

The Things We Envy: Fitting Envy and Human Goodness

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To appear in *Fittingness*, edited by Christopher Howard and Richard Rowland, OUP

This is the penultimate, pre-proofs version. Please cite the print version.

Abstract

I argue that fitting envy plays a special role in safeguarding our happiness and flourishing. After presenting my theory of envy and its fittingness conditions, I contrast Kant's view that envy is always unfitting with D'Arms and Jacobson's defense of fitting envy as an evolutionarily-shaped response to a deep and wide human concern, that is, relative positioning. However, D'Arms and Jacobson don't go far enough. First, I expand on their analysis of positional goodness, distinguishing between an epistemic claim, according to which we use implicit or explicit comparison to know what position we occupy in a continuum of goodness, and thus to form judgments of goodness, and a metaphysical one, according to which much human goodness depends on implicit or explicit rankings and positionality. Second, I argue that fitting envy is not only intrinsically valuable qua fitting response to authentic goodness, but can be epistemically, morally and prudentially valuable.

Keywords

Envy; fitting envy; fitting emotions; emulative envy; positional goods; fittingness and happiness; envy and happiness; envy and flourishing; value of envy; benign envy.

0. Introduction¹

Thick and abundant hair; an unblemished skin; physical strength; being quick-witted; a fast sport car; a lush garden; a dotting and supportive partner; well-behaved and academically successful children; a reputation on social media; a remunerative job.

¹ For incisive and constructive criticism on a previous version of this paper I'm grateful to all the participants to "Fit Fest", and in particular to Rachel Achs, Selim Berker, Louise Hanson, Tom Hurka, Stephanie Leary, Brian McElwee, Oded Na'aman, Mauro Rossi, Philip Stratton-Lake, and Christine Tappolet. I'm also thankful to Stephen Campbell and Oded Na'aman for in-depth conversations and precious advice about how to reframe my argument; to Justin D'Arms for clarifications about his and Daniel Jacobson's view; to Tyler Doggett for helpful feedback on a prior version of this paper (cf. "Conclusion" in Protasi 2021), and Kariah Phillips for sharing her professional counseling insights on this topic. Finally, thanks to Christopher Howard and Richard Rowland for inviting me to contribute to this volume and for their encouraging and detailed feedback on my contribution.

These are only a few of the things we envy. A comprehensive list would be extremely long, perhaps infinite. For something to be an object of envy, the envier has to think of it as both valuable and as something they lack: we envy others for things that we care about but that we don't have. There are all sorts of objects that fit such a subjective description. Thus, it seems that, in principle, anything could be envied.

But not everything is objectively worthy of envy. In fact, one may argue that *nothing* is truly enviable, or, in other words, that envy is never an apt response to the perceived lack of a good.

The idea that envy is systematically misguided or necessarily inappropriate is fairly popular in the history of ideas, both within and without academia, and takes various forms. In popular sayings, envy is presented as irrational (“envy slayeth the silly ones”), maliciously counterproductive (“envy spoils the good it covets”), self-defeating even, since it “slays itself by its own arrows” and “shoots at others, but hits itself.”

In this paper I focus on a particular version of this critique: the idea that envy is never fitting. Envy's complex nature makes the analysis of its fittingness conditions complicated, but here I'm particularly interested in one component: the envied object. If the envied object is never authentically good, then envy is necessarily unfitting. I'll clarify and expand on this concept momentarily, but let me first emphasize that it differs from another kind of popular critique: the idea that envy is always immoral and imprudent. Many people think that envy proper always motivates the envier to act badly. The sayings above incorporate some of that critique: envy “shoots at others” and “spoils the good”.

The critique I intend to challenge precedes worries about envy's alleged moral or prudential badness, and is, rather, about envy's core concern: *relative positioning*. The gist of such critique is that authentic goodness doesn't depend on any sort of comparison. This is a popular view in everyday conversations about envy (“you should focus on what you have, not what others have!”), but can also be found in the philosophical tradition.

I defend the opposite view: authentic goodness *very often* depends on some sort of comparison, and thus, not only can envy be fitting, but furthermore its core concern is systematically connected with our flourishing as humans.

Here is a preview of the paper. I start by presenting my original taxonomy of envy and showing how it expands our understanding of the many ways in which envy can be fitting or unfitting (section 1). Then, I introduce the position that envy is always unfitting insofar as it's concerned with the inauthentic good of relative positioning, a position exemplified by Immanuel

Kant (section 2), and contrast it with Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson’s view, which is that envy can be fitting insofar as it is an evolutionarily-shaped response to a deep and wide human concern, viz., relative positioning (section 3). However, I argue that D’Arms and Jacobson don’t go far enough in their defense of fitting envy. First, I expand on their analysis of positional goodness, by distinguishing between two claims: an epistemic one, according to which we use implicit or explicit comparison to know what position we occupy in this continuum of goodness, and thus to form judgments of goodness (section 4), and a metaphysical one, according to which much human goodness depends on implicit or explicit rankings and positionality (section 5). Second, I show that we can be a lot more sanguine about the role of envy in our ethical lives than D’Arms and Jacobson appear to be. They are hesitant to attribute a positive practical role to fitting envy and suggest instead that it might be appropriate to repress it. Against this view, I argue that fitting envy is not only intrinsically valuable qua fitting response to authentic goodness, but can be epistemically, morally and prudentially valuable (section 6). Fitting envy plays a crucial role in safeguarding our well-being and, in some varieties, even our flourishing as moral agents.

