Varieties of Envy

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In this paper I present a novel taxonomy of envy as a psychological state, according to which there are four kinds of envy: emulative, inert, aggressive and spiteful envy. My taxonomy accounts for our nuanced experience of this complex emotion, as it is backed up by empirical evidence, grounded in the history of philosophy, and reflected in the sayings and intuitions of popular culture.[1] An inquiry into the varieties of envy is valuable not only to understand it as a psychological phenomenon, but also to shed light on the nature of its alleged viciousness: developing a more precise and adequate knowledge of envy's anatomy allows the moralist to come up with the right diagnoses and remedies.

Here is an overview of the paper. The first section introduces the notion that there is more than one kind of envy, together with the anecdotal and linguistic evidence that supports it. The second section proposes and explains in detail a definition of envy *tout court*. The third section presents a recurring distinction between behavioral tendencies of envy, which has been explained in two distinct ways, one mostly proposed by psychologists, the other discernible in the philosophical tradition. The fourth section argues that these models of explanation track two variables (focus of concern and perceived obtainability of the good), whose interplay is responsible for the existence of the four envies. The fifth section illustrates four paradigmatic cases, and provides a detailed analysis of the phenomenology, motivational structure, and typical behavioral outputs of each. The paper ends with a brief discussion of the practical implications of the taxonomy.

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[1] Even though envy appears to be a universal emotion, its specific expressions may be quite different cross-culturally. The focus of this article is envy in the contemporary Western context. The historical references are all from the Western tradition. The psychological research cited is mostly based on samples drawn from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (cf. Henrich et al., 2010). The four kinds of envy described here are social constructs that are culturally specific, and I do not claim that they exhaust all the possible varieties of envy as they can be, or have been, experienced by human beings. Consequently, I do not discuss issues concerning the evolutionary history of envy. Thank you to two

1. Envy Is Said in Many Ways

According to Chaucer "all other sins oppose one virtue, but envy is against all virtue and all goodness" and is therefore the worst of the capitals sins.[2] While the condemnation of envy is particularly fierce in the Middle Ages (when the *Canterbury Tales* were composed), it dates back to antiquity, consolidates in the modern era, and is inherited almost entirely undisputed by us. Philosophers, theologians, poets, novelists, and other commentators on human nature have all added their voice to the chorus of envy detractors.

Consistently with this long-standing, widespread and unabated censure, it is often said that envy is never readily admitted.[3] Indeed, envy is a trait that most people tend to hide, and deny to have, sometimes aggressively (Foster, 1972, pp. 165-166). Yet, *qualified* declarations of envy are sometimes made, and even publicly shared. Consider the following example.

A friend of mine boasted on Facebook about the nice weather she was enjoying in Southern California during a snowy winter. Her Facebook "friends" commented along the lines of: "Can I be a little jealous? No envious?" "Feeling 'envy'!" and "Let others feel positive jealousy!"

This kind of situation on the one hand confirms that what people generally perceive as *envy proper*, the capital sin and shameful vice, is not confessable. On the other hand, it shows that another kind of envy can be confessed, and is even expected as a legitimate response: ' "envy" ' in quotes, or 'jealousy' or 'positive jealousy'. It is well known to scholars that English speakers use 'jealousy' as a synonym of envy when they aim to convey that they are feeling a more positive kind of envy.[4]

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[2] Cf. *The Parson's Tale*. Notice that in this paper I adopt a secular perspective and set aside theological issues.

[3] Francois de la Rochefoucauld famously wrote: "We can often be vain of our passions, even the guiltiest ones; but envy is so sneaking and shameful that we never dare confess it." (de la Rochefoucauld, 2008, p. 9). Plutarch (in *De Invidia et Odio*, 5) and Mandeville (*The Fable of the Bees*, "note N") make a similar point, among others.

[4] According to D'Arms, 2009, "the philosophical consensus is that these are distinct emotions" (p. 3, section 1.2). See for instance Ben-Ze'ev (1990), Farrell (1980), Neu (1980), and Taylor (1988). A similar consensus can be found in psychology, see the reviews in Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007, pp. 471-473, and Smith and Kim, 2007, pp. 47-48. In my view, the crucial difference between the two emotions is that the jealous is afraid of, and pained by, the possibility or actuality of *losing* a special relationship to a person, or a valued good, whereas the envious perceives herself to be in a position of disadvantage or inferiority because she *lacks* an object, a talent, a status, the possibility of achieving a goal. Envy and jealousy are in this respect opposite attitudes: jealousy guards what envy covets (Foster, 1972, p. 168). This simple dichotomy of loss vs. lack is a relatively established way of distinguishing between envy and jealousy (see for instance Parrott (1991), Parrott and Smith (1993), and

In fact, some languages, such as Dutch, Thai, Polish, and Arabic,[5] have *two terms* that refer to envy. One term refers to what in English we would call envy *simpliciter*. The other refers to a kind of envy free of malice, focused on the goodness of the envied object, and less shameful or embarrassing to admit.

These linguistic phenomena find confirmation in the study of envy *as an emotion*. Both philosophers and psychologists have argued in favor of the thesis that there is more than one kind of emotion that qualifies as envy.[6] Most of them, however, have argued in favor of a binary distinction: *malicious* envy and *benign* envy. I will show that such dichotomy is too simplistic and does not adequately capture all of our experiences of envy, but before doing so we need a non-controversial account of envy *tout court*.

2. What is Envy?

Let us start with a formal characterization of envy as a three-place relation, composed by the envier, that is, the subject who feels the emotion; the envied or target, that is, the person toward whom the emotion is directed; the good, that is, the object with regard to which the envier is in a disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the envied. This definition will come handy later, when discussing the internal structure of each kind of envy.

But we need a more substantive definition about what envy is about, how it feels, and the circumstances in which it arises. Envy is an aversive reaction to a perceived inferiority to a similar other, with regard to a good that is relevant to the sense of identity of the envier. This definition

Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007) among psychologists, and Ben-Ze'ev (1990), Purshouse (2004), and Konyndyk DeYoung (2009) among philosophers), even though it is not free from complications (see e. g. Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007, pp. 471-473).

