



## **#79 The Psychology of Envy and Social Justice**

“Our envy of others devours us most of all.” (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Gulag Archipelago)

Stretching back to the time of the Ancient Greeks, countless philosophers have contemplated the nature of envy, or what Immanuel Kant described as the “tendency to perceive with displeasure the good of others.” (Immanuel Kant)

Those who have written about envy, be it Aristotle, Aquinas, Adam Smith, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, have all come to a similar conclusion – envy is a destructive and diseased state of mind that harms not only the envier, but those whom the envy is directed towards, and society as a whole.

But today the personal vice of envy has been made into a virtue by politicians. By manipulating the human tendency to envy, politicians have stumbled upon a very effective means of gaining power and control over largely unsuspecting populations. In this video, we will examine this phenomenon while also looking at the nature of envy in general, how attempts to enforce uniformity ironically only exacerbate envy and how those afflicted with envy should, for their own well-being, strive to rid themselves of it.

Envy is a directed emotion, in other words it presupposes the coexistence of two or more people – the envier who experiences the emotion, and the envied who is the target of the emotion. A good definition of envy is found in the 19th century 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.” (Grimm’s German Dictionary)

A common misconception is to confuse envy with indignation. In Aristotle’s work Rhetoric, he stresses the difference between the two concepts writing:



“The indignant person feels anger at the prosperity of those who do not deserve it, and the envious at that of everyone.” (Rhetoric, Aristotle)

Or as he puts it more simply:

“indignation is felt at the well-being of evil persons, while envy at the happiness of the good ones.” (Rhetoric, Aristotle)

In contrast to envy, indignation is not a vice as it is rooted in a desire for justice. Envy, on the other hand, as Schopenhauer noted, is rooted in

“the inevitable comparison between our own situation and that of others.” (Essays and Aphorisms, Arthur Schopenhauer)

When comparison to another elicits awareness of our inferiorities – be it in terms of wealth, possessions, mental or physical characteristics – this can generate envy if we believe that what we lack in comparison to another accounts for our relative unhappiness.

Individuals gripped by envy view those superior to them as enemies. Rather than focusing on improving themselves, the envious believe that their path to happiness is tied to the fate of those they envy. In other words, they believe that somehow their happiness will be increased if they can pull others down.

A desire to see others brought down does not nurture a prosperous society, instead it hinders social progress. Those devoured by envy are not likely to become the great inventors, artists, writers, entrepreneurs, or scientists who help advance a society. Rather, they despise individuals of great talent, as their existence only makes the inferiorities of the envy-prone more obvious.

The destructive nature of envy has made the use of institutions and practices to inhibit its impact extremely common throughout history. As Helmut Schoeck states in his book *Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour*:

“...no society can exist in which envy [is] raised to the status of a normative virtue...Even [the] superstition...of simple societies, sees envy as a disease, the



envious man as dangerously sick – a cancer from which the individual and the group must be protected – but never as a normal case of human behavior and endeavor. Nowhere, with very few exceptions, do we find the belief that society must adapt itself to the envious man, but always that it must seek to protect itself against him.” (Envy: A Theory of Social Behaviour, Helmut Schoeck)

But disconcertingly a dangerous perversion seems to be taking place in the modern world. Rather than relying on practices and institutions to inhibit the effects of envy, Gonzalo Fernandez de la Mora in his book *Egalitarian Envy*, warns that Western societies are now being shaped by politicians who are stoking the flames of envy for the purpose of gaining power and control.

This is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to around the end of the 19th century and the rise of mass communication technologies. Before the emergence of these technologies, envy was directed, almost exclusively, toward members of one’s own community. Someone living in Europe in the 17th century, for example, would be unlikely to envy the riches of an emperor of a distant land, as a condition for the emergence of envy is observation of the happiness of another. However, the rise of mass media changed this situation. Now we can intimately observe the lives of people we don’t have personal contact with and thus make judgements about their happiness. de La Mora explains the significance of this situation, stating:

“Contemporary people are subject to a massive supply of information through the mass media; consequently, people can have opinions about the happiness of those they have never met or groups of people to which they do not belong; and, as a result of these feelings, they may envy. This possibility becomes a probability if, as is habitual in the mass media, information is distributed already “focused” by a partial selection, an intentional editing, mystifying, or simply a bias that, in our case, is directed to bring out the differences among individuals. . . One does not envy this or that person, but an abstraction, like “the rich” or “the elitists.”” (Gonzalo Fernandez de la Mora, *Egalitarian Envy*)

By promoting and appealing to this envy, demagogues can spark conflicts and make potential victims out of us all – for who will not find themselves inferior to an idealized group of people. But those who envy in this collective manner, and



especially those who promote it, will never admit their true motives, rather as de La Mora states in a passage extremely relevant to the modern day:

“A contemporary disguise of collective envy is what is called “social justice.” How does this ideological...argumentation run? A fundamental postulate is established that the more just a society is, the more equal its members are in opportunities, position, and wealth; and immediately it is established that the party will fight without rest to achieve such “justice.””(Gonzalo Fernandez de la Mora, Egalitarian Envy)

But social justice, or the attempt to make us all more equal using the force of the state, will not bring about a society less prone to envy. In fact, as this unnatural uniformity is enforced on a society new sources of envy will emerge which are far more pernicious. For example, if somehow, all were made equal in terms of material wealth, this would not rid the world of envy. Rather it would only mean that those prone to envy would direct their attention to other forms of inequality, such as inequalities in mental and physical characteristics. Schopenhauer warned of this type of envy, writing that envy

“directed against personal qualities is the most insatiable and poisonous because the envious is left without hope; it is also the lowest type of envy for it hates what it ought to love and respect.” (Arthur Schopenhauer)

In addition to bringing more dangerous forms of envy to the fore, societies that fall victim to the demagogic call for more equality, ironically see the growth of the most insidious form of inequality possible – a vast inequality of power between the ruling elite and the rest of the population. To make good on their promise to bring ever more justice to the world, and ever more equality, governments must be granted immense powers to remake society.

But with all that said we can choose not to fall victim to this political ploy. Instead of viewing our inadequacies as reasons to bring others down, we can choose more constructive reactions such as emulation and self-improvement. Emulation occurs when the recognition of one’s inferiorities leads them to view the superior not as enemies, but examples to learn from and figures of motivation. Instead of the desire to level all, emulation leads a person to lift themselves up to the level of



the best, or even to surpass those they once looked up to. Kierkegaard noted that “envy is concealed admiration” and thus emulation can be viewed as the positive reaction to what drives weaker individuals to envy.

Reacting to one’s inferiorities with the desire to improve oneself, is not only good for the individual, but for society as a whole. It means more people will focus on the creation of the new and the better, rather than on the destruction of others. But on the other hand, if our society continues to move down a path led by the envy stoking rhetoric of demagogues, we will reach a point, according to Nietzsche, where people will become so resentful of others that even the happy among us will begin to question if they have a right to their happiness:

“All men of resentment, are these physiologically distorted and worm-riddled persons, a whole quivering kingdom of burrowing revenge, indefatigable and insatiable in its outbursts against the happy, and equally so in disguises for revenge, in pretexts for revenge: when will they really reach their final, fondest, most sublime triumph of revenge? At that time, doubtless, when they succeed in pushing their own misery, indeed all misery there is, into the consciousness of the happy; so that the latter begin one day to be ashamed of their happiness, and perchance say to themselves when they meet, ‘It is a shame to be happy! There is too much misery!’” (On the Genealogy of Morality, Nietzsche)