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Self-Envy as Existential Envy

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Is it possible for a man to envy himself or a part of himself, that one of his selves envies another of his parts, his other self?

Miguel de Unamuno¹

Abstract: This paper explores self-envy as a kind of envy in which the subject targets herself. In particular, I argue that self-envy should be regarded as a variation of existential envy, i.e., envy directed toward the rival's entire existence, though in the case of self-envy, the rival is oneself. The paper starts by showing that self-envy is characterized by an apparent weakening of envy's triangular structure insofar as the subject, the rival, and the good coincide in the self. After discussing an interpretation of self-envy in terms of a splitting of the self, I present an alternative explanation in terms of the ontological possibilities inherent in our actual and past empirical selves to become our ideal self. I argue that in self-envy, an actual empirical self envies her past empirical self for having more ontological possibilities of becoming her ideal self. I proceed to show that self-envy can be interpreted as a variety of existential envy. I argue that the existential self-reproach so characteristic of self-envy can be counterbalanced by feeling unconditionally loved by others and God.

Keywords: Self-envy, Existential Envy, Existential Self-reproach, Ideal Self, Empirical Self, Ontological Possibility

Zusammenfassung: In diesem Beitrag wird Selbstneid als eine Form des Neids, bei dem das Subjekt sich selbst ins Visier nimmt, untersucht. Insbesondere argumentiere ich, dass Selbstneid als eine Variante von existentiellem Neid betrachtet werden sollte, d.h. als Neid, der sich auf die gesamte Existenz des Rivalen bezieht, obwohl im Fall des Selbstneids der Rivale man selbst ist. Zunächst zeige ich, dass Selbstneid durch eine scheinbare Abschwächung der Dreiecksstruktur des Neides gekennzeichnet wird, da das Subjekt, der Rivale und das Gute im Selbst überein-

¹ Miguel de Unamuno, *Obras Completas IX* (Madrid: Escelicer, 1966 [1918]), 877. Original Spanish: “No cabrá que un hombre llegue a envidiarse a sí mismo, o a una parte de él, uno de sus yos, a otra de sus partes, a su otro yo?” (my translation.)

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stimmen. Anschließend erörtere ich eine Interpretation des Selbstneids als Spaltung des Selbst, und stelle dann eine alternative Erklärung, in der Form von unserem aktuellen und unserem vergangenen empirischen Selbst innewohnenden ontologischen Möglichkeiten, unser ideales Selbst zu werden, vor. Ich argumentiere, dass ein aktuelles, empirisches Selbst beim Selbstneid das vergangene empirische Selbst darum beneidet, mehr ontologische Möglichkeiten zu haben, das ideale Selbst zu werden. Daraufhin erweise ich, dass Selbstneid als eine Variante des existentiellen Neids interpretiert werden kann. Ich argumentiere, dass der für Selbstneid so charakteristische existenzielle Selbstvorwurf dadurch ausgeglichen werden kann, dass man sich von anderen und von Gott bedingungslos geliebt fühlt.

Schlüsselwörter: Selbstneid, Existentieller Neid, Existentieller Selbstvorwurf, Ideales Selbst, Empirisches Selbst, Ontologische Möglichkeit

1 Introduction

Imagine a philosopher who is deeply unsatisfied with her life and wishes that she had become a psychologist. This person might look back on her life and notice that in the past she had possibilities – now no longer available to her – to become a psychologist but her past decisions and actions put her on a different path in life. She realizes that she could have become a psychologist but missed the chance. Might this person desire to turn back the clocks, exchange places with her past self, regret her past decisions, feel nostalgic about her previous self, and end up envying *herself*?

In contrast to self-contempt, self-hate or self-disgust, self-envy has been far less analyzed in the philosophical literature. The possibility of there being a kind of envy directed toward oneself seems to be a plain contradiction: envy is usually regarded as an emotion which takes others (their talents, qualities, and existence) as its target, but not one's own self.² Yet, despite this general skepticism, there is a little literature on this issue. Miguel de Unamuno explored self-envy in a short narration entitled *Artemio, heautontimoroumenos*³ from which the quotation at the beginning of this article is taken. The possibility of self-envy has also been analyzed in the psychoanalytical tradition, López-Corvo's work on this issue being the most impor-

2 Neither Fussi nor Protasi examine this kind of envy in their respective typologies of envy's objects. See Alessandra Fussi, "Envy and Its Objects," *Humana.Mente: Journal of Philosophical Studies* 35 (2019): 124–49. Sara Protasi, "Varieties of Envy," *Philosophical Psychology* 29/4 (2016): 535–49.

