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Krista Karbowski Thomason
Swarthmore College, kthomas2@swarthmore.edu

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The Moral Value of Envy
Forthcoming in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*
Krista K. Thomason
Swarthmore College

My neighbor has a beautiful garden and I do not.¹ I sulk when I see my neighbor's garden in bloom and instead of admiring her talent I begrudge it. Although there is some disagreement in the literature about just what constitutes envy, in this case, it seems I envy my neighbor's garden. When we envy others, we feel badly about ourselves because of something the envied person has and we begrudge the envied person for having it.² Envy like the kind I have for my neighbor's garden has long been thought to be immoral.³ My envy need not cause me to act in morally inappropriate ways. I do not take gardening shears to my neighbor's roses even though I may begrudge her for having them. On a traditional understanding of envy, I ought not envy my neighbor's garden, not because my envy causes me to do bad things, but simply because it is morally wrong for me to feel. I should feel badly for feeling envy and judge myself vicious or at the very least not as virtuous as I could be on account of it. I would be a morally better person if I stopped feeling envy.

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¹ Taylor uses this example (2006, 41).

² Solomon offers an account similar to this, but is unclear whether the begrudging attitude is necessary to envy (2007). Neu describes this as malicious envy (2000).

³ Reid calls envy "the most malignant passion that can lodge itself in the human breast" (1843, 184). Spinoza claims that envy is a kind of hatred and that emotions "arising from hatred are bad" (2006, 125). Roberts (1991), Taylor (2006), Solomon (2007), and de Sousa (1987) argue that envy is immoral or "nasty." Ben-Ze'ev argues that envy is usually (but not always) immoral (1990). Nussbaum argues that envy is "primitive" and moral progress is made if we overcome it (2001). D'Arms and Jacobson make the distinction between an emotion being "fitting" and it being "appropriate," and envy is their example of an emotion that might be fitting, but morally inappropriate (2000).

In spite of these convictions, envy has recently garnered some defenders.⁴ These defenses show that some instances or episodes of envy can be *morally permissible*. Determining an emotion's moral permissibility involves examining the circumstances under which we should feel it and what objects it ought to be directed toward. By contrast, I will argue for what I call the *moral value* of envy.⁵ Determining an emotion's moral value involves examining the role it plays in moral psychology rather than the circumstances under which it is permissible to feel. As I will argue, an emotion's moral permissibility does not determine its moral value. Even if envy has morally permissible episodes, it does not follow from this that envy is an important or valuable part of our moral emotional life. I will argue that envy does have this kind of moral value. Let me be clear that I do not argue that every episode of envy is morally good or beneficial: such a claim would simply amount to the claim that envy is in every case morally permissible. Determining envy's moral value requires setting aside questions about the moral permissibility of its episodes. Instead, I aim to argue that a liability to feelings of envy is a valuable feature of moral life. As such, I deny that we should try our best to get over feelings of envy. I argue that we envy others for enjoying goods or talents that we see as contributing to the kinds of lives we want to live. Feelings of envy are thus partially constitutive of our valuing those goods and talents. Moral agents will feel envy, and as I will argue, *should* feel envy.

Before I begin, let me set some parameters for the paper. Because the literature of moral emotions is extensive, there are several discussions that I will not address. It is not my aim here to offer any account of emotions considered generally. I take no position on whether emotions are

⁴ La Caze defends what she calls "righteous envy" (2001). Ben-Ze'ev makes the case that envy is morally neutral (2002). Rawls defends what he calls "emulative envy," which moves us to improve ourselves (1999). Neu (2000), La Caze (2001), Ben-Ze'ev (1997) also point out the way envy can motivate self-improvement.

⁵ Nozick defends the value of envy by linking it to self-esteem, though his discussion is not specifically about its moral value (1974, 239-246).

affective, bodily, or cognitive; I accept that emotions involve all of these elements to some degree. Further, I consider these emotions as temporary experiences and not as vices, virtues, or enduring character traits. Also, although some philosophers wish to distinguish between attitudes, emotions, and feelings, I will use them interchangeably, though I will primarily use the word ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling.’ It will become obvious from the discussion that my arguments will not pertain to bodily sensations such as feelings of warmth. Feelings, attitudes, and emotions as I understand them here are “about” something in ways that bodily sensations are not.⁶

1. How Can Emotions Be Immoral?

Our emotions are often the subject of our own and others’ moral assessment.⁷ We can blame others and ourselves for feeling too angry over a small slight or for feeling pleasure at someone else’s misfortune.⁸ The moral assessment of emotions, however, admits of two kinds. First, we might be blamed for an emotion that is disproportionate: we might claim, for example, that overreacting to a small slight is morally wrong because it is excessive.⁹ This criticism is not an indictment of anger per se, but rather just that we feel it disproportionately. In this case, the assessment we make is about anger’s “fit” (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000, 68).¹⁰ The fit of an emotion tells us whether or not it is proportionate to the circumstances, but not whether it is morally appropriate or inappropriate to feel. Even if my anger is fitting and the insult is not a trivial one, we might still ask the further

⁶ For helpful discussions of the distinction between feelings, emotions, and attitudes see Oakley (1992, 6-38); Stocker and Hegeman (1996, 17-54); Nussbaum (1996, 89-137); Solomon (2007, 137-142).