[5] Dutch: benijden and afgunst, Polish: zazdros´c´ and zawis´c´, and Thai: (phonetically) ı`t-cha and rı´ t-yaa, as documented in van de Ven et al. 2009, p. 420. Hadi Jorati, whom I thank, told me that Arabic has similar terms: غبطة (ghibt) and ط (hasad). I am relying on native speakers' testimony and my own consultation of the relevant dictionaries with regard to these distinctions.

[6] I focus on psychology and philosophy, but envy is studied from a wide range of perspectives. See Smith (2008) for a comprehensive interdisciplinary review.

emerges from the overlapping of the most authoritative psychological and philosophical accounts of envy as an emotion.

In order to unpack this long definition, let us start with the *aversive* character of envy. Envy is unpleasant, if not outright painful. This feature is virtually undisputed, and some authors even consider it a defining feature.[7] The aversive nature of envy is a consequence of the perception of inferiority that envy responds to.[8] By *inferiority* I mean any kind of situation in which the envier sees herself as coming off worse than another.

The two remaining parts of the definition are connected to the phenomenon of social comparison. First, the *similarity factor*, according to which we envy only those who are similar to us in some relevant sense. Similarity is not only the enabling condition for social comparison, but it is also what makes it diagnostic and informative.[9] As Susan Fiske puts it, human beings are "comparison machines" (2011, p. 13): we continuously and often inadvertently compare ourselves to people who are like us in capabilities, endowments, values and aspirations.

It turns out, however, that social comparison tends to always be *slightly upward*: we compare to those who, from an impartial perspective, are slightly better than us (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007, p. 454). Upward comparison provides positive instances of what one wants to evaluate, and is conducive to self-improvement, but is also a risky business: if we compare to someone whom we perceive as similar, and find out that she outperforms us in something important to us, then we are painfully disappointed. And indeed we are likely to find ourselves in this situation, if we are always shooting a little higher than we realize.

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[7] Especially philosophers, such as Plato (*Philebus* 47d-50e), Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, II. 10), Hobbes (*Leviathan*, ch. 6), Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book II, ch. XX, §13) and Spinoza (*Ethica*, corollary to prop. 55). Among contemporaries, see Tai et al. (2012).

[8] While this perception may be incorrect, either because the perceived lack is not actual, or because what one perceives as good is in fact bad, for simplicity I assume that the envier is always correct in her perceptions.

[9] Hume makes both observations in the *Treatise* (II.2.8), but already Aristotle had individuated the similarity factor: "we feel [envy] towards our equals; [...] and by 'equals' I mean equals in birth, relationship, age, disposition, distinction, or wealth. […] We envy those who are near us in time, place, age, or reputation. […] So too we compete with those who follow the same ends as ourselves: we compete with our rivals in sport or in love, and generally with those who are after the same things; and it is therefore these whom we are bound to envy beyond all others. Hence the saying, Potter against potter." (*Rhetoric*, II. 10).

The similarity factor is an established empirical finding, but not one that is spelled out in detail in the psychological literature. It is easy to see why: what counts as "similar" is heavily context-dependent. The relevant similarity may be based on gender, sex, age, or some other general category. For instance, when we envy someone for their athletic fitness, age and gender are relevant and salient features, while more specific personal features may be unimportant. But in other contexts being similar means sharing the same level of skills and interests, such as two professors in the same department who work in the same field and compete for the same award.

Finally, we feel envy when we perceive ourselves as inferior to a similar other with respect to a good in a domain that is relevant to our sense of identity. The *self-relevance factor* is also an established but poorly defined and underspecified concept in the psychological literature. A philosophically refined interpretation would have to include what we care about, what we aspire to be, and what we perceive ourselves as being.

The self-relevance factor is required because not all instances of upward social comparison trigger aversive responses. Sometimes we are *positively* affected by being outperformed, as for instance when we identify with the other person. This is called a process of *reflection*, and it happens when the domain in question is not relevant to our sense of identity.[10] A friend's superior soccer performances will not make me feel bad about myself, if being a good soccer player is not something I aspire to be. Quite the contrary, I may feel proud of my friend and "bask in reflected glory" (Cialdini et al., 1976): I will tell everyone that she is *my* friend! However, if I myself care very much about being a good soccer player, a process of *comparison* will take place: being outperformed will affect my self-esteem and I will likely feel envy (provided the other preconditions are satisfied, namely I perceive to be outperformed and I see her as sufficiently similar to me).[11]

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[10] See Tesser and Collins (1988); Tesser et al. (1988), for the self-evaluation maintenance (SEM) model of social behavior. See Salovey and Rodin (1984), and Salovey and Rothman (1991) among others for an application of this model to envy.

[11] Very young children, who have not developed a well-defined sense of identity, experience envy across *all* domains, whereas older children express envy only in areas that they rated as self-defining (Bers and Rodin, 1984). In this paper I focus on adult envy.

We now know what envy *is*. But the main reason why envy is talked about is what it *does*, or rather it makes us do. The next section discusses envy's motivational tendencies.

3. What Does Envy Do?

Dorothy Sayers characterizes what envy motivates the envier to do thus: "Envy is the great leveler: if it cannot level things up, it will level them down" (1999). In order to overcome her disadvantage, the envier can either pull herself up to the level of the envied, or she can pull the envied down to her level.[12]

This idea of *leveling orientation* is intuitive, and present in virtually all accounts of envy, in one version or another. But the explanation as to why someone would be inclined to level up or down is not always the same. An analysis of the philosophical and psychological literature reveals that there are two main accounts, one that is paradigmatically psychological, and the other that is paradigmatically philosophical. Let us start with the latter, which is best exemplified in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

Aristotle distinguishes between two related, but in one important respect opposite, emotions: *phthonos* and *zēlos*. They are both defined as pains at the sight of other people's good fortunes, felt toward people who are similar to us. But in *phthonos*, we feel this pain "not with the idea of getting something for ourselves, but because other people have it" (1387b24-25) whereas in *zēlos* the pain "is felt not because others have these goods, but because we have not got them ourselves" (1388a34). *Phthonos* is said to be morally blameworthy, and felt by bad people, whereas *zēlos* is said to be morally praiseworthy, and felt by good people.