1. The Multifarious Nature of Envy, and Its Fittingness Conditions

In this section I provide a sketch of an account of envy I defend elsewhere (Protasi 2016, 2021), which is supported by extensive empirical evidence, and also foreshadowed in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*, among other philosophical works.

Envy is usually understood as a three-place relation, involving the subject who feels the emotion (envier); the person toward whom the emotion is directed (envied); and the object that is envied (the good). It’s important to keep in mind the *relational* and *comparative* nature of envy (that it’s always targeted at and vis-à-vis another person) so as to distinguish it from a mere desire or wish to have something one doesn’t have (whereby there is no relation to another person) and from coveting something possessed by another (whereby the other person doesn’t constitute a standard of comparison, and which lacks the painful self-reflective element typical of envy).

So, here is a more substantive definition that helps distinguish envy from similar attitudes: envy is an aversive response to a perceived inferiority or disadvantage vis-à-vis a similar other, with regard to a good that is relevant to the sense of identity of the envier.²

² I can’t address the many objections that usually arise when presenting such a definition to a philosophical audience; so many different elements whetting the appetite for an endless search for counterexamples! Plenty of scenarios can be concocted to show that this account doesn’t capture all possible cases of envy—some quite plausible! However, I talk of

Let me unpack this definition by using a concrete example. Suppose I confess feeling envy for my sister's unblemished skin. (That I don't have a sister makes my confession a lot easier.) By confessing this envy, I thereby communicate to you that I'm feeling some sort of pain (my response is affectively *aversive*), which is brought about by the perception that someone whom I see as similar to me has a superior skin texture; my envy also tells you that I see my own skin as comparatively tarnished; finally, you can also infer that having unblemished skin, or perhaps more generally an unblemished exterior, is something that I care about, or, as some psychologists put it, a "self-relevant" goal or domain (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 454-456).

As mentioned earlier, there's robust empirical evidence supporting each component of this definition: social psychologists agree that any kind of envy is painful or at least unpleasant to feel; that we only feel it towards someone whom we perceive as similar to us in some respect, someone who's in the same comparison class as we, and whom we perceive as being in a superior position of some sort; and, finally, that we envy people only for things that we perceive to be good under certain descriptions and that we see as relevant and important to us (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007; Smith and Kim 2007; Lange and Crusius 2015 provide detailed reviews).

Naturally, the empirical evidence concerning these conditions isn't always nuanced. When it comes to similarity between the envied and the envier, for instance, psychologists usually refer to simple demographic factors like age and gender. But philosophers (Aristotle, Francis Bacon, Hume) also discuss this aspect of envy in their analyses, and include similarity based on kinship, spatiotemporal closeness, occupation, and caring about the same things. Sometimes we envy people with regard to general goods (happiness, health, luck in love), or specific but almost universally desired ones (such as a vaccine for COVID-19)—in these cases, the envied are similar to us qua fellow human beings, and the domain of self-relevance is very broad (most of us care about being happy and healthy). Even when similarity is broadly construed, however, envy is likely to be more intense if the envied other is similar to us in some respect, such as being "near [...] in time and place and age and reputation" (Kennedy 2007, 145), as Aristotle remarks in the *Rhetoric* (*Rhet.* II.10).

In sum, the majority of those who have thought and written about envy, whether philosophers or psychologists, in ancient or contemporary times, agree on what this emotion is. The

envy as a concrete culturally-specific (think: contemporary "Western" industrialized societies) emotional phenomenon that affects the *average* person. People vary in their emotional repertoire. When anthropologists say that envy is a universal emotion, that claim isn't falsified by the fact that a few people never feel envy. Similarly, when psychologists talk about the factors that I'm about to explain, that is compatible with idiosyncratic experiences or the existence of cases that aren't fully captured by these conditions.

disagreement begins when it comes to what it motivates us to do and whether it's necessarily immoral. The traditional and popular understanding of envy is that of a *malicious* (thus immoral) emotion, which pushes the agent to bring down the envied and spoil the envied good. This notion, however, has come under severe empirical critique in the last fifteen years: many studies have shown the existence of a genuine kind of envy that is *benign*, insofar as it motivates to “level up”, to try and emulate the envied or to attain what the envied has (van de Ven 2016). The consensus is that, in order for benign envy to arise, the envier has to feel pretty confident and hopeful that they can overcome their disadvantage. If they feel “hopeless” and “helpless” (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 456-459), then they are likely to develop feelings of malicious envy and be motivated to “level down” and engage in aggressive and hostile behaviors, such as sabotaging the envied or spoiling the good among others.