⁷ Several philosophers have addressed the question of how emotions are subject to moral assessment. See Adams (1985); Greenspan (1991); Sherman (1999); Smith (2005); Solomon (2007); Neu (2008).

⁸ One might be tempted to say that we blame ourselves in these cases for a character flaw, but I take it we can also blame ourselves (and others can reproach us) on the basis of the reaction alone even if it does not reflect our character.

⁹ D’Arms and Jacobson refer to this as criticizing the emotion’s size (2000, 74).

¹⁰ I am adopting D’Arms and Jacobson’s terminology.

question about whether my anger is morally appropriate. Suppose, for example, that I am a generally angry person. I see this trait as vicious and I am trying to overcome it. Given this condition, even in a case where my anger fits, I might still judge my anger morally inappropriate—I ought not feel it because it is undermining my commitment to becoming a more mild person.

The criticism of envy is not about its fit, but rather its “appropriateness” (D’Arms and Jacobson 2000, 70). One could claim that when I envy my neighbor’s garden, my envy fits the circumstances: she has something that I deeply desire and as such it makes sense that I would feel envy. We often express this sentiment by saying things like, “Of course you envy her; it’s perfectly natural.” But the fact that my envy is fitting in this situation does not make it morally appropriate to feel. In fact, unlike anger, envy is thought never to be morally appropriate. Anger could be morally appropriate if I feel it at the right time and toward the right sorts of things, such as when someone lies to me or tries to cheat me. But, there is no “right” (appropriate) time for envy or “right” (appropriate) amount of envy. As Aristotle would say, envy admits of no mean.¹¹ When we claim that envy is morally wrong to feel, we usually mean that we ought not feel it no matter how fitting it is to the circumstances.

Emotions like envy that are never appropriate are, what I will call, *immoral emotions*. We can understand why an immoral emotion is never appropriate to feel by first understanding how an emotion can be morally appropriate (I will shorten this to ‘moral’) or morally neutral. One criterion to determine if an emotion is moral is “whether the core evaluative concern of the emotion is moral.” (Ben-Ze’ev 2002, 148). The core evaluative concern of an emotion would be what the emotion is “about:” the reason we feel the emotion or that which the emotion is directed toward.¹²

¹¹ Envy and other emotions like it “have been named in such a way that they are combined with badness from the start.” (Book II.6).

¹² Oakley (1992) and de Sousa (2001) have offered similar frameworks for understanding what a moral emotion is.

A moral emotion is “about” some recognizable aspect of moral life. This criterion is illustrated in Strawson’s watershed paper on resentment (2003). Resentment is a moral emotion because it arises from the recognition that one has been unjustly wronged; resentment is thus “about” being unjustly wronged (Strawson 2003, 77). By contrast, an emotion like sadness is morally neutral. Sadness seems to be primarily about a loss, and many losses have little to do with morality. I can feel sad when my favorite football team loses a tough game. Since the core evaluation of sadness is not about features of moral life, it is a morally neutral emotion rather than a moral emotion.

To see how an emotion could be immoral as opposed to moral or morally neutral, we can reverse the criterion regarding its evaluative core. Immoral emotions will have an immoral evaluative concern at their core. Take malice (or Schadenfreude) as an example. While resentment’s core concern is about undeserved wrongs, malice’s core concern is a positive evaluation of another person’s undeserved suffering.¹³ We could say, then, that since it is never morally appropriate to take joy in another person’s undeserved suffering, malice is an immoral emotion.

