

Envy and its Objects

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ABSTRACT

The paper critically discusses the thesis, originally put forth by Taylor (2006), that there is a (mostly benign) form of envy whose target is the good possessed by someone else. Section 2 analyzes the distinction between object-envy and state-envy, discusses the connection between object-envy and benign envy, and develops the ethical consequences that follow from the thesis that envy is never benign. Section 3 presents a thought experiment with five variations developed from the basic elements of object-envy: an agent, a good the agent desires but lacks, and a person who possesses the good. The variations generate emotions like longing, sadness, happiness for, admiration, covetousness, self-disappointment, but they do not generate envy. Section 4 concentrates on envious self-reproach and shows that its nature and genesis are different from the self-disappointment one may experience in other forms of self-assessment. Section 5 argues that the so-called sour-grape syndrome serves different goals when it is connected to a good one lacks and when it is connected to envious comparisons. Section 6 maintains that what looks like benign envy can be better understood as emulous admiration. In conclusion, the paper argues that object-envy is not a useful concept. The desired goods are not valued in themselves when a person feels envy. Rather, they are taken to signal the superior recognition enjoyed by someone else within the reference group that is currently deemed important by the agent.

1. Introduction

The similarity of envy to other emotions, mentioned by several scholars (Ben-Ze'ev, 2000; Epstein, 2003; Taylor, 2006; Vendrell Ferran, 2006; Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2007), makes its categorization problematic. While in its extreme forms envy can look like anger or hatred (Plutarch, 1927; Scheler, 1994), in its most common instances it can be confused with covetousness and indignation. Furthermore, it shares important features with admiration, emulation, jealousy, and it has some links with depression.

According to Parrott and Smith (1993, p. 906) «envy occurs when a person lacks another's superior quality, achievement, or possession, and either desires it or

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wishes that the other lacks it». This description illustrates well *how* envy occurs, but we should not take it to explain also *why* it occurs. As I will argue, envy is *not* primarily concerned with the *good* possessed by the other, but with the fact that *the other* possesses the good.¹ The relevant issue is not that the agent desires something he does not have, but that he finds himself in a painful situation of inferiority with respect to someone else.

It is not a matter of desert—the target may well be considered by the envier to deserve the good she possesses. The envier is pained because by possessing a certain good the target puts him in a situation of comparable inferiority.² To make explicit this point, we could say then that envy is a painful feeling of inferiority resulting from the comparison with someone considered similar in relevant respects—someone who, by her condition of superiority, is felt by the envier to put him in a bad light.

But one would not be worried to be seen in a bad light if he did not seek recognition. Hence we should add that envy presupposes a point of view from which the envier cares about being judged positively. If the target can be praised for her success in attaining a certain good, by comparison the envier can be blamed for his failure to achieve the same sort of good. As Aristotle suggested, the envier feels that the target's success makes him reproachable in the eyes of those who could otherwise appreciate him.

Envy entails a desire to overcome the agent's painful situation of inferiority. From his perspective, the situation can improve in two ways: either the envier moves up, or the envied moves down. The envier's desires and actions will therefore be shaped by these two alternatives, with the significant contribution of other beliefs and affective reactions stemming from the envier's evaluation of his capacities and circumstances. Does he live in a social and economic situation that he believes will not hinder his efforts? Can he trust in his own capacities? If he is confident in his own abilities and hopes that others will stand by him, he may strive to obtain the goods that will make him feel comparatively successful again.

But suppose he is not self-confident, or imagine that he has reasons to fear that, by bad luck or the hostility of others, his inferiority cannot be overcome. Given these premises, if his focus falls on his powerlessness he may become depressed.

¹ From now on, when I do not address concrete examples of envy, I am going to refer to three terms in the envious relationship: the envier (or the agent), the envied (or the target), and the valued good (or object). In order to avoid confusion with pronouns, I will refer to the envier as a he and to the envied as a she.

² Cfr. Ben-Ze'ev (2001, p. 19): «We envy those whose standing is evaluated to be higher than our current baseline».

Otherwise, he will likely develop hostility towards the person he considers responsible for his inferior situation. Such hostility may remain confined to his desires – he will wish her bad luck, or feel *Schadenfreude* when she fails at something. Or he may become more aggressive, and in this case he will actively try to spoil her advantage.

Given the view of envy I just sketched, it becomes understandable why the envier's desire to spoil the other's advantage may not be as irrational as it is sometimes claimed to be. If the problem is not that the envier desires a good he does not have, but that the other makes him feel inferior, then the ultimate goal of envy is not that of acquiring a valued good. Rather, the goal is putting an end to the situation of inferiority, while the valued good is only instrumental to that goal. If the target loses what makes her look superior, the envier feels better, even if this entails that he too will be deprived of it. He feels better because he feels less threatened. His social image is restored. He is no longer in the position of someone who can be seen as inferior.

The view of envy I just proposed is not uncontroversial. In this paper I want to critically discuss the thesis, originally put forth by Taylor (2006), that there is a (mostly benign) form of envy whose object is indeed *the good* possessed by someone else. Taylor maintains that envy can take two basic forms: «object-envy» and «state-envy». While I have no objections to her concept of state-envy (which I take to be similar to the interpretation of envy I just offered), the main point of my paper is to argue that object-envy is not a useful concept. It is questionable that it univocally identifies a specific emotion. Even when it does, the emotion it identifies does not involve rivalry over social recognition, which, as I just maintained, is in my view the fundamental background of envy.

It has been noticed by Kelly (2016) that Taylor's notion of object-envy does not seem to be clearly distinguishable from that of covetousness.³ As I will argue, the confusion is not just with covetousness, but also with other emotions concerning the loss of (or the failure to acquire) objects or characteristics one strongly desires to have. In other words, what Taylor calls object-envy can more easily be understood along the lines of longing if what one desires is the

³ On covetousness, cfr. Ben-Zeev (2001; p. 303: «To "covet" has two principal meanings: (1) the desire to possess that which is another's, and (2) to have an excessive or culpable desire. Covetousness is concerned with the desired thing itself, not with other independent human parties related to it. In cases of covetousness directed at persons, the latter are treated as inanimate objects».

possession of a valued good, or of admiring emulation⁴ if what one desires is a quality, an ability or a characteristic one would like to have.

