

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ENVY

Envy is almost universally condemned and feared. But is its bad reputation always warranted? In this book, Sara Protasi argues that envy is more multifaceted than it seems, and that some varieties of it can be productive and even virtuous. Protasi brings together empirical evidence and philosophical research to generate a novel view according to which there are four kinds of envy: emulative, inert, aggressive, and spiteful. For each kind, she individuates different situational antecedents, phenomenological expressions, motivational tendencies, and behavioral outputs. She then develops the normative implications of this taxonomy from a moral and prudential perspective, in the domain of personal loving relationships, and in the political sphere. A historical appendix completes the book. Through a careful and comprehensive investigation of envy's complexity, and its multifarious implications for human relations and human value, *The Philosophy of Envy* surprisingly reveals that envy plays a crucial role in safeguarding our happiness.

SARA PROTASI is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Puget Sound. She has published essays on love, envy, beauty, pornography, and pedagogy.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ENVY

SARA PROTASI

University of Puget Sound



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
 978-1-009-00171-7 — The Philosophy of Envy
 Sara Protasi
 Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
 UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
 One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
 314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
 103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
 education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009001717

DOI: 10.1017/9781009007023

© Sara Protasi 2021

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
 of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
 place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2021

First paperback edition 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

NAMES: Protasi, Sara, 1978– author.

TITLE: The philosophy of envy / Sara Protasi, University of Puget Sound, Washington.

DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2021. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2020057996 (print) | LCCN 2020057997 (ebook) | ISBN 9781316519172

(hardback) | ISBN 9781009001717 (paperback) | ISBN 9781009007023 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Envy. | Ethics. | Social psychology.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC BJ1535.E57 P76 2021 (print) | LCC BJ1535.E57 (ebook) | DDC 179/.8–DC23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020057996>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2020057997>

ISBN 978-1-316-51917-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-00171-7 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
 or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
 publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
 remain, accurate or appropriate.

*For M and m, amori della mamma: may you learn to love and
envy well.*

For Shen-yi, 我的寶貝: “words cannot describe.”

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	x
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction: The Sidelong Gaze	I
1 What Is Envy?	6
1.1 Introduction: Two Different Green-Eyed Monsters	6
1.2 Envy and Jealousy as Rivalrous Emotions	8
1.3 To Lack or to Lose, That Is the Question	11
1.4 Complications: Ambiguous, Hybrid, and Transitional Scenarios	15
1.5 What Is Envy, Then? A Definition	20
2 Varieties of Envy	26
2.1 Introduction: Envy Is Said in Many Ways	26
2.2 What Does Envy Do? Leveling Up and Leveling Down	29
2.3 The Variables of Envy: Focus of Concern and Perceived Obtainability of the Good	37
2.4 The Varieties of Envy	44
3 The Value of Envy	66
3.1 Introduction: Is Envy Guilty as Charged?	66
3.2 Preliminaries	68
3.3 “It Should Have Been Me!”	70
3.4 “It Should Be Me!”	73
3.5 “It Could Have Been Me!”	76
3.6 “It Could Be Me!”	79
3.7 Ontology and Normativity Coming Together	83
3.8 Emulative Envy as a Virtuous Emotion	85
3.9 Toward a Theory of Remedies of Envy	92
4 Love and Envy, Two Sides of the Same Coin	94
4.1 Introduction: Love Does Not Envy, Or Does It?	94
4.2 Preliminaries: Love, Envy, and Two Kinds of Incompatibility	96

viii	<i>Contents</i>	
4.3	Comparison, Similarity, and Desire for Esteem: Where Love and Envy Thrive	100
4.4	In Praise of Envyng the Beloved	110
5	Political Envy	117
5.1	Introduction: Envy as a Political Emotion?	117
5.2	The Rhetoric of Class Envy and Envious Egalitarianism	121
5.3	Envy and Prejudice	131
5.4	Varieties of Political Envy	142
5.5	Taming the Green-Eyed Monsters	148
	Conclusion: Envy and Human Goodness	151
	<i>Appendix In the Beginning Was Phthonos: A Short History of Envy</i>	161
A.1	Introduction: Envy in Western History of Philosophy	161
A.2	Envy as a <i>Pathos</i> in the Ancient Greek Tradition	163
A.3	Envy as a Sin in Christian and Islamic Thought	177
A.4	Envy in the Modern Era	188
A.5	Envy in John Rawls	208
	<i>References</i>	215
	<i>Index</i>	234

Figures

2.1 Varieties of envy	<i>page</i> 43
2.2 Gabriele Taylor's taxonomy	47

Tables

2.1	The four kinds of envy	<i>page</i> 65
3.1	Kinds of envy in relation to their badness	83
3.2	Kinds of envy in relation to both their badness and the variables that determine them	85
A.1	Summary of Aristotle's views of <i>phthonos</i> and related emotions across the three works	175
A.2	Summary of Descartes' views on responses to deserved and undeserved fortune	200

Preface and Acknowledgments

The first memory I have of reflecting philosophically about envy is from when I was about ten years old. I remember walking in the garden of my church before Confession. That year I was preparing for my First Communion, and I was a very conscientious believer who did her spiritual homework. I must have been told about the seven deadly sins at Sunday school, and I recall marveling at how envy could be in the same list as gluttony or vanity. Envy was clearly The Worst Thing Ever. So shameful, so painful – nothing else was as bad in my eyes. Envy was both the only one of those sins worth confessing to, and the one that was hardest to confess to.

