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Self-Envy

(or Envy Actually)

If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling that ~~love~~ envy actually is all around.

When I started reading Sara Protasi's book, *The Philosophy of Envy*, I was excited to learn more about an emotion I thought I rarely experienced. In the opening pages, I found myself nodding along as Protasi quotes her mother saying: "I never feel envy, but I often feel jealousy!" (6). But envy, it turns out, is sneaky, often masking itself in the guise of other emotions, hiding just below the surface. What this meticulously argued book unveils is both a nuanced taxonomy of different kinds of envy and the intimate relationship that envy has to all manner of other emotions, including jealousy, shame, resentment, despair, and love. I now recognize that not only am I more familiar with envy than I supposed, but I experience envy rather often.

This got me thinking about other instances of envy that I experience which I have previously overlooked or perhaps mislabeled. Prompted by Protasi's insightful handling of envy in its varied forms, one question kept coming back to me: can you envy *yourself*? Envy, as we will see, is typically defined as directed at another person. I will claim, however, that one can indeed experience *self-envy*, even that it is not an uncommon experience. My aim is two-fold. First, I want to offer an expansion to Protasi's own extensive documenting of envy by considering a category of envy that has been overlooked due to the assumption that envy must always be other-directed. Second, I want to suggest that contemplating self-envy reveals other emotions that have more than a passing relationship with envy – emotions such as nostalgia, regret, frustration, and grief. I also think that these considerations add more ballast

to Protasi's defense of envy as not always a vicious emotion, working to rehabilitate, in part at least, envy's reputation.

Let us start with an overview of some of the key claims in the book.

1. The Philosophy of Envy

Protasi defines 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” (21). Envy is depicted as having a tripartite structure: it involves the person experiencing envy (the *envier*), the person towards whom the envy is directed (the *envied* or the *target*), and the object that the envier perceives themselves to be lacking (the *good*). In being an emotion that “necessarily involves comparing oneself to another” (21), envy is a social emotion. It is also a ‘self-conscious emotion’ (Salice & Sanchez 2019). Experiencing envy reveals us as being in a position of perceived inferiority in light of the other. Envy is not just about the other person; it is also about *our self*. Envy, then, can be categorized with other self-conscious emotions such as pride or shame.

It also has an epistemic dimension – it provides us with knowledge about our values.¹ If I envy my sister's sense of style, this reveals the value I place on personal style. Moreover, it reveals personal style as something I would like to possess myself, something that I take to be relevant to my own identity and sense of who I am. In contrast, I might admire my sister's handwriting while not feeling envious of it, not feeling that my own inferior handwriting reflects on me being an inferior *person* due to my perceived deficiency.

While envy is an emotion involving comparison, we notably do not experience envy in relation to everyone. We envy those we perceive to be in a position of superiority or advantage, and who are sufficiently similar to us. “We do not envy people out of our league”

(22), Protasi tells us, as their perceived superiority does not painfully reflect on us in the same way as someone who we consider to be in the same “comparison class” as us. Thus, I might envy my sister’s style but instead feel admiration or awe of Grace Jones’ or Marlene Dietrich’s iconic looks.

Phenomenologically speaking, experiencing envy is a painful affair, as it involves feeling oneself lacking in something you care about. It can vary from mildly unpleasant to nearly unbearable. Envy can also motivate us in different ways: it can make us strive to get what we lack, it can cause us to want to get the good away from the envied person, or it can drive us to despair. Protasi provides a framework for guiding us through different varieties of envy. She highlights four variables that impact the character of envy: a focus either more on (1) the good or on the (2) envied person, and the envier feeling (3) more or (4) less capable of getting the good themselves. Protasi uses these variables to outline four kinds of envy:

Emulative envy: where the envier is focused on the good (e.g., personal style) and believes themselves capable of obtaining the good for oneself (e.g., through cultivating good aesthetic taste). This motivates the envier to ‘level up’, to emulate the envied person.

Inert envy: where the envier is focused on the good (e.g., personal style) and doesn’t believe themselves capable of obtaining the good (e.g., believing oneself to lack good taste). This can lead the envier to feel despair and despondency.

Aggressive envy: where the envier is focused on the envied (e.g., my sister) and believes themselves capable of taking the good away from the envied (e.g., taking her clothes for myself). This can lead the envier to try and steal the good.

