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# The Moral Psychology of Envy

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD  
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## *Chapter 12*

# **The Envious Consumer**

Niels van de Ven

“All you need is envy.” This is how Young and Rubicam, a global marketing agency, opens their 2006 report on how brands can position themselves to sell more products. The advertising agency argues that envious desire can motivate consumers to buy, and provides advice on how brands can harness the power of envy to increase sales. A thought-provoking claim, as the typical view of envy throughout history has been far more negative (see Smith and Kim 2007 for an overview). Young and Rubicam knew that many people hold a negative view on envy, as they also added a section on whether their envy-building strategy is evil. So, why would a brand want to trigger envy, if envy has long been condemned as something evil?

In this chapter, I provide an answer to this question, by focusing on the emerging research in psychology and marketing on how envy drives consumers. I describe the functional view of envy that argues that it, like any emotion, serves an important function to people: envy helps protect our relative position (status) in a group (see Van de Ven 2015; Lange, Weidman, and Crusius 2018). The functional approach makes a distinction in a benign and malicious subtype of envy. The malicious type of envy is the one people traditionally think of: a destructive, begrudging feeling that the other should lose the advantage that triggered the envy. For consumers, it leads to negative perceptions and communication about the person and the brand owned by the envied person. Benign envy is still a negative and frustrating feeling to experience, but the goals and motivations are aimed at acquiring whatever the envied person has. In this sense, the envious desire motivates people to achieve more themselves.

After providing the overview on the empirical research on envy in consumption from the psychology and marketing literature, I reflect on whether people also consume to be envied themselves. Finally, I describe how the

empirical findings based on the functional account of envy might further the thinking on the role envy plays in response to inequality in society. For example, the different antecedents for benign and malicious envy might help gain a better understanding of not only consumer envy but also help to shed light on how people deal with inequality.

### BENIGN ENVY

The most straightforward way envy is important for consumption is that envy can fuel the desire for goods that others have. The anthropologist George Foster (1972) argued that getting what others have is one possible way to get rid of the frustrating feeling of envy. The frustrating feeling of envy arises because someone else is better off in a domain that is important to oneself. Rawls (1971) and Taylor (1988) called this “emulative envy.” Research in psychology indeed found that envy can be seen as having two subtypes, that differ in how they deal with this frustration (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009; Lange et al. 2018). First, malicious envy is the stereotypical destructive type of envy, that resolves the frustration by pulling down the other from their superior position. The envied person is then no longer superior, so the source of frustration is gone. The other subtype is benign envy, which motivates someone to improve their own position. By moving up to the same level as the superior other, the frustration is also resolved. It is this latter type of envy that motivates people to strive for the coveted advantage someone else has, which likely fuels consumption. Indeed, academic research found that when students saw a video of a fellow student who enthusiastically described his new iPhone, this triggered benign envy in the study respondents and made them willing to pay more for the product themselves (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011).

It’s to be noted that there is an alternative view on subtypes of envy, according to which there is only one envy that it can lead to both more constructive and destructive behavior depending on the circumstances (Cohen-Charash and Larson 2017 and Tai, Narayanan, and McAllister 2012). I think this view is compatible with the view that distinguishes subtypes of envy. It just depends on the level at which one zooms in (or out) of the experience. In the emotion literature behavioral tendencies are typically seen as an integral part of the emotional experience (e.g., Frijda 1988), which is why I prefer to distinguish envy as having subtypes (see Van de Ven 2015 and Crusius et al. 2020 for more on this discussion).