Throughout the years since I have observed a lot of envy in the different communities that I inhabit as an academic, a dancer, a parent, and a human being with decent observation and introspection skills. Since that day in the church's garden my thoughts on envy have evolved: I have a more comprehensive and, hopefully, truthful view of envy now. But I don't know if I would have become the kind of person who reflects philosophically about the same topic at ten and at forty without the guidance and example of my parents. They were both excellent students, who implicitly showed me the importance of education without ever pressuring me explicitly. I had the privilege of growing up in an apartment full of books, where reading the newspaper daily was the natural thing to do. My mother, Angela Plutino, showed me that it was possible for a woman to be educated, have a successful teaching career, and be a nurturing mother; she encouraged my writing ambitions and praised my literary attempts from an early age. My father, Marco Protasi, showed me what academic life looked like, and spent many evenings conversing with me about philosophy, theology, and literature. He also embodied an ideal of rational and thoughtful Christianity that I ultimately could not embrace, but which still affects the way I think about morality and life.

There is much more I could say, but the succinct version is that I owe thanks to both my parents that this book exists.

Philosophy is a communal enterprise, always, but this is particularly true when it is about a delicate human subject such as envy. It turns out that, even if people are reluctant to admit their envy, they all find it a fascinating subject and are much more willing to share their envious feelings and experiences once they hear that envy might not be all bad! I am grateful to all of the many people who engaged with me in candid discussions on sensitive personal matters. I enjoyed the enthusiastic responses to my defense of envy, but I particularly appreciated the many objections that pushed me to strengthen my arguments and that, sometimes, changed my positions. I acknowledge many such contributions in each chapter.¹

But writing a book's acknowledgments is, as it turns out, a chance to think back about one's intellectual journey, and so I am going to express here gratitude toward the myriad friends and colleagues who have walked alongside me for parts or the entirety of the journey so far.

Starting with the event that divides academic life into two ages (BD and AD, Before Dissertation and After Dissertation). I was lucky to have the most wonderful dissertation committee: Tamar Szabó Gendler, advisor extraordinaire, who always strikes the perfect balance between demandingness and encouragement, rigor and care, demonstrating how to be an exceptional scholar and teacher, and also honestly and humbly disclosing the work that went into it; Steve Darwall, whose generosity I will forever be grateful for (he agreed to be not just in one but *two* dissertation committees of mine!) and whose vast knowledge of many fields relevant to my work has proved invaluable for my research through the years; June Gruber, who kept all of us philosophers on track, provided psychological expertise, and made me feel less intimidated in meetings; and finally Verity Harte, who constantly motivated me to make my arguments tighter, my historical references more careful, and my writing more exact.

Among the Yale faculty who have contributed directly or indirectly to developing the ideas in this book, I owe special mentions to three of them. Michael Della Rocca has supported me both intellectually and emotionally since I was a first-year student, and I would not have become a professional philosopher without him. Zoltán Gendler Szabó helped me see how

¹ It is customary to apologize in advance for one's forgetfulness, and in my case it is not at all a formality: while I did my best to write down the name of everybody who provided feedback to me, my memory is atrocious. So, if you helped me along the way, and your name does not appear in the book, please know I am truly grateful to you, too.

Preface and Acknowledgments

xiii

I thought about love and envy as two sides of the same coin – the epiphany occurred in front of beers at a dive bar in New Haven and I still remember where I was sitting! Finally, Shelly Kagan knew when to step in, and when to step back, and even though my philosophical style is pretty much the opposite of his, I learned a lot from him. But I am grateful to all of the brilliant teachers whose courses I have taken or audited at Yale, because they have all contributed to shape the philosopher I am still trying to become.

My fellow graduate students – in particular Gwen Bradford, Pamela Corcoran, Eric Guindon, Maya Gupta, Julia Jorati, Matt Lindauer, Mark Maxwell, Aaron Norby, Alex Silverman, Esther Schubert Palacios, and Mary-Beth Willard – were (and still are) inspiring, fun, and a frequent source of emulative envy and admiration. They pushed me to be my best self with their altruism, warmth, honesty, and sheer brilliance. It is thanks to such models that I applied for and was granted a completion dissertation fellowship by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Mellon Foundation, which I am very grateful for. Portions of Chapter 1 were previously published in Protasi (2016) and (2017b), Chapter 2 is a significantly revised version of Protasi (2016), and Chapter 4 is a lightly revised version of Protasi (2017c). I thank the publishers for granting me permission to reuse this material. I am also thankful to Hilary Gaskin for her precious advice and support on this project.