Using this condition, we see why envy might be immoral. When we envy someone, we feel badly about ourselves because of something the envied person has. If I envy my neighbor’s garden, the fact that her garden is beautiful makes me feel worse about myself (or perhaps about my own garden). Contained within my envy is the judgment that I am somehow inferior to the person I envy (Solomon 2007, 248-250). This feature of envy often (though not always) leads to the tendency toward “sour grapes,” where we might claim that things we envy are not actually worth wanting (Taylor 2006, 43-44). If I can convince myself that my neighbor’s garden is not that wonderful after all, it will alleviate my feelings of inferiority because I can convince myself she is not superior for having it. In addition to the sour grapes response, envy can (though not always) give rise to a wish

¹³ Some philosophers have argued that malice or Schadenfreude is not immoral because it is felt toward deserved suffering. See, for example, Ben-Ze’ev (2000) and Kristjansson (2003).

for the envied person's misfortune. Because I envy my neighbor's garden, I might be happy if a strong storm ruined it or if a blight killed all her roses. The destruction of the garden would alleviate my feelings of inferiority because it would no longer stand as a reminder of my subpar gardening skills. Clearly, I ought not wish for destruction of my neighbor's garden, knowing that it would cause her great sadness, simply because it makes me feel inferior.

At its core, envy has a "standard of self-assessment that demeans" the person who feels it and the person to whom it is directed (Roberts 1991, 18). That is, envy does not foremost regard others as moral persons, but instead as competitors in a game of who has the most. When we envy others, it is usually for their material goods (houses and cars), their professional achievements (prizes and promotions), or their natural endowments (good looks, athletic ability, and artistic prowess). If in envying we see others and ourselves as competitors for goods, then we fail to see others and ourselves as fellow moral agents. Envy thus "demeans" both parties. If I envy my neighbor's garden, I am measuring my own worth in terms of my (lack of) possessions and I am judging my neighbor as superior to me because of her possessions. If the above account is correct, we can see why one might conclude that envy is never morally appropriate to feel.

2. Defenses of Envy

Some philosophers dispute the claim that envy is never morally appropriate in the ways described above. They argue that although envy can have immoral instances, it is not in every case immoral. Let me offer a brief sketch of these defenses.

First, several philosophers have pointed to a distinction between vicious envy and emulative envy (Ben-Ze'ev 1997; Rawls 1999; Neu 2000; La Caze 2001; Taylor 2006). Unlike vicious envy, emulative envy spurs us to self-improvement. To return to the example of my neighbor's garden, while vicious envy would lead me to wish for a blight to take her roses, emulative envy would inspire

me to put in the time and effort to have a garden just like hers. Since emulative envy moves us to improve ourselves, it can be morally permissible and morally beneficial.

Both La Caze and Ben-Ze'ev have offered different ways of defending envy. Ben-Ze'ev's defense is limited. Although he remains skeptical of envy's moral value, he admits that envy is often concerned with inequality. He writes, "[T]he envious subject's demand for a more equal distribution of fortunes may be understood as a general moral demand" (1990, 513). If we envy others because they have more than their fair share, then envy is about unfairness or inequality. These are cases where envy can be morally appropriate or morally justified. As such, envy turns out to be at least morally neutral rather than immoral (2002, 152). La Caze's defense is more robust. She argues that envy can be morally appropriate if it is directed at injustice: when we feel envy because someone has received goods that are undeserved, envy is justified (2001, 36). She provides an example of what she calls "righteous envy:" a student may feel envy when a teacher favors a classmate over her (2001, 35). In this case envy is a moral emotion because it responds to unfair treatment and undeserved rewards. In these cases, "envy is concerned with moral entitlements and obligations, as well as desert or worthiness" (2001, 36). When envy is focused on injustice and equality in this way, it can be morally permissible.

The strategy employed by the defenses above is to show that envy can have morally permissible episodes. In these accounts, envy is morally permissible when its core evaluative concern is a familiar moral concept. In the same way that resentment is a moral emotion because it is "about" an undeserved wrong, envy is moral when it is "about" injustice. By contrast, in cases where envy is not "about" a moral concept, such as when I envy my neighbor's garden, it is immoral. Since there are morally permissible instances of envy, we are tempted to conclude that envy is morally valuable. La Caze, for instance, claims that since envy can be about injustice, it has a "valuable moral role" (2001, 31). As such, she argues that we are wrong to think that we ought to suppress or get

over feelings of envy because they are “central to the way in which emotions can dispose us to do more and to not accept our lot” (2001, 43).

There are, however, two senses of the term ‘moral emotion’ that are conflated here. On one hand, envy is a moral emotion when it is about familiar moral concepts, and as such, it can be *morally permissible*. On the other hand, envy plays an important role in our moral emotional lives. In this sense, envy is a moral emotion because it is *morally valuable*. The problem is that an emotion can be morally permissible without being morally valuable: an emotion’s permissibility does not determine its value. Even if there are particular circumstances when it is appropriate to feel envy, that fact does not show that it plays a positive role in our lives more generally.

