
ARTICLE

Envy and Resentment in the Time of Coronavirus

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I examine the role played by the emotions of envy and resentment in interpersonal online dynamics during the COVID19 pandemic. I start by reviewing what we know about the interplay of social media use, social comparison and well-being, and by applying this knowledge to current circumstances. Then, I introduce some philosophical distinctions that complicate the already complex empirical evidence, differentiating, in particular, between envy and resentment, and between different kinds of envy. I argue that we can use the knowledge of these distinctions to better cope with these painful, but sometimes productive and always informative, emotions.

Since the start of the COVID19 pandemic, the bittersweet activity of browsing Facebook or Instagram has become increasingly devoid of sweetness, and increasingly replete with the acrid taste of envy, jealousy, anger, resentment and indignation. In a time of public health crisis and political and civic unrest, some online interactions have often become so toxic and hateful that taking a break from them has become synonymous with self-care.

In this contribution, I examine the role played in particular by the emotions of envy and resentment in these interpersonal online dynamics, highlighting how these feelings are stirred up by other people's perceived better situation. I start by reviewing what we know about the interplay of social media use, social comparison and well-being, and I apply this knowledge to current circumstances. Then, I introduce some philosophical distinctions that complicate the already complex empirical evidence. First, I distinguish between envy—an emotion that does not arise from a perception of wrongdoing and that I define here as an aversive response to perceived disadvantage vis-à-vis a similar other with regard to a self-important domain—and the emotions of resentment and indignation, which I define as aversive responses to a perceived wrongdoing or injustice. Envy and resentment, in particular, are often confused with each other, but have different fittingness conditions and are thus appropriate to feel in different circumstances. When an injustice has been perpetrated, resentment and indignation should motivate us to fight to rectify the wrongdoing. But when envy is fitting, we need different remedies. Which remedy is appropriate, however, depends on the type of envy at stake. Thus, my second distinction is between four different kinds of envy: emulative, inert, aggressive, and spiteful. Only spiteful and aggressive envy are hateful and should be repressed; inert envy requires adopting a more optimistic outlook, while emulative envy can motivate us to improve our situation. I explore the implications of this taxonomy for the pandemic context.

While many of my examples stem from observations of events occurred in 2020–2021 and by my acquaintance with the North American and European context in particular, my conclusions hopefully generalize and apply to other countries and other times as well.

1. The grass is always greener and the bars have already reopened on the other side of the (virtual) fence

There is a wealth of empirical research on the effects of social networking sites (SNSs) on psychological well-being and emotional health.¹ Recent reviews (e.g. Erfani and Abedin 2018; Seabrook et al. 2016) show that the relation between social media use and well-being is complex, multifaceted, and ambiguous, insofar as SNSs can impact us in both positive and negative ways. SNSs can be a source of support and connectedness, a domain in which meaningful and even deep relationships flourish. Thanks to these sites, we keep in touch with childhood friends and family members living afar, and we develop new relations with people never met in real life, but with whom we have affinities and share common passions. Perhaps surprisingly, “SNS use is associated with lower levels of loneliness and greater feelings of belonging (social

¹ It is worth noting that most of these studies focus on teenagers and college students, which is a significant limitation in terms of generalizability of the results.

connectedness), social capital, and actual and perceived access to social support and is generally associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem" (Seabrook et al. 2016).

However, much like in-person social interactions, online relations also can affect us in negative ways and increase distress, depression, loneliness, and anxiety. Depressive rumination (that is, a response style where individuals maintain a passive and repetitive focus on their distress and negative interactions), narcissistic behavior due to low self-esteem, and excessive and unsupervised use of the media all seem to mediate the relation between psychological distress and SNS use (Erfani et al. 2021).

But there is another factor that contributes to negative effects of SNS, which is going to be central in this discussion, and that is *social comparison*: when people compare themselves to others on Facebook, and perceive themselves as coming off short, the result is often greater anxiety and depressive symptoms (Appel et al. 2016; Tandoc et al. 2015).

