

Envy as a Civic Emotion

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In the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua Giotto depicts seven pairs of opposing virtues and vices. Among them, are *Envy* and *Love*. That love is an opposite and remedy to envy is a widespread notion, rooted in theological Christian tradition, but present also in other traditions, which has deep ramifications in the philosophical treatment of envy. One such ramification can be found in a contemporary debate in political philosophy: Martha Nussbaum proposes love as a remedy to the kind of envy that can destabilize society, what Rawls called “general envy”. In this essay, I argue that such a solution is unsatisfying, and that we can fight envy with envy, encouraging the arousal of a kind of envy that is not malicious and is socially productive.¹

¹ Other authors have argued that envy in general can have a positive role in society. Marguerite La Caze argues that envy can be, like resentment, a moral emotion, when it is directed at undeserved success (cf. “Envy and resentment”, *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, 4:1, 2001, 31–45). A direct critique to La Caze’s account, which I find correct, is presented by Aaron Ben-ze’ev in “Are Envy, Anger, and Resentment Moral Emotions?”, *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action*, 5:2, 2002, 148–154. A compelling, empirically-minded critique of positions such as la Caze’s can be found in Miceli, M. and Castelfranchi, C., “The envious mind”, *Cognition and Emotion*, 2007, 21 (3), 449–479. Several authors defend a limited role for envy in the distributive justice debate on envy that stems from Rawls’ treatment (cf. Green, J. E., “Rawls and the forgotten figure of the most advantaged: In defense of reasonable envy toward the superrich.” *American Political Science Review*, 2013, 107: 1, 123–138; Frye, H., “The Relation of Envy to Distributive Justice”, *Social Theory and Practice*, 2016, 42:3, 501–524; Bankovsky, M., “Excusing Economic Envy: On Injustice and Impotence”, *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 2018, 35:2, 257–279. I critique these views in *The Philosophy of Envy*, 2021, Cambridge University Press.). My (moderate) defense of envy’s role in society does not depend on any specific commitment in political theory, but rather on substantive views about the nature of envy itself.

I. The Problem of Envy in *A Theory of Justice*

In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls excludes envy from the psychological propensities that the parties under the veil of ignorance can be subject to.² The first reason for this exclusion is that individual propensity to envying is a contingency that should not influence the choice of principles of justice. The second is that envy is not a morally desirable trait of a rational individual.

Rawls defines envy proper as “as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages”.³ Consequently, envy motivates one to deprive others of what they have even at a personal cost for oneself, and is thus counterproductive and malicious, detrimental to individual and collective well-being.

Rawls distinguishes this malicious envy from two other kinds. One is “benign envy”, which is simply the wish to have something we lack, and that we consider as worthy of praise. Rawls thinks it is a sort of compliment, rather than an expression of emotion proper, and does not further discuss it. The second is “emulative envy,” which “leads us to try to achieve what others have. The sight of their greater good moves us to strive in socially beneficial ways for similar things for ourselves” (p. 467). Rawls does not discuss emulative envy in detail, and it is not clear how close it is in his view to destructive envy. I will come back to his view of emulative envy later on.

Within destructive envy, Rawls further distinguishes between general and particular. General envy is general in two senses. First, because it arises in a social context: the envier

² Patrick Tomlin argues that this is not a legitimate move on Rawls’ part. Cf. Tomlin, P. “Envy, Facts and Justice: A Critique of the Treatment of Envy in Justice as Fairness”, *Res Publica*, 2008: 101-116.

³ Rawls, J. *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 466. All following in-text page references refer to this work.

will look at the envied as member of a social group or class: “The upper classes say are envied for their greater wealth and opportunity” (p. 466). Second, because the good that is envied is also general. It is contrasted with the particular envy that arises in personal rivalry and competition: “Those who lose out in the quest for office and honor, or for the affections of another, are liable to envy the success of their rivals and to covet the very same thing that they have won” (p. 466). Since he believes that this latter kind cannot be eliminated even in a just society, Rawls focuses on general destructive envy.