The tendency to improve one’s position as a response to envy has been discussed in economics and sociology as well, for example under the name of keeping-up-with-the-Joneses (Matt 2003). People want to keep up with

what their neighbors have, and they feel bad (likely envy) if they fall behind (Frank 2013). Although benign envy thus motivates to improve one's position (they try to achieve what others have), it should be stressed that this is not necessarily positive. As Frank argued, the continuous motivation to need more can lead to overconsumption and a chronic dissatisfaction with one's current state. This is also known as the "hedonic treadmill" (Brickman and Campbell 1971), the idea that after getting more goods the expectations and desires increase again. As soon as people have acquired something, they become habituated to that situation and set their eyes on a next target, creating a perpetual sense that one is lacking the things that one wants (or needs). The function of benign envy is to solve the frustration that arises because someone else is better off by improving one's own position. And although this sounds as self-improvement and thus something positive, the hedonic treadmill example suggests this need not be positive. There are more such possible negative consequences of benign envy. Consider the work by Sharma, Singh, and Sharma (2020) who found that players of online computer games that felt more benign envy were more likely to attempt to cheat in these games. Note that this was general cheating to improve one's chance of winning the game, not cheating to specifically hurt the envied other. Exactly the strong desire to improve their own position that was triggered by envy made the gamers try to cut corners in the game. Both Crusius and Mussweiler (2012) and Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2011) found that envious people were suddenly willing to pay more for a good if they saw someone else having it and felt envy as a result, and whether such social effects actually are in the best interest of the person is questionable. A final example of negative consequences (from a legal perspective) of benign envy is that envious consumers were more willing to buy counterfeit goods, again as a method to reduce the difference between oneself and the envied person (Loureiro, Pinero de Plaza, and Taghian 2020).

All these possible negative consequences of benign envy in the domain of consumption are important in more academic discussions of envy. Some argued that the proponents of benign envy claim that benign envy is a very positive experience, but this is not what the proponents of the subtype approach actually claimed (see the discussion in Crusius et al. 2019). When psychologists talk about a positive motivation in benign envy, this is not intended as an evaluation of whether the outcome is good or bad, but rather in the sense that it motivates people to get more of something compared with what they currently have. Perhaps striving for other goals (instead of the one triggered by benign envy) could have made people happier, or the additional consumption might create a temporary boost in happiness for the individual but harms society as it might lead to overconsumption. For most empirical psychologists studying envy it is clear that benign envy feels negative (i.e.,

painful) and triggers a motivation to improve one's position. This latter motivation can lead to positive and negative outcomes (for broader discussions on how philosophers have seen envy as something positive and negative, see Taylor 1988; La Caze 2001; Thomason 2015; D'Arms 2017; Protasi 2021).

Belk (2009) wrote an excellent article, arguing that in the last century benign envy has largely replaced malicious envy. Due to marketing efforts, easier access to consumer goods that makes many more products available, and unprecedented economic growth, the idea took hold in society that it is possible to attain what others have (where in the past many products were simply out of reach for the masses and especially the poor). Belk argued that in the past one's position in life was largely fixed, and envy would thus mainly be outed in its malicious form as self-improvement was often not possible. But for modern consumers much more is attainable, which is why benign envy has largely replaced malicious envy. We'll come back to this later in the section on the relation between envy and inequality, but from all this work it is clear that benign envy plays a large role in consumption.

## MALICIOUS ENVY

Where benign envy contains motivational tendencies to reduce the gap to the envied other by improving one's own position, malicious envy does so by trying to hurt the position of the envied person (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2009). Zizzo and Oswald (2001) found that envy can be so malicious, that people are willing to give up some of their money if doing so allows them to destroy even more money from the envied person. Malicious envy also made people gossip more about the envied person (Wert and Salovey 2004) and was found to lead to negative behavior toward the envied person in the workplace (Duffy, Shaw, and Schaubroeck 2008). In marketing, it is also clear that the negative effects of malicious envy are not only aimed toward the envied person: malicious envy is typically felt toward the superior person, but it was also found to increase dissatisfaction with the brand/product that the envied other owns, and make the envious person less likely to recommend the product to others (Anaya et al. 2016; Wobker, Kopton, and Kenning 2013). In other words, the negative attitudes thus extend to the *object* of envy in these consumer settings.