Some contemporary philosophers have also developed more positive accounts of envy (La Caze 2001; Thomason 2015). I, too, defend the view that envy need not be bad and argue that a certain species of envy, what I call *emulative envy*, may even be virtuous in some conditions (Protasi 2021). Emulative envy is characterized by being more concerned with the good than with the envied's possession of it,³ and by a perception that leveling up to the envied is a likely possibility. In other words, the emulative envier is more preoccupied with the lack of a certain good than with the fact that another person has it. The envied's having the good is both a reminder of the envier's lack and proof that the envier could also have it (insofar as the envier and the envied are similar). Furthermore, the emulative envier believes that they can improve their condition and achieve the good on their own terms, without taking it from the envied. Thus, they are motivated to “level up” to the envied.

Recall my envy for my sister's unblemished skin. If I feel emulative envy, that means that I think that I might be able to improve the state of my skin, perhaps through an appropriate skin regimen or nutritional plan, and that I care about this good more than the fact that it's *my sister* who has better skin. It's not that I have a rivalry with my sister, but rather that I really care about good skin and my sister's skin shows me the possibility of achieving it.

³ Focus of concern is a continuous variable. As mentioned earlier, envy always involves three parties, so the envier is always concerned with the envied *and* the good. But sometimes they are *more* concerned with lacking the good, whereas other times they are *more* concerned with the fact that the envied has it. Aristotle makes the same point (but in dichotomous terms) when distinguishing between *zēlos* (usually translated as ‘emulation’) and *phthonos* (usually translated as ‘envy’) in *Rhetoric* II, 10-11.

You may object that this doesn't sound like envy. This is a reasonable concern which I address extensively elsewhere (Protasi 2016, and 2021, esp. 51-54). For the purposes of the present discussion, and given that the notion of benign envy is becoming mainstream in the empirical literature, I'll just assume it. I won't, however, assume my more controversial view that benign envy can be virtuous (note that my example above doesn't qualify as virtuous, since unblemished skin is not clearly a component of *eudaimonia* and it actually sounds a bit frivolous and ableist—fortunately, it's a purely hypothetical case!).

There are three other kinds of envy that I discuss in my work. *Inert envy* is an ineffective version of emulative envy, which one feels when one is more concerned with the good than with the envied, but doesn't feel capable of improving one's situation. It's a self-defeating emotion, which aims for something it cannot achieve, and doesn't motivate anything but sulking and resignation. It's not malicious, but is prudentially bad, and counterproductive. A good example would be “baby envy”: when someone cannot conceive a child, and they envy people who can. These enviers often don't wish the envied lose their good (i.e. lose their fertility or the baby), but their envy cannot in typical cases lead to self-improvement. *Aggressive envy* is one species of what is usually called malicious envy. It's more focused on the envied than the good, and it motivates bringing the envied down to one's level. It's the kind of envy that motivates stealing the good and sabotaging the envied; its paradigmatic example is tripping someone during a race in order to get ahead of them. It doesn't achieve one's self-improvement, but it helps to reduce the gap with the envied. This envy motivates morally bad behavior, but it can bring genuine advantages. Finally, another species of malicious envy is *spiteful envy*, which is the perverse cousin of aggressive envy, the one we feel when we lack all hope of even subtracting the good, and so it motivates us to spoil it. My usual example here is *Othello's* villain: Iago cannot get Cassio's promotion, or Othello's beautiful wife. So, he proceeds to destroy their happiness. In a way, spiteful envy is slightly more effective than inert envy, since the envied does lose their advantage. But *Othello* aims to teach us that this advantage is short-lived (Iago will languish in prison for his misdeeds). Spiteful envy is thus both morally and prudentially bad.

Importantly, *all* of these types can be fitting, but envy is so complex that evaluations of its fittingness are complex too. Many of envy's facets consist in subjective perceptions; thus, whether one's envy is fitting depends on whether those perceptions are apt. Am I right in thinking that my sister's skin is smoother than mine? Perhaps I magnify my blemishes or underestimate hers. Is it the case that my sister is similar to me in relevant respects? Even though we're genetically related

(assuming she is my biological sibling), perhaps she's much younger, in which case a comparison to her may not make much sense when it comes to skin texture.⁴

Now, one may ask: is it really appropriate *given who I am* to care so much about this? I may be opaque to myself, lacking self-knowledge or even deceiving myself. Upon reflection, I may realize that what really bothers me is something else. Perhaps I'm pained by how my parents praise my sister's appearance over mine, which in turn manifests to me a disparity in love and care. If that's the case, then my envy for her skin is unfitting, not because unblemished skin isn't good—it's unfitting because an unblemished skin is not relevant to my self-identity, and it's a proxy, a trigger or a symptom of another sort of perceived inferiority.⁵ It might also be that *resentment*, not envy, is the fitting response here, if my parents are wronging me.

