

Book Reviews

The Philosophy of Envy
Sara Protasi

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Envy-shaming has become problematic. Scholars and journalists are eager to remove the social stigmas long attached to envy—and shame, too. Opprobrium attached to shameful conduct and to negative emotions like envy traditionally buttress the social order. This is one reason that Aristotle regards bashfulness as appropriate for the young. These days, however, public shaming—body-shaming, sex-shaming, age-shaming—is generally in bad odour. The language of ‘shaming’ shifts our attention to the bullies, those who decide who is too fat, too ‘slutty’, or too young, and who hurl these epithets around to make people feel inferior. A broad self-esteem movement since the 1970s gives us reason to take pause about the shame that the young are made to feel, more pause than Aristotle seems to have taken. But what about feelings that are traditionally shameful to express, such as envy? Throughout the 1990s, Richard Smith and some of his colleagues in psychology defended the view that envy always involves a perception of injustice, and therefore a moral component that ought to be evaluated rather than condemned.¹

In recent decades, a few provocative philosophers of the emotions have defended envy as well, sometimes building upon the broader literature in psychology. Unlike earlier political philosophers, they do not defend envy as an immoral but necessary means to bring about a more just (and in the future, less invidious) society; rather, these ethical philosophers insist that envy is appropriate for the moral life. In her 2001 article ‘Envy and Resentment’, Marguerite La Caze argues that envy is a moral emotion when it is directed at a particular class of objects, namely the undeserved gains of others.² The next year, in *Justifying Emotions: Pride and Jealousy*, Kristján Kristjánsson argues that jealousy, which he describes as a mix of

¹ See Richard H. Smith, ed., *Envy: Theory and Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Marguerite La Caze, ‘Envy and Resentment’, *Philosophical Explorations* 4:1 (2001): 31–45.

envy, resentment and anger, is not only a necessary condition of human happiness, but also an essential element of self-respecting personhood.³ Although La Caze and Kristjánsson develop quite different accounts of moral envy, both propose that envy provides the necessary motivation for moral agents to care about fairness and to demand that they are fairly treated themselves.

The Philosophy of Envy makes a careful defence of a nuanced position among these broader philosophical defences of envy. Protasi defines envy as an aversive response to a perceived disadvantage vis-à-vis a similar other with regard to a perceived good. She adds one additional condition that turns out to be crucial: this disadvantage must be important to our self-evaluation or our sense of our identity (23). In this way, Protasi describes the painfulness of envy as a sting against our self-esteem. She defends envy as a motivation for personal self-improvement that is sometimes perfectly appropriate, but she is much more critical of political envy, which is an ‘unstable’ collective emotion she calls ‘scary’ (130).

Even though feeling envy diminishes our self-esteem, Protasi does not give this painful perception *carte blanche* to satisfy its cravings and level inequalities in defence of our self-worth. She rejects La Caze’s description of envy as a moral emotion on two grounds: first, others’ undeserved gains might be beyond the scope of moral evaluation or redress (e.g., envying a naturally gifted singer), and second, envy is liable to have immoral effects (35). Envy sometimes turns out to be a fitting response to a situation where positional goods are at stake. Envy tends to be appropriate, Protasi thinks, so long as one focuses on the goods the envied person possesses, and so long as these goods are obtainable. These two criteria fix the valence of ‘emulative envy’. She regards emulation as a genuine instance of envy, but also perfectly acceptable as a motivation for self-improvement (83). Emulative envy is amoral in itself but morally acceptable in particular situations, namely, those in which securing positional goods according to relevant social comparisons seems to be important to our happiness.