Besides the possible destructive consequences of envy, marketing research sometimes also found more constructive (motivating) responses from the malicious form of envy. For example, Kristofferson, Lambertson, and Dahl (2018) found that when people were maliciously envious of another consumer who owned a superior product, those with generally low self-esteem disliked the brand of the product more, while those that generally have high

self-esteem actually liked the brand *more*. This is a surprising finding for two reasons. First, people with low self-esteem tend to experience more malicious envy in general (Smith et al. 1999), and if malicious envy typically leads to negative behavior toward the envied person it is unclear *why* self-esteem would moderate the effect of malicious envy on brand liking as Kristofferson et al. (2018) found. Second, people with a high self-esteem are more likely to think that the coveted object is attainable for themselves and perceived attainability makes benign envy more likely (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2012). Therefore, one would be more likely to expect that those with high self-esteem would like the brand more because of (benign) envy. How the findings of Kristofferson et al. (2018) thus fit in this broader range of findings remains somewhat of an open question.

Another interesting finding on consumer envy by Salerno, Laran, and Janiszewski (2018) is that with benign envy people focus on the *process* on how to improve their own situation. This makes sense given the different motivations that are triggered by the subtypes of envy, as benign envy motivates to improve and a focus on the process how something can be attained will likely help to do so. But for malicious envy they found that consumers focused on the eventual *outcome* (who gets what in the end), and that consumers who experienced malicious envy actually sought out direct rewards that would help them improve their position. In other words, benign envy led to a more intrinsic motivation for self-improvement, while malicious envy led to more direct search for gratification by rewarding oneself. At first sight this seems to conflict with the findings of Crusius and Lange (2014), who found that it is benign envy that tends to focus someone's attention to the object of envy (the outcome), while malicious envy tends to focus attention toward the other person. However, this search for gratification might well be a way to resolve the frustrating feeling as people typically try to get rid of negative feelings by seeking instant gratification (Malesza 2019).

An interesting question is whether malicious envy might sometimes fuel a desire to *overtake* and outperform the superior other. Malicious envy often results in a strong dislike of the envied person and a desire to degrade the other (Parrott and Smith 1993). Outperforming them, not just getting what the other has, might help satisfy that motivation as well as overtaking the other person also reduces the status and position of the envied other. The difference with benign envy then is that benign envy motivates to improve one's position (and when one outperforms the other it is a side effect that the position of the envied person is harmed), while for malicious envy the harm to the position of the other is the primary driver of motivation (and the resulting improvement to the envier's position is the side effect). In situations of competition the realization that others are doing well has been found to fuel

a desire to outperform them (Chan and Briers 2018; Wolf et al. 2020). So, does this occur via the motivation to improve oneself (from benign envy) or from a motivation to put down the other (from malicious envy)? Lin (2018) studied responses to social media posts and found that it actually seemed to be malicious envy that led to a motivation to outperform the other.

### WHEN DOES (EACH TYPE OF) ENVY ARISE?

The literature on how people make social comparisons suggests that envy is more intense for things that are (a) important to our self-view and (b) when we compare ourselves to people who are initially thought to be similar to us (Festinger 1954; Tesser 1988). Furthermore, envy is typically stronger toward people who are (initially) similar to us. The more people think, “that could have been me!” the stronger their envy is (Van de Ven and Zeelenberg 2015). Interestingly, in society this means that envy is often felt more toward others that are relatively close to us in for example social rank, rather than towards the super-rich.

The fact that we typically compare ourselves (and feel envy toward) those who are initially close to us does not mean that the super-rich, that are more visible to us now in times of television and social media, do not have an effect on us via social comparison and envy. As Frank (1999) argued, many goods get their value from their *relative* worth, rather than their absolute worth. The 400,000-euro car is better than the 100,000-euro car; but the difference between these two in the absolute value of the car (how it can get us from *A* to *B*) is very small, and most of its price premium buys a relative rank difference that shows off one’s social status. The super-rich still sets a standard for others that “trickles down” to people’s desires at lower levels of income.<sup>1</sup> Frank argued that many luxury goods are positional, and thus get most of their value from the social rank they provide. This is also why many people that are financially well-off still feel that they do not have enough, as they need to keep spending to keep up in status with the people around them. This phenomenon seems particularly apparent in the United States: the website Financial Samurai shows how a couple that makes \$500,000 a year (compared to a US median household income of \$68,000) can still feel that their budget is really tight as they try to keep up with the spending of their equally affluent neighbors (Financial Samurai 2021).