This is not surprising: even more so than in real life, on social media the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, because people are much less inclined to post photos of their lawn's yellowy patches. And when all of our neighbors' lawns *appear* to be greener than ours (even when in fact they are not), we are more likely to develop feelings of envy, as is well explained by Appel and collaborators (2016):

SNS self-presentation is frequently motivated by impression management and the presented information is positively skewed. Consequently, the probability of unflattering social comparisons increases. Negative social comparisons are at the core of envy, so the chance for envy to thrive is high. Additionally, users mainly interact with friends and peers on Facebook. This implies both similarity to comparison standards and high personal relevance, two factors fueling social comparisons and envy alike. Indeed, painful social comparison and envy are among the most often reported stressors and sources of frustration on Facebook (Appel et al. 2016: 46).

So, social comparison on SNS is likely to trigger envy, which in turn may lead to social anxiety and depression. While the exact causal links are at this time unclear, given that most studies on this topic are not experimental and provide only correlational data, it is plausible that there is a bidirectional relation, or a vicious cycle: those who may already be depressed, or insecure, or score high on the dispositional envy scale (Smith et al., 1999) may be more likely to pay attention to the posts of "friends" who appear to do better than themselves, and thus become in turn more depressed, or insecure, or more envious.²

In the context of a pandemic, even people with healthy self-esteem (that is, who score high on established self-esteem scales; see Robins et al. 2001) or less prone to depression are likely to struggle. During the lockdowns that were imposed (and are still being imposed at the time of writing) in countries all over the globe, many people saw their material conditions worsen and their chances of meaningful interactions with people (other than those present in their household) decrease; uncertainty and stress rose and so did the need for mental health services (Panchal et al. 2021). Even as restrictions ease, and uncertainty and anxiety are decreasing in countries like the United States, experts worry about long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health (Joseph 2021).

Our responses to other people's perceived good fortune are thus likely to be more intense and painful than usual. Seeing our ex boast about their happy life might already be difficult in normal times, but it is definitely worse once we have already endured months of social isolation, or unemployment, or lack of childcare, with no end in sight.³

Furthermore, in a pandemic our perception of control is decreased and anxiety is heightened (Jungmann and Witthöft 2020), even though there might be individual variations: medical professionals, essential workers and working parents are likely to be feeling more overwhelmed and stressed than individuals free from care duties, or those who are able to safely and autonomously work from their homes, or those who enjoy being able to have meetings in sweatpants and increased control over one's time.⁴ Furthermore, personality traits matter: for instance, introverts or people who suffer from social anxiety might actually prefer to have most of their interactions be online as opposed to face-to-face (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2002; Mitchel et al. 2011; Hutchins et al. 2021).⁵ However, almost everyone in a pandemic suffers from a general sense of uncertainty, stemming from the very nature of the phenomenon (i.e. a novel virus about which much is still unknown and which is still mutating). As we shall see, perceived lack of control makes us feel more malicious kinds of envy.

² The evidence of a correlation between envy and depression, outside of the SNS context, is robust (Smith and Kim 2007; Appel et al. 2016; Xiang et al. 2020). Note, however, that this correlation concerns depression and *malicious* envy. No such correlation has been found for dispositional benign envy (Lange and Crusius 2015). I talk about non-malicious forms of envy below.

³ Again, many of these examples are context-dependent. Writing about this topic in a way that accounts for variations across time and place is quite challenging.

⁴ Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive conditions: very stressed-out parents might be relieved that at least they don't have to dress up for a meeting. But the main point that the pandemic has affected some categories of people more than others still holds.

⁵ However, some initial research suggests that during this pandemic both introverts and extroverts looked for, and found, a sense of social connectedness online (Folk et al. 2020).

Stepping away from our screens may help reduce the negative effects of SNS use, but it is hard to do so at a time when we cannot easily distract ourselves with more rewarding activities, when everyone is already in front of a phone or a computer all day, whether for work (if one is lucky enough to have it), or to help one's kids with homework, or to shop, etc. Furthermore, SNS do also affect us positively from a social perspective, keeping us connected with people that we cannot see in person anymore (Folk et al. 2020), or with new friends or mere acquaintances, whom might actually be easier to relate to when social anxiety is higher (Dutta et al. 2018). It is not possible to only enjoy the positive effects of online interactions (namely, keeping socially connected during a time of physical isolation) without also suffering the negative effects.

And so, because SNS provide the majority of our social life in a pandemic, that is how we have found ourselves looking in disbelief at friends—and most painfully frenemies—ignoring public health guidelines and flaunting their mask-free shenanigans; getting indignant at our relatives propagating dangerous and debunked theories about the virus and purported remedies; feeling the sting of envy as acquaintances share post-vaccine pictures, while we are still unable to get one; or wallowing in sadness as the prospect of hugging loved ones who live in different countries is still out of reach.