The question he faces with regard to this kind of envy is “whether the well-ordered society corresponding to the conception adopted will actually generate feelings of envy and patterns of psychological attitudes that will undermine the arrangements it counts to be just” (465). More specifically, his worry is that the difference principle might sanction inequalities so great as to “arouse envy to a socially dangerous extent” (466).

Rawls correctly realizes that a citizen who found herself in a society where disparities are so large as to cause a loss of self-esteem would be warranted in feeling envy. In such a case it would be unreasonable to expect someone to feel differently, and envy would be *excusable*. The question then becomes “whether a basic structure which satisfies the principles of justice is likely to arouse so much excusable envy that the choice of these principles should be reconsidered” (468).

Rawls’ final verdict, as one can imagine, is negative: we do not need to reconsider the choice of principles of justice. He reaches this conclusion after examining three conditions that make hostile outbreaks of envy problematic. The first one concerns individual psychology: when people lack self-esteem and self-confidence, they are more likely to feel

envy, because they perceive their inferiority as reflecting negatively on themselves.⁴ Lack of self-esteem is experienced as humiliating and painful when social circumstances make visible such a discrepancy between oneself and others, and this is the second, social condition, which Rawls discusses. Finally, the third condition is also social: the societal structure may appear to prevent the envious person from improving her situation.

Rawls believes that a well-ordered society may mitigate, if not prevent, all three conditions. That citizens are all granted the same respect as persons and the same basic rights is supposed to assuage issues of self-esteem. Furthermore, “members of the community have a common sense of justice and they are bound by ties of civic friendship” (470), the latter being a notion that is developed in Nussbaum’s work.

The second condition is also addressed at multiple levels: Rawls argues that the difference principle will not in practice allow for excessive disparities in wealth, and anyway they would be smaller than the disparities that have prevailed in society so far. Furthermore, Rawls believes that the well-ordered society’s plurality of associations tends to reduce or eliminate the visibility of differences between people’s prospects.

As with regard to the third condition, Rawls simply states that “it would seem that a well-ordered society as much as any other offers constructive alternatives to hostile outbreaks of envy” (471).⁵

⁴ Rawls’ intuition is solidly backed up by empirical evidence, cf. among others Salovey, P., and Rodin, J., “Provoking jealousy and envy: Domain relevance and self-esteem threat”, *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 1991, 10: 395-413, and Smith, R. H., Parrott, G. W., Diener, E. W., Hoyle, R. H., and Kim, S., “Dispositional Envy”, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1999, 25: 1007-1020. Note, however, that the same empirical evidence shows that envy mostly arises from *small*, not large inequalities. I set such complications aside here.

⁵ Nussbaum’s gloss on this point is helpful. She connects Rawls’ remark to his previous discussion of plurality of associations, thus suggesting that it is the possibility of competing along a variety of dimensions what provide “constructive alternatives”. I take it that the idea would be that, in a just society, everybody has a chance to succeed at something.

Rawls concludes that that “the principles of justice are not likely to arouse excusable general envy (nor particular envy either) to a troublesome extent” (471), and this is where we leave him.

II. Nussbaum’s Solution to the Problem of Envy

Martha Nussbaum shares, to an extent, Rawls’ conclusion. She discusses the problem of societal envy in her discussion of “the enemies of compassion” in *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, where she proposes a theory of political love that addresses questions left open in Rawls’ work.⁶

Like Rawls, she believes that societal envy is a pernicious emotion, which is not fully avoidable, but whose pernicious effects can be limited in a just society. She agrees with Rawls on the importance of laws and institutions that guarantee basic rights for all citizens, and of educational and economic systems that allow them to perceive themselves as capable of improving their condition and advancing their status,

However, she goes beyond Rawls in two ways. First, she highlights the importance of encouraging citizens to develop the right values:

“Consider a high school reunion that values money alone: there will be a great deal of hostile envy at that reunion, because people will be very unequally placed with regard to money, and the reunion makes these inequalities evident, as such occasions always do. ... In a society that values a range of types of constructive

⁶ Nussbaum, M. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Harvard University Press, 2013. Nussbaum presents analogous views on envy also in *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis*, Simon & Schuster, 2018.

achievements, there will be no linear ranking, and people can take pride in a variety of lives. To that extent, hostile envy is diminished.”⁷

While I agree with Nussbaum about the importance of instilling the right values in citizens (both intrinsically and as a way to assuage envy), I do not think that is enough. Most people value money precisely because it is instrumental to constructive achievements. This is especially true in societies such as the United States, in which access to education, entertainment, arts, and to so many other sources of value is heavily dependent on having the appropriate financial means. Thus, envying someone for their money would still be appropriate in those societies, and it is plausible that those are the societies in which class envy is felt more intensely. My speculation is supported if we look at an example that Nussbaum considers right after her discussion of the importance of appropriate values.