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[12] There is a third option. Rather than trying to close the gap, one can cope with envy *indirectly*. A common strategy is to re-evaluate the object of envy and come to see it as not good for oneself. This is known as the *sour grape* strategy, from the famous Aesop's fable: if I envy someone's capacity to reach what seems like delicious fruit, I might cope with it by convincing myself that after all that fruit is not as delicious as it seems. This strategy need not be a form of self-deception, as in the fable: in its most successful instances it may involve a genuine and useful re-assessment of one's values and goals. (See Exline and Zell (2008) for a review of "antidotes" to envy in this sense.) This strategy, which dismisses the disadvantage either as only superficial or as irrelevant to one's well-being, makes one's envy *inappropriate*: if the good is not a genuine good, then there is no real inferiority or disadvantage. In this paper I focus on appropriate envy.

Aristotle characterizes both emotions as aversive reactions to a perceived inferiority to someone who is similar to us, with regard to some valued good. The crucial difference between them is that they have a different *focus*: *phthonos* is focused on the fact *that the envied has the object*, whereas *zēlos* is focused *on the lack of the valued object*.[13]

Aristotle clearly spells out the motivational consequences: "*zēlos* makes us take steps to secure the good things in question, *phthonos* makes us take steps to stop our neighbor having them." (1388a34-35) In other words, one motivates to pull the envied down, whereas the other motivates to pull oneself up. For Aristotle, then, there are two kinds of envy: one is characterized by a focus on the envied, which motivates to level down and is thus malicious and morally reproachable, and the other is characterized by a focus on the good, which motivates to level up and is thus morally laudable. [14]

This normative insight is lacked by psychologists, who explain leveling orientation quite differently.[15] Studies in social comparison show that the way we react to informative social

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[13] In the contemporary literature, Aaron Ben-Ze'ev has a similar notion of focus of concern (Ben-Ze'ev, 2002). Gabriele Taylor uses the notion of focus and that of leveling orientation to distinguish between kinds of envy (Taylor, 1988, 2006) but in a way that I find inadequate, cf. footnote 23. Jerome Neu (1980, pp. 433-434) uses focus of concern to distinguish between jealousy (where the focus is on the valued object) and envy (where the focus is on the rival), and not between what he calls admiring envy and malicious envy, which differ in leveling orientation. D'Arms and Kerr dismiss "focus of attention" as a discriminating factor between kinds of envy (2008, pp. 46-47). The authors conclude that focusing on the rival means being "bothered by" the fact that the rival has the good, which is a locution also used in Farrell, 1980, but neither article spells out the notion fully.

[14] My interpretation of *zēlos* is not uncontroversial. The term is generally translated in English as "emulation" or, more rarely, as "zeal," and the corresponding emotion is often interpreted as one that differs *in kind* from envy (for instance see Kristjánsson, 2006). I believe that this reading is affected by the Scholastic interpretation of Aristotle (Timpe and Perrine, 2014, for instance, refer to Aristotelian *zēlos* when analyzing Aquinas' account of envy and zeal). While this approach may be enlightening when thinking of envy *as a capital sin*, it seems anachronistic and misleading when interpreting the Aristotelian account of envy as an *emotion*. Aristotle presents *zēlos* and *phthonos* as emotions with a similar structure, both being pains at the sight of another's good fortune. The different focus of concern is the only feature that Aristotle explicitly puts forward as distinguishing them (their opposite behavioral tendency is directly consequent to the different focus). Since focus of concern is often used by contemporary philosophers to differentiate different kinds of envy, and since both *zēlos* and *phthonos* satisfy a widely shared conception of envy as an emotion, it seems to me that we have good reason to conceptualize *zēlos* as a kind of envy, albeit not a vicious one. I thank an anonymous referee for encouraging me to address this hermeneutical question.

[15] In psychology we find a discussion of the correlation between malicious and benign envy with "focus of attention" (Crusius and Lange, 2014), but the term is used differently than in the philosophical discussion. Here the term refers not to a *determinant* of envy that concerns the agent's values, but rather what the agents pays attention to, as a *consequent* of envy. The authors found that when agents feel benign envy, they tend to focus

comparison depends on perception of control over the outcome. If we believe that we have no

control on our poor performance and that there are scarce possibilities of improvement, we react

aggressively toward those who outperform us, and we feel worse about ourselves.[16] Psychologists

consider perception of control as the crucial determinant of leveling orientation, and of whether we

experience benign envy (or an emotion that is similar to envy but not malevolent) or malicious envy

(Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007, Smith and Kim, 2007, van de Ven et al., 2009, 2012).[17] This is a

purely descriptive notion, a precondition on par with the similarity and the self-relevance factor, and

it is independent from the idea of focus.

Both paradigms, the philosophical and the psychological, are correct, but insufficient on

their own: we need both.

4. The Variables of Envy

The two paradigms seen in section 3 track what I call the *variables* of envy.

The first variable is *focus of concern*: the envier is either focused on the good or focused on the

envied. This should not be interpreted as a matter of salience, or attention, in a psychological sense

(as in Crusius and Lange, 2014), but as a value-laden notion: what the envier focuses on is what she

cares about, from a prudential point of view. The envier focuses on the good when she values the

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their attention on the envied good, and when they feel malicious envy, they tend to focus on the envied. This
result is compatible with my taxonomy. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this reference.

[16] See Testa and Major (1990) and Lockwood and Kunda (1997). But also some philosophers (Francis Bacon in
On Envy, and Rawls, 1971, p. 467) explain leveling orientation this way.

[17] Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007) and Smith and Kim (2007), however, do not consider benign envy (or, as
Miceli and Castelfranchi call it, emulation) a form of envy proper. Van de Ven et al. (2012) analyze the role of
another factor, *perceived deservingness* of the outcome, and its interactions with perceived control. This paper
accomplishes, among others, two important results: it further confirms the differences in appraisal and
experience between benign envy and admiration, and it shows that when enviers perceive the superior situation
of the envied as deserved, they tend to feel benign envy, and when they perceive it as undeserved, they feel
malicious envy. I do not consider deservingness here because the interaction between control and
deservingness needs further enquiry and it is not clear that they are independent variables. It is also not clear
how perceived deservingness interacts with like or dislike of the envied. Van de Ven et al. speculate that when
we do not like the envied we tend to consider their fortune as less deserved, and that seems right to me. I also
think that disliking the envied correlates with an adversarial attitude and thus a focus on the envied. It is
possible that focus of concern may ultimately account for both perception of (un)deservingness of the outcome
and (dis)like of the envied.

good for its own sake.[18] The pain that results from the lack of the good is exacerbated by the fact that the envied possesses the good. The envier focuses on the target when she is pained by the unfavorable comparison to the envied. The good is not valued for its own sake, but as a means to overcoming one's inferiority.