To see the difference between moral permissibility and moral value, contrast envy with resentment. Resentment is not always morally permissible. Sometimes we feel too much resentment or we feel it about things that are not worth resenting. But resentment also has morally permissible cases. It is morally appropriate to feel resentment in cases when someone lies to me or tries to cheat me. The fact that it is morally appropriate to feel resentment in those cases is not, however, what determines resentment’s moral value. One way resentment is morally valuable is because it is integral to holding others responsible for the wrongs they do (Strawson 2003, 77-83). Another way resentment is valuable is because it is tied to one’s sense of self-respect (Murphy 2003, 18-19). Feelings of resentment are not just central to our concept of responsibility, but also to our own sense that we do not deserve to be treated badly by others. The fact that I resent the person who tries to cheat me means that I regard myself as someone who deserves to be treated with respect. If resentment is tied to or constitutive of important features of moral life, then it is morally valuable in virtue of its connections to those things. But notice that these connections hold even though there are cases of morally inappropriate resentment. Thus, resentment’s moral value is distinct from its moral permissibility.

Is envy connected to morally valuable aspects of life in the way that resentment is? The above defenses of envy fail to answer this question. They show that envy is not always immoral, but this is far from showing how it is connected to important parts of moral life. First, we might simply conclude from envy's permissible instances that it is morally neutral, but not necessarily morally valuable (Ben-Ze'ev 2002, 152). Recall the example of sadness I mentioned earlier: sadness involves the feeling of a loss. That loss might be a moral loss (the life lost when someone is murdered), but it might be morally neutral as well. I can be sad when my favorite football team loses a tough game. But my favorite football team's loss is unrelated to moral life. Thus, even if we determine that envy has morally permissible instances, it could simply be morally neutral. In showing that envy can be morally permissible, it does not follow that envy has moral value.

One could argue that emulative envy has moral value since it leads to self-improvement. The fact that emulative envy leads to self-improvement is a good moral consequence, but that does not make it essential to self-improvement. That an emotion has moral benefits does not mean it is integral to the benefits that it leads to. Sympathy, for instance, can lead me to give to charity, but that does not make sympathy a necessary part of giving to charity. I could likewise give to charity out of a sense of duty. The relationship between sympathy and charity could be contingent, and emulative envy's relationship to self-improvement might be likewise contingent. We could strive for improvement out of hope or out of the thrill of a challenge. What is more, even if emulative envy can lead to self-improvement, it can often lead to vicious envy (Rawls 1999, 467). Even those who defend envy are careful to specify that we ought only to feel it in the right ways and at the right times, and that we should "moderate the intensity and frequency" of its instances precisely because of this danger (Ben-Ze'ev 1990, 515). If emulative envy leads to vicious envy, it would undermine the self-improvement that emulative envy is meant to inspire, and it would then be hard to support the conclusion that envy is integral to self-improvement.

Perhaps righteous envy can be morally valuable even if emulative envy is not. Recall that righteous envy occurs in response to injustice. As such, one might conclude that feelings of envy are thus integral to our sense of justice and injustice.¹⁴ As La Caze claims, people incapable of envy have “detached themselves from their moral community and must have difficulty in properly recognizing injustice” (2002, 44). If La Caze is right, envy would be tied to our sense of injustice in much the same way resentment is tied to self-respect. But this conclusion is drawn from the fact that episodes of envy can be about injustice. Envy might be permissible when it is about injustice, but it does not follow from this that a person who does not feel envy is unable to recognize injustice. A person capable of resentment would be able to make such judgments, so envy need not be central to our sense of justice. One might think that envy and resentment are so closely tied to each other that to be susceptible to one, we must be susceptible to the other. Indeed, La Caze attempts to show that resentment and envy share many features in common. She argues that they both “alert us to injustice, lead to reflection on its sources, and can be a spur to action” (2002, 41). That resentment and envy are related to similar things, however, does not show that they are intimately tied together or that they are both equally connected to our sense of injustice. I might be moved to create a garden similar to my neighbor’s out of the desire for an achievement, but I might also be moved to do so out of spite for my neighbor. Just because the pleasure of accomplishing a goal and spite lead to the same action, it does not follow that spite and the pleasure of accomplishing a goal are related. Moreover, a desire for achievement seems more closely related to self-improvement than spite does. There is no reason to think that because envy can be about injustice it must be central to our sense of justice.

What the above defenses show is that envy is *sometimes* immoral and *sometimes* moral rather than *always* immoral and *never* moral. But to claim that an emotion can be sometimes moral does not

¹⁴ Solomon argues for a conclusion like this (1995).

show it is central to our moral lives. To argue that an emotion is morally valuable, one would need to show how it figures importantly into our moral psychology in a way that is similar to an emotion like resentment. Envy will have moral value if it is integral to some other valuable feature of moral life. In what follows, I will argue that envy does have this kind of value.