The second way in which Nussbaum intends to go beyond Rawls is by articulating an ideal of “civic friendship,” which Rawls endorsed without ever defining. The general idea is that *personal love* may be a model for political love. Political love, in turn, is a remedy for envy. Envy, according to Nussbaum, attacks compassion, because it limits the agent’s altruistic concern to those who are in her immediate circle of friends and family, and at the same time it inhibits empathy toward everybody else, who thus becomes an enemy. The antidote to this process is developing a sense of friendship and common fate with one’s fellow citizens, so that the more advantaged not only tolerate but support social policies that help the less advantaged, and the less advantaged, in turn, do not feel envy toward the more advantaged.

In order to substantiate this suggestion, she makes the example of Finland, a country that she perceives to have low levels of interclass envy. Her Finnish friends believe that the explanation for this fact is that the Finns conceive of their small country as a family.

⁷ Ibid. p. 345.

Nussbaum has only one qualm with such an explanation: it cannot easily generalize to most other countries, which are much larger, and it should not, in a sense, because Finnish society is extremely homogenous and reluctant to admit immigrants or asylum seekers, and this is a feature that Nussbaum finds problematic (and I agree with her).

But Nussbaum thinks that the Finnish model, setting aside its problematic features, is an inspiring one, and she goes on to ask: in which ways can one create, in larger, and more diverse and inclusive societies, “a sense of common fate, or, in Whitman’s terms, ‘plant companionship thick as trees?’”⁸

My reaction to the Finnish example is, however, one of skepticism. A complex question concerning the existence of low levels of inter-class envy cannot be answered without an attentive, empirically-based investigation of Finnish economic and social structures, which obviously cannot be attempted here. But even without hard data there are reasons to doubt the power of familial love against envy: we know from personal experience, anecdotal evidence, and psychoanalytic research that families can be full of envy.

Furthermore, similar concerns apply to friendly love, which Nussbaum sees as the closest model for political love. Like Rawls, she acknowledges that a society free of rivalry and competition is not possible, and maybe undesirable, since fair competition is collectively advantageous. But competition and rivalry, and the envy that come with them, are often present in friendly relationships, even healthy ones. Throughout the book, Nussbaum emphasizes that she aims to discuss *real* emotions felt by *real* people, but then she cannot ignore the complex intermingling of love and envy in real life scenarios.

⁸ Ibid. p. 346.

To sum up the gist of my critique to Nussbaum's solution: how can civic friendship avoid being affected by rivalry and competition, and become a solution to the problem of envy in society, if friendship (and love more generally) is not incompatible with envy?⁹

One could worry at this point that I inadvertently shifted the topic of discussion, since Rawls intends discusses general envy, which focuses on kinds of goods, rather than *particular* envy, which arises out of personal rivalries and competitions and cannot be avoided even in a just society. I have a two-pronged response to this worry.

First, I could note that it is Nussbaum herself who has made the shift, given that civic friendship is modeled (at least in part) on personal friendship and familial love. She thinks that we need to widen the same kind of sympathetic concerns that we feel for our friends and family members to our fellow citizens. But then it becomes crucial that within those friendly and familial relationships love coexists with envy.

For instance, one example of personal envy that Nussbaum discusses is that of feeling envy for the cool kids in high school. But all too often those cool kids may be our friends, as many fictional and non-fictional narratives of "frenemies" and other ambivalent friendships testify.¹⁰ Sibling rivalry is also an obvious example of cohabitation of intense affect and competitive feelings, which include both jealousy and envy.¹¹ Looking for a solution to envy in personal love unavoidably brings with it envy itself.