The reactions captured by longing for a valued object or by admiring emulation are different from those associated with envy. If seeing someone else possessing a certain object gives rise to the desire for that object, the agent may certainly feel hostility towards the target. However, envious feelings would stem from the other's superior situation, while in the case of a strong desire for the object, the hostility towards the target derives from seeing her as an obstacle to one's desires. In turn, the reactions captured by admiring emulation can be devoid of hostility towards the target if the agent's focus is on his own improvement rather than on doing better than the target in a given reference group. Admiring emulation can be spurred by self-criticism. Self-criticism, in turn, may be occasioned by social comparison without being caused by the desire to be recognized as comparatively superior. We admire people we have no intention to emulate (I cannot draw and I do not identify as a painter, but I do admire Leonardo da Vinci), and we may feel admiring emulation for people who excel in activities we personally care about, and with whom for various reasons we do not feel in competition. Possible targets are those who exemplify qualities we deem relevant for our identity even if they are excellent to a degree beyond our reach. Children who play soccer can be inspired to improve their skills by emulating Messi, although they feel no rivalry with, let alone envy for, him.⁵ In sum, in the case of admiring emulation, the gap we need to fill is not between our situation and the situation of our rival, but between our present baseline and an ideal we strive to reach (by improving a quality, acquiring a characteristic, realizing an achievement, etc.). The target is not our rival but our exemplar, and it may even actively help us in the

⁴ I call this emotion «admiring emulation» to distinguish it from the emulation that Taylor considers an expression of state-envy. While the latter entails rivalry within the same reference group, admiring emulation does not entail rivalry, either because the reference group is different, or because other reasons prevent the agent from feeling threatened by the other's success.

⁵ I will develop this point in section 6). As an anonymous referee points out, admiration is usually associated with pleasure, while emulation can be painful. Because the gap between the admired and the agent is so big that it cannot be bridged, the agent often feels only pleasure in contemplating his object of admiration. However, the agent can also feel a form of admiring emulation, as suggested by Zagzebski (2017), and this can be painful. Because he compares with his target, the agent realizes that his skills need improvement. Hence, he can strive to become better by taking the target as his paradigm. The agent is not envious: he feels no rivalry and no hostility towards the target. The target of admiring emulation often does not belong to the same reference group, while the target of envy always belongs to the same reference group. As I will argue, this is my main point of disagreement with Protasi (2016), who treats a similar case as an example of benign envy.

process of perfecting our skills, as is often the case with mentors or coaches we particularly respect.

Longing will not give rise to pleasure if the target loses the valued object, unless her being deprived of it is seen by the agent as a necessary condition for obtaining it. It makes no sense for the agent to spoil the other's possession if what he truly wants is the object itself, nor will he be happy if the target is deprived of it by others or by bad luck. By contrast, an envious person who cannot acquire the valued object will feel some relief if the target loses it.

After examining Taylor's distinction between object-envy and state-envy, I proceed to evaluate the connection between object-envy and benign envy and I discuss the ethical consequences that derive from the conclusion, one I share with D'Arms (2017), that envy in itself is never benign. In section 3. I propose a thought experiment. On the basis of the elements that generate object-envy according to Taylor, I imagine five variations on a situation which comprises an agent, a good the agent desires but lacks, and a person who possesses the good. As I argue, the variations generate emotions like longing, sadness, happiness for, admiration, covetousness, self-disappointment, but they do not generate envy. In section 4. I concentrate on the nature of envious self-reproach, and I claim that its nature and genesis are different from the self-disappointment one may experience in other forms of self-assessment. Section 5. argues that the sour-grape syndrome serves different goals when it is connected with a good one fails to acquire and when it is connected with social comparison. In section 6. I defend the thesis that what looks like benign envy can be better understood as emulous admiration.

My conclusion is that what Taylor calls object-envy is a confusing concept, because the desired goods are not valued in themselves when a person feels envy. Rather, they are taken to signal the superior recognition enjoyed by someone else within the reference group to which the agent belongs.

2. State-envy, object-envy, benign envy

As we have seen, Taylor distinguishes between object-envy and state-envy. In turn, she divides state-envy into emulative envy and destructive envy. Object-envy, according to her, is the pain one feels at the realization that someone else has a good (it can be a valued object, but also a quality, a capacity or a trait) that one would very much like to have, accompanied by depressing or even humiliating thoughts about oneself due to the failure to possess the good. While object-envy concentrates on the good, and is accompanied by the strong desire to have it, state-envy concentrates on the inferior condition in which one finds oneself in comparison with the superior situation enjoyed

by someone else. Object-envy values positively the object possessed by the other, while state-envy considers the situation of superiority enjoyed by the other as the cause of the painful inferiority in which the subject finds him- or herself.

Taylor considers emulative envy and destructive state-envy as two ways in which state-envy can express itself. Instead, other scholars draw a distinction between benign envy and malicious envy.⁶ They attribute to benign envy some traits of object-envy (valuing the good itself and desiring to acquire it) combined with some traits of emulative envy (striving to acquire the good in order to overcome one's inferiority).

Unfortunately, the distinction between benign envy and malicious envy faces two equally undesirable alternatives. Either benign envy loses almost all connection with malicious envy, and the emotion feels more like admiration than envy; or the emotion is potentially open to hostility, but in this case it cannot be called benign. This objection has been raised by D'Arms (2017), who does not find benign envy a useful concept. He maintains that «the characteristic dissatisfaction of envy supplies or embodies some level of motivation toward whatever would ameliorate the situation: in other words, toward either outdoing or undoing the rival's advantage». Since the goal is «ameliorating the situation», i.e., overcoming inferiority, strictly from the point of view of envy there is no intrinsic reason why someone may incline towards acquiring the good rather than towards damaging his or her target. As D'Arms suggests, a «decent envier» may have moral reasons preventing him from acting on the desire to spoil or steal the other's good, but the feelings themselves will be determined not by morality, but by other factors. For example, someone convinced that he is capable of acquiring the good may not desire to damage the person who possesses it, since this option may present more costs than benefits from a prudential point of view. By contrast, the desires of someone who feels disempowered and hopeless may veer towards hostility.