One strength of *The Philosophy of Envy* is Protasi’s careful attention to how envy engenders ‘confabulation and post hoc rationalization’ (37). She makes two distinctions within envy: envy can focus on

³ Kristján Kristjánsson, *Justifying Emotions: Pride and Jealousy* (London: Routledge, 2002).

envied *objects* or envied *persons*, in situations where the envied objects are *obtainable* or *unobtainable*. Spiteful envy would spoil the happiness of envied persons where goods are unobtainable. Aggressive envy would steal the happiness of envied persons. Inert envy wallows sulkily in its inability to obtain some good. Emulative envy, however, would self-improve in order to gain the goods that one envies (43). The first kind of envy is both prudentially and morally bad; the last kind is neither prudentially nor morally bad (83). Protasi's is a useful taxonomy that attends to the complexity of envy without confusing it with the moral passions like resentment and indignation that are part of envy's confabulations and rationalizations. She makes clear that these distinctions are not, in fact, always stable or often clear.

Within the philosophy-of-envy literature, it is not entirely clear how Protasi's defence of the fittingness of emulative envy differs from Kristjánsson's defence of jealous envy, or for that matter, why she avoids a virtue-ethics perspective more broadly. Protasi does treat jealousy as a different emotion, where one has a perceived advantage that is threatened, and which one must defend (11). Less clear is why she is reluctant to describe the appropriateness of social comparisons in terms of virtue, even when she informs us that certain habits and dispositions are likely to make us happy. Instead of virtue-talk, Protasi prefers to call us towards 'wise love' in our personal friendships (112). An emulative envy that is close to admiration affords us a resource for thinking about how to love wisely. One reason Protasi may eschew virtue is the strong theme of moral luck that runs throughout the book; it is not always up to us to simply choose emulative envy over its less acceptable alternatives. Also, it seems that while Protasi is 'attracted' to virtue ethics, she wishes to present a more refined theory of the value of envy, distinguishing between moral and prudential outcomes for example, than virtue ethics allows (85). While Protasi's defence of a particular kind of envy resembles Kristjánsson's, then, she is unwilling to commit to his or any virtue ethics approach.

Wise love does not scale up from personal friendships into politics, where Protasi is much more hesitant to see a positive role of envy, including emulative envy. Philosophers from Plato to Robert Nozick worry about envy as a motivation for egalitarian politics. Protasi thinks that her argument against the immorality of envy is sufficient to dismiss this historical consensus view. More plausibly,

she thinks this claim can only lead to a dead-end ‘clash of intuitions’ that cannot be resolved (128). Political theorists whose concerns range beyond normative questions to the determinants of social order and subaltern power, however, are unlikely to be satisfied with how quickly Protasi dismisses the egalitarian envy argument. She is probably right, nonetheless, that envy-attribution can only end in a clash of intuitions.

Protasi’s discussion of political envy includes a consideration of thorny issues of racial justice, and involves situations where envy is mixed with resentment and anger (143). These closely resemble Kristjánsson’s examples, where jealous envy is likewise mixed with these moral emotions (143). However, Protasi steers in a different direction. Her focal example is a white politics of resentment, in which a loss of social advantages leads to ‘uberspiteful’ envy (126). Perhaps because Protasi avoids attributing envy to subaltern or minoritized groups, she does not shift the focus to those who make others feel envious or identify them as enviers. Yet, as Raymond Geuss points out, envy is prone to any number of imaginative constructions in this way.⁴ Envy-shaming will be part of our politics so long as ‘the haves’ have reason to attribute envy to ‘the have-nots’ in order to deny that the less powerful in fact feel a rational fear or a justified resentment. All of this rhetoric of envy-attribution is beyond the scope of Protasi’s analysis of political envy.

My focus on the politics of envy may speak more about my interests than hers. But the politics of envy does generate a problem for Protasi’s approach as a whole: How important should social comparisons be for us? A moral sentimentalist like Adam Smith can recommend the mirror of society and propose that we first learn to act with propriety and virtue by seeing how others regard our conduct, because he trusts nature to work well. Protasi’s description of society, however, includes the familiar intersections of structural injustice. She admits that emulative envy of unhealthy standards of beauty, or money as a standard of success, can all be harmful (30-31). She implicitly steers clear of racialized standards of beauty or success, later on, by restricting the right kind of emulative