Spiteful envy: where the envier is focused on the envied (e.g., my sister) and believes themselves incapable of taking the good away from the envied (e.g., she’d notice if I

started wearing her clothes and demand them back). This can lead to the envier attempting to destroy the good, thus ‘levelling down’ the envied.

By distinguishing these different kinds of envy, how they feel, and what responses they likely motivate, Protasi opens the door for defending the claim that experiencing envy is not always the vice it is taken to be. In inert envy, for instance, we can experience an extremely unpleasant form of envy that can lead to despair and depression, but which does not cause us to attack the envied person, even leaving room for us to be simultaneously happy for the envied person’s good fortune. Emulative envy might even lead to virtuous actions of attempting to better ourselves. As such, Protasi takes a departure from accounts that posit envy as necessarily desiring to take the good away from the envied other (e.g., D’Arms & Kerr 2008; Salice & Sanchez 2019) and aims to rehabilitate envy’s reputation, stressing its role in revealing what we cherish, and even prompting self-flourishing.

Alongside her taxonomy of envy, Protasi adeptly reveals the way that envy intertwines with, and sometimes even poses as, other emotions. Like many accounts, the difference between envy and jealousy is carefully detailed. Protasi notes that there are many similarities between these two rivalrous emotions, including their tripartite structure, and suggests that these emotions often co-occur. However, like other researchers, she distinguishes these two emotions on the grounds that envy is concerned about the envier’s *lack* of something, while the jealous person is instead concerned about *losing* something – “envy coverts what jealousy guards” (13). The similarities between envy and jealousy, as well as society’s more accepting attitude towards jealousy, often lead people to describe themselves as jealous when they are, in fact, envious.

However, Protasi goes beyond the classic comparison of envy and jealousy. She claims that envy is not only commonly mislabeled as jealousy but that envy often masquerades as other

emotions. Most notably envy commonly presents as resentment or anger. Take, for instance, the rage of Incels directed at so-called ‘Staceys’ and ‘Chads’ who have the sexual success and social power they lack (130).ⁱⁱ More provocatively, Protasi also argues that love and envy have a close relationship. She argues that although envy is typically viewed as something that extinguishes love, even antithetical to love, envy and love are “two sides of the same coin”. Protasi highlights that envy and love emerge from the same psychological tendencies to engage in social comparison. The same kinds of qualities that we hold in esteem that might arouse love for another can also arouse envy; being impressed by my partner’s beautiful writing may be part of why I love them but can also be the source of my envying their easy style. Thus, to attempt to extinguish envy for one’s loved one could also harm one’s love for them. Indeed, Protasi goes so far as to advocate that emulative envy can be beneficial to one’s loving relationships, potentially leading to the “opportunity for growth, both for the relationship and for the lovers” (111).

Given envy’s co-occurrence with other emotions, it is perhaps no surprise that envy can fly under the radar; especially when we take into account envy’s reputation as a negative, vicious emotion. Protasi notes that people are typically more comfortable acknowledging jealousy, anger, or resentment than envy (as both her mother and I can attest to) (27). It is envy’s covetousness that, in part, makes envy difficult to confess. There is an uncomfortable *rawness* about envy. Admitting to nakedly wanting something that another has discloses who we are, what we care about, and that we are (perceived to be) inferior: “Tell me what you envy and I will tell you who you are, or at least what you care about” (20). It makes us vulnerable and, due to its reputation for being vicious, makes others wary. Admitting to being envious risks exposing us to shame.

Compounding this stigma are the cultural, gendered associations of envy. Envy is Medusa, petty schoolgirls, and bitter spinsters. It is famously directed at penises. It is a maligned

emotion not just because of its supposedly vicious nature but because it is experienced by the maligned. After all, only people who are ‘lacking’ experience it, and those who lack are regularly reviled. Envy, then, is not just personal but political. Not only does reviling enviers often work to disproportionately stigmatize the marginalized and vulnerable, but our very socio-cultural practices and contexts scaffold what we (ought to) value, thus shaping who, how, and why we feel envy (von Maur 2021). We might speculate, for instance, that women are more prone to experiencing envy when situated in societies that place them in positions of inferiority and disadvantage, seeding feelings of self-doubt and imposter syndrome, while also pedaling gendered expectations of perfection such as through beauty ideals (Widdows 2018). Envy is not just about *individual* deficiency but is rooted in *structural* expectations, value-systems, and situated self-perception. Like other emotions, such as loneliness (Wilkinson 2022) and anger (Lorde 1997), envy is a feminist issue. While Protasi concludes the book by thinking about envy in political contexts, the inherently political nature of envy, as an emotion about value and comparison, presents important avenues for critical exploration. Not only would pursuing these considerations deepen our understanding of envy, disclosing the socio-political and situated nature of this emotion would likely further Protasi’s aim of rehabilitating envy by uncovering how society sets certain people up to feel envy more than others.