From an ethical point of view, D'Arms's account can be complemented along the following lines. There is no such thing as benign envy, but it is possible to be «decent enviers» or «nasty enviers». A decent envier recognizes the hostile and malicious desires stemming from his rivalry over recognition, but chooses not to act on them because he does not want to hurt others. A nasty envier chooses the opposite. In an Aristotelian perspective,⁷ the decent envier is still not a virtuous person, because his internal conflict reflects a form of disharmony from which virtue is free. True, even

⁶ For example Roberts (1991), Protasi (2016). They try to isolate kinds of envy whose goals and action tendencies are morally acceptable.

⁷ I am thinking here of the Aristotelian perspective on the relationship between emotions and virtues in general, not of Aristotle's particular view of *zelos* and *phthonos*.

a virtuous person might not be able, sometimes, to prevent himself from feeling envious – after all, emotions do not occur as a matter of choice –, but in such (hopefully few) cases, he will force himself to act as a decent envier. Even though a virtuous person cannot choose not to feel certain emotions when they are occurring, he will not be at the mercy of whatever emotion takes hold of him, insofar as he can exercise some control over his character. For example, he will stay away from choices and situations that he believes might strengthen his envious disposition. He will avoid being overly attached to certain values, and in particular he will watch out for all those practices in which love of fame and love of victory play a central role. To restate this in Platonic-Aristotelian language, he will do what he can to keep his *thumoidetic* traits (love of fame and love of victory) in good balance with other aspects of his personality.⁸

3. Five variations

In order to better appreciate the problem with object-envy, I propose a thought experiment. I will describe a situation which contains the three main ingredients of object-envy as it is characterized by Taylor: an agent who desires a certain good but does not have it, the desired good, and a person who possesses the desired good. I will then produce a few variations. We will see that different emotional reactions can be attributed to the agent when her relationship with the elements in the situation changes. More precisely, we will focus on:

- a) The desired good. It can be desired and valued either because of its distinctive characteristics, or because it is perceived as an instance, an exemplar, or a sign of a valued category. In the latter case it can be viewed as replaceable by a similar good.⁹
- b) the agent's self-evaluation in relationship to having failed to acquire the good;

⁸ Cfr. Plato, *Rep.*, 580d–581e, esp. 581c: Socrates distinguishes people ruled by different parts of the soul by claiming that they love different objects. Those ruled by reason (*logistikón*) love wisdom and truth, those ruled by spiritedness (*thumos*) love victory and honor, and those ruled by appetite (*epithumetikon*) love profit and money. On the problem of choosing one's emotions in an Aristotelian framework, see Kosman (1980); Burnyeat (1980).

⁹ We will consider the relationship to a good that is desired for its unique qualities only in variation 1). In variation 4) the impossibility to acquire the object leads the agent to deny it has the unique qualities that made it desirable in the first place. The other variations will contain examples of goods that are considered by the agent to a greater or lesser extent replaceable. In variation 2) the object is valued in light of the desire for money and wealth.

- c) the relationship the agent entertains with the person who presently possesses the good.

It is not my goal here to give a comprehensive account of the possible ways in which the three elements can be understood, in themselves or in their mutual relationships. Nor do I presume to connect each variation with specific emotions. Rather, I will use the variations as starting points for reflecting on the reasons why the conditions spelled out by Taylor are not sufficient for envy, while they are likely to produce other emotional responses.

The initial example is the following: Anne finds out that her friend Mary just acquired a beautiful house in the Tuscan countryside. Anne would love to have a second home. She feels frustrated at the news of her friend's successful purchase and becomes preoccupied with the idea of finding a similar place for herself.

I suppose we can agree that if our description stops here we do not have enough information to figure out which emotional response(s) Anne might have to the situation. Here are a few possibilities.

- 1) Mary's success might be relevant only insofar as it brings home to Anne how good it would have been for her to buy that particular house. She now feels it embodies all she has been looking for: the natural setting, the view, the way the space is divided, the kind of light — everything tells Anne that she missed a great opportunity. She is happy for Mary, yet she feels a sense of loss about the house, as if it had always been hers.

These feelings do not necessarily interfere with each other. She might feel sad that she will not be able to spend her summers in such a lovely place, but also full of admiration at her friend's good taste. Furthermore, she might hope to find a similar home for herself in the future. Her happiness for Mary goes together with a mixture of relief and gratitude at the thought that the house will be cared for by someone who understands its beauty. If it had been bought by others, it might have been subject to tasteless renovations and lose its charm.

Instead of envy, in this first variation we can ascribe to Anne a variety of different emotions. She misses that beautiful house, but she is happy for Mary. She admires her friend's skills and good taste, she is relieved and grateful that the house's beauty will be preserved, she is hopeful about her future prospects.

- 2) Mary's success makes Anne feel she failed to acquire something of value, and this is painful, because Anne is never happy with what she has: she constantly wants more. As soon as she gets a hold of a new object she loses interest and

starts craving for something else. The place Mary bought is not important in itself. Anne does not concentrate on the details; she is not in love with the landscape, she is not imagining what it would be like to live there. Rather, she thinks that the house has excellent market value. A place like that can only accrue wealth over the years.

Anne loves to own expensive things. Her friend's successful search for a house in the countryside painfully reminds her of her failure, not because the house is important in itself, nor because this makes Mary look superior, but because she missed a good deal. If she experiences some hostility towards her friend, it is because Mary and people like her stand in the way of a bargain. What Anne feels is not envy but covetousness.

- 3) Mary's success makes Anne feel that she missed an opportunity that was very close at hand. Though Anne is struck by the beauty of the house, her emotions do not focus specifically on it, but rather on the fact of having missed this opportunity. The situation can be read as personal failure, and this is precisely the way she takes it. Anne reproaches herself («if only I had returned the real estate agent's calls, now that house would be mine; if only I had not been procrastinating, as I always do...»). She is disappointed in herself. She is hopeful but also restless and on the verge of becoming obsessed with finding a new home to buy. She feels she now has to succeed at all costs.

