

## *Chapter 7*

# **Malicious Moral Envy**

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Former United States president Donald Trump would like to win the Nobel Peace Prize. His predecessor, Barack Obama, won the prize early in his presidency. Trump managed to get nominated for the prize—as did Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler—but a win has been elusive. Unable to secure the honor for himself, Trump resorted to denigrating the prize and its winners—calling the process “unfair” and saying Obama “did nothing” to deserve it (Wagner 2019; Farley 2020).

Famously insecure and competitive, Trump seems especially fixated on people widely regarded as admirable. As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded in 2020, Trump’s fixation shifted from Obama to Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert and a career public servant with a reputation for integrity, honesty, and selflessness (Specter 2020; Blow 2020; Bruni 2021). As Dr. Fauci’s public profile rose, so too did Trump’s ire. With Fauci’s net approval rating at plus 71 percent and Trump’s at minus 5 percent, the White House sidelined Fauci, curtailed his public appearances, and allowed an advisor to release a list of times Fauci’s advice had been wrong (Abutaleb, Dawsey, and McGinley 2020). With Trump’s encouragement, Fauci’s public health advice became politicized and the #fireFauci appeared on social media. Fauci received death threats (Stein 2020). At a press briefing in July 2020, Trump said, “[Fauci’s] got this high approval rating, so why don’t I have a high approval rating?” Referring to Fauci and his colleague Dr. Deborah Birx, Trump went on: “They’re highly thought of, but nobody likes me” (C-SPAN 2020). By October, Trump’s advisor Stephen Bannon was calling for Fauci to be subjected to medieval execution: “heads on spikes” (Peiser 2020). By November, Trump was saying he planned to fire Fauci after election day. He didn’t, but his allies continued their efforts to discredit Fauci well beyond the end of Trump’s presidency. In spring 2021, former Trump

advisor Peter Navarro was calling Fauci “a sociopath” and “the father of the actual virus” (Baker 2021) while Senator Rand Paul was calling Dr. Fauci “a little dictator” and an “ignoramus” (Chamberlain 2021). The Fauci drama seemed to reach its apotheosis in the fall of 2021 when the tabloid media ran misleading stories claiming Fauci was personally responsible for scientific studies in which dogs were tortured (Millbank 2021). Donald Trump Jr. began selling t-shirts that said “Fauci Kills Puppies” (Dasgupta 2021). Still, it got worse: as the Omicron variant emerged in late November 2021, Fox News guest Lara Logan compared Dr. Fauci to Nazi doctor and war criminal Josef Mengele (Barr 2021).

Behind the name-calling lies a general pattern: a subject fixates on a rival’s accomplishments or public esteem; seek the same for himself; and failing to get it, sets out to tarnish, denigrate, or sabotage the person, or the honor itself. These are the marks of envy, and it’s no surprise that headlines from the Trump era often reference envy, or its cousin, jealousy, by name. What is especially interesting about these cases is that the people targeted are not merely famous but *admired* and morally so—Obama, beacon of hope, Nobel Peace Prize winner; Fauci, *mensch*, savior to the sick, trusted truth-teller. I propose that these are cases of *malicious moral envy*.

In this chapter, I briefly sketch what malicious moral envy is, and then argue that it is puzzling. The puzzlement is due, partly, to the fact that this emotion is self-defeating. The person who displays malicious moral envy betrays a set of attitudes that are in tension with one another: they value moral virtue or moral accomplishment and regard it as important to their identity; yet, they are moved to engage in harmful and morally vicious leveling-down behaviors like tarnishing and sabotaging. If they act on their malicious moral envy—as Trump and his followers did—they make themselves morally worse. But in addition to being self-defeating in this way, I argue that malicious moral envy reveals a deeper ambivalence and complexity in our relationship to moral standards and expectations. We are both attracted to and repelled by our moral betters. We admire them, but do not necessarily want to hold ourselves to their high standards. Leveling-down behavior is an expression of this ambivalence, and in its gentler forms, can even be an important way that a social community negotiates and navigates their shared moral expectations.

## WHAT MALICIOUS MORAL ENVY IS

Malicious moral envy is a subtype of envy more generally. To map its contours, I make use of Sara Protasi’s account and typology of the varieties of envy (Protasi 2016, 2021). 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” (2021, 25). Envy is thus intimately bound up in our practices of social comparison. It is crucial, according to Protasi, that the target (envied) be sufficiently similar to the subject (envier) so that the social comparison is coherent. It is also crucial that the envied good matters to the subject’s sense of self, otherwise faring poorly in comparison would be of no consequence to the subject’s self-esteem.