2. Envy or Resentment? That Is The (First) Question

In the last year and a half, many popular articles have discussed the negative feelings aroused by comparing our lot to that of others on SNSs. Envy has prominently featured in many headlines: envy felt toward those who live in “reopened” areas where people could go back to living a more normal life (Baer 2021); envy felt toward the more privileged who had more material resources to weather the pandemic with comfort (whether it was a beach house, better wi-fi, or the ability to go to a less-affected country) (Murillo 2020; Pruden 2020; Wartik 2020); or, as mentioned earlier, envy toward those who were able to get a vaccine (Netburn 2021; Shmerling 2021).

However, envy is a complex emotion that often masks itself as other feelings and attitudes, and this is a phenomenon often ignored in these popular discussions. Scholars of envy know how difficult it is to disentangle the dark green-eyed monsters of envy, spite and Schadenfreude from what moral philosophers have argued to be the more luminous and respectable moral sentiments of righteous resentment and indignation.

Let us start with some definitions. When I feel envy, I am pained by a comparative disadvantage vis-a-vis a similar other in a domain of self-importance (Lange and Crusius 2015; Protasi 2021). That is, envy is not just any painful response to perceived inferiority, or a wish to have something that is simply occasioned by seeing it possessed by someone else, but an emotion specifically triggered by perceiving oneself as coming off short compared to another person, within a context that matters to one's identity. This is particularly likely to occur when the gap between the envier and the envied is relatively small and when the envied person is similar to the envier in relevant respects. These are features of envy that are present in many philosophical accounts of envy, historical and contemporary, and that have been confirmed by empirical evidence (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007; Smith and Kim 2007). Aristotle already talks about the envy that arises between potters (*Rhetoric* II.10, Aristotle 2004), while Francis Bacon in his essay *On Envy* talks about envy between writers, when their abilities are roughly equal; a writer being envious of a potter, or vice versa, would be unusual, unless the potter and the writer happen to be friends and are thus likely to compare their lives with regard to a good that they both value, such as, for instance, marital happiness or being respected in one's profession (Bacon 1999). Social comparison is informative and diagnostic only when it takes place over comparable situations and values. Thus, envy does not arise when we compare ourselves to people who are very different from us, who occupy a very different station in life, who are from very different backgrounds, and so forth.

Because envy necessarily involves a perception of personal inferiority to a similar other, it is accompanied by shame and feels, as Aristotle puts it, like “a reproach to oneself” (*Rhetoric* II.10, Aristotle 2004); furthermore, envy often involves hostility and malice, and is thus morally condemned in all traditions and cultures. (But I will argue later that it need not be.) Therefore, we usually, consciously or not, suppress our envy, or refuse to acknowledge it. Plutarch in *De Invidia et Odio* already observes that envy masks itself: because of the social and moral stigma attached to envy, people tend not to admit feeling envy even to themselves, and their minds often engage in *confabulation*, a technical notion used in cognitive sciences referring to the tendency to make up justificatory reasons *post hoc*.⁶ One form this phenomenon takes is to find reasons why one's perceived disadvantage is unjust and thus to think of oneself as a victim, as someone who has been wronged. That is, envy often masquerades as the emotion that philosophers call *resentment*, that is, an aversive response to a perceived wrongdoing or injustice that affects us personally.

For instance, imagine a student who sees a classmate receiving a grade higher than theirs. They feel a painful feeling that they might have a hard time diagnosing. It might be envy, but because of the moral and social stigma associated to envy,

⁶ Confabulation is often presented by popular sources (e.g. Wikipedia) exclusively as a memory error that occurs in patients with dementia or other neurological disorders; in discussion of mental health treatments, however, it emerges that it also affects neurotypical patients, for instance during counseling sessions (see e.g. Brown and Carter 2020). Furthermore, in the philosophical literature on moral judgment, confabulation is discussed as a phenomenon that is unrelated to memory, and is considered, roughly, a synonym of rationalization (e.g. Railton 2014 and Greenspan 2015; see however Jefferson 2020, which draws finer distinctions).