Positional goods, those that derive value from their relative rank more than their absolute benefit, need not be consumer products: some areas that people themselves indicated to be positional are grades in school, investing for future prosperity, intelligence, physical fitness, weight, and attractiveness (Hillesheim and Mechtel 2013). As an example, most people prefer getting a



B as a grade when everyone else has a C, than to receive an A when everyone else gets an A+. For such positional goods envy is found to be stronger (Boardman, Raciti, and Lawley 2018), likely because what the other has also has a negative effect on the person who is worse off. One of Frank's points in his book is that much more (luxury) goods in rich countries are positional than might appear at first sight, and based on the findings of Boardman and colleagues thus have much potential to trigger envy as well. All in all, the fact that much luxury consumption is positional (Frank 1999) and that positional goods trigger envy (Boardman, Raciti, and Lawley 2018), makes it not so surprising that in this era of excess envy over consumption is on the rise (see Belk 2009).

Aside from the psychological literature on when envy is likely to be more intense, it is also important to look at when the benign and malicious forms of envy are more likely to occur. For a more thorough overview, see Van de Ven and Zeelenberg (2020) but the most important is the deservingness of the advantage of the other: When the position of the superior other is deserved, benign envy is more likely, when it is undeserved malicious envy is more likely to result (Smith et al. 1994; Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2012; Ferreira and Botelho 2021; but for a critique, see Protasi 2021). Other than this, for example, the relationship with the envied person matters: if people have a better bond with others benign envy is more likely when these others are better off (e.g., Lin and Utz 2015; Lee and Eastin 2020), and if we dislike them malicious envy is more likely (Ferreira and Botelho 2021). Perceived control (being able to obtain the outcome of the envied person as well) is more likely to lead to benign envy (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2012), and focusing on the object of envy leads to more benign envy while focusing on the person tends to lead to more malicious envy (Crusius and Lange 2014; Protasi 2021).

These are the most important antecedents that have been identified that distinguish benign from malicious envy. Note that the empirical support for this is initially derived from studies that asked respondents to recall instances of benign and malicious envy, after which these respondents rated several questions about the situation that had elicited these emotions. Such studies for example found that for malicious envy respondents had thought the situation to be undeserved. Based on appraisal theory (see Moors et al. 2013 for an overview), which argues that the initial perception of a situation (the appraisal) gives rise to a specific emotion, these findings were interpreted as if the appraisal (undeservedness) causes the emotion (malicious envy). Still the causality is not fully confirmed as a change in perceptions of deservingness could also technically be a *consequence* of the emotion, rather than an antecedent. Especially for perceived undeservedness, there is some debate on whether this might be a consequence of malicious envy (see Miceli and

Castelfranchi 2007; Protasi 2021), but note that there are studies (e.g., Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2011) in which perceived deservedness was manipulated after which differences in benign and malicious envy (and subsequent behavioral intentions) were found and causality was thus more strongly confirmed.

All in all, thinking about the possible antecedents of the envy subtypes is important, because by understanding this better we can also make predictions in how people typically react to others that are better off than we are and thus to inequality in general. I come back to this later in the section on how research on envy might inform the thoughts on responses to inequality, but let me first focus on how people respond to being envied themselves.

### DO PEOPLE WANT TO BE ENVIED?

Besides the direct motivations that envy triggers in people, there is another way that envy might affect consumers: a consumer might respond to *being* envied. Young and Rubicam, the branding agency that argued that all a brand needs is envy, assumed that consumers also buy products because they want to be envied by others. But is this the case? Foster (1972) argued that being envied triggers feelings on two dimensions: a competition axis (where you feel happy as your status increases) and a fear axis (when you worry about the other's negative behavior that might result from envy). Consistent with this is that Rodriguez Mosquera, Parrott, and Hurtado de Mendoza (2010) found that being envied is an ambivalent feeling: people might feel good for being better off but worried about the possible negative feelings it triggers in others.