In this third variation Anne is still not envious of her friend, but, differently from what happens in variation 1), she is not really focused on the object itself or on its affective value. On the one hand she feels wounded in her self-esteem (hence her self-reproach and self-disappointment). On the other hand her fretting over a renewed search protects her from the pain caused by the failure to secure the object she desired. She wants to replace it as soon as possible. She feels regretful, restless, impatient, obsessed with new possibilities.

- 4) When Anne sees the house just acquired by Mary, she is struck by its beauty. However, she immediately starts finding little faults with it: isn't it perhaps too expensive? Isn't the garden a bit too small? Would it not have been nice for a house in the countryside to have a fireplace?

Anne feels the need to diminish the object's value. If it is not as precious as it promised to be, the pain of seeing it in the possession of others will go away.

This is the notorious sour-grapes syndrome, which, as suggested by Taylor (2006, p. 43-44), is typical of envy. However, Anne is not bothered at all by Mary's success. She is not trying to diminish the value of the house in order to make Mary's

situation less obviously superior to hers. Rather, she is defending herself from the pain of a desire that she knows she cannot satisfy. Her concern is not with self-evaluation, as in variation 3). Nor is she comparing her failure with Mary's success. She is finding a way of coping with the pain of having missed an important object. The way she deals with this problem is to prevent herself from experiencing it as a problem.

- 5) Anne has been toying with the idea of a second home for a while now, but her thoughts were never focused on something specific. Would it be better to vacation in the mountains, or maybe find a beach house and move there for good? How about renting a small place in a European capital? She actually never looked seriously into the matter. It is only when she finds out about Mary's house in Tuscany that her thoughts all of a sudden become focused. This is what she wants!

Is this a case of envy? It need not be. Perhaps Mary simply gave Anne the opportunity to develop a new project for herself at this stage of her life. She does not wish that Mary had not been successful, she is not seeing the house in Tuscany as desirable just because Mary has it and she does not. No: after a first pang of pain at the realization that she is far from realizing what for the time being is only a dream, Anne feels grateful that Mary gave her this idea. In a place like this she can see herself working, reading, enjoying being alone, but also inviting friends over, taking care of the garden, spending time with her extended family. Especially if she believes that she will sooner or later satisfy her desire, Anne is not going to become envious.¹⁰ Rather, she is likely to feel a form of admiring emulation for Mary. She can consider her an exemplar, as someone in whose steps she can walk. Anne may even experience some form of anticipated bliss thinking of her life in the countryside once she finds the right place.¹¹

¹⁰ On the inverse relationship between the likelihood of envy and the hope to attain a certain goal by the agent, see Aristotle (2006; 1368b30-33). Protasi (2016) makes a similar point about perceived attainability. In variations 1) and 5) Anne's hope that she will be able to attain her goal makes it much more difficult for envy to arise than if she had serious doubts about that. If she despaired she could ever live in a house similar to the one purchased by Mary, she would probably find it difficult to feel happy for Mary and to appreciate wholeheartedly her success. On the perceived controllability of the outcome and its relation with other factors in envy, see Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007; p. 454-456). Scheler (1994) emphasizes the role of the perception of powerlessness in the genesis of envy and its role in the development towards the *ressentiment* syndrome.

¹¹ Anticipated emotions are those an agent feels he or she will experience in the future. For example, I can expect now that I will be disappointed tomorrow if I do not pass the test. In the fifth variation, Anne is imagining her future in a house similar to the one Mary bought for herself. If she

Let us now draw some conclusions from our thought experiment. In the next section we will return to variation 3) and focus on what makes Anne's self-disappointment different from a case of envious self-reproach. In section 5. we will ask why in variation 4) Anne's impulse to find fault with the object she cannot have is not the same as the sour-grape syndrome produced by envy. In section 6. we will discuss why it is preferable to see Anne's reaction in variation 5) as emulative admiration rather than consider it a case of benign envy.

4. Self-examination, self-disappointment, envious self-reproach

According to Taylor, object-envy does not entail comparison between the agent's situation and that of the person who possesses the good. Hence, in all five variations I imagined Anne as focused primarily on the good she does not have, rather than on Mary's success. In variation 1) the object is desired per se, as having characteristics that make it look unique. The consequence, however, is that the emotions felt by Anne do not belong in the sphere of envy and *ressentiment*, but in the sphere of longing and love.

One might object that the reason the first variation excludes envy as a likely affective response is that an important element is missing, namely the negative self-evaluation that Taylor included in her account of object-envy:

In cases of object-envy the envy is of the good the other has; its possessor plays a relatively minor role as being merely the occasion for the envious person's realization of her deficiencies. Perception of the other's possession of the good turns her attention to irritating or even humiliating thoughts about her lack of it, but the possessor of the desired good plays no prominent role in her consciousness. (Taylor, 2016, p. 43)

In order to respond to this possible objection, in variation 3) I added self-reproach to the longing for an object possessed by someone else. However, even in variation 3) envy did not seem a likely outcome. Anne may well reproach herself for having been unable to secure the good so successfully acquired by her friend, but if her focus falls solely on two elements – the opportunity she missed and her falling below her own expectations— her self-disappointment can be explained without any reference to her

is hopeful that she will find the right place, she may be anticipating her joy. On anticipated emotions, cf. Miceli and Castelfranchi (2014, pp. 184-199).

feelings for Mary. Hence, in variation 3) self-disappointment excludes the appeal to intersubjectivity that is usually present in envious feelings. Even though Anne is attached to a good possessed by Mary, even if Mary succeeds where Anne fails, Mary's success plays no other role than that of occasioning the self-evaluation that results in Anne's self-disappointment. Mary's success is not, as it were, embedded in the process of self-disappointment and self-reproach.

Let us consider further the nature of self-disappointment. When it is claimed that envy entails self-disappointment or self-reproach, what are these terms supposed to mean?

In variation 3) we are confronted with an instance of negative self-evaluation in which the agent reflects on herself and finds herself wanting with respect to a certain standard. Anne is disappointed in herself because she thinks she could have done something better (she could have taken the matter to heart, called the real estate agent, etc.). We can imagine she could easily own such thoughts and treat them as temporary conclusions she reaches about herself. They are not intrusive, unwanted thoughts: they feel like the painful acknowledgment that she failed to live up to some of her expectations.

