

The Doctrine of Envy

Introduction:

The major resource for this study is the book, *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior*, by Helmut Schoeck, reprinted in English in 1987 by Liberty Fund, Inc., from the original, 1966, German edition.

My purpose in using this resource is because Schoeck's book applies the word to the circumstances by which envy is exercised in the human race. This universal and singular source of the sin of envy and its applications are a constant among those who populate the earth at any given moment of history.

The Bible regards envy as a sin; its Greek root, ζήλος (*zēlos*), and its derivatives are used 17 times in the New Testament. What follows are excerpts from Schoeck with page numbers indicated in parentheses.

A. Definitions:

'Envy' and 'envious' in modern English are derived from the Latin *invidia* and *invidiosus*, which have the same meanings. The verb 'to envy' corresponds to the Latin *invidere*. (17)

Definitions emphasize the feeling of hostility, spite and ill-will. According to these, envy is present when there is 'mortification and ill-will occasioned by the contemplation of superior advantages.'

The first definition of envy as a verb is more specific: 'To feel displeasure and ill-will at the superiority of (another person) in happiness, success, reputation, or the possession of anything desirable.' It is also called envy when a person withholds a thing from someone else out of spite.

'Jealous' came to include a craving for the affection of someone else. Later it came to designate the fear of losing another person's affections, just like 'jealous' in the modern sense.

But the principle meaning of 'jealousy' remains the passionate endeavor to keep something that is one's own by right. One may postulate a man of jealous disposition whose mind is at rest once he knows he is free of rivals. (18)

Where jealousy acquires undertones of mistrust or hatred, what is meant is generally the suspicion that somebody is seeking to take something from us which we have hitherto enjoyed in tranquility. (18-19)

The jealous man can never normally become a spontaneous, primary aggressor. His hostile behavior begins only when a rival appears on the scene to give him specific reason of anxiety.



‘Envious’ is defined as a disgruntled emotional state arising from the possessions or achievements of another, a spiteful wish that the other should lose them. ‘Jealous’ is used when we observe or imagine with mistrust or dissatisfaction that someone is acquiring something which is really our due or which belongs to us.

Thus, the decisive difference is evident: jealousy is only directed against a definite transfer of coveted assets, never against the asset as such. Envy very often denies the asset itself. (19)

Envy and emulation.

A masterly definition and description of envy is found in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, published in 1912. Therein, William L. Davidson, Professor of Logic at the University of Aberdeen, has this to say:

Envy is an emotion that is essentially both selfish and malevolent. It is aimed at persons, and implies dislike of one who possesses what the envious man himself covets or desires, and a wish to harm him. There is in it also a consciousness of inferiority to the person envied. He who has got what I envy is felt by me to have advantage of me, and I resent it. Consequently, I rejoice if he finds that his envied possession does not give him entire satisfaction—much more, if it actually entails on him dissatisfaction and pain: that simply reduces his superiority in my eyes, and ministers to my feelings of self-importance. Envy is in itself a powerful emotion, although it is associated with pleasure when misfortune is seen to befall the object of it. (20–21)

Next, envy is compared with emulation, a term that has been equated with it.

NOTE: “Emulate” needs to be defined for the context that follows:

Of persons: To strive to equal or rival (a person, his achievements or qualities); to copy or imitate with the object of equaling or excelling. To desire to rival; hence, to be jealous of, envy, feel a grudge against. **Emulation:** The endeavor to equal or surpass others in any achievement or quality; also, the desire or ambition to equal or excel. Ambitious rivalry for power or honors; competition or ill-will between rivals.¹⁰

¹⁰ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), s.vv. “emulate,” “emulation.”



Americans prefer ‘envy’ to the obsolete use of ‘emulation,’ but are quite unaware of the shift in meaning. They have forgotten envy’s spiteful, destructive spirit.

He emulates, who seeks to do what another has done, is neither self-seeking, spiteful, nor filled with hatred. Emulation requires a rival, a competitor, but the latter does not have to be seen as an enemy. He may even be a friend whose example stimulates our own power and talents. (21)

While ambition may be laudable, it may also degenerate into a ruthlessness leading ultimately to methods of harming a rival very similar to those of the envious man. Emulation may turn into envy as when, for instance, shortly before the end of the race a runner realizes that he will not be able to outpace the winner and so tries to trip him up. (21–22)

John Gay (1669–1745), philosopher and Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, keeps to the common definition of envy as the anguish that besets us when we observe the prosperity of others; but ... it is not the prosperity of all but of specific persons. As soon as we look around us to discover who it is we might envy we will, Gay maintains, find the source of this passion: the objects of envy invariably prove to be persons who had formerly been the envious man’s rivals. (22)

What is decisive is the envious man’s conviction that the envied man’s prosperity, his success and his income are somehow to blame for the subject’s deprivation, for the lack that he feels [i.e., class warfare].

