

The Aptness of Envy

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Abstract: *Are demands for equality motivated by envy? Nietzsche, Freud, Hayek, and Nozick all thought so. Call this the Envy Objection. For egalitarians, the Envy Objection is meant to sting. Many egalitarians have tried to evade the Envy Objection. But should egalitarians be worried about envy? In this article, I argue that egalitarians should stop worrying and learn to love envy. I argue that the persistent unwillingness to embrace the Envy Objection is rooted in a common misunderstanding of the nature of the charge, what it reveals, and what can be said in response to it. I develop what Bernard Williams might call a vindictory genealogy of envy, thereby allowing us to see that envy, rather than undermining egalitarian intuitions, can in fact play a distinct justificatory role (when it is fitting), which undermines the Envy Objection.*

A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.

—Proverbs 14:30

Are demands for equality motivated by envy? We might trace answers in the affirmative back to Nietzsche, who in 1887 wrote that the origins of egalitarian ideals are rooted in *ressentiment*, which begins its life as envy (Nietzsche 1887/2008 as cited in D’Arms and Kerr 2010, 59, n.12). In 1921, Freud followed in Nietzsche’s footsteps by asserting that concerns for justice are merely the product of childhood envy (Freud 1921/1949, 120 as cited in D’Arms 2017). Along the same lines, in 1960, Hayek suggested, “When we inquire into the justification of these demands [for equality], we find that they rest on the discontent that the success of some people often produces in those that are less successful, or to put it bluntly, on envy” (Hayek 1960, 91 as cited in Frye 2016, 501). Finally, in 1974, Nozick proposed that

people “dream up” egalitarian principles to rationalize their envy (Nozick 1974, 240).

For egalitarians, the charge is meant to sting. It stings because envy is widely regarded as a moral failing. Indeed, Aristotle (2001, 1401) portrays envy as the attitude of “pain at the good fortune of others,” which seems morally problematic. Alongside pride, greed, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth, envy is one of the Roman Catholic Church’s seven deadly sins. Envy seems unreasonable to many because it is, as Rawls (1971, 466 as cited in Frye 2016, 504) put it, “[T]he 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.” Envy, you might think, can never be good if it is, as Spinoza (1996, 99; E3p55s) put it, “hatred itself.” In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1996, §36 as cited in D’Arms 2017, §1.1) wrote that envy is “a reluctance to see our own well-being overshadowed by another’s because the standard we use to see how well off we are is

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not the intrinsic worth of our own well-being but how it compares with that of others.”

It is no wonder then that many egalitarians have tried to evade—or at least address—the charge that demands for equality are rooted in envy (Anderson 1999, 307; Anderson 2007, 621; Rawls 1971, 472; Scanlon 2018, 2–3; cf. Protasi 2021, 122). Yet the charge that egalitarianism is envy incarnate is not merely an academic one; it routinely appears in public discourse. For instance, in 2012, Mitt Romney spoke about the “bitter politics of envy” to Matt Lauer:

Lauer: I’m curious about the word ‘envy.’ Did you suggest that anyone who questions the policies and practices of Wall Street and financial institutions, anyone who has questions about the distribution of wealth and power in this country, is envious? Is it about jealousy or fairness?

Romney: You know, I think it’s about envy. I think it’s about class warfare (Sorkin 2012).

If Romney has one thing in common with egalitarians, it is a shared worry about envy in politics. But should egalitarians be worried about envy? In this article, I argue that egalitarians should stop worrying about envy and perhaps come to embrace it. I argue that the unwillingness to embrace the charge that demands for equality are motivated by envy is rooted in a common misunderstanding of (i) the nature of the charge, (ii) what it reveals, and (iii) what can be said in response to it.

In what follows, I clarify what I take to be the common thread behind each particular instance of the charge that demands for equality are motivated by envy (see the section entitled “The Envy Debunking Argument”). Following this, I argue for what I call “the aptness of envy,” which says that at least some instances of envy are apt; that is, they are fitting with respect to their object because some things really are enviable. Drawing on a case of apt envy, I argue that those caught up in the ideal of envy-free politics, contrary to occupying the privileged epistemic position, are blind to the value of our capacity to appreciate injustice, for there is such a thing as “righteous envy,” it turns out, and it can “alert us to injustice, lead to reflection on its sources, and can be a spur to action” (La Caze 2001, 41). I then show how my treatment of the Envy Objection helps us think more clearly about what was, is, and ought to be the point of equality (see the section entitled “A Case of Fitting Envy”). I close in the conclusion by noting a curious dialectical feature of the debate at hand, which suggests a way out of the persistent quarrel between egalitarians and those who claim that their views are motivated by envy.