Finally, if we do accept the distinction between different kinds of envy, we might wonder whether one's perception of control over the outcome (i.e., my ability to obtain the good, or to steal it or spoil it) is correct. Suppose I am more focused on the good (my sister's *beautiful skin*) than the envied (my *sister's* having such beautiful skin). Perhaps I'm overly confident in my capacity to improve an organ as capricious and voluble as the skin; or, vice versa, I'm too insecure or ignorant about the great improvements in skin cosmetics. Either way, whether I'm correct in my perception of the likelihood that I can level up to my sister will determine whether the particular kind of envy I'm feeling is fitting or unfitting. That is, if I'm too optimistic about my capacity to improve my skin, my *emulative* envy will be unfitting; vice versa, if I'm too insecure, my *inert* envy will be unfitting. Imagine, instead, that I'm more focused on the envied than on the good. Then, perhaps I feel spiteful envy and I'm confident I can switch her beauty products and damage her skin. But in fact beautiful skin is just in her DNA (somehow I don't share those particular genes with her!), and so my spiteful envy is unfitting. (Given the envied object, aggressive envy just doesn't seem possible. This isn't a flaw in the model, but a reflection of the multifarious nature of envy and envied goods.)

So far, we have looked at the fittingness of the envied's assessment of their position vis-à-vis the envied (whether they are actually disadvantaged; how similar they actually are); of their perception of self-relevance (given the envier's overall system of values, is this particular concern

⁴ This isn't to say an older person cannot envy a younger person, but only that their envy might not be fitting. I'm happy to grant this is up for debate—much depends on what the salient similarity in the eyes of the envier is; but we can easily imagine someone telling the envier: “come on, it doesn't make sense for you to envy her! She's so much younger than you! You have great skin for your age!”. Thanks to Steve Campbell for pressing me on this point.

⁵ Introspection can go wrong in many other ways: I might not even be aware I'm envious, or I might mistake my envy for resentment (a well-known phenomenon; see e.g., Parrott and Smith 1993). I set these complications aside.

consistent with it?); and of their perception of control over the situation (is it really the case that I can/cannot level up or down with the envied?).

But there's another factor that determines whether my envy is fitting, one that has received more attention in the philosophical tradition than the ones highlighted above: is the object of envy really *good for me and my well-being more generally*, and thus truly worth pursuing? The agent sees the lacked object as good, but are they mistaken? If they are, their envy is unfitting.

For the purposes of this discussion, I assume both objectivism and pluralism about value; I'm not committed to a specific list, but here are some popular and not too controversial examples of goods: happiness (in the psychological sense, i.e., a positive balance of affective states including sensory pleasures), excellence, beauty, health, knowledge, (rewarding) interpersonal relationships, meaning, and achievement.

Thus, I'm leaving out, for now, objects like wealth and the latest tech gadget, or a combination of the two, such as the Black Diamond iPhone 5—a status symbol for our times. Even though status symbols are often envied, many philosophers doubt that they are actually good for us, and I agree.

While happiness, excellence, beauty, health, knowledge, love, meaning, and achievement may be considered relatively uncontroversial examples of goods, suggesting that they are fitting objects of envy may be met with unease, as we are going to see in the next section.

2. Against Fitting Envy: Immanuel Kant

To reiterate, there are many distinct, if often related, critiques of envy across cultures and philosophical traditions. Some of them derive from distrust about emotions in general (e.g., Stoicism), while some others are specifically concerned with envy and its alleged immorality (e.g., Bacon and Spinoza). Others don't explicitly or vehemently condemn envy, and yet don't rush to defend its possible fittingness either (e.g., Descartes and Hume).

Among those concerned with envy's viciousness, Kant deplores both the immoral actions it motivates and its inappropriate focus on relative positioning. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, envy is defined as “a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress, even though it doesn't detract from one's own; when it breaks forth into action (to diminish their well-being) It's called envy proper; otherwise It's merely jealousy (*invidentia*)” (4:458).

Envy “proper” is denounced as a “vice of hatred” (4:458), “contrary to a man’s duty to himself as well as to others” (4:459). Insofar as it goes against the demands of practical reason to respect humanity and make other people’s happiness our end, it’s practically irrational.⁶ Even mere jealousy is arguably worrisome, given that it’s a distress at the good fortune of others even when it doesn’t affect us directly, and that it motivates immoral actions.

Since he talks about a “propensity”, Kant probably isn’t thinking about occurrent emotions, but rather dispositions or character traits. Nevertheless, I doubt he’d feel too sanguine about occurrent bouts of envy, either. Both here and elsewhere Kant is concerned with envy’s essentially comparative and competitive nature. I think that for him that is the fundamental problem with envy; therein originates its vicious nature.

He discusses social comparison and the “malignant inclination” of envy (6:93) also in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In that text, Kant is worried by a typically human form of self-love, shaped by the concern for what others think of us (6:27). After an initial anxiety for being of equal worth to others, we gradually develop “an unnatural desire to acquire superiority for oneself over others” (6:27). Envy is thus both irrational and immoral, and the source of its irrationality and immorality ultimately lies in the process of social comparison, which wreaks havoc in man’s originally good nature.

For this reason, Kant rejects both envy and the tendency to compare oneself to others even with regard to pedagogy: while encouraging children to emulate their well-behaved peers might seem like a good practice, it ends up stirring resentment and envy. Thus, Kant recommends educators to cultivate in children the aspiration to duty itself (*Lectures on Pedagogy* 9:491-492).

