁴ Keenan (2002, 261).

⁷⁵ Consider an analogy: a person with a cavity may simply stop eating foods that irritate the cavity. This does not 'correct' the cavity. It does not remove the ailment; it simply attempts to work around it. To correct it, the person must treat the cavity directly.

⁷⁶ For more on charity, see Paul Waddell's chapter in this volume.

When one feels envy, one is dissatisfied with one's own possessions and situation.' Such dissatisfaction may arise from a lack of self-love,⁷⁷ which shows that envy may partially be the result of a lack of love for one's own person. This is why charity is a corrective virtue to envy, for charity requires self-love. Beyond this, charity also helps one see that one's own good and the good of the other are not necessarily competitive or exclusive. As evidenced by some of the work by social-psychologists, when we see our own good as connected with the good of others, rather than as competing with the good of others, we are less likely to suffer the vice of envy.⁷⁸ Particularly if one takes a view such as Aquinas' in which all creatures' ultimate good is found in union with God, charity will unify rather than divide individuals. Even Bertrand Russell saw that envy could be overcome by seeing the good of the other as cooperative rather than competitive: 'merely to realize the causes of one's own envious feelings is to take a long step towards curing them. The habit of thinking in terms of comparison is a fatal one.'⁷⁹ Replacing such comparisons with admiration both diminishes envy and increases happiness.⁸⁰

The other virtue that corrects envy is humility.⁸¹ Humility is frequently understood to be a negative character trait such that the humble person is one who underestimates her own self-worth and is inappropriately deferent to others. This is not what we mean by the virtue of humility. We understand humility to be the disposition to recognize that each person has an innate, non-contingent worth or value, including one's own self. As we've argued, envy arises from a comparative notion of self-worth, where in order for a person to feel positive about his own self-worth he must positively compare with another. A humble person, however, will not see her own self-worth depend upon a positive comparison to another. She will instead find her self-worth rooted in something else. This is not to say that the humble person will never compare herself with others—according to some studies, the disposition to compare is overwhelming and constant. Rather, it is to say that those comparisons will not offer her fodder for evaluating her self-worth, as in the vice of envy, but will rather offer occasions for self-improvement, as in the motivational emotion which goes by the same name.⁸²

⁷⁷ See again the study by Lyumbomirsky and Ross (1997).

⁷⁸ See Fiske (2011, 111-18).

⁷⁹ Russell (1930, 87).

⁸⁰ Russell (1930, 85).

⁸¹ For more on humility, see Craig Boyd's chapter on pride in this same volume.

⁸² Authorship on this article is equal. We would like to thank Chris Callaway, Zac Cogley, Rebecca DeYoung, David McNaughton, and Christina Van Dyke for helpful comments and discussions related to this paper.

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