⁹ Notice that incompatibility here is meant to be both descriptive and normative: even authentic, genuine love and friendship can coexist with envy, even though admittedly one may hold *ideals* of love that exclude any form of envy (I do not hold that view).

¹⁰ Cf. Bigelow Bushman, B. and Holt-Lunstad, J. 2009, "Understanding Social Relationship Maintenance Among Friends: Why we don't end those frustrating friendships", *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 28 (6): 749-778.

¹¹ I disagree with Nussbaum's claim at p. 339 that sibling rivalry involves only, or primarily, jealousy. While it may be true that siblings compete for parental love, and that the emotional response to that competition is best characterized in terms of jealousy, siblings (especially same gender ones) naturally compete in many other contexts, such as school, social circles, sports, and in those contexts what they feel is clearly envy.

Second, and more importantly, *particular* envy is not the same as *personal* envy: Rawls is right in thinking that no just society can avoid the kind of envy that stems out of very specific life circumstances, such as sibling rivalry or rivalry between two close friends with regard to a very specific and exclusive good, such as being valedictorian at the same school (this is what he calls particular envy). But what Nussbaum discusses are cases of envy that, while experienced within *personal* relationships, are felt with regard to goods that are affected by societal structure: a teenager may be envious of her richer friends who get educational opportunities precluded to her, and her envy and resentment may affect the stability of society, and are in any case relevant when we assess how just societal policies are.¹² This may be one context in which it is appropriate to say that the personal is political.

III. Interlude: Love and Envy as Opposite Sides of our Unsociable Sociability¹³

Nussbaum's solution to the problem of envy is not only interesting and worth addressing in its own right. It also exemplifies a long-standing philosophical and theological tradition that sees love and envy as incompatible attitudes, one a virtue, the other a vice. But I submit that

¹² Patrick Tomlin (*ibid.*) discusses this kind of cases and argues that Rawls conflates two ways in which envy can be particular: with regard to the object and with regard to the target. Rawls talks about the former: envying others (presumably either individuals or groups) for general goods. But Tomlin uses the example of envying one's sibling, a particular individual, because of their superior position with regard to access to primary social goods, which is a general good. An implication of Tomlin's distinction is that envy can also be *general* in these two senses. Thus we have four kinds of envy: envy that is general both with regard to target and object (e.g. poor people may envy rich people); envy that is general with regard to target but particular with regard to goods (e.g. women might envy men because they are advantaged in the run for President); envy that is particular with regard to target but general with regard to object (e.g. I may envy my brother because he has a job with better pension benefits); and finally envy that is particular both with regard to object and target (envying a particular person for a particular trait, position, or advantage they have).

¹³ In this interlude I allude to themes and material that I discuss in greater detail in Protasi, S. "Invideo et Amo: On Envying the Beloved", *Philosophia*, 2017, 45, 1765–1784, and in Protasi, S. *The Philosophy of Envy*, esp. ch. 4, 2021, Cambridge University Press.

they are in fact opposite sides of the same coin, what Kant called our human “unsociable sociability.”¹⁴

On the one hand, man is a social animal, attracted to other human beings, and characterized by feelings of love, friendship, altruism, benevolence and other pro-social attitudes and emotions. On the other hand, man is an anti-social beast, aggressive and hostile toward other human beings, and characterized by feelings of hatred, enmity, egoism, and malice. Many other animals exhibit both pro-social and anti-social behavior. But only in human lives are these opposite tendencies tightly intertwined.

The reason for this connection is that humans derive a deep, highly motivating enjoyment from “what is eminent,”¹⁵ that is, from what is comparatively excellent. They want to be acknowledged by their peers as worthy of esteem and appreciation.¹⁶ This desire for social esteem, which is grounded in the tendency to compare oneself to similar others, is the root of our sociable unsociability, of which the paradoxical relation between love and envy is one vivid expression.

¹⁴ Kant, I., *Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim* (1784), tr. by Wood, A. W., ed. by Zöllner, G. and Loudon R. B., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007.