It is tempting to think of envy as being essentially a negatively valenced, even antisocial emotion, but Protasi and others suggest there are in fact multiple subtypes of envy, not all of which are necessarily antisocial. Envy can motivate you to level down your rival, and this has been called invidious, destructive, or malicious envy (D’Arms 2017). Envy can also motivate you to level yourself up, and this has been called benign envy. In Protasi’s taxonomy there are even further discriminations to be made: when our focus is mainly trained on the valued good itself, our envy is “emulative” if we regard the good as obtainable, or “inert” if we do not.<sup>1</sup> When our focus is mainly trained on the envied person, our envy is “aggressive” if we think we can take it from them, or “spiteful” if we cannot (Protasi 2021, 43). Protasi acknowledges that real-life cases will be messy and vague. Still, her shorthand for the behavioral tendencies associated with each species is helpful: on aggressive envy we are moved to *steal* that valued good, and on spiteful envy we are moved to *spoil* it (43).

Robert Roberts also focused on this negative side of envy and gave the following helpful schema:

The defining proposition for envy, then, would appear to be something like this:  
*It is important for me to have the personal worth that would be established by my being or appearing to be equal or superior to R in respect X; however, I am or appear to be inferior to R in respect X; may R be or appear to be degraded in respect X.* (Roberts 2003, 262)

The last part is crucial: “may R be or appear to be degraded” expresses a desire, or perhaps an instruction, for leveling-down. The drive to *degrade* is what makes the envy malicious or destructive. Stealing the good is the best solution, as that would lower the rival while raising oneself in equal measure. Where stealing is not possible, spoiling is second-best: if I can’t have what the rival does, my consolation is that at least they can’t have it either. Or so the twisted logic goes.

What, then, would make malicious envy count as moral?<sup>2</sup> By “moral” here I just mean *regarding morality* or *about moral properties*, in the sense where moral is contrasted with nonmoral; I don’t mean “moral” in the sense of “morally good,” where moral is contrasted with immoral.<sup>3</sup> Malicious moral

envy is thus malicious envy over someone's moral properties rather than their nonmoral properties. In principle, you could envy someone for their exquisite moral badness, their superiority as a scoundrel. But let's set that case aside and focus on the more common case. Malicious moral envy can be defined as follows:

**Malicious moral envy:** an aversive reaction to a perceived moral inferiority relative to a similar rival, with regard to a moral property (virtue, accomplishment, esteem, etc.)<sup>4</sup> relevant to one's identity, that provokes malicious leveling-down attitudes or behaviors.

This definition incorporates Protasi's *similarity condition* and *self-relevance condition*, as well as Roberts' *degradation condition*. It also makes clear that the valued good is the rival's *moral* properties, whether that be their virtuous character, their tangible moral accomplishments, or the warranted moral esteem in which others hold them. The inferiority the subject detects in themselves is a *moral* inferiority, and the rival must be similar in whatever aspects of similarity are necessary for *moral* social comparison—perhaps reared in a similar culture, operating within a similar set of personal or financial constraints, developmentally and psychologically similar, and so on.

Recall *Trump v. Obama* and *Trump v. Fauci*. What makes these cases of malicious moral envy? Trump had an aversive reaction to his perceived (moral) inferiority relative to Obama, with regard to a valued good, namely the winning of a (moral) award, the Nobel Peace Prize. Obama meets the similarity condition because he, too, was a US President, a public figure, a person whose accomplishments will be tallied in history books. Indeed, he was the prior occupant of Trump's office, living quarters, airplane, and so on, so the rivalry was salient to Trump. Trump attempted to level himself up, by getting himself nominated for the prize. That effort failed (so far?), so the next pathway is to level down Obama (deeming his prize undeserved) and level down the prize itself (deeming the process unfair).<sup>5</sup>

This is spiteful envy—spoiling the valued good. The only remaining component is that the valued good must be relevant to the envier's identity. I won't examine Donald Trump's psychology at length. Suffice it to say that notwithstanding his narcissism (Conway 2019)—or perhaps because of it—it is plausible that Trump sees himself as a morally admirable and accomplished person, indeed a peacemaker who eschewed war (it is supposed to be a *peace* prize, after all). It is plausible, therefore, that the goal of faring well in *moral* comparison with other presidents would meet Protasi's *self-relevance* condition for him. Granted, there is a more superficial reading where he simply wants praise and merely values *winning*, and what he needs for his self-esteem is not to be a moral paragon but simply to be a winner.