A Definition in German

Grimm’s German Dictionary: Envy expresses that vindictive and inwardly tormenting frame of mind, the displeasure with which one perceives the prosperity and the advantages of others, begrudges them these things and in addition wishes one were able to destroy or to possess them oneself: synonymous with malevolence, ill-will, the evil eye. (24)

We shall now examine the elements of the definition:

1. Vindictive, inwardly tormenting, displeasure. These represent a feeling of aggression already conscious of impotence, so that from the start some of the aggression and a good measure of anguish and torment are somewhat masochistically turned back upon the subject. (24–25)
2. It is anguish to perceive the prosperity and advantages of others. Envy is emphatically an act of perception. Anyone who has a propensity for envy, who is driven by that emotion, will always manage to find enviable qualities or possessions in others to arouse his envy.

3. One begrudges others their personal or material assets, being as a rule almost more intent on their destruction than on their acquisition. The professional thief is less tormented by envy, than is the arsonist. Beneath the envious man's primary destructive desire is the realization that in the long run it would be a very demanding responsibility were he to have the envied man's qualities or possessions, and that the best kind of world would be a very demanding responsibility were he to have the envied man's qualities or possessions, and that the best kind of world would be one in which neither he, the subject, nor the object of his envy would have them. For instance, an envy-oriented politician regards a lower national income *per capita* as more tolerable than one that is higher for all and includes a number of wealthy men.

In Genesis 26:12–15 we read: ‘Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the Lord blessed him, and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy; for he had possessions of flocks and herds and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him. For all the wells which his father's servants had dugged in the days of Abraham his father, the Philistines had stopped them, and filled them with earth.’ (In this respect, human nature has changed little since Old Testament Times.) (25)

From these definitions we now need to distinguish between the terms, jealousy and envy.

B. Georg Simmel on envy.

In Chapter 4 of his *Sociology*, which is concerned with conflict, Simmel investigates the phenomenon of envy, which he sees as contained within the concepts of hatred, jealousy, and ill-will:

The expression ‘jealousy’ should be restricted to an asset upon which there is a legitimate claim, even if the jealous man is subjectively mistaken about his possible loss of that asset. The envious man, in certain circumstances, does not even want to have the coveted asset, nor could he enjoy it, but would find it unbearable that another should do so. He becomes ill with annoyance over someone else's private yacht although he has never wished to board a ship in his life.

Jealousy is determined by the fact that a possession is withheld from us *because* it is held by another, and that were this to cease, it would at once become ours: the feelings of the envious man turn rather upon the possession, those of the jealous man upon the possessor. It is possible to envy a man's fame without oneself having any pretensions to fame; but one is jealous of him if one believes that one is equally or more deserving of it. (115–116)

Begrudging others their assets.

Approximately halfway between the clearly defined phenomena of envy and jealousy there is a third, belonging to the same scale, which might be termed begrudging: the envious desire for an object, not because it is of itself desirable to the subject, but only because other possess it. On the one hand there is the passionate form of begrudging which prefers to renounce the object itself, would indeed rather see it destroyed than allow another to have it; on the other, there is complete personal indifference or aversion to the object, and yet utter horror at the thought that someone else possesses it. (117)

C. The Problem of Irredeemable Guilt

The French-Swiss doctor Paul Tournier, who endeavors to combine psychoanalysis and Protestantism in his work, has produced an uncommonly illuminating book on genuine and false feelings of guilt in his book, *Guilt and Grace: A Psychological Study* (New York: Harper, 1962).

Tournier shies away from the problem of envy. But his book is almost exclusively concerned with what happens psychologically when we are afraid of being envied.

NOTE: There is a distinct difference between jealousy and envy, Envy is directed toward an individual while jealousy is directed toward his possessions, attributes, or circumstances.

Paul Tournier

Feelings of guilt, often regarded as irrational, determine what a man does and what he fails to do. Tournier shies away from the problem of envy. But his book is almost exclusively concerned with what happens psychologically when we are afraid of being envied. The term 'envy,' however, does not appear in the index. He is noticeably reluctant to push ahead when his observations bring him to the threshold of envy. To give an example:

'Everyone has his own rhythm, and people have different rhythms from one another. In an office, the great speed of one typist will constantly arouse in her slower fellow-workers a sense of guilt which will paralyze them still further in their work.'

Why does he not say, 'feeling of envy?' The sense of guilt comes later, particular of typists who discover that their speed may never come up to standard.

'Yet it is a simple fact of nature which should be seen objectively. There is no special merit in the speed of the rapid typist any more than there is culpability in the slowness of her colleagues.'

Of course not! But that is never the way envy reacts. Tournier comments: (309)

'Moreover, if she is at all sensitive, the rapid typist will come to feel guilty for being the involuntary cause of umbrage among others and will do many little services for them to win their forgiveness.'

