

objects less omnipotently, relate to them as separate objects, and introject them and their qualities more fully and realistically, and thus also to separate from them.

## Envy in everyday life

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### Introduction

It may perhaps seem strange to be writing about envy in everyday life, because, one might say, it is such an everyday emotion, known to everyone. It has always been talked about; we find throughout literature abounding references to and descriptions of envy and its workings. We know about the green-eyed monster from *Othello*:

Iago: O beware, my lord, of jealousy;  
It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock  
The meat it feeds on.

Here Shakespeare uses the word 'jealousy', but it is very close to what we would feel to be an essential aspect of envy. I shall come back to the relationship between the two. Yet, in a strange way, psychoanalysis, until about thirty years ago, paid attention to envy but only from a very limited standpoint. Freud talked, almost entirely, about one kind of envy, which he called 'penis envy'. That was the envy of the woman for the man's penis and his masculine attributes, her resentment at not having one, and so on, but broader ideas about the significance of envy and its ubiquity, or the notion that a man might envy a woman's attributes and capacities, really scarcely entered into Freud's writing. It was probably not until the 1950s, particularly 1957, when Melanie Klein published her book *Envy and Gratitude*, that the significance of envy became more fully discussed and understood. Anyone who knows this book will see that what I am going to discuss is essentially derived from Melanie Klein's thinking.

It is interesting to consider why the significance of envy took so long to be recognized, while its near relation, jealousy, had been in the analytic literature and part of general understanding for a very long time. Now I think that our understanding and recognition of jealousy, as compared with our neglect of envy, has very important roots. If one thinks about jealousy, what do we mean? We mean a relationship which involves three people; one is jealous because someone one loves, or to whom one is attached, shows more interest or affection for someone else. But this is considered, broadly speaking, all right. I think this is because the jealousy is based on love of or affection for one person; otherwise one wouldn't feel jealous. So there is a reason for jealousy which makes it, to some extent, tolerable and forgivable. Indeed, we know that certain crimes committed under the pressure of extreme jealousy may be said to have extenuating circumstances, and the verdict and sentence will be mitigated accordingly.

But with envy the picture is different: it involves basically two people; and the envy is about what the other person possesses, or his capacities, achievements, personal qualities, and so on; and it involves to a greater or less extent a spoiling quality or at least hostility towards the good abilities of the other person, though this may not be recognized. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (1979 edition) describes 'The feeling of mortification and ill will occasioned by the contemplation of superior advantages possessed by another'. If one destroys from jealousy, there is some reason for it; but in envy the spoiling is done from hatred and there appear to be no extenuating circumstances. As one of my patients put it, it is so 'meaningless'.

Envy often seems to be connected with greed and yet it is different from greed. The person who is greedy wants to get something, disregarding the cost to the person from whom he wants it, and recognizes there is something good to be obtained; but the envious person is not so much interested in getting something for himself and enjoying it, even greedily; but rather in taking something away from the other person, which he may then make over to himself, so that it becomes part of himself.

What I want to do now is to look at envy as we see it operating in everyday life and then consider some of its implications. The conscious end we all know about, in a sense — feelings of resentment at someone being ahead, doing better, and vague hostility, rivalry, competitiveness — but it is when it is more powerful that the trouble starts; for example, when it leads to a kind of constant carping criticism or snide remarks. Or the other way round, when the envious individual cannot see anything to praise or value in another individual, but always finds doubts, 'well, it was good, but ...' — and he will find some reason to doubt or

knock the other person. And as there really always is some ground for criticism in any of us or in what we do, the envious attitude can easily be missed and the criticisms or doubts can look real.

Another way in which envy can be seen more easily is when it leads openly to a kind of ruthless determination to get what the other person has, so that if X. has a good job or a new cooking pot, his envious friend will not be satisfied until he has a similar or better one. This kind of attitude is, of course, much nearer to an overweening ambition. It is probably less dangerous and troublesome than the more insidious type, which causes the real trouble. The manifestations of envy that concern us more here are those more clearly associated with spoiling — spoiling being probably fundamental to envy. The envious person can spoil literally by mud-slinging, damaging, or hurting another person or his possessions; or he can spoil by psychological mud-slinging, hurting another person's attributes or achievements in his own mind, in his thinking, or externally by criticism, mockery, or provocation. I say 'provocation' because it is a marvellous spoiler, well-known to many people, often very visible, say in adolescence and in psychoanalytic treatment. We can see this kind of thing when the envious person envies the other person's quiet intelligence and peace of mind and sets about to needle and provoke until the other loses his cool. This can be a very clear weapon in analysis.