A different kind of self-disappointment is at stake in envy. In order to see this, let us imagine now that Anne was truly envious of Mary. Probably, she would see Mary's success itself as a form of reproach to her. Anne would not feel active in the process. She would not behave like someone who is examining herself and considers herself in control of what she is doing. She would not become an object to herself, as in variation 3). Rather, she would be on the receiving end, as it were. She would feel *reproached* by Mary's success, *as if Mary had answered a question Anne had never asked her in the first place*. Anne's focus of attention would not be on herself, but on Mary. In this sense her self-disappointment would not be thematic; she would feel it almost as an intrusive thought. If Anne were in such a situation, she would *feel* inferior without necessarily *thinking* that she was inferior. Because she would feel *judged* by the other's action without necessarily realizing that this is the case, she would start viewing Mary in a new light – as judgmental and harsh, for example – without knowing exactly why. She would surprisingly find perceptive, rather than annoying, some gossipers describing her friend as haughty and full of herself, even though Anne could not honestly say she ever saw Mary as judgmental and harsh before.

That envy is often associated with some form of self-reproach was already pointed out by Aristotle, who claimed that are likely to become the objects of envy «those whose possessions or successes are a reproach to themselves [i.e., to the envious], and these, too, are those near or like them; for it is clear that it is their own

fault that they do not obtain the same advantage, so that this pains and causes envy» (*Rhet.*, II, 1388a17).

Kelly (2016), who quotes Aristotle, proposes to replace Taylor's object-envy with two kinds of envious response, which he calls «deficiency-envy» and «possessor-envy». Deficiency envy occurs when «the envier unwillingly acknowledges the superiority of the envied but focuses on self-reprove rather than attacking the other».¹² Possessor-envy occurs when «the envier now hostilely sees the envied as someone who is the cause of, or responsible for, the envier's deprivation or not having some good. [...] Were it not for Cassio, Iago believes he would have the fame, attention, honor, and accolades he at least thinks he deserves».¹³ Kelly's point is that envy is always both self-assessing and other-assessing, and I believe he is quite right about this.¹⁴ In what he calls deficiency-envy it is easy to see the aspect of self-reproach, while the assessment of the other's superiority remains in the background. Conversely, in possessor-envy it is easy to see the other-assessing aspect, while self-assessment remains in the background.

If my point about the particular kind of self-reproach entailed in envy is correct, we can understand better the peculiar quality of hostile feelings stemming from it. As I have argued, the situation of envious self-reproach does not come as the result of a process of self-assessment autonomously undertaken. Rather, it is experienced as the reaction to a blow. The envious person may see the other as intentionally exhibiting her superiority, as someone who is standoffish and critical towards him. More than likely, self-reproach will not generate humility, but frustration

¹² Kelly (2016, p. 170). Salice & Montes Sánchez (2018, p. 7) do not quote Kelly (2016), but they make a very similar point: «When the accent is on hostility, then the rival is the target of the emotion. The subject's thematic consciousness is about the rival, but the peripheral or nonthematic consciousness is about the self, which is the background object of the emotion. Envy, in this case, is made intelligible by the sense of impotence. The more one feels impotent, the more the other is resented. Envy's second accent is on disempowerment and the associated localized negative self-assessment: here, the emotion has the self in target position and the rival in the focus: it is in virtue of the rival's (perceived) superiority that the negative evaluation about the self is made intelligible». Kelly speaks of two forms of envy, while Salice and Montes Sánchez characterize envy itself as possessing two intentional objects. Even though the difference may only be terminological, I find the idea of the two phenomenological accents more accurate: it is easily conceivable that during the same episode of envy someone may vacillate between the two objects.

¹³ Kelly (2016, p. 169-170).

¹⁴ Ben-Ze'ev (2000) makes a similar point by distinguishing envy's emotional object from its focus of concern: «The focus of concern usually refers to our personal situation in a certain group. In envy, the emotional object is the person having something that we would like to have, and the focus of concern is our undeserved inferiority».

and badly repressed aggressive behavior. Hence, self-reproach may be associated, if not with openly hostile reactions, at least with only halfhearted and insincere-sounding expressions of praise for a person who (the envier feels) uses her own achievements to make others feel inferior. From this point of view, the results presented in Finske (2011) on inter-groups envy are not surprising. According to this research, groups that consider themselves in a condition of inferiority feel scorned by more successful out-groups, and view them as competent but machine-like. Ironically, at the same time as they prejudicially attribute to the more successful outgroups a form of heartless arrogance, they see themselves as less competent perhaps, but certainly warmer and more empathic.

Let us now go back to object-envy. I do agree with Taylor's suggestion that an envious person will have «irritating or even humiliating thoughts» about herself. What I do not find persuasive is that Taylor considers self-reproach as an aspect of object-envy rather than of state-envy. If those painful thoughts are not merely *occasioned* by the other's success, but are felt to be *caused* by the other's success, then self-reproach can acquire hostile overtones, but in this case the boundaries set for object-envy are not respected.

If Anne's worry is that Mary's achievement puts her in a bad light, then what really bothers Anne is not her failure *per se*, but her relative inferiority with respect to Mary. This would not be a case of object-envy but of state-envy according to Taylor:

In state-envy, on the other hand, the envy is of the-other-having-that-good. Here the other is seen as not merely that which happens to prompt her disagreeable view of herself, but is thought of as somehow crucially involved in her finding herself in an inferior position. (Taylor, 2016, p. 43)

Of course I will not deny that negative feelings about oneself may follow the discovery that one failed where someone else succeeded. However, not all such reactions are of an envious nature. When they are, they feel different from mere self-disappointment. As we saw in variation 3), someone like Anne can be disappointed in herself without taking her friend's success as a reproach to her, or, even worse, without seeing her friend as haughty and contemptuous. Instead, rivalry over recognition may generate «irritating or even humiliating thoughts» that are typical of what Taylor would call state-envy: they feel different because their genesis and nature are different.

5. “Pity so as not to envy them”

I believe we can come to a similar conclusion if we consider variation 4). The sour-grape phenomenon belongs to envy if by this term we mean what Taylor calls state-envy – an emotion in which one resents the fact that others enjoy a comparably superior position. But this phenomenon lacks all envious overtones if the agent’s intentionality is directed solely to his relationship with the good he lacks, as we saw in variation 4): Anne diminished the value of the house in the countryside because she could not bear the pain of missing it. It made no difference to her that it was Mary rather than someone else who owned the house instead of her.