3 This means literally: "the one who tormented himself."

tant contribution.⁴ In contemporary philosophy, self-envy has been discussed by Ben-ze'ev (drawing on Hume),⁵ Vendrell Ferran (drawing on Unamuno),⁶ and more recently Osler.⁷ Drawing on my previous work on the topic, this paper explores self-envy as a particular form of envy. As I shall argue, self-envy should be regarded as a variety of existential envy, i.e., an envy which targets the entire existence of the rival. Yet while in standard cases of existential envy, the subject targets the rival's existence, in self-envy, the rival is one's own self.

To develop my argument, I will work with an idea already present in Unamuno and other authors of the last century working on envy such as Schoeck, Zambrano, and Biemel,⁸ according to which envy presupposes a gap between the subject's ontological reality and an ideal about the kind of person the subject would like to be. Applying this idea to the case of self-envy, we can see that the subject experiences this gap within her own self. To explain how this gap is possible, I will introduce the concepts of actual and past empirical selves and their respective ontological possibilities as well as the concept of an ideal self. As I shall argue, in self-envy, an actual empirical self is envious of a past empirical self by virtue of having ontological possibilities (now foreclosed) of becoming the subject's ideal self. My aim is to show that self-envy is a possible emotional response that arises when a subject imagines the kind of person she wants to be and realizes that she had the possibility to become this person, but that this possibility no longer exists. In this regard, the self-reflexive and self-disclosive⁹ nature of envy is taken to an extreme in this variety of envy insofar as it reveals to the subject that she could have become the person she really wants to be.

The paper is structured as follows. I begin by showing that self-envy is characterized by an apparent weakening of envy's triangular structure insofar as the subject, the rival, and the good, coincide in the self (section 2). After discussing an interpretation of self-envy in terms of a splitting of the self (section 3), I present an

4 Rafael López-Corvo, *Self-Envy: Therapy and the Divided Inner World* (London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1995).

5 Aaron Ben-ze'ev, *The Subtlety of Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 302.

6 Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, "Narrative Fiction as Philosophical Exploration: A Case Study on Self-Envy and Akrasia." In *Literature as Thought Experiment? Perspectives from Philosophy and Literary Studies*, edited by Falk Bornmüller, Johannes Franzen, and Mathis Lessau (Fink: Paderborn, 2019), 123–38.

7 Lucy Osler, "Self-Envy (or Envy Actually)," *APA Studies on Feminism and Philosophy* 23/2 (2024).

8 Miguel de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Peoples* (London: Leopold, 1921), 55. Helmut Schoeck, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987). Walter Biemel, "Über den Neid," In *Rencontre|Encounter|Begegnung. Contributions à une psychologie humaine dédiées au professeur F. J. J. Buytendijk*, ed. Martinus Jan Langeveld (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1957), 40–50. Maria Zambrano, *El Hombre y lo divino* (Madrid: Siruela, 1991), 262.

9 Alessandro Salice and Alba Montes Sánchez, "Envy and Us," *European Journal of Philosophy* 27/1 (2019): 227–42.

alternative explanation in terms of an actual and past self's ontological possibilities of becoming one's ideal self (section 4). I proceed to show that self-envy can be interpreted as a variety of existential envy (section 5). I argue that the existential self-reproach characteristic of this kind of envy can be counterbalanced by feeling unconditionally loved by others and God (section 6). The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the paper (section 7).

2 Subject, Rival, and Good: Variations of Envy's Triangular Structure

It is widely stated in the literature that envy has a triangular structure which entails the envious subject (self), the coveted object (good), and the envied other (rival). However, in some forms of envy these elements can overlap. This is the case in existential envy. The existential envier does not target an object (in the broad sense, encompassing possessions, talents, social status, etc.) possessed by the rival but the rival's entire existence. In so doing, envy's triangular structure turns into a dyadic one.¹⁰ Self-envy also appears to entail a blurring of the distinction between the elements of envy. The self is simultaneously subject, rival, and good. As a result, in self-envy, the standard triangular structure seems to turn into a monadic one.

How does a self-envier choose her own self as a target? As happens in regular envy, the rival fulfills three criteria: closeness, similarity, and relevance to oneself. As to closeness, in standard cases of envy, the subject targets someone who is a member of her own in-group who, in terms of time, space, age, and reputation, is close to oneself.¹¹ In existential envy, the rival is usually a friend or a sibling. In the particular case of self-envy, the rival is the envier's own self. In self-envy, between subject and rival, there is a *maximal closeness*.

Regarding similarity, the envier usually perceives the rival as similar. This enables her to identify with and compare herself to the rival. The envier and rival might share a similar background, social status, education, etc. Yet the rival is in a slightly better position than the subject regarding the good. In this respect, envy entails an "upward comparison."¹² In existential envy, the rival is the kind of person

¹⁰ Ingrid Vendrell Ferran, "I Could Have Been You. Existential Envy and the Self." In *The Moral Psychology of Envy*, edited by Sara Protasi (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023), 77–92.

