

Chapter 4

“I Could Have Been You”

Existential Envy and the Self

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Envy is a thousand times more terrible than hunger, for it is spiritual hunger.

—Unamuno (1921, 55)

This chapter explores a scarcely investigated kind of envy in which the subject targets the rival’s entire being rather than one of her possessions, achievements, or talents. In the sparse literature on the issue, this kind of envy has been labeled as “existential envy” (Fernández de la Mora 2000; Scheler 2010; Taylor 2006; Vendrell Ferran 2006), and less frequently as “ontological envy” (Olson 2003). As I shall argue, existential envy is characterized by a weakening of the distinction between the envied good and the envied rival and by a strong focus on the envious self. In this sort of envy, strong feelings of an insurmountable inferiority, powerlessness, and despair appear connected to the counterfactual thought: “I could have been you!” Indeed, the envier thinks that, though it is no longer possible, she could have had the other’s life, coming to see in the rival the person that she could have been but never became and experiencing, in this way, the shortcomings of her own existence.

Attention will be paid in particular to three interrelated aspects of the self in this kind of envy.¹ First, as Taylor notes, in existential envy the good and the owner of the good wholly coincide (2006, 52). However, an analysis of the relation between the self and its intentional object in this kind of envy is required in order to explain how the envier comes to blur the distinction between good and rival. Second, drawing on Kristjánsson (2010) and

in particular on Salice and Montes Sánchez (2019) for whom envy is a self-conscious emotion,² I will argue that it is by virtue of a set of feelings of diminution in the envier's own self-worth that in existential envy there is a strong focus on one's own envious self. Lastly, following this lead, I will explore the self-disclosive dimension of this emotion. As I shall demonstrate, the existential envier becomes aware that another person is closer to her ideal self than she is, such that the rival painfully reminds her of unfulfilled but now unrealizable possibilities inherent to her being. In other words, the envier discovers that, though she could have been the other, now it is the rival who embodies the kind of existence that she covets but has failed to obtain. By linking existential envy to the idea of ontological possibilities of a human being, I explore an intriguing idea previously noted by phenomenologists such as Biemel (1957) and Zambrano (1991) and which was a central concern of Unamuno's philosophical and literary works (1921, 1966, 2009) according to which the envious self wants to become a different person.

This chapter proceeds as follows. I begin with an analysis of the intentional object of existential envy that is, of what it means that the envier targets the other's being. Next, I explore existential envy's focus on the self by examining in detail the series of feelings of diminution in the envier's own value. I then turn to analyze the set of comparisons between self and other and the counterfactual thought "I could have been you!" which I take to be definitory of this kind of envy. In the final part of the chapter, the relation between the envier's bad self-image, self-reproach, and self-deception is discussed, prior to summarizing the main findings in the concluding remarks.

WHAT DO WE ENVY IN EXISTENTIAL ENVY? ON THE OVERLAPPING OF GOOD AND RIVAL

Envy has a triangular structure comprising the coveted object (good), the envied other (rival), and the envious subject (self). As mentioned above, in existential envy, good and rival overlap, because here the envious subject targets not the other's possessions, social status, or talents, but her entire being. How does this blurring of the distinction between good and rival come to be? To answer this question, a detailed analysis of the relation between the existential envier and her intentional object is required.

To begin with, as in envy in general, the existential envier chooses the rival on the basis of three criteria: closeness, similarity, and relevance to oneself. The rival is usually a person who is *close* in terms of time, space, age, and reputation (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 453). The subject does not tend to envy persons who are distant and with whom she almost never interacts.³ The

rival is perceived as being a member of the in-group of the envier. In existential envy, the rival is usually a sibling, a close relative, or a friend.

Second, the existential envier chooses the rival on the basis of a perceived *similarity*. The similarity enables the envier to identify with the rival. Yet, as noted in the literature, the rival is placed in a better position than the envier, allowing a comparison that is slightly "upward" (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 453; Smith 2000). In existential envy, the envier and the rival might share similar backgrounds, social status, education, and the like. However, the envier regards the rival as being the kind of person that she would like to be.