To put the problem round the other way. What a really envious person cannot bear is to face another's success, enjoyment, pleasure; and the nearer to home one gets, the more difficult this is likely to feel. So the really envious person cannot bear that something good is given to him by another person. He cannot enjoy it; he will begrudge recognizing its goodness, begrudge acknowledging its value; and will be unable to experience and to express gratitude. As one of my patients describes it, faced with the problem of experiencing and expressing gratitude, he just 'cannot get it out' — it sticks in his throat. Now if this is so on a verbal level with a man who has been in analysis some time, who has considerable insight and a great wish to change, we can get a feeling of the depth of the underlying problem.

An excessively envious person, therefore, may find it so hard to tolerate that another person has something to give him that he cannot recognize or use the other person constructively. It may be seen emerging as real inability to take in information or help, actually to understand it. It can be an important element in children who cannot learn at school, as if they simply have to reject any help at all. (This is, of course, only one element in a total situation, but the element we are considering here.) This problem can prevent the individual from reading and using books, scientific papers, and so on, because the feeling is of having to know

what is written before he reads it, and, therefore, his mind is not free to follow the argument of the book or paper. It can prevent him or her from using or believing in available professional help or advice. We can see a similar aspect in what I would call 'the deadening of conversations'. A very envious person can hardly bear to listen to what another person has to tell and may find all kinds of ways of stopping the conversation, taking it over, paralysing it, because he or she cannot bear to listen to entertaining things, experiences, interesting thoughts coming from someone else.

Before I go on to look at some further implications of what I am describing, I want to bring a brief example of the workings of destructive envy in a case in analytic treatment. A man who had been in analysis for some time, who originally had considerable sexual difficulties, was cold, detached, and unfeeling in a rather cruel way, but had made a great deal of progress, had married, and now was hoping that, after some initial difficulties in conceiving, his wife might be pregnant. He came in one session and told me the following dream. *My patient and his wife went to X— by plane and were met by some friends of his, let us call them Andrew and Barbara. He found he couldn't remember Barbara's name, so he couldn't introduce her properly to his wife, who hadn't met her before. The couple took them to another town to a restaurant. They sat at a long table and my patient noticed how Barbara had become small, angular, peaked, and dull. His wife talked a lot, but became clearly out of her depth and a bit silly, but, he said in a kind but slightly patronizing way, it didn't really matter much, it was nothing. She also looked a bit like a young boy. After this, the friends, Andrew and Barbara, took my patient and his wife to the town, where they were to catch their plane back to London.*

My patient gave a number of associations to the dream and spoke about the details, which I cannot attempt to give here. I just want to describe what I think the dream was about and hope my reasoning will be followed. Here is a man who really consciously wants his wife to have a baby and wants the analysis to go well, but we see that the two women, wife and Barbara, become diminished. The wife loses her femininity, goes boyish and silly, but he forgives her. The friend, Barbara, goes dull, small, and angular. Small and angular sounds to me a bit like myself, but he had not been finding the analysis dull or lifeless recently! I think that these two women, who are immediately important in his life, have had their particular qualities removed in the dream, those very qualities which he values in them — my capacity to be alert and alive to what is going on, so I become small and angular, not just in body, but in mind; and his wife's capacity to be intelligent, alert, and feminine and conceiving — all this goes.

After this, the two couples went to the town from which my patient

and his wife would get the plane home. This, he explained to me, was odd, because the town where they had been eating also has an airport, and therefore they could in reality have travelled directly from there to London. I think this latter point suggests that once my patient has got his good objects, his wife and myself, in a patronized or devalued condition, then his mental balance is restored and he can return to his usual base, his old habitual way of relating to people, seeing them as inferior and not enviable. This is the way he returns home. This balance had been disturbed by his awareness of his wife's unique position if pregnant and my value as the analysis proceeded, myself seen as analytically pregnant with ideas.

We can see in this material a very important element, that of what this patient used to call the meaninglessness of his spoiling. He does not himself gain from taking away his wife's femininity or my aliveness; on the contrary, from the reality angle, he would lose by it. But, as I suggested, the envious person is actually more interested in spoiling what the other person has than in getting actual good things or experiences for himself. My patient cannot get himself pregnant by attacking his wife's femininity. If I become a dull, stupid analyst I am not much use to him, but his envy is appeased. There is nothing left to envy and his mental balance is restored. Thus we can see in this brief example how the patient's envy 'doth mock the meat it feeds on'.