3.0 The Moral Value of Envy

Let me be clear: claiming that envy has moral value does not entail that envy is always morally good to feel. Such a claim would be a modified version of the argument about an emotion's moral permissibility—it would amount to the claim that rather than being sometimes permissible, this emotion is always permissible. We can hold that an emotion has moral value without claiming that it is always good to feel. Resentment operates in exactly this way. We are liable to resentment because we have self-respect and because we hold others responsible for their actions. Even if we think these are morally valuable commitments, it does not then mean that every episode of resentment is morally good. It simply means that maintaining commitments we value requires feeling resentment, even if it is painful and sometimes harmful. My suggestion is that envy is likewise tied to other morally valuable aspects of life and maintaining our commitments to those valuable aspects will require feelings of envy. I want to suggest that we are liable to envy because we value goods and talents as part of a worthwhile life. I envy others for what they have because the things they have are things I see as central to living the kind of life I envision for myself.

Further, I want to be clear that my argument is revisionist in one way, but not in another. My goal here is not to redefine envy. As I understand it, envy means begrudging another person for something that person has and feeling worse about oneself for not having it. Given this definition of envy, we usually conclude that it is thus an immoral emotion that we would be better off not feeling at all. This conclusion is the one that I want to challenge. I am challenging the idea that envy

deserves the condemnation it has traditionally received or that it is immoral by definition. My strategy is to try to show (a) that the vicious elements of envy are either not as vicious as they seem or that they are not essential features of the emotion and (b) that envy, like resentment, is closely tied to valuable features of moral life and thus is not an emotion we should want to part with.

First, it is important to note that the precise object of envy is other people.¹⁵ I envy my neighbor for having a lovely garden, but I do not envy the garden itself, even though I may say, “I envy my neighbor’s garden.” Notice that I also do not envy the garden of a botanical society or a museum. We tend to envy people who are similar to us in station since we are comparing our lives to theirs.¹⁶ As such, envy is normally thought to have an essentially competitive element, since we seem to envy others who enjoy good or talents that manage to move them above us. Roberts, for example, claims that when we envy others we see them as winning and us as losing in some competition of status (1991, 15).¹⁷ But cases of envy vary beyond rivalry and status. We do not, for example, always envy our actual rivals; we also envy our friends, siblings, parents, and colleagues. One might be tempted to think of these cases as “friendly” envy and thus not the problematic kind.¹⁸ But, this explanation does not account for the fact that we may criticize ourselves for these feelings of envy. We often say, “She is my friend and I shouldn’t feel this way about her success.” If this kind of envy was innocuous, it seems unlikely that we would feel guilty, self-critical, or embarrassed about our envy. We can also think of cases where the circumstances are equal and yet

¹⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify this point.

¹⁶ Solomon wants to allow that we can envy people in radically different circumstances. He writes, “I can envy Russell Crowe for his Academy Award even though I am not an actor and have never displayed any acting talent at all” (2007, 102). I find this claim implausible. If envy is comparative, it isn’t clear how we can even begin to compare ourselves to people with whom we have nothing in common. I think we can (and do) envy celebrities as representatives of kinds of lives that we want. I do not envy a celebrity in the same way I envy a colleague, but I can envy a celebrity for being apparently wealthy and worry-free.

¹⁷ Neu likewise construes envy as directed toward a rival (2000, 47-48).

¹⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

we envy people nonetheless. Suppose I have a colleague who is going on sabbatical and I envy her because of it. I am due a sabbatical in two years, so she does not have a higher status than me and we are not in a competition for sabbatical. My envy is simply due to the fact that she will soon be enjoying something that I desperately want, but not because she is denying it to me or because it gives her a status above me. When we envy people we care about, I take it the cases are similar. I can envy a friend who is taking a fabulous vacation, even when I have the means to do so myself. Envy does not have to be competitive or directed at our rivals. It can arise when we see someone else enjoying something that we want to have for ourselves even when status is not involved.