Lastly, while in envy the rival is chosen on the basis of those features that are *relevant* to the envious self (Smith 2000, 174), in the particular case of existential envy, the envier chooses the rival on the basis of the kind of existence she would like to have. What is relevant here is the rival's being. This poses the following question: Is it that only certain aspects of the rival are being envied or her entire existence?

A look into the existing accounts of existential envy reveals that both interpretations are possible: existential envy has been described as targeting existentially relevant aspects of the other's being as well as targeting the other's entire existence.⁴ According to the first option, the envier targets *aspects of the rival's existence which are relevant for the envious self*. The subject envies *being like the rival in some existentially relevant respect*. This view has been defended by Fernández de la Mora for whom existential envy is "caused by qualities that are not congenital; but they are so intimately embodied within the nature of the envious person that they become a part of his own makeup, like a habit—thus sanctity and some other capacities" (2000, 69–70). The envier wants to be like the rival in one or another respect—to have some or even many of her features—but she does not want to be the rival in her totality.

According to the second option, the existential envier targets *the rival's entire being*. Here, the subject does not envy being like the other in some or other respect, but she envies *being the other* in her totality. For Scheler, existential envy "is directed against the other person's very nature" (2010, 30): "It is as if it whispers continually: 'I can forgive everything, but not that you are—that you are what you are—that I am not what you are—indeed that I am not you.' This form of envy strips the opponent of his very existence, for this existence as such is felt to be a 'pressure,' a 'reproach,' and an unbearable humiliation" (ibid.). Taylor's (2006) understanding of existential envy as the type of envy in which the rival and the good coincide also has to be interpreted along these lines. The envier regards the rival as being the kind of person she would like to be. In this respect, existential envy does not target specific domains of the other, but her entire being. As a result, the triangular structure is transformed into a dyadic one, in which the envier targets the rival as such.

In this chapter, I adopt the second understanding of existential envy. I take existential envy to be global rather than domain-specific. In so doing, I regard existential envy as similar to globalist emotions such as contempt (Bell 2013, 64), in which we target the other as a whole rather than a specific feature. This globalizing tendency explains why, though the existential envier might not find all aspects of the rival desirable, those desirable aspects tend to be more salient to the envier and are taken to be representative of the envied other's being. The desire to be the rival, and not just to possess one of the other's traits, is what leads to a blurring of the distinction between good and rival in this kind of envy.⁵

The existence of such a globalizing tendency, which evolves progressively in this type of envy, makes the two options compatible. In fact, I regard the first option (in which existential envy is aspect-oriented) as one that well accounts for the initial stages of the formation of this emotion—that is, the first step of a process potentially culminating in a stronger form of envy in which we desire to be the other in her totality. This process involves a globalizing tendency according to which the attentional focus moves from particular features which are existentially relevant to the rival as such.

Since in the globalizing kind of envy, attention is absolutely and obsessively directed toward the rival, the envier's existence is centered on the other, as observed by Biemel (1957), Unamuno (2009), and Zambrano (1991), rather than on her true self. Knowing that one cannot become the other, the existential envier regards the rival not only as irreplaceable but also as unobtainable, and as such they become the target of her hostility and the motive for her feeling diminished in her own self-worth. In this respect, this kind of envy has been described as the “most terrible” (Scheler 2010, 30) and the “worst case of envy” (Taylor 2006, 52).

EXISTENTIAL ENVY AND FEELINGS OF DIMINUTION IN SELF-WORTH

According to Salice and Montes Sánchez (2019), hostile envy has a strong focus of concern on the self.⁶ More precisely, they argue that it is by virtue of feelings of disempowerment that the envier experiences a negative self-assessment. Expanding on this idea, I will analyze how the existential envier focuses on her own self and comes to a negative evaluation of her own person. For this, I take into account a series of feelings in which the diminution in one's own worth is sensed. I refer to these feelings in which the subject senses fluctuations in one's own value as “feelings of self-worth.” Though this expression was coined by Voigtländer (1910), my concept differs from hers. While she uses the phrase to refer to all affective experiences

that involve an apprehension of one's own value such as pride or courage, I distinguish the apprehension of value in feelings of self-worth (e.g., feeling inferior, feeling powerless, etc.) from the emotions which might entail such feelings (e.g., pride) and from character traits that are responsible for making us prone to experience such feelings (e.g., courage).⁷