the student might instead perceive their response as one of anger, and anger of a particular kind: resentment. “It’s not fair!”—the student will think and say.⁷

From the outside, whether the better grade was actually deserved or not is the question that will naturally arise. If the grade difference was not warranted by a difference in quality of the assessed work, then it seems that the student has indeed been wronged. As unaffected observers (by assumption) we might join the student in feeling a sort of impartial, or third-personal, aversive response to wrongdoing or injustice. Philosophers call this emotion *indignation* (Strawson 1962; Darwall 2006).⁸

Both resentment and indignation can be considered “cognitively sharpened” forms of anger, to use an expression by philosophers D’Arms and Jacobson (2005), insofar as they involve the notion that the agent who has committed the wrongdoing can be held morally accountable (whether that can be said of anger more generally is controversial and depends on definitions of anger; see Cherry and Flanagan 2018 for some recent accounts). Given that these emotions are responses to a perception of wrongdoing or having been slighted, they concern more than just the *good* fortune of others. For instance, I may feel indignant that a good person was unjustly deprived of a reward, or I may be resentful that I was punished for a crime I did not commit. So, they may concern the *bad* fortune of others, as well. However, those instances of resentment and indignation would not risk being confused with envy, which is a response to perceived good fortune or advantage, so I shall set them aside.⁹

With these definitions in place, let us go back to some pandemic scenarios. Imagine that you are scrolling through your Instagram feed and see the photo of a colorful cocktail against a sandy beach. Molly is at it again: boasting her fortune, posting photo after photo of her vacation at a time where people are losing their jobs and mourning their loved ones! How can she be so callous and selfish—you think to yourself, while leaving the obligatory “heart” through gritted teeth.

What is going on here? Is this envy or resentment or indignation or...? The question can be asked from a subjective perspective: the agent could pause and ask themselves a few questions about their mental state. I am going to talk about this option, and its limitations, below. But first I want to think about the objective, external perspective: which emotional response is *fitting* to feel toward Molly? By “fitting emotion” I mean, following D’Arms and Jacobson (2000, 2005), an emotion such that anyone would have a *reason* (of a distinctive kind) to feel it in these circumstances, independently of their emotional propensities and values. In other words, a fitting emotion is a rationally appropriate response to a certain situation, in a way that has nothing to do with other sorts of reasons, such as prudential, moral, aesthetics or epistemic.

For example, assume that my envy toward Molly is fitting. That means that my envy is appropriate in this internal peculiar way: there is something genuinely enviable in the world that I am appropriately responding to.¹⁰ This is the case even though it may be counterproductive for me to feel envy (i.e. *prudentially* bad), or malicious (i.e. *morally* bad), or it may be ugly (i.e. *aesthetically* bad), or it might be disadvantageous with regard to my ability to gain knowledge (i.e. *epistemically* bad). So, I might have other reasons to not feel envy for Molly, even if my envy is fitting, and they may override reasons of fittingness (and thus might affect how I behave), but that does not render my envy unfitting.

This is not to say that emotions are always fitting. From a psychological perspective, it is common to hear the claim that a person is always “entitled” to their feelings, that is, that their feelings are “valid” in the sense they reflect the person’s own judgment, outlook, or perception of the world. (This claim often is made in therapeutic contexts like counseling, or spiritual contexts, and thus is associated to a prescription of accepting one’s feelings, which is an approach I am sympathetic to). But from a philosophical perspective, emotions are sometimes “invalid” in the sense of being unfitting to the circumstances, that is, of not being the appropriate emotional reaction to them. For example, if my envy is directed toward things that are not truly enviable, then my envy is unfitting. If my resentment is directed at things that are not truly worthy of resentment (but perhaps they are enviable) then my resentment is not fitting (but envy may be).

Envy, resentment and indignation might not *feel* different, from a phenomenological internal perspective, because there are no physiological changes reliably and constantly associated to these emotions, even though popular metaphors for them tend to differ (with envy being associated with the idea of sourness and acidity, of being eaten or devoured from the inside, while indignation and resentment *qua* forms of anger might be associated with heat and feeling ebullient). But these emotions differ in their subjective evaluation of the situation: in the case of envy, a judgment of injustice, even a subjective

⁷ That envy goes unacknowledged and even unrecognized by the envier and masquerades as resentment is a well-studied phenomenon in contemporary psychology (see Miceli and Castelfranchi 2007 and Smith and Kim 2007 for discussion and references). Note that this “hiding nature” of envy makes studying it empirically difficult, since subjects will be reluctant to admit feeling it.