¹¹ Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi, "The Envious Mind," *Cognition and Emotion* 21/3 (2007): 453.

¹² Miceli and Castelfranchi, *The Envious Mind*, 453. Richard H. Smith, "Assimilative and Contrastive Emotional Reactions to Upward and Downward Social Comparison," In *Handbook of Social Compar-*

the envier would like to be. In self-envy, the rival is the envier's own self: envier and rival are *identical*. However, insofar as the rival is in a better position than the envier regarding the good, the identity between both is not numerical but only *qualitative*. This means that envier and rival are not absolutely identical: they share a number of properties but not all. In other words, there are certain properties of the envied self which are not possessed by the envious self, and it is by virtue of these properties that the latter envies the former.

Finally, the envier targets the rival on account of features which are relevant to herself.¹³ In existential envy, the rival has the kind of existence that the envier would like to have. The other's existence is what is relevant to her. Yet, this can be interpreted in two different senses. While for one group of philosophers, including the likes of Fernandez de la Mora,¹⁴ existential envy targets only certain properties of the rival's existence which are relevant to the envious self, for another group, comprised of Scheler¹⁵ and Taylor¹⁶ among others, existential envy targets the rival's entire existence. In the latter case, existential envy is global because the envier wants to be the other as such. Both approaches are compatible. Existential envy might start out as being oriented toward a property or set of properties, but it might advance through further stages until it targets the other in her totality.¹⁷ What is the case for the self-envier?

In self-envy, the envier targets the rival on account of those *properties of the envied self which are relevant to her*. Analogously to the case of existential envy, two interpretations are possible here. While for Unamuno¹⁸ and Osler,¹⁹ self-envy is directed toward certain properties of the envied self, at other times Unamuno seems to argue that the envier targets the envied self in her totality. Both interpretations are compatible here as well. The self-envier can start by targeting only a property or a set of properties of the envied self, but the envy might progress to a point where it targets the envied self in her totality. In the latter case, the self-envier aims at achieving a numerical identify with the envied self. In short, she wants to be her envied self. In this paper, I will use the expression self-envy to refer to this stronger form.

ison: *The Springer Series in Social Clinical Psychology*, ed. Jerry Suls and Ladd Wheeler (Boston: Springer, 2000).

13 Smith, *Assimilative and Contrastive Emotional Reactions*, 179.

14 Gonzalo Fernández de la Mora, *Egalitarian Envy: The Political Foundations of Social Justice* (New York: ToExcel, 2000), 69.

15 Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2010), 30.

16 Gabriele Taylor, *Deadly Vices* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

17 Vendrell Ferran, *Existential Envy*, 77–92.

18 Unamuno, *Obras Completas IX*.

19 Osler, *Self-Envy*.

To sum up, in self-envy, the envier targets her own self. This leads to an apparent blurring of the distinction between subject, rival, and good. Between subject and rival, there is maximal closeness and qualitative identity. For instance, the dissatisfied philosopher from our opening example envies her past self for having more chances to become a psychologist and targets her own past self with whom she shares a qualitative but not a numerical identity. Her past self was younger, perhaps more energetic and more vibrant than she is now, or had more time and fewer obligations to become a psychologist. Therefore, the weakening of envy's triangular structure is only apparent because the envious self and the envied self are qualitatively identical but not numerically identical: the envied self is in a slightly better position insofar as it possesses properties which the envious self lacks. For envy to occur there must be a difference between the envious and the envied self. Thus, self-envy's monadic structure does not imply that in self-envy there is a monolithic self.

3 Self-Envy and the Divided Self

So far, I have argued that in self-envy there is an apparent weakening of the distinction between subject, good, and rival, insofar as all three elements coincide. However, the envied self and the envious self are not absolutely identical. To shed light on the plural nature of the self in self-envy, this section examines an interpretation of self-envy in terms of a divided self.

In Unamuno's short narration, Artemio has two selves, which Unamuno refers to as an angelic and a demonic self. Each self envies the other. In Unamuno's account, self-envy presupposes an existential conflict between a real and a desired self. Artemio's angelic ego envies the demonic one for its capacity to achieve his goals. At the same time, the demonic ego envies the angelic ego for being virtuous. These two selves alternate roles in Artemio's personality, taking it in turns to occupy a dominating position therein. When the angelic ego is dominant, because it works as Artemio's moral conscience, it envies the demonic ego for its determination, strength, power of will, and so on. Conversely, when the demonic ego dominates Artemio's personality, it envies the angelic ego for being morally good.