The feelings of self-worth involved in existential envy are not limited to the feelings of inferiority usually stated in the literature on this emotion and to feelings of disempowerment mentioned by Salice and Montes Sánchez; they also involve feelings of disadvantage, helplessness, and hopefulness.⁸ As I shall argue, each of these feelings is responsible for making the envier focus on a different aspect of her own value.

In the first place, envy has been regarded as necessarily entailing *feelings of inferiority* (Ben-ze'ev 1992, 552 and 556; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 252; Protasi 2016, 537). These feelings play an important role in the self-assessment involved in envy because they give the envier a sense of being in a lower position than the rival (Heider 1958; Scheler 2010). Feelings of inferiority have a focus on the other as possessor of the good, on the self as lacking the good, and on the superior position of the other. In existential envy, these feelings take on an extreme expression because the good is unobtainable. Feelings of inferiority are presented as "undeserved" (as noted by Ben-ze'ev 1992, 563). They might trigger strong anger, indignation, rivalry, and, on certain occasions, also shame.

Though feelings of inferiority and *feelings of disadvantage* have usually been regarded as synonymous (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 452), a distinction can be traced between the envier's inferiority regarding the rival and the envier's perception of her chances to overcome this inferiority. One might feel inferior to another person and at the same time assess the possibilities to overcome the inferiority as good. Feelings of advantage and disadvantage are focused not on the superior other and the inferior self, but on the possibilities that the environment offers to the self to achieve the good. Envy is usually hostile when the envier perceives obtaining the good as unlikely. In existential envy, the envious self is aware of the absolutely disadvantageous position because she cannot become the same person as the rival.

Some authors have argued that envy also involves feelings of disempowerment (Salice and Montes Sánchez 2019), also called *feelings of powerlessness* (Scheler 2010; more recently Fussi 2019). While the expression "powerlessness" underscores the inability to overcome a situation of comparative inferiority, "disempowerment" suggests that the envier once had a power that she has now lost (this is, however, not always the case: perhaps the envier never had such power). Since the existential envier tells herself, "I could have been you," she must believe that at least to a certain degree obtaining the desired outcome was within the realms of possibility. Unlike

the feelings of disadvantage, feelings of powerlessness do not concern the chances that the environment offers to the envier; rather, they relate to her own resources and capacities to overcome the inferiority and obtain the good. Feelings of powerlessness can be regarded as a form of feelings of incapacity—that is, feelings in which the sense of “I can” that usually underlies our daily activities and that involves the certainty that we will be able to realize something, breaks down, bringing a lack of confidence and insecurity (for feelings of insecurity in envy, see Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 452). Given that the existential envier is aware that she cannot have the rival’s being, she experiences an absolute lack of control over the outcome. As a result, feelings of powerlessness are accompanied by extreme hostility.

Finally, existential envy involves *feelings of helplessness and hopefulness*. For Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007, 457), in envy these feelings differ from the typical feelings of helplessness and hopefulness experienced in depression because the envier still has some vision of obtaining the good. Though this might be true of some instances of envy, it is certainly not the case with existential envy. On the one hand, the existential envier experiences these feelings because she is aware that she cannot obtain the desired good: she cannot become the rival. On the other hand, these feelings foster despair and involve self-reproach for being unable to attain the coveted good. In existential envy, helplessness and hopefulness make the envier focus on her lack of expectations to overcome her powerlessness.