The Philosophy of Envy presents a compelling argument that, even if we don’t want to admit it, this maligned emotion is experienced much more often than we might suppose. Indeed, as Protasi (2021) herself speculates, in a world of social media, where we are so easily able to compare ourselves to others and unrealistic images and expectations abound, it is easy to believe that we are in an envy-saturated age. These observations prompted me to wonder if the spread of envy goes beyond the forms Protasi considers in her book. Going back to the definition of envy as an aversive response to perceiving oneself to be in a position of

inferiority in relation to a similar other, I wondered who could be a more ‘similar other’ than myself. This got me asking: can envy be *self-directed*?

2. Self-Envy Three Ways

Little has been written on self-envy. Envy, as Protasi notes and endorses, is typically defined as *necessarily* involving another person (or persons). If envy is about desiring something that we perceive ourselves as lacking, how could we ever envy ourselves? As such, we might suppose that the very notion of self-envy simply cannot get off the ground.

The most sustained consideration of self-envy is found in the psychoanalytic work of Rafael E. López-Corvo. López-Corvo (1991, 1999) describes self-envy as a feature of various self-disorders where one part of the self, typically associated with a child-like part, envies another part of the self, typically associated with a more mature and creative part. As an act of revenge, the envious self seeks to harm or undermine the envied self, often resulting in self-destructive behavior. Putting to one side questions about the accuracy of this description of self-disorders, this characterization of spiteful self-envy seems to necessarily presuppose a pathological splitting or fragmentation of self. Ingrid Vendrall Ferran also considers a similar idea in the work of the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno. The character Artemio, in the 1918 short story “Artemio, heuatontimoroumenos”, has “two rival halves” (Ferran 2019, 125) of his personality, which experience envy with regard one another and go out of their way to thwart one another’s plans.

I want to consider the possibility of non-pathological self-envy. I outline three ways that we can experience non-pathological self-envy, that is, envy in relation to your *past* self, your *future* self, and *counterfactual* selves. This is by no means intended to be an exhaustive account of self-envy. Instead, it’s an initial case in favor of the concept that also works to reveal other emotions that might harbor or prompt envy.

2.1. Envyng Your Past Self

I often find myself envying my past self. Instances of this include envying the me that used to bounce out of bed at 5.30 a.m., the me that lived in Copenhagen, and, as much as I wish I didn't, the me with younger skin.ⁱⁱⁱ I think about how lucky she had it, how she had these goods that I now lack, some of which she didn't even obviously value at the time. I sometimes experience an envy in relation to my past self that might be best described as a kind of existential envy – an envy for myself at a particular time, for a particular way that I used to be in the world.^{iv} A classic case of this is envying myself as a child, when I did not have the burden of being (or attempting to be) an adult in the world. I envy her the simplicity that life held. I also catch myself envying the me experiencing certain things for the first time – falling in love, hearing Holly Herndon's *Proto*, or eating Biscoff on a crumpet – new experiences that, by definition, I can never experience again.

Just as with other-directed envy, the experience of these envies can vary in intensity, from the relatively fleeting and shallow to the more prolonged and painful. They can also vary across the dimensions of being more focused on the good to more focused on my past self. In cases of existential self-envy, it seems the good and the envied merge together as I envy the very way I used to be in the world. Such experiences can have the tone of spiteful or aggressive envy, leading to me disavowing the value I place on these goods (I don't really care about being an early riser) or attempting to ruin the memory in some way (it wasn't *really* that good). But they can also lead to the sulkiness that is the telltale sign of inert envy (I'll never be like that again) or the stimulation of emulative envy (I did it before so I surely can do it again!).

While I do not think there is an exact cut off point, it seems that I am more likely to experience self-envy towards a past self the more distant it is to my current self temporally;

or, perhaps, towards a me that precedes some kind of transformative experience, such as before a major life event (e.g., marriage, death of a parent or loved one, birth of a child, etc.), that radically changes my orientation in or understanding of the world.^v Such past selves are more easily experienced as distant from my present-day self and thus able to stand as a target of envy without implying some kind of pathological splitting of the self.