¹⁵ This is Hobbes’ expression, *à propos* of human thirst for honor, which is a distinctive human feature lacked by other social animals such as ants and bees (see Hobbes, T., *Leviathan* (1651), ed. by Malcolm, N., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012, par. 17. Current scientific evidence is insufficient to prove that this is a unique human trait. We know that primates and other animals work hard to climb up, and remain at the top of, the social hierarchy (cf. e.g. Muller and Wrangham 2003, and Geschiere et al 2011), but it is a lot harder to determine whether they desire social esteem or feel emotions analogous to the human ones. It is similarly difficult to ascertain whether animals feel envy proper (as opposed to resentment or jealousy). Thank you to Laurie Santos for some clarifications and references, and to Verity Harte for stimulating my thoughts on this issue.

¹⁶ This is a fundamental theme in Rousseau’s philosophy. Like Hobbes and Kant, Rousseau is aware that the antisocial and the prosocial behavior of human beings are connected in structural ways, but it can be argued that this realization plays a central role in his system. He sees *amour propre* as the originating source of many evils but also of many goods, all of which are distinctively human. *Amour propre* is a form of self-love that drives a person to seek recognition, in all its forms, of her fellow human beings. (I am following Neuhaus, F., *Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*, New York: OUP, 2008.) Rousseau, however, never focuses on envy in particular.

Love and envy, notwithstanding their many opposite traits, share this fundamental aspect: the desire of being selected as uniquely valuable, of standing out in a crowd as the “coolest” individual: most lovable, but also most enviable. A passage from Rousseau’s *Second Discourse on Inequality* provides a vivid illustration of this point:

“[Men] became accustomed to looking more closely at the different objects of their desires and to making comparisons; imperceptibly they acquired ideas of beauty and merit which led to feelings of preference. In consequence of seeing each other often, they could not do without seeing each other constantly. A tender and pleasant feeling insinuated itself into their souls, and the least opposition turned it into an impetuous fury: with love arose jealousy; discord triumphed, and human blood was sacrificed to the gentlest of all passions... Each one began to consider the rest, and to wish to be considered in turn; and thus a value came to be attached to public esteem. Whoever sang or danced best, whoever was the handsomest, the strongest, the most dexterous, or the most eloquent, came to be of most consideration; and this was the first step towards inequality, and at the same time towards vice. From these first distinctions arose on the one side vanity and contempt and on the other shame and envy: and the fermentation caused by these new leavens ended by producing combinations fatal to innocence and happiness.”¹⁷

Our estimable qualities, which are assessed on a comparative basis, make us an appropriate potential recipient of either love or envy. When we are the target of either emotion, we come to perceive ourselves as having valuable traits which makes us more attractive than similar others. When we are the agents feeling either love or envy, we look at the person who has

¹⁷ Rousseau, J. J., *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, II, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (1750-1762), tr. by Cole, G. D. H., London: Dent, and Everyman’s library, 1973, pp. 89-90.

those valuable traits, and we are drawn to them, either to share and rejoice of those qualities or to acquire them ourselves.

The desire to be loved and the desire to be envied each involve a desire to stand out from the crowd, of being selected as uniquely valuable, as the most attractive individual. The coexistence of love and envy, then, is the consequence of deeply seated features of human nature. They are expressions of our unsociable sociability. Once we accept that *envy is the dark side of love*, however, we come to see that *love is the luminous side of envy*, and that there is a kind of envy that is compatible with love and that can contribute to the flourishing of human societies: emulative envy.

IV. Emulative Envy as a Civic Emotion

Envy comes in many varieties, which vary in internal psychological structure, behavioral manifestations, and moral and prudential value, but which all satisfy a widely shared definition of envy in social psychology: envy is an aversive response to a perceived disadvantage to a similar other with regard to a good that is important to the self.¹⁸

Their characteristics are determined by the interplay of two variables, focus of concern and perceived obtainability of the good. Focus of concern is what the envier cares about. The envier focuses more on the good when she values the good for its own sake. The pain that results from the lack of the good is exacerbated by the fact that the envied possesses the good. The envier focuses more on the target when she is pained by the unfavorable comparison to the target. The good is not valued for its own sake, but as a means to overcoming one's inferiority.

¹⁸ I defend, and describe in greater detail, the taxonomy of envy presented here in Protasi, S. "Varieties of Envy", *Philosophical Psychology*, 2016, 29:4, 535–549, and in *The Philosophy of Envy*, cit. For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of envy in the political sphere see *The Philosophy of Envy*, ch. 5.