This variable is exhaustive: there is no third alternative. It is also practically exclusive: even though it is theoretically possible for the envier to be exactly equally focused on the object and the envied, such a perfect balance is unlikely to take place. If it did, the resulting emotion would be a borderline case.

However, this variable should not be interpreted as dichotomous, that is, non-continuous. Real cases of envy show that enviers are *more* focused on the good or *more* focused on the envied. Consider a case of sibling envy based on ease of communication with one's parents. A plausible characterization of the envier's focus of concern is that she values the ease of communication with her parents for its own sake, but she is also bothered that it is her brother who is better than her in this regard: their sibling rivalry is a background in which the lack of the good strikes her as particularly painful. In such a case, she is more focused on the good than on the envied, but she is also a little focused on the envied. But when her brother's superior skills are particularly relevant, as for instance when she is being explicitly compared to him, then she may be more focused on the envied. Furthermore, the agent's focus may shift from good to envied and vice versa even within the same case of envy, due to changed circumstances. For instance, after a fight with her parents in which she felt deeply misunderstood, the envier may be more focused on the good even in the context of an overall stronger focus on the envied. Focus of concern needs therefore to be conceived of as a continuum, dynamic variable.

When one is more focused on the good, one is more inclined to get the good itself, and less concerned with depriving the envied of it. If the context is a zero-sum game, such that only the

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[18] I am using the expression "for its own sake" somewhat loosely, to indicate that the envier values the good independently from the fact that the envied has it. I intend this formulation to be compatible with the fact that envier might value the good because it is instrumental to achieve another good.

envier or the envied can be in the advantaged position, then a side effect of the envier obtaining the good is that the envied loses the good.[19] But the envier's intention is not to deprive the envied of the good, but only to get it for herself, in line with the intuitive idea of pulling oneself up.

Vice versa, when one is more focused on the envied, one is more inclined to deprive him of the good. What bothers the envier is that the envied has the good, so her aim is to take the good away from the envied. Getting the good for oneself at the same time, however, as a result of the envied's deprivation, is not simply an undesired side effect, but part of the motivational structure: the envier does want the good as well, even if only *instrumentally*, as a way to overcome her disadvantage.

But there is a further specification with regard to leveling down that cannot be made without introducing the second variable: *perceived obtainability of the good.* This is also a continuous variable, since individuals may be more or less confident, circumstances more or less favorable, and so forth. What obtaining the good amounts to depends on whether the envier is focused on the good or on the envied. If she is focused on the good, obtaining the good means just that—getting the good for herself—but if she is focused on the envied, obtaining the good means *taking it away* from the envied.

We can see now that obtainability of the good is a more nuanced variable than the psychological notion of perceived control over the outcome, because it includes the notion of the good, which is in turn affected by the notion of focus. Thus, we can characterize leveling orientation much more precisely than in either the philosophical or the psychological paradigm alone. In particular, leveling down, as I indicated earlier, is one motivational tendency that can produce *two* different typical behaviors, depending on perceived obtainability: if I perceive myself as capable of taking away the good and acquire it myself, then I will try to *steal* (either literally or figuratively) the good; but if I perceive myself as incapable of doing so, I will try to *spoil* the good.

Notwithstanding their reciprocal influence, obtainability of the good and focus of concern do not correlate. There are many factors that determine whether a good is perceived as obtainable or

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[19] This is not a particularly idiosyncratic point: the doctrine of double effect is also based on the idea that we can distinguish between the content of our intended action and a foreseeable but contingently related side effect of our intended action.

not, such as the agent's level of self esteem (a self-confident agent will be more disposed to see the good as obtainable than an insecure one), and the nature of the good at stake (some goods are not obtainable when already in possession of someone else—that is, the situation is a zero-sum game), and other circumstantial or psychological features (for instance, individuals from privileged backgrounds are likely to be more hopeful with regard to the possibility of overcoming their disadvantage). I see no reason why focus of concern would have any direct effect on perceived obtainability.

Whether one perceives the good as obtainable, instead, may have some effect on focus of concern. One may be more prone to focus on the good if one thinks that one can easily obtain it. However, one would expect this effect to be quite weak, compared to other factors such as one's system of values, general preferences and interests, etc.[20]

Since they are independent, the two variables give rise to *four distinct kinds of envy*, as exemplified in the figure:
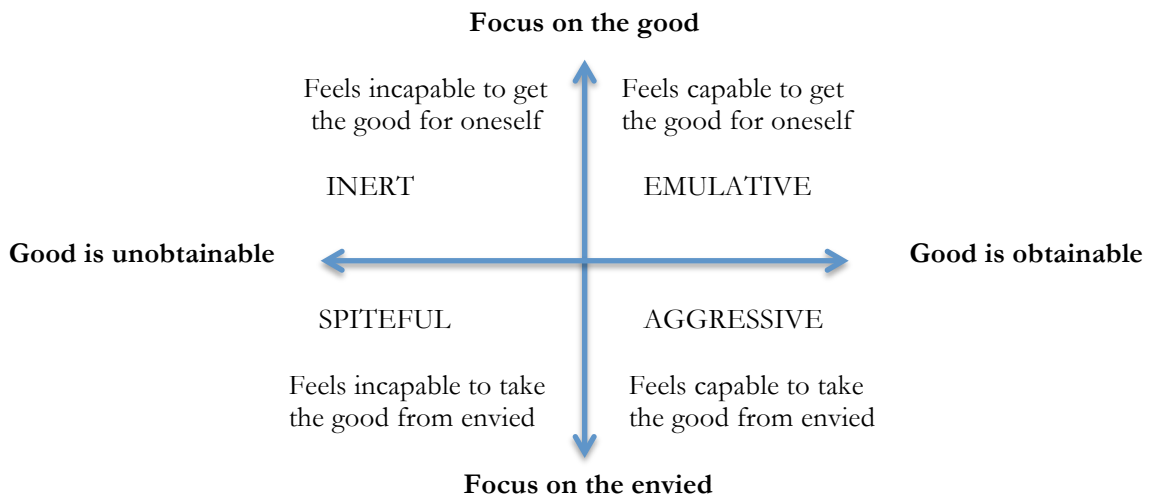

Figure 1: Varieties of Envy

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[20] There is no empirical work on the potential interactions between focus of concern and obtainability of the good, as far as I am aware. It is not clear to me the extent to which a notion such as focus of concern can be investigated empirically, at least with the conventional social psychology methodology. I thank an anonymous reviewer for prompting me to clarify this point.