Even if one disagrees with my interpretation of Kant, I hope one would still find this type of view not only intelligible, but familiar: authentic goodness is often said to be non-comparative and non-positional in everyday conversations.

When children lament that their siblings or friends get to have or do something they don’t, parents and educators usually invite them to focus on their own situation, to think of their lot as independent from that of others. (My personal experience as a parent is particularly paradoxical, as I defend envy and the value of competition in theory, and am constantly frustrated by its effects on my children in practice.)

⁶ Thanks to E. Sonny E. Elizondo for help with this formulation, and for feedback on my understanding of these texts.

When adults express their envy, they often find that self-help books, meditation apps, psychology blogs, religious sermons, and philosophy op-eds encourage them to feel gratitude for the good fortune they have, on the one hand, and to avoid comparisons to others, on the other. According to this perspective, envy is systematically unfitting, because how we stack up compared to others is not truly relevant to our well-being. Being inferior to the envied is not *actually* bad, and improving one's relative position is not *actually* good.

While it's usually acknowledged that envy, as a natural human emotion, may not be fully eliminated, the general advice is to avoid feeling it as much as possible, and the most effective way to do that is attacking it at its roots, refraining from comparison and from attributing value to one's relative standing.

The problem with this advice is two-fold: it's not psychologically realistic, and it's not prudentially desirable. It's not realistic because interpersonal comparison is a very powerful and basic mechanism that cannot be easily extirpated from our minds, and that undergirds many important psychological functions (I say more about this in section 4). Even if it were possible to get rid of interpersonal comparison, however, it wouldn't be desirable, because our conception of goodness wouldn't be recognizable without it.

3. In Favor of Fitting Envy: Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson

When it comes to defending envy's fittingness, the obligatory reference is D'Arms and Jacobson's seminal work on the fittingness of human sentiments (2000, 2002, 2006). I won't review this work in detail, but only summarize their most persuasive argument in defense of envy's fittingness.

D'Arms and Jacobson (2006) consider envy the "most intuitively compelling case" (p. 106) for the "zealot's" view that some emotions are systematically unfitting. They happily concede that envy is both ugly and painful, and claim that attempts to embellish it and defend its potentially benign or positive nature are either misleading or confused (ouch!). So, they argue with the "zealot" on their own grounds: if they can prove that even envy can be fitting, then *a fortiori* their view holds for any other human sentiment.

Their defense of envy rests on their well-known notion of fittingness: "to think an emotion a fitting response to some object is to think there is (*pro tanto*) reason, of a distinctive sort, for feeling the emotion toward it" (ibid., 108). Reasons of fit are distinctive, and differ from moral and prudential reasons, in that they "speak directly to what one takes the emotion to be concerned with"

(ivi). Emotions—they argue—are evolutionarily-shaped responses to many cross-cultural concerns and values. Their pluralistic approach accounts for the fact that human values are often in conflict with one another, both within and across domains: not only is it possible to be faced with genuine ethical dilemmas, but also to experience tension and strife between aesthetic, interpersonal, ethical and epistemic considerations.

The human concern individuated by envy is *relative positioning*: when we feel envy, we, at least sometimes, appropriately react to being disadvantaged vis-à-vis a (similar) other (with regard to a domain of self-importance). This concern is not only *deep*, that is, ingrained and hard to eradicate in an average human being, but also *wide*, that is, “firmly enmeshed in our web of psychological responses” (ibid., 116). Envy is concerned with *positional goods*, which are both ubiquitous and, *contra* Kant, important. Positional goods can be defined as “goods the absolute value of which, to their possessors, depends on those possessors’ place in the distribution of the good—on their relative standing with respect to the good in question” (Brighthouse and Swift 2006, 474). If it can be shown that positional goods are a central and appropriate human concern, then envy is at least sometimes fitting.

D’Arms and Jacobson go on to list many positional goods, starting from the most obvious examples, such as sports achievements, job promotions, and being at the top of social hierarchy, all the way to *excellence* itself: they argue that the very idea of excellence is inherently comparative and relative: “which accomplishments count as excellent, or sufficiently good to be worthy of pride, is largely a function of the performance of others (especially those who are nearby)” (2006, 123).

Since relative positioning is a central and appropriate human concern, envy, as a response to this concern, is thus fitting. D’Arms and Jacobson, however, go on to caution against inferring that envy’s fittingness makes it prudentially or morally good: “perhaps morality forbids acting from envy or even feeling it” (ibid., 124).

D’Arms and Jacobson’s argument doesn’t rest on equating every excellence or accomplishment to a zero-sum game. Some of the contexts they describe are zero-sum (i.e. sport races), but many others are not and yet they rely on comparison (whether one is a “strong” runner depends on the comparison class). Thus, I think that D’Arms and Jacobson don’t carefully distinguish between associated but distinct concepts: zero-sum situations, positional goods, and relative or comparative standards of goodness. The remainder of the paper is devoted to developing their argument further. First, I consider the role comparison plays in *judgments* about goodness; then, the role it plays in shaping goodness itself.

