You are four, and you really really want a big red heart-shaped lollipop. You have been staring at it for days in the candy store window. And then, today, here it is, in the hands of your classmate, who’s, of course, gloating about it. You are so mad, so upset, and there’s this unpleasant ache, deep down in your tummy. “NO fair!” you think. Can you really be blamed when you feel a deep satisfaction at the sight of the lollipop slipping from your friend’s little hands and falling on the dirty ground?

You have grown up now, and you think back to the lollipop episode with a mixture of amusement and shame. And yet, as you retell the story to your best friend, you cannot help but notice that today they look so good, with their new fashionable haircut. Your best friend is one of the coolest people at your high school, and you are – not. That sinking feeling in your belly resurfaces. You repress a little sigh, and go on chatting, casually dropping a: “Hey, I saw Rainier making out with Sam in the cafeteria the other day. I thought you two were getting serious?”

By the time you are a first-year student in college you and your best friend from high school have grown apart. You are focused on studying and are working hard to get a scholarship. When you discover the one you had applied for has been given to your roommate, you are heartbroken. You are happy for them too, since they are nice and you respect them. You are not an insecure teenager anymore, and you know they won fair and square. But there’s this gnawing awareness that they are always a little better than you. So, you wish them all the best, and move out.

You have become a college professor. You have spent years studying hard, looking up to people like your roommate. You applied for more scholarships, and won some of them. You got lucky, too, and landed a good job at a university near your hometown. You decide to go to your high school reunion. You are happy to see your long-lost friend, who’s coming to hug you. They are sporting a smart suit, looking great. You feel a familiar pang. But you have learned to use that feeling more

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productively. You compliment their suit. They cheerfully answer: “Thanks. I can tell you where I got it, maybe you can get one too.” “Yeah, thanks, maybe I will!” is your reply. And you smile.

Do any of these scenarios resonate with you? Chances are some of them will. Everyone feels envy at some point in their life. Some people are more aware of their envy than others; some people are prone to feel envy more than others; some people feel more malicious kinds of envy than others; and some people are crippled by their envy more than others. Still, there is no culture that is devoid of envy, even though it takes different forms in different places and times.

Notwithstanding envy’s ubiquity, it is a maligned emotion. It is condemned by all religious traditions, feared in all societies, repressed by most who feel it, and often kept a secret even to oneself. Because envy is a cross-cultural emotion we have good reasons to think that it serves an important function in human psychology, and yet it has a terrible reputation. This book aims to restore the truth about envy and argues that such a reputation is at least partially undeserved. Like other slandered negative emotions, such as contempt and disgust, which have already been rehabilitated in the philosophical and psychological literature, envy has a role to play in our lives and may be essential to our flourishing. Once we can see the bright side of envy, its benefits and its reasons, then we can also better deal with its darkest features, its harms and its deceptions.

My overarching argumentative strategy is to develop an original taxonomy of envy as an emotion. Once we know what envy is and how many kinds there are, we can look more fruitfully into how to deal with envy – how to cope with, inhibit, or encourage it – and into its value or disvalue. Thus the first two chapters are devoted to laying out the ontology – what envy is. The remaining three chapters develop the practical normativity of envy – what is good and bad about envy in three main domains: ethics, love, and politics. The Conclusion tackles the axiology that stems from envy – the value of enviable things, which are more than you might expect. Finally, an Appendix traces the history of envy.

Here is a chapter-by-chapter overview of the book.

Chapter 1 can be seen largely as preliminary: it builds on established conceptual theories and empirical evidence about the nature of envy and, in particular, how it differs from jealousy. Envy and jealousy are often confused with each other, to the point that in English the very terms “envy” and “jealousy” are often used interchangeably. However, the scholarly consensus is that they are distinct emotions. It behooves any analysis of envy to start by clarifying how envy differs from jealousy: in agreement
with the dominant view, I argue that envy is about being concerned with the lack of a valuable object, while jealousy is about being concerned with the loss of a valuable object. I devise several original objections to this popular way of drawing the distinction, and show how the view can respond to them. I also highlight the ways in which envy does indeed resemble jealousy. After this discussion of envy in relation to jealousy I introduce the definition of envy on its own. Here, too, I draw from preexisting work in both philosophy and psychology, in order to define envy as: an aversive emotional response to a perceived inferiority or disadvantage vis-à-vis a similar other with regard to a domain of self-importance, which motivates to overcome that inferiority or disadvantage.