The emotions occupying the quadrants on the right hand-side roughly correspond to the traditional notions of benign (upper quadrant) and malicious (lower quadrant) envy. The emotions occupying the quadrants on the left hand-side can be seen as the *unproductive* versions of the first two, and they account for features of the experience of envy that are familiar and yet often neglected by the literature, especially in the case of inert envy.

Like any theoretical model, simplifications are unavoidable. The figure above gives the appearance of clear-cut, easy to differentiate, paradigmatic, and static emotional occurrences. Real life cases are more indefinite, difficult to identify, idiosyncratic, dynamic, and may involve dispositions. The axes of the diagram are only artificial boundaries. Two cases of envy that are in different quadrants may be more similar to each other than two cases that are in the same quadrant: what matters is relative distance.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the model is explanatorily still powerful. It can account for quite different behaviors that are thought to stem from envy, such as emulation of the envied and spoiling the good; for quite different attitudes toward the envied, ranging from esteem to hatred; and finally for quite different moral judgment of the envier, who can be seen as praiseworthy, or blameworthy, but also pitiable and morally excusable.

6. The Varieties of Envy

I can finally present an exemplary[21] case for each kind of envy, whose characteristics— phenomenology, relation between envier and envied, motivational tendencies, and typical behavioral outcomes—result from the interaction of focus of concern and perceived obtainability of the good.

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[21] By exemplary I mean most realistic and plausible characterization, rather than average or median. Therefore the exemplary cases may be located in a different position in each quadrant, rather than being equidistant.

Emulative Envy

Emma[22] is a philosophy PhD student. She envies her adviser Diotima, because of Diotima's superior philosophical talents. Emma values being an excellent philosopher for its own sake, and she is motivated to become one. She is confident that she can become as good as Diotima, who is a role model for her, and she works hard in order to achieve this goal. She stops feeling envy toward Diotima only when she thinks that she has become as good a philosopher as Diotima is.

Emulative envy is the result of being focused on the good, and believing oneself to be capable of getting the good for oneself.[23] When I am more focused on the good, I am more motivated to get it for myself, without concern for whether the envied is deprived of it. In fact, far from being a rival the envied is a *model*, someone to look up to. Consequently, emulative envy is only mildly aversive, because the envier is confident that she can achieve the good, differently from inert envy, and not as bothered by the envier's better position as in aggressive and spiteful envy.

The typical behavioral tendency of emulative envy is to try to improve one's standing. Emulative envy is therefore not only non-malicious, insofar as it does not motivate the envier to pull the envied down, but it may be prudentially good, if the attempt to pull oneself up is successful.[24]

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[22] The envier's name in this and the following vignettes starts with the first syllables of the corresponding kind of envy.

[23] Other philosophers who talk of emulative envy are Gabriele Taylor and John Rawls. Taylor (2008) defines emulative envy as focused on the rival, but with an orientation to level up, and calls envy that is focused on the rival but with an orientation to level down "destructive envy". She provides no explanation as to why a subject focused on the rival can come to feel one or the other. She calls "admiring envy" a kind of envy that is focused on the good, but it is not clear how that emotion differs from admiration proper. John Rawls's definition of emulative envy is closer to mine in that it motivates us to strive to get the good for ourselves "in socially beneficial ways" (Rawls, 1971, p. 467). It is not clear in the text how emulative envy differs from what he calls "benign envy", which he explicitly sets apart both from emulative envy and envy "proper", that is, malicious. Of the latter, he says it is connected to a sense of defeat and failure, thus implicitly individuating the low-control factor, but he does not articulate this intuition.

[24] In evolutionary psychology terms, emulative envy is adaptive (Hill and Buss, 2008). Self-improvement may also be only *partially* successful: the envier may get better without reaching the level of the envied. Different emotional states can ensue: Emma may come to feel inert envy, which involves the perception of the good as unattainable; she may become more focused on the envied, and come to feel aggressive or spiteful envy; she may re-evaluate the good (e. g. "I don't after all care about being an excellent philosopher"), or re-assess her position (e. g. "I am not as bad as I thought I was"—this would probably require an act of self-deception by now), or the relevant comparison class (e.g. "Diotima is *much better* than me"), in which case she may feel admiration.

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Because of these features, emulative envy might indeed be a more effective and apt response to a perceived disadvantage, than emotions that enjoy a better reputation, such as for instance admiration.

Admiration can be defined as "a feeling of *delighted* approval of the accomplishment or character of another person and is argued to have inspiration as its motivational output" (Van de Ven et al., 2011, p.1, my emphasis).

Differently from emulative envy, admiration is pleasant and consequently it does *not* motivate to close the gap with the person in the superior position. Evidence shows that admirers feel connected to the admired, and have increased energy levels, but they do not go on to improve their performance (Van de Ven et al., 2011). After all, why would they: they are feeling pretty good about the status quo! Kierkegaard says it very nicely: "admiration is happy self-surrender; envy is unhappy self-assertion" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 139).

Admiration is similar to awe: we admire a person as we admire a landscape. We might be motivated to protect it, but not to become like it. The structure of admiration is thus dyadic, rather than triadic: the subject feels an emotion toward a target who is also the object of the emotion. The agent's comparative disadvantage is not a salient component of the appraisal content of admiration (van de Ven et al., 2012), but only a condition of possibility of the emotion: it is in virtue of my comparative disadvantage that I come to feel admiration. Furthermore, even if both envy and admiration arise in consequence of upward social comparison, envy is felt toward those who are similar to us and with regard to a self-important domain, whereas admiration is felt toward those who are much better than us, or whose achievements concern a domain that is not relevant to our self-conception (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007, pp. 470-471).