⁸ It is also possible to feel both, if I am capable of thinking about the personal wrongdoing from an impartial or impersonal perspective. Perhaps I might not even care about it in my case (imagine that I do not particularly care about grades or this one grade) and yet be indignant because I think it is an injustice that can harm other students.

⁹ A question parallel to the one I am pursuing here is how to distinguish between the righteous pleasure of seeing the wicked suffer and *schadenfreude*, the more generic pleasure at another person’s misfortune, which is insensitive to desert and often accompanies malicious envy. Among the philosophers who develop or critique Aristotelian analyses of emotions that arise in response of the good or bad fortune of others, see Kristjánsson 2018 and Ben-ze’ev 2000.

¹⁰ There are different ways of cashing out the idea of fittingness which depend on other theoretical commitments concerning value, so some philosophers would disagree that value is “in the world”.

one, is not needed, while it is essential and salient to resentment (and, *mutatis mutandis*, to indignation).¹¹ Do I perceive Molly to be engaged in some sort of harmful behavior, or am I just pained by the fact that she is sipping a drink at her beach house, and I am not? Am I posting an angry rant on Uncle Jack's wall because he really ought to wear his mask properly, or because I am envious he gets to go out, and I cannot?

Concerns for public health are legitimate, and it may be meritorious (if not always effective) to call out those who violate public health guidelines. A sensitivity to wrongdoing and to moral failure should be cultivated in all domains, including seemingly trivial ones, when they carry large consequences or are representative of vicious attitudes. But sometimes those high-minded ethical imperatives are enmeshed with more mundane and envious motivations. One might engage in some counterfactual thinking: if our roles were reversed, would I feel guilty or shame for engaging in this behavior, or would I feel at peace and with a good conscience?

Introspection, however, might not be enough, as it is notoriously unreliable in general (Schwitzgebel 2008; see Hohwy 2011 for a slightly different take) and with regard to envy in particular (Smith and Kim 2007). Third-party observers might be better positioned to diagnose correctly what you are feeling. They might be able to notice evidence of bad faith and hypocrisy more easily, to detect recurring envious patterns, or recognize established rivalries, all of which are harder to acknowledge first-personally.

Consciously trying to assume a detached perspective is also helpful in attempting to figure out whether my emotional responses are fitting. It is possible that I am the kind of person who always feels indignant when others enjoy more fortune than I do, but that does not make my indignation fitting.¹²

The issue is further complicated by the fact that moral quandaries abound during a crisis such as the one we are living.¹³ Should my neighbor really be chastised for not taking into consideration the inequity of forming a home-schooling community? On the one hand, she is doing the best she can to provide education and care for her children under very challenging circumstances; on the other, she is contributing to deepening social injustices. Such moral assessments are not made any easier if I harbor envious feelings in my breast, and it might be genuinely difficult to identify them correctly, first, and then assess whether they are fitting.

3. Fighting the Green Monsters, or Riding Them to Success

Assume that we have made some progress in diagnosing correctly what we are feeling, whether it is envy (which, to reiterate, is not a fitting response to a wrongdoing or injustice, but simply to perceived comparative disadvantage), or resentment or indignation (which are).

We are half-way through improving our life in a difficult moment. Knowing what kind of emotion is fitting to feel, and shaping our emotional responses accordingly, might help channel these negative and painful feelings in a productive direction, even if one might still remain incapable of rejoicing in another person's more privileged situation.

Sometimes one's disadvantage is easily remedied: a friend of mine this summer often shared pictures of her beautiful porch taken from her newly acquired hammock (while also, wisely, sharing the difficulties she was facing in other respects). Then, at some point she shared a link to said hammock on a well-known shopping site, so that her friends could procure the same joys for themselves. Those who could easily afford the expense and had a suitable space did not even need to agonize over what they were feeling: they could just go ahead and emulate their friend, which probably also decreased any perception of injustice on their part.

However, not everybody has the means to easily fix the cause of their feelings.¹⁴ As I said, one factor that makes social media browsing so painful in a pandemic is that there are many things outside of our control. In those cases, there are two options.