Chapter 2 – the conceptual heart of this book – argues for the view that there are four kinds of envy. Envy is essentially a response to a perceived inferiority. Such inferiority can be overcome either by bringing oneself up to the level of the envied or by pulling them down to one’s level. This double motivation has been explained in two distinct ways, one mostly proposed by psychologists, the other discernible in the philosophical tradition. I argue that these models of explanation track two variables, focus of concern and obtainability of the good, whose interplay is responsible for the variety of envy. Emulative envy stems from being primarily concerned with getting the good for oneself, and perceiving oneself as capable of doing so; the typical behavioral tendency is self-improvement. Inert envy is the sterile version of emulative envy: the envier wants to get the good for oneself, but doesn’t think that they can do so; the typical behavioral tendency is self-loathing, wallowing in one’s misery, and avoidance of the envied. Aggressive envy derives from being primarily concerned with the envied’s possession of the good, rather than the good itself, and perceiving oneself as capable of taking the good away from the envied; the typical behavioral tendency is thus sabotaging and stealing the envied object. Finally, spiteful envy is a less productive version of aggressive envy: the envier wants to take the good from the envied, but doesn’t think that they can do so; the typical behavioral tendency is spoiling the good. I illustrate a paradigmatic case for each, providing a detailed analysis of the phenomenology, situational determinants, motivational structure, and typical behavioral outputs, and I explain how they differ from nearby emotions and attitudes such as admiration, covetousness, and spite.

Chapter 3 focuses on envy’s moral and prudential dimensions in the private sphere. How does envy, in all its forms, affect an agent’s interactions with other people, including friends and relatives? Is it always bad to feel? Can it bring genuine advantages and is it ever adaptive, as

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evolutionary psychologists claim? I argue that there can be no univocal answers to these questions. Instead the answer varies for different kinds of envy. Emulative envy is neither morally nor prudentially bad; inert envy is very bad prudentially, but (mostly) not morally bad; aggressive envy is morally very bad, but may bring some genuine prudential gain; and spiteful envy is both morally and prudentially very bad. These differences have been overlooked by philosophers and psychologists, and are relevant to a variety of practical applications, especially in the fields of clinical practice and organizational studies. Controversially, I argue that emulative envy can in certain circumstances even be a virtuous emotion, and should be encouraged and cultivated.

Chapter 4 analyzes the relationship between envy and its apparent opposite, love. From Plato and the Fathers of the Christian Church to modern clinical psychologists, the received wisdom is that envy destroys love, and that love extinguishes envy. Such an opposition is plausible: envy is believed to necessarily involve malice toward the envied, while love is believed to necessarily involve concern for the beloved’s welfare; envy feels bad, while (reciprocated) love feels good; envy brings with it Schadenfreude, pleasure at others’ misfortune, while love brings with it what Germans call “Mitfreude,” joy at others’ success. Indeed, the experience of envy in loving relationships is perhaps the hardest kind of envy for people to weather. Against this received wisdom, I argue that envy and love are not incompatible opposites but two sides of the same coin. They thrive under the same psychological conditions and, as such, often accompany one another. In fact, I argue that love can benefit from emulative envy, and – if it is wise – love can tolerate some amount of inert, aggressive, and spiteful envy. Envy is the dark side of love, and love can illuminate envy.