In my view, variation 4) provides a counterexample to Taylor’s thesis that the sour-grape syndrome can be taken as an expression of object-envy. She discusses it in reference to a passage by Proust:

In *Swann’s Way* Marcel remarks of his great-aunt: ‘Whenever she saw in others an advantage, however trivial, which she herself lacked, she would persuade herself that it was no advantage at all, but a drawback, and would pity so as not to envy them’ (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, i. ch. 1). Such evasive moves, if she manages to convince herself, are presumably helpful in saving her from feelings of inferiority. They are also corruptive to a greater or lesser degree in that they can only confuse the agent’s evaluations. But if it is only object-envy she is suppressing then she will not be exposed to the destructive harm brought about by vicious envy. (Taylor, 2016, p. 43–44)

The quotation from *Swann’s Way* can be confusing if we take it at face value. When Marcel claims that his great-aunt «would pity so as not to envy them», he cannot imply that his great-aunt did not envy at all the people whose advantages she tried to belittle. What he must mean, rather, is that by diminishing the value of the goods possessed by her neighbors she prevented herself from feeling the hostility that would be the natural consequence of her envy. The mechanism must be the following: Marcel’s great-aunt compares her situation with that of others who enjoy certain goods. Because those goods look like privileges and advantages, their situation appears superior: she is struck by a painful feeling of inferiority. If this feeling turned into destructive envy, she would desire to harm those who enjoy superiority over her, and plot to eliminate those advantages in some devious way. However, for various reasons (we can speculate here: she is not powerful enough to damage those who stir her envy; she fears their revenge;

she is hindered by moral concerns; she does not want her envy to become apparent, etc.) she opts for a different strategy. Instead of acting directly on the situation, she acts on her own interpretation of it. She produces a distorted and tendentious report, misrepresenting the advantages her acquaintances enjoy and portraying them to herself as drawbacks.

She cannot rely on patent lies, because she actually needs to find persuasive her revised version of the events. What she will do then is tamper with the relative importance of certain aspects and give priority to minor points while obscuring those aspects that at first sight did appear to her the most significant. She will attribute a prominent place to anything that in her acquaintances' situation may seem even slightly burdensome or potentially unpleasant, while relegating to the background all the benefits they enjoy. If she manipulates the significance of the given circumstances in such a way that those who appear to enjoy good fortune in the end look at a disadvantage, she obtains two results. The first is to prevent her initial envy from turning into destructive envy. The second is to persuade herself that what she really feels towards her acquaintances is pity, a laudable emotion.

What she would like to call pity, however, is in fact disguised *Schadenfreude*. Pity would require her to be sincerely pained by the misfortunes of others, while a little bit of satisfaction must certainly infuse her present sympathetic attitude. Having been disturbed by her acquaintances' success, she cannot but welcome with some pleasure the idea that their situation is actually deplorable. Ultimately, the pleasure she takes in pitying her acquaintances derives from the restored image of her own superiority.

In conclusion, we can say that the sour-grape syndrome as a defense mechanism can serve different goals. Similarly to what happens in variation 4), the agent may fight the pain of missing an object (a person, or even a quality) she lost (or never had) by attacking the object's value, so as to persuade herself that what she lacks is in the end not as important as it seems. If, instead, she has an envious goal, she will usually diminish the object in order to belittle the other's advantage. One typical strategy is the one described by Proust. Backhanded and poisonous compliments can serve this goal as well. One may praise the good and at the same time indicate, almost as an afterthought, that it has some unwanted consequences: «wow! What a wonderful house! Will you be able to go on vacation again or do you need to spend every summer taking care of it?». Another option is to insinuate that, even though the acquired good is to be praised, the situation itself remains hopeless: «how wonderful you bought a new

house! I guess it will keep you busy now that your children left you alone... What a pity...».¹⁵

A wonderful short story by Cheever, *The Worm in the Apple*,¹⁶ presents yet another interesting version of the sour-grape syndrome. In this case we witness at the same time the impulse to find pleasure in others' misfortunes *and* its frustration. The target of envy is a family whose happiness is intolerable to the narrator, as it clearly appears from the very beginning:

The Crutchmans were so very, very happy and so temperate in all their habits and so pleased with everything that came their way that one was bound to suspect a worm in their rosy apple and that the extraordinary rosiness of the fruit was only meant to conceal the gravity and the depth of the infection. Their house, for instance, on Hill Street with all those big glass windows. Who but someone suffering from a guilt complex would want so much light to pour into their rooms? And all the wall-to-wall carpeting as if an inch of bare floor (there was none) would touch on some deep memory of unrequition and loneliness. And there was a certain necrophilic ardor to their gardening. Why be so intense about digging holes and planting seeds and watching them come up? Why this morbid concern with the earth? She was a pretty woman with that striking pallor you so often find in nymphomaniacs. Larry was a big man who used to garden without a shirt, which may have shown a tendency to infantile exhibitionism. (Cheever, 1980, p. 338)

Throughout the story the same voice, about which we know absolutely nothing, looks for hidden failures, deep unhappiness, wrong choices and weak moments that might bring this or that member of the family to deep trouble. We feel this voice's disappointment at every turn when things, invariably, end up well for the Crutchmans. We need nobody to tell us that we are listening to pure envy.

¹⁵ Miceli (2012, p. 40) offers some interesting (and quite amusing) examples of backbiting and backhanded compliments motivated by envy.

¹⁶ I am thankful to Michele Pierozzi, who took a moral philosophy course I taught in 2016, and brought this short story to my attention in the context of a discussion of *phthonos*.

6. Benign envy or emulative admiration?

On the basis of variations 1), 2), 3), and 4) we can confidently affirm at this point that someone is not experiencing envy if, lacking a certain good, he is not pained by a situation of relative inferiority which affects both his attitude towards those enjoying a superior position, and his attitude towards himself.