¹¹ This is slightly more controversial than I present it here. For a minority position in philosophy, according to which envy may include perception of injustice, see La Caze 2001 (critiqued among others by Ben-Ze'ev 2002). Some psychologists (e.g., Smith 1991) think of envy as involving a perception of subjective injustice, thus blurring the distinction between envy and resentment; Miceli and Castelfranchi (2007: 463–467) provide a sophisticated critique of this position from within psychology.

¹² Amoral and moral sentiments such as envy and resentment can co-occur, but the question of whether they are both fitting remains. For simplicity, I am going to ignore this more complicated possibility.

¹³ For a discussion of moral injury in a pandemic, see Liberman (in progress).

¹⁴ An anonymous reviewer, whom I thank, invites me to consider the possibility that some people are just more prone to feel envy than others, and that the deck or the hammock are objects that help to direct and focus one's underlying envy, rather than its sources. It is true that there is individual variation in tendency to feel envy (as measured by dispositional envy scales, such as those developed in Smith et al. 1999, and Lange and Crusius 2015), and that people who are strongly disposed toward envy will probably feel it soon again, with regard to some other object, but that is compatible with what I say here. Being disposed to feel envy means that one is disposed to feel occurrent bouts of envy, which are caused by a perceived comparative lack or disadvantage vis-à-vis a similar other. Consequently, one can assuage or extinguish a specific episode of envy, even if they are going to feel it soon after. This holds for any emotion: I might be a fearful person, temperamentally, but that does not mean that: 1. it is inappropriate to say that I am scared by a specific object or other; 2. my fear of a specific object can never be assuaged; or 3. I am constantly in fear. I do acknowledge that here I am not discussing the important issue of dealing with dispositional envy, but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

If the advantage is undeserved and injustice is truly involved, then we really ought to fan the fires of righteous anger, but in the right direction.¹⁵ Consider the fact that people have had and will have to endure lockdowns in completely abhorrent living situations, either due to poverty, or abuse; or think about the gap between college students who can comfortably attend their online classes from houses where they have their own room and fast wi-fi, and students who have to sit outside of a McDonald's just to get an internet connection. It is fitting to feel *indignant* rage at the economic and socio-cultural systems that allow for a myriad of such inequalities to thrive. It is fitting to be intensely *resentful* at public officials who have failed to uphold their duty to protect and serve their communities. Envy, in these cases, is a distraction: it narrows one's concern onto oneself and one's misfortune, when instead we should broaden our focus on the larger picture.¹⁶

This is not to say that resentment toward individuals is never fitting or productive. Sometimes, those people on the internet are indeed jerks who selfishly act against the common good. And they should be called out for that, if one has examined one's conscience thoroughly enough (again, assuming that calling them out is an effective strategy to make them listen, which is controversial—"calling in" might be a more productive behavior).

But sometimes we can determine that, objectively, no injustice is involved and we are simply pained by the fact that someone else is doing better than us. At this very moment, someone is getting more work done than you, simply because of their temperament or psychological outlook. Or they got a job offer even as job opportunities are dwindling and people are losing their jobs because of the financial repercussions of the pandemic. Or they live in a country where the pandemic has just not spread, or is on its way to recovery, while yours might be affected by a new wave or variant. What can we do in these cases? What can make our "liking" their status on Facebook a bit sweeter and more genuine? In other words, how can we reduce the negative effects of social comparison on SNSs while still enjoying their benefits of increased social connectedness?

Here, I offer a philosophical framework that may help shape our envious feelings.¹⁷

I defend the view that there are four subtypes of envy in Western contemporary culture, which I call emulative envy, inert envy, aggressive envy, and spiteful envy.¹⁸

They are the result of the interplay of two independent variables, *focus of concern* and *obtainability of the good*. *Emulative envy* stems from being primarily concerned with getting the good for oneself and perceiving oneself as capable of doing so; the typical behavioral tendency is self-improvement. Think of the dance student who looks up to the classmate who got the soloist role at the audition: their painful feeling of perceived inferiority makes them more motivated to practice harder and achieve the strength and gracefulness of the envied.

Inert envy is the sterile version of emulative envy: the envier wants to get the good for oneself, but does not think that she can do so; the typical behavioral tendency is self-loathing, wallowing in one's misery, and avoidance of the envied. Think of a person struggling with fertility problems who envies their friend who just got pregnant: they do not want their friend to lose their baby, but they are painfully aware of their empty womb, and they find it easier to just stop seeing their friend for a little while.