The Envy Debunking Argument

The charge is familiar and simple to state, but to fix ideas, let us define the Envy Objection as follows: you only favor egalitarian principles because of your underlying envy.¹ Now as mentioned in the introduction, it is hard to figure out what to make of the Envy Objection. Is it the conclusion of an argument or a premise within an argument? If it is a conclusion, then it is incomplete. To illustrate, suppose we figure out that Sam believes some proposition on the basis of x where x might be perception, testimony, or something else. This by itself tells us nothing about whether Sam’s belief is unjustified. Put otherwise, your belief that you are reading this article right now is likely based on perception; but knowing this tells us nothing about whether your belief is unjustified—for that, we would need support for the further claim that perception is systematically unreliable. Hence, I take it that the Envy Objection is more charitably understood as a premise rather than a conclusion.

Now, I want to claim that the Envy Objection is a premise in a debunking argument. In their simplest form, debunking arguments consist of a causal premise and an epistemic premise (Kahane 2011). To return to our example, the causal premise identifies what causes Sam to believe some proposition, for instance, underlying psychological features. The epistemic premise asserts that the causal premise, once revealed, provides Sam with a reason to doubt their belief; for example, those underlying psychological features do not appropriately track the truth. Accordingly, a debunking argument concludes that Sam’s belief is unjustified.

To get an example in mind, consider so-called evolutionary debunking arguments, which derive the epistemic premise from facts about the (supposed) evolutionary origins of our moral beliefs (Vavova 2015, 104). As Darwin writes:

If men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would

¹I follow Scanlon (2018, 32) in my characterization of the Envy Objection. What do I mean by “envy”? Of course, I do not want to stack the deck for myself by rigging up a technical definition of “envy,” which my opponents might disagree with. How to individuate emotions is a complicated question, but for the sake of argument let us stack our opponent’s deck in their favor; that is, let us say with Nozick (1974, 239) that A is *jealous* of B when A wants what B has, and that A is *envious* of B when A wants B to have what A has.

think of interfering (Darwin 1874, 73 as cited in Hopster 2018, 10).

Combining Darwin's thought with an epistemic premise yields the idea that since evolution aims for fitness-enhancing beliefs, which are indifferent to moral truths, we should not think that our common-sense moral beliefs (such as lying is wrong) are tracking mind-independent moral truths as some robust moral realists might have it (Enoch 2011; cf. Street 2006). After all, as Darwin notes, had evolution taken us down a different path we would have a different stock of common-sense moral beliefs; and thinking that the stock that we happened to develop by mere chance is the right stock is akin to thinking that you got the winning lottery ticket *before* the numbers are even announced (Street 2016, 20). It is from this epistemic premise that debunkers derive the conclusion that Sam's moral beliefs are unjustified.

Let us abstract further. To think of a few more examples, consider some of the following claims, which form the causal premise of various debunking arguments. You only believe that lying is wrong because this belief enhances reproductive success (Joyce 2013, 356; cf. Street 2006, 115). You only believe that consequentialism is false because of a chemical reaction in your ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Greene 2014, 702–18). You only believe in the analytic/synthetic distinction because you went to Oxford.²

Adopting the same argumentative tack as the evolutionary debunker, we can tack on an epistemic premise to any of these claims. Thus, if we combine the first claim with an epistemic premise, we get yet another version of an evolutionary debunking argument. Likewise, we might combine an epistemic premise with the second and third claims to yield similar debunking arguments. For example, we might call the second claim an instance of a psychological debunking argument since it aims to undermine the epistemic status of deontological judgments by appealing to their origins in the amygdala. Similarly, we might call the third claim an instance of a historical debunking argument since it aims to undermine the epistemic status of your supposed belief in the analytic/synthetic distinction by appealing to the historical contingency of your having that belief.

In a similar manner, we might combine the Envy Objection with the epistemic premise to yield what I call the envy debunking argument:

(Premise 1) S's belief in egalitarian principles is solely motivated by envy.

(Premise 2) Beliefs motivated solely by envy do not provide an appropriate justification for beliefs.

(Conclusion) Therefore, S's belief in egalitarian principles is unjustified.³

What should we make of the envy debunking argument? First, note that the first premise of the envy debunking argument makes the empirical claim that S's belief in egalitarian principles is arrived at through motivated reasoning (that is, emotionally biased reasoning). And while the empirical literature seems to complicate this claim,⁴ I would like to set this worry aside. This is because I am willing to stack the deck in favor of my opponent and grant that at least *some* demands for equality are based on envy. What I take to be of philosophical interest in the envy debunking argument is the second premise. I take something like the second premise to be the driving force behind Harry Frankfurt's charge that egalitarian intuitions are misguided by envy (that is, that envy is systematically distorting). In his recent book, *On Inequality*, Frankfurt writes:

Quite often, advocacy of egalitarianism is based less on an argument than on a purported moral intuition: economic inequality just seems wrong. It strikes many people as altogether apparent that, taken simply in its own right, the possession by some of more money than others is morally offensive. I suspect that people who profess to have this intuition concerning manifestations of inequality are actually not responding to the inequality they perceive but