Let us concentrate now on Protasi (2016), who discusses as a case of benign envy the first of four distinct kinds of envy generated by the interaction between two variables: focus of concern and perceived obtainability of the good. According to Protasi, if the agent's focus of concern is on the valued good rather than on the target, and if the agent is confident that he can obtain the good, then the agent will experience benign envy. As an example of benign envy Protasi asks us to imagine a graduate student, Emma, who is envious of the superior philosophical abilities possessed by her advisor, Diotima. Emma would like to be as talented in philosophy as her advisor, and she is confident that she can become as good a philosopher as Diotima. She takes her as her role model and stops feeling envious only when she achieves her goal.

This account of benign envy is very similar to Taylor's account of object-envy: in both cases the agent is not bothered by the comparison with her target, and does not feel any hostility towards her.¹⁷ Since the focus is only on the good to be acquired, the person who possesses the good is not someone whose success appears as a form of reproach, in the sense we discussed above. Certainly, because Diotima is such a good professor Emma realizes how much she needs to do in order to become as good as she is. But Diotima's success is not such that it projects a shadow over Emma's good qualities. To the contrary, it can help her develop her potential and make her flourish.

Since envy arises from a difference in the possession of a good – she has it and I do not – and since what bothers the envier is this difference, what she wants is for it to be cancelled. This, according to D'Arms (2017), implies that it cannot be indifferent to the envier that her target loses the good, because

¹⁷ In footnote 23, Protasi compares her account of benign envy (which she also calls «emulative envy») with Taylor's account of emulation and finds it wanting. I believe that a more profitable comparison would have been with Taylor's account of object-envy. Taylor defines emulation as a case of state-envy: the agent who feels emulation desires to overcome the unfavorable comparison with his target and feels in competition with her. Protasi insists that in her own version of emulative envy the agent is focused on the good and motivated to get it for himself rather than being pained by the other's superiority. This is precisely the stance that Taylor attributes to object envy. I thank an anonymous reader for inviting me to clarify this point.

in this way she loses also the comparative advantage over the envier. Hence, *Schadenfreude* follows naturally from envy, as we have seen while reflecting on Marcel's great-aunt.

Yet, in Protasi's example there is no rivalry involved. The story reminds us of the situation described in variation 5). Rather than being disturbed by Mary's success, Anne discovers that she can pursue a similar path. Like Emma, Anne is happy to take her friend as a model to emulate. It would make no sense for Emma and Anne to wish that the persons they admire lost what makes them admirable. Emma would feel no pleasure if Diotima had a brain injury and lost her talents; Anne would be very sad if Mary's house caught fire.

In my view, Anne and Emma do not feel envy, but rather admiration in the sense identified by Zagzebski (2017, p. 43): «The admired person is imitably attractive. That is, admiration for acquired excellences gives rise to the motive to emulate the admired person in the way in which she is admired».

Protasi excludes admiration as a candidate emotion, because she claims that admiration presupposes a gap that cannot be bridged between the agent and the admired (hence, it does not inspire the agent to change her situation). However, as Zagzebski has argued, when admiration is directed at acquired excellence, rather than at natural talent, it does take on an emulative quality:

I think that admiring artistic genius feels different from admiring generosity of spirit. There is also a difference in the way the two kinds of excellences can be emulated. I can imitate a person with an acquired excellence, but I cannot imitate a natural talent. It is not something I can hope to attain myself if I do not already have it. But it is significant that the people who excel in intellectual or artistic excellence or physical strength would rarely be noticed if they did not improve their talent with hard work, perseverance, determination, and courage, often making sacrifices to develop and express their gift. (Zagzebski 2017, p. 37)

Of course one can differentiate emotions conceptually by resorting to different terminologies, but Protasi's example seems unconvincing as a case of envy not only because Diotima is clearly presented as admirable, but also because Emma's admiration seems to coexist with no hostility whatsoever towards her advisor. She is happy that Diotima has such superior qualities, and she does not desire at all that she loses them. Protasi might respond that this is exactly what it is to feel benign envy: it means to emulate someone and try to acquire the same

good for oneself, with no desire to spoil the other's good (as in spiteful envy), or steal it away from him or her (as in aggressive envy).

The complete absence of hostility, however, can be understood also in light of the absence of self-reproach, in the sense discussed above. Emma feels less accomplished than Diotima, but she has no reason to consider Diotima's success as a reproach to herself because, in the academic environment they share, they do not belong to the same reference group. Emma is at the beginning of her studies, while her advisor— we can presume — is older and at a different stage in her career. Emma can admire Diotima and take her as an exemplar because there is a gap between them that prevents Emma from considering Diotima a rival (at least for the time being). If, instead of being a professor, Diotima had been a graduate student in the same PhD program, we can presume that it would have been more difficult for Emma to avoid the kind of hostility and self-reproach that accompanies envious feelings.

There can be no competition (or at least no envious comparison) if there is too big a distance between the agent and the possessor of the desired good. This point, which is present in all modern accounts of envy, was first formulated by Aristotle (2007):

The kind of people who feel envy are those who have, or seem to themselves to have, [more fortunate acquaintances among] those like themselves. I mean those like themselves in terms of birth, relationship, age, disposition, reputation, possessions, as well as those who just fall short of having all of these on an equal basis (*Rhet.* II, 1387b25-30).

We cannot feel envious of others if we do not feel similar to them. We envy people who belong to our reference group, with whom we can compare, and who can make us feel inadequate. The similarity need not be objective, but it must certainly be subjectively relevant, as Aristotle is at pains to point out («those who have, or seem to themselves to have...»). Ben-Ze'ev explains well the relevance of the reference group within which the aspects that are salient for envy are singled out by an agent. When the gap between the agent and the other is perceived as too big, the target is no longer seen as a member of the reference group, hence the emotion will change (for example, from envy to admiration):

We compare ourselves with people who are close to us in time and space and those we consider to occupy an approximately similar position or

possess a similar ability. We tend to exclude from our reference group people who appear definitely superior or inferior to us, as well as those belonging to irrelevant domains. Accordingly, a greater subject-object gap does not necessarily imply greater emotional intensity; it may also change the nature of the given emotion. A typical difference between envy and admiration is that in envy the gap is much smaller. A small gap is also typical of pleasure-in-others'-misfortune and, in general, of emotions in which rivalry is central. Our superior or inferior position is important when the gap is not wide and there is still a chance of changing our current position. When the gap is wide, we often take it as a given, thereby experiencing no rivalry and hence no emotion. Wide gaps are typical of pity, gratitude, and other emotions in which rivalry is not a central concern and we are not expected to try and overcome the gap. (Ben-Ze'ev 2000, p. 133)