At this point one may be convinced that emulative envy exists and is different from admiration, but doubt that it is a kind of envy. I address three versions of this objection.

First, English speakers might doubt that emulative envy is aversive at all. This judgment may be based on the conflation between emulative envy and 'emulation', which is not an unpleasant

emotion (if it is an emotion at all). But empirical evidence supports the claim that emotions such as the one I described are unpleasant (Van de Ven et al., 2009).

Second, emulative envy does not seem particularly difficult to confess. But since envy is generally very difficult or even impossible to confess, then emulative envy cannot truly be envy (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007 make this objection to "benign envy").

However, the available empirical evidence casts doubt on this expectation: studies that compared "malicious" and "benign envy" experiences show that they are both associated with feelings of shame and negative feelings about oneself (van de Ven et al., 2009). This is not surprising, given that both kinds of envy involve inferiority in a self-important domain, hence they affect one's perception of the self in the eyes of others. That even emulative envy is difficult to confess is compatible with the possibility, foreshadowed in section 1, that emulative envy is easier to admit than the other kinds.

Finally, one could object that emulative envy is not envy because it is not malicious. In order to not be question begging, such an objection needs to appeal to some kind of evidence. But there is psychological, linguistic and anecdotal evidence supporting the existence of what is often called "benign envy".

However, Justin D'Arms defends a more subtle view that does not require empirical support (D'Arms, 2009, D'Arms and Jacobson, 2000, D'Arms and Kerr, 2008). According to him, the proponent of the view that envy is necessarily malicious is "best understood as holding a disjunctive view of envy's constitutive desires" (D'Arms 2009, p. 5 of pdf version). The envier is motivated toward whatever would ameliorate her situation, either by *outdoing* or *undoing the rival's advantage*, in D'Arms words. Even in what looks like benign envy there is a subterraneous and implicit maliciousness: if the target's advantage is undone, then one's envy would be satisfied. He suggests that it is only a matter of moral conscience whether enviers opt for leveling up or down.

But this conception does not take into account the role of focus and how it determines envy's *constitutive desire*. What Emma cares about is to become as excellent philosopher (to the level

personified by Diotima, but not because Diotima has it) and such a good requires autonomous development of philosophical skills. Since stealing such talents is not possible, the only leveling down option is spoiling Diotima's philosophical talents (maybe by causing a brain injury). But such an outcome would never satisfy Emma. It is not a matter of moral conscience, as D'Arms speculates. Even if Diotima happened to lose her philosophical talent on her own, Emma's envy would not be satisfied, because its constitutive desire of obtaining the good for herself would not be satisfied. Her envy would be simply emptied of its object: Emma cannot feel emulative envy toward Diotima if Diotima is not worthy of being emulated anymore. But Emma would still want to get to the level where Diotima had been.

In conclusion, emulative envy is not even implicitly malevolent, and yet it is a kind of envy proper.

Inert Envy

Indrani is infertile. She envies her friend Priya, who just got pregnant. Indrani values having a biological child for its own sake, and she is motivated to have one. However, she is aware that this possibility is precluded to her. Priya is a litmus test of what Indrani sees as a flaw of hers: it shows her what she cannot have. She congratulates Priya on her pregnancy, but whenever she has a chance she—sympathetically of course—remarks on Priya's weight gain and fatigued looks. The day that Priya has a miscarriage, she feels some relief, but her envy is not satisfied.[25]

Inert envy is the result of being focused on the good, but believing oneself to be incapable of getting the good for herself. Since she perceives (correctly) the good as unobtainable, the motivation to improve her situation is frustrated.

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[25] A Google search on "baby envy" leads to dozens of articles and blog posts reporting stories analogous to the one I tell here: see for instance http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/07/fertility-diary-baby-envy/

Inert envy is very painful. The envier experiences despair, frustration, self-loathing, and, often, shame and guilt for feeling envy.[26]

The envier is not motivated to self-improve, because she feels hopeless about the possibility of overcoming her disadvantage, and consequently the envied cannot be a model as in emulative envy. Priya is only a standard of self-assessment, and a disappointing one at that: it shows to Indrani, *and to others*, that she is lacking in some important respect.

Consequently, being in the presence of the envied may trigger mildly hostile reactions, such as gossiping and backbiting. These behaviors are often labeled in the psychological literature as ways of pulling the envied down (e.g. Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007, van de Ven et al., 2012). My model allows drawing finer distinctions. Gossiping and backbiting are ways to pull the envied down *when the good at stake is affected by these behaviors*. For instance, if the envied enjoys a reputation for being a zealous worker, the envier may effectively damage this reputation by spreading rumors on the envied's indolence. But if Indrani suggests to others that being pregnant made Priya conceited, her backbiting behavior is not an expression of leveling down, but an expression of Indrani's (conscious or unconscious) hostility for the source of her pain.

Another behavioral output typical of inert envy is a half-hearted way of complimenting the envied. Such compliments reflect a genuine appreciation of the trait or object possessed by the envied, but they are not warm insofar as they reflect the internal discomfort of the envier. Compliments have two components. The apparent one is a positive value judgment: the trait or object complimented is good ("you have such *nice hair*!"). The less explicit one is a sympathetic and warm appreciation that the person complimented has trait or object x ("[I'm glad that] *you* have such nice hair!").

Inert enviers lack this sympathetic appreciation, because they are pained by their lack. In some cases, their compliments may explicitly reflect this pain (e.g. "You're such a good painter! I will

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[26] Shame and guilt are neither necessary, nor unusual component of any kind of envy, but they are presumably more likely in inert envy, where the envier does not see the target as someone to bring down, and where confabulatory pretenses of injustice may be less frequent.

never be able to paint like that…"), and be unpleasant or embarrassing to receive. The typical compliment of an emulative envier will be quite different: "You are such a good painter! I really need to work more on my skills. Would you teach me?" Such a compliment still contains a comparative judgment and an admission of inferiority, but the optimism and lack of self-pity outweigh the frustration, and the compliment is quite pleasant to receive.[27] For analogous reasons, a typical expression of inert envy is detached or even dehumanizing praise, such as "She is so efficient! She's like a robot".[28]

Half-hearted compliments and detached praise are sometimes seen as ways of reacting to the shame and guilt associated with envy.[29] But a more comprehensive analysis of the kinds of envy and their structure shows that they are expressions of a frustrated motivation to pull oneself up to the level of the envied.