The *feelings of injustice*, often mentioned in the literature on envy, deserve a separate mention. Do feelings of injustice indicate a diminution in the envier’s own value? While some authors have argued that envy entails a “tendency toward equalization” (Heider 1958, 287; Salice and Montes Sánchez 2019), functions as an indicator of inequalities (La Caze 2001, 37), and involves the perception of a subjective injustice (Smith 2000), my view here is that the proclaimed feelings of injustice in envy are not genuine. Indeed, as has been argued by Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007), even the envier sometimes knows that such feelings are illegitimate because there is no sufficient reason for them. More precisely, I regard such feelings to be part of a self-deceptive strategy and as such they involve bad faith (Ben-ze’ev 1992, 551 and 553). The existential envier uses them to disguise, even to herself, not only strong feelings of hostility but also her own inability to obtain the desired outcome. Though she presents herself as a victim of unfair circumstances (claiming that in more favorable conditions she would have obtained the good), the existential envier does not want a fairer world but a world in which she occupies the better position. Therefore, such feelings are non-genuine: in envy, feelings of injustice are not genuine feelings of self-worth. However, by virtue of presenting the envier as a victim of unfairness, rather than as a person who can be held accountable for being unable to obtain the good, they

fulfill a protective function, shielding the envier from a devaluation in others' and her own eyes.

To recap, in existential envy, the envier genuinely experiences herself as inferior, as being in a disadvantageous position, as being powerless, helpless, and hopeless. Though in each of them a distinct aspect of the envier's self is assessed and presented as diminished in worth, in all of them the subject genuinely experiences a diminution in her own value and becomes in different respects the focus of her own concern. These feelings, which I described as "feelings of self-worth," should not be conflated with the corresponding judgments that go along with them. Indeed, while one might assess oneself by judging that one is inferior, at a disadvantage, powerless, helpless, and hopeless, the kind of assessment that I have in mind here, and that is responsible for making the envier apprehend an aspect of her own value as diminished, is not a judgment but an affective state.

Due to these feelings of diminution in self-worth, the existential envier experiences, senses, and suffers an attack on her self-esteem. Indeed, though all kinds of envy undermine the envier's own self-concept (Heider 1958, 286; Smith 2000, 193) and involve a loss of self-esteem (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 457), in existential envy, the attack is much stronger due to the unobtainable nature of the envied good. It is worth noting that the kind of self-esteem referred to here is episodic or state self-esteem—that is, the occurrent experience of a diminution in self-worth. Episodic self-esteem has to be distinguished from dispositional or trait self-esteem as an enduring feature of a person's character (for this distinction, see Salice 2020; dispositional self-esteem will be analyzed in a later section). These forms of self-esteem can come apart. Indeed, one can have a high dispositional self-esteem and nonetheless experience a diminution in one's episodic self-esteem, when for instance one is insulted, degraded, or becomes aware of one's inferiority, powerlessness, and so on, as happens in instances of envy.

COMPARISONS AND COUNTERFACTUALS: EXISTENTIAL ENVY'S INTENSITY AND QUALITY

Counterfactual thoughts are involved in many emotions such as shame, guilt, regret, and envy (Van de Ven and Zeelenberg 2014). These emotions involve upward counterfactuals regarding how the current situation could have been better (by contrast, downward counterfactuals are thoughts in which the self is in a worse situation). Given that envy is an emotion of upward comparison, it involves also upward counterfactuals in which the envier has obtained the coveted good. As Smith notes, "upward comparisons" create an "imagined, better alternative to one's current situation" (2000, 179). There is extensive

literature on this notion that envy depends on counterfactual thinking.⁹ More specifically, as argued by Elster (1999), the envious subject tells herself a story that involves the counterfactual thought “It could have been me,” in which it would be plausible that she obtains the good (see also Ben-ze’ev 1992; Crusius and Lange 2020; Van de Ven and Zeelenberg 2014; for different variations of this counterfactual in envy, see also Protasi 2021, 70–83). My thought here is that this counterfactual also grounds existential envy. Yet, as I shall argue, the existential envier thinks not just “It could have been me” but, more precisely, “I could have been you!” To develop my argument, I examine the structure of comparisons to others and to the self, and the corresponding counterfactual thoughts in existential envy.