But even on that reading, it is plausible that he values the Nobel Peace Prize more than most other prizes, precisely because it is considered a *moral* honor and he wants to be considered a winner in the moral domain just as much as in business, politics, entertainment, and so on.

The case of *Trump v. Fauci* is messier but no less striking. Many of Dr. Fauci's admirable qualities are in domains that would not meet the similarity or self-relevance conditions in a comparison with Trump. Dr. Fauci is known as: an accomplished scientist—not something Trump aspires to be; a selfless caretaker and advocate for HIV/AIDS patients—Trump is a germaphobe known for his lack of empathy; and a nonpartisan, devoted bureaucrat whose main allegiances are to science and public health—whereas Trump decries the federal government “swamp.” For these reasons, it is only under specific conditions that Fauci would be similar enough to Trump to generate a *self-relevant* rivalry. Fauci only became a target of Trump's envy when he rose to a level of public prominence sufficient to generate a coherent social comparison.

In spring 2020, both men were central to the government's response to the pandemic. Both were high-ranking government officials. (Indeed, Fauci is the highest paid US federal employee, earning more than the president.) Both were on TV nearly every day. Both are New Yorkers of a certain age. With these similarities in place, what seemed to trigger Trump's malicious moral envy was that it became clear that the public *trusted* Dr. Fauci and did *not* trust him. This was not just a matter of fame, popularity, or approval.<sup>6</sup> Polls showed that Americans regarded Dr. Fauci as a reliable source of information about the pandemic—that is, information relevant to their well-being and even survival. Sixty-seven percent trusted Fauci, while only 26 percent trusted Trump (Sanger-Katz 2020). This, I argue, is a *moral* comparison: trustworthiness and honesty are moral properties, especially in a pandemic. Moreover, even epistemic properties that are not normally regarded as moral—such as credibility or expertise—can become moralized (not to mention politicized) in the right context. We should thus take into consideration that Trump has a documented history of deception and lying, while Fauci has a documented history of scrupulous truth-telling, nonpartisanship, scientific integrity, and caring for others. In this context, to regard Trump as not credible about the pandemic is not merely to regard him as factually uninformed but to regard him as untrustworthy in a moralized sense: not apt to save us, not having our best interests at heart. The poll was a moral rebuke.

Trump's malicious reaction was to level Fauci down: take away his microphone, question his judgment, threaten his job, spread rumors about his motives, and the like. The efforts were successful in that many Americans who had not heard of Dr. Fauci before the pandemic now regarded him as a

suspect character. Meanwhile, Fauci won several new “moral courage” prizes to add to his collection.

### PUZZLEMENT AND SELF-DEFEAT

Thus far I’ve tried to show that malicious moral envy is a recognizable sub-type of envy. Because of his unusual psychology and the political partisanship surrounding him, examples involving Donald Trump are fraught. But he gives voice to thoughts and feelings that many others may be socially inhibited from expressing or acting upon. Indeed, I suspect that lesser forms of malicious moral envy are common in psychologically “healthy” people whose self-esteem is bound up with their moral identity. If you want to be morally good and you regard someone as similar to yourself but morally better, it makes sense that you would regard your moral inferiority as a problem to be solved—a mark of shame, a flaw, a source of angst, an opportunity for self-improvement. But self-improvement is hard and costly. If you cannot solve your problem by leveling yourself up, a remaining option is to level the person down. The motivation to tarnish moral standouts, to cut down the “tall poppy,” is probably more common than we like to admit.

Broadly speaking, you have two methods for leveling down your moral rival: *spoiling* and *stealing*. It’s hard to steal someone’s moral properties or achievements, but you can try: take credit for their moral accomplishments, adopt or co-opt their moral projects, mimic or fake their moral virtues, claim they were only emulating you or stealing your idea, you were the *original* good person, and so on. If stealing is not feasible, spoiling is easier: expose their flaws, ruin their reputation, associate them with scandal, render them powerless, sabotage their projects, exile them from the social community, and so on.<sup>7</sup> Some of these vicious behaviors are familiar from professional contexts or petty rivalries between neighbors or family members. Morality is a social phenomenon, so the mechanics of moral leveling-down are not much different than any other form of social leveling-down.