Envy is also taken to be about status because it involves feelings of inferiority, which usually arise over some possession. This is one of the reasons envy is considered vicious: when we feel envy we are shallow because we feel inferior for not having certain possessions. We should be “unconcerned with things.” Surely it is morally problematic to be *too* concerned with things. When we reproach people for being materialistic, we mean to criticize their excessive attachment to things. We can also be concerned with things for the wrong reasons. I might want a nice house just to spite my neighbors, but that is not a justifiable reason to want a nice house. We can of course call into question the value of certain goods and talents: having a nice garden is not “really important.” The claim that goods and talents are not “really important” because they are not morally important does not thereby entail they are not important at all. Further, to argue that the frequent objects of envy are not things worth wanting is not to argue that the only things worth wanting are things like a good moral character. Simply because we praise people for being “unconcerned with such things” does not mean it is immoral to be concerned with such things. One can be too concerned with such things in the sense that she can value them too much or to her own detriment, but that does not call into question caring about goods and talents generally.

Of course, just because it not morally wrong to care about goods and talents, it does not follow that caring about these things is morally valuable. One could say that caring about them is at best morally neutral. The mistake in this argument is to think that because particular goods and talents do not determine an agent's moral worth, then the fact that we care about having goods and talents is thus not a concern of moral life or not a concern of persons *qua* moral agents. But this reflects a narrow view of the concerns of moral agents. Moral agents surely do care about having a good moral character, but they also care about living a life that they deem worthwhile. Worthwhile lives will include pursuits that are particular to the agent whose life it is: gardening, studying philosophy, or playing the tuba.¹⁹ Of course being a good tuba player does not make me a morally good agent, but I care about being a good tuba player because I am a moral agent. A moral agent is someone to whom goods and talents matter because they are part of a life she deems valuable.²⁰ And this kind of concern—living a life that I deem valuable—is a concern of moral agents.²¹ Not only is it not immoral to pursue goods and talents in this way, it quite recognizably moral. Moral agents have conceptions of their own good and that good is made up of many non-moral things.

My suggestion is that we primarily envy others for goods and talents that we see as representative of the kind of life we want. If I envy my colleague's salary, it is not because of something special about the exact number, but rather because the salary represents success or wealth, which is central to the kind of life I deem worthwhile.²² I may envy a friend for a fabulous

¹⁹ Caring about a worthwhile life need not amount to just wanting a happy life or a life of satisfaction. Tiberius and Plakias make the case for "value-based life-satisfaction" that can accommodate the idea that an agent's well-being can be guided by values (2010).

²⁰ Here I draw a great deal of inspiration from Rawls' discussion of a rational life plan (1999, 347-392).

²¹ Bennett Helm makes a helpful distinction between "agency" and "rationally mediated goal-directedness." He writes, "Genuine agency is [the] pursuit of ends in light of their import to the agent." (2009, 250) In other words, moral agents do not merely pursue ends; they pursue ends because they value those ends or see them as important.

²² I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

vacation because I want to live a life of adventure and fabulous vacations are a part of living that kind of life. One of the ways we live out our different kinds of lives is by enjoying goods that are intimately related to those lives. Living a life of sophistication, for example, will be comprised of (among other things) enjoying the goods that go along with that kind of life, such as fine wine collections. Thus, the things we envy are not “mere things;” they are things that contribute to lives we deem worthwhile. We can see this point when we think of the way people try to console envy. We may say, “Well, you don’t have a fabulous vacation, but think of all the things you do have.” This consolation is meant to convince the envying person that she does have a worthwhile life in spite of not having the vacation.

My sense of my own worth is affected by whether or not I see myself as having the kind of life that I want. As such, my sense of worth will this being affected by whether or not I have those things that I see as comprising the life that I want. I feel diminished seeing my friend leaving on her fabulous trip because her vacation reflects that she is living the kind of life that a desperately want for myself. Since living the kind of life I want is tied to my sense of worth, her vacation makes me feel worse about myself. Of course, we can be open to criticism for the kinds of things we see as part of a worthwhile life and for the extent to which we value those things. One could think that in envying my neighbor for her garden, I am placing too much importance on gardens. Although this criticism is a plausible one, it is not an indictment of envy as such. It is instead an indictment of the value I place on gardens. The object of reproach is not my envy, but the disproportionate value I place on this particular good.

Even if valuing goods and talents is a recognizable part of moral life, opponents of envy will no doubt be troubled by envy’s begrudging element. The fact that we begrudge others for having the goods and talents we value makes envy seem morally problematic. Is it, as the opponents of envy claim, unjust for us to begrudge others for what they have? It will be helpful to know just what

