

# Exposing and Countering the Logic of Envy

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## 1 Introduction

This paper examines the consequences of being conformed to the world, specifically, how such conformance can result in malicious and destructive envy. It discusses the age-old problem of envy and its expression in the desire to deprive others and looks at how the modern world creates envy at an ever greater scale. It considers how we can use envy to explain current events that are not readily explained through other lenses, such as economics. Finally, it looks at ways to escape the trap of ever more envy, specifically through privacy, humility, and intentionality, as well as the forces in this world that stand against these positive behaviors and keep us conformed.

## 2 The Problem of Envy

Envy is as old as humanity. We readily find examples in the Old and New Testament: We see it in Joseph's brothers wanting to kill him because their father loved him most. We see it in the indignation of the son who stayed at home and worked every day for his father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. We see it in the anger of the workers of the vineyard owner who paid everyone a day's wage, no matter what time they started working.

The focus of this paper is envy in the sense of its Latin root *invidere* (to hate, to look with malice); nowadays sometimes referred to as 'malicious envy'. Malicious envy manifests not by wanting to lift ourselves to the level of another who has what we desire, but by wanting to deprive them, to bring them down to our level. By contrast, 'benign envy' spurs us on to reach or exceed their level.

King Solomon's ruling in the case of the two mothers and the dead baby illustrates that he understood the logic of envy and its desire to deprive the other (Judgment of Solomon, 1 Kings 3:16-28). The mother whose baby had died was not motivated by the joy of motherhood and the love for a child. She willingly accepted the judgment of splitting the living baby in half, knowing the baby would be killed. For her, it was satisfaction enough that her rival would also be deprived of a child.

Rationality and economics do not explain the bad mother's behavior, just like they struggle with explaining outcomes in one-shot ultimatum games<sup>1</sup>, in which players frequently reject deals in which the other player would gain more than they do, even though accepting the deals would make both players better off than they were before.

We may say these outcomes are economically irrational, yet, we can understand the vengeful logic that leads to them. The logic that applies here is about punishment, about depriving somebody else rather than improving one's status quo. Calling it irrational is a useful defense to avoid admitting that, on some level, we may understand the terrible motivation of the bad mother more than we'd like to admit. Often, our psychological defenses kick in quickly so that we do not realize our motivation is envy, let alone consciously experience it. This lets us distance ourselves and safely judge the bad mother in the story of the Judgment of Solomon, rather than asking in what situations we value depriving a rival over what we know to be right.

### 3 Mimesis: Scaling Envy

Envy arises as a consequence of scarcity, of desiring something that can only be possessed by fewer people than the total number desiring it. Let us denote  $X$  as something desirable with an available quantity  $Q$  (there is enough for  $Q$  people) and the amount of people desiring it  $P$ . When  $P > Q$ , envy arises<sup>2</sup>.

Different forces fuel the flames of envy, among them mimetic desire; competition for rank; and media.

Mimetic desire increases  $P$ , the number of people desiring the same thing, since they model their desires after others who already desire  $X$ .

In competitions for rank – wanting the most likes or wanting to be president, the greatest disciple, or the best Olympic ice skater –  $Q$  is less than  $P$  by definition;  $Q$  may even be just one<sup>3</sup>.

Globalization and the internet, and especially social media and the globalization of media, have removed a lot of the friction that used to counteract mimetic desire. In his *Incerto*, Nassim Taleb points out that we used to compete with people in our village but now we compete with the world. We have increased  $P$  and reduced  $Q$ ; in other words, we have scaled up envy.

Social media also make  $P$  and  $Q$  more explicit. They amplify what others desire, making it easy for us to desire the same. They abstract much of the nuance in human relationships away and replace it with cold hard numbers of 'friends' and 'likes' that are highly visible. As a consequence, others may infer social standing and compete for these metrics. This may

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<sup>1</sup>The ultimatum game is a game with two players, the proposer and the responder, and a sum of money to distribute. The proposer proposes a split (say 50/50 or 80/20), the responder then can accept the deal, in which case the money is distributed according to the proposed split, or reject it, in which case both parties get nothing.

<sup>2</sup>Note that  $P$  and  $Q$  may be perceived quantities; they do not have to be objective facts. It is enough to *think* that there is not enough to go around.

<sup>3</sup> $Q$  might even be zero, for example, when we desire unobtainable photoshopped beauty standards shown in the media.

incite envy where there was none before. For instance, I used to be able to tell a joke and people laughed, then my friend told a joke, and people laughed also, end of story. But, on social media, we can see which joke they liked better, nudging my friend and me into a public rivalry.

## 4 The Logic of Envy as a Lens

Malicious envy leads to a rage that is satisfied by depriving the other. The Last Psychiatrist, a blogger, refers to this as “balancing the ledger” and senses its origin in our inability to act on our own desires. The thesis is that we do not know and are not taught how to want on our own, only like others. This perspective offers a useful lens to understand the world. Just like Solomon’s ruling or the ultimatum games mentioned above, it sheds a light on what our rational mind refuses to grasp.