Not every example of the other's superior situation will necessarily stir our envy. For envy to arise, we must feel that a particular situation of inferiority is relevant for our identity. If Anne does not care for sports and her best friend Julia wins a race, it is more likely that she feels admiration rather than envy. Anne perceives no threat to her self-esteem, since running races is not something that identifies her in any way. In this case, Julia's success can easily become her own success, by way of a «reflection» process which allows Anne to identify with her friend rather than (as in envy) to feel in competition with her.¹⁸

Being moved to admiration rather than to envy is also a function of the level of intimacy with the other person. Even if the other's success represents a potential threat to my own self-esteem, the possibility of identifying with her is available when my affection towards her is such that I experience her as a part of myself. Aristotle thinks that children often play this role in people's lives. Friends, on the other hand, are at risk of becoming the objects of our envy, because 1) they are for the most part similar to us in those respects that we value as relevant for our own self-esteem, and 2) they are linked to us by a level of intimacy that is strong, but not such as to induce identification.

¹⁸ On the self-relevance of the goal and the role of social comparison as factors in envy, see Tesser & Collins (1988); Salovey & Rothman (1991). On the relationship between self-esteem and the reference groups of envy, cfr. Vendrell Ferran (2006, pp. 50-52). For a discussion of self-esteem and self-respect in relationship with shame see Fussi (2018). For the connection between pride, shame, and we-intentionality, see Salice & Montes Sánchez (2016).

While children can be felt as parts of ourselves, the best friend, Aristotle says, is another self, i.e., someone separate from us. If my best friend is a philosopher and she becomes more successful on the very same topic on which I am supposedly an expert, the situation can provoke my envy. On the one hand friendship makes me wish good things to my friend; on the other hand envy makes me desire that she be less successful, because, since we belong to the same reference group, I can fear that the light that shines on her success will project a shadow over my qualities and achievements.

If we go back to Protasi's example, we can presume that being philosophically adept is a self-defining quality for Emma. If Diotima had been a graduate student like her, Emma would probably have included her in the same reference group. Hence she would have felt her success as a potential threat to her social image. Since Diotima can be seen as a member of a different reference group, her success is not problematic. But because Diotima embodies to an excellent degree a quality that for Emma is self-defining, she can play the role of an exemplar in the sense indicated by Zagzebski (2017, p. 20): «a person who is admirable in some respect is imitable in that respect. The feeling of admiration is a kind of attraction that carries the impetus to imitate or emulate with it».

Of course, that Emma can emulate her advisor is also due to Emma's sense of control over the outcome: she must trust in her power to become a better philosopher. If, for reasons that need not derive from a comparison with her advisor, Emma had serious doubts about her own capacities and thought that her future attempts to study and write would not be supported by her environment, she would probably not find the strength to emulate the person she admires most. Her admiration for Diotima, initially active and full of excitement, could slowly be replaced by an ambivalent attitude towards her. Diotima's brilliant qualities would become painful reminders of the unfulfilled promises in her own life. Emma would still not be envious of Diotima's *capacities*. However, she could become resentful, and find it unfair that in her youth Diotima had many more opportunities than she has been offered, or become angry at the thought that her advisor could have done more to support her. In the end, if Emma found it impossible to imagine any good alternatives for her future, she could fall into depression.

I have been arguing that Emma's emotion can be identified with emulative admiration rather than with envy. For envy to arise, the target must be considered a member of the same reference group, so that the similarity becomes a matter of comparison and rivalry. Since people can be similar to each

other for all kinds of reasons, even similarities that involve self-relevant values may cause no envy if, as in the case of Diotima and Emma, the target is not included by the agent in the same reference group.

The choice of the reference group is subjective and it may depend on all sorts of reasons. I maintained earlier that if being good at sports is not a self-identifying value for Anne, and her friend Julia wins an important race, Anne probably will admire rather than envy her. Suppose, however, that they are together at a party, and their acquaintances keep repeating that Julia is really great: not only she is a brilliant philosopher, she is also athletic and has a well-rounded, adventurous personality. In this situation Anne may identify her reference group differently from what she normally does. She might feel Julia's success as a reproach to her. While previously there was no rivalry between them, Anne can feel rivalry now: Julia is seen as superior by people by whom Anne would like to be appreciated. She feels a pang of envy.

7. Conclusion

On the basis of the three ingredients included in Taylor's account of object-envy (an agent who lacks a certain good, the good, and someone who possesses the good), I proposed five variations on a situation that should have produced envious responses. Instead, the affective responses were different from each other, but they were never really identifiable as envy.

The three ingredients are not sufficient to generate the kind of self-reproach, the action tendencies and the coping strategies that would be typical of envy.

Envy is never only about a good possessed by someone else. It is always about a situation of inferiority that results from a comparison with someone whom the agent identifies as similar within a certain reference group. Furthermore, the pain of envy does not derive from the situation of inferiority itself, but from *being considered* (or imagining being considered) in a situation of inferiority. In other words, *the ultimate object of envy is fame*. This point was first made by Aristotle:

The good things that people envy have been mentioned; for almost all things that cause people to love fame and honor, whether deeds or possessions, and make them desire attention and whatever things are the gifts of fortune (*eutychemata*) are, almost all of them, objects of envy, and especially those that they themselves desire or think they ought to

have or things they possess only slightly more than others or slightly less.
(Aristotle, *Rhet.* II, 1387b35-1388a5)

Aristotle's point is confirmed by our analysis. While the light of success illuminates someone else's qualities and possessions, it casts a shadow on the envier's own achievements. He becomes obscure, he feels irrelevant and displaced in a social scene in which it is vital not to become invisible.

To restate this point in less metaphorical terms, the disparity that causes envy is one of recognition in a relevant group. The pain derives not from what I lack (the superior philosophical skills, a house in the countryside, winning a race, etc.), but from the fact that *I can be seen to lack it* in comparison with someone who makes me feel inadequate and inferior

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