begrudging amounts to. First, begrudging someone does not have to mean wishing that she lose the envied possession. Although we normally think that is it essential to envy that we want to see the other person lose the thing she has, I suggest that this desire is not a feature of envy itself, but rather something that results from envy.²³ The destructive desire, like the sour grapes response, is a way for me to try to alleviate my feelings of diminishment. If my neighbor's garden is ruined, then it can no longer serve as a reminder that I do not possess my own. Being angry with my neighbor or wishing for her garden's destruction is thus a way to cope with my feelings of inferiority, but the destructive desire is not essential to envy. The fact that we can envy those we care about reflects this point: I can envy my friend's vacation and begrudge her for having it without wishing that she suddenly falls ill and cannot go. Further, we need not think that others do not deserve to have those goods and talents or that we deserve them more.²⁴ Again, couching envy in terms of desert helps us to cope with the painful feelings of envy: if I can convince myself that my neighbor does not deserve her nice garden, then I can feel as though I am the victim of injustice in not having one. I can thus alleviate my inferiority by rationalizing it into feelings of injustice or indignation. When I begrudge my neighbor, it means that I am pained because she is enjoying something that I desperately want. Begrudging is a mild form of anger more closely akin to bitterness than hatred. When we envy our friends, we still begrudge them even though we do not wish them ill. The fact that we are bitter about others enjoying the things that we value is simply part of our desperate wish to have it. The begrudging element of envy is due to the pain we feel when we see someone else living the kind of life we want to live. But begrudging someone does not require that we must wish that she lose her possession; I am simply angry that she has it and I do not.

²³ Although Roberts argues that the destructive wish is central to envy, even on his account the wish is a kind of coping strategy. The destructive wish comes about as a way for the envying person to recover her self-esteem (1991, 15-16).

²⁴ Solomon argues that envy is "wanting what one knows full well one does not in any sense deserve" (2007, 102).

The expectation seems to be that we should be happy for others even if they are enjoying goods and talents that we want for ourselves, but this presupposes a mistaken view about the nature of emotional investment. Feeling envious because someone else has something that I care about having for myself is part of my investment in that thing. Just as my sense of self-respect is reflected in my feelings of resentment, the value I place on gardening is reflected in the envy I feel when I see others engaging in it successfully. If I place central importance on a good or talent, I cannot be indifferent or pleased when I see someone else with it. Feelings of envy are thus a part of moral life because having goods and talents that we see as central to a good life is a moral concern. I envy my neighbor's garden because I see having a beautiful garden as part of a life that I value. Just because having a nice garden is not part of a moral character, it does not mean that the emotional investment I have in a garden is not related to my moral agency.²⁵ Emotional investment in those things that I see as contributing to a life I judge worthwhile is a central feature of moral agency.

4.0 Objections

I want to conclude by addressing two objections. First, one could argue that we can still be emotionally invested in things that we see as central to a good life without feeling envy. In fact, one could think that maintaining a conception of a good life without feeling envy is required for moral progress.²⁶ Second, one could argue that other morally better emotions like admiration can take the place of envy.

²⁵ I do not mean to claim that our emotional investment in something is sufficient for valuing it. Instead I simply mean that when we value something, there is an emotional component to the activity of valuing that thing.

²⁶ Nussbaum calls envy "primitive" and claims that it is moral progress to "renounce" it (2001, 212). Taylor argues that envy reveals destructive self-deception and so it harmful to the person who feels it (2006, 49-50).

The first objection maintains that we can be invested in goods and talents that we value without feeling envy and the person who does so makes moral progress. But there is a practical tension in the emotional life of a person who cares about having goods and talents but does not feel envy.²⁷ This would require that someone could care about having goods and talents she values without feeling badly when she does not have them and without feeling badly when she sees others enjoying them. The problem with this conception is that envy is not merely a byproduct of the fact that I value these things; it is constitutive of valuing these things as part of a worthwhile life. I cannot be said to care about having a nice garden if the realization that I do not have one has no negative emotional effect on me. The person who does not feel badly for not having goods and talents cannot be said really to care about having them. One could object that we can feel badly for not having these goods without feeling envy—we will feel sadness or disappointment instead. But sadness and disappointment do not reflect an agent’s judgment that the envied good is central to a good life. We can be sad or disappointed for lacking things that we would merely like to have. I might like to have a garden without then feeling diminished for not having it. But, as I have argued, this would mean that my investment in it is merely peripheral rather than central. Part of the reason that envy is painful is precisely because it is accompanied by a certain sort of anguish that something we deeply value is in the hands of someone else.²⁸ But it is this anguish that reflects the depth and strength of our investment in the envied good. As Neu argues, the person who appreciates what it means to be in an exclusive and intimate relationship must be liable to jealousy *precisely because* she appreciates intimacy (2000, 45-47). Likewise, it is precisely because we are so invested in the good that we envy those who have it rather than feel sad for not having it.

²⁷ Wolf makes a similar point about the moral saint: “[W]hen one reflects, for example, on the [moral saint] easily giving up his fishing trip or hot fudge sundae at the drop of a moral hat, one is apt to wonder not at how much he loves morality, but at how little he loves these other things” (1982, 424).