The problem: a *good* person would not do these things. (Sabotage, fraud, co-optation, etc., are at least *prima facie* morally prohibited regardless of one’s moral theory.) Spite and aggression are not morally neutral. These are vicious traits. If envy is an aversive reaction to one’s own perceived (moral) inferiority relative to a similar other in a self-relevant domain, and if moral properties are a self-relevant domain, how can the envier coherently feel or act on malicious moral envy? How can they reconcile the vices of *spite* and *aggression* with valuing moral virtue in a way that is tied to their sense of identity? By engaging in the leveling-down behavior, the subject *makes* *themselves morally worse*. Put another way, the existence of malicious moral

envy seems both to *presuppose* that the envier values moral virtue, character, standards, and achievements, and also to reveal a lack of respect for these valued goods. Does the envier want to be morally good, or not?

My claim is not that there is any deep contradiction here, nor that the malicious moral envier is confused. But I do think there is a tension, a muddle, an ambivalence, a degree of irrationality, and that the morally best people would tend not to feel this way and certainly not to act on it. After all, to act on this attitude—to engage in leveling-down behavior and not just fantasize about it—is to level *oneself* down, morally. The emotion is thus self-defeating, in the sense that if you carry out its distinctive action tendencies, you undermine its defining aim, which was to reduce the distance between yourself and your rival in a moral comparison.<sup>8</sup>

### EXPLAINING AWAY THE PUZZLE

Briefly, let's consider some "easy" ways to resolve the puzzlement associated with malicious moral envy. Ultimately, we will find that enough puzzle residue remains to ground a deeper examination.

First is simply to claim that I have not identified any real cases of malicious moral envy in the world. Cases involving Donald Trump are not genuine cases of malicious moral envy, one might complain. Trump does not envy Obama or Fauci's *moral* qualities, in this reading. He is simply in a competition with them for attention, love, media coverage, and so on. I concede that these other forms of envy are present in this case, but I have tried to show that there is, in addition, a moral dimension to the envy in these cases, including to the leveling-down behavior, where the goal appears not simply to make Obama and Fauci less loved, but less morally esteemed. Furthermore, other players were recruited into the envious game here, players without Trump's outsized reputation for narcissism.

A second route to explaining away the problem is to say that while these are genuine cases of malicious moral envy, they are not puzzling. There is no tension or inconsistency in wanting to be virtuous while engaging in non-virtuous behavior. This is, instead, a case of *akrasia*, or weakness of will: the envier wants to be as virtuous as the envied target but, try as they might, they simply cannot resist the temptation to be a jerk. Or perhaps they aren't even trying to be virtuous: they are not an akratic jerk but merely a jerk. After all, humans are messy, conflicted, flawed lumps of flesh, not consistent, efficient, logical, virtue-pursuing machines. There's no rule that says jerks cannot *want* to be morally good. Fair enough: it's less puzzling when the agent is severely akratic or severely a jerk. But not all cases will be like this. And

moreover, I think this pushes the puzzle back one level, for we can then ask: What does it reveal about us that in moments of weakness, some of us react to another's moral virtue by enacting moral vice, and likewise, that even jerks are envious of their moral betters?

Finally, even after we set aside cases where all we have is a narcissist looking for love, a weak-willed dreamer, or a jerk behaving badly, a hidden ambiguity remains. Even in a case where it seems we have a moral envier who really does have an aversive reaction to a rival's moral virtue or goodness, we can ask: Does he value the moral goodness and accomplishment *as such*, or rather the appearance and social recognition of having (achieved) these things, and the relative position in a hierarchy of esteem that comes with it? Trump may not envy Obama's moral virtue, per se, but rather the fact that others give Obama highly moral marks. Indeed, he may not even believe that Obama and Fauci are morally superior to himself, or morally good at all. He may simply realize that other people regard them as such. He may regard their moral reputations as undeserved and, thus, view leveling-down as a warranted correction. This would not be a genuine case of malicious moral envy, but merely a case of envying someone's moral reputation.<sup>9</sup> To distinguish cases of genuine malicious moral envy from these other cases, we should simply specify that the object of envy must be a trait that the envier regards as moral. How can we tell? We cannot be certain, but it is telling that Trump's leveling-down behaviors are directed at people (like Dr. Fauci) whose moral reputations are validated by multiple independent pieces of evidence and underwritten by institutions with nonpartisan epistemic and moral authority, such as prestigious medical schools. This does not guarantee that Trump genuinely believes Fauci is his moral better, but it means Trump is targeting someone with a documented moral record and not *merely* an aura of esteem.