The interpretation of self-envy in terms of a divided self is the cornerstone of psychoanalytical models of self-envy such as that developed by López-Corvo. According to this author, an idea close to self-envy can already be found in Freud's paper "Those Wrecked by Success" (1916) to describe certain patients who fall ill when they fulfill a long-held wish. These patients do not tolerate their own happiness. The sources that induce illness as a result of success are connected to the Oedipus complex. In López-Corvo's view, the concept of a divided self is also implicit in Klein's work (1963) when she makes reference to "the envious and destructive

attack against the mother's fertility."²⁰ The expression "self-envy" as such was introduced by Clifford Scott (1975) in his discussion of dreams, though he did not develop it further. For Scott, self-envy is present when there is a conflict between a depreciated and an idealizing aspect of what becomes a whole ego.

Drawing on this psychoanalytical tradition, López-Corvo argues that just as characters in our dreams appear capable of independent action and seem to sustain a life of their own but are actually just the result of our inner unconscious fantasies, so too it can happen that different parts of self-objects can behave in a similar way. In this regard, self-envy presupposes a "divided self" or "multiple interacting egos."²¹ As López-Corvo puts it, self-envy can be defined as the "envious attack by a part of the self, usually related to childhood self-objects, against another part of the self identified as a creative and harmonious mother-father or parent-sibling relationship, also within the self, which is now transferenceally projected as a means of avoiding superego accusations."²² In his view, there are feelings of self-reproach (and guilt) induced by a superego attack which might be difficult to distinguish from self-envy. Yet both emotions come from opposite directions. While self-reproach comes from a superego attack against the ego and guilt is experienced because of destructive Oedipal fantasies, self-envy arises from an attack of an introjected part-object.²³ Self-envy entails an "ego incongruity."²⁴ One part of the self, which remains separated, exercises destructive and envious feelings toward creative parts of the self.

In my view, to explain cases such as our unhappy philosopher as self-envy, the concept of a divided self is not necessary. For starters, both Unamuno's thought experiment of a divided Artemio and López-Corvo's psychoanalytical approach, working with the idea of a split within the self, describe extreme and pathological cases in which the subject has lost a basic affective connection with herself. Yet the phenomenon of self-envy, as illustrated in the example, is more mundane and does not necessarily have to be regarded as pathological. In addition, to understand the example, we do not need an object relations theory or the strong psychoanalytical assumptions of the Oedipus complex and the distinction between ego and superego. In the psychopathological context, and indeed that of psychoanalytical therapy, it might be useful to explain self-envy in terms of a divided self. Yet, as I will show, the example can be explained without the need to factor in these theoretical assumptions.

²⁰ López-Corvo, *Self-Envy*, 22–23.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² Rafael López-Corvo, "About Interpretation of Self-Envy," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 73/4 (1992): 720.

²³ López-Corvo, *Self-Envy*, 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

4 Self-Envy and the Ontological Possibilities of the Self

In *Artemio*, Unamuno raises another potential way of understanding self-envy. In his view, self-envy can be described not as a struggle between an angelic and a demonic ego, but rather as a kind of internal struggle within each of these egos. In this vein, he speaks about Artemio's actual demonic ego envying a possible demonic ego which, if it had come to realization, Artemio would now be a real man of action. Analogously, the angelic ego envies a possible virtuous ego that was never realized but whose realization would have transformed Artemio into a truly virtuous man.²⁵ The gap between a real and an ideal ego takes place here between Artemio's actual ego and what he could have become. Though this understanding of self-envy appears only implicitly in Unamuno's short narration compared to the interpretation in terms of a split in the self,²⁶ this interpretation is relevant because it shows that self-envy could be explained as a tension between real and possible selves.

To develop the idea of a possible self for envy, I have introduced, in my previous work, the concepts of actual and past empirical selves and their respective ontological possibilities as well as that of an ideal self. To begin, an "empirical self" refers to the biographical, psychological, social features of a self. As such, it is only one realization of the different possibilities inherent in a human being. A subject could have become a different subject from the one she is. Empirical selves evolve over time. In this respect, I distinguish between actual, past, and future empirical selves, though for self-envy, I will focus only on actual and past selves.

Empirical selves are marked by "ontological possibilities." The idea, which can be found in Hartmann²⁷ and which here I apply to envy, is that only some possibilities inherent in our being come to realization in our empirical self. In the course of life, a person cuts herself off from possibilities which were originally open to her. Thus, we come to realize only a part of what is latent within us. The actual empirical self is our ontological reality, but this is just one among many different ontological possibilities inherent in us. Our past empirical self had ontological possibilities which are now closed off to our actual empirical self.

