[Review of:] *The Philosophy of Envy* / Sara Protasi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021

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BOOK REVIEW

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Envy has long been regarded a paradigmatic example of a vicious emotion. From Aquinas' characterization of envy as a capital sin to more recent work in psychology and philosophy, envy has been portrayed as detrimental to the agent's well-being and moral status. Is this negative picture of envy justified? In her book *The Philosophy of Envy* (2021), Sara Protasi tackles this question through a precise and psychologically informed journey into the nature of this emotion. The upshot of her discussion is an accurate portrait of envy, one that will make it appear that envy is not necessarily a vicious emotion. By distinguishing several forms of envy, Protasi shows that not every form of this emotion is morally problematic. She invites us to look at envy from a different perspective by suggesting that it can improve our well-being and moral lives by deepening our loving relationships, helping us acquire new goods and contributing to our flourishing. The book fills an important gap in the philosophical literature on emotions. Being particularly accessible, it is a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in the philosophy and psychology of emotions. In this review, I lay out what I perceive as the book's main contributions and discuss some points of concern.

In chapter 1, Protasi begins by distinguishing envy from another traditionally negatively perceived emotion: jealousy. When we are envious of someone, we perceive ourselves as inferior because we lack something that the other person possesses. When we are jealous, on the other hand, we have something that the other person lacks and that we fear losing and thus perceive ourselves as superior. For example, a person in the grip of jealousy might have a successful career and jealously guard it in the face of competition. Similarly, a jealous person might be in a relationship with someone, thus not lacking anything, but still fearing that her partner will leave her for someone else. It is thus possible to distinguish between envy and jealousy by claiming that envy is primarily a reaction to the perceived lack of a good whereas jealousy targets a possible loss. In envy, one covets what another has; in jealously one fiercely guards something one is afraid of losing. Paradigmatically,

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envy and jealousy also prompt different kinds of behavior. In the case of envy, one is motivated to overcome one's inferiority, for example by acquiring the good at stake or by depriving another of it; in jealousy one is prompted to protect the good and ensure that it is beyond one's rival reach.

The second chapter contains one of the book's core contributions, the distinction of four forms of envy: inert, aggressive, spiteful and emulative envy. This categorization stems from the idea that there are roughly two ways in which one can be envious. First, one may be envious in the sense that one is motivated to rise to the level of the envied person. Second, one may be envious in the sense that one is motivated to bring the envied person down to one's level. Think of when you were a child, and your sibling got a toy that you did not have. In some cases, you thought it would be good to be given the same toy in order to restore equality. In some other cases, you were motivated to destroy or steal your sibling's toy. But how can these two very different reactions be explained by the same emotion?

According to Protasi, the fact that we are sometimes motivated to level up and sometimes to level down can be explained in two ways. The first explanation appeals to the notion of having sufficient *control* over whether the desired state of affairs will obtain. If we think we do enjoy such control, then we are motivated to level up, to rise to the level of the envied. On the other hand, if we think we lack such control, for instance because we think that our build will never allow us to be a good dancer or that our parents will never get us what they got our sibling, we are motivated to level down.

The second explanation for these two different reactions to envy makes use of the notion of *focus of concern*. In some cases, we are more focused on the good than on the fact that another is better off than us. In other cases, we are not really interested in the good but rather in the fact that someone, a rival, is better off than us. In these latter cases, rather than seeking to acquire the good, we are motivated to level down and to deprive the envied of their advantage so that we no longer perceive ourselves as inferior. Coming back to our example, you may have been upset that your sibling had a toy that you wanted for its own sake, or rather frustrated that your sibling was in a better position than you.

Protasi combines these two types of explanations, the perceived control and the focus of concern and uses them to identify four varieties of envy. In *inert* envy, one envies the good that someone else possesses while feeling incapable of remedying one's perceived inferiority. One is therefore not motivated to act on his envy. In *spiteful* envy, one is more upset by the fact that someone is superior to oneself than by one's lack of a good while also thinking of oneself as incapable of acquiring that good. In this case, one is motivated to spoil the good. *Aggressive* envy is similar to spiteful envy in that one is more focused on the fact that someone is better off than oneself than on the good. The difference with spiteful envy concerns control: in aggressive envy, options other than spoiling the good are open. One may perceive oneself as capable of stealing it from the rival or of obtaining it through other means. In a competition, for example, one feels capable of beating one's competitor. The last form of envy is *emulative envy*. In emulative envy, one is more focused on the good than on one's inferiority and one perceives oneself as capable of remedying this state of affairs. Because one is focused on the good, one will not try to spoil

it but will be motivated to improve oneself in order to obtain the good in question. As Protasi puts it, "[e]mulative envy is the result of being more focused on the good than on the target and believing oneself to be more capable of getting the good for oneself than not" (p. 44). In that case "[t]he envied is there not as a rival to bet for its own sake, but as a model to look up to".

This brief discussion of emulative envy foreshadows chapter, 3 which focuses on the value of envy and attempts to determine whether envy can be understood as a virtuous emotion. Protasi insists on distinguishing envy and admiration so that it is not possible to explain the moral value of emulative envy by saying that it is a form of admiration in disguise. In this third chapter, her main claim is that emulative envy can be virtuous as long as we do not take its comparative nature to be intrinsically problematic. Going even further, she wonders "[w]hether emulative envy […] is an emotion that a fully virtuous agent is not just permitted to occasionally feel but ought to be disposed to" (p. 85). Answering positively, she argues that "[e]mulative envy is the only morally and prudentially appropriate response to the comparative lack of important goods" (p. 90).