⁴ Raymond Geuss, ‘Identification and the Politics of Envy’ in *Markets, Morals, Politics: Jealousy of Trade and the History of Political Thought*, eds. Béla Kapossy, Isaac Nakhimovsky, Sophus A. Reinert, & Richard Whatmore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 244-264.

envy to presumably more appropriate contexts: within Black and Asian-American communities. But it may be very difficult to evaluate between competing sources of social comparison, navigating the pursuit of ‘Black excellence’, for example, whenever it diverges from what a wider society views as excellent. Protasi concludes with a noncommittal pluralism about which positional goods are worthwhile that amounts to saying that honor from someone makes some people happy sometimes (159). We seem to know if envy is appropriate only when we evaluate these positional goods in the end, if we ever make such a final evaluation.

Emulative envy, the kind of envy that Protasi thinks is most often morally acceptable, is described as being close to admiration. She offers this distinction: emulative envy remains ‘competitive’, while admiration is ‘affiliative’ and engenders a sense of ‘long-term improvement’ (49). Yet emulative envy and admiration still seem so close as to be confused. Here, I think Protasi’s crucial assumption that envy is always relevant to our self-esteem gets her into trouble. Surely our admiration is not restricted to would-be role models. I may admire an athlete, an artist, or even a political leader whom I never intend to emulate, whether I am a fellow athlete, artist, or politician who could never hope to rival their greatness, or because I am simply her or his fan, connoisseur, or partisan. This kind of admiration is the opposite of envy—I perceive my disadvantage vis-à-vis the admired other, yet this inequality pleases rather than pains me. Egalitarians are liable to worry about admiration that shades almost into worship of the rich and powerful, as Adam Smith does when he calls this the most universal cause of our moral corruption. And there is the more disturbing possibility of self-abasement that Frederick Douglass describes in the third chapter of his *Narrative*, in which the enslaved are motivated to fight one another for the reputation of their masters. Admiration that does not motivate us to self-improvement is the opposite of envy. Is emulation an instance of admiration, as Smith believed? *The Philosophy of Envy* misses an opportunity to work this important problem out. From the perspective of admiration, emulation does not seem like a genuine instance of envy, but as if it hovers between envy and its opposite.

The oddest feature of *The Philosophy of Envy* is the appendix, which is longer than any of the five substantive chapters. Though called ‘A Short History of Envy’, it raises few historical questions.

Why did envy become taboo in so many traditional societies? What causes concepts of envy to change over time? G. W. F. Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Friedrich Nietzsche offer intriguing suggestions, but these fall outside the scope of the appendix. To raise these questions is to historicize the contemporary debate in which Protasi is engaged. Did any ancients defend envy? (Yes, in fact, the sophist Hippias does, so Plato and Aristotle may criticize envy in full knowledge of his opinion.) Protasi offers the appendix as a starting point for a historian unfamiliar with the intellectual history of envy (5). It would be better to start by dispelling the myth that contemporary defences of envy like Protasi's make an unprecedented break with a long unexamined, however variously construed, traditional moral prejudice.

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Capitalism: The Story Behind the Word
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'Capitalism is a nineteenth-century word with a twenty-first-century charge' (viii). Though the word sits at the centre of much modern debate about politics and economics, it is a 'compound term' with a long and oft-forgotten history. Re-acquainting ourselves with this history and picking apart its multiple layers of meaning deepens our understanding of present debates about capitalism and expands our vision of what might be possible within politics. Such is the claim of Cambridge historian and political theorist Michael Sonenscher, whose recent book, *Capitalism: The Story Behind the Word*, offers a much-needed historical account of the contentious concept and encourages a reframing of current political discussion. The book provides a fascinating backstory by revisiting little-known nineteenth-century debates about commercial society and the division of labour, terms which—though distinct at their conception—were gradually subsumed under the broader 'problem of capitalism'. Sonenscher argues that 'the distinction between capitalism and commercial society is worth making' because capitalism refers to a theory