³Sara Protasi has suggested a candidate formulation of the argument implicit in the Envy Objection, which she calls the Envious Egalitarian Argument: "Egalitarianism is motivated by envy. Envy is always a vice. Political ideals motivated by vices ought to be rejected. Thus, egalitarianism ought to be rejected" (Protasi 2021, 121). Although I think Protasi and I understand the charge in a similar manner, my formulation of it as a debunking argument makes the second premise explicit as an *epistemic* vice, as opposed to a *moral* vice. In some respects, I prefer my formulation since I doubt that what is at issue is whether a given ideal is motivated by a moral vice; that does not seem directly undermining. On the other hand, perhaps Protasi's formulation has the virtue of capturing the nominal usage of the Envy Objection, whereas my formulation is rigged, as it were, to capture a conceptual issue, which might only be a possibility in logical space (that is, perhaps no *actual* utterance of the Envy Objection has the hidden premises that I have specified). Thanks to Sara Protasi for discussion on this point.

⁴See Kemp and Bolle (2013) for a recent overview.

²See Vavova (2018, 143) for this example, which illustrates a worry that G. A. Cohen (2000, 18) had once it was revealed to him that had he studied at Harvard as opposed to Oxford, he might have taken the Quinean position on the analytic/synthetic distinction.

to another feature of the situations they are observing (Frankfurt 2015, 41).⁵

Frankfurt's critique seems to be that what "disturbs us" and "moves us" when thinking about inequality is the brute fact of poverty, rather than the mere differences between individuals (Frankfurt 2015, 42). Frankfurt's charge thus bears the earmarks of the epistemic premise of the envy debunking argument. This is because he claims that egalitarians are irrationally misled by their envious attitudes to focus on equality; fully cleansed of envy, one would realize, Frankfurt claims, that absolute poverty is what we ought to care about.

Note that the alleged conceptual link between envy and irrationality is not unique to Frankfurt's critique. Recall that Nietzsche, Freud, and Hayek also made a similar diagnosis of the causes and consequences of the politics of envy. And the worry is still in the air, for as Brighthouse and Swift (2006, 472) write, "To advocate equality, it is alleged, is to endorse leveling down, confirming the suspicion that egalitarians are irrationally obsessed by relativities and motivated by envy." The idea that envy is just the emotion that is constitutive of the irrational motivation to level down also appears near the end of Nozick's (1974, 239) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. As Sara Protasi (2021, 129) notes, even Rawls (1971) himself and so-called Rawlsian conceptions of envy follow suit (Frye 2016; Green 2013). What most parties to the debate can agree to then is that beliefs motivated solely by envy do not provide an appropriate justification for beliefs and that the explanation for this is the tight conceptual link between envy and irrationality (Frankfurt 2015, 13–14). Note well that establishing this conceptual link is important not only for vindicating the truth of the envy debunking argument as a matter of philosophical fact but also for supporting a particular vision of political life, and the vision is one wherein we are encouraged to relate to one another through what I will call a politics of dismissal, which is perhaps best embodied in Mitt Romney's reply to Matt Lauer. When pressed by Lauer to genuinely engage with and thereby understand the per-

spectives of those who question the politics and practices of Wall Street, Romney has a ready answer: envy.

Now rarely is a one-word answer convincing, but if equality is not good for its own sake, then it is true to say that the envious person is systematically misled in their evaluative appraisals in the same way that those in love are often misled in their evaluative appraisals of their beloved. So, for example, just as it is natural to say that Samson was "blinded by love" when he was seduced by Delilah, we might think it fair to say that those caught up in envy are epistemically blind to what justice requires. The fact that their belief is improperly based seems to defeat it. Indeed, it is no accident that in order to first get behind the veil of ignorance one must cleanse oneself of envy. As Wall (2015, 256) notes, Rawls stipulates that "the parties [in the original position] are mutually disinterested. They do not concern themselves with how others fare. It follows that the parties are not motivated by considerations of envy or spite" (Rawls 1971, 472). Thus, appraisals about equality that are motivated by envy seem to be fundamentally misguided because they conflict with the principles guiding objective inquiry into justice. Such principles, it is often thought, seem to demand that we, in a disinterested fashion, take up what Thomas Nagel calls "the view from nowhere" (Nagel 1986, 70). The problem with the envious person then is that in failing to take up the view from nowhere, they violate the procedural principles that are constitutive of objective inquiry into justice: like lovers blinded by their love, envious become blinded by their envy—or so the envy debunking argument tells us.

A Case of Fitting Envy

We have seen that the Envy Objection is an incompletely theorized attempt to diagnose an epistemic failing within those who hold egalitarian ideals. The full form of this argument is the envy debunking argument. In this section, I argue that the envy debunking argument fails because envy can be analyzed as an emotion that is fitting and apt for egalitarians to have.

