

On the definition of jealousy and other emotions in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*

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Abstract. This paper responds to an ingenious footnote from Robert Nozick's book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Using a table of four possible situations, Nozick defines what it is to be jealous, envious, begrudging, spiteful, and competitive. I deny a claim that Nozick makes for his table, a claim needed for these definitions. I also point out that Nozick fails to capture what he has in mind by jealousy.

Note: I have uploaded a slightly revised paper, because of a strange convergence I noticed between an example in the published version and a comedy sketch.

In a footnote within *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Robert Nozick presents us with the following possibilities, concerning you, another person, and some kind of object or some attribute (1974: 239), such as the attribute of being able to swim:

	The other person	You
1	Has it	Have it
2	Has it	Do not have it
3	Does not have it	Have it
4	Does not have it	Do not have it

Nozick then goes on to use this table to specify what it is to be jealous, envious, begrudging, spiteful, and competitive. For example, he says that if you are jealous of someone about something, you prefer 1 over 2, while being indifferent between 3 and 4.

Nozick's definitions have been evaluated positively in some previous literature on emotions and on vices (Miller 1995: 125; Hurka 2001: 100). The footnote is impressive, but it is also flawed. Below I point out two problems with what he says.

A. Immediately before Nozick presents his table of possibilities, he writes: “With regard to you, another person, and having a kind of object or attribute, there are four possibilities.” (1974: 239) Nozick is saying that whichever kind of object or whichever attribute one considers, there are these four possibilities. But for some attributes this looks false. Consider the attribute of being the first human to climb to the top of Mount Everest, where “the first human to...” implies a single human. One of the possibilities that Nozick presents in his table, that you have it and the other person has it, does not apply here. Both cannot have this attribute. There are many other attributes like this, where there is no possibility of both people having it.

This is a problem for Nozick when we try to apply his definitions to such attributes. For example, what happens if we try to work out what it is for you to be competitive about winning a boxing match (where drawing does not count as winning)? If we apply Nozick’s table, it says, “There are four possibilities here. And if you exhibit the following preferences in relation to these possibilities, then you are competitive...” But there are not four possibilities. Both of you cannot win. Furthermore, a person may well not have preferences towards impossible circumstances.

B. Recall Nozick’s definition of being jealous: you prefer 1 over 2, while being indifferent between 3 and 4. Nozick tells us, “The root idea is that you are jealous if you want it because he has it.” (1974: 239) But Nozick’s definition does not capture this root idea or a developed version of it. Even if you have the preferences Nozick associates with jealousy, this does not tell us anything about why you have such preferences. The preferences may not be there because the other person has an attribute and this has caused a desire in you for this attribute (see also Green 1988: 329).

To illustrate this point, imagine twins called Clarissa and Sabrina, who often dress identically. Clarissa wants them both to have a triangle symbol on their foreheads. She

prefers (1) that both she and Sabrina have a triangle symbol on their foreheads, over (2) just Sabrina having this symbol. On the other hand, if Clarissa is faced with a choice of (3) just her having the symbol or else (4) neither of them having it, she is indifferent. Both of these options fail to realize her ideal, but in different ways. The ideal she has in mind involves triangle symbols and identical appearances. Option (3) scores higher on triangle symbolism but lower on identical appearances. Option (4) scores lower on triangle symbolism, but higher on identical appearances. Both triangle symbolism and identical appearances matter equally to Clarissa. Clarissa has the preferences that Nozick associates with jealousy, but Clarissa is not jealous. It is not as if Clarissa has seen Sabrina with a triangle symbol and this has caused her to have a desire for this symbol. Rather neither of them has the symbol yet and she has formed an ideal that requires both of them to have it in order to be realized.

This example shows that Nozick's definition of jealousy does not capture what we ordinarily call jealousy nor does it come close to capturing his root idea.

References

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