We've considered three debunking explanations of the cases of malicious moral envy we began with. I concede that it is impossible to tease apart whether any of these stories is the true tale of *Trump v. Obama* and *Trump v. Fauci*. Most likely, a little of each is mixed in with some genuine malicious moral envy. After all, moral motivations are usually inaccessible to observers, and sometimes to agents themselves.

In what remains, let's assume for the sake of argument that non-debunkable, genuine cases of *malicious moral envy* exist and are puzzling. Further probing the puzzlement will shed light on our moral lives more generally.

## RESIDUAL PUZZLEMENT AND MORAL AMBIVALENCE

Recall the puzzle: the malicious moral envier has an aversive reaction to a target who fares better than him in a moral comparison, but instead of



endeavoring to improve himself, he endeavors to tarnish the target. What is most puzzling is that our envier, by hypothesis, really does *value* or *admire* whatever grounds the target's high moral standing. Suppose it's their honesty, compassion, self-sacrifice, and moral courage, as demonstrated via a track record of tangible moral accomplishments and the testimony of reliable third-party observers. To tarnish or sabotage this person would be not only spiteful but dishonest, cruel, selfish, and cowardly. It would display the vicious counterparts to the target's virtues. Thus our envier's remedy for the problem of faring poorly relative to his competitor is a remedy that renders himself *even worse off* in this comparison. In the moral rat race, you can't lap your honest competitor by being dishonest, nor can you get ahead on compassion by being cruel. These leveling-down tendencies are not just counterproductive, they are almost *incoherent*.

What to make of this incoherence? I want to suggest that what we are seeing is a symptom of a broader ambivalence about morality, moral requirements, moral objectivity, and morality's general intrusion in our lives. This allows us to make some connections between the literature on envy's role in moral education (which often takes a virtue-ethical approach), and the literature on saints and heroes, supererogation, morality's demandingness, and moral motivation (which are just as often couched in deontological or consequentialist terms).

Moral exemplars and the admiration they elicit are thought to be a powerful tool for moral education, especially with respect to inculcating moral virtue (Zagzebski 2017). Vaccarezza and Niccoli (2019) have argued that even when exemplars elicit "negative" emotions like envy, they can still be a powerful tool. Envy and other negative exemplarity-related emotions, they argue, are instrumental to producing good outcomes but are also intrinsically valuable insofar as they provide epistemic access to sources of knowledge about value, and insofar as they represent a virtuous intermediate state between excess and defect. This is true of emulative envy, which counts as a negative emotion in their picture. But they are less sanguine about malicious ("destructive") envy. They recommend beginning moral education with distant exemplars—saints and heroes—precisely because these exemplars would be less likely to induce destructive envy than exemplars drawn from a peer group (2019, 340–41).

I agree with Vaccarezza and Niccoli that saints and heroes provide epistemic access to important moral knowledge. Whereas they focus on the fact that the emotions we feel about exemplars can provide direct awareness of moral properties, I've argued that learning about the lives of moral saints provides us with evidence about well-being and sacrifice, evidence that bears on what can be deemed obligatory rather than supererogatory (Carbonell 2012). The epistemology of sacrifice can actually influence the metaphysics of what morality demands, resulting in a ratcheting-up of moral requirements, with

the outliers in the moral community serving as standard-bearers for others. This process begins when observers encounter saintly or heroic behaviors in others and begin to interrogate how demanding or costly those behaviors really are.

This all makes sense when what we feel toward exemplars is *emulative* envy. But what should we say about malicious envy? Acting out of malicious envy—slandering, sabotaging, exiling, or otherwise leveling-down a rival—is not only self-defeating but surely a net detriment to the moral community. It's neither instrumentally nor intrinsically valuable. But what about simply *entertaining* malicious envy as a feeling or appraisal, that is, talking about it with others, turning it over in your head, exploring its implications? Could this be less problematic? At the very least, to entertain the leveling-down of others, including subjecting their putatively valid moral accomplishments and motivations to scrutiny and skepticism, is consistent with a long and rich history of ambivalence toward moral exemplars and even toward moral goodness itself.