4. The Role of Comparison in Judgments of Goodness

Let's go back to sibling envy. When I think about the kind of envy I feel toward my imaginary saintly sister, I don't have to reach too far in my imagination: I can think of sibling rivalries I witnessed from up close, including between my own kids. Envy in children is ubiquitous and often unfitting, and it's ubiquitous for the same reason it's often unfitting, namely because their social comparison skills are still developing and they don't have a good sense of relevant comparison classes (so, for instance, they may get upset if a professional artist draws better than them). Furthermore, they have a fluid and ever-changing sense of their own identity and what matters to them: they haven't yet "specialized" in one domain, like adults do when they think of themselves as "a dancer" or "a philosopher". Thus, since almost everyone who outperforms them is perceived as similar, and because so many things matter to them, their envy is often all-encompassing and indiscriminating (Bers and Rodin 1984).

But sometimes children's comparisons are spot on, sensible, and appropriate. And this behavior—social psychologists tell us—is healthy and normal. Susan Fiske calls humans "comparison machines" (Fiske, 2011, 13) We habitually and automatically (thus often unconsciously) compare ourselves to others, and this mechanism is essential for a variety of psychological functions, including gathering information for self-assessment and self-improvement, self-esteem protection, and fitting into social groups (Mussweiler 2003; Fiske 2011; Corcoran et al. 2011; Mussweiler et al. 2011).

One might object that people can be assessed non-comparatively as well. But there are reasons to doubt this. D'Arms and Jacobson (2006) already present a persuasive discussion of various situations in which being considered a good X soon becomes a matter of being considered *better than or worse than* another person (along the relevant dimension). After reviewing domains such as scholarship, arts, industry, and athletics (all domains central to our flourishing) they talk of being the "Number One Dad"—the dad who mentors and coaches the kids in the neighborhood. Obviously, this is definitionally a comparative property, since it includes a ranking. But one might want to eschew comparisons and aim to be a "Good-Enough Dad".

On the one hand, the property of *good-enough-daddyhood* may be said to be non-comparative: for instance, a good-enough daddy does not abuse his children and provides for their essential physical and emotional needs.

On the other hand, this is a socially-constructed notion, a type of goodness that is unavoidably shaped by human judgments and perceptions, which are in turn subject to historically-situated social and cultural norms: good-enough dads 50 years ago were those who did not beat their children and showed up at dinner time. The criteria for crossing the “good enough” threshold, our *judgments* about what a good-enough dad is like, are much more demanding nowadays.

The same holds for many contemporary standards of goodness. Take the arts, in the ancient Greek sense of *technai*: people run faster and longer, create more complex artworks, invent more impressive technology, achieve ever-greater feats of virtuosity in all domains.

So, whether or not we are considered good children, parents, or spouses, whether we are decreed as excellent philosophers, computer scientists, dancers, engineers, or potters—any threshold that is used to evaluate success or achievement or even just mere adequacy is going to be determined by looking at what other individuals on average accomplish.⁷

A similar point applies to assessments of physical properties such as good growth or good health, which all rely on some form of comparison or other. When children are evaluated for growth, pediatricians consult charts that are inherently, by design comparative: being a tall child simply means being taller than the average child. Counting as “healthy” at 70 years of age relies on very different indicators than at 3 or 25, and counting as healthy in a contemporary industrialized society looks quite different from what it did in preindustrial societies of the past, or in today’s hunter-gatherer societies. How to understand the notions of health and healthy systems is a controversial topic, but here I set aside the conceptual complications and suggest that, in practice, our judgments of health are unavoidably comparative.⁸ This point generalizes to most (all?) bodily and mental properties that people deem valuable, whether it’s IQ or endurance and speed, and applies even to judgments of properties like vertical symmetry in a face, which is well-known to be a crucial feature in judgments of attractiveness (Fink et al. 2006; Young et al. 2011) perhaps because it’s a marker of genetic health and resistance to disease (Jones et al. 2001; Young et al. 2011). Perceptions of facial attractiveness are shown to be biased by assimilative and contrastive biases, both of which depend on comparison; as Pegors et al. (2015) put it: “[t]o navigate the social world, it

⁷ Gwen Bradford, the philosophical authority on accomplishments, also argues that difficulty and achievements are attributed on the basis of relevant comparison classes (Bradford 2015, 61-62).

⁸ See Murphy 2020 for the complex debate on the concept of health. Elizabeth Barnes discusses both comparative health judgments and theories of health in a book in progress. Bloomfield 2001 defends a relativistic understanding of the *property* of healthiness.

is important to be able to evaluate face attractiveness, but these judgments are always made in relation to a larger social and environmental context.”

Both empirical and anecdotal evidence suggest that our concern for relative positioning is impossible to eradicate. Our deeming something *good* is often ultimately a matter of deeming it to be *better than*. I’ll come back to the implications of these judgments for fitting envy, but I want first to examine a more direct way in which comparison is relevant to human goodness.

5. The Role of Comparison in Goodness

Some things cannot *be* good outside of a competition or ranking. The relativity here is metaphysically and logically necessary. This is the case of positional goods mentioned earlier. Positional goods are often discussed in economics, where they are sometimes framed in terms of “positional concerns” (Solnick and Hemenway 1998).