What I call the "ideal self" refers to the envier's possibilities of being that she would like to see realized as her empirical self. The ideal self is constituted by the envier's desires and imaginings about the kind of person she would like to be. Each

²⁵ Unamuno, *Obras Completas IX*, 879.

²⁶ Vendrell Ferran, *Narrative Fiction*, 128.

²⁷ Hartmann uses this notion in his aesthetics. Nicolai Hartmann, *Aesthetics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 193.

of us has different ideal selves and each of them underscores an aspect of our being (the philosopher can have an ideal self in respect of being a good friend, a good mother, etc.). In addition, there are different versions of each of these ideal selves (there are different forms in which one can be a good friend, a good mother, etc.). Importantly, the envier must regard the ideal self as one of her ontological possibilities (irrespective of whether it is a real ontological possibility or it is merely regarded as such).

In my view, these distinct concepts enable a concept of self-envy in which a subject becomes aware that she could have become the person who she wanted to be (no matter if this was a real possibility or merely an imagined one), but that it is now too late to do so. In particular, the idea of ontological possibilities that have not been realized is central for my account. Insofar as self-envy concerns our actual self and what we could have become, the notion of a future empirical self does not play any role. Working with these concepts, in a previous work, I have stated that self-envy can 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.”²⁸ According to my account of self-envy, the actual empirical self targets the past empirical self by virtue of the ontological possibilities she had to become her ideal self.

In short, the object of self-envy is the subject’s past empirical self which is presented to the envier’s mind as having the ontological possibilities to become her current ideal self. In so doing, the self-envier regards her past empirical self as something worth being envious of. Going back to the example of the disgruntled philosopher – it can be an aspect of the actual empirical self of a person that she is a philosopher. To be a psychologist would be her ideal self. She does not regard being an actress as part of her ideal self because she never thought of this as one of her ontological possibilities (being an actress does not fit in with her character). Importantly, the actual self thinks that it was part of her past empirical self that she could have become a psychologist, but this ontological possibility was not realized and is now closed off from her.

Two caveats are necessary in this description of the object of self-envy. First, this representation of the envier’s past empirical self as having ontological possibilities to become the self-envier’s actual ideal self takes place no matter whether her past empirical self really had these possibilities or not. Second, and importantly, the representation of the envier’s past empirical self can be brought to the envier’s

28 Vendrell Ferran, *Existential Envy*, 90.

mind via imaginings, memories, beliefs or suppositions. It can be the case that the self-envier imagines her past empirical self as having the ontological possibility to become her current ideal self. It might also occur that the self-envier remembers her past empirical self has having such ontological possibilities. The self-envier might believe that her past empirical self had these ontological possibilities. Finally, it can also be the case that the self-envier just supposes that her past empirical self had the ontological possibilities to become her current ideal self. These are differences regarding the cognitive states responsible for presenting the object of envy to the envier's mind. As such, they are differences of nuance which are not relevant for envy. In all four cases, the self-envier targets her past empirical self by virtue of having ontological possibilities which she now regards as foreclosed to her.

This characterization of self-envy is valuable in that it enables us to understand how – despite having a monadic structure where subject, rival, and good coincide – the self is not a monolithic entity. In fact, in self-envy, the blurring of the distinction is only superficial, because envy's triangularity is preserved within the structure of "the self." As is the case for regular envy, we can find in self-envy a triangular structure. More precisely, in self-envy, the subject is the actual empirical self, the good is an ideal self, and the rival is the past empirical self for whom it was possible to become the ideal self. The actual empirical self aims at becoming numerically identical with her past empirical self, targeting in this way the past self's entire existence.

In a recent paper, drawing on my understanding of envy in terms of ontological possibilities, Osler has explored different ways in which the self might envy oneself.²⁹ Yet, for Osler, in self-envy, the subject might target a future, coetaneous or past self. By contrast, in my account, self-envy is always directed toward past empirical selves by virtue of having possibilities which the envier regards now as being foreclosed to her. Though it is conceptually possible for a subject to conceive of hypothetical coetaneous and future selves as targets of envy, in these cases the ontological possibilities of the self are either still open (e.g. the self can develop in the desired direction exemplified by the coetaneous and the future self) or unrealistic (e.g. though one might desire to be a future self who is still alive in 2124, it is uncommon to speak of envy here). As a result, these cases are not linked to painful emotions that I take to be central to self-envy, such as nostalgia, regret, self-contempt, etc. In fact, these cases of "envy" towards a coetaneous and a future selves can even be linked to positive and motivating feelings of admiration and pride. In addition, while in my approach self-envy is linked to hostility insofar as the good is unobtainable (we cannot become our past selves), for coetaneous and future selves the good might be obtainable (at least on certain occa-

²⁹ Osler, *Self-Envy*, Osler misinterprets my position, since I argued that self-envy can be understood in two different senses. See Vendrell Ferran, *Narrative Fiction*, 128.

sions). Moreover, a comparison with a coetaneous and a future self usually prompts different feelings from that of envy, such as hope or expectation. Finally, what usually motivates self-envy, in my account, is a fundamental dissatisfaction with one's own existence, while cases in which we compare ourselves with a coetaneous or future self can be motivated by a desire for self-realization. In other words, in my view, self-envy entails a subject's reproach toward her own existence, which leads her to desire to become again her past empirical self.