But before we get to any analysis, it is important that we clarify the normative notion of fittingness. For our purposes, it is not important to provide a full analysis of the notion of fittingness. Instead, we can follow Chris Howard (2018, 2) in paraphrasing the notion of fittingness as "the relation in which a response stands to an object when the object merits—or is worthy of—that response." So, for example, when Sam fears the state of nature, her fear is fitting because fear is a fitting response

⁵Scanlon (2018) also reads Frankfurt's *On Inequality* as advancing a form of the Envy Objection. I take it that Frankfurt's targeting of "economic inequality" indicates that he takes the "currency of egalitarian justice"—to borrow a phrase from Cohen (1989)—to be distributive in nature, as opposed to relational. And while it is conceptually possible to use the envy debunking argument against relational egalitarianism, I take it that its most common usage is as an objection to distributive egalitarians who claim that there is something objectionable about economic inequality *in itself* (that is, regardless of its effects in promoting, for example, fair equality of opportunity or relational egalitarian goods). Cf. Phillips (2021, 77). See also Moyn (2018, 4) on Frankfurt's sufficientarian argument and the historical backdrop from which it emerged.

to the danger that the state of nature poses to her. By contrast, if Victor fears the COVID-19 vaccine, perhaps due to lies spread by a politician, his fear is not fitting because fear is not merited when there is no danger. Moreover, it is fitting to fear the fearful; it is also fitting to “laud the laudable, love the lovable, blame the blameworthy, or be amused by the amusing” (Howard 2018, 1). And so, we might wonder: is it fitting to envy the enviable?

The answer to this question turns on whether anything merits the attitude of envy. As mentioned at this article’s outset, it is highly controversial whether envy can ever be fitting. If envy is the cousin of *schadenfreude* (that is, the feeling of pleasure at another’s misery) then perhaps it is never fitting to envy. Many think so. Yet in what follows, I aim to provide an account of the conditions under which envy can be fitting.⁶ According to my account, envy is fitting with respect to its object when the object is in fact enviable; and something is enviable when (i) the envier and the rival stand in the right relation, (ii) the difference in possession is bad for the envier, and (iii) the badness is explained by a lack of certain positional goods connected to inferior status. The first two conditions are widely taken to be trivial (or sometimes conceptual) truths about envy, but let us take a moment to give some shape to them before we turn to the more controversial third condition. Doing so will allow us to see more clearly the political salience of the envy debunking argument and, more generally, the ongoing uneasy relationship between egalitarian politics and envy.

The first condition says that the envier and the rival stand in the right relation, where “right relation” is often glossed as being a peer.⁷ Aristotle attributes the thought that envy only arises between peers to Aeschylus, often described as the father of tragedy. And in the same spirit, Aristotle writes:

[...] we compete with those who follow the same ends as ourselves: we compete with our rivals in sport or love, and generally with those who are after the same things; and it is therefore these whom we are bound to envy beyond all others. Hence the saying: Potter against potter (Aristo-

tle 2001, 1401 as cited in D’Arms and Kerr 2010, 43).⁸

If envy is to be fitting at all, it must exist between peers with comparable abilities. So, while it is intelligible for Plato to envy Aristotle’s philosophical abilities—he is *the* philosopher after all—it is unintelligible for Plato to envy, say, Aeschylus’s widespread acclaim as “*the* finest Athenian tragic poet” (Torrance 2020). Had Plato chosen the path of a tragic poet, as opposed to that of a philosopher, Aeschylus might have been his rival; thus, it would make sense if he felt a twinge of envy upon reading his plays. But given that Plato chose otherwise, it makes no sense to say that he envies Aeschylus. He might feel admiration and respect for Aeschylus, but he is not envious. Of course, Plato could think of his preferences counterfactually, asking instead whether he would have been successful had he gone down Aeschylus’s path. In this case, we can grant that Plato’s envy is intelligible given his new counterfactual vantage point.

The second condition says that the difference in possession is bad for the envier. As D’Arms and Kerr note, we are often sloppy with our usage of the word “envy.” So, for instance, one might say “I envy the success of your political campaign” or “I really envy your diplomacy skills” (D’Arms and Kerr 2010, 46). In light of this, some psychologists now distinguish between malicious envy (which aims at bringing the rival down from their superior position) and benign envy (wherein the envier only experiences mild frustration and a desire to improve their lot) (see Ven (2016) and Protasi (2016) for a useful overview). However, some think that cases of benign envy are more properly described as jealousy or longing (D’Arms and Kerr 2010, 47). It is not my aim in this article to take a stand on this issue. While it is an easier task to argue that benign envy can be apt, I aim to argue that even malicious envy can be apt. The badness that results from malicious envy is the motivational tendencies and the (bad) behavioral consequences that they lead to.

Finally, the third condition says that when envy is fitting, the badness is explained by a lack of certain positional goods connected to inferior status. To give a precise definition, let us follow Brighthouse and Swift (2006, 474 as cited in Protasi 2021, 156) in defining positional goods as “goods the absolute value of which, to their possessors, depends on those possessors’ place in the distribution of the good—on their relative standing with respect to the good in question.” Common positional goods include

⁶While much of my account draws on D’Arms and Jacobson (2006), I depart from their account in how I cash out the third condition.

⁷I am not committed to this as a conceptual truth about envy. I aim to remain neutral with respect to how to cash out what counts as a “right relation” between the envier and the rival. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to lay out Aristotle’s influential contribution here.

