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Sara Protasi: The Philosophy of Envy

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Hardback (ISBN 978-1-316-51917-2), £75. 260 pp.

Envy is a complex and intriguing emotion that has received too little philosophical attention in recent years. Sara Protasi's book comes to remedy that gap, but the value of her work goes beyond its exploring in detail a neglected topic.[1] Protasi has produced a carefully researched, nuanced and highly original contribution to the study of envy and human moral psychology in general, an engaging read that brings philosophy into a fruitful dialogue with empirical psychology and offers a clear introduction to the topic, while containing many novel arguments for those well-versed in the debates.

The volume consists of five chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion and followed by an appendix. The chapters employ a thematic approach, while the appendix is historical and summarizes some important views on envy throughout the history of Western thought. All in all, Protasi seeks to defend the view that envy is not all vicious, that one of its varieties can be fully virtuous, and that it plays an important role in our moral psychology.

Chapter 1, "What is Envy?", reviews and clears the theoretical ground and introduces Protasi's definition of envy as "an aversive response to a perceived inferiority or disadvantage vis-à-vis a similar other, with regard to a good that is relevant to the sense of identity of the envier" (p. 25). Once this largely uncontroversial definition is established, Protasi moves on to her original contributions (especially in chapters 2 and 3, which form the theoretical core of the book).

Chapter 2, "Varieties of Envy", develops Protasi's highly original taxonomy of envy. In her view, the distinction between 'malicious' and 'benign' envy doesn't do justice to the complexity of this emotion. According to Protasi, there are two main variables that determine whether an envier is motivated to level up with the rival, i.e. to work to get to their level without harming them (benign envy), or to bring

[1] Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (1990, 1992, 2002), Justin D'Arms and Alison Duncan Kerr (D'Arms, 2017; D'arms & Kerr, 2008) and Kristján Kristjánsson (2001) have recently devoted sustained attention to envy.

the rival down to their own level (malicious envy). The first variable is 'focus of concern', i.e., the object that predominantly preoccupies an envier: either the lack of the *good* itself or the fact that the *rival* has it. The second variable is 'perceived obtainability of the good': whether enviers believe they can get the good. Combining these two variables results in four varieties of envy (which admit of degrees and hybrid versions):

- Emulative envy is characterised by a focus on the good and a belief that it is obtainable. It motivates the envier to level up and implies no hostility.
- Inert envy is characterised by a focus on the good and a belief that it is *not* obtainable. Protasi calls it 'inert' because it leads to inaction: there is nothing the envier *can* do. Since it involves no hostility towards the rival, it leads to frustration and self-loathing.
- Aggressive envy is characterised by a focus on the rival and a belief that the good is obtainable. It involves hostility and motivates levelling down by taking the good away from the rival.
- Spiteful envy is characterised by a focus on the rival and a belief that the good is *not* obtainable. It involves hostility towards the rival and, since the good is perceived to be unobtainable, it motivates the envier to level down by other means, including destroying the good or harming the rival.

In Chapter 3, "The Value of Envy", Protasi employs her taxonomy to resist the traditional indictment of envy as vicious. In her view, only the varieties that focus on the rival can be classified as such. The remaining two varieties are morally neutral, and emulative envy can become fully virtuous: when the good one aspires to is actually good, envy constitutes a powerful motivator to improve oneself.

Chapter 4, "Love and Envy, Two Sides of the Same Coin", addresses the alleged opposition between these emotions. Protasi attacks the view that love and envy are normatively incompatible. In her view, they are two sides of the same coin, because they thrive in the same psychological conditions: we tend to love and envy those that are similar to us. She contends that emulative envy is compatible with love and may be one of the ways in which our loving relationships spur us to improve ourselves.

Chapter 5, "Political Envy", has two parts. First, Protasi surveys the main debate on envy in recent political thinking: Rawls' attempt to defend his *Theory of Justice* from accusations that egalitarianism is inspired by envy. For Protasi, the entire debate rests on a flawed premise: none of the players has an adequate theory of envy. The dispute is purely speculative, disconnected from the psychology of envy and the actual roles it plays in the political arena. In the second part of the chapter, Protasi points to one realm where real human envy plays a role: racism. As an example, she analyses envy as an important overlooked factor driving anti-Asian racism in the US. I concur with Protasi's own claim that this is largely uncharted territory, and much work needs to be done to produce accurate analyses of political envy in different contexts. This chapter seems to me an important starting point for the discussion.

The book ends with an Appendix that summarizes the main accounts of envy in the history of Western thought, from Plato and Aristotle, through Roman and Mediaeval thinkers (both Christian and Muslim: a refreshing reminder of their commonalities), the Renaissance and Modernity to John Rawls. It offers a clear, concise and informative overview, which shows how old some of our ideas about envy are and how they have evolved.

To end on a slightly critical note, while I celebrate Protasi's aim to resist the traditional demonization of envy and offer a more nuanced picture of it, I am sceptical that envy can be completely devoid of hostility towards the rival. This seems plausible if one takes motivations to be the definitory feature of emotions, and one defines envy as the emotion that motivates levelling with a rival. But if one gives more weight to phenomenology, the idea seems less plausible. It seems to me that *attending inimically to someone as* the possessor of a good you desire is a phenomenon with a different phenomenal feel and intentional structure than simply coveting something someone else has, with no hostility involved (for more on this, see Salice & Montes Sánchez, 2019). Secondly –as an invitation for future research—, although Protasi stresses the importance of social comparison in envy, she doesn't make explicit the idea that envy is essentially the emotion of a (hyper)social creature that defines not only some of its values (positional values), but also important aspects of its identity in terms of its relations to others. This is rarely emphasized in studies of envy, and Protasi's final chapter on politics already points to some of the reasons why exploring it in depth is so important. Notwithstanding these points, I think Protasi has produced a clear, thorough, and highly original book that will become a reference to anyone interested in the moral psychology of envy for years to come.

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