A further issue of my account of self-envy which requires clarification concerns the relation between self-envy and other affective states linked to it. Once the subject targets her past empirical self by virtue of having ontological possibilities which are now no longer available to her, what determines that the subject experiences self-envy instead of just feeling regret or nostalgia? In regret, the subject painfully targets what her past empirical self has done (or not done). However, the current self does not feel diminished in worth regarding her past empirical self, nor has feelings of aggression towards it. Moreover, regret might enable the subject a positive relation to herself. Nostalgia has also a painful component but unlike envy it can also be bittersweet. Moreover, in nostalgia, the subject neither feels diminished in worth regarding the target nor has feelings of aggression towards it. In short, only in self-envy the subject feels the value of her current empirical self as diminished in worth compared to the value of her past empirical self (by means of feeling inferior, at disadvantage, powerless, helpless, and so on) and has feelings of aggression towards it.

5 Self-Envy as Existential Envy

The analogy between self-envy and existential envy was already present in section 2, where I analyzed the apparent blurring of envy's triangular structure in self-envy using existential envy as a foil. In this section, I argue that self-envy can be regarded as a variety of existential envy. Insofar as self-envy is directed toward the *existence* of a past self, self-envy can be regarded as a form of existential envy, i.e., an envy directed toward the target's existence. Yet, in self-envy, instead of the rival's existence, it is the existence of one's own past empirical self that is envied.

As mentioned above, envy entails an upward comparison, i.e., the subject compares herself with someone who is similar but in a slightly better position to obtain the good.³⁰ Correspondingly, envy entails upward counterfactuals according to which the envious self tells her a story in which she has the counterfactual thought:

30 Smith, *Assimilative and Contrastive Emotional Reactions*, 179.

“It could have been me.”³¹ What is the structure of this comparison in self-envy and the counterfactual thought intrinsic to it? As I shall argue, self-envy entails a variety of the central counterfactual thought inherent to existential envy. While the central thought in existential envy is “I could have been you!”, in self-envy it is “I could have become the person I want to be!”. More precisely, the envious self tells her a story in which she thinks: “My past self could have become the self I want to be because I had the possibilities to realize myself in this direction, but now these possibilities are closed off.”

In my view, in self-envy, the subject starts comparing herself with the person she would like to be. Thus, a first comparison takes place between *the envier’s actual empirical self and her ideal self*. As a result, she experiences a painful gap between what she really is and what she could have been. The ideal self is not necessarily embodied by an external other (though another person can function as a trigger for this comparison). What is necessary is that the envier *imagines* an ideal self which was an ontological possibility for her, and that the envier feels the gap between what she really is and what she wants to be. This is what happens when the philosopher imagines being a psychologist and realizes that she would like to be a psychologist, a possibility which is now no longer open to her. This leads her to the counterfactual thought: “If only I had become a different person!”

A second comparison takes place between *the envier’s past empirical self and her ideal self*. The self-envier represents to herself her past empirical self as having possibilities to become her ideal self. No matter if her past self really had these possibilities or not, what is important here is that the envier’s actual self represents to herself her past self as having them. As we have seen, the representation of her past self might take place in different ways (imaginings, memories, beliefs, suppositions). What is important here is that the envier thinks that her past empirical self was closer to her ideal self than her actual empirical self is. She becomes aware of previous possibilities inherent to her being, which would have led her past empirical self to become her ideal self. In this vein, the philosopher of our example looks at her past empirical self and becomes aware that she could have studied a different subject, read different books, worked in a different field, etc. and realizes that she could have become a psychologist. The counterfactual thought is: “I (my past empirical self) could have been my ideal self.”