⁸Note that for Aristotle, *being a peer* is not simply a matter of domain (the class of potters), but it crucially includes having a relevant comparison class (that is, the *excellent* potter who is slightly better than the merely *good* potter).

power, status, and various luxury items. For instance, if you are the monarch, then you have power over the nobles, who, in turn, have power over the knights, and so on and so forth. I am not the first to suggest that positional goods matter for an account of fitting envy. Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson's (2006, 120) defense of fitting envy also focuses on positional goods. Where I part ways with D'Arms and Jacobson is by adding the following proviso, which I will call the

fitting envy proviso: The badness that results from a difference in possession between A and B must be explained by virtue of a lack of a positional good related to an inferior status, which thereby diminishes flourishing.⁹

At the outset, I should address a criticism one might raise against the fitting envy proviso. Critics who think that envy is an amoral emotion might argue that the fitting envy proviso builds a moral quality into fitting envy, which is more properly called fitting resentment or fitting indignation. In response, I want to say that although envy is not necessarily a moral emotion, I am not conceptually confused to think that the cases where it appears fitting or appropriate might seem to entail *some* moral quality. Of course, the critic might then contend that I have shifted the subject in designating envy as picking out a weak form of apt resentment or apt indignation. I understand this worry. But I would like to bring the critic's attention to the fact that many amoral emotions seem to be fitting precisely when they are morally justified. Consider, for instance, cases of apt anger at injustice (Srinivasan 2018). The critic could easily complain that so-called "apt anger" is nothing more than "apt indignation" or "apt resentment." But this seems too quick, for although anger is not, as a matter of necessity, a moral emotion, it does not seem to follow that all its instances are inherently amoral. We do talk about righteous anger, after all. Thus, I want to say, alongside La Caze (2001, 41), that there are instances of righteous envy, for although envy is sometimes sloppily spoken of when resentment would be a better choice, I think that there are borderline cases where it is not clear that a particular injustice is at stake; and at times, envy seems to be a term for talking about that gray area (cf. Thomason's [2015, 41] discussion of La Caze [2001]). Indeed, we will later see just how complicated talking about this gray area is when we consider the fitting envy proviso in concrete political cases.

⁹The relevant sense of "inferiority" that I have in mind here roughly tracks the phenomenon of lacking the *assurance* of one's equal moral worth (Waldron 2012, chap. 4 as cited in Stoljar and Voigt 2021, 157).

With this worry set aside, let us turn back to the fitting envy proviso itself. The fitting envy proviso places a constraint on what positional goods matter by drawing a line in the sand. On one side we have garden-variety positional goods, such as *being the most influential politician* or *being the most powerful labor union*. Possession of these positional goods does not necessarily entail that those not in possession of such goods feel inferior. But on the other side, we have more nefarious positional goods such as *being the object of unjustified special treatment* and other positional goods closely connected with unjustified inequalities of status, esteem, and authority. Possession of these positional goods does, it seems to me, have the potential to realize feelings of inferiority (cf. Anderson 1999, 326).

Now, D'Arms and Jacobson seem to reject the fitting envy proviso insofar as they argue that it can be fitting to envy *any* positional good. They ask us to consider the positional good of being the best coach in the neighborhood:

Number One Local Coach: Imagine a father who invests his energy in playing with and mentoring the neighborhood kids and comes to be proud of being their teacher. This role may become one of the most meaningful aspects of his life, to the extent that he would feel displaced were another parent to usurp it. But not everyone can be the Number One Dad, no matter how many Father's Day mugs suggest otherwise (D'Arms and Jacobson 2006, 121).

D'Arms and Jacobson go on to write that once we grant that "positional goods matter for human flourishing, then it follows that envy is sometimes fitting" (D'Arms and Jacobson 2006, 123–24). I am willing to grant that being the Number One Local Coach can contribute to a flourishing life. But I want to ask: is any comparative loss to our flourishing worthy of envy? Suppose you and I, feeling especially lucky, decide to buy lottery tickets. You scratch and reveal the phrase *Winner! \$50!* I scratch mine, only to reveal the unfortunate phrase *please try again*. Strictly speaking, there is a change in my positional status. After we have scratched our tickets, I am slightly worse off, and you are slightly better off. Yet despite this difference, it seems strange to say that *any* change—no matter how small—between the two peers results in fitting envy. For instance, if I displayed envy on the drive home—for example, by incessantly fussing over my loss and your gain—it would seem reasonable for you to say to me, "Oh, get over it. It is not *that bad* of a loss." And likewise, in the Number One Local Coach scenario, it seems that the mere change in a positional

good would not warrant envy. For suppose that the father who loses the positional good of being the Number One Local Coach does so because he simply gets too old to be the coach. If the new coach on the block senses that he is envious of this, it would seem appropriate for him to say, “You’ve had your turn; now do not try to spoil mine. It is not so bad for you. After all, you got to be the Number One Local Coach for 30 years.” Here, the badness the old coach experiences is temporary and minimal. I take it that this difference in the badness at hand shows that not all positional goods merit envy.