Aggressive envy derives from being primarily concerned with the envied's possession of the good, rather than the good itself, and perceiving oneself as capable of taking the good away from the envied; the typical behavioral tendency is thus sabotaging and stealing the envied object. Here a good example would be a runner who trips the athlete who is about to cross the finish line; while the envier has not become any faster, they have managed to snatch the win.

Finally, *spiteful envy* is a less productive version of aggressive envy: the envier wants to take the good from the envied, but does not think that she can do so; the typical behavioral tendency is spoiling the good. A good example of this would be Iago in the Shakespearean tragedy *Othello*. Even though Iago does not succeed in gaining anything from his plots, he does bring Othello (and many other innocents) down.

¹⁵ There are many defenses of anger available in the literature. Many of them (together with some critiques) can be found in Cherry and Flanagan 2018. Note that systemic injustices are often hidden. Later on, I mention that sheer geographical location is a matter of luck. But many socioeconomic factors are involved in where one can afford to live.

¹⁶ There is empirical work on how emotions narrow or broaden our *attention*, but here I am thinking of something different: the scope of our care and concern, rather than attentional focus or salience.

¹⁷ This should not be taken as clinical advice, but rather as a theoretical tool for those who are either interested in a journey of self-discovery or are aiding others in therapeutic settings, where often the distinctions between kinds of envy and between envy and resentment are not drawn. For a recent work in clinical psychology that mentions "emulation" as a productive response, see Leahy 2020 (but I distinguish between emulation and emulative envy in Protasi 2016, 2021).

¹⁸ See Protasi 2016, 2021 for an extensive defense of this taxonomy and references to the empirical evidence supporting it. In my work I try to remain neutral with regard to controversial matters about the nature of emotions, and in particular the debate on whether emotions in general are natural kinds or social/psychological constructs (Barrett 2006). There is anthropological evidence that envy is a pan-cultural emotion (Foster 1972; Parrott and Mosquera 2008), and an emotion that resembles envy as I have defined it can be found in preindustrial cultures of the past and the present. However, my claim here is more limited: envy in contemporary Western societies can be best understood according to the ontological taxonomy I introduced. This is not to say that *every single episode of envy* as experienced subjectively by an individual living in these societies can be accounted for by my model. Emotional experience is messy, and as Aristotle said, "[o]ur discussion will be adequate if it has as much clearness as the subject-matter admits of, for precision is not to be sought for alike in all discussions" (Nicomachean Ethics, I.3; Aristotle 1994).

In the limited space that remains, I can only allude to how my model can be applied to some of the pandemic situations that we have envisaged earlier. An advantage of this model is that it differentiates between the hateful and aggressive kinds of envy (aggressive and spiteful), the non-malicious but self-defeating kind of envy (inert), and the most benign and productive one (emulative).

Aggressive and spiteful envy are the ones that give envy its bad reputation as a form of hatred (as Spinoza and Kant, among other philosophers, argue; see Spinoza, 1949: 79 and Kant 1996: 206) or even self-hatred (as Nietzsche thought with regard to the *ressentiment* of the “weak man”; Nietzsche, 1994: 23). This type of envy is universally condemned by religious and spiritual traditions for good reasons: it is destructive and immoral, tearing apart personal relationships and entire communities.

In the pandemic scenarios, spiteful envy is the type that we might see more frequently, as it is usually not possible to steal the envied object in these cases. Spiteful envy is the most malicious and hateful type of envy and motivates hostile behaviors such as insulting people on the internet and putting them down, disparaging and bullying them, tainting the envied’s reputation and happiness, and making them feel guilty if they are enjoying more privileged circumstances. I might not get to sip that cocktail on the beach, but I hope it goes down the wrong pipe for you!

Sometimes, however, we are not bothered by the envied’s advantage as much as their possession of a good: that is what we mostly care about. And yet, because of our perceived lack of control over the situation, we won’t be able to feel emulative envy, but rather inert envy. This is the kind of envy that makes us sulk and think that we will never be good enough. In the pandemic scenario, it is the type of envy that makes us avoid looking at those post-vaccine photos online. While we would never want our friends to not get their vaccine, we feel impotent and uncertain about when we might be able to get it, and we slosh in the sour puddle of our envy, feeling bad about it, on top of it! What kind of monster can’t rejoice of their friend’s safety?—we may think.