The *first comparison-to-another* takes place between the *subject’s and the rival’s “empirical selves.”* What I call here “empirical self” entails the biographical, social, psychological factual features of the envier’s being. This empirical self is only one among different possibilities inherent to a person’s being since a person could have become a different person from the person she is. For instance, it is part of my empirical self that I am a philosopher. Though there was a possibility that I could have become a psychologist, this possibility was not realized and is now closed off.¹⁰ In the course of life, only some of the possibilities inherent to our being can come to realization in our empirical self. In each decision we take, in each step in our personal history, we cut ourselves off from possibilities originally open to us. Each person is somehow aware that what lies within her can only be partially realized in life. This empirical self is our ontological reality, which is only one among different ontological possibilities that we could have realized.

The counterfactual thought associated with this comparison is “It could have been me.” The envier thinks that she could have become the kind of person that the rival is. Yet, since existential envy targets the other’s entire being, the counterfactual thought for this kind of envy is better expressed in terms of “I could have been you.” The envier imaginatively engages with the possibility of being a different person. She thinks that she could have had the rival’s empirical self. Put otherwise: she thinks that she could have been the rival.

Given that in existential envy, the envier chooses the rival in virtue of the kind of being she also wanted to be, this kind of envy involves a *second comparison-to-another* between *the rival’s empirical self and what can be called the envier’s “ideal self.”* The “ideal self” refers to those possibilities of the envier’s being that she would like to see realized in her empirical self. In this respect, the ideal self is configured by ideals, desires, and imaginings about the kind of person she would like to be. As employed here, the ideal self is framed within what the subject senses as an ontological possibility inherent to her being (independently of the possibility being real or merely imagined). For instance, being a famous dancer is not part of my ideal self

because dancing is outside the realm of my possibilities (I lack the talent). Since each person has different ontological possibilities inherent to her being, each of us can have different ideal selves. Each of these ideal selves underscores an aspect of our being over others. One might have an ideal self as a good philosopher, as a good friend, and so on. Moreover, a person might have different versions of her ideal self. If becoming a good philosopher is part of one's ideal self, then there are many ways in which one can imagine being a good thinker. In the particular case of existential envy, the envier comes to focus on the ideal self as embodied by the rival. Indeed, as we have seen, in existential envy there is a narrowing of attention on the rival's being, which makes the other irreplaceable and unique. As a result, the envier comes to think that the rival is the "living image" of her ideal self. In so doing, she ignores other possible ideal selves.

In this picture, the rival is almost a proxy standing in for one of the envier's ideal selves, the specific ideal self which becomes the envier's main focus. As Zambrano puts it: "the vision of the other is the mirror of one's own life: we see ourselves in seeing the other" (1991, 268–70). As a result, the envier realizes that the rival is closer to her ideal self than she is. The counterfactual thought at the basis of this comparison between the rival and the envier's ideal self is not merely "I could have been you" but "I could have been my ideal self." Given that the rival is someone who is close, similar, and relevant, the envier realizes that she could have become the kind of person that the rival is.

This comparison leads to a *self-comparison* in which *the envier's empirical self is compared with her ideal self* (the ideal self now instantiated by the rival).¹¹ As a consequence, she experiences a discrepancy between the person she factually is and the person she could have been and would like to be. As already argued by Unamuno (1966), the envier becomes aware of the distance between her ontological reality and a desired ontological possibility. It is in this sense that he describes envy as "spiritual hunger" (1921, 55). This idea can also be found in Zambrano (1991, 262) who, inspired by Unamuno, depicts envy as a self-destructive greed for the other.

The counterfactual thought involved in this self-comparison is entirely focused on the self. The existential envier thinks "If only the circumstances had been different" as well as "If I only had done this or that." Given that the good is unobtainable, these thoughts do not motivate self-improvement. Rather, they appear coupled with hostility toward the other and herself (for being unable to obtain the good) and alternate between victimhood and self-reproach.