It is therefore not surprising that Indrani feels relief from the announcement that Priya had a miscarriage. Such a transient relief is different from Schadenfreude proper, that is, pleasure at another's misfortune, which typically accompanies more malicious kinds of envy (van de Ven et al., 2014). More than pleasure, Indrani feels that her pain is lessened, because her inferiority is made less salient to her, but it is not caused by the envied's misfortune *per se*. Indeed, in addition to feeling shame and guilt for her reaction, Indrani may feel genuine sadness for Priya, who is, after all, her friend.

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[27] In societies where resources are scarce the implicit assumption is that *any* compliment implies some degree of malicious envy, therefore compliments are feared, and etiquette rules prohibit making them. In the same societies, not only one avoids boasting one's good fortune, but goes as far as hiding it (cf. soiling the newborn babies' faces with mud, minimizing or denying the qualities of one's children, hiding one's wealth, and so forth), in order to avoid the scary and dangerous "evil eye" of the enviers (Foster, 1972 and Lindholm, 2008).

[28] Susan Fiske and collaborators, working on intergroup envy, have shown that envied groups are perceived by enviers as highly competent, but cold. Detachment and dehumanization of envied groups have serious social and moral consequences (Fiske, 2011, and Harris et al., 2008). Similar considerations seem to apply to envy for individuals. Notice also that liking a person, which implies warmth and seeing her as a person, is likely to diminish envy (Smith, 2000, p. 177 and p.183).

[29] Foster (1972), and Smith and Kim (2007) discuss compliments as expressions of envy, but do not connect with frustrated intention to level up. Miceli (2012, p. 40) presents some funny and appropriate examples of backhanded compliments. She does not however discuss their implications for the structure of envy. Backhanded compliments seem to be straightforward expressions of poorly disguised hostility and do not necessarily imply appreciation of the envied good.

Unlike emulative envy, the envied's loss of the good can give relief to the envier for two reasons. First, the envier more or less consciously represents the envied as the cause of her pain. Even if Indrani knows that Priya has no direct responsibility for her disadvantage, Priya has occasioned the unfavorable and painful comparison.[30]

Second, there is indeed a real change: the envier is not inferior to the envied anymore and therefore she is not suffering for the unfavorable comparison to the envied. However, the good has not been obtained for oneself. The fact that there was a disadvantage is still relevant, since the envier does care about obtaining the good itself. Indrani wants to have her own baby, and Priya losing her is not going to change the fact that she cannot. Her envy is not satisfied, because its constitutive desire is not satisfied.

In fact, inert envy, by its own nature, can never be satisfied! Its structure is self-defeating: it aims to achieve something that it presupposes to be unachievable. It is quite an unfortunate emotion to be in the grip of.

Inert envy, notwithstanding its neglect in theoretical discussions, should be a familiar experience.[31] It is an interesting combination of morally valuable elements, such as caring for a good

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[30] In some cases the envied may indeed be causally, even though not morally, responsible for the envier's disadvantage. In that case, I suspect that the envier will be more likely to become focused on the target and experience either aggressive or spiteful envy.

[31] An anonymous reviewer suggests that inert envy may in fact be what others refer to as *covetousness*. In Roberts (2003), for instance, covetousness, while not defined explicitly, is said to imply the awareness that the desired object belongs to another person, without any rivalry or competitiveness. Rather, "the focus may overwhelmingly on the thing desired" (p. 262). This notion of covetousness, however, differs from inert envy in that it does not include perceived control over the outcome, which is responsible for inert envy's "sulking" tendency, and ultimately self-defeating character. A glimpse of the unproductive nature of inert envy may be found in the characterization of covetousness of Konyndyk DeYoung (2009, p. 43), given that one of the examples of covetousness she provides is the Biblical story of Ahab and Naboth. As said in 1 Kings 2-4 (NIV): "Ahab said to Naboth, 'Let me have your vineyard to use for a vegetable garden, since it is close to my palace. In exchange I will give you a better vineyard or, if you prefer, I will pay you whatever it is worth.' But Naboth replied, 'The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.' So Ahab went home, sullen and angry … He lay on his bed sulking and refused to eat." However, her other example of covetousness (of which she does not provide a definition) is that of Kind David, who covets Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. Given that this desire motivates David to send Uriah to die, so that he can have Bathsheba, the emotion here at stake might rather be aggressive envy. Hence, Konyndyk DeYoung's covetousness does not correspond to inert envy either. Dictionary definitions of covetousness are also unhelpful, because they either refer to the general intense desire to possess an object belonging to someone else (which can be a component of many emotions), or to a necessarily immoral kind of desire, akin to greed, that makes the use of the term more suitable to a theological discussion of a sin, than to a philosophical analysis of kinds of envy.

for its own sake and wishing to be able to obtain it, and morally despicable ones, such as feeling relief or mild joy at someone's misfortune. It makes us aware of the gap between our best intentions and the incapacity to realize them, and of the effects of such a gap on our moral character. Inert envy, more than any other invidious emotions, reveals the complexity of a multifaceted emotion such as envy. This complexity is lost in the simplistic distinction between benign and malicious envy.

Aggressive envy

Agrippine is a science fiction writer. She envies Ursula, who is her main rival. They are very close in fame and book sales, but Ursula has so far succeeded in selling more books, and in receiving more awards, critical praises, and interviews. Agrippine believes that winning the Victor Hugo prize would turn the tables. They are both in the final list, but Agrippine knows that the jury is leaning toward awarding it to Ursula. She bribes two of the jurors, and as a consequence she wins the prize. Even if she is aware she did not win because of her artistic merit, Agrippine's envy is satisfied because she defeated her rival.