In response, D’Arms and Jacobson might claim that to make my case against this instance of envy, I must “deny the importance of positional goods across the board” (D’Arms and Jacobson 2006, 124). But I do not see why this is the case. Not all positional goods are created equally. Some positional goods are so important they are necessary for genuine human flourishing. Consider the type of positional good referenced by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*:

By necessities I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not a necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presupposed, nobody can well fall into without extreme bad conduct (Smith 2003, 1102–03).¹⁰

Now, to reify this argument and to bring the politics of envy back into play, let us suppose the year is 1776 and Smith’s day laborer sees a man pass by wearing a linen shirt. He turns his head in disgrace and starts thinking envious thoughts. Is his envy fitting? Recall that an emotion is fitting to some object “when the object merits—

¹⁰I should note that some readers might find this example from Smith unconvincing because their egalitarian intuitions might only be attuned to monetary inequalities between persons. For this critic, I would like to say that it is possible to construct a linkage argument wherein vast inequalities of wealth are taken to result in status inequalities that are objectionable because, for example, they erode democratic societies or they indirectly produce the type of shame that Smith speaks of in his example of the man without a linen shirt in 1776. I discuss more nonmonetary examples in what follows.

or is worthy of—that response” (Howard 2018, 2). I have already rejected the view that *any* difference in positional goods between A and B merits envy. Thus, what I take to be the salient difference in this case is this: we can explain the badness that the day laborer experiences as resulting from a lack of a positional good related to inferior status (that is, it satisfies the fitting envy proviso). Conversely, the usurped Number One Local Coach (call him the Second-Best Local Coach) can still appear in public and not have his status marked as an inferior; like a silver-medal Olympian, he might feel displeased with his rank, but he will not be marked as an inferior among his peers.

Moreover, I think that it is appropriate to feel pain at the sight of status symbols that mark your position as an inferior. To feel nothing at all would be to be completely indifferent to your sense of self-worth. And so, I suggest that in feeling envy at the sight of a linen shirt, the day laborer is desiring to stand in a relationship with a rival that involves a noninferior status; his fitting envy is, in other words, a means of imagining a counterfactual scenario wherein he stands in a relation of equal respect and esteem with his rival.

Now if the problem in Smith’s time was that linen shirts took on a symbolic function of marking out some as superior and others as inferior, we might wonder whether we, in our own time, are living with linen shirts in our midst.¹¹ I think we are, and they take on (at least) two forms: *de jure* or *de facto*. When laws take on the function of marking out some as superiors and others as inferiors, they thereby bring about a medley of envy, shame, and inferiority among others. As Martin Luther King Jr. writes in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, segregation “distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation ... ends up relegating persons to the status of things” (King 2010, 93 as cited in Stoljar and Voigt 2021, 160). Yet even in the absence of law, as we know from Adam Smith, objects can and often do take on the function of marking out some as superior and others as inferior. Johannes Schulz (2019, 166) notes the following recent example:

In June 2016, Corey Menafee, a dishwasher at Yale University, used a broomstick to smash a stained-glass window in the dining hall of Yale’s Calhoun College depicting African slaves carrying bales of cotton. He had gotten sick of what he saw as a racist piece of art, unfit for a “modern era where we shouldn’t have to be subjected to

¹¹It is important to note that there is nothing inherently bad about linen shirts as such because all positional goods have the potential to realize feelings of inferiority.

those ... degrading images" (Schulz 2019, 166; see Menafee 2016).¹²

As in Smith's case, there is an important asymmetry between the King and Menafee case and the case of the Number One Local Coach. Whereas the former cases seem to satisfy the fitting envy proviso, the latter does not. We can explain this asymmetry by noting the salient difference between being seen as the Second-Best Local Coach and being marked as an inferior by either laws or objects. Apt envy, in the former cases, I suggest, is the desire to level down—to eliminate the symbolic power—so that both parties stand in a relation of equal respect and esteem.

But recall that envy is painful. And so, to return to Smith's case, it might be better if the day laborer simply took up the view of the impartial spectator to judge that positional goods that mark one party as an inferior fail to respect people's equal moral worth. If such a rational evaluation is possible, a critic might object and claim that we have reason to stamp out all envious feelings. In response, I would like to employ a similar explanation given by Amia Srinivasan in response to the critic of fitting anger. The critics' complaint, in a nutshell, is this: getting angry is bad for you. Insofar as you have a moral duty to care for yourself, you have a reason not to get angry, for anger often incites violence and can quickly spin out of control. Would it not be better for you and the world if you did not get angry (Srinivasan 2018, 131)? In response to the critic, Srinivasan writes:

I want to suggest that getting angry is a means of affectively registering or appreciating the injustice of the world, and that our capacity to get aptly angry is best compared with our capacity for aesthetic appreciation. Just as appreciating the beautiful or the sublime has a value distinct from the value of knowing that something is beautiful or sublime, there might well be a value to appreciating the injustice of the world through one's apt anger—a value that is distinct from that of simply knowing that the world is unjust (Srinivasan 2018, 132).