When one is more focused on the good, one is more inclined to get the good itself, and less concerned with depriving the target of it. Vice versa, when one is more focused on the target, one is more inclined to deprive the envied of the good.

The second variable is perceived obtainability of the good. What obtaining the good equates to depends on whether the envier is focused on the good or on the target. If she is focused on the good, obtaining the good means getting the good for herself, without any intention to deprive the envied. If she is focused on the target, obtaining the good means taking the good away from the target.

The interplay between these two variables produces four emotions: emulative envy, inert envy, aggressive envy, and spiteful envy, illustrated in the figure below.



Fig. 2 Varieties of Envy

Emulative envy, which is characterized by a focus on the good and the perception that the good is obtainable, is the kind of envy that can contribute to the stability of our society. The agent feeling emulative envy looks at the envied not as someone to deprive of the good, but as a representation of what the agent herself could have, as a model for self-improvement.

Emulative envy is thus not malicious and it is potentially socially advantageous. It is compatible with fair but fierce competition and is a more realistic alternative to love or civic friendship. In societies shaped by stark inequalities such as, for instance, the United States, appealing to love and cooperation might be ineffective, or even counterproductive. While we should certainly uphold *ideals* of brotherly love and cooperation, it is naïve to expect those ideals to be embraced in the current political and social climate.¹⁹

While emulative envy is compatible with love, it is *also* compatible with more lukewarm feelings, such as tolerance, with indifference, and even dislike.²⁰ I can look up to someone along a certain dimension (for instance, professional success) even if I do not respect or like them along others (for instance, value or ethnicity). Class envy, or any other often pernicious form of group envy, need not take the form of malicious envy, as envisioned by Nussbaum and Rawls. A low-class worker would benefit from feeling emulative envy toward her middle-class counterpart: she would feel motivated to self-improve her condition, without being inclined to deprive the envied of her advantages, but without the demanding prescription of liking or admiring her.

Furthermore, feeling emulative envy is compatible with a motivation to fight for social justice, and thus with feeling *resentment*, or *indignation*. Resentment and indignation, differently from envy, are moral emotions, in the sense that they necessarily involve a moral claim: when I resent someone, I must think that they have wronged me; when I am indignant about something, I must think that some wrong has been done to someone.²¹ But

¹⁹ Similar considerations apply to admiration, which is often considered the nobler version of envy: it is simply unrealistic to think that admiration can replace envy, especially in the context of class envy.

²⁰ I thank Myisha Cherry for drawing my attention to this possibility.

²¹ Thus, resentment is personal, while indignation is impersonal (that is, the wrong is seen from an impartial perspective, even when I am the person who has been wronged). Cf. Strawson, P. F., "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 48: 1–25, 1962. Both share what Stephen Darwall calls *second-*

envy requires no such claim: I can be envious of someone even if they deserve what they have (indeed, I will be even more envious because of that!).²²

In some circumstances it might be appropriate to look, and fight for, for structural changes, which are unlikely to be brought about by emulative envy. But emulative envy adds a valuable tool to citizens' emotional repertoire, allowing them to feel a warranted response and also to act on it in socially legitimate and useful ways. So, for instance, a well-ordered society might still involve significant financial inequalities, which in turn transform into differential access to educational opportunities. The response of disadvantaged citizens could be two-pronged: motivated by resentment, they could fight for policies that increase equality, either via political activism or voting, and at the same time, motivated by emulative envy, they could work on their personal, individual improvement.²³

Emulative envy is also different from “emulation”. Emulation does not refer to an emotion, but rather to a behavior, or intention, to equal, or excel someone else. Emulation in itself is not associated with a specific affect, and can be found in association with different emotions (such as filial love), or contexts (such as religious experience). Emulative envy, like any other kind of envy, is a specific emotion with a negative affect. However, like other painful but positive emotional states such as feeling humbled, it helps a person to improve herself.²⁴

personal nature (Darwall, S. *The Second Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²² Nussbaum claims that resentment, together with what she calls “emulation”, are “healthy emotions in a decent society” (p. 342), insofar as resentment leads to improvements in society, and emulation leads to improvements in the individual. As I say above, I think that resentment and emulative envy can co-occur. I discuss emulation below.