Before my time at Yale I was welcomed by two other wonderful communities of scholars. I was sent to the University of Michigan by my Italian advisor Tito Magri. Among the many ways in which he helped me become a professional philosopher, this was maybe the most consequential, for reasons I came to fully appreciate only years later. My young self was equal part awed and terrified by those Michigan philosophers, who all sounded like geniuses to me. Among them, I am especially grateful for their teaching, support, and friendship to Aaron Bronfman, Stephen Campbell, Vanessa Carbonell, Victor Caston, Eduardo García-Ramírez, Allan Gibbard, Lina Jansson, Molly Mahony, Eleni Manis, Ivan Mayerhofer, Alex Plakias, Ian Proops, Peter Railton, Neil Sinhababu (honorary member), Erica Stonestreet, Wendy Tng, and Ken Walton.

I was at the University of Chicago in between doctorates, as appropriate a choice for a liminal existence as there can be. I went there to study with Martha Nussbaum. I owe Martha so much more than can be expressed in a few lines. She was the first living philosopher whose book I devoured like a novel, and the only one whose influence I find in everything I write. She and Aristotle have changed my life – in that order.

Academic life is nomadic life. After Ann Arbor, Chicago, and New Haven, I have philosophized in Manhattan, KS (thank you, Amy Lara, Jim Hamilton, Kathy Karlin, Andrew Moon, Chris Remple, and Sangeeta Sangha); Leeds, UK (shout-out to the best philosophical karaoke: Elizabeth Barnes, Ross Cameron, Daniel Elstein, Gerald Lang, Heather Logue, Aaron Meskin, and Tasia Scrutton; and also thank you, Jason and Starr Turner, for shepherding us through parenting); and Singapore (*namaste*, Christina Chuang), before finding some stability in Tacoma.

The philosophy department at the University of Puget Sound has welcomed me and my family with open arms. They have supported me not only in all aspects of my job but also in my personal life, and have never made me feel like I should set aside any aspect of the latter in favor of the former. Thank you, Bill Beardsley, Doug Cannon, Justin Tiehen, and Ariela Tubert.

My department exemplifies the best of my university, whose faculty and staff have taught me what it means to be a teacher–scholar. So many of them have enriched my life in the last five years, but I am particular thankful to Nancy Bristow, Gwynne Brown, Julie Nelson Cristoph, America Chambers, Katy Curtis, Eric Orlin, Lo Sun Perry, Melvin Rouse, Renee Simms, Jason Struna, Seth Weinberger, and Heather White for their mentorship and friendship. I am grateful to the University of Puget Sound for a pre-tenure sabbatical leave grant intended to support the writing of this book.

But even with financial support and time off from teaching, this project would have never been successful without the help of several peer groups, those I formed with Isha Rajbhandari and Sarah West; Saba Fatima and Alison Reiheld; and Olivia Bailey, Mara Bollard, Alida Liberman, Alice MacLachlan, and Denise Viganì: You are all beautiful, caring, and super-smart, and I cannot believe you are my friends and colleagues!

Tyler Doggett and Neal Tognazzini were both tremendous sources of peer support as well. They are exemplars of nurturing masculinity and almost self-effacing generosity. I cannot list all of the many ways in which they supported me throughout the years, but they really went above and beyond the call of duty. I also want to thank the students enrolled in PHIL 420 Everyday Ethics at Western Washington University for their feedback on Chapters 1–3 of a previous draft of this book.

Among the men defying the male academic stereotype are also David Livingstone Smith, whose mentorship with regard to publishing and public philosophy was very appreciated, and Jens Lange and Niels van de Ven, who promptly and generously responded to my requests for

Preface and Acknowledgments

xv

references and explanations of more technical aspects of work in psychology.

But there is life outside of academia, you might be shocked to hear. In the years this book was written I was truly lucky to be gifted friendship, dance wisdom, and yummy food (among other components of *eudaimonia*) by Diana Busch, Giulia Cardillo, Jomarie Carlson, Levin Conway, Tiffany Gilkison, Jane Kenyon, Betsy Kindblade, Melanie Kirk-Stauffer, Birgitte Necessary, and Mary Ellen Sullivan. I am also grateful to my aunt, Chiara Protasi, and my brother, Davide Protasi, for their love and support from afar. Among the many beloved friends from my Roman gang (really too many to list – you know who you are!), a special mention goes to my first philosophy teacher, Sergio Cicatelli, whose initial lecture on philosophy as stemming from wonder mesmerized and bewitched me, and I have not woken up from that spell since.

Finally, the person who deserves the most important acknowledgment is my loving partner, attentive co-parent, witty friend, and gifted colleague, Shen-yi Liao. Without him, nothing that matters would be possible. He was the cutest of those Ann Arbor geniuses, and he has been there every step of the way, sustaining all of my pursuits and showing me every day what a real feminist looks like. My flourishing is intertwined with his: We love and envy each other in just the right way – blooms, weeds, and all. This book is dedicated to him and to our awe-inspiring and occasionally maddening little sprouts, Ming-li Maya and Ming-yun Mira.