Again, I think it pertinent to note the role that digital technology might play in prompting experiences of (self-)envy. Just as I might find myself envious of others from being exposed to their photos online, I might find myself envious of my past self when Google Photos bombards me with photos of younger me or when I trawl my own social media pages looking at all the fun things I was doing that weren't admin or boring chores. Online I am faced with the memories that I felt warranted capturing and preserving, me "living my best life". Digital technology, in externalizing aspects of my past self, might also work to create the kind of distance or separation between my past and present required for self-envy to take root. This incessant exposure to my past self might be a hotbed of self-envy. I am also increasingly fed endless adverts for face cream to help me regain my youth, sedimenting the kinds of value that reify youth, potentially working to prompt self-envious feelings towards a younger version of me.

Thinking about self-envy for one's past self is suggestive for thinking about the relationship between envy and nostalgia. Nostalgia is a bittersweet emotion that involves a longing for times gone past – think Proust and his madeleines (Trigg 2006). Such experiences often revolve around feeling a longing for some good in one's past, such as childhood, a past relationship, an old home, or a less creaky body. But this longing comes with a bitter taste, we do not just fondly remember this time as in reminiscing, we feel its absence and our inability to go back to that moment in time and space. I suggest that the bitterness we associate with nostalgia can involve the twinges of self-envy – envy for that past self with

goods which we now take to be out of our reach. Just as love can be accompanied by envy, so can nostalgia for one's past solicit self-envy; they seem to emerge from the same ground of comparing oneself to one's own past. As we typically experience nostalgia for goods that are not within our control to obtain (as they are bound up with a time that has gone), I suggest that the self-envy that binds itself to nostalgia is often inert envy. This, I think, helps explain why indulging in too much in nostalgia can lead to despondency. Where the sweetness of nostalgia evaporates altogether, this could fuel regret, self-judgment, and self-recrimination for not being the person we used to be.

2.2. Envyng Your Future Self

Sometimes I envy future mes. When hiking up a steep mountain, I envy the me who has already reached the top. I envy the me who has already written this commentary and has managed to do so adroitly and engagingly. I catch myself envying the me who has already made a decision about whether to have children or not. Often, these instances involve envy in relation to goods that are on a path I am already pursuing – projects or decisions that I am currently grappling with. I am prone to experiencing this in moments of frustration, when I feel stuck, that the path ahead of me is blocked, when the effort is burdensome, and in moments of self-doubt about my ability to achieve my goals. I engage in wishful fantasies of already having done the thing and can end up experiencing envy towards this imagined projection of myself in the future; a future me that is me but a little bit better, a little bit calmer, a little bit happier, a little more successful.

One might resent the future self who already has what the current self lacks. In a milder form, I sometimes picture this future me as a bit smug and self-satisfied, particularly when self-doubt takes hold, which might suggest an imaginative form of levelling down this future me. However, with Protasi's spectrum of envy in hand, I'm inclined to think that this kind of self-

envy can also be self-motivating. It can be used to encourage me onwards, to become that future me; particularly when I take myself to be capable of achieving, or at least aspiring to achieve, these goods if only I put in the effort required. As such, these look like cases of emulative envy that take place without the need for a model actualized in another person. Rather, I hold this idealized future me up as worthy of chasing and this can motivate perseverance. We might even cultivate this emulative self-envy as a tool for motivation and self-improvement.

2.3. Envyng Your Counterfactual Self

I recently had an experience of, what I am calling, counterfactual self-envy at a gig in Gunnersbury Park. I was listening to delightfully hopeful and tender music amongst a crowd predominantly made up of queer people in their late teens and early twenties. Everyone looked beautiful, creative, and happy (though I know this unlikely to be an entirely accurate interpretation). I found myself crying through most of the set at the kindness and generosity of the performers and the audience. It was a very beautiful experience but also, to my surprise, rather painful. As the gig went on, I realized that what I felt was a kind of *envy*.

On the surface, this seems like a classic case of inert envy. I was envious of these young queer people. I perceived myself as lacking the social space of support, acceptance, and exploration when growing up that I imagined these people to have. Their richness in the things I lack, and which I value and desire, caused me both pain and a certain amount of grief. I certainly did not want to take away these things from the crowd. Indeed, I was struck by the hope I so often have when around such groups.