Spiteful and aggressive envy are morally bad while inert envy is prudentially bad: while they are natural human feelings, and we should accept that we may feel them occasionally, we should bring ourselves to feel another kind of envy, when possible.

Emulative envy is void of malevolent intentions and it motivates the envier to self-improve. When I feel emulative envy I want to emulate the envied and push myself to their level, reaching the good or advantage that I perceive myself as lacking. Remember my hammock-lover friend? She was encouraging people to feel emulative envy, whether she realized it or not. However, for this envy to arise, the envier needs to believe that they can, in fact, succeed in their emulative goals. In order to bring ourselves to feel this kind of envy, we ought to cultivate a positive and optimistic attitude, a growth mindset (Dweck 2016), which involves understanding that our skills are not fixed. We can remind ourselves that, aside from a handful of authentic geniuses à la Mozart, most people who have “natural talent” are people who benefited from material resources and practice from an early age, and that we can, too, become talented in some way or other.¹⁹

I have recently come to appreciate an adage that is apparently beloved by elementary school teachers: everybody is good at something and nobody is good at everything. It may sound trivial, but it is worth internalizing in our fight against the worst manifestations of envy in many contexts; furthermore, creating a society where everybody can develop their talents and potential may even be a political objective.²⁰

I want to conclude by acknowledging that shaping one’s emotional responses is not always possible, and this is particularly true at a time of crisis. Improvement of our situation may genuinely be outside of one’s control. Furthermore, if we set up too high a goal, then we are likely to perceive it as unobtainable. The perfectionist and ambitious among us struggle in times of crisis and thus tend to feel more envy than others. To take academics as an example that is both appropriate for the topic and likely to resonate with the reader of this paper, think about how hard it has been for academics to achieve their high goals in the past year and a half. Many of us are juggling the same commitments with half the work hours (or less, since single parents and in general those who are mainly in charge of care duties are reduced to much less than that) and with markedly fewer resources than usual (less help from administrative assistants, decreased access to libraries, clunkier ways to pursue collaborations and networking, printing may be impossible or expensive, and so on).²¹ If we are perfectionists, we will have to walk a fine line between pursuing high achievements in selected domains while repudiating excellence in many others.

A positive aspect of the impossibility to level up, however, is the opportunity to re-assess one’s goals and conception of goodness. Envy has a signaling value: it tells what we care about. But envy can be unfitting, and one way in which it can be unfitting is when we care about objects that are not genuinely valuable. In the booming literature on the pandemic, and also during many exchanges on social media with other academics, I have seen the recurring suggestion that this may

¹⁹ The role of luck, however, should not be underestimated (Frank 2016).

²⁰ John Rawls makes a similar point in *A Theory of Justice*, when he claims that the well-ordered society will contain a plurality of associations, in which people can thrive and excel at different things (Rawls 1999: 471).

²¹ This list is reflective of the privilege many of us enjoy in normal times. Many academics who are contingent or work at disadvantaged institutions already lack access to many of these resources.

be the time to rethink our relations (who really matters in our lives?); the way we work (how can we have a better life-job balance and reduce commuting times; how can we make conferences more accessible to those with disabilities or fewer economic resources?); the way we learn and teach (what lessons can we derive from this gigantic online pedagogy experiment? How can we make learning more flexible and accessible to students with different needs, personalities, and even circadian rhythms?); the way we understand success and productivity and value (who really are the *essential workers*? Why do we feel valueless when we are not producing?); the way we access and provide health care (so it is possible to provide free and universal healthcare when everybody's interest is at stake!); and much more.

Similarly, when it comes to pandemic envy, perhaps it is time to rethink the things we envy, many of which may be inauthentic goods, and focus on the truly enviable ones: being healthy and safe from harm; being able to raise one's children with the support of one's community; being able to develop one's talents and having a modicum of financial security. These are all things that we can do something about, if not now, in the near future. While envy is not the same as its moral cousins of resentment and indignation, it too can alert us to the risk of being left behind in an unequal society.²²

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²² Bankovsky 2018, Frye 2016, and Green 2013 all defend a version of this claim.

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