This ambivalence was famously explored by Susan Wolf in "Moral Saints" (1982), where she argues that moral theories and even our common-sense moral commitments put forward ideals that we don't *actually* want to emulate. It's telling, Wolf claims, that the protagonists we are drawn to in literature are flawed rather than morally perfect; perfect moral saints are repulsive in their humorless, single-minded devotion to morality.<sup>10</sup> We don't want to be them, to be like them, or to be around them. She claims there is "a limit to how much morality we can stand" (Wolf 1982, 423) and that it's possible for someone to be "too good" (421)—that is, it can be bad to be (too) good.

Granted, we can disambiguate this thought and re-write it to remove the air of paradox—it is (*non-morally*) bad to be too (*morally*) good. Wolf's thought, then, is that perfect adherence to the demands thrown up by our moral theories sometimes generates conflict with other ways of living an excellent life. But even this uncontroversial point sheds helpful light on our exploration of malicious moral envy. I am not claiming that Wolf's take-down of moral saints is an instance of moral envy, much less *malicious* moral envy, nor that she is merely giving voice to our envious thoughts. Rather, I want to suggest that malicious moral envy and the critical, skeptical examination of moral outliers have a common cause: our ambivalence about morality and our defensive stance toward any intrusions it should make into the other, non-moral sources of value and meaning in our lives. And this ambivalence might not be a bad thing.

We see an even stronger expression of this ambivalence in the literature on "admirable immorality." This idea has its intellectual roots in Nietzsche, but here I'll focus on more recent discussions. Just as Wolf (1982) suggests that it is not always better to be morally better, Bernard Williams (1981)

suggests the world might be better without universal moral compliance, and Michael Slote (1986) argues that some *intrinsically* immoral character traits are nonetheless admirable. The underlying point of contention here is the “Overridingness Thesis,” which is the view that “morality overrides all opposing considerations” (Slote 1986, 84).<sup>11</sup> Williams considers the example of Churchill’s ruthless fire-bombing of German cities (preventing further bloodshed); Slote considers the example of a father who lies to the police about his son’s whereabouts (manifesting unconditional love). Setting aside how we should best think about these particular examples, they serve as good illustrations of *moral ambivalence*.

Moral ambivalence, I propose, plays an important role in how moral communities negotiate shared standards and reconcile disagreements. If this is right, malicious moral envy and the *admiration of immorality* are two sides of the same coin. The malicious moral envier sees someone’s moral goodness, feels negatively about it, and is moved to behave viciously toward that person. The admirer of immorality sees someone’s moral badness or moral error, and nevertheless sees something praiseworthy in it. Granted, some cases in the literature on “admirable immorality” may not reflect ambivalence per se but, rather, a sensitivity to nonmoral considerations, or considerations beyond a particular normative theory, such as virtue considerations seen against the backdrop of a duty-based theory.<sup>12</sup> That is, what we’re ambivalent about may be our theories, rather than the substantive moral qualities of an act or agent. However, admirable immorality involves—by stipulation—deeming an action both immoral *and* admirable. So it’s certainly a more ambivalent position than simply claiming an action cannot be immoral because it is, say, what the virtuous person would do.

We also display moral ambivalence when we question and speculate about people’s moral motivations. When someone we care about acts wrongly, it is tempting to find a narrative according to which they had good intentions and merely lost their way; this reduces the dissonance caused by the thought that someone *like me* has done something *like that*. Conversely, when someone does something morally extraordinary, a peanut gallery of critics will appear with debunking explanations—ulterior motives, hidden agendas, and even psychiatric diagnoses.