No doubt the girl who is superior is not really aware of anything like 'envy-avoidance' and 'envy-assuagement,' feeling instead a vague sense of guilt. This is not due to the facts as they stand, but to the taboo with which we surround the phenomenon of envy. On the other hand, her conciliatory gesture in rendering small services will always bring about the opposite of what was intended—even greater resentment, that is, because she has again demonstrated her superiority. Furthermore, the envious person is made really angry by such an attempt to conciliate him. In many offices, as also in schools, those who are quicker or more talented soon lower their own performance to the average level of the group so as to avoid envy.

Tournier is aware of the self-imposed limitation resulting from uneasiness or fear of envy in the less able or less willing, but again he only speaks of the sense of guilt of the superior worker, and not of the less capable one's envy.

Tournier rightly calls that attitude 'false guilt feeling.' I prefer the term 'envy-avoidance behavior.' (310)



The envious man certainly does very often disguise his hostility, his damaging intention, giving it the form of apparently well-intentioned advice, of criticism or of mocking or insidious judgment, but that in no way alters the basic factor of envy. (311)

Tournier, although he knows it is envy as such whose existence brings about the sense of guilt, is unable to look at it squarely. He wrestles with the problem of guilt which defies all therapy and all religion.

Towards the end of Tournier's book, in a chapter entitled "Everything Must Be Paid For," he touches on a basic trait notable in the human psyche. Not only the atheist and the Christian in the culture of the West and the penitents in various religions—all these are tormented by a feeling that there always remains some kind of guilt that must be expiated. Few experiences are so difficult for human beings to digest as the acceptance of a religious or secular act of grace.

Man cannot conceive that evil will ever finally disappear for it must somehow conform to the principle of the indestructibility of matter and energy. Tournier then recalls the significant fact that according to Mosaic law there has to be two scapegoats, between which lots were cast; one offered up to God, the other was driven out into the wilderness, laden with the sins of the people. (315–316)

Further on, Tournier describes people who, driven by an implacable sense of guilt, sometimes impose upon themselves quite absurd penances in a vain endeavor to rid themselves of that guilt which, seen rationally, has long been expiated before God and man.¹¹ (316)

(End JAS3-44. See JAS2-45 for continuation of study at p. 441.)

¹¹ Helmut Schoeck, "Envy in Language," and "The Guilt of Being Unequal," in *Envy: A Theory of Social Behavior* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 17–25, 309–311, 315–316.



He sees the problem as a psychological rather than a religious one, though it affects Protestants more than Catholics.

Tournier writes, “At the heart of all churches there are moralistically minded men who wish to impose upon others conditions for salvation. It is a psychological matter because it concerns a tendency inherent in the human mind, the mechanism, in fact, for covering up guilt ... which makes a show of one’s merits, virtues and abstinences for self-justification, and eagerly presents them to others as the conditions for grace.”

Tournier’s observation is important in that it suggests the assumption that social controls especially those with ascetic undertones which many declare to be universally binding—might primarily have originated in uncontrolled feelings of guilt, however much they may seem to be motives inspired by envy. Our inability really to shake off a sense of guilt although we have been forgiven might, however, have some connection with assumed or known envy of ourselves by others who begrudge us the state of innocence.

In promising the same degree of grace to all without exception, irrespective of previous deserts, it would seem to me that the New Testament preaches an unenvying mental attitude. On occasion it almost seems to throw out a challenge to the ‘sense of justice,’ which is unmasked as envy, as in the parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25–32) and the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). (316)

The depth and primitive nature of the human fear of envy in others is seen not least in the inability of even the Christian doctrine of salvation to furnish its own believers with a clear conscience, or bring them to accept without guilt what appears to be divine injustice.



The problem here is not the believer, cruelly smitten by fate, arrainging his God, but the man favored by good luck, like the sole survivor of a catastrophe, who can never stop asking himself the guilty question, “Why was I saved? Weren’t many of those who died better than myself?” Only by studying the whole personality in all its aspects would it be possible to distinguish, in each case, between genuine and less genuine feelings of guilt.¹ (317)

D. Summary:

The reason for observing these excerpts from Schoeck’s book is the combat that typically occurs in the souls of men. The key concept which presently fuels the mental attitude struggles among us is the false notion of equality.

It is true that in our nation’s Declaration of Independence, following its Exordium, Jefferson’s first Statement reads, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal.”

But how this equality is defined is important to note for context, “they are designed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

What makes these Men equal are “Rights” that support independent possession of Life itself which functions within the environment of Liberty that enables them to accomplish whatever course of life they wish to pursue to accrue personal Happiness.

Some will utilize these assets to become more successful than others while on the other hand some will not utilize their equal station in life to accomplish much of anything.

Those who accomplish nothing of sustenance look upon the successful with envy, not necessarily to join them in their happiness but to prevent them from enjoying it.

Those who have accomplished much and, as a result enjoy the happiness their efforts have produced, are browbeaten from those down below whose efforts were not as successful.

There are many reasons why one individual is able to accomplish much while others are not able to do so. All Men are created equal but some Men who make poor decisions are not willing to live with the results.

¹ Helmut Schoeck, “The Guilt of Being Unequal,” in *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987), 308-317.