The key to understanding the possible negative response to being envied is the model of Exline and Lobel (1999) on how people respond to being the target of an upward social comparison. When people feel that they are the target of an upward social comparison, they make an evaluation whether the other person (a) feels threatened by this comparison (and is thus potentially envious) and (b) whether they care about the other person's response. This latter can be a care for the well-being of the outperformed (and thus potentially envious) person, care for the relationship one has with the other, or a care for one's own well-being. For example, this model can help explain why many students prefer private praise over public recognition (Exline et al. 2004), as private (in contrast to public) praise helps to prevent negative consequences to others or in their relationship to the other students.

Based on this model by Exline and Lobel (1999), Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters (2010) predicted that people would not mind being benignly envied but would feel worried when others were maliciously envious of them. After all, benign envy would not typically lead to negative behavior toward

the envied person, while malicious envy does. They indeed found that when others were thought to be maliciously envious, the envied person would put in extra effort to help the envious person in an attempt to ward off the negative consequences of malicious envy. Consistent with this idea that being benignly envied is less bad than being maliciously envied, Feng et al. (2021) found that when a consumer is benignly envied their bond with the brand of the owned product increases, but when consumers think they are maliciously envied for owning a brand, they feel more anxious and get a worse connection with the brand.

The empirical support for Foster's (1972) fear axis, that people sometimes worry when they are being envied, is thus quite clear. But what about the competitiveness axis? Does being envied feel good? Situations in which we are envied can indeed have positive consequences as being envied was associated with having a higher self-confidence (Rodriguez Mosquera et al. 2010). Similarly, Lee et al. (2018) found that people who feel they are envied at work also experience positive feelings. However, is this *because* someone is envied? Or do people feel good because they are in a situation that makes them stand out positively? This seems like an important distinction: people want to have high status and want to be admired, and feel good when they have this. But these are also the situations that might trigger envy. It might thus well be that sometimes people feel good in situations in which they are envied, but that does not mean that people feel good *because* they are envied. Fileva (2019) argued that some people might want to provoke envy, but to the best of my knowledge there is no support for this claim, nor do I think there is a good reason to expect that this would be the case.

From a functional perspective, it makes sense to expect that people feel good when they do well and are assigned high status by others.<sup>2</sup> After all, having a high status confers benefits (e.g., consumers who buy luxury products are seen as having higher status and are treated better as a result, Nelissen and Meijers 2011). But why would people want to be envied? As discussed earlier, it creates a negative feeling in others, and either a motivation to pull the superior person down from their positions or a motivation in the envious to improve their situation. The first two are clearly negative outcomes, the third one is more neutral from the perspective of an envied person (although it has a clear functional benefit to the envious person). There is thus no clear reason to expect that people want to be envied (other than it being a side-effect of for example striving for status). Rawls (1971) argued that some people in superior positions are jealous (defined as a situation in which people are not willing to give up some of their advantage to others, see also Taylor, 1988), and do not want others to improve. Although I agree that something like this might happen at times, I again do not think that this supports an idea that people want to be envied. Simply the fact that they want to keep their superior

position and status seems a sufficient explanation and it is not needed for people to want to be envied to explain that they strive for more.

So far, I have not seen empirical support for the argument that sometimes people want to be envied (as suggested in Fileva 2019). In Lin, Van de Ven, and Utz (2018) we had tested why people post about material and experiential purchases on social media, and how they respond to others doing so. We found that people expect others to be more envious of material purchases, but, contrary to this expectation, it turns out that people are actually more envious of experiential purchases. We had added a few exploratory questions on why people post about their purchases (see the appendix of that paper for the full list) that we ended up not reporting on, but one question explicitly asked respondents whether they post their purchases because they want to be envied. On a scale from -3 (disagree) to +3 (agree) with 0 as a neutral midpoint, we found that respondents from the United States, on average, disagreed with this statement as the mean score is significantly below the neutral midpoint ( $M = -0.22$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ,  $t(405) = 2.45$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ,  $d = 0.24$ ). The effect is small, but on average people thus disagreed with the idea that they like to be envied. Of course, this is a self-report measure, and people might not want to admit that they want to be envied, but to me it at the very least indicates that people do not strive to be envied, and perhaps even prefer to generally avoid it. It seems more likely that being envied is a side effect of our actual desire for status.