In her book about real-life moral heroes, Larissa MacFarquhar (2015) argues that this moral unease and disorientation is a reaction to the sublime:

The life of a zealous do-gooder is a kind of human sublime—by which I mean that, although there is a hard beauty in it, the word “beautiful” doesn’t capture the ambivalence it stirs up. . . . A sublime object, such as a mountain or a rough sea, inspires awe, but also dread. Confronting it, you see its formidable nobility, and at the same time you sense uncomfortably that you would not survive

in it for long. It is this sense of sublime that I mean to apply to do-gooders: to confront such a life is to feel awe mixed with unease—a sense that you wouldn't survive in that life for long, and might not want to. (MacFarquhar 2015: 3–4)

MacFarquhar traces the history of this unease, from Freud-inspired theories of “moral narcissism” and “psychotic altruism” (2015, 111–12) to the backlash against international humanitarian aid workers (164–65) to the way early altruistic kidney donors were assumed mentally ill (199–202). She sees a similar theme in the development of the organization *Al-Anon*, which succeeded in leveling down family members who enable alcoholics—they aren't selfless and devoted, they are “co-dependent” and as disordered as the person struggling with the addiction (155–58). Viewed through *Al-Anon*'s pessimistic lens, “the logic of codependency suggests that helping is often a disease, because the one who helps is not free” (168).

The pathologizing of moral exemplars is a kind of leveling-down, and we've seen it in the way some world leaders have denigrated young climate activist Greta Thunberg.<sup>13</sup> A related phenomenon can be found in the philosophical literature on moral motivation, where some argue that the desire to do the right thing, when interpreted in a certain way, amounts to *fetishizing* morality (Carbonell 2013). Even where there is no suggestion of mental illness or deviance, the discovery of weaknesses or flaws in moral exemplars is often met with relief. In his book about the global health leader and (arguably) moral saint Dr. Paul Farmer, author Tracy Kidder (2003) sees traces of moral envy in Farmer's social circle:

Lately, he received a fair amount of criticism from friends for not spending more time with his family, and there were some who, when they spoke about this matter out of his earshot, seemed oddly animated. Their voices would rise, or they would smile conspiratorially. “Can you imagine what it's like being married to him?” I wonder if this was a species of moral envy. Jim Kim said, “Paul has a gift for making people feel guilty.” Farmer counseled others to take vacations while taking none himself. He didn't disapprove of others having luxuries, so long as they gave something to the causes of the poor. He demanded a great deal from proteges and colleagues, and he always forgave them when they didn't measure up. And so I think it was a relief, for some, to find what looked like a chink in his moral armor. (Kidder 2003, 212)

Whereas *Trump v. Obama* and *Trump v. Fauci* are cases of genuinely *malicious* moral envy, what we see here is a more harmless analogue. These conspiratorial friends are not trying to ruin Farmer's reputation, sabotage his projects, or harm him in any way; nor do they seem spiteful. But they are engaging in a kind of leveling-down, motivated by a kind of envy. Their ambivalence—admiration mixed with guilt, awe mixed with skepticism,

solidarity mixed with distancing, praise mixed with criticism—is a healthy social dynamic in a moral community that is deliberating, together, about what they can morally expect from one another. Like envy itself, this ambivalence may have important epistemic value (Exline and Zell 2008; Vaccarezza and Niccoli 2019).

## CONCLUSION

Malicious moral envy is a subtype of envy more generally, and a paradigm case would involve genuinely destructive, antisocial behaviors toward someone deemed a moral rival. Such cases will be rare, because in all human interactions, destructive behavior is the exception, not the norm. And we would expect it to be even more exceptional among people who value and admire others for their moral properties or accomplishments. Indeed, malicious moral envy is self-defeating. Some purported cases of malicious moral envy can be explained away, or are hopelessly entangled with confounding variables. But some cases remain, and they are a species of a moral general genus of moral ambivalence. Ambivalence is sometimes a fitting attitude to have toward the messy and complicated moral landscape we are confronted with. In particular, the scope and limits of our duties to one another, along with the range of ways our character can be appraised for how we live up to those duties (or fail to), are essentially social matters. As we navigate and negotiate them together, we find that they are plastic, shifting and stretching in response to changing conditions. Expressions of moral ambivalence, up to and including malicious moral envy, are both a consequence of morality's social nature, and a tool for finding out way through it.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

1. This chapter focuses on *malicious* moral envy. There is a fascinating literature on its *benign* counterpart. See Engelen et al. (2018), Kristjánsson (2006, 2017), Protasi (2021), Vaccarezza (2019), and Zagzebski (2015, 2017). See also Maria Silvia Vaccarezza and Ariele Niccoli's contribution to this volume: "Let the Donkeys Be Donkeys: In Defense of Inspiring Envy" (chapter 6).