Now, as the title of this article suggests, a similar sort of tale can be told about apt counterproductive envy. Apt envy—even though it is, by definition, phenomenologically bad to feel—might be a means of apprehending

positional goods related to inferior status. As Srinivasan notes, even though it is possible to *know* that these things are of value—say, from the view from nowhere—it is difficult to make the case that we can *appreciate* them from there. Rather, their nature seems to suggest that we take up what Wallace (2013) calls "the view from here" to properly appreciate their effects on us.¹³

Herein lies the subtlety that both the critic of anger and envy seem to miss. For even if the critic grants that anger or envy is sometimes fitting, they might then ask: what difference does it make to what we should do? The problem with this question lies not in its demand but in its political framing, for behind the question lies a conception of politics that claims that its primary purpose is to figure out what we should do. And while deliberating, compromising, and legislating might be the bread and butter of politics, they do not encompass its whole. Political life—much like moral life—is also about what we should want, think, and feel; how we should be (cf. Taylor 1989, 79). Those caught up in the ideal of an anger-free or envy-free politics, contrary to occupying the privileged epistemic position, are blind to the value of our capacity to appreciate injustice.¹⁴ And if what I have argued here is right, then there is value in recognizing positional goods that are markers of inferiority. It is fitting, in other words, to envy those things that are worthy of envy.¹⁵

¹³Here, I briefly address the phenomenon of *epistemic risk* at work in emotions such as anger or envy. It seems to me that in the case of anger and envy—and perhaps all emotions—there is what I call a *perspectivalist dilemma*. Consider envy: on the one hand, if we adopt the view from nowhere (or step behind the veil of ignorance, fully cleansed of envy) we seem to reveal an important class of moral truths that pick out nonpositional goods. Yet at the same time, in virtue of taking such a perspective, we also conceal what is right beneath our feet, namely, those goods that are positional in nature. Now consider anger: in striving for an anger-free politics, we might reveal within ourselves a capacity for mutually disinterested, impartial appraisals. Yet at the same time, in virtue of striving for such a politics, we also conceal our ability to, as Srinivasan puts it, "feel the ugly facts that structure our political reality" (Srinivasan 2018, 141). What is perhaps tragic to notice is that we cannot get out of the perspectivalist dilemma—that is, the complex interplay of revealing and concealing—simply by taking up the view from nowhere; such a perspective, while it may yield some knowledge, also conceals much of what is right in front of us.

¹⁴Cf. Thomason's (2015, 41) discussion of La Caze (2001), in particular, see La Caze's (2001, 41) claim that envy can "alert us to injustice, lead to reflection on its sources, and can be a spur to action."

¹⁵Perhaps there is an important disanalogy between anger and envy. Like Srinivasan's defense of apt anger, my defense of apt envy relies on intuitions elicited by careful consideration of cases. Yet it is of course open to the critic to deny that these intuitions are compelling, or to worry that if envy is fitting, then perhaps spite, contempt, or jealousy are fitting, which may strike some as unintuitive. While I do not think that I have the space to adequately

¹²There are other examples too. Schulz (2019, 166) also notes the protest in Oxford over the statue of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes. Similar protests have occurred at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and McGill University in Montréal. Cf. Emre (2021).

Let us now return to the envy debunking argument by asking: what follows from the claim that there are cases of apt envy? I take it that this implies that the proponent of the Envy Objection must reformulate their envy debunking argument. Recall that the envy debunking argument concluded that the envious person, in failing to take up the view from nowhere, violates the procedural principles that are constitutive of objective inquiry into justice. This argument relied on the claim that envy is never fitting, that is, that enviers are systematically off-track in their emotional appraisals. But if this claim is false, as I have argued, then we might turn the envy debunking argument on its head and provide a vindictory story about the relationship between egalitarianism and envy (Williams 2002, 256 as cited in Srinivasan 2019, 129). For if certain positional goods are enviable, then it does not immediately follow that a belief solely motivated by envy fails to track the truth. On the contrary, when envy is fitting, it is a way of apprehending positional goods related to inferior status. And if these goods are enviable, then it follows that proponents of the Envy Objection are guilty of launching a critique that misses the mark because it smuggles in a negative epistemic upshot to a bare psychological claim. Now, this does not yet vindicate an egalitarian politics, but it does blunt the force of Nietzsche, Freud, Hayek, Nozick, and Frankfurt's critique, and thereby clears the ground for a more nuanced inquiry into what is really at stake in the quarrel between egalitarians and those who claim that their views are motivated by envy.¹⁶

But perhaps at this point, a critic may worry that my account of apt envy makes our emotional life appear too neat. This worry, as I understand it, is epistemic in

consider whether spite, contempt, or jealousy is fitting, I want to add two important qualifications to my argument. First, I concede that the argument I have given in this article is, like most philosophical arguments, provisional; further reflection on other cases may undermine it. Second—and this is the main point—even if a critic finds the argument unconvincing, the burden of proof is still shifted: it is now up to proponents of the Envy Objection to provide further support to their claim that envy can never be fitting. They cannot take it as axiomatic.