In my view, this self-comparison entails a moment of self-disclosure. As noted by Biemel (1957), in envy the subject becomes aware of desirable possibilities inherent to her being. In this respect, the self-disclosure has a positive moment. In the specific case of existential envy, the subject realizes

that desirable possibilities inherent to her being have remained unfulfilled. However, since in existential envy the good is unobtainable, the envier also realizes that these possibilities are now closed off: she cannot become the rival. Consequently, the rival reminds her that these ontological possibilities could have been realized. In brief, existential envy has to do with the subject becoming aware of what she thinks are desirable possibilities inherent to her being, but which have remained unfulfilled and for which it is now too late to realize, while another person—the rival—has succeeded in developing or realizing these possibilities.

This set of comparisons and the coupled counterfactual thoughts upon which existential envy is based explain the *intensity* with which this emotion is experienced. According to Van de Ven and Zeelenberg (2014, 957), a person is more prone to engage in counterfactual thought when she feels “close to the outcome.” For envy, this means that when the margin to obtain the good is experienced as small, it is easier for the envier to imagine an alternative situation in which she obtained the good. Counterfactual thought is also increased when the subject has the impression of “controlling” the situation. If people do not think that the situation could be changed by oneself, then they do not engage in counterfactual thought (2014, 967). The more an individual engages in these counterfactual thoughts, the more intense envy will be. Existential envy is particularly intense because the envier thinks that she “could” have been the other and that it was in her power to obtain the desired outcome.

Interestingly, as argued by Crusius and Lange (forthcoming), counterfactual thoughts are relevant in determining not only the intensity of envy, but also its *quality*. In their view, patterns of counterfactual thought can be employed to distinguish between benign and hostile envy. They establish these patterns by focusing on three elements: (1) directedness (upward, downward); (2) structure (if it adds a successful antecedent, such as “If I had done this or that” or if it subtracts it, such as “If only I had not let myself be distracted”); (3) and focus (on the self or the other). They found that benign envy was associated with upward, additive, and self-focused counterfactuals about what the envier could have done to obtain the good. By contrast, hostile envy was associated with upward and other-focused counterfactuals. In other words, in hostile envy the counterfactuals are about actions done by other people which could or should have led to a better outcome for the self, rather than actions done by the self because in these cases the envious self has less control over the situation.¹²

Along these lines, we can determine existential envy’s quality. Its *unique pattern of thought* involves: (1) upward directed counterfactuals; (2) its structure can be additive or subtractive; and (3) it can be other- and self-focused. Like instances of hostile envy as described by Crusius and Lange, existential

envy involves counterfactuals about actions of others that could have led to obtaining the good. However, it also involves counterfactuals about what the envier could have done to become the kind of person now instantiated by the rival. Does this imply that existential envy has a benign dimension? I think not. As described above, the self-focused counterfactuals do not aim at self-improvement because the possibilities to become the rival's being are closed off. Rather, these counterfactuals about the self take the form of a self-reproach. These thoughts remind the envier that if she had acted differently, she could have obtained the desired outcome.

SELF-IMAGE, SELF-REPROACH, AND SELF-DECEPTION

In this section, my aim is to explore how the self-reproach characteristic of existential envy is linked to the bad image that the envier has of herself and how it motivates self-deception.¹³ In my view, in existential envy not only does the subject experience an attack on their episodic self-esteem (as examined earlier in the section on envy and feelings of self-worth); it also tends to be experienced by persons with low dispositional self-esteem.

The link between existential envy and low dispositional self-esteem cannot be plainly explained by claiming—as Taylor (2006) has done—that hostile envy is always linked to low self-esteem. In fact, hostile envy might be experienced not just by subjects with low self-esteem, but also by subjects with high self-esteem who nonetheless undergo episodes in which a diminution in their own value is sensed (see Vrabel, Zeigler-Hill, and Southard 2018, 103). Moreover, people with high self-esteem such as grandiose narcissists are able to experience hostile envy when they are moved by fear of failure and rivalry (as argued by Lange, Crusius, and Hagemeyer 2016, 169), which contradicts the widespread view that grandiose narcissists do not usually engage in counterfactual thinking due to the positive image that they have of themselves (as maintained by Van de Ven and Zeelenberg 2014, 968).