2. There isn't space to situate my view historically, but Protasi (2021) provides an overview in the appendix. Protasi locates passages in Catherine of Siena, Aquinas, and Al-Ghazali that plausibly are discussions of *moral envy*. However, it is harder to find any discussion of *malicious* moral envy.

3. I take no position on whether envy, in general, should count as a "moral emotion," either on the basis of its central evaluative concern or its typical consequences.

I am only suggesting that some cases of envy are moral. See Ben-Ze'ev (2002) on what makes an emotion moral, immoral, or morally neutral.

4. I am mixing types of moral evaluation here, intending to remain neutral with respect to moral theory. Thus, malicious moral envy should be an intelligible concept regardless of whether virtue theory, consequentialism, deontology, and so on, is the correct moral theory, and regardless of the envier's preferred theory (if any). Still, there will be complications that arise for each theory, and we might need theory to determine whether a particular case of moral envy is fitting—that is, whether the target is *enviable*.

5. Trump had a long history of racist behavior toward President Obama predating his own presidency. I bracket that here, but racist hierarchies complicate both the social comparison and the available options for leveling-down behavior. See chapter 5 of Protasi (2021) for more on political envy and racial prejudice.

6. Multiple types of envy are at play here. Trump mentioned Fauci's *approval rating*. This could be regarded as a (moral) assessment of someone's job performance, but also as a mere proxy for being liked or loved. As Sara Protasi has suggested to me, an alternative reading is that Trump simply needs love and envies Fauci for how much people love him. Reportedly, Trump's antipathy toward Fauci peaked when Brad Pitt portrayed Fauci on *Saturday Night Live*. This is malicious envy, but not malicious *moral* envy. According to the source: "Trump really can't stand it when you get bigger and more popular than him. . . . Getting you off TV is the way he brings you down" (Costa et al. 2020).

7. *Blame* may count as a leveling-down behavior that manifests moral envy. Trump's allies Rand Paul and Peter Navarro have leveled-down Dr. Fauci by blaming him for the pandemic. See Neal Tognazzini's contribution to this volume: "'You're Just Jealous!': On Envious Blame" (chapter 8).

8. Vaccarezza and Niccoli (2019) make this same point about other-regarding virtues. They claim these virtues are good targets for moral education, because they are likely to elicit emulative envy rather than destructive envy, precisely because destructive envy would be self-defeating in such cases: "it would mean ipso facto missing any chance to equal the envied in relation to the envied trait" (2019, 341). I would add that the self-defeat is *most* glaring when there is a *match* between the envied virtue and the destructive vice (compassion and cruelty, honesty and deception). However, we can regard malicious moral envy as self-defeating more broadly, even when there is no such match, and even without a virtue theory framing. Even in a consequentialist picture, malicious moral envy can be seen as self-defeating: it obstructs both the subject and the target's ability to contribute to good outcomes.

9. Malicious leveling-down can be considered a degraded contribution to public moral discourse. "Moral grandstanding" is another such degraded contribution which is motivated by desire to be *recognized* rather than to be right (Tosi and Warmke 2016). Both behaviors reflect poorly on the subject. Unlike grandstanding, malicious moral envy would be driven by a sincere motivation to be morally better, rather than just to be *seen* as morally better. Thank you to Maria Silvia Vaccarezza for suggesting this connection.

10. I raise some worries for Wolf's argument and put forward real-life moral saints as potential counter-examples, in Carbonell (2009).

11. See Baron (1986), Flanagan (1986), and Louden (1988) for criticisms of Slote's argument here.

12. I thank Maria Silvia Vaccarezza and Ariele Niccoli for helping me see this important point.

13. Just as Trump's envy of Obama is tinged with racism, his criticism of Greta Thunberg is complicated by misogyny and ableism. See, for example, Nelson (2019) and North (2019). Is this a case of malicious moral envy? To be sure, Thunberg is not a peer to Trump. Still, sexism and ableism could amplify moral envy, in the sense that it may be even more enraging to Trump that someone "lower" than him on these other social hierarchies is regarded as morally superior.

14. I am grateful to participants in the Moral Psychology of Envy Workshop at the University of Puget Sound in May 2021, in particular Sara Protasi, Maria Silvia Vaccarezza, Ariele Niccoli, Neal Tognazzini, and Niels van de Ven for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts. Thanks also to James Carbonell, Jon Shaheen, Heidi Mai-bom, and Alex Plakias for helpful conversation.

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