Chapter 5 investigates the implications of my taxonomy for the public and political sphere. Envy is surprisingly absent in the recent revival of political emotions and this chapter aims to start remedying such lacuna. I start by reviewing a debate in distributive justice that is dominated by what I call the Envious Egalitarianism argument, according to which egalitarianism should be rejected because it is motivated by the vice of envy. John Rawls tackles this argument in A Theory of Justice, and his approach shapes the subsequent debate on envy in political philosophy. I argue that such a debate is misguided for two reasons: it uses an exceedingly narrow notion of envy – which I call uberspiteful envy – and it is exclusively focused on so-called “class envy” and thus on differences of socioeconomic status. Instead, I suggest a more contemporary lens which
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considers the role of envy in all its varieties and with regard to different kinds of differences in identity and status. In particular, I focus on racial relations and introduce the idea of envious racial prejudice. I apply my taxonomy to this new perspective, devoting particular attention to the case of Asian Americans, whose experience of racism is often underinvestigated at least in part – I suggest – because they are the object of envy. I conclude by acknowledging that the application of my taxonomy to the public sphere is not straightforward, and that political envy is often mingled with other emotions, such as resentment, indignation, and particularly jealousy. Thus, I end this chapter by returning and complicating the view I defended in Chapter 1.

The Conclusion is a collection of musings on what envy tells us about the structure of human value. I start with the notion of fitting envy and the idea that some things are worthy objects of envy. This notion implies that envy informs us not just of particular things we as individuals care about, but also of general goods that we as a species ought to care about because they are authentically good. Thus, I reject the ingrained conviction that authentic goodness is necessarily non-comparative and non-positional, and try to develop the implications of the idea that human psychology is deeply shaped by social comparison. I venture to suggest that there are two different but related such implications. The first is metaphysical: what is good for humans is almost entirely dependent on how we relate to and stack against one another. The second is epistemic: what is judged to be good relies almost entirely on standards that are relative and dependent on interpersonal comparison.

Because I see philosophy as a collaborative enterprise that stretches across time and place, the book contains an Appendix, in which I survey notions of envy and related emotions as they have been discussed in the ancient Greek tradition, in late antiquity and medieval thought, and in the modern era (with a quick dive into the twentieth century). The Appendix, which is limited mostly to the “Western” tradition, can be read both as a complement to the book or independently from it: it can be a starting point for the historian who has never thought about envy, or it can be a way to retrace already familiar notions in the history of thought. Rather than attempting a comprehensive review, I highlight the more interesting and influential views, and highlight connections with the contemporary debate.
CHAPTER I

What Is Envy?

O jealousy! Thou magnifier of trifles.
Friedrich von Schiller, Fiesco, or the Genoese Conspiracy

1.1 Introduction: Two Different Green-Eyed Monsters

One day I was talking to my mother about the topic of my dissertation, which was on envy, and she exclaimed, “I never feel envy, but I often feel jealousy!” Since this conversation happened in Italian, she used the terms: “invidia” and “gelosia.” While the translation between Italian and English may appear straightforward, things are a bit more complicated below the surface. If an English speaker had said “I am not envious, I am just jealous!” not only the force of the distinction would have been diminished but possibly the distinction itself would have been unintelligible, or at least fuzzy. That is because, as I discuss below, in English “jealousy” is often used as a synonym for “envy.” This is not an idiosyncrasy exclusive to English. French, for instance, behaves this way too, which is perhaps not surprising given that “envy” and “jealousie” derive from “envie” and “jalousie,” respectively. (However, other romance languages such as Spanish and, as I said, Italian do not share this feature.)

There is a second notable linguistic phenomenon concerning envy, namely that in some languages (such as Dutch) there are two words that can be aptly translated as “envy” in English, one of which has a more positive connotation than the other (I come back to this linguistic practice in Chapter 2).

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In some linguistic communities, then, speakers are arguably more specific in talking about their envious experience, while in others speakers are much vaguer about it, since they also include what many people perceive as a different emotion. This is not idiosyncratic to envy: our linguistic practices are known to influence the way we think about our emotional experience, even though the extent of this influence is debatable (Prinz 2016). One could interpret these linguistic differences as reflecting deep divides in the emotional experience, or think of them as only superficial and argue that, deep down, we all feel the same emotions and only talk about them in different ways. More generally, given that language is an important component of culture, one could wonder whether emotions are natural universal phenomena grounded in hardwired responses, or cultural local ones that are constructed from more primitive biological elements. I do not wish to take a stand in this debate at a general level, but I do locate myself in the social constructionist camp with regard to envy in particular, albeit with a few provisos.