A final comparison takes place between *the subject’s past empirical self and the subject’s actual empirical self*. The envious self compares her past empirical self who

31 See Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind: Rationality and the Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Sara Protasi, *The Philosophy of Envy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 70–83.

was full of possibilities, with her actual empirical self for whom these possibilities no longer exist. The envier experiences a gap between her past and her actual empirical selves insofar as the actual empirical self does not have the possibilities of her past empirical self. The subject imagines her past empirical self taking different decisions, acting differently etc., such that she could have become her ideal self. The philosopher of our example regrets how her life has developed due to her past decisions, expectations, actions, and so on; she would like to be her past empirical self to change things. The counterfactual thought here is: “If only I could be my past empirical self again!” Here the past empirical self functions as the rival insofar as she wants her existence.

The structure of these comparisons is quite similar to the structure of existential envy. Existential envy starts with a *comparison-to-another*, that is, between the *subject's and the rival's actual empirical selves*, proceeds to a comparison between *the rival's actual empirical self and the envier's ideal self*, and finishes with a self-comparison in which the *envier's actual empirical self is compared with her ideal self* as exemplified by the rival. The existential envier then becomes aware of desirable possibilities inherent to her being which are not fulfilled. Yet since the envier cannot become a different person, these possibilities are now off-limits to her. The counterfactual thoughts corresponding to each of these comparisons start with “I could have been you,” progressing to “I could have been my ideal self,” and end in “If only the circumstances had been different,” “If only I had done this or that.” In this respect, we find in self-envy a variation of the central counterfactual thought of existential envy. Yet instead of “I could have been you,” the self-envier tells herself “I could have been my ideal self.” Moreover, in existential envy and in self-envy, the subject is deeply dissatisfied with herself and has not made peace with her own story.

That said, self-envy seems to be a variety of existential envy rather than one of its standard cases. First, while in existential envy the rival is another person who is regarded as the “living image” of the envier’s ideal self, i.e., rival and good (the ideal self) coincide, in self-envy the rival is one’s own past empirical self on the grounds that they are closer to the envier’s ideal self. However, the past empirical self is not the same as her ideal self. This has the interesting consequence that while in existential envy there is a real blurring of the distinction between rival (the other) and good (ideal self), in self-envy the rival (my past empirical self) remains different from the good (ideal self). Thus, there is only an apparent weakening of the distinction between the three elements of envy.

Second, the order of the counterfactual thoughts in self-envy is exactly an inverted order of the counterfactual thoughts characteristic of existential envy. In self-envy, the first comparison takes place between the subject’s actual self and her ideal self, while in existential envy, the comparison starts between the subject and

the rival actual empirical selves. This difference is due to the fact that self-envy is much more focused on the self than existential envy, which, like standard cases of envy, occurs in the interpersonal space. In fact, self-envy reveals a particular form in which a person, by means of imagining who she could have become, relates to herself. More precisely, self-envy reveals to the subject that she could have been the person she wants to be but can no longer do so.

6 Self-Envy, Existential Self-Reproach, and Feeling Unconditionally Loved

Self-envy is linked to negative feelings of different kinds. On the one hand, the self-envier is dissatisfied with her life, has a bad image of herself, and does not love who she is. As a result, she imagines what she would like to be. She experiences her actual existence as unfulfilled. She subsequently experiences shame, self-contempt, even self-hatred toward her actual existence. Without doubt, there is a kind of *existential self-reproach for the person she actually is*. On the other hand, the envier regrets the course of life initiated by her past empirical self. Her actual self *reproaches her past empirical self* for the decisions, thoughts, feelings, etc. which led her to the life path she is now on. Toward her past self, she has feelings of nostalgia, remorse, regret, etc. Insofar as this past empirical self is in fact her rival and she cannot turn back the clock and become her past empirical self, she also has hostile feelings toward it. In this section, from all these negative feelings, I will focus only on that of existential self-reproach with a view to uncovering its sources and what I think is a path to counterbalance it: the feeling of being unconditionally loved.

The self-envier's existential self-reproach is the product of a low dispositional self-esteem.³² The subject does not want to be the person she is and would prefer to be someone else. She would like to go back to the past so that she could become a different person than the one she is. She is deeply unhappy with her actual existence and experiences it as less worthy than any other existence that is closer to her ideal self than she is. She feels that she has failed herself. Insofar as the good now is unobtainable but could have been obtained if she had taken other decisions, actions, etc., this form of envy is linked to intense pain and hostility. This hostility is

³² Against Taylor, *Deadly Vices*, I do not think that all forms of envy are linked to low self-esteem. As argued by Lange, Crusius, and Hagemeyer, people with high self-esteem can experience envy as well. See Jens Lange, Jan Crusius, and Birk Hagemeyer, "The Evil Queen's Dilemma: Linking Narcissistic Admiration and Rivalry to Benign and Malicious Envy," *European Journal of Personality* 30 (2016): 168–88.

directed toward her actual self (she experiences her existence as failure) as well as her past self (for having had opportunities and wasting them).