A standard example of a non-material positional good is *honor*, as a social status notion: to be honored in a certain society means to be anointed, to be given a social status that is higher than other people’s. It’s an “essentially hierarchical” notion as Stephen Darwall puts it (2013, 17). To be in any honor association is valuable because it’s selective and “rank-defining” (ibid., 18).

Other examples of positional goods are connected to social status, and in a consumeristic society they are often material goods, objects or experiences that cost a lot of money and which many people cannot afford, and thus function as status symbols. That paradigmatic examples of *conspicuous consumption* (defined as “expenditure on or consumption of luxuries on a lavish scale in an attempt to enhance one’s prestige”) are also paradigmatic examples of envy is not incidental to envy’s bad fame. These tend to be dismissed as inauthentic goods not only by moral philosophers, but also by sociologists and psychologists, for good reasons: evidence shows that they don’t actually bring happiness, and one of the reasons why they don’t is that agents are caught up in an arms race, which is never-ending and collectively damaging (Frank 1999). But some positional goods aren’t as easily rejected as false idols: educational pedigrees are one such case. Ivy League degrees have value partly (some might say primarily!) in virtue of the social currency they carry, as shown by the success of many an underachieving student who can nevertheless tout having graduated from a prestigious institution (the list of US presidents provides some examples). These degrees are prized because it’s

⁹ https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/conspicuous_consumption

very difficult to be admitted to one of those schools. Similarly with publications: the higher the rejection rate of a journal, the better the journal is taken to be. (We can quibble about the causal chain here: it's possible that initially a journal is taken to be very good because of its editors—editors who often come from prestigious institutions, but never mind that—but soon enough high rejection rate becomes a feature of a good journal.) Variations of this mechanism can be found everywhere: a robust feature of human psychology is that we value being part of exclusive clubs. Groucho Marx's joke that he doesn't want to be a member of a club that admits him relies in part on this truth.

Furthermore, many goods, whether they are themselves positional or not, have *latent* positional aspects, as argued by Brighthouse and Swift (2006, 478-479). Even if healthiness is not positional in itself, it may be instrumental to achieving positional goods: the healthier a person is, the greater access they have to jobs, education, and other positional or otherwise scarce goods. Similar considerations apply for beauty or wits, insofar as they allow people to get ahead in the world. Indeed, physical attractiveness and intelligence are among the goods for which positional preferences are strongest: in surveys, people consistently claim to prefer lower absolute levels of attractiveness and intelligence for oneself and one's kids, if that allows them to have them in *comparatively higher* amounts (Solnick and Hemenway 2005; Hillesheim and Mechtel 2015).¹⁰

Note the difference between the claim I'm making here and the claim I made in the previous section. It's not just that when we judge someone to be attractive or intelligent we are, consciously or unconsciously, comparing them to others in the relevant comparison class; it's also that attractiveness and intelligence themselves (even if they could be measured according to absolute non-relational standards) are positional and have indirect positional aspects.

This is not to say that all goods are positional, directly or latently. Take such sensorial pleasures and simple joys as hearing birds tweet and children laugh on a sunny Winter morning; the warmth and sounds and color of an autumnal fire; an unexpected caress by a usually reserved lover, or the smile of a stranger. These experiences are arguably good, and even components of our flourishing, and yet don't depend on comparison, hierarchy, or competition. And there are other goods and components of our well-being like this, including perhaps knowledge and meaning.

My aim in this and the previous section was to show that positional goods and goods with latent positional aspects are numerous and important, and that, furthermore, most of our judgments

¹⁰ Interestingly, in these surveys people rush to note that “their positional choices were not motivated primarily by envy. Many seemed to see life as an ongoing competition, in which not being ahead means falling behind.” (Solnick and Hemenway, 379). Setting aside the fact that people aren't always aware of their envy, or eager to admit it, not being primarily motivated by envy is compatible with their envy being fitting.

of goodness are comparative. Thus, not only envy can be fitting, but it can be fitting in many more situations than previously highlighted, even by advocates of envy's fittingness such as D'Arms and Jacobson.

In response, one might argue that our judgments of goodness are *systematically disconnected* from actual goodness—that we're just wrong when we deem something to be good based on its being *better than*. Relatedly, one might argue that positional goods are *inauthentic* goods, false idols: even if humans do care about relative positioning, they shouldn't. If that were true, then Kant would be right: envy is never fitting. We should *not* be pained by inferiority to a similar other with regard to a self-important domain.

In the end, this debate boils down to conflicting intuitions about value and the relation it bears to human psychological propensities. I agree with the view that Martha Nussbaum attributes to Aristotle: "What we find valuable depends essentially on what we need and how we are limited. The goodness and beauty of human value cannot be comprehended or seen apart from that context." (Nussbaum 1986/2001, 342) I hope to have shed light on the extent to which comparison and relative positioning affect both goodness and judgments of goodness, which in turn suggests that a conception of human goodness that is entirely noncomparative and nonpositional is unrecognizable as such.