On the one hand, it seems that envy is present in all cultures (Foster 1972; Parrott and Mosquera 2008), and there are plausible evolutionary explanations for it (Hill and Buss 2008). Thus, I believe that something like the emotion that I call “envy” in English is indeed a universal human experience. At the same time, envy seems too cognitively complex and dependent on social interactions and thus cultural norms to be interestingly discussed as a universal emotion. In this book I draw from a variety of ancient, modern, and contemporary sources across different disciplines to support an account of envy that is unavoidably particular and specific to the spatiotemporal context of my likely audience: educated individuals from Westernized countries.

1 Note that language and culture can come apart. English and Dutch are very close linguistically (they are both West Germanic languages), and yet their envy vocabulary, so to speak, is very different. French and Italian also belong to the same linguistic family and yet they differ in whether the word for jealousy can be used to refer to envy. Vice versa, I have talked to native English speakers from very different cultural contexts (North America, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Australia) and they all confirmed they often hear envy and jealousy used as synonyms. So, on the one hand, language seems to affect emotional experience independently of culture, but, on the other hand, closely related languages can behave very differently down the line, presumably due to different cultural contexts.

1 The relation between language, culture, and emotion is complicated indeed.

2 See Mallon and Stich 2000 for a review of the debate, and an interesting proposal to dissolve it; see also Barrett 2006, 2017 for a more recent perspective on the construction of emotions.

3 The empirical evidence that I rely on is mostly collected through study of contemporary “WEIRD” subjects, that is, individuals who live in Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic societies (Henrich et al. 2010). This is another reason why my account is culturally specific.
Overall I aim to steer clear of as many theoretical commitments as I can: I do not commit myself to any specific view about emotions in general. While I have my leanings, I hope that my analysis of envy can prove useful across different schools of thought. I try to use terminology that is as neutral as possible. This theoretical neutrality has the further advantage of making the book accessible to a wider audience, that is, readers who are not familiar with the intricacies of the debate on the ontology of emotions, or other more technical discussions in this field.

That being said, the definition of envy, and how it differs from jealousy, is a necessary preliminary for an inquiry into its nature. Too many times I find myself talking about envy in informal settings and being asked what I think about – jealousy! Therefore the bulk of this chapter is dedicated to clarifying the relation between envy and jealousy. Section 1.2 provides evidence and explanation of why they are confused with each other. Section 1.3 presents the most prominent and persuasive view of how they differ, namely that envy is about lack of a good, while jealousy is about the loss of a good. But human emotionality is messy and complications arise, so Section 1.4 is devoted to ambiguous, hybrid, and transitional cases. Last, but certainly not least, Section 1.5 introduces the definition of envy that I use throughout the book.

1.2 Envy and Jealousy as Rivalrous Emotions

Before proposing an account of the difference between envy and jealousy, let me substantiate my claim that they are often conflated and thus the claim that they are, indeed, distinct (or else there would be no “conflation”).

Merriam-Webster’s first definition of “jealous” is “hostile toward a rival or one believed to enjoy an advantage: ENVIOUS,” while the OED lists “envy” as a synonym of jealousy as its second meaning. Seminal works on envy in sociology and anthropology contain discussions lamenting the presumed synonymy of these English terms (Schoeck 1969, 71–2; Foster 1972, 167–8), which is presented as an unfortunate source of confusion for scholarly investigation. Social psychologists have since cast doubt on the synonymy claim, arguing that “jealousy” encompasses a range of meanings that include those of “envy,” but not vice versa (Silver and Sabini 1978). They have provided evidence that two emotions are
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phenomenologically experienced as distinct even by English speakers: envy is more likely to be characterized by feelings of inferiority and self-criticism, wishfulness and longing, and a motivation to self-improve; jealousy is more likely to be characterized by feelings of suspiciousness and distrust, rejection and hurt, hostility and anger at others, and fear of loss (Smith et al. 1988).

