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## SOME JOYFUL THOUGHTS ON ENVY

The infernal serpent; he it was whose guile stirred up with  
envy and revenge, deceived the mother of mankind.

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JOHN MILTON, *PARADISE LOST*

There is a persistent folk belief among some Mediterranean peoples that envy is an almost palpable kind of malign force in the world. Envy appears when good fortune befalls someone. It was believed to be so strong that strategies appeared to ward off its power. In rural Greece or Italy, it was considered bad form or even dangerous to praise the beauty of a baby, lest “envy” snatch it. Many homes would post an effigy of an all-seeing eye “to keep envy away.” Others wore amulets to ward off envy. This somewhat crude form of envy posits an unspoken belief that there is something deep in human relations in which the good fortune of one brings forth a malign urge to destroy that good fortune in another.

Envy, in that sense, was a destructive force very different from what we mean when we use the term today. We might admit to envying a neighbor's new Lexus or express envy at the good luck of someone who won the lottery. Those uses, typically, are casual, conversational, and harmless. Even in casual conversation, someone might say something like "I envy her," or "He was the envy of everyone in the room." Such expressions are more akin to simple jealousy than venomous envy. The use of "envy" in the examples cited above has flattened out the deep meaning of the word.

Why, then, did Pope Gregory the Great slip envy into his list of the seven deadly sins? Why did he see it as part of a chain springing from pride, the mother lode of sins, since it did not appear in the list of *logismoi* coming from the older monastic tradition?

Why did Church Fathers, who thought deeply about envy at a time when people took the capital sins more seriously than they may today, see in it something destructive to one's humanity? A clue may be found in an observation of Thomas Aquinas. He describes envy as sadness (*tristitia*) at the goods possessed by another. Aquinas does not think that envy is some kind of elemental force but, rather, a corruption of the human tendency to experience sadness. The specific kind of sadness embedded in the Latin word *tristitia* carries with it a complex tone of suppressed rage, melancholy, and festering resentment directed at another.

Aquinas thought the demons experienced envy, and many centuries later C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* would show why that is the case. Lewis was well aware of the tradition that the demons lived in a constant state of rage and resentment. After all, scholar of Milton that he was, Lewis knew that the great poet invented the word “pandemonium” to describe where the evil ones lived; that word, of course, is now a synonym for raging confusion. In that sense, envy has a certain relationship to wrath. Sadness, of course, was part of the lexicon of the old tradition of the *logismoi*, but sadness is also implicated in *acedia* and is a by-product of gluttony.

It may well be that Gregory, and later Thomas Aquinas, remembered the cautionary story of Saul, the first king of the Jewish people. Despite his military prowess, Saul—who had been formally anointed king—found himself at odds with David, who would become his successor. How it must have tormented Saul when his own son, Jonathan, became David’s favored friend, and his own daughter, Michal, became David’s wife. First Samuel relates how Saul became increasingly jealous and vengeful, driven by an “evil spirit” (1 Sm 16:14) to the point where he schemed to murder David, after having plotted against him and having driven him into hiding in the desert. Despite their tortured reconciliation, Saul’s life ended in suicide (1 Sm 31:4) after failing to win a battle over the Philistines. If there was ever an example of murderous envy, it can be found as a paradigm in the story of King Saul.

In the *Divine Comedy*, Dante likens envy to a kind of blindness. Those who walked on the path up the Mount of Purgatory had their eyes stitched shut to pay for casting an envious eye on others during their lifetime. Thus, to make the punishment fit the crime, the envious had to have their sense of sight and their hearts purged.

Let us consider how this blindness or sadness that Aquinas equated with envy operates within a person. At the success of another, one may harbor an inner sense of grievance, a certain self-pity, resentment, and feeling of superiority. This envy may simply reside within the self, mixed with a smoldering sense of anger, or it may become a goad to action. Let us consider each case in turn.

To internalize envy is rather like internalizing resentment. Only the envious person is aware of the envy. The person envied may go on about life totally oblivious to the fact that he or she is the object of such a powerful negative emotion. The envious one falls into a pattern of constant comparison, adding up real or imagined slights. Interactions with others become self-conscious, suspect, calculated, and full of second-guessing. This brooding only stokes envy further, bringing with it more sourness, unhappiness, and emotional turmoil. Envy easily turns into hatred, and when the person envied makes a gesture of kindness, it only fuels the feeling of envy (“Who does he think he is?” “What does he really mean by saying that?”). In that sense, envy is a kind of anger, and like anger it tends to smolder

deep in a person's psyche, touching everything the person sees and feels about another person.

Envy takes a more ominous turn when the perpetrator feels compelled to lash out at the object of his envy as we have seen in the biblical story of Saul. Literature and life are filled with examples, some of them murderous, of those who allow their sense of resentment and envy to spill over into strategies and plots to bring down the other. The textbook example is the scheming Iago, who drives the noble Othello to a tragic end. Hypocritically, Iago warns Othello against the "green-eyed monster" of jealousy, by which Shakespeare obviously meant envy. The phrase "green-eyed" in the Bard's vocabulary meant sickliness, which speaks to how draining and all consuming it can be for a person to be caught up in the cycle of envy. Iago is an evil character, and his evil derives precisely from his envy of Othello and gains more substance by his desire to lash out.

One does not need to consult Shakespeare, however, to find such models of simple jealousy turned to sinful envy. My suspicion is that in every institution—business, university, church, community, or even a family—one can find daily examples of those who thwart the good works or reputation of others by seemingly innocent passivity or through active sabotage. An envious person may bad-mouth a colleague, "accidentally" reveal a secret, or undermine a co-worker by failing to complete his part of a joint project in a timely manner. Contemporary psychological discourse

speaks of “passive-aggressive behavior,” but lurking beneath that description is envy.

Something else is connected to envy, and it goes by various names. The envious person is inordinately delighted at the bad fortune of others. The Germans call this *Schadenfreude*, while the old moral theology texts called it “morose delectation.” To delight in the misfortune of others is an obstacle to kindness and benevolence. For example, in the *Purgatorio*, Dante describes a woman who is so delighted in the downfall of her fellow citizens that she rejoices at the death of her own nephew. Thus the power of envy can marginalize or destroy the capacity for generosity of spirit.

While we separate envy as a distinct vice, it is clear that in life envy is usually bound up with or leads to a whole complex of unhealthy human impulses. Envy is not unconnected to pride—over estimation of one’s own worth—and is certainly not free from avarice or anger. The early monks often listed envy as part of a catalog of ills pouring from a disordered life and considered it a failure of Christian humility. These dissatisfactions can be the equivalent of emotional gnats that flit about in our life now and again. But when they are allowed free rein, envy and its allies can become consuming and destructive of one’s humanity. The envious person not only poisons his own life, but, given the chance, will allow that poison to seep out and harm others.