There are many layers of problems that are revealed in this apparently simple example. On the level of adult relationships, we can see how his envy can lead to a mean spoiling of his wife's femininity; but it could also push into his relationship with the baby: if the wife does become pregnant, for example, his envy could emerge as his resenting his wife's capacity to care for and bring up and feed the baby. This kind of resentment might look more like jealousy of the mother-and-baby relationship, but behind that the envy in this patient would, I think, be the more dangerous element, unless I am able to help him enough. In parenthesis, I would add that I think it is very often the case that situations that look like jealousy or pathological jealousy are really based on this kind of fundamental envy — but that is another issue.

To return to this patient, I have tried to indicate some of the deeper layers behind the current adult problems with his wife: for example, how he becomes unable to get good analytic nourishment from me, unable happily to be on the receiving end. I am trying here to indicate how the early problems of receiving and enjoying in such people are likely to emerge at every step of development and interfere with progress in new relationships and situations.

I want now to look at some further implications of this type of envious attitude. As I have discussed, the really envious person cannot enjoy what

comes from somebody else and cannot experience gratitude, which means that his capacity to enjoy and to love is severely interfered with. We know that we build our characters by taking into ourselves — introjecting — our early relationships to our parents and close figures of our infancy and childhood as we experience them, and that we feel about ourselves according to the world we build up inside, our internal world. If envy, for whatever reason, prevents the individual from building good, warm, trusting relationships, his whole inner world, and thus his character, will be influenced, and he is likely to remain correspondingly insecure. This very insecurity or sense of inadequacy will increase the hatred of others who are more comfortable, more confident, and more stable; and so the insecurity increases the envy, and we get a vicious circle.

And there are other problems. The person who is very envious and spoiling in his relationships, even in a hidden way, including hidden from himself, will experience his world as hostile or spoiling towards him and become more paranoid or suspicious in his attitude to people, so that his world becomes unpleasant to him and he becomes more and more on the defensive and less able to enjoy. Indeed, one of the great problems about very envious people, even where it is not conscious, is that they have so little real enjoyment in life. When they do have good experiences and pleasure, there is the nagging feeling that they could get more, or someone else has better; or there is something wrong with it, or, if they get it now, why couldn't they have had it before; it would have been so much better when they were younger. This we see again in the analysis with the patient who, when he does accept that something we have said is helpful, will in the next moment let us know that, in so far as we have shown it to him now, it would have been so much more helpful had he been able to understand it a year ago.

Of course, by this time, it is not only the patient who is deprived of happy experiences, but analytically also the analyst, who is given little chance to enjoy his position as analyst of this patient.

It is, of course, very uncomfortable to be constantly or frequently aware of envious feelings; it is unpleasant and disturbing; and most people, probably all of us to a greater or less extent, try unconsciously to protect themselves with various manoeuvres against it, try to build defences against experiencing envy. These defences can help the individual temporarily to suffer less, but, like all defences, can also cause further trouble, especially if they are strong.

I want now to talk about some of these defences and some of the troubles they cause. There is often a mixture of the actual expression of envy and defences against that envy. It is not always possible to say whether a thing is an envious attack or whether it is a defence against it. Take, for example, the dream of the man with the wife who hoped she was

pregnant: if he can keep me in his mind as dull and non-conceiving, he protects himself from being hostile to me for being helpful, and yet, in making me, as I am suggesting he did in the dream, dull and small mentally, this can be seen in itself to be an attack on me. In treatment it can be very important to sort this out.

Let us now look at other types of defences as they emerge in ordinary living, and are reflected in the analytic situation. One way to avoid too much envy is to idealize the person who stirs it up; so to idealize that the other person is seen as so beautiful or having such striking capacities, to have done such an outstanding piece of work, and so on, that the gap between the other person and the self becomes so enormous that apparently no comparison is possible. This keeps the potentially envied person on a pedestal and out of range. In analysis one can often see this happening, when the patient has to keep the analyst as so good, just loved and valued, and the whole relationship kept positive, no criticism allowed in. This can be quite a problem with some very ill patients, who cling to this state of affairs as if terrified of what would happen if envious or critical thoughts emerged, as if the patient simply could not contain them. This can actually be quite hard for the young or inexperienced therapist or analyst to handle, since it is very much nicer and more comfortable to believe one really is a good, intelligent, and lively kind of analyst; it is much pleasanter to hear about stupidity, heavy-handedness, insensitivity, and so forth as being the qualities which other people's therapists or analysts have; and in this way both patient and analyst can keep some real problems nicely split off.