As we are scaling envy globally, this lens helps us to understand the bitter divisions we see everywhere and the resulting behaviors. For example, in politics, as more and more power is centralized, we reduce the  $Q$  for an ever greater power of government. This power is ultimately the ability to force the other side to do one’s bidding backed by the state’s monopoly on violence. In the United States, due to its two-party system, this plays out in its extreme form. What was the first act of the last two administrations after coming into power? They loudly and publicly undid as much as they could of what the previous administration had accomplished. They balanced the ledger<sup>4</sup>.

This logic offers explanations for why elections and votes are decried as illegitimate by the losing side<sup>5</sup> rather than focusing energy on future victories through better positive visions and campaigns. Denying the legitimacy deprives the other side of their victory, at least in our own psychological ledger, and justifies all rageful punishment once our side is back in power.

Through this lens, we see how we can say that we want peace, but instead of seeking expedient diplomatic solutions, we keep fighting wars in hopes of reaching the point where we utterly humiliate the adversary. We see why it’s not enough to counter somebody in a debate with superior arguments, but why they must be cancelled, deprived of their platform.

While we see the unfortunate consequences at scale, the responsibility rests with each of us individually. It is the sum of all individual envy that results in the conflicts and divisions we see today.

I have witnessed this personal envy firsthand in my time as a corporate executive, both in myself and others. For example, due to my role, I knew the salaries of the roughly one hundred people in my organization. Immediately, I made judgments about what was fair and what was not, of who got paid ‘too much’ for what I judged their worth to be. I heard

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<sup>4</sup>This is a purposely caricatured view; it illustrates what the world looks like through only this particular lens. There are many other lenses that offer explanations for these actions as well. The same goes for all following examples.

<sup>5</sup>For example, after the US presidential elections in 2000, 2016, 2020 or after the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK. In the case of Brexit, this happened through the claim that the Leavers only voted the way they did because they were deceived.

complaints by seasoned leaders being upset that the new generation in IT makes twice as much or more than when they started.

I have seen employees feeling taken advantage of by their employer and trying to “get back” at them; all but loudly rejoicing when a project failed or somebody got in trouble, as long as they could not be blamed – even if their effort could have prevented the situation to begin with. I am sad to say that I can understand it because I have seen it in myself, imagining a David vs. Goliath fight against an arrogant large vendor, trying to raise every question, every concern, every issue to make their job as hard as possible. They get paid millions, I thought, they might as well work hard to earn it.

Viewing our actions through this lens forces uncomfortable questions. We must look into our hearts and examine our motivations. Does the militant vegan celebrate a new climate rule limiting cattle farming as a step towards saving the world, or because of the secret satisfaction that comes from depriving the carnivore of meat? Does the militant carnivore post a picture of a rare steak online to share a joyful meal or to get satisfaction from upsetting the vegan?

If we are honest with ourselves and find our actions motivated by envy, wanting to deprive the other because of a mimetic desire, it becomes clear that we need to choose a better path. What could such a path look like?

## 5 A Way Out

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul calls the readers to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”. The more we are conformed to the world, the more we enter into mimetic rivalries. The modern world teaches us to be public and loud, participating in the competition for attention. When we are conformed to the world, we cannot be modest; we must stand out; we must be desired. We see our value as coming from this because, when we look around, everyone else seems to be playing this game.

The use of the word *renewing* in St. Paul’s epistle as a way to transformation is spot-on: we do not have to start over and invent something from scratch. We already know about and have examples of behaviors that can be imitated to escape this mimetic trap: privacy, intentionality, and humility.

Given that desire for  $X$  results in envy when  $P > Q$ , the ways to counter envy are by reducing  $P$ , increasing  $Q$ , or changing  $X$ . Below, we discuss how privacy can serve to reduce  $P$  while intentionality and humility help us cultivate desires for  $X$ s in which  $Q$  is not less than  $P$ .

The challenge in adopting these behaviors is that we cannot simply look around and find mimetic models to copy. Not being readily available as models is precisely what removes private and humble people from the envy-fueling and -fueled competition.

## 5.1 Privacy

Privacy is a hot topic at present and discussed as something desirable. Data breaches make news frequently. Politicians respond with extensive laws like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union. However, our revealed preferences show that we don't value it nearly as much as we discuss it.

The great influences of our time – in particular, technology and social media – work against privacy. Siri or Alexa cannot be at your beck and call anytime unless they are listening to you all the time. Social media platforms need our experiences to be public, productized for the consumption of others. They are engineered to give us dopamine hits from sharing and from others liking what we show them. What's not taken into account is how much the fact that it is going to be shared affects the experience and our own enjoyment of it<sup>6</sup>.

As a result of these influences, the private experience is underappreciated, or, more precisely, it has become hard to imagine how to be private. Try to imagine a private person. Do you see a recluse, somebody brooding in a dark room, somebody who seems a little strange? Somebody who sits next to you on the subway but simply does not share their life online? Or an understated millionaire next door? The two latter ones are far more realistic<sup>7</sup>.