²⁸ Thanks to Elizabeth Sperry for this suggestion.

The arguments I have made here oppose the notion that moral progress requires getting over feelings of envy. The person who overcomes envy is supposed to have removed all the bad spots, but kept the rest of her moral psychology intact. But it is a mistake to think that our emotional lives are piecemeal in this way. Rawls makes this observation when he discusses the conceptual links between moral emotions and natural emotions: although some of these emotions can be painful, “there is no way for us to avoid a liability to them without disfiguring ourselves”(1999, 428).²⁹ Getting over feelings of envy would be disfiguring in this way. We cannot attempt to get over our feelings of envy without likewise diminishing our emotional investment in the lives we want to live. The person who feels only sadness or disappointment rather than envy is emotionally detached from the goods and talents she values, and as such does not really see them as central to life worth living. One could argue that being emotionally detached from goods is morally progressive, but being emotionally detached from goods requires a great deal more than not feeling envy. It would require altering my conception of a good life not just so that I am less invested in things (because I would still feel some envy in this case) but so that things no longer show up to me as something to care about.³⁰ But, this only illustrates Rawls’ point: we cannot simply get over certain feelings and leave our psychologies untouched. Moral progress in this case would lie not in feeling less envy, but in adopting this more enlightened conception of a good life.

The final objection states that other morally better emotions could play the role that envy plays in our lives. Surely we could care about having the goods we value by admiring what others have rather than feeling envy.³¹ There are two important differences, however, between admiration

²⁹ Rawls has in mind painful moral emotions like guilt and resentment, but his basic idea is that liabilities to painful emotions are inseparable from important moral commitments. My argument here is thus an extension and modification of his.

³⁰ Certain religious traditions argue for ideals like this, but that they are religious is no accident. Religious traditions tend to downplay to role of individual passions and desires in moral life.

³¹ Thanks to Zach Hoskins for bringing this objection to my attention.

and envy. First, the natural scope of admiration is different than envy's. That is, we usually admire people for doing things that are not necessarily within our reach. We are more likely to admire the accomplishments of people we see as greater than ourselves: we admire the achievements or talents of our mentors or of great leaders. When we admire people, we experience a mild form of awe or amazement at what they do. But to be in awe or amazed—even in a minor way—seems to require that we do not see it as readily available to us. That I am in awe of my friend's singing voice means that I see her talent as special and (at least presently) beyond my own abilities. My suggestion is that we are more apt to admire things that we see ourselves as less capable of achieving, and as such we do not immediately see them as central to our lives. As I have noted, we tend to envy people who are roughly our equals because we can more readily see reflections of our own lives in theirs. The more similar we are to others, the more likely it seems to be that we envy their accomplishments instead of admiring them.

Admiration also does not require the same feelings of diminishment, but that also suggests that admiration tends to be directed toward things we do not connect that closely with our own lives. Envy makes me feel badly about myself, but I can admire another without thinking about myself at all. Envy is uniquely connected to my sense of my own worth, but admiration is not. Admiration is envy's analog in that it responds to the goods or talents of others, but it does so without being self-referential. Unlike the things I admire, the goods that I envy are not just things I deem valuable or important. They are things that I see as contributing to the life that I want for myself. I might admire someone for climbing Mount Kilimanjaro without concluding that climbing Mount Kilimanjaro is something I want to do. Since admiration is a judgment about what is valuable or worth having without necessarily being related to the kind of life that I want, admiration cannot replace envy's role in our lives. My emotional investment in pursuing goods and talents has to

involve emotions that connect those goods and talents with me. Envy does this in a way that admiration does not.

What I have argued here is that envy has moral value because moral agents value goods and talents as part of lives they see as worthwhile. It does not follow from envy's moral value that every case of envy is morally good; it does follow that we would not be morally better people if we never felt envy. We often say, "Of course you envy her; it's natural." This claim, as I read it, is not a statement of biological, sociological, or psychological fact. It is not the claim that humans are in fact often envious of other humans. It is "natural" for moral agents to feel envy because they are emotionally invested in the goods and talents that they judge to be valuable. Moral agents care about a good moral character and they care about doing morally right things, but they also care about having a worthwhile life. My feelings of envy are partially constitutive of my emotional investment in the goods and talents I want for myself. That things matter to me and that I am emotionally invested in things is part of what it means to be a moral agent. I envy my neighbor's garden not because of my flawed and fragile human nature, but because I am a moral agent who cares about the things I see as contributing to a life I deem worthwhile.

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