Furthermore, jealousy is almost always accompanied by some envy for the rival, but the opposite does not hold, and envy is characteristically associated with concern for public disapproval, while jealousy is associated with self-righteousness (Parrott and Smith 1993).

This second result is crucial to understanding the linguistic asymmetry: jealous people do not worry about hiding their jealousy, because jealousy, albeit condemned when excessive, is less stigmatized than envy and considered more legitimate. Consequently it makes sense for “jealousy” to incorporate some of envy’s meaning, but not the opposite.

Both linguistic conflation and differentiation of the two emotions have also been proved via taxometric analysis, which not only confirms the qualitative differences between envy and jealousy but also shows that envy and jealousy are discrete complex affective kinds rather than different regions of the same continuous affective domain (Haslam and Bornstein 1996).

Finally, philosophers and scholars of religion also tend to agree that envy and jealousy are distinct emotions (e.g., Farrell 1980; Neu 1980; Ben-Ze’ev 1990, 2000; Schimmel 2008; Taylor 1988, 2006).

An interdisciplinary consensus of this size is hard to ignore: sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers all agree that envy and jealousy are distinct. But then, why are these emotions so often confused with each other?

First of all, both emotions involve a three-party relation. First, there is the agent, the person who feels the emotion: they who are jealous, or envious. Second, there is the person toward whom the emotion is directed: they who are the primary target of jealousy, or envied. Note the awkward way of referring to the person jealousy is directed at. That is because saying “I’m jealous of x” in common parlance is ambiguous. It may refer to the logical equivalent of the envied, or it may refer to the logical equivalent of the object of envy, the thing in virtue of which we envy the envied – which is often another person in the case of jealousy.

But in abstract terms, when thinking about the logical structure of the two emotions, let me call that object in virtue of which we feel the emotion the good. Different theorists will have different names for the notion I am
referring to, but here I want to stick to a commonsensical view, because we are trying to understand why these emotions are so similar and so I am using a schema that enhances the similarity.

The good, in the case of jealousy, is usually a person, but it need not be. As Gabriele Taylor puts it, “in both cases the person experiencing the emotion sees herself as standing in some relation to the valued good, where this good may be some material possession, a social position or position of relative power, a personal quality, or some kind of personal relationship” (Taylor 1988, 233). However, paradigmatic cases of jealousy usually involve three people. The jealous spouse’s jealousy is targeted at another person who is seen as threatening one’s relationship to a loved one. In my terminology, the other person is the target of jealousy, and the loved one is the good.

It is clear from this description that the target of jealousy is some sort of rival. But so is the target of envy, the envied. Both emotions are thus rivalrous or adversarial emotions. There is some sort of competition between the agent and the target, and the good is the prize, the object they both want. Even in cases of nonprototypical jealousy we can see at least an adversarial relation: the person who jealously guards their privacy is acting against someone who is seen as an enemy, even if potentially an abstract one, such as corporations or the government. Often, albeit not always in the case of jealousy, this competitive nature involves an element of comparison. The jealous spouse typically fears that the rival will be seen by their beloved as superior, more attractive in some way. The envious necessarily sees the envied as in a superior position, as we shall see soon. While the comparative element is not necessary in jealousy, it is common enough. Relatedly, the competition is often, albeit not necessarily in either emotion, perceived as a zero-sum game: only the agent or the target can win the prize, in the eyes of the agent, and that is what drives the competition and determines the adversarial nature of the relation.

In virtue of these features, both emotions are affectively aversive, in the sense that they are painful to experience, because they negatively affect the agent’s self-esteem, involve the idea of a threat to one’s well-being, and create a conflict with another person.

Now, note that there are many counterexamples to the picture I just drew. In fact, most of this book is devoted to showing that there are forms of envy that do not fit neatly into this description. But this is a common, if often implicit and unconscious, way of thinking about the two emotions that should help to see why they are often associated and confused with each other.