Mimesis does not help us with finding our private desires. We cannot model our desires after those who enjoy their lives privately because we don't know what their enjoyment looks like. Being private has become a foreign – even frowned upon – concept. We may pay lip service to privacy but when I was researching this paper, the first suggestion Google came up with after typing 'is not being on' was 'is not being on social media a red flag'.

Yet, it is precisely the fact that we cannot model our desires after a private person that makes privacy valuable in the context of this paper. It reduces the chance of their desire becoming somebody else's desire and a target for rivalry. In other words, it removes them from  $P$  (as perceived by others).

One step towards helping us regain privacy can be cultivating pursuits that have no meaning to anyone else. They are enjoyable in and of themselves. For me, coming from the tech world, one such pursuit is the hobby of tinkering: Solving an already solved problem again on my own in a new way, purposely reinventing the wheel. The payoff is in indulging curiosity, in the challenge of the task, and in the joy of figuring something out. The problem has already been solved, so there is no publically valuable contribution.

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<sup>6</sup>Several studies have linked increased time on social media to adverse effects on well-being, including depression (e.g., *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* DOI 10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751 and *Clinical Psychological Science* DOI 10.1177/2167702617723376). On social media, we look at experiences that we imagine other people have and enjoy. We conclude that they must be happier, so by comparison, we become unhappier. Worse, many experiences posted online are edited or put in a better light, so we create a platform in which everyone envies one another for lives that *nobody* lives.

<sup>7</sup>In 1996, the book *The Millionaire Next Door* reported the surprisingly high density of millionaires in blue-collar and middle-class neighborhoods in America. These millionaires do not look the part; they don't exhibit the symbols of wealth publicly.

## 5.2 Intentionality

Intentionality speaks to our agency in choosing our desires and models. Being intentional is far from easy since we are constantly exposed to environments that try to shape how we want for their own purposes. In a society and economic system that is built on consumption of mass-produced goods, uniformity in our wants is desirable: for this system, the ideal case is that we only want what its products can satisfy.

How we are shaped by the world becomes apparent by examining the discrepancies between our intentions and our actions. We do things that we do not intend to do and even things we intend *not* to do. We may intend to eat local, sustainably grown products; yet we frequently end up at the supermarket buying out-of-season fruit that was transported halfway across the world. When we act without clear intention, we often end up on the path of least resistance. We end up following desires we see all around us, like the desire for convenience and for virtually unlimited choice.

Intentionality is also about why and how we indulge in our pursuits. The social media age has taught us “pics or it didn’t happen”. It’s not enough to have an enjoyable experience; it has to be shared with others, which puts it in the public domain where rivalries occur.

Jesuits refer to intentionally experiencing something as *savoring* – mindfully allowing your senses to dwell in the moment to get the full flavor of it. By savoring, we can discover the godly in experiences, that which cannot easily be shared and is not competitive, and we can see the abundance. Where there is abundance, there is no need for rivalry and envy;  $Q$  is more than sufficiently large.

## 5.3 Humility

Humility pulls teeth from the beast of mimetic rivalry in a different way: by allowing us to question the goodness and righteousness of our desires. It helps us to remove our ego from the equation. This makes it easier to examine whether a desire we have is truly ‘ours’ or whether we model it after the desires of others.

For example, we may be envious of somebody who is the best in our field. This easily becomes a slight against our ego and can lead to malicious envy. Humility allows us to not take ourselves too seriously in this situation, to consider whether perhaps a healthier desire would be to strive for excellence, for mastery in this field. This allows us to admire others who have achieved it and opens up the possibility to learn from them rather than to want to compete against or even destroy them. Instead of being the first to the finish line (in which case,  $Q = 1$ ), it now becomes about crossing the finish line (no limitation on  $Q$ ).

This approach combines well with privacy. In the public eye, we are nudged towards showing that we are better than others, not just that we are good (even when we are excellent). We must stand out to not be drowned out. A private pursuit of excellence is not subject to this pressure. It becomes about competence and mastery rather than competition.

Private pursuits help us find and engage on our own desires regardless of how ‘valuable’ they appear in the public eye. Humility helps us move away from wanting to be desired. It reduces the pressure to engage in pursuits merely to become more desirable to others.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper advocates for renewing our minds by rediscovering and living more privately, more humbly, and more intentionally. This may seem contrarian and counter-cultural today. It is.

We will not reduce envy and its harmful effects by doing more of what got us into this highly inter-connected and consumption-oriented world full of envy and division. In wealthy countries, we live in abundance and yet subject ourselves to a scarcity mindset of our own making, by existing primarily in comparison to others. As a result, too many of us are too often on the lookout for a ledger to balance, wasting our energy on being upset and wanting to see comeuppance, wanting to see somebody deprived.

If we accept the need for renewing our mind by cultivating “anti-mimetic” values and behaviors, the next step is finding sustainable ways to do so. We need to teach coming generations effectively about privacy and humility, about valuing competence over competition, about how to want on their own rather than like others. Fortunately, much of this is already contained in ancient and spiritual wisdom. Rather than starting from scratch, we need to renew our minds and learn how to apply and teach this wisdom in our daily lives.

The prize is worth the work needed to get there: living out the best in us rather than the worst, living lives in which another’s joy is a cause for delight, not envy.