A different, but probably related, kind of splitting can be seen in the kind of defence in which the individual tends to devalue the self, making out that he has nothing to give, that he is so poor and so limited, and in this way he increases the gap between the self and the other person. For example, how could such a poor creature in any way compare himself with X., and so on. This type of defence can be very close to a kind of masochism, placating and flattering. It cannot of course work, because it tends to make the individual either very self-righteous or more depressed, feeling worthless, giving up hope; and often, in fact, starting to wallow in this state, which makes things even worse and more difficult to get out of.

Another type of defence, which I have already just touched on, is more connected with a particular kind of greed, and is very important in some people who have difficulties in learning and absorbing information, including, of course, analytic information, though it may not look like that. Certain patients in analysis may appear highly co-operative and understanding; but, as one looks at the development of the session, one may see that what they are actually doing is not responding to

interpretations and to understanding, being able to agree to differ, to chew things over, digest them, and so on; they are doing something else. They listen and, as it were, swallow up and take over the analyst's ideas, very often without actually following through what the analyst or therapist is really saying or meaning, and failing to register anything new or fresh or any subtlety or nuance in what is being said. Thus one gets the impression that the patient has in his phantasy got into the analyst's mind so that he has at that moment become analyst to himself or to the patient on the couch, so to speak, and the analyst proper has become almost redundant, almost non-existent. It may look like insight, but it is very different, and the process can be very subtle. It is clear why I am describing this as a defence against envy. In so far as the patient has taken over in this very quick way, he never has the experience of being given something good and digestible or of knowing that it comes from someone else, here the analyst, who might therefore be helpful, even enviable; so envy this way can be obviated. One can also see how this type of defence can be linked with learning difficulties, as I said before, and also with earlier feeding difficulties, even actual anorexia, and with frigidity, but this is a vast topic on which we cannot embark here.

This type of taking over mentally is probably closely connected with a very familiar kind of behaviour, also based on projection. I say 'also', because the getting into the analyst's mind is really in the nature of a projective identification with the analyst.

But the kind that I want to go on to discuss now is when the envious person, instead of being aware of his envy, tries, usually unconsciously, to stir it up in other people, subtly or not so subtly, making others aware of his or her particular qualities or capacities, in such a way as to provoke envy in the others. It can be a very deep characterological trait. Of course, it creates further problems, because such individuals become preoccupied with other people's competitiveness, hostility, and envy, and feel both in a sense superior, as though they contain all the good qualities, and also very threatened. I am going to give an example from analysis, but I think the picture that emerges will be a familiar one.

This is a young woman, who came from abroad to complete some postgraduate scientific work and then stayed on here to get analytic treatment. She was attractive, lively, and very intelligent. On the one hand, she kept me in her mind, in the way I described previously, as quite idealized. I was consciously seen as a very good analyst — straight, cultured, decent, and so on. But just behind this I began to sense a very different picture of me — of which she was not aware at that point — me seen as an envious old spinster who didn't really want her, the patient, to have a good time and full social life, lots of friends and be

admired by young men (all of which she had). The picture of me as an old spinster, that is all right, but what about my spoiling, envious attitude, split off from her consciousness, but beginning to emerge? It could, of course, be true, but it might not be. What I did notice was an enormous concern in my patient to discuss and re-discuss endlessly in her analysis and outside what was going on, which boy friend had telephoned, what he said, what she thought about what he said, and so on, largely focusing on herself and her central role in her world. Any awareness, any evidence as to my being a human being with my own life hardly came alive in her mind. Her girl friends, of her own generation, increasingly emerged in the analysis as a bit 'paranoid', her word, trying to make her feel low, enjoying pointing out unhappy things in her relationships or competitive with her, and so forth. Now I do not doubt that there was some truth in it, but ...

What I think was really happening was that her balance had been maintained in the past by her holding on to and building up her relationships in which she was largely unaware of success, pleasure, interest in other people's lives, as we see in the analysis, and unconsciously tried to stimulate interest, preoccupation with her relationships, particularly with men, excitement, envy, and competitiveness in her friends, as she tried with me. And I suspect she was very successful. That she did become an object of envy and that the way she talked, dressed, hinted, was aimed at stirring this up, now seems clear. She worked among a very gifted group of young scientists and managed to convey their interests in a way which was, I think, unconsciously intended to fascinate me and yet make me feel, in the kindest possible way, how ignorant I happened to be about her field.