6. The Multifaceted Value of Fitting Envy

To sum up: I have defended a metaphysical claim—that much human goodness is shaped by positionality—and an epistemic one—that we use implicit or explicit comparison to know what position we occupy in this continuum of goodness. Envy's preoccupation with one's relative positioning is fitting, insofar as it recognizes fundamental components of our subjective well-being and flourishing.

So far, I have expanded D'Arms and Jacobson's view on the centrality of relative positioning in our conception of goodness and value. Now, I argue that fitting envy can be also epistemically, prudentially, and morally valuable, which is something that Justin D'Arms, especially, is skeptical about (see D'Arms 2017, and my critique in Protasi 2021, 52-54).

Psychologists often talk about the importance of envy's *signaling value*. Envy tells us, on the one hand, what we perceive we lack, and, on the other, what we desire and care about.¹¹ However, unfitting envy sends a distorted signal, while fitting envy sends an accurate one: it informs a (self-

¹¹ Exline and Zell (2008) claim also, more controversially, that envy signals alienation or disconnection.

aware) envier about important things that concern them. Recall my initial example but tweak it a bit: imagine that I envy my sibling for their ability to forgive a narcissistic parent. If my envy is fitting, it tells me that I perceive myself as less generous and compassionate than someone who is similar to me in a self-relevant domain, and that this ability I lack is authentically good.

Thus, fitting envy has *epistemic* value for the individual. (It also has epistemic value for the species: after all, we have just spent some time thinking about what envy tells us about human goodness.)

But note also something else: my envy—let’s assume—is emulative. I really care about being the type of child who can forgive parental narcissism, and I’m pained by the comparison with my sibling only because they and I are similar. If they can forgive our parent, why can’t I? That is, I’m more focused on the good than the envied, who is a benchmark, showing me what I could achieve. Secondly, I happen to feel confident that I can become like them: I saw them go through years of therapy. It was not just a matter of genetic luck: they work hard on their relationship with our parent. I realize I can do that too.

Thus, I’m motivated to improve myself, to emulate my sibling. My envy here is neither counterproductive nor misguided—on the contrary, it focuses on relative positioning with regard to valuable moral goods and it motivates morally appropriate behavior. If I were to “level up” with my sibling, becoming capable of forgiveness and understanding, my well-being would increase, and I would be a better person. Fitting envy can thus be *morally* and *prudentially* valuable.

So, when envy is fitting and emulative, it motivates us to achieve objectively good things within our reach; it pushes us to improve ourselves and aspire to excellence. Fitting emulative envy, far from being a vice that ought to be repressed, plays a central role in our flourishing.

But even other varieties of envy have partial value: they all provide information about ourselves, our perception of how we compare to others, of what we value, and so forth. Even the most spiteful envy can be diagnostic, if we’re willing to look inside ourselves: how have we got to the point of wishing ill will to others? What are we disposed to do when in the grip of this ugly emotion? Obviously, any emotion, no matter how vile, can be informative. But if envy is systematically connected to our flourishing, because it concerns things we genuinely and centrally care about, perhaps its informational value is more precious than that of other fitting attitudes, such as humor.

Furthermore, fitting aggressive envy has some prudential value, even if it’s immoral. Sometimes stealing the good is an effective way of increasing personal well-being, and we should be

aware of this, especially if we want to prevent aggressive envy's harmful effects. Again, envy connects us to goodness in a peculiar way. Its affectively aversive nature makes it more motivating than pleasant emotions (Vaish et al. 2008), so we should acknowledge its power and value, even when we ultimately think that moral considerations defeat all the others. This is particularly important when thinking about emotions at the species level, as sometimes what is good for the individual conflicts with what is good for the species.

In *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective* (1784) Kant presents a thesis that starkly contrast with his claims about envy in other works. There, he suggests that antisocial passions, including envious competitiveness, can help to develop humanity's full potential. He compares human beings who accept the hardship of a civic union to trees, which "precisely by seeking to take air and light from all the others around them, compel each other to look for air and light above themselves and thus grow up straight and beautiful, while those that live apart from others and sprout their branches freely grow stunted, crooked, and bent." (8:22, Kant 2006, 8). In a civic union, individuals are bound by norms that limit their aggressive tendencies and that allow them to compete in a regulated manner, in a way that allows humankind to develop culture and art. Without the "unsociable" tendencies that drive humans to compete and fight with each other, they would remain in an Arcadian state of contentment and mutual affection that would, however, leave them passive, slothful, and "as good-natured as the sheep that they put out to pasture," (8:21, Kant 2006, 7), their excellent natural capacities forever dormant.

In this essay, Kant concedes that envy and competitive tendencies push us toward the good, toward developing our potential as humans. While it is possible that sometimes fitting envy should not be felt, expressed or acted upon, because of countervailing reasons against it, and while some individuals might be better served by their envious tendencies than others, for all sorts of contextual and idiosyncratic reasons, envy offers to all humans the possibility of being attuned to distinctively human goodness, and the push to excel in domains they care about. This is such a fundamental feature of human reality, that even Kant cannot deny it.

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