Lin, Van de Ven, and Utz (2018) thus found that on average people do not want to be envied, but this does not mean that there are no people that would like to be envied. The variation in responses to that question was quite large, and there are generally some clear differences in how people respond to receiving preferential treatment. For example, Butori and De Bruyn (2013) found that some customers dislike receiving preferential treatment from a service provider, while others actually love this. Perhaps people with strong narcissistic traits actually like to be envied (although again the question should be raised whether it is a side effect of their desire for status, or a pure desire to be envied). Furthermore, if we strongly dislike someone we would not care much about their well-being or our relationship with them, and we might actually like it that we cause negative feelings in them. To summarize this point, it is an empirical claim that people want to be envied and further work to test this is very welcome, and could focus for example on testing whether people actually want to be envied and whether possible moderators exist that are related to for example culture, personality traits, or sociological factors.

## ENVY AND CONSUMER INEQUALITY

The previous overview of the empirical literature on envy and its relation to consumption clearly shows that envy is an important response to consumer inequality. In mild forms unequal outcomes often exist: the rich can buy more (and better) goods, a regular customer might receive a free upgrade to their hotel room that others do not get, and there might only be one table in the restaurant with the best view. In all these cases some inequality exists in the outcomes of consumers, and we've discussed that envy can play a role in situations such as these. But inequality in society is clearly a bigger issue with far-reaching (moral) implications, as was for example argued by Rawls (1971) and many others. Does envy play a role in responses to societal inequality? Should it?

Some philosophers have argued that all envy is irrational (e.g., Morgan-Knapp 2014; Nozick 1974). Nozick argued that the only reason the superior position of another person can be painful to us is if the other's position is deserved. After all, if it was not deserved, it should not negatively affect our self-view. Any envy, that he defined as malicious envy in the sense that it leads to a preference that the superior other loses their advantage, is thus by his definition misguided and irrational. From a functional, psychological perspective this does not make sense. Envy is an emotion, and all emotions evolved because they helped humans adapt to their (social) environment (Keltner and Gross 1999). If someone else undeservedly receives a promotion that I coveted, my self-esteem might be protected a bit by the fact that the other did not deserve their advantage, but it still rattles me that I did not have the promotion. That frustration, that pain, is still the fuel of (malicious) envy. As discussed before, malicious envy can still have useful functions by restoring the imbalance by pulling down the other, or by motivating the better off to share some of their superior position (see also Foster 1972). Furthermore, both Nozick (1974) and Morgan-Knapp (2014) ignored the possible benefits of benign envy, namely that exactly the frustration that someone else is better off can actually be a motivation to improve oneself.

Does this mean that envy *should* play a role in redistributive policies in society, as for example Bankovsky (2018) argues? I do not know. But I certainly do not think we should condemn any envious response to those in a superior position as being derived from irrational envy. People have sexual desires. Whether these are acted upon in a healthy way depends on individual characteristics, social norms, and a societal structure. The same holds for an emotion like envy: it exists and evolved because it is functional to help monitor and protect one's status in a group. Whether it is acted upon in a healthy way depends on a combination of individual characteristics, social norms,

and societal structures. I think that such a functional perspective to analyze the emotion can help in gaining a better understanding of the role envy plays in the responses to inequality. Let me point to a few areas where I think combining the psychological and philosophical viewpoints might be worthwhile.

A key to understanding the responses to inequality is that envy, like other emotions, is not driven mainly by the objective situation, but rather by one's *perception* of the situation (Roseman 1991). People are not averse to inequality, as long as it is perceived as fair and deserved (Starmans, Sheskin, and Bloom 2017). Obviously, the *perception* of undeservingness is often related to actual undeservingness, but these do not always map nicely onto each other. For example, people that have a high "belief in a just world," in the sense that they believe that people tend to get from life what they deserve based on their input, are also more likely to accept inequality (Garcia-Sanchez et al. 2021). Bénabou and Tirole (2006) argue that this is why people in the US accept inequality more than they do in Europe (and dislike redistributive tax policies), because in the US they more strongly believe that people deserve their socioeconomic position despite the fact that social mobility is actually higher in Europe. In other words, their work finds that doing well in the US is much more based more on the social rank you already had as a kid than it is in Europe, but people in the US actually think that the better off deserve their position in the social hierarchy more. This difference in perception might likely give rise to different likely envious responses toward the super-rich in Europe versus the US, as discussed earlier that perceptions of deservedness are actually one of the key factors that determine whether the resulting envy will be of the benign or malicious type.