It is, of course, no wonder that this young woman felt herself to be uncomfortably surrounded by envious friends and an envious and begrudging old analyst, and then had to try to put this right. People like this patient try to get rid of, or project, envious and similar feelings. Others seem more actively to stifle, almost kill off, such feelings and emotions. For example, the man, with the wife who hoped to be pregnant, when he came into analysis and still to some extent much later on, would just dry up his feelings and not feel them. People's coming or going, what they did, or analytic holidays or changes, just apparently did not touch him, and therefore all kinds of emotion, and certainly envy, were kept at bay. He then gave the impression of being a very cold person and yet, in fact, this is not so, and only time will show if we can really release the feelings which I am convinced are there and are potentially available.

Of course, restricting contacts, avoiding areas of living that stimulate

rivalry and envy is another important way of defending against envy and one that is very familiar. It is almost certainly one important root of male homosexuality: if the male homosexual avoids close emotional and physical contact with women, he does not have to face up to strong awareness of differences that could stir up envy and allied anxieties. But a more massive restricting of life can also be seen, almost characterologically, in certain people, who manage quite effectively as long as the restrictions hold, but can become very disturbed when the restrictions shift.

I remember well a patient of mine, who was successful in his work, married with children. He managed to live such a closed-in life that he and his wife never invited people to their home other than close relatives, and then very rarely, and one or two very lame ducks, so to speak. He somewhat looked down on his wife and was rather contemptuous in a polite way towards his colleagues. He tried to avoid all social occasions, which was sometimes extremely awkward at work. He did not travel. So he almost did not have to talk to people or hear what other people were doing or thinking about, apart from his specific work area. What this very restricted life was achieving, from the angle which we are considering today, was that he was never really challenged. He could almost avoid being put in a position where he would hear anything said that might make him feel inferior or envious or feel in need of help or people. Eventually even these restrictions did not work and he broke down and then came into analysis.

One further point: I feel I neither have the knowledge, nor am I in a position to talk about the broader sociological implications of envy, which I nevertheless think are immense; but on an individual level I am sure that in people who have not sufficiently come to terms with it in themselves, there are bound to be difficulties at every new stage of development and perhaps particularly in ageing. To age, with what one might call proper resignation, means to be able to allow the younger generations to have things, knowledge, gifts, and a future that the ageing generation cannot have; and it means making way for the next generations, being able to identify with and even enjoy their success, and to regret what one has not achieved as well as to enjoy what one has. Excessive envy can make this particular stage of development very difficult and yet everyone has to reach it.

I have been discussing envy as we see it emerging, or even not emerging, in our everyday life. An issue I have not touched on is how we actually do try to deal with it. I have suggested it is ubiquitous, and indicated that we are all born with a potentiality for envy; and that we all have to deal with it in our own lives and have to live with it as part of our personalities. Perhaps all I can say at this stage is that ordinarily

we would hope that the individual has sufficient available affection and love, and capacity to feel warmth and gratitude, to be able to counter-balance his rivalry and his envy, and yet be aware of its existence and allow other human beings to be seen as worthy of envy. This is, in a sense, one of the things that we hope to achieve in analysing our patients who have not been able to cope with these problems in their own lives; that is, to bring about insight into the real depths of the envy and to re-discover and release the split-off or stifled love and gratitude, and so help the patient to integrate them. This in itself can lead to considerable relief and help to loosen the awful grip of the envious feelings, and lead to a more benign circle.

I have thus tried to discuss the enormous power and significance of envy, not just in our detailed work as analysts and therapists, but even more in our everyday living.

### Summary

This chapter aims to describe and discuss the notion of envy, from its most simple and conscious manifestations, to its deeply destructive and spoiling ones, both conscious and unconscious; to see it as an inevitable part of mental life and everyday living. If envy is too powerful and not sufficiently mitigated by love, it will disturb normal relations with people and the building up of a healthy and comfortable character structure; and will contribute to serious emotional difficulties. The pain of envy leads us to attempt to build various differing defences which are described here. Brief case material is quoted to show envy in operation during analytical treatment, and the aims of therapy are discussed in terms of bringing about greater integration between the various conflicting forces and so lessening the vicious circle that insufficiently mitigated envy tends to perpetuate.