What I found peculiar, though, was that I did not just, or even mostly, experience myself as envying the rest of the audience. I felt an envy for the me that I might have been had I been born not in 1988 but in 2000, the me that might have known they were queer before they

were nearly 30, for what Ferran (2019) calls my “ontological possibilities”. I envied this counterfactual me for having the possibilities that I perceived myself as lacking (or not brave enough to follow) when I was growing up. I envied her freedom and confidence. I sincerely do not think that what I was experiencing was as simple as ‘I could have been you!’ but something closer to ‘I could have been (another) ME!’. I did not want to stand in *their* shoes, I wanted to be in my *own* – but in a different way. It felt self-directed. Like in the case of the self-envy directed at a future self, the target of my envy seems to be better picked out as an imagined me, a me that might have been under different auspices.

Other examples of counterfactual self-envy could include envying the self that took the risky but exciting job offer, the self that jumped into love, the self that decided to have or not to have children. These experiences of envy arise without the presence of any specific person as a trigger but through counterfactual imagination and speculation. Posting on social media platforms might also lead to an unusual form of counterfactual envy. As mentioned above, people are prone to presenting themselves in their best, shiniest light. I, like many others, present an idealized version of myself, an idealized me that I not only present to the world but that can be thrown back on myself, sometimes leading me to the strange sensation of envying the social media version of myself. A counterfactual version of myself that has not so much taken a different path, taken up different ontological possibilities, but is scrubbed of the complexities, drudgery, and responsibilities of being a whole person in the world.^{vi} The use of filters can even allow us to “see” different (often physical) counterfactual versions of ourselves (Krueger & Osler 2020), potentially acting as a fertilizer for counterfactual self-envy.

Such experiences can come shot through with regret and grief, emotions that themselves relate to experiences of lost or absent possibilities (Mehmel 2021; Millar & Lopez-Cantero 2022; Ratcliffe & Richardson 2023). Counterfactual self-envy, as I experienced, can be quite

painful. But I also think that counterfactual self-envy can be accompanied with a love for this other you, a joy in their bravery, their differences, their opportunities, their way of being; again, we can see love and envy arising from the same soil. I think such cases can also have a similar texture to nostalgia, a bittersweet experience that both mourns something we cannot have or cannot be while also cherishing that possible self, even cheering them on.

3. What Self-Envy Tells Us About Envy

What I have presented is by no means a complete account of self-envy. However, I think these sketches point to additional ways in which envy might wend its way into our lives, intertwined with other emotions. Most obviously, thinking about self-envy shows how envy, as an emotion of comparison, need not relate to another person but can emerge when comparing oneself in the present moment to other versions (imaginary or otherwise) of oneself through self-reflection and self-projection. As such, rather than accepting too readily the received idea that envy must necessarily involve another person, we can further expand our exploration and understanding of envy by considering cases where it is self-directed. Seeing envy as something that can be self-directed sits nicely with Protasi's move to shine a light on envy that is not so obviously spiteful or vicious. Self-envy does not seem to only result in attempts to rid the envied self of the good, though it certainly can, but to inertia, wistfulness, and even self-flourishing.

Less obviously, but I think just as interestingly, many of my examples of self-envy involve acts of imagination. This leads me to think that envy, more generally, often involves imagination. When we envy others, we rarely envy them in all their full actuality, but instead envy an idealized version of them. As I have discussed above, it might be particularly fruitful to consider this in the context of digital technology and social media, where we both are constantly confronted by our selves and others in idealized ways. This once again returns us

to critical questions about what underpins and prompts (self-)envy, questions that ask not just what envy is but what values and ideals drive and are manifested in and through it.

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ⁱ For accounts of how emotional experience reveals value, see, e.g., Furtak 2018, Mitchell 2021.

ⁱⁱ For an excellent analysis of Incels, rage, and loneliness, see Tietjen & Tirkkonen 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ I suspect that ageing is a common cause of self-envy, where we do not simply envy ‘young people’ or ‘younger bodies’ but our own younger bodies, as we used to be. Societal disdain of older women likely works as a driver of this kind of self-envy.

^{iv} For a discussion of other-directed existential envy, see Ferran 2022.

^v For discussions of transformative experience, see Paul 2014, Callard et al. 2020.

^{vi} Thank you to Rick Furtak for talking through this example with me.