Aggressive envy is the result of being focused on the envied, and believing oneself to be capable of taking the good away from them. When I am more focused on the envied, what matters to me more than getting the good *per se* is outperforming the other person. Therefore, I will be more inclined to bring the envied down. But different behavioral outputs will result depending on what happens with perceived obtainability of the good.

If I perceive myself to be able to subtract the good from the envied, even if I care more about beating the envied than getting the good in itself, I will not be motivated to spoil the good, or to engage in behaviors so destructive that my chances to obtain the good decrease. That is, I will be motivated to sabotage the envied. As it was for self-improvement, what that means depends on the good at stake, and it may not be always possible.

Aggressive envy is actively malevolent. The envied is like a rival in a duel, who has to be attacked and defeated. Because of the rivalry that develops between the envier and the envied, in

addition to the behaviors aimed at taking the good away from the rival, the aggressive envier might try to harm the rival out of sheer malice. As a consequence, aggressive envy is painful but has also the pleasure of anticipated revenge. These feelings are likely to be highly motivating, although motivating toward morally reproachable results.

Aggressive envy closely resembles the traditional conception of malicious envy. My model, however, allows us to accurately distinguish it from its timid and frustrated relative, inert envy, on the one hand, and from its most ferocious one, which we are seeing next.

Spiteful Envy

Spike envies his longtime rival Angel, because Angel is loved by an attractive, cool girl, Buffy. Spike does not love Buffy, but he desires her as a status symbol. He cannot take Buffy away from Angel: even if he kidnapped her, she would never love him. So he kills her. If he can't be Buffy's beloved, neither can Angel.[32]

Spiteful envy is the result of being focused on the envied, and believing oneself to be incapable of taking the good away from them. If I perceive myself to be incapable of ever getting the good, even by sabotaging the target, then my frustration and aggression toward the envied will give rise to full-blown, swiping destruction: both the envied and the good will be affected. Spike knows that even if he gets Angel out of the way somehow, Buffy will not love him, and so the only way to satisfy his envy is to kill Buffy. There are of course more mundane and less extreme cases, like the child who is not allowed to take the toy another child is enjoying, and breaks it in response.

In spiteful envy the envied, far from being a model, is like a shooting target. But the good grounding the envied's superiority is also a target of hate, since the envier does not believe in the possibility of subtracting it from the envied.

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[32] The vignette is loosely inspired by the second season of the TV show *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

If there is a candidate for being the subject of the saying "envy spoils the good it covets", that is spiteful envy. In a sense, then, spiteful envy is similar to inert envy, because it does not motivate the envier to get the good. In another, however, it is different, because it may bring to successfully close the gap with the envied: destroying the good is *one way* of taking the good from the envied. It is, therefore, not self-defeating in the same way inert envy is.

It is also the most malicious of all, since it harms both the envied and the good. Spiteful envy is the kind of envy that is closest to Chaucer's description, with which we started: "envy is against all virtues and all goodness. For it is sorry for all the goodness of one's neighbor, making it different from all other sins. There is scarcely any sin that doesn't have within it some delight, but Envy has within it only anguish and sorrow" (Chaucer, 2011, p. 475). Spiteful envy is the source of the very first murder in the Biblical tradition: Cain kills Abel out of envy, because God (from Cain's perspective) has favored Abel's gift and despised Cain's.

Spiteful envy feels pretty bad, since it lacks the pleasant hope of stealing the good. Contra Chaucer, however, there might be pleasure in spoiling the good, even though such a pleasure may be short-lived: Spike is left without what made Angel superior to him, and while Angel might find another person to love and be loved by, Spike cannot. Defeating Angel in this way has not taught him anything that could improve his future well-being.

Differentiating spiteful envy from aggressive envy allows us to see that moral considerations should be separated from prudential ones. Aggressive envy can bring long-lasting, albeit immoral, advantages to the envier. Spiteful envy cannot do so.

7. Conclusion: Toward A Theory of Remedies of Envy

In this paper I have argued for the existence of four kinds of envy. This taxonomy is valuable because it describes an empirical phenomenon more accurately than other models, which tend to overlook inert envy and to conflate aggressive and spiteful envy. It also enables us to look for a

remedy that is closely targeted to the specific disease, when envy is a disease at all: understanding its multifaceted expressions allows us to circumvent the negatives ones, and favor the positive ones.

Spiteful envy is prudentially self-defeating, morally wrong, and aesthetically repugnant: nothing good can come out of it. As moral educators we ought to find ways to prevent it from arising, and to fight it once it has arisen, either by repressing it or by trying to transform it into a less bad kind of envy, and possibly into emulative envy. Emulative envy, albeit unpleasant to experience, is highly motivating to self-improvement, and may be the morally appropriate reaction to perceived inferiority to a similar other in a domain of self-relevance.[33] Inert envy and aggressive envy are both problematic, but in opposite ways. Inert envy is mostly bad for the envier, and it can be prevented by reinforcing people's self-esteem and encouraging them to see situations as open to improvement. Aggressive envy can be very harmful to the envied, and yet it may be prudentially self-serving, hence representing a particularly insidious case for the moral educator to treat, but even it may be addressed by increasing the envier's focus on the good.

Beyond moral philosophy, there are many fields interested in a solution to the problems caused by envy, from relatively abstract like political philosophy to more concrete ones such as organizational studies and psychotherapy (see Smith, 2008 for an overview). I would expect this taxonomy to be especially useful to clinical practitioners, who might invite their clients to focus on the dynamic relations of the four envies, and who might train them to feel the least harmful kind of envy compatible to the circumstances. In the limited space of this article, I hope I have delineated a model that can be further expanded and tailored to fit different disciplines.[34]

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[33] It may be argued that admiration is a morally superior response. Whether that is the case depends partly on issues that I cannot face here (concerning the nature of the good and what counts as morally appropriate), and partly on whether admiration *can* arise in the contexts in which envy arises, that is, circumstances in which comparison to the other person reflects badly on oneself. If admiration cannot arise in those circumstances (as the results from van de Ven, 2009 and van de Ven, 2012 suggest), and if ought implies can, then emulative envy may be the only morally appropriate response. I devote more attention to the normative implications of my taxonomy in "What Is Bad About Envy?" Thank you to an anonymous referee for asking me to address this possibility.

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