Yet, though hostile envy is not always linked to low self-esteem, existential envy is. Given that in this type of envy the subject wants to change places with the other and have the other's existence, we can assume not only that she is deeply unsatisfied with her being, but also that she regards her whole being as less worthy than that of the rival. The existential envier has a *bad image of herself*.

In my view, this bad self-image is linked to the existential envier's *self-reproach*. The envier reproaches herself not only in virtue of experiencing a highly morally condemned emotion, but also because she has been unable to obtain the good. As noted by Biemel (1957, 47), in seeing that the other has obtained the desired good, the envier sees herself as having fallen

behind her own possibilities. In this respect, she is reminded of her failure. As we have seen, the envier has counterfactual thoughts about what she could have done, to become the kind of person now instantiated by the rival.¹⁴

Within this frame, *self-deception* appears as a mechanism to protect the envious self from the pains associated with this emotion. Though the link between envy and self-deception has been noted in the literature (Biemel 1957, 52; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 449; Taylor 2006, 49), the question about where exactly in existential envy the self-deceptive mechanism is at work remains open. The envier is not deceptive about the value of the good and of the rival. Indeed, the envier still acknowledges that the good is desirable and that the rival is superior to her regarding the good. Rather, the envier is deceptive about her own envious self. But which aspect of the self is affected by this deception?

For Taylor, since the envious self is not esteem-worthy but defective, what the envier wants to protect is *the appearance of an esteem-worthy self*, which she and others can then respect (2006, 49). While I agree that self-deception has a protective function here, I believe that what the envier attempts to protect is not the appearance of an esteem-worthy self, but the aforementioned *painful self-reproach inherent to this kind of envy*. To this end, she deceives herself about the emotion she is experiencing. As seen earlier in the section about the feelings of diminution in one's self-worth, she tries to disguise her envy as feelings of injustice. In so doing, she can hide from others and herself the fact that she does not want a world of equals, but a world in which she is in a privileged position. But, most importantly, in disguising her envy in terms of feelings of injustice, she avoids being held accountable for her existential failure. She protects herself from being held responsible for the discrepancy between her ontological reality and her desired but unrealized ontological possibilities.¹⁵ As a result, she can flee into an inauthentic and imaginary self.¹⁶ However, this flight is only momentary since the envier is not totally self-deceptive and is reminded again and again that she can be made accountable for not having realized those desired possibilities inherent to her being.

CONCLUSION

This chapter offered an analysis of existential envy as a scarcely investigated kind of envy. I argued for three main claims: (1) that in existential envy, the differences between good and rival are weakened due to the envier's desire to become the other; (2) that strong feelings of a diminution in one's self-worth are responsible for the envier focusing on the self and experiencing a negative assessment; and (3) that existential envy has a self-disclosive nature

according to which the envious discovers that desired possibilities inherent to her being have remained unfulfilled. If my analysis is right, then existential envy is an emotion that, despite targeting the rival for being the kind of person one would also like to be, is in fact an emotion about the self. More precisely, it is an emotion about one of our ideal selves that we could have become but have failed to realize.¹⁷

NOTES

1. For a different approach to the self of envy in which this emotion is contrasted with compassion, see Christina Chuang's chapter, "Compassion, Envy and the Self," in this volume.

2. One of the virtues of these accounts is that they describe envy by focusing on the self rather than on the good or the rival. In contrast, traditional approaches to envy have focused mainly either on the good and the consequent feelings of sorrow or anger for not possessing it—this type of definition can be found in Aquinas (Perrine 2011) and Klein (1997)—and/or on the rival as possessor of the good and the consequent feelings of comparative inferiority (Ben-ze'ev 2001; Fussi 2019). The focus on the good and the rival has also been employed to elaborate taxonomies of this emotion (Taylor 2006; Protasi 2016).

3. It is possible that an element of the comparison acquires self-relevance *a posteriori*. Once envy arises, one compares oneself to the other and in the course of this comparison, one might discover other elements which then become relevant for the self (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007, 455).