The idea is plausible, but we may wonder if it does not characterize the person that is on the path to virtue rather than the fully virtuous person. Indeed, one would think that the fully virtuous person is able to identify goodness by other means than competitive social comparison. I thus have some difficulty in conceiving of envy as a virtuous emotion. I would rather contend that the fully virtuous person can be admirative of someone for possessing a good that she lacks and that this will prompt her to seek this good for herself without envy. Think about the emotions you experience from reading an excellent article or watching a great figure skating performance on TV. In these cases, it seems that admiration plays the same motivating role as envy without entailing the competitive element that makes us uneasy to qualify envy as a virtuous emotion. It is important to distinguish between comparison and competition: one can be admirative of someone without competing with her whereas the comparative dimension of envy is necessarily competitive. We may even question Protasi's point according to which admiration necessarily has a comparative dimension (p. 91). In many situations we can admire someone without this indicating that we consider ourselves to be inferior. For example, we may admire health workers for their resilience without thinking that we are not resilient ourselves. Similarly, I can admire my friend for the progress she has made in sports even if she is less accomplished than me.

Protasi suggests that envy is the only appropriate emotion when one realizes that one lacks a good and that this is true of all people, fully virtuous people included. This seems wrong. An example may help clarify this point: a perfectly virtuous person may be a rather poor athlete and come an excellent athlete doing his routine. Clearly, the other athlete possesses something that the virtuous person does not, something that is presumably a good. In this case, Protasi seems to insist that the virtuous person is required to feel envy. This doesn't sound right. Admiration adequately tracks goodness and if the good is a good that the virtuous person wishes to acquire, admiration is probably a sufficient driving force. Leaving aside the question whether the virtuous person is required to feel admiration in this situation, it seems clear to me that he is no less virtuous for not feeling envy. I briefly return to these

issues when I discuss the conclusion of the book and the idea that goodness is often positional.

The discussion on the value of envy continues in chapter 4, where Protasi explores the role of envy in loving relationships. Starting from the idea that love and envy have often been described as incompatible, she goes on to argue that the contrary is true. According to her, love and envy thrive in the same psychological conditions – we love and envy people that are similar to us – therefore the two emotions often happen to co-occur. Moreover, she argues, love can benefit from emulative envy. This second claim is original and stimulating but is in my opinion too strong. It is one thing to say that love is not incompatible with envy, it is another to say that envy can be beneficial for loving relationships. On Protasi's view, emulative envy can provide opportunities for growth both at the individual level and at the level of a loving relationship: "[w]hen envy is emulative, loving wisely takes rivalry and competition as a chance for shared, genuine improvement, and reciprocal altruistic support" (p. 111). Here, as in other places, Protasi favours detailed examples over other forms of philosophical argument or explanation. In this case, her "[f]inal argument consists in describing wise love by pointing at two case studies of *philia* among women" (p. 112), namely the relationship between two characters from Grey's Anatomy, Meredith and Cristina, and between two characters from Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila and Lenù. Protasi explains that when a loving relationship is wise, emulative envy is virtuous and enriches their relationship. The claim that emulative envy can benefit some loving relationship should get our attention, but it is somewhat regrettable that it is not supported by some further conceptual or empirical argument. The examples leave us wanting more and do not allow to draw any general conclusion about the value of envy in loving relationships.

In chapter 5, Protasi examines the case of envy as a political emotion. The questions that are raised in the chapter are "[w]hether envy can contribute to establish what justice requires" (p.12) and what is the role of envy when dealing with political issues such as racism. Her cautious conclusion on these issues is that, although emulative envy may be a private virtue, it is more difficult to claim that envy, as a political and public emotion, is also a virtue. Negative emotions such as jealousy and envy, Protasi argues, need to be treated with great care at the political level. She also notes that at the political level the distinction between jealousy and envy is not as clear as it is at the individual level.

Finally, in the conclusion, Protasi examines the link between envy, its comparative dimension and human goodness. Starting from the idea that our lives are inevitably competitive, she insists that "[s]tandards of goodness are almost always comparative" (p.151) rendering emotions such as envy and jealousy surprisingly often appropriate. Indeed, many goods are positional in nature. Think of success, honor, beauty, talent and even virtue, many of them things that we would all deem "good". You can be talented in, say, dance, only if you compare well to (most) other dancers. There is, in Protasi's view, no such things as a good dancer *simpliciter*. One is a good dancer only if one occupies a high position in a ranking of dancers' talent. She nevertheless concedes that some goods are not positional or comparative, for example "[a] walk in the park on a sunny day when the birds are chirping and the children are laughing" (p. 159) thereby endorsing a pluralist view about value: goodness is

sometimes - although not always- positional and when it is, envy is the most appropriate response both from a prudential and a moral point of view.

Protasi's book is part of a trend of work that seeks to rehabilitate some "negative" emotions as central components of our emotional and moral lives. Other works on anger, shame and guilt have already been published, but Protasi's book is the first to approach envy in such a systematic way. Her book is undoubtedly a very valuable addition to the literature. As I said, we may question some of her key claims. For example, the idea that envy is an emotion that a completely virtuous person should be disposed to feel seems to contradict the traditionally accepted picture of what a completely virtuous person is. Similarly, the idea that envy is beneficial for certain types of loving relationships is original and appealing, but because it is mainly defended through examples, it fails to fully convince. Despite this, the book succeeds in showing that envy plays a central role in our emotional lives and interpersonal relationships and that it is probably far less morally problematic than has been argued in the past.

The last 50 pages of the book are devoted to an appendix detailing how envy has been addressed throughout the history of philosophy, from ancient thinkers to Rawls. This part, complementary to the rest of the book, will be useful for anyone looking to study a particular's thinker view of envy.

Declarations

Conflict of interest While working on this paper, I've been employed (and still am) as a doctoral assistant at the University of Geneva. The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.