²³ Emulative envy may also play a role at the group level. I discuss group envy in *The Philosophy of Envy*, cit.

²⁴ It is possible that when Nussbaum talks about emulation she has, at least in part, in mind something like my notion of emulative envy.

In fact, many of the strategies suggested by Rawls and above all by Nussbaum to combat malicious envy are also ways to favor the arousal of emulative envy: preserving people's self-respect and helping them to develop a healthy, non-inflated but not deflated self-esteem; guaranteeing equal opportunities and multiplying chances to excel; stressing the value, both individual and collective, of diverse pursuits, skills, goals, as they fit different kinds of people.

One reason why the role of emulative envy is not more prominent in discussions such as Rawls' is that there is widespread skepticism that emulative envy is envy proper. This is however not just a terminological diatribe, but a question of how to correctly identify a human emotion. There are both theoretical and pragmatic reasons in support of my view. I make the theoretical argument elsewhere.²⁵ Here I want to highlight the pragmatic one: calling emulative envy "envy" helps us to come to terms with a human emotion that is very powerful, almost certainly ineradicable, and potentially very useful. For every emotion, there is a positive side—envy is no exception.²⁶

VI. Conclusion

I am going to conclude with a couple of caveats. First, it is important to point out that defending emulative envy as a solution to the problem of envy in society does not amount to defending it as the only solution. Sometimes, advocating brotherly love may be appropriate, for instance in religious contexts, or communities: it is not a coincidence that contemporary

²⁵ Cf. *Varieties of Envy* and *The Philosophy of Envy*, cit.

²⁶ Other recent philosophical attempts to re-evaluate negative emotions can be found in the work of Macalester Bell and Meena Krishnamurthy among others (cf. Bell, M., *Hard Feelings: The Moral Psychology of Contempt*, OUP, 2013; Krishnamurthy M., "(White) Tyranny and the Democratic Value of Distrust," *The Monist*, 94:8, 2015.

appeals to love and friendship as political emotions stem from reflecting on the actions of spiritual leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi.

Sometimes, as I remarked above but is worth repeating, stirring resentment proper, envy's righteous cousin, may be the only appropriate solution. Emulative envy motivates one to bring about changes in an individualistic, self-centered way. While these changes may in turn be beneficial for society, they may be insufficient. Resentment, with its constitutive focus on wrongdoing, may motivate the agent, in the context of a social injustice, to fight for necessary structural changes.

Second, my defense of emulative envy should not be confused with a defense of "keeping up with the Joneses", or with a call for higher conspicuous consumption: I do not recommend feeling emulative envy for the neighbor's yacht or watch.²⁷ I share Nussbaum's attention to values, and her recommendation that a just society send the right message about what is actually valuable and thus worthy of being envied. And in fact class envy is not just about money, as I argued above: we feel envy for others' access to excellent health care and education, or their capability to enjoy enriching experiences such as traveling, going to museums, eating healthy food. Guaranteeing a certain amount of these goods to every citizen is the goal of any distributive justice project, but there will always be differences: some citizens will always be richer than others, others will get better jobs, and so forth. Emulative envy is the most constructive emotion one can feel in these cases.

²⁷ I do not, in itself, chastise it either, since feeling emulative envy in those cases may still be better than feeling other kinds of envy. However, we may want to discourage emulation that has pernicious consequences for society: one obvious example are arms race, but that is not the only case. For an excellent discussion of the risks of conspicuous consumption, and the emulative practices that it generates, see Frank, R. *Luxury Fever*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

Envy is a complex aspect of human nature, and only by understanding its nuances we can progress toward a realizable ideal of a just society, rather than an improbable envy-free utopia.²⁸

²⁸ For useful feedbacks and criticisms, I thank Shannon Dunn, the audience members of the conference “Overcoming Intolerance: Nussbaum and Her Critics”, organized by Thom Brooks and Mozaffar Qizilbash (in particular my commentators Phillip Horky and Martha Nussbaum), and the audience members of the 2015 Open Session in Warwick.