¹⁶I unfortunately lack the space to engage in a thorough discussion of whether envy, if apt, bears meaningfully on the debate between relational egalitarianism and distributive egalitarianism (Anderson 1999; 2007; Cohen 1989; Elford 2017; Nath 2020; Scheffler 2003; 2015; Schemmel 2012; 2019; Tomlin 2014). But I will note one worry: many assume that we ought to specify the value of relational equality with an idealized nonpolitical example and only thereafter generalize to nonidealized political cases (Scheffler 2015, 24). But perhaps the reverse is true. Might we instead start our inquiry with nonidealized political cases and thereafter ask what it means to relate as equals? Cf. Srinivasan (2018, 142) on contemporary uneasiness about political emotions and its historical roots in the Stoic ideal, which prizes “reason without affect.”

nature, for the critic may grant (for the sake of argument) that perhaps there are things that really are worthy of envy but that our emotional life is often negotiated interpersonally rather than privately. This adds a complication to the task I set for myself in this article: knowing what an apt emotion is (is my love/blame/anger/envy apt?) may be radically different from knowing what an apt basic belief is (is there really a bird in the tree?).

To get the problem in view, we might consider Charles Taylor's (1985) central point in *Self-Interpreting Animals*. Transposing Taylor's point for our discussion at hand yields (1) envy involves an import-ascription, that is, the experience of our situation as “being a certain way”; (2) this import-ascription is subject-referring, which is to say that it concerns “the life of the subject *qua* subject”; (3) subject-referring feelings are constitutive of self-understanding; (4) crucially, our subject-referring feelings are “constituted by the articulations we come to accept of them”; (5) “these articulations, which we can think of as interpretations, require language”; (6) the process of interpretation requires an intersubjective dialogue with others (Taylor 1985, 48, 54, 76).

Now if Taylor is right, then it follows that (7) our self-understanding of whether a given instance of envy (or anger for that matter) is apt is met with a cognitive barrier, namely, peer disagreement, linguistic negotiation within asymmetric power relations, self-deception, and a whole host of other skeptical difficulties. Recognizing this asymmetry should lead us to conclude that getting a “correct” self-interpretation is often much more difficult than getting a correct understanding of, say, whether there really is a bird in the tree. This is because how we think about how we should feel is often highly politicized. As Srinivasan notes, calls to rid politics of anger and other uneasy emotions are not mere pleas for neutral, rational discourse. On the contrary, they are often an exercise of political power. Now since I want to say the same of envy, it is important that we recognize the difficulty brought forth by Taylor's point: it is one thing to know that anger or envy *can* be apt; it is another to know when a given instance of anger or envy *is* apt. Srinivasan has argued that anger can be apt, and I hope to have done the same for envy, especially as it is situated in our contemporary political context. Still, the epistemic difficulty remains; and this difficulty is as much a political problem as it is a philosophical problem. It is political, in part, because it is hard to see how to resolve the difficulty alone; and it is philosophical, in part, because the resolution of the difficulty requires a rethink of a notoriously complicated emotion—envy. Such a rethink of the politics of envy is a task contemporary relational egalitarians and historians

of political thought would do well to take up, for without a clear historical sense of how the Envy Objection has shaped our sense of what was, is, and ought to be the point of equality, we are left both conceptually and historically impoverished (Anderson 1999; cf. Bejan 2022).

Conclusion

My goal in this article was to make sense of the charge that egalitarians are motivated by envy. Having clarified the nature of the charge, its content, and its normative upshot, I hope to have shown that the charge is merely a particular instance of a more general form of argument—namely, a debunking argument. I then offered an account of fitting envy, which undermines the envy debunking argument. Of course, the idea that envy could ever be fitting might still seem strange to the critic. Perhaps my account, although more plausible than no account at all, still seems weak. And so, at this point, a critic might object that we have arrived at a strange place in the dialectic. That is, they might ask: if the Envy Objection to egalitarianism is just the envy debunking argument, and the truth of the envy debunking argument turns on facts about whether certain positional goods are in fact enviable, then cannot I just object to your first-order claim about the value of certain positional goods? To this I reply: of course you can. But once you make that move, you ought to concede that the political debate should now proceed from the question of whether positional goods are worthy of envy and *not* the charge that demands for equality are motivated by envy. For as I have shown, the charge, taken by itself, does not show much at all; for the charge to sting—to get its normative bite—the proponent of the Envy Objection requires a larger argument for why it is never fitting to feel envy. So how should egalitarians and their critics proceed? Insofar as the critic remains unpersuaded by the argument in this article, they should recognize a need to reframe the quarrel between egalitarians and those who claim that their views are motivated by envy. Instead of asking whether egalitarian intuitions are motivated by envy, both parties to the political debate should be asking: is it ever apt to feel envy?

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