To counterbalance this existential self-reproach and the negative hostile affective states linked to it, the cultivation of self-love appears to be an essential instrument.³³ However, due to the presence of low self-esteem, the subject has difficulties in loving herself. She rejects her actual empirical self because she is not the person she would like to be, and she feels her existence to be one of failure. Against this backdrop, a possibility for the subject to cultivate self-love can arise from *feelings of being unconditionally loved by others*. Feeling loved for the person she is might show the self-envier that her existence is worthy, that her actual being is not a failure, that there is nothing wrong with who she is, and that there are no reasons to feel envious of her past self for having possibilities no longer available to her. This could lead her to modify her ideal self, minimizing the gap between the person she actually is and the one she would like to be, and to accept the person she actually is. However, given that love between fellow human beings is seldom unconditional, this path to self-love might lead to a cultivation of positive feelings toward oneself but still entail doubt about the value of the subject's own existence.

A second path for the cultivation of self-love which is open only to believers consists in *feeling loved by a personal and benevolent God*. For believers, God's love for the human being is unconditional insofar as the subject is accepted for who she is. This love neither expects anything in return nor aims at changing the other. This love is absolute insofar as it cannot be maximized.³⁴ In knowing and feeling oneself to be the recipient of this kind of love, the self-envier might start to accept her ontological reality and experience that her actual empirical self is perfect as it is.

In this regard, feeling loved and, in particular, feeling unconditionally loved for the person one is might be a "transformative experience" for the subject.³⁵ This transformation might take place at two different levels. It might lead to an epistemic change: the self-envier comes to know that she and her actual existence are worthy of love. Yet an existential transformation is possible too. Acknowledging the worth

³³ Another instrument which I will not explore here consists in taking control over self-envy by means of having meta-emotions toward it. For instance, we can experience shame about envying ourselves. This shame makes the self-envier aware that she does not want to have this emotion and, in so doing, take control over it. See Vendrell Ferran, *Narrative Fiction*. Moreover, one can deny that the former self had these ontological possibilities and downplay the importance for which the former self stands. One negative way in which this might occur is in *ressentiment*. In addition, one can change the narratives regarding one's own past and turn envy into pride. By means of this mechanism, the self-envier deploys her past empirical self of her positive values.

³⁴ Kurt Stavenhagen, *Absolute Stellungnahmen. Eine ontologische Untersuchung über das Wesen der Religion* (Erlangen: Philosophische Akademie, 1925).

³⁵ Laurie Ann Paul, *Transformative Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

of one's own actual existence might lead the subject to a deep self-transformation in which she feels that her empirical self is worthy of love, she does not regret the course that her life has taken, and she does not want to go back to the past and envy her past empirical self.

7 Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I argued that self-envy should be regarded as a particular variation of existential envy. Yet while existential envy targets the rival's existence, in self-envy the rival is one's own past empirical self. In self-envy, subject, rival, and good coincide in the "self". Analogously to the existential envier who thinks "I could have been you!", the self-envier thinks "I (my past empirical self) could have become the person I want to be." The self-envier regards her actual existence as a failure and would like to become her past empirical self who had more possibilities to become the person she wants to be. Given that this is impossible, she is full of hostility toward her past self in a sense that is similar to the hostility experienced by the existential envier toward the rival. As a result, self-envy can be regarded as a variety of existential envy. However, while in existential envy, there is a real blurring of envy's triangular structure insofar as rival and good coincide, the weakening of envy's triangular structure in self-envy is only apparent. Despite the fact that subject, rival, and good coincide in the self, the self is not a monolithic structure. As I have shown, triangularity is preserved behind an apparent blurring of the distinction between subject, rival, and good in self-envy. Indeed, I have shown that in self-envy, triangularity is preserved insofar as an actual empirical self (subject) targets her own past empirical self (rival) by virtue of being closer to her ideal self (good) than she is. Moreover, while the existential envier starts with a comparison with the rival, the self-envier starts comparing her actual empirical self with her ideal self.

To finalize, let me come back to the philosopher example from the introduction and the question whether a subject can envy herself. Now, we can say that when the unsatisfied philosopher looks at her past self, realizes that she could have become a psychologist, regrets the decisions she has taken and would like to again be the person she was so as to change the course of her life, she experiences self-envy. Her actual self would like to have the existence of her past empirical self who was closer to her ideal self. Thus, self-envy is a concept which reveals a subject's relation to herself, one in which the subject becomes aware that she could have been the person she wants to be, though now this possibility is no longer available to her. I have also argued that one of the forms in which this existential self-reproach and the corresponding negative feelings inherent to self-envy could be counterbalanced is feeling unconditionally loved as the person one is.

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