4. Both notions of existential envy are distinguished here in terms of the targeted object. For an analysis of other aspects, see Vendrell Ferran (forthcoming).

5. For an analysis of the significance of covetous desire in envy from a sociocultural perspective, see Patricia M. Rodriguez Mosquera's contribution "A Sociocultural Perspective on Envy" (chapter 1) in this volume.

6. They employ the notion of "focus of concern" to denote how a specific evaluative property is attributed to an object—in this respect, theirs differs from the notion of focus of concern as developed by Protasi (2016; 2021, 32–33). Taking the idea of an oscillation between object and focus, Salice and Montes Sánchez (2019) distinguish two accents in envy: when focused on the rival, envy is predominantly experienced in terms of hostility; when focused on the self, it is experienced with an accent of disempowerment. A similar idea can be found in Smith (2000, 183) for whom envy has a dual focus. When directed toward oneself, it produces feelings of depression; when directed toward others, resentment.

7. I prefer the expression "feelings of self-worth" to the expression "self-esteem feelings" (e.g., Keshen 1996) because it underscores the subject's experiences of a diminution in her own worth (for the link between envy and self-worth, see, for instance, Perrine 2011; Scheler 2010; and Heider 1958).

8. I take such feelings here to be constitutive ingredients or moments of existential envy as emotional experience. I leave aside the question of whether such feelings might motivate envy or appear as a result of envy.

9. I work here with the idea that envy is based on such counterfactual thoughts—that is, counterfactual thought leads to envy. This does not exclude the possibility that when envy is present, it also leads us to generate counterfactual thoughts (Van de Ven and Zeelenberg 2014, 954 and 967).

10. This concept of ontological possibilities inherent to our being is described by Hartmann outside the context of envy (e.g., 2014, 193). The idea that envy entails a question about the kind of person we want to be seems to me already present in Schoeck (1987).

11. This idea of a gap between two aspects of the self poses the possibility of self-envy—which, to my knowledge, is only mentioned in the contemporary literature by Ben-ze'ev (2000, 302), in his discussion of Hume's position on this issue. In my view, there are two possible explanations of self-envy. First, it can be interpreted in terms of a splitting of the self in which one part envies the other. This possibility has been examined by psychoanalyst López-Corvo (1994) and by Unamuno in a short narration (1966). Second, self-envy can also take place when the actual empirical self envies a past empirical self who was in a better position to obtain the good (e.g., by virtue of being more beautiful, more vibrant, more energetic, having more possibilities to succeed, etc.). The current empirical self might feel nostalgic about the past self and might be full of reproach, contempt, hate, and shame toward it.

12. Though both authors employ these elements to distinguish benign from malicious envy, in my view, all envy is malicious, since it is marked by hostility and motivates destructive actions. I tend to interpret what is called benign envy as cases of admiration or covetousness. I will not argue here for this view since it is irrelevant for the purposes of this paper.

13. For an analysis of the link between envy and self-deception, see Vanessa Carbonell's contribution to this volume, "Malicious Moral Envy" (chapter 7).

14. As observed in the literature, the counterfactual thought in envy is similar to counterfactual thought in regret (Van de Ven and Zeelenberg 2014, 967).

15. Though I cannot develop an argument for it here, in my view, feelings of injustice might also hide the fact that the mere existence of the rival makes the envier experience a diminution in her own value as well as that her envy is an expression of bad character (that she is not only greedy and covetous, but she is someone who cannot suffer that other people are superior and better placed than her).

16. The idea of envy and inauthenticity has been explored by Biemel (1957), though he does not link it with the sense of responsibility.

17. Early versions of this chapter were presented in a workshop organized by Sara Protasi in May 2021 and in the annual meeting of the EPSSE in Graz in June 2021. I am indebted to the audiences at these conferences and in particular to Alfred Archer, Aaron Ben-ze'ev, Jan Crusius, Sara Protasi, and Niels van de Ven for valuable suggestions. I am also grateful to Christina Chuang and Sara Protasi for insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper that helped to substantially improve it. My gratitude goes also to Simon Mussell for proofreading the chapter.

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