Perhaps another point that might be interesting to political philosophers is that besides perceived deservedness, this chapter highlighted some other antecedents that are thought to determine whether envy would likely be of the benign or malicious type. First, the relationship with the envied other matters; if people have a better bond with others benign envy is more likely (e.g., Lin and Utz 2015; Lee and Eastin 2020), and if we dislike them malicious envy is more likely (Ferreira and Botelho 2021). Consistent with this is that, if the better off are more humble about their accomplishments, benign envy is more likely, while if they behave more arrogantly, malicious envy is more likely (Lange and Crusius 2015; Lin 2018). A society in which the general atmosphere is more friendly and optimistic, and in which the better off do not show off in an arrogant manner will thus be more likely to trigger benign envy over existing inequality. We also know that people feel less bad over being benignly envied than over being maliciously envied (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2010), so in a society in which the better off actually deserve their advantage (or at least are perceived to deserve their advantage)

the better off also feel less bad over being envied as they expect others to be benignly envious (and not maliciously envious).

Another factor that can play a role is perceived control: when people think it is feasible that they can improve their own situation, benign envy is more likely (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, and Pieters 2012). Note that Boardman Raciti, and Lawley (2018) did not find an effect of controllability, so it remains a question how important this is in responses to inequality. Interestingly, Smith (2004) argued that if someone feels envy for a longer period of time, the experience can also “transmute” into other emotions. Specifically, if obtaining the desired outcome is impossible to people, they might give up and either accept the situation or they might start to develop resentment toward the superior person or the society that creates the inequality. Our understanding of envy might help to predict how people behave following the inequality.

Finally, although I strongly think that envy is functional in how it helps a person achieve their social goals, fully giving in to its action tendencies is not always objectively best. Acting very negatively toward those with high status might backfire, as other people might actually look favorable on those with high status and might dislike you for trying to sabotage these better off. Following our passions and intuition often points us in the right direction, but adding some thoughts, consideration, and restraint at time helps as well. I therefore agree with Protasi (2021) and Morgan-Knapp (2014) that we would often do well to regulate our envious experience, as we are not always accurate in our perceptions or they might not be in our best interest given the circumstances. By listening to envy as a signal that we apparently find something really important, by careful questioning of our own assumptions on whether it is deserved or undeserved that the other has their advantage (and thus potentially transform out malicious envy into the benign form), and by realizing that we do not always need to compare ourselves to others, we might regulate our envy and resolve the frustration that gave rise to the envy as well.

## CONCLUSION

Envy serves a clear function: it monitors our social status and signals when our status is threatened by others that do better than us. It is therefore an important emotion that reacts to situations of inequality. Envy can motivate people to improve their position, or be more malicious and be aimed at pulling down the superior other. This latter has no absolute benefit to an envious person, but it does have the indirect benefit that by pulling down the superior other the status gap is reduced again. Furthermore, the fear of being envied might actually make the better off share some of their advantage, especially in situations in which their advantage was undeserved. This has clear benefits to

a group as well. I hope this functional perspective of envy, based on empirical work in psychology and consumer research that has revealed much of the antecedents of these subtypes of envy, can help to further the (political) philosophical thinking on the role envy plays (or should play) in the responses to societal inequality.

## NOTES

1. Alfred Archer, Alan Thomas, and Bart Engelen talk about how the rich influence the tastes and aspirations of the lower classes in their contribution to this volume: “The Politics of Envy: Outlaw Emotions in Capitalist Societies” (chapter 10).
2. For an in-depth discussion of this aspect, see Jens Lange and Jan Crusius’s contribution to this volume: “How Envy and Being Envied Shape Social Hierarchies” (chapter 2).

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