

Sketching Envy from Philosophy to Psychology

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Abstract

What is envy and how can we define it so as to incorporate the emotion in economic models? Through referring on philosophical and psychological research, this paper aims at deriving a stable and concise definition of the emotion of envy. Philosophy allows us to define the elements forming envy and to disentangle the latter from other emotions. Research on psychology help us in understanding the affective and behavioural responses of the emotion. We conclude that envy arises from any unflattering social comparison that threatens individual self-evaluation and includes a depressive and a hostile dimension. We also discuss whether the behaviour induced by envy results in destructive or in emulative actions. We will disentangle the elements that might explain why envy does not always exert the subject to adopt a hostile attitude toward the envied.

Key words: Envy, Philosophy, Psychology, Emotion, Social comparison.

JEL classification: D11;

Introduction

Theodore Roosevelt claims that “*Probably the greatest harm done by vast wealth is the harm that we of moderate means do ourselves when we let the vices of envy and hatred enter deep into our own natures*”. By these lines, the former President of the United States underlines that envy is an obstacle to the good working of modern societies. In line with the latter many scholars emphasize on the danger of that emotion. Belshaw (1955) and Mui (1995) stress the economic ravages incurred by envy that can refrain economic activities. More precisely, they refer to the emotion of envy to explain why agents (e.g. persons, group of persons or firms) are reluctant to introduce innovation. According to them, agents renounce to innovate because they fear that by innovating they arise envy within non-innovating agents which can push the latter to attack them. Rawls (1971) is so afraid of envy that his theory of justice relies on the assumption that individuals are born without envy. More recently Zizzo and Oswald (2001) suggest that, motivated by envy, a great majority of subjects choose to destroy others’ incomes even by incurring a personal cost. Beckman et al. (2002) point out the invasiveness of envy in decisions involving Pareto efficiency and convey that envy is a powerful micro-motivation. Why such a fear about envy?

The emotion both fascinates and frightens scholars. Envy fascinates because it is mostly inherent to human nature and one of the most powerful emotion leading to behaviour. Envy is an omnipresent emotion rendering it very difficult to cope with: it is one of the very first emotions that children are prone to experience inside the core of their, even protective, family.⁴⁵ Schoeck (1969) also emphasizes on the pervasive character of envy by making references to various cultures. The author underlines that whereas we do not find in every culture concepts such as love, hope or justice; every civilization, even very primitive ones, have implemented one or more specific terms in order to represent the person who is distressed by the others’ members possessions which he lacks and who desire to see these desired attributes destroyed without obtaining it. Furthermore every culture has implemented devices made of norms and rituals in order to prevent envious feelings and to protect oneself against envious persons. Foster (1972) also supports this claim and tries to distinguish the different behaviours implemented by societies so as to cope with envy. Nevertheless, at the same time, the emotion embodies a threatening aspect: consumed by envy, the subject is exerted to engage in an

⁴⁵ Freud insists largely on the consequences of that